

ONTICIDE

Afro-pessimism, Gay Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence

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Violence is a matrix of (im)possibility, a paradigm for ontology.
—Frank Wilderson

Gay Nigger #1 as a Problem for Thought

In March 2000, New York City police found Steen Keith Fenrich's dismembered body in Alley Pond Park, Queens. His severed flesh (feet, toes, fingers, and arms) was stored in a blue plastic tub. The murderer, it seems, meticulously preserved the dismembered body in the tub, not only as a mimetic form of captivity—the literal warehousing and storing of a black body, where “tomb” and “prison” assume terrifying interchangeability—but also as a form of memorialization. Preservation becomes a perverse form of celebration and transforms his body into a “fleshy archive.” Each abrasion, gash, and laceration becomes what Hortense Spillers (2003: 205) might call a “hieroglyphics of the flesh,” or what psychoanalysts might call a “corporeal letter” (Leclaire 1998: 47)—these markings record the intoxication of unchecked power and destructive maneuvering over the captive body (*ibid.*).¹ It also creates, as Spillers (2003: 207) writes, “the distance between a cultural *vestibularity* and a *culture*,” placing Steen's body outside the cultural space of ethics, relationality, and the sacred, and inserting it into the deadly precultural space of pure drive and unrestrained fantasy—the blue tub becomes the material embodiment, or extension, of the murderer's unconscious.²

Police also found a skull in the tub, flayed and bleached. The murderer wrote Steen's social security number on it, but not his name. Proper names announce humanity or reflect ontological “uniqueness,” as Hannah Arendt (1958: 7–8) would call it, but assigning numbers, images, and signs to the body is a form

of branding. Flesh denied the symbolic fiction of “proper names” is reduced to a mere thing—a “being for the captor.” If indeed proper names indicate a certain ontological dignity, then Steen’s murderer stripped him of this fiction, as a final act of rage, announcing to the world the undeniable position of Steen as an “object” in the “order of things.” Also written on Steen’s skull were the words “Gay Nigger #1.” This coupling of epithet with numbers not only continues the symbolic humiliation but also, chillingly, portends the continuation of the event, that there in fact will be a “Gay Nigger #2,” a “Gay Nigger #3,” a “Gay Nigger #4,” and so on—an endless reproduction of the original act, a compulsive repetition crisis of mutilation, castration, dismemberment, and decapitation.

Apparently Steen’s white stepfather murdered his black stepson out of rage. John Fenrich killed his stepson because he was gay, police claim (Resnick 2000). According to Steen’s boyfriend, John treated them with contempt and, when asked about Steen’s whereabouts, John told him that Steen “went away for a couple of weeks”—a departure without a return (*ibid.*). This event, in which the white stepfather murders his “gay black stepson,” seems to be a curious reversal of the psychoanalytic primal murder. It departs from the traditional narrative in that the son does not kill and eat the father to instantiate the “law” or the agency of the superego; rather, the (primal) father murders his son as a testament to his own omnipotence and the son’s subjection to his desire. Perhaps we can think of Steen’s death as reflecting the underbelly of Sigmund Freud’s patricidal myth in *Totem and Taboo*—a “racialized primal murder” that sets antiblack violence into motion and renders the “moral law” destructive and internecine.

The term *Gay Nigger #1* carved into Steen’s skull is a philosophical conundrum, or problem space, precisely because it carries the antagonism between humanism and fungibility within its discursive structure.³ The term *Gay* indexes *human* identity, and *Nigger* is the “thing” void of human ontology—ontology’s mystery. It brings these two crises into juxtaposition, creating somewhat of a theoretical fatality, a devastating crime scene. At the site of this fatality lies Steen’s mutilated, supine black body, which we cannot quite place within the symbolics of identity, politics, history, sociology, or law. In cases like these, we put “theory” and “philosophy” into service to figure out who did “it,” what the murder weapon was, and what the injury was—if we can even call it an injury. This situation frustrates the researcher (researcher as detective, philosopher, and medical examiner all at once) in that he lacks a coherent grammar to make this suffering legible. The assaulting party is more like a structural phenomenon, and the fatality is a precondition of the world itself. In this sense, the fatality is rendered banal, diurnal, and quotidian, as it sustains the very field of existence.

The “problem space” that Steen inhabits is the circuit of violence that fractures in at least two ways: the province of human difference and the undifferentiated zone of blackness. The two terms that are brought into alignment here, *Nigger* and *Gay*, are both formations of historical, philosophical, and sociopolitical violence. Understanding the operations of this violence is the vital task of the researcher investigating the fatal collision between these terms because they indicate a certain ontological violation that preconditions physical injury. This fatality marks the site of a double exclusion, or “murderous operation.” The epithet “Gay Nigger #1” written on Steen’s skull attempts to capture this collision through language. The juxtaposition creates what Alain Badiou (2007) might call “the in-existent existence.”⁷⁴ This is a situation in which existence assumes such a low intensity that its very appearance undermines it and makes it obsolete. The “in-existent existence” is so inconceivable that it becomes somewhat “speculative,” or purely conceptual. The existential cartography of “Gay Nigger #1” is “unmappable,” and because the juxtaposition forces a conceptual contradiction, it is nonexistent, or more precisely, does not appear within the horizon of existing entities. If he can be said to “exist” at all, as many will undoubtedly insist, the dead “man” possesses such a low frequency that this existence is rendered inconsequential.

This “problem space,” the dissonance between humanism and fungibility, however, is not unique to sexuality. Markers such as “woman,” “child,” “man,” “transgender,” and so forth all create the same problematic when juxtaposed with blackness. The terms enclosed in scare quotes are markers of human difference, and blackness as a fungible commodity is excluded from this realm of difference, and by consequence those markers do not easily apply. But this presents a certain double bind for an Afro-pessimistic analysis: Do we describe the violence Steen experienced as antiblackness and disregard the marker “gay” that is also written on his skull as a structural adjustment error? If the term *gay* is a feature of human difference, what alternative designation would allow us to capture Steen’s violation Afro-pessimistically? These questions orbit around the problem space Steen inhabits between the designators of humanism, which *attempt* to provide comprehension of the violence (as antigay violence), and the undifferentiated space of black fungibility in which differences are irrelevant, since violence is gratuitous (antiblackness). Part of the difficulty with an Afro-pessimistic investigation of Steen is that the investigator can easily get caught in a “performative contradiction” of sorts (or what Frank Wilderson would term “structural adjustment”): to acknowledge the “difference” that contributed to the brutalization of Steen, a brutality that targeted his particular *being*, would incorrectly situate Steen in the realm of human difference that excludes him. But without a marker of difference,

something that indicates the *particularity* of the “violence” performed under the banner “Gay Nigger #1,” we erase an aspect of Steen that renders him perhaps *more* vulnerable to certain violence than others structurally positioned as black (the same could also be said for “black women,” “black trans,” etc.).

The problem before us is that within the philosophical space of Afro-pessimism, we are unable to approach “difference” or “particularity” because humanism claims these as its property (Hartman 1997; Wilderson 2010; Walcott 2014). And since the black is *not* a human, it cannot claim “difference” or “particularity” as a feature of existence (because these belong to the human). The consequence of this is that the fungible commodity is presented as monolithic and, consequently, the gratuitous violence this commodity magnetizes is also monolithic. Humanism creates a double bind within which an Afro-pessimistic analysis proceeds, but the procedure (the powerful analysis of antiblack “violence”) is unable to conceptualize what is *surplus* or *exorbitant* to antiblackness.

In this article, I argue against the monolithic conceptualization of the fungible object and insist that violence fractures the commodity in protean ways. Certain aspects of the fungible commodity render it more vulnerable to sustained and brutal violence—which is not completely captured under the banner “antiblackness.” Because we lack a grammar outside humanism that would allow us to articulate “particularity,” “difference,” and “surplus violence” without getting trapped in a double bind, I propose a procedure of writing with and against humanism to address this problem. I call this procedure “onticide.” It uses the technique of erasure (*sous rature*) in relation to features of human difference that exclude blackness but are necessary to articulate the fracturing of fungible commodities. This approach departs from intersectional analyses that attempt to either reconcile blackness with humanity and its difference or conceive of blackness as ontologically equivalent with features of human difference. I suggest that the intersectional approach is inadequate to the task of articulating the particularity of violence Steen experienced, and that an onticidal approach (writing with and against humanist terms of difference) enables us to contend with the humanist double bind more productively.

Humanism and Differentiating Violence

We can name the violence that fractures around “Gay Nigger #1” as “humanism” and “fungibility.” Following Martin Heidegger (1977), we understand humanism as a metaphysical discourse of humans, their unified essence, schematized/calculable nature, and the philosophy of their solipsistic, sovereign power. We can also

suggest that part of humanism's metaphysical impulse is to define man's essence as a *differentiating being*. It is through difference that man experiences uniqueness, and this uniqueness, established against an "other," provides the necessary building blocks for ontological development and self-actualization. To *be* human is to carry out the task of endless differentiation, through what Gianni Vattimo (2003) would call "projectionality," or man's unique lifelong project of self-actualization. Differentiating is a *human entitlement*. In short, we might understand humanism, then, as a philosophy of difference, where difference is the foundation on which man emerges as a unique being in the world.⁵

But the question of man's differentiating impulse is really a question about forms of violence, since differentiating, or "ontological cutting," requires tremendous violence to carry out the task. To establish uniqueness, man must also establish an "other"; the process of differentiating and "othering" are mutually constitutive and ontologically necessary, as G. W. F. Hegel has taught us in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As Wilderson (2010: 84) suggests, "Violence is a paradigm of ontology," and at least for the human-being, this violence entails the work of securing the boundaries of the self against ontological assault, fixing the other in a space of alterity, and constantly negotiating this boundary with an arsenal of destructive practices.⁶ The "human," then, is a repository of violent practices and technologies that has crystallized over time. Humanism is precisely the philosophy of this violence—its evolution and the resources necessary to maintain it. Human difference is the result of this violent process (differentiating, othering, and boundary policing). I would suggest that we think of the terms of human difference, such as *woman*, *man*, *worker*, and in this case *Gay*, as the discursive vehicles of differentiating violence, or the "genres of Man" according to Sylvia Wynter (Wynter and McKittrick 2015).⁷ For these terms mark the dialectic between differentiation and self-constitution that enable the human-being to assume form in the universe of symbols and signification. The human-being is the Hegelian "synthesis" of this dialectical violence.

In *Nihilism and Metaphysics: The Third Voyage*, the Italian philosopher Vittorio Possenti (2014: 295) understands humanism and metaphysics as partners in reclaiming the essence of Man, "since humanism has a radically and fundamentally metaphysical character, the return to being and the return to the person are two parts of the same movement." Humanism posits Man, ontologically, as the highest form of being, and in its unending project to return Man to this essential nature of ontological supremacy, it disavows the violence that preconditions it. (This, we can say, is precisely Heidegger's critique of metaphysics: that it is inherently violent in its attempt to schematize and calculate this "essence" as

an object of science, instead of giving Man up to Being and acknowledging our inability to dominate and calculate Being.) For humanists, then, the search for Man's essence becomes something like a *Seinphilosophie*, a philosophy of being, since it has established that Man's essence provides the fundamental structure for Being itself (although Man does not exhaust the field of Being but is only an entity within its aperture). Possenti considers this essence an "ontological incommunicability" (ibid.: 284). Man "exists in himself and for himself through the subsisting soul—no one else can exist in his place; his existence is absolutely individual; it cannot be communicated with others nor can it be exercised vicariously or assumed by others" (ibid.). Furthermore, this incommunicability manifests itself as the *capacity* for "self-reflection, self-possession, and returning to himself to determine himself from within" (ibid.: 283). Man is always and only a "being-for-itself," according to this philosophy. A return to this essence of ontological supremacy also returns us to the scene of violence from which these endeavors emerge. Although we attempt to purge violence from ontological investigations, a "pure ontology" (as Giorgio Agamben and Walter Benjamin might call it) is mythical, and the incommunicability that characterizes part of Man's essence *speaks* through practices of differentiating violence to maintain the "absolute individuality" and "self-possession" that Possenti understands as Man's being. Put differently, ontology itself is a violent formation. Humanism reconfigures the violence of differentiation as the self-actualizing process of metaphysics—the attempt to reunite Man with a forgotten being (against Heidegger's assertion, however, that metaphysics must wither to enable Man to remember being).

For the humanist, inviolable individuality characterizes this being we call the "human." Individuating this being is the process of differentiating violence, since the individual entity must shore up its existence against the plurality of other entities. But Possenti, along with other humanists/metaphysicians, disavows this violence; he transvalues it as a spiritual virtue, one that enables the "subsisting of the soul" (ibid.: 284). What blackness exposes, however, is that the inviolable essence of the human's individuality and incommunicability is a *racial privilege*. The ontological essence that Possenti's metaphysical enterprise describes is the intersection of violence and blackness, since chattel slavery and ontological excision engender the modern subject and the domain of the "human" that preoccupies our investigations. Understanding precisely why this is the case is the purpose of Afro-pessimism as a philosophical enterprise. In short, there is no way to eliminate differentiating violence without eliminating the human, since both are mutually constitutive and coterminous.

Afro-pessimism, Fungibility, and Blackness

When Wilderson (2010: 58) suggests that blackness is a “structural position of non-communicability in the face of all other positions,” his “structural incommunicability” differs starkly from the “incommunicability” that Possenti uses to describe the ontology of the human.⁸ Wilderson’s incommunicability *preconditions* the celebrated incommunicability of Possenti’s humanism. What is incommunicable, and unthought, within humanism for Afro-pessimists is the absolute non-individuality and interchangeability of blackness (this is the structural positioning of blackness). Whereas Possenti posits human uniqueness as the fundamental ontological anchoring of human-beingness, Afro-pessimists aver that this uniqueness is enabled by the fungible constitution of blackness. Ronald Judy (1993: 89) would call this incommunicability “muteness,” an “interdiction of the African, a censorship to be inarticulate, to not compel, to have no capacity to move, to be without effect, without agency, without thought.” Judy’s interdiction is an ontological one; the human capacities of individuality, uniqueness, self-reflection, and self-possession are denied to black being, such that black being is rendered an *object*: We could suggest that this interdiction is what enables the ontology of the human to have any intelligibility at all, and it is this primary interdiction that has remained absent from humanist discourse. “White (Human) capacity, in advance of the event of discrimination or oppression, is parasitic on Black incapacity. Without the Negro, capacity itself is incoherent,” according to Wilderson (2010: 45). Unlike Freud’s Taboo prohibition that organizes Civilization for humans, 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). Without this fundamental capacity of differentiation and the ban on differentiating blackness, Civilization and Civil Society crumble. James Bliss (2015) persuasively argues that antiblackness is the *energy* of the human, and part of this violent energy is the task of differentiating the human from the fungible black commodity. The task of Afro-pessimism, then, is to expose, unveil, and remember this “absent center of ontology,” as Slavoj Žižek (2000) might call it—the great interdiction on black ontology that is rendered absent because it is muted and denied, but also present because it structures society.⁹

The incommunicability of blackness is captured in the term *fungibility*. 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. The black commodity, however, constitutes more than just an economic entity in a market of exchange—its replaceability and interchangeability provide the ground on which humans engage in “ontological narcissism,” as William Connolly (2002: 30) names it. Humans develop a pleasurable sense of self and ontological boundaries/plenitude (differentiation) by using the commodity’s interchangeable and replaceable condition to shore up their uniqueness, or the “incommunicable nature” of humanity that Possenti describes. Saidiya Hartman (1997: 21) meditates on this ontological usage of black commodities and suggests:

The relation between pleasure and the possession of slave property, in both the figurative and literal senses, can be explained in part by the fungibility of the slave—that is, the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity—and by the extensive capacities of property—that is, the augmentation of the master subject through his embodiment in external objects and persons. Put differently, the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master’s body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion.

Spillers (2003: 206) reminds us that the captive “is reduced to a thing, to *being* for the captor.” Reduction not only to a thing but reduction to *being* for the captor indicates that this reduction serves an *ontological* function, not merely an economic one. To “be” for the captor—to serve as an empty, abstract, and abject vessel for the other’s self-actualization, pleasure, and self-constitution—is a function of the black commodity that is necessary for human uniqueness, self-possession, and self-reflection. This, then, is the ultimate scandal or ontological violation of the New World: black flesh is reduced to devastating sameness and interchangeability (fungibility). 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. This is a space outside the differentiating function of the Father’s Name and his Law, rendering the captive a pure object—a *body without flesh* (if we read Deleuze and Guattari 2004 through Spillers 2003).¹⁰ This body becomes, as Spillers (2003: 206) reminds us, “a site of irresistible sensuality” for the captor, but because this body lacks subjectivity, it cannot desire but is, instead, *desired on*. We could suggest that desire and sen-

suality become instruments of the ontological enterprise of human differentiation and self-constitution, and blackness is situated on this nexus between violence and sexuality—or what Jared Sexton (2008: 9) would call an antiblack libidinal economy.¹¹

For Afro-pessimists, the space of difference is the site of extreme violence that is subtended by an interdiction on difference or humanity, which characterizes the condition of blackness in modernity. Whereas the space of human difference allows for the proliferation of identities and subjectivities, fungibility homogenizes blackness such that identities and subjectivities are absent. When Wilderson (2010: 84) argues that “violence is a matrix of (im)possibility, a paradigm for ontology,” we understand that differentiating violence is absolutely essential (“possible”) for the constitution of the self, and gratuitous violence (violence not predicated on transgression but simply on *being* black) is necessary to maintain the formation of homogeneity that defines fungible blackness. Thus the matrix of violence within which the “Gay Nigger #1” is placed constitutes an “impossibility,” precisely because the matrix cannot accommodate this being and it conceals the *surplus*, which exceeds violence as a matrix. Ontology and violence, for the black object, are mutually constitutive and indissociable.

Differentiating violence, however, might also characterize the violence itself, for humans employ different forms of violence to constitute themselves—we have given names to these forms of violence within the Symbolic such as “sexism,” “ableism,” and “heterosexism,” among many others. We might suggest that different forms of violence are used to constitute different aspects of human uniqueness. But differentiation raises peculiar issues for Afro-pessimism: Is the gratuitous violence that produces the fungible commodity monolithic? Do we characterize all violence against the fungible object as “antiblackness,” or are commodities cut differently by the differentiating violence the human uses to differentiate its self? If the fungible object is interchangeable, is the violence that it experiences unquestionably interchangeable with other objects as well? How do we conceptualize “violence” for which the matrix of understating (humanism) is inadequate?

These inquiries present a problem for Afro-pessimism that it must theorize through to understand Steen Fenrich (and other black beings). The “Gay Nigger #1” is certainly the target of gratuitous violence, vicious antiblack formations, but in Afro-pessimism the violence that we docket as “antigay” or heterosexist violence gets subsumed implicitly under the banner of antiblackness because the fungible black is placed outside difference and identity. And since antigay violence targets *humans* with a uniqueness and individuality that we call “gay,” blacks become disqualified from the human identity “gay,” and consequently, antigay violence

would become somewhat of a misnomer to describe Steen's murder, since the black is excluded from this identity. Thus we are without a grammar to describe the uniqueness of this brutality, and it is *more* than antiblackness—a surplus violence to antiblackness. By disregarding the humanist term *gay*, we simplify the complexity of the violence that constitutes the “Gay Nigger #1,” and since violence is a matrix of ontology, the particularity of the violence this being experienced also speaks to its ontological constitution. Discussing cinema's inability to comprehend or address blackness, Wilderson (2010: 281) avers: “In point of fact, the compositional effects of Heath's cinematic frame are not available to the Black unless the Black has been structurally adjusted within the frame, made to *appear* as ‘man,’ ‘woman,’ ‘Proletarian,’ ‘child,’ ‘gay,’ or ‘straight,’ and so on. Such a structural adjustment makes the Black ‘palatable’ and allows for his or her cinematic ‘conversion [from] seen into scene’” (emphasis added).

His phenomenological and existential reading of cinema is not exclusive to cinema, however; for theoretical and philosophical discourses use structural adjustments to make the black *appear* as well. If the designator “gay” distorts the phenomenological and existential reality of blackness—that blackness really does not appear within the horizon of existing human entities and thus does not “exist” in the way we traditionally understand existence—then applying the term *anti-gay violence* to Steen's brutalization would be an erroneous attempt to give him a phenomenology and existence where none exists following Wilderson's logic.

It also throws us into a conceptual crisis because the violence directed against the “Gay Nigger #1” is inconceivable and inarticulate within Afro-pessimistic logics (although the violence against the “Nigger” at least has a grammar under the sign “antiblack”). Put differently, we lose something (whatever this something “is”) under the banner “fungibility” when the particular violence that Steen, and others structured similarly, experienced is broadly characterized as antiblackness. How do we then understand the “Gay Nigger #1” philosophically and theoretically within Afro-pessimistic discourse? Are antiblack violence and antiqueser violence indissociable? And if they are indissociable, why are some black commodities the targets of “anti-gay” violence and other black commodities are not? If antiblack violence serves as the unifying ground of fungible commodities, then differentiating violence might just fracture this commodity, such that it is interchangeable on one register (antiblackness) but *not* on another.

The problem space that opens this article circulates around these inquiries as it concerns the “Gay Nigger #1.” In essence, this problem space is nothing more than the double bind of humanism that lingers despite our investment in invali-

dating and disarming it. To avoid the “structural adjustment” that many scholars rely on to incorporate blacks into the fold of humanism and its liberal narratives, Afro-pessimists have rejected, to the extent that we can reject, this humanism and its structural adjustment. In the vacuous space of undifferentiation, differences such as “gender,” “sexuality,” “ability,” and so forth are also rejected because they belong to the human and not the fungible commodity. But this rejection leaves us without a way to understand the particularities of violence and the way this particular violence constitutes ontology. Thus, the “black gay,” the black lesbian, and the “black heterosexual” object might bond over the pulverizing technologies of antiblack violence, but fracture around antiqueer violence. *We lack a procedure to theorize this fracturing outside humanism.* But, again, I am writing gay, lesbian, and heterosexual under erasure here to docket the double bind that this inquiry presents. 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.

Afro-pessimism becomes uncomfortably silent when confronted with issues of sexism experienced by black women and antiqueer violence experienced by black gays or lesbians, for example, to avoid the performative contradiction. The assumption that antiblack violence will offer a theoretical/philosophical covering for these beings neglects the particularities of the violence experienced and the particularities of the fungible commodity that becomes the target of specific violence. 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. I would argue that this fracturing is significant if we take Wilderson’s (2010) argument seriously that “violence is a matrix of (im)possibility, a paradigm for ontology” because it speaks to the way that the fungible commodity is constituted through different procedures of violence, which cannot be easily subsumed under the banner “antiblackness.”

But scholars have attempted to reconcile blackness with sexual difference and sexual identity through logics of equivalence. This scholarship operates under what I call “the intersectional approach.” Although this approach provides intellectual space for contemplating and representing sexual difference and sexual identity, it often does so precisely by way of a structural adjustment. Thus it enacts a performative contradiction (between blackness and humanism) that it either ignores or neglects.

The Intersectional Approach

In “Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture,” Eric Stanley (2011) provides a perspicacious reading of Steen’s brutalization as “overkill.” It is significant in that it provides a philosophical framework for understanding the particularity of the violence and the ontological implications of it. This is a violence that exceeds the logic of utility—a violence whose “end” is simply to reproduce the panicked pleasure that constitutes it. Physical death, then, is not sufficient satiation; even after the biological functioning of the body ceases (e.g., the heart stops, brain incapacitated, breathing stops), the aggressor continues to mutilate the body, postmortem, as ending “biological life” is not the real aim of this sadistic drive. This “surplus violence” attempts an impossible existential objective—“to push [queers] backward out of time, out of History, and into that which comes before,” according to Stanley (2011: 9). Given the impossibility of the existential “ends” that set this violence into motion, the brutality must continue past death, outside “the normative times of life and death,” beyond utility and reason, and incessantly encircle the impossible object of its drive. Overkill, then, is the social materialization of the drive. It is surplus violence (and surplus pleasure) that is caught in the circuit of failure, and the disavowal of such a failure—where failure is registered as success—that is, each additional stab, laceration, puncture, and dismemberment, brings one “closer” to achieving the unachievable. Thus this excessive violence is the symptom of an impossible existential aim.

The problematic that Stanley brilliantly articulates invites us to consider the functionality of violence on the onto-existential horizon and the inadequacy of humanist instruments to address, and redress, these violations (e.g., “rights,” “equal protection,” “citizenship”). One simply cannot rely on “rational instruments” to resolve an irrational dilemma, especially when these very instruments depend on the destructive kernel of irrationality to sustain them. In other words, the horror of overkill is less the spectacular violence of mutilated flesh than that any “solution” or “corrective” to this problem would also have to reside beyond “the normative times of life and death” (Stanley 2011: 9) and outside reason itself. Overkill is the violence that sustains society, and without it, liberal democracy and its institutions would cease to exist.

In thinking about Steen Keith Fenrich and the nonutilitarian “logic” of overkill, I want to pause at two passages in the essay. According to Stanley, “not all who might identify under the name *queer* experience the same relationship to violence. For sure, the overwhelming numbers of trans/queer people who are murdered in the United States are of color” (2). In the footnote accompanying this pas-

sage, the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs claims that “of those murdered 79 percent were people of color.” This passage raises important inquiries: what determines, or structures, this differential relationship to violence for those who might identify as “queer”? Should the marker “queer” fracture to account for the differential relation to violence, a violence that is constitutive of society itself? Is this differential relationship to violence, which in at least one instance breaks along “people of color” and “non-people of color,” an expression of the difference between fungibility and humanism? Is overkill the materialization of the violence sustaining the antagonism at the core of modernity? I raise these inquiries to think about the particularity of overkill—its will to “do violence to *nothingness*” (10). It is the relationship between beings considered “nothingness” along the onto-existential horizon and the violence that reinforces this positionality that is important. The differential relationship to violence could also be read as a differential relationship to “nothingness,” where “nothingness” is the symbolic designator of the incomprehensible remainder or exclusion. The fact that the overwhelming majority of those murdered are “of color” and the position of blacks as fungible commodities outside humanist difference is no mere coincidence.

Queer here conceals and preserves the humanity that queer theorists like Stanley proclaim it disrupts. We might suggest that the “different relationship to violence,” and concomitantly, the different relationship to “nothingness” is the limit between “being-for-the captor” (fungible object) and the “human subject” experiencing oppression. *Queer*, as a conceptual term, collapses these positions and inappropriately applies the position of “object” and “nothingness” to a structure of oppression, thus creating a form of equivalence between the structural position of the commodity and the position of the human. To put this differently, “unfreedom” brings the subject to the limit of subjectivity, but it is a limit, nonetheless. In cases of extreme unfreedom, we might describe this being as a “liminal subject”—where the rider “liminal” registers the existential crisis of unfreedom (the structure of suffering), but the “liminal subject” is *not* the object denied symbolic placement, differentiating flesh, and a grammar of suffering.

This, I argue, is the difference between Steen Keith Fenrich (fungible object) and Matthew Shepard (human subject), whom Stanley also references. The brutality of “antiqueer” violence often distorts the onto-existential horizon and collapses the positions between “liminal subject” and “object.” This is not to suggest that white people do not experience horrendous acts of brutality; it is to suggest, however, that we have a “grammar of suffering” to register this violence *as* violence and, at least in theory, articulate its unethicity. In other words, the brutality visited on Shepard is intelligible because his humanity docketed this violence

as a violation of human uniqueness and value, whereas Fenrich can lay no claim to such uniqueness and value in the realm of difference, rendering the brutality he experienced inconceivable within the terms of humanism. Stanley cogently limns the double bind of liberal democracy and rights discourse: “for the law to read anti-queer violence as a symptom of larger cultural forces, the punishment of the ‘guilty party’ would only be a representation of justice. To this end, the law is made possible through the reproduction of both material and discursive formations of anti-queer, along with many other forms of violence” (8). The law depends on the very violence it outlaws to sustain itself; rights, justice, and equality are all legal instruments that conceal, reproduce, and disavow violence. But there is a difference between the inevitable preclusion of justice, as it concerns anti-queer violence, and the articulation and social recognition of suffering itself (i.e., grammar of suffering). This is most telling in a footnote in which Stanley describes the national response to Shepard’s brutal murder:

There are also instances when anti-queer violence erupts onto the social screen, for example the 1999 murder of Matthew Shepard. Shepard, a white, gay, twenty-one-year-old college student, it could be argued, was held as referent for all anti-queer violence because of the relative ease of mourning him. Although this might be true, anti-queer violence must be simultaneously put on display and made to disappear so that the murders of queers exist outside national meaning. Mourning for Shepard, through the spectacle of mocking pain, works to disappear the archive that is queer death. (18)

What structured the process of empathy that made Shepard a potential “referent for all queer violence” and facilitated the “relative ease of mourning him”? If we pause at the subordinate clause “although this might be true,” we realize that this “truth” makes all the difference between the liminal subject and the fungible object—between the national identification with Shepard and the ungrievable (and incommunicable) “loss” of Fenrich. Shepard becomes a *political synecdoche* with humanity; his “queerness” is registered as “part” of a larger whole of the human family. It is this shared humanity that made it relatively easy to mourn him. National “mourning” expresses the communicability of this loss. As Judith Butler (2006) reminds us, a life must be registered as livable to be mourned at all; put differently, it is shared humanity that secures the circuit of synecdoche, empathy, and grief. If the nation registered this “murder” as a loss, then Shepard cannot properly be said to inhabit the “nothingness” of the onto-existential hori-

zon. Without this shared humanity, even if just a “specter of humanity,” Shepard could not serve as a legible referent for a lost life, and the circuit of empathy would have been fractured. Humanism attempted to recuperate the liminal subject anti-queer violence pushed to the limits of subjectivity; this indeed was a failed project, but failure reveals a deeper truth: the fact that the project of recuperation was “tried at all” is an indication that the murder did not exist outside national meaning.

The same cannot be said for Fenrich, or many of the other “people of color” whose murders are ungrivable because they are inconceivable. These beings are excluded from the synecdochal play between “part” and “whole” and reside in the vacuous space of what Hartman and Wilderson (2003) call the “unthought.” As Thomas Glave (2005: 200, 204) poignantly notes, “Not everyone’s name, like Matthew Shepard’s, will become a virtual referent for some sort of queer violence. . . . Steen Fenrich bears little resemblance to Matthew Shepard, the victim of anti-gay violence who, for whatever reasons, seems to have attracted the most grief, the most caring, the most consistent moral outrage. Steen Fenrich is not, at least as a black male, no matter what his sexuality, a candidate for Matthew Shephardhood. In the context of a race-ist United States, no black person ever can be.” Shepard assumes a hagiographic place within public memory, and this place is not democratic, inclusive, or universal. It is a space foreclosed to Fenrich, and this foreclosure is a premier feature of onticide and the violence it engenders. Unlike Shepard, 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.

The attempt to reclaim Shepard, what I am calling “the project of recuperation,” separates the redeemable from the socially dead, the liminal subject from the derelict object, and the suffering subject from the uninjurable. Stanley (2011: 18) rightly criticizes the “social screen” for its tendency to sanitize suffering and to present mourning as a “spectacle of mocking pain,” but the social screen also reflects the axiological assumptions about the value of beings. The fact that Shepard’s murder captured the screen at all is an indication that his death was registered as *a lost life* and his murder registered as unethical suffering. Where was the national media coverage on Steen Keith Fenrich? Because he could not participate in the synecdochal play between “part and whole” and because his existence (if we can say he “existed” at all) inhabited such a low frequency on the onto-existential horizon, he never died because he was already dead—there was not a “loss” because there was never a possession of life. You cannot kill what is already dead. Thus recuperation was not possible on the social screen, and the nation could not perform mourning. This is what it means for “the archive of queer

death to disappear.” The nation remembers Shepard; his suffering has a grammar, and we can articulate this grammar. His death did not, and will not, disappear. Steen’s death, however, was not registered as a death and so never really appeared at all or, more accurately, was always already absent. Overkill cuts the “Gay-Nigger #1” into an infinite array of fragments. The missing heads, legs, hands, and limbs, “unlocatable” and unrecoverable by police and investigators, constitutes an *itinerancy* unmappable and unthought within the matrix of humanist violence.

It is indeed a fact that the fungible object is always already the target of antiblack gratuitous violence, but does this satisfactorily answer the question “why Steen Fenrich?” Can we accurately characterize what happened to Fenrich as antiblackness and nothing more? Overkill exceeds antiblack violence when we factor in that Fenrich was not just a “Nigger” but also a “~~Gay~~ Nigger.” But to perform equivalence, Stanley must disavow that the term *Gay* assumes an ontological position that Fenrich could not inhabit—nor could “any other black male, regardless of his sexuality” inhabit according to Glave. Consequently, Stanley uses a “structural adjustment” to make Fenrich, and other targets of overkill, *appear* within humanism, even as he rails against this discourse. The issue with the intersectional approach is that it assumes that the term of difference *Gay* is available to all beings, even though this term is a feature of human difference, abject difference but human nevertheless. We must then contemplate a procedure of thinking through the fracturing of the fungible object and at the same time acknowledge that the terms of difference do not easily apply to this object.

Onticide: A Paradigm for “Violence”

For Jacques Derrida, writing under erasure (*sous rature*) signals the inadequacy of language, and it unveils what is concealed: the sign is never a coherent, self-enclosed entity but always fractured and opened to the very thing it purports to exclude. Since language attempts to conceal the trace of its other through its sign, language is inaccurate but necessary. The erased sign, then, points to the inherent undecidability of language, and the tradition of metaphysics and phenomenology must be deconstructed continually to illumine the trace-structure that destabilizes every sign. But one cannot simply obliterate language, the metaphysical heritage within which the subject is situated. To negotiate with the violent tradition of metaphysics, Derrida adopts writing signs under erasure to docket the inadequacy of the particular sign in question (since it attempts to police its lexical borders and exclude its “other”) and to remind us that since this heritage cannot be entirely destroyed, this language is still necessary for intelligibility and communication.

In her introduction to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1976: xviii) suggests "the authority of the text is provisional, the origin is a trace; contradicting logic, we must learn to use and erase our language at the same time." Furthermore, she argues that "the predicament of having to use resources of the heritage that one questions is the overt concern of Derrida's work" (318). Writing under erasure is a procedure that negotiates with a violent heritage by acknowledging its indispensability and exposing the violence that each sign conceals by unveiling the trace-structure and the devastating system of value embedded in language.

I propose "onticide" as a procedure of negotiating with an antiblack heritage, humanism. The erasure employed is not a deconstructive move, since the antagonism that structures an antiblack world *cannot* be deconstructed (much as the trace-structure for Derrida is undeconstructable); rather, the erasure is designed to signal a certain murderous operation through ontology. The line inserted through humanist terms of difference highlights the interdiction on black ontology and black capacity that enable these terms. Whereas Derrida's deconstruction posits the trace-structure as providing the condition of possibility for language and the world, Afro-pessimism would assert that the interdiction on blackness preconditions the operations of humanist grammar and civil society. Rather than focus on language in general, as Derrida's deconstructive procedure does, onicide is concerned with the terms of human difference, or identity, which provide the building blocks for human uniqueness and individuality. Thus the line through the term *Gay*, for example, highlights the interdiction, a ban, on blackness that renders sexuality and sexual identity possible. Onticide's erasure, then, would highlight the *original death* of blackness at the center of humanism. Humanism is fractured by this interdiction on blackness, and it is this fracturing that produces the field of human difference and uniqueness. In a word, ontology is made possible by the death of blackness—onticide. The erasure draws attention to this fact.

Onticide also provides a procedure for negotiating with (un)differentiating violence because it allows us to conceptualize the fracturing within the fungible commodity and the specificity of the violence this commodity experiences. Put differently, the erasure through the humanist terms of difference indicates the exclusion of blackness, the ban, but also the necessity of using a grammar that is inadequate. The erasure through the term *Gay*, then, is a way to claim an impossible difference, not a structural adjustment; it does not embrace the term under erasure but recognizes that without an alternative grammar beyond humanism, we must use the term as we undermine it simultaneously. Will the erasure obliterate humanism? No. Only an "end of the world" will destroy humanism and its gram-

mar, but because we are barred from the field of difference we use the term inordinately. We use humanist terms and erase them to challenge and invalidate them. The erasure also highlights the inherent violence within humanist language as it concerns *blackness*: to articulate particularity or fracturing, the particular violence that a Gay-Nigger #1 experiences in this instance, one must stand before the ban in language and align with the particularity of the term while recognizing that blackness is unrecognizable within its terms. It is a strategic alignment with a term of exclusion with the dual purpose of critiquing humanism and providing a way through the performative contradiction that silences particular violence against fungible objects. This alignment, however, is *not* an appeal for inclusivity or incorporation into the term but an attempt to express the ineffable, *difference* outside Difference.

An onticidal practice of writing Gay-Nigger #1 would communicate that (1) the term *Gay* is a feature of human difference and that the bar written through it signals the death and exclusion of blackness that makes the term possible; (2) grammatical paucity is a feature of antiblack suffering, and to provide intellectual space for certain forms of sufferings and ontologies, we juxtapose blackness (*Nigger* in this instance) with the term of human difference (*Gay*) to indicate the fracturing of the fungible commodity; (3) Gay-Nigger stands in for a conceptual crisis that we do not quite have a grammar to describe, but without it the violence against beings like Steen Keith Fenrich would become silenced by our attempts to avoid contradiction; (4) we do not erase the term *Nigger* in this instance because that is one term that is available for blacks as objects. *Nigger* is not a feature of *human* difference, so it does not orbit in the symbolic as the term *Gay*. Oticide cannot ultimately deconstruct the terms of difference, since we will never gain equivalence to humanity by inversion and displacement (the procedure of Deconstruction). Given that antiblackness has rendered inversion and displacement impossibilities, by muting the black body and stripping it of “ontological resistance,” 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.

In meditating on the problem of grammar and violent syntax, Spillers (2003: 226) suggests: “The project of liberation for African-Americans has found urgency in two passionate motivations that are twinned—(1) to break apart, to rupture violently the laws of American behavior that make such [anti-black] syntax possible; (2) to introduce a new *semantic* field/fold more appropriate to his/her own historic movement.” Although Afro-pessimism does not embrace the project of liberation—since liberation is an impossibility in an antiblack world—oticide

would push us to consider the necessity of the second proposition that Spillers presents. This procedure is an attempt to move us toward a new semantic field more appropriate to the fungible commodity. Because we are unable to completely purge the field of humanism and antiblackness, onticide would expose the ban at the center of this field and imagine new lexical material to articulate the density of black suffering. Again, the procedure that I am proposing, onticide, is a way to think through the ontological implications of violence and the way this violence fractures the fungible commodity in multiple ways. Since blacks are excluded from the realm of Difference, we cannot properly call the fragmentation “difference” or “identity” (in the sense that we would for humans). Rather, the procedure, mindful of the double bind that humanism places on blackness, invades the field of difference insubordinately, by aligning with terms of exclusion as a way to undermine these very terms.

Thus we can understand the violence that positioned Fenrich as “inexistent existence” (*Gay Nigger #1*) through an onticidal procedure instead of an intersectional one. What distinguishes the two procedures is that the intersectional approach seeks to understand blackness through forms of *equivalence* with human identity. In this instance, queerness and blackness are structurally aligned such that they become somewhat interchangeable forms of abstraction or are intelligible through each other (we do not need a bar through *Gay* with the intersectional approach because an interdiction against blackness does not exist, so the term *Gay* is readily available for blackness). We know queerness more accurately because we know blackness, and we know blackness more intimately because we know queerness, according to this approach. Put differently, the intersectional approach makes epistemological claims by presenting blackness and queerness (and other forms of difference) as ontologically equivalent. The epistemological thrust of this approach is to figure blackness into the field of Difference *without* a barrier. The “*Gay Nigger #1*” is a possibility, then, through this approach—even for those who embrace Afro-pessimistic thematics.

Onticide, conversely, refuses the epistemological temptation to understand blackness through maneuvers of equivalence; no form of human difference will render blackness intelligible. Onticide strategically erases and aligns with terms of difference to explicate the violent fracturing of the fungible commodity. This alignment does not render queerness and blackness equivalent, but signals the lack of a grammar to describe fracturing outside human difference. The erasure “plays” with difference precisely to expose the violence that sustains it—the interdiction at the heart of humanism. The “alignment” that I have in mind here is not an endorsement of queerness or any human difference—blackness cannot fully

recognize itself within the terms of human difference; instead, the alignment is more of a juxtaposition with a term of exclusion for the purpose of articulating ontological violence.

Antiblack Violence, Ontological Difference, Surplus

The difficult question that remains, the intransigent remainder, asks the (im)possible: What is the “status” of the *violence* onticide addresses? Is it ontological or ontic? Or both? Or neither? Conceptualizing the *violence* that situates the “Gay Nigger #1” in the interstices of existence (or a hologram of semiotics, representation, and meaning) is a difficult task, primarily because this violence fractures the discourses of humanism. What I have attempted to do throughout this article is to argue that we *lack* a grammar to describe the “murder” of Steen Fenrich—and that this *lack* is a feature of antiblack suffering. To say that we lack a grammar renders the violence (if we can even call it violence) literally untranslatable within the humanist schema of violence, redress, and suffering.

This brings us back to the epigraph: “Violence is a matrix of (im)possibility, a paradigm of ontology.” To understand violence as “a matrix of the (im)possible” is to think of the matrix *itself* as flawed, an inadequate semiotic/hermeneutical field in relation to blackness, but an inadequacy that *enables* the *possibility* for human understanding of violence. Put differently, “violence” as a concept, as an epistemological object, relies on a *matrix of Being* (the division between the ontic/ontological) to provide it with meaning and understanding. We can situate “antigay” violence, for example, within this matrix—for the human *being* can lay recourse to Being (the ontological) in an appeal *against* violence. *Being* grounds one’s understanding of violence—where violence is understood as a *violation* of one’s Being. Ontic Violence (i.e., what we might call “performative” or “ritualistic” instantiations) opens up a “possibility” to the extent that this violence brings the human back to the inviolability of his or her Being—since the matrix of violence can accommodate the Being of the human.

When discussing antiblackness, however, the “im” of (im)possibility is foregrounded because *the ontological difference is not an issue for blacks; it is only an issue for the human-being*. Antiblack violence is an (im)possible matrix because ontology does not explain the *being* of the black, according to Fanon. Ontology fails to explain not only the *being* of the black but also the *violence* the black experiences in an antiblack world. Thus we cannot *properly* situate black suffering within the division of ontic/ontological or performative/structural because these divisions *assume being where none exists for the black* (we might say that there is

“existence,” if not ontology, but even this term is inadequate to explain what inhabits such a low frequency). But given the dominance of humanism, this matrix (as the division between ontic/ontological), we are left to situate antiblack “violence” within this matrix of Being—a forced contradiction of sorts. Antiblack violence is *neither* ontological *nor* ontic, since the ontological difference and Being are not an issue for it (thus the signifier “onticide” is a play and critique on this impossibility). This is why Afro-pessimism suggests 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.”

Can we make a distinction between diurnal/everyday violence (e.g., lynching) and a violence that structures the world as it concerns antiblackness? I would argue that antiblack violence is *gratuitous* precisely because it blurs the distinction between the “everyday” and “world constituting” violence. Following the ontic/ontological distinction, everyday violence (ontic) follows the logic of transgression (even the transgression of nonnormative behavior). But antiblack violence *cannot be explained ontically because it is not predicated on transgression but existence itself*. We think of “existence itself” as a feature, or issue, of the ontological, but this division does not hold because gratuity is a problem defying the ontological difference. Thus antiblack violence is read as (im)possible within a humanist matrix *because* it is gratuitous—without causation, without reason, without division, without solution, and without recourse to the field of Being. This makes antiblack violence *distinct* from other forms of violence, violence that can be understood within the ontological difference—since *being is an issue for it*. But I must say, even for those who would argue that they experience “ontological violence”—the loss of human dignity following Arendt’s theory, for example—the victim of such violence *can still lay claim to Being* (and human rights). Ontology explains the existence of these victims, and ontology, ultimately, is the field within which one appeals for redress, justice, liberty, and freedom. This is not an option for blacks, and violence continues without end—gratuitous violence.

The word *onticide*, then, is both a critique of the antiblack, humanist matrix that renders violence intelligible (the ontic/ontological divide) for the human and also a procedure of addressing *surplus violence*. I am calling this violence “surplus,” an excess or exorbitance, because “being” is still a problem for blacks on the “ontic” level as well, if we are forced into this matrix. When a black object is lynched, castrated, raped, or beaten unconscious by police, for example, this violence *is* world-constituting (not just performative or structural) for an antiblack world. Each “violent act” reconstitutes and sustains the world and its institutions. We might even suggest that the human’s division between the ontic and ontological

conceals this very fact that *gratuitous violence breaks down ontological difference*. We do not have a *matrix* to explain violence that collapses the ontological difference; this “collapse” is a feature of antiblack suffering which we *lack* a grammar to describe. So the inquiries—Is antiblack violence ontological? Is anti-gay violence, experienced by the black object, ontic/performative?—rely on an ontological distinction that conceals the uniqueness of black suffering. At the fault line, the break between the ontological and the ontic, “violence” is (im)possible—unthinkable within the grammars of violence and Being available to us.

The *uniqueness* of antiblack violence is also important to reiterate, which is why Wilderson would aver it is “without analogue” (*surplus* violence and anti-queer violence are not synonymous, since surplus violence exceeds both anti-queer violence and antiblackness). Indeed, many populations have experienced horrific forms of violence and continue to suffer from wanton violence—for example, non-heteronormative populations. But the violence *humans* experience can be mapped along the ontological distinction, and this is precisely why humans have a “grammar of suffering” (and can propose “solutions” to the problem of violence). Ontological difference makes such a grammar *possible*. Antiblack violence is unique *because* it cannot be mapped along this difference, thus rendering the “matrix” (im)possible. Furthermore, ontology becomes a mere “paradigm” in the way Agamben describes paradigm as a sort of philosophical allegory, a putting in parallel of two things to illuminate both. Ontology does not *apply* to blacks but can only serve as a structural allegory through which violence is read.¹²

Where does this leave us in our analysis of onticide? Steen Fenrich is always already situated in a matrix of (im)possibility, a matrix that disables conceptualization of his suffering while enabling the grammar of human suffering. But the “Gay” written on his skull presents a problem for this matrix—it attempts to apply the ontological difference to him, so that his suffering can be understood. I have argued that this application is a conceptual error. How do we situate the violence under the banner *Gay* within this matrix? The ontological difference, the matrix of understanding, is still inapplicable even though the signifier “Gay” is written on his skull. This is precisely the conundrum, the impasse we reach. Moreover, even though antigay violence might register as ontic or performative, this does not mean that the murder of Fenrich is also ontic. We lack a matrix (since “violence” as a matrix is impossible because of its humanist presumptions) within which to place *what* happened to him. Perhaps “what” happened to Fenrich is *not* antigay, since he cannot lay recourse to the Being of the human, but it is *surplus*. It is exorbitant to antiblackness, but an exorbitance that serves only as

a thought experiment (within the discourses of humanism), since antiblack violence is already an exorbitance to this matrix (How can “something” be exorbitant to what is already an exorbitance?). Thus the signifier “surplus” is the attempt to foreground this impasse, this fault line. Without recourse to “Gay,” the surplus remains unthinkable and the violence remains unintelligible. This is not the “fault” of Afro-pessimism, however, as much as it is a *symptom* of the vicious matrix itself (the forced double bind is the *discursive* manifestation of black suffering). Onticide, then, presents a *surplus*, which disables the ontological distinction and confounds our analysis of antiblackness (i.e., the exorbitance of the exorbitant). It is a violence that is neither ontological nor ontic but “something” that preconditions the very ontological distinction, which gives intelligibility to the matrix of violence—(im)possible. It is a “violence” for which we lack a grammar or a matrix within which to situate it, but which makes black *gay*-existence unbearable.

Conclusion

The “Gay Nigger #1” is a problem for thought, to borrow Nahum Chandler’s (2013) phrase.¹³ On the one hand, it does not readily *appear* within the frame of philosophical or theoretical discourse, and one often resorts to “structural adjustments” to render it visible. On the other hand, by making the “Nigger” *appear* human, structural adjustments distort antiblackness and the violence of fungibility. Situated at this tension between humanism and fungibility lie Fenrich’s dismembered flesh and a brutality that is either misunderstood as human violation or subsumed into antiblackness, thus denying its complexity and fullness.

“Gay-Nigger #1” and the violence that it engenders present methodological problems, which are difficult to resolve. Onticide is an attempt to think through these methodological problems, mindful of the fact that we owe it to Steen Fenrich, and many other beautiful *beings*, to “make them appear” without simplifying the particularity of the violence or the structural position they inhabited. Thus we must contend with an exceptionally violent tradition, humanism, to provide intellectual and philosophical space for them. Afro-pessimism, I believe, provides the *best* philosophical frame to begin this, and onicide would assist us in holding the tension between humanism and fungibility without erasing the bodies pulverized by surplus violence.

One must articulate the underbelly of humanism *through* and *against* humanism—the discursive terrain is uneven and unjust. If there is indeed “no outside” to the “master” text of humanism, the methodological problem is a violence that forecloses the articulation of blackness from the start. Blackness is a textual

“slave” lacking recognition or resistance. The “Gay-Nigger #1” is entrapped in this methodological quagmire. This is its dreaded condition, and it is a condition that we must continue to theorize around, even if we can never actually approach it.

Notes

This piece is an extensive revision of an earlier presentation of the paper, designed for a conference. It can be found at <https://illwilleditions.noblogs.org/files/2015/09/Warren-Onticide-Afropessimism-Queer-Theory-and-Ethics-READ.pdf>

1. Serge Leclaire (1998) presents a psychoanalytic method of reading the “symptom” as a letter (or a message) that contains *savoir* (or a knowledge of the unconscious), knowledge the analysand disavows. This letter transmits a message that can eventually, with analysis, be decoded in the analytic setting. But Spillers presents another aspect of the “political unconscious,” as Fredric Jameson (1981) might call it. This letter reveals itself as a hieroglyphic, and we are without the tools to translate it. The letter’s status as hieroglyph is “sign” of black suffering without any recourse to “traversal,” as a potential solution. My argument, here, is that the markings on Steen’s body do not translate into the “letters of humanism.” In fact, the wounds and gashes constitute an untranslatable aspect of “violence”—which we might call gratuitous. Humanism *lacks* a letter to understand gratuity, and it remains a “puzzle.”
2. I would also suggest that Steen’s dismembered body is the literal projection of the unconscious fantasy of fragmentation—the “body in bits and pieces.” Jacques Lacan (1953) asserts that the problem of bodily incoherence returns to the subject in fantasy—this Real that continues to torment the subject. I would argue that the “fungible” object serves as an object of narcissistic coherence, and thus the terror of incoherence is projected onto black bodies.
3. I borrow the idea of a problem space from Scott 2004: 4.
4. In this difficult text, Alain Badiou continues the work started in *Being and Event* and argues for a return to mathematics, in particular set theory (multiplicity), to understand Being (as the ultimate way for contending with transcendental thinking). This text is of great interest to me because Badiou centers the distinction between “existence” and “being,” which mathematical sets illumine. In particular he suggests, “If the degree of an identity of a thing to itself is the minimal degree, we can say that this “thing does not exist in the world. The thing is in the world, but with an intensity which is equal to zero. So we can say its existence is a non-existence [as opposed to the thing that has an identity to itself of maximum degrees and *does* exist, which would be my reading of the human in this analysis].” I borrow this passage not because I am wedded to the idea of the multiplicity and void, which set theory illumines, but because the idea of degrees of existence that are not exhausted, or subsumed, by being is important. It provides a *heuristic frame* to the *problem* (of

black being) of a thing existing in the world (with low intensity) and a “void” being (of which infinite multiplication is a feature. This is contrary to Badiou’s understanding of “Being,” as possibility but, again, I think it is a great point of departure—heuristically at least). I would argue that the gulf between existence and being is a product of antiblackness, and “violence” reduces black being to low intensity. Thus, I read the text as an *allegory* of blackness and not merely as a critique of Heidegger’s shortcomings.

5. In *Humanism*, Tony Davies (2008) covers many forms of humanism—from theological, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and contemporary iterations of it. Although the term *humanism* is diverse, a common thread across these iterations is the search for man’s essence. It is this “essence” that is the focus of this article. I am arguing that despite the diversity of humanism, blackness has consistently remained excluded from this essential nature of man.
6. I am hyphenating *human-being* to emphasize the being from which the human grounds its existence. This grounding, I am arguing, is not universal. Blackness cannot ground existence in such being, and this is the crux of black suffering in an anti-black world.
7. For Wynter, Man “over-represents” himself as Human—where “man” and “human” are synonyms, but one feature of a violent episteme in need of transformation (she offers, via Frantz Fanon, “sociogeny” as an alternative to the hegemony of Darwin and Economic systems, which posit Man as Human). My analysis aligns with Wynter’s critique of Man, and its antiblack substantiation, but I am not interested in reclaiming the human or reinventing the human. I think we will also be entangled in the violence of humanism as long as we cling to this signifier. Thus, onticide is not a procedure for reclamation of the onto-metaphysical presumptions of the “human” but my attempt to reject the human, which continues to blackness—to the extent that one could ever fully reject the human, since we are entrapped in metaphysics and humanism.
8. I discuss this in depth in “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope” (Warren 2015).
9. In this important collection of essays, Žižek insists, following the coordinates of fantasy Lacan lays out, that ideology covers over an “abyss” or kernel of vacuity and impasse at the heart of philosophical thinking. For example, he argues that Heidegger encountered the “abyss of radical subjectivity” in *Being and Time*, an abyss announced by Kant’s problems with the transcendental imagination, in his attempt to provide coherency for the historicity of Being and “time” that orients *Dasein* (Žižek 2000: 23). For my purposes, antiblackness is also a feature of the abyss, which fractures coherency for philosophical system because it is inassimilable. For example, Heidegger cannot envision “equipment in human form” (the black object) because he makes a clear distinction between *Dasein* and equipment. The blurring of the distinction is “unthought,” and the best he can do is to offer something pathetic, as in “primitive *Dasein*” (ahistorical cultures), which lack an *understanding* of Being, and

thus is unable to present the *question* of Being (is, then, ontological difference an *issue* for primitive Dasein?) in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* (Heidegger 1984: 138, 174). Whereas Žižek focuses on the transcendental imagination as a “deadlock,” *primitive Dasein* (a “being” who exists but cannot pose a proper ontological question) is the philosophical abyss that antiblackness presents and remains unthought in humanism and antihumanists threads. Perhaps “primitive Dasein” is the instantiation of an *imaginative procedure* that Heidegger refuses, and which continues in philosophical practice.

10. This is a riff on Deleuze and Guattari 2004.
11. Judith Butler (2015) also explores the function of desire in the Hegelian scene of self-constitution.
12. Agamben (2009: 18) states, “The term that is to function as a paradigm is disactivated from its normal usage not so as to be displaced into another area. . . . the paradigm is a singular case that is isolated from the context to which it belongs only to the extent that by exhibiting its singularity it renders a new group of phenomena intelligible whose homogeneity the paradigm itself constitutes.” Ontology, in this way, serves as a paradigm for antiblack violence, and antiblack violence serves as a paradigm for ontology. Using ontology as a paradigm for antiblackness illumines the abyss of ontology and the death that renders it possible.
13. In this philosophical masterpiece, Chandler presents DuBois as a precursor, or forerunner, of deconstructive practice. According to Chandler, DuBois not only troubles racial distinction but also the *ground* of Being itself, on which racial logic is situated. Chandler’s practice is to “desediment” this ground. Thinking Being, in this way, becomes a “problem for thought,” for there is no “pure” ontological ground from which to conceptualize Being—Being is something other. The practice of desedimentation, then, is in alignment with certain aspects of onticide, with the exception that I believe, ultimately, that antiblackness is “undeconstructable,” and *this* is the problem for thought that deconstruction can never really approach—a problem that the “GayNigger #1” foregrounds.

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