# Onticide
Afropessimism, Queer Theory, & Ethics

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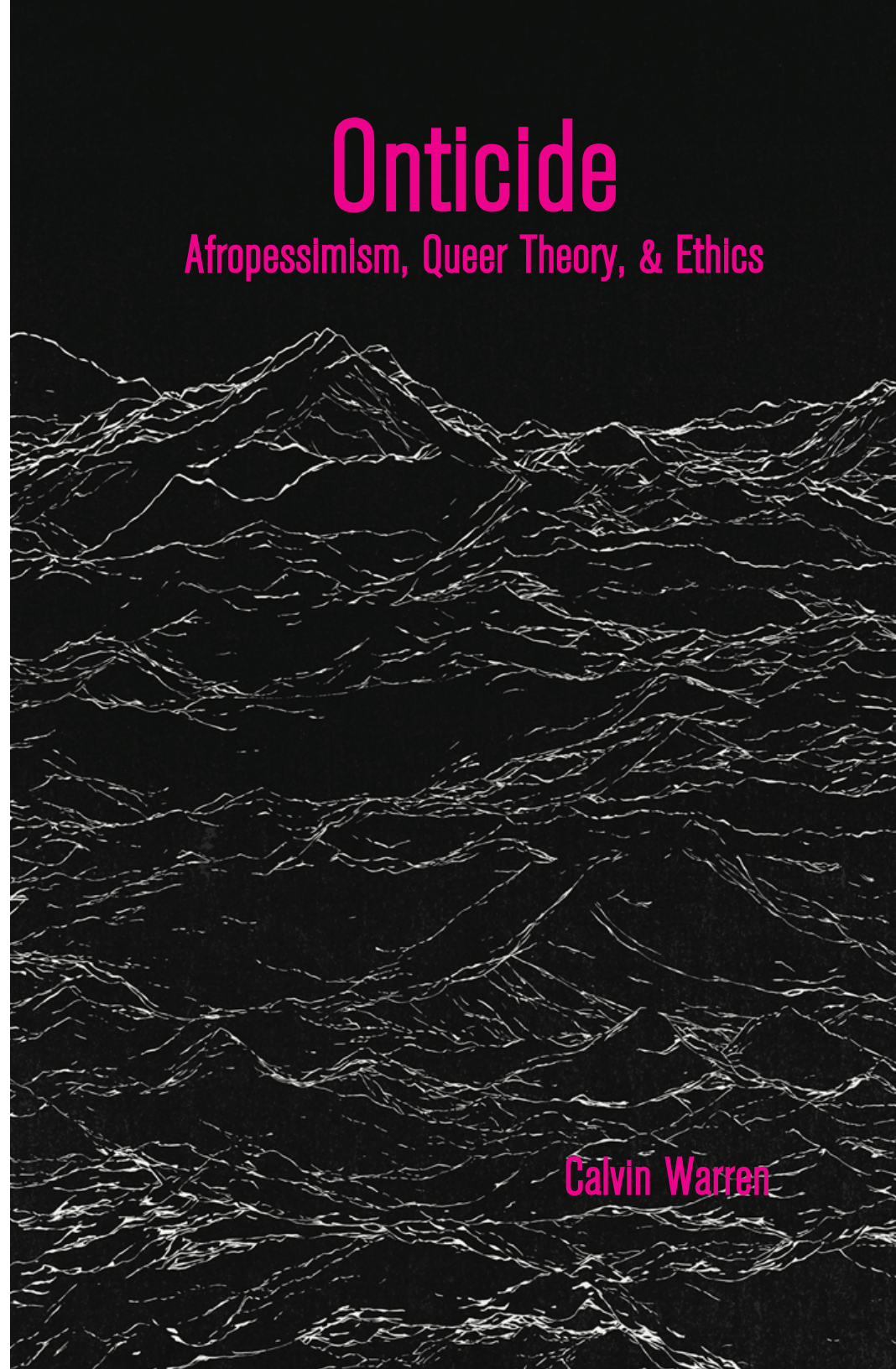
the New World that continues in the "present': "But I would make a distinction in this case between "body" and "flesh" and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject positions. In that sense, before the "body" there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities in concert with the African "middle man," we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the *flesh*, as the person of African females and males register the wounding. If we think of the "flesh" as a primary narrative, then, we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or "escaped" overboard." Spillers, *White, Black & in Color*, 206.

as the failure of proper or affirming representation, we might think of it as the double-bind of anti-blackness. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

[15] Alain Badiou, *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*. Trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

[16] Eric Stanley, "Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture." *Social Text* 107. Vol. 29. No.2 Summer 2011, 9.

[17] *Ibid*. pg. 2 and footnote 5.

[18] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004)

[19] Saidiya Hartman, "The Position of the Unthought: An Interview with Saidiya Hartman." *Qui Parle* 13.2 (2003).

[20] Thomas Glave, *Words to Our Now*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 200- 204.

[21] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Waking Nightmares: Zakiyyah Iman Jackson on David Marriott." *GLQ* 17: 2-3. 358.

[22] Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 35-63

[23] Nahum Chandler, "Originary Displacement." *Boundary 2* 27(3): 249-286.

[24] Sexton and Copeland borrow this term from Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*. They use this term to understand black existence as situated outside of humanism's grammar. It is an unthinkable life without ontological resistance. Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland. *Qui Parle*, vol. 13. No. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003). *On the Postcolony*. Trans. A. M. Berrett, Janet Roitman, Murray Last, and Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). Hortense Spillers brilliantly distinguishes "body" from "flesh" as the initial violation of

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[11] Serge Leclaire, *Psychoanalyzing: On the Order of the Unconscious and the Practice of the Letter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[12] Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 207.

[13] 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, "Some Reflections of the Ego," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34 (1953): 13.

[14] The "danger" of recounting this violence, and of anti-black violence in general, is that is it easily caught up in the pornographic pleasures of black suffering. Each narration repeats the initiating moment of destruction and, inevitably, exceeds the intention of the author. The "text," then, does not belong to the author, and because the author cannot control its interpretation or its "psychic destination," Steen's body could become vulnerable to an insatiable racist gaze and potentially become an "irresistible source of destructive sensuality," (Spillers). In her groundbreaking text *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman reflects on this dilemma in her reading of Aunt Hester's beating in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and asks: "how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle"— especially when the recitation of such horrors often "immures us to the pain by virtue of their familiarity" (3)? The line between witness and voyeur is a delicate one, and representation is situated at this treacherous boundary. Fred Moten's *In the Break* perspicuously acknowledges the inevitability of such reproduction, even when we attempt to avoid the horrific scene. Each refusal is a reconstitution. The dialogue between Hartman and Moten, I suggest, demonstrates the "paradox of representing black suffering." Because "black suffering" lacks a grammar and is anamorphic to the field of representation, it is situated outside of the humanist discourses of empathy, relief, and justice. In other words, there isn't an alternative representative space outside the pornographic because blackness is illegible within humanist representation. Each attempt to situate the black pained body within the field of humanist representation will ultimately fail. Rather than thinking of "pornotroping"

[2] Wilderson refers to this as an "unspeakable" ethics, or an ethics that "dare not speak its name" because of its tendentious foundations.

[3] I borrow the idea of a problem-space from David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

[4] Jared Sexton, "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts" *Lateral*, issue 1, and Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*.

[5] I am describing a paradigm of discourses in queer theory that might be called "anti-humanist." This is not the queer theory that avowedly retains the "human" as a site of agency, hope, and political transformation (e.g. Jose Esteban Munoz's *Queer Utopia*), but it is a queer theory that is organized around various forms of rejection, or divestiture. The human rejects its capacities or privileges as an act of political critique or "masocritcal pleasure" (e.g. Lee Edelman's *No Future*, giving up the privilege of "futurity/time-capacity," Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, divesting masculinity, among many others).

[6] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Ronald Judy, "Fanon's Body of Black Experience" in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Lewis Gordon, T. demean Sharpley-Whiting and Renee T. White. Eds. (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

[7] Hortense Spillers, *Black, White & in Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206.

[8] This is a riff on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. Trans. Robert Harley, Mark Seem, and Helen R, Lane (New York: Continuum, 2004).

[9] Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 208.

[10] See *Black Queer Studies*. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson. Eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) and *Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality*. Devon W. Carbado. Ed. (NYU, 1999).

If the position of the Black is, as I argue, a paradigmatic impossibility in the Western Hemisphere, indeed, in the world, in other words, if a Black is the very antithesis of a Human subject, as imagined by Marxism and psychoanalysis, then his or her paradigmatic exile is not simply a function of repressive practices on the part of institutions (as political science and sociology would have it). *This banishment from the Human fold is to be found most profoundly in the emancipatory meditations of Black people's staunchest "allies".*

—Frank Wilderson

Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside, does not allow us to understand the existence of the black man.

—Franz Fanon

I

The "Black Queer" does not and cannot exist. This is an ethical statement about the tension between what Frank Wilderson would call "an experience of unfreedom" (Queerness) and a structural position of non-ontology (Blackness). [1] This term "non-ontology" suggests a negative axis of being—being not predicated on mere appearance in the phenomenal real (Fanon)—ontology's necessary exclusion. The "black queer" throws into sharper relief a deep problem between ontology, freedom, and ethics.

We could suggest that the term "black queer" dramatizes the fundamental tension in humanism itself, especially contemporary iterations of it: how to eradicate the violence that limits human potential, and expand the category of the human, when the violence rejected is absolutely necessary for the human to exist as such. In other words, humanism is caught in an ethical dilemma, or double-bind. The "emancipatory meditations" against the violence that produces contingent experiences of unfreedom for humans also provides the grounding for the category of the human around which these meditations mobilize. The "human" is a repository of violent practices and technologies that has crystalized over time. The ethical impulse is to resolve the tension within humanism, to wrest the "human" from the historical violence upon which it is founded. This ethical enterprise inevitably fails, for in the end, the human is nothing more than this very violence, rendering violence and the human mutually constitutive and coterminous. The experience of unfreedom (suffering) is the outcome of this violence. Making this suffering legible is the ethical drive of humanist thinking and the objective of a politics invested in "freedom." Violence, humanity, unfreedom, and freedom constitute an unending cycle of desire, deferral, and despair. This cycle of violence captures the tension in humanism that much of contemporary theory either attempts to resolve (Ethics) or wishes to abandon (divesture).

The violence that constitutes the human and produces suffering is sustained through an ontological antagonism. The boundaries of the human are shored-up by this antagonism and without it, the human, and the world within which it lives, would cease to exist. The non- ontology of blackness secures the boundaries of the human; it delimits the coordinates of the human. Blackness is an exclusion that enables

here is the activation of 'flesh,' which is different from the body—bodies do not exist without the flesh, and it is the "flesh" that was stolen from the captive, and it is the flesh that is irretrievable, despite "optimistic" desires to reclaim it. [25]

The "black queer" and the violence that engenders it present methodological problems that are unresolvable. Because of these problems, I have had to write within the tension of impossible communicability; this necessitates using paradox, oxymoron, and contradiction to describe the indescribable and to name the innominate. This is inescapable. One must articulate the underbelly of humanism *through* 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 "black queer" is entrapped in this methodological quagmire. This is the dreaded condition of the "black queer," and it is a condition that we must continue to theorize around, even if we can never actually approach it.

NOTES

[1] Frank Wilderson provides an important distinction between freedom as an ontological concept (i.e. situated on the horizon of the 'infinite') and freedom as a political and contingent concept (i.e freedom *from* forms oppression such as patriarchy, heteronormativity, etc). For Wilderson, the theoretical transition from freedom as an ontological concept to freedom as contingency is a feature of humanism that enables anti-blackness to escape ethical critique. For if freedom is returned to its "ontological" origins, the unfreedom of the captive would pose a serious challenge to the enterprise of ethics itself. "Black freedom" would require the world to dissolve; "freedom from the world, freedom from humanity, and freedom from everyone (including one's black self) is tantamount to the dissolution of the world and its institutions." Frank Wilderson, *Red, White, & Black* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 22-23.

these are *human* attributes, we need a way of describing the violence directed toward the "inconceivable being-ness" of the black queer. The lack of a proper grammar outside of humanism to *name* both the target of this violence and the violence itself is a theoretical problem that redoubles itself in physical forms of destruction. I have given a *name* to this physical and theoretical violence—"onticide." It is the meeting of the non-ontology of blackness, sustained through the viciousness of anti-blackness, and the extreme condition of suffering, sustained through compulsory performances, practices, and pleasures (anti-gay violence).

The "Black Queer," then, is a problem for thought, to borrow Nahum Chandler's phrase, and to suggest that it does not "exist" is to indicate that it is outside of meaning and humanism's grammar. [23] To assert its existence would amount to a conceptual contradiction because "Blackness" is the ontological position of the derelict object, unredeemable, and "Queerness" is the site of a subjectivity pushed to its limit—pushed, but yet within the scope of humanity. The two positions are not reconcilable, and when they do intersect, the result is fatal. The suffering of anti-gay violence is within the world; we have a grammar to capture its horror. The "suffering" of the black-object is not of this world—it sustains the world, but is not of it—and the "suffering" of this object lacks a proper grammar (the word "suffering" itself must be written in quotation marks or under erasure in relation to the black-as-object). The 'being' situated at the site of this violence is what we call a "black queer," but it is a 'being' that does not exist within the onto-existential horizon, and if we insist on the "existence" of this being it inhabits such a low frequency that its existence becomes inconsequential.

Indeed, bodies are visible and perceptible to the 'eye,' but every seeing, every phenomenal entity must first have a place within the Symbolic before it is comprehensible. *Bodies without flesh*, without the narratives of life, movement, and futurity that the flesh presents to the world, cannot be said really to exist at all—they are specters of ontology, socially dead bodies, stripped of flesh and existence. This social death is what Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland would call "raw life." It is a life indistinguishable from death, existence reduced to "meat"—which is really no human existence at all. [24] What you "see" when you look at a "black queer" is the incomprehensible, the outer-worldly. To put things differently, my conception of existence

ontology. In its exclusion from the realm of ontology, blackness is unthinkable, innominate, and paradoxical. In essence, blackness *exists to not exist*—it embodies the most perplexing paradox that sustains ontology (or in psychoanalytic terms it is the Real of ontology). The field of Ethics, then, conceals a dirty secret: the ontological ground upon which it is situated is unethical. Ethics subverts itself, but it can only exist through this very subversion. All ethical discourses organized around the elimination of suffering or the experiences of freedom are imbricated in this unethicality. Blackness is both the life and death of humanism and its ethics, and for this reason, it lacks a legible grammar to articulate this dread. It is an incomprehensible suffering, or an unending injury not understood as legitimate injury. To take matters further, there would be no human suffering without the prior exclusion of blackness, but there would also be no world or human without this exclusion either. It is an unresolvable antagonism. [2]

II

The term "black queer" is a philosophical conundrum, or problem space, precisely because it carries this antagonism, the ethical dilemma of humanism, within its discursive structure. [3] It brings two crises into juxtaposition creating somewhat of a theoretical fatality, a devastating crime scene. At the site of this fatality lies a mutilated, supine black body 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 was the murder weapon, and what was the injury—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 theoretical and philosophical instruments that we have to examine and explain this scenario—which I will call "queer theory" and "Afro-pessimism"—fracture around the "black queer," endlessly encircling it, but never able to approach it. In fact, queer theory

and Afro- pessimism are located in different philosophical registers, which are incompatible and irreconcilable. These discourses collide, or crash, at the site of the "black queer"—the black queer becomes a blind spot distorting the field of vision for both discourses, and the result is fatal. The desire to find synthesis and common ground between the two enterprises often results in theoretical misrecognition, false analogies, and impoverished ethics. The "black queer," then, is theoretically homeless and vulnerable to the impact of discourses traveling at high velocity. Perhaps we ask too much of theory and philosophy. This essay meditates on this itinerancy.

What is seductive about queer theory is that it provides a grammar of suffering for this fatality. The metaphorical space of the closet, freedom from injustice, heterosexist violence, among other concepts makes queer theory almost irresistible to the theorist yearning for a grammar to communicate the horrors of anti-black and non-heteronormative violence. The horizon of queer communicability, however, is not that of the black—as the black-as-object is situated out of space, time, and the world itself. [4] Can we address the being fallen off the map of conceivability? We depend on the grammar of queer theory to salvage this being, to reconstitute it within the logics of life and death (a redemptive "hodological space"). This temptation presents an ethical crisis because the grammar of queer theory is predicated upon the very dissolution of the being it is called upon to salvage. The "black queer" signifies a double-death, a redoubling of the internecine processes of erasure. Indeed, "queerness" is impossible without the derelict being of blackness—its grammar, object, and predicating "subject" emerge through the death sentence of blackness. Queer theory is always already in a relationship with blackness, but not as an "ally."

We might think of queer theory as a particular humanism (a "closeted humanism"), even as it announces its intention to unravel, displace, and discredit the very humanism that sustains it. It is a disavowed humanism—a humanism that must sustain itself through technologies of forgetfulness, historical suppression, and reanimated/reconfigured social violence. This form of humanism, hiding behind walls of radical proclamations ("emancipatory meditations"), denies itself only to reconstitute itself in the final outcome. In other words, queer theory is caught in a tortuous bind that neither provides ethical relief nor emancipatory transformations for blackness; it parasitically

lematic—despite its desire to exceed identity, sexual practices, etc. We do not have a proper grammar outside of humanism to describe the domain of "pleasure," "desire," "sexuality," and "gender" for the socially dead object. This is part of the torment and dereliction of blackness; it is placed outside of life and its customary lexis. And this is what it means to inhabit the position of the "unthought" and the incommunicable.

IV

What I have argued throughout this essay is that the "black queer" is a conceptual problematic that is not fully understood in any of the theoretical discourses intended to explicate it. Neither "Queer theory" nor "Afro-pessimism" can articulate the fatal collision that pushes a being outside the symbolics of temporality, space, and meaning. Queer theory's "closeted humanism" reconstitutes the "human" even as it attempts to challenge and, at times, erase it. The violence of captivity provides the condition of possibility for queer theory. Queerness must disavow this violence to assume the posture of "emancipatory meditation," in some cases, and "radical divesture" in other cases. The social does not exist without the mutilated body of the captive—reduced to a "thing," a being for the captive. Queer theory has yet to acknowledge or engage this history of violence at its core—every radical proclamation whether "anti" humanist or avowedly humanist is imbricated and complicit in this violence.

Afro-pessimism, conversely, explicates the violence of captivity and rightly understands it as constitutive of the world itself. It, however, is caught in the "double-bind of communicability" that repeats the very violence of undifferentiation that it critiques. This double-bind is not the "creation" of the Afro-pessimist, but is, instead, an unavoidable violence that exposes some black-objects to forms of anti-blackness not properly theorized (e.g. if we think of "anti-gay" violence as a particular form, or iteration, of anti-blackness itself). Because undifferentiation assumes a homogenous object pulverized by a monolithic violence, it often conceals the insidious ways that anti-blackness cuts the object differently. Some violence is directed to *specific* "object-forms," and although we can not properly call this specificity "identity," "sexuality," "gender," or "orientation" because

ceptual fallacy and results in nothing more than a "structural adjustment"—the attempt to incorporate blacks into the fold of humanity through the grammar of another's suffering. The queer subject is constructed as degenerate and transgressive, but the fundamental distinction between the 'degenerate queer' and the 'derelict black-as-object' is that one possesses a grammar to express unfreedom and the other lacks communicability altogether.

We can approach this from a different angle: A person understood as "queer" could purchase a black-object from the auction block like his/her hetero-normative counterpart. In those rare instances where the black-as-object was able to participate in this economy and purchase a black-object as well, the black purchaser could, at any moment, become another commodity—if found without freedom papers or validation from a white guardian—the system of fungible blackness made any black interchangeable and substitutional. This movement between object and subject is not a problem for queerness, but is an unresolvable problem for blackness. This is the important difference between the two. Queerness does not inhabit the position of the object—which is the ontology of blackness. Blackness is much more than deviance; it is the object that allows the distinction between deviance and normativity to have any meaning at all. To equate blackness with queerness because of shared discourses of deviance, transgression, and perversity misses the "existential negation" of blackness. While we can talk about the non-normativity of liminal subjects, blackness does not travel within the Symbolic the way queerness does and must be conceptualized with different terms.

What, then, is queer about blackness? Nothing. In using the grammar of queerness to explicate the structure of blackness, we equate fungability with the repertoire of non-normative sexualities that constitute conditions of *human* suffering. In this sense, we get a nuanced interpretation of Hortense Spillers's profound suggestion that under captivity "the customary aspects of sexuality, including 'reproduction,' 'motherhood,' 'pleasure,' and 'desire' are all thrown into crisis" (221). Blackness does rupture sexuality and gender in that it is (mis) applied. This creates something like *personification*, but in this case, it is the application of human qualities to a *sentient* object. Sexuality is dubiously appropriate because it belongs to the human, and the signifier "queerness" cannot sidestep this fact or resolve this prob-

feeds off of the black body and needs this mutilated body as its site of constitution. Many will argue that the queer is not a human, but ruptures humanity and becomes more like a "non-human" or an "anti-human." For these scholars, queerness is inimical to humanism and presents a serious challenge of its presumptions. This, I would argue, is not the case. The fundamental assumptions about human capacity and space orientation are quite present in queer theory. The anti-humanist thread in queer theory is really a reconstitution of the liberal subject—a liberal subject that *divests* its privilege. Divestiture retains the old subject under suspicion and, at the same time, disavows this retention. Abnegation and divestiture are still entangled in the "sinews of capacity and power," as Wilderson would call it; furthermore, only a "subject" situated in space and time, with certain entitlements, capacities, and privilege can surrender, or give up, privilege. It is precisely this "subject" that emerges from the antagonistic violence of humanism, and it is this subject that is inimical to the black-as-object. [5]

Afro-pessimism refigures theory from the position of the derelict object. It acknowledges that the black-as-object is situated outside of space, time, and the world, and therefore, the black "does not exist" in the world because it lacks symbolic placement (Fanon). Blackness is pure object delimiting the boundaries between the human subject and its predicating verbs. As an object, it is fungible (Hartman) and accumulated (Wilderson), and lacks a coherent grammar of suffering. [6] Hortense Spillers reminds us that the captive "is reduced to a thing, to *being* for the captor", and that "identities," or differences, are stripped from this being, neutralizing the multi- dimensionality of its flesh and reducing it to a homogenous commodity of exchange in a pulverizing libidinal economy (i.e. "body" as a unit of exchange). [7] This, then, is the ultimate scandal or ontological violation of the New World: black flesh is reduced to devastating *sameness*, and becomes interchangeable, or fungible, within an economy of exchange. 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. The captive is pure object—*a body without flesh* (if we read Deleuze and Guattari through Spillers). [8] This body becomes, as Hortense Spillers reminds us, " a site of irresistible sensuality," for the captor, but because this body lacks subjectivity, it cannot desire but is, instead, *desired upon*.

It is this initial murder occurring "over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise," that sustains the antagonism for modernity. [9]

This condition of being expelled from Difference and reduced to the object-space of undifferentiation presents a crisis for Afro-pessimism that it neither set into motion, nor could it theorize away. We can call this the "double-bind of communicability." Black suffering is illegible and incommunicable because it lacks a proper grammar of enunciation. Suffering belongs to the human; it is an inescapable feature of the 'human condition.' The "violation of the flesh," however, is a murderous practice without a 'proper name' or any name that is recognizable within the Symbolic. Queer theory and its grammar of suffering fails the black-as-object here; its posture toward emancipation and freedom, do not fit the (non)ontology of blackness. Anti-black violence is, indeed, constitutive of the 'object,' but does this constitution occur uniformly? Do certain objects receive unique forms of anti-blackness—specific technologies of pulverization designed for particular objects? Are there "differences" between black-objects or are these objects homogenous? Fungability, although a productive way of understanding the crude object-position of blackness, presents anti-black violence as homogenous and predictable. In other words, 'difference' is the province of the "human," but without difference, we lack a conceptual apparatus to articulate the way anti-blackness impacts objects distinctively. To claim difference would be to claim humanity, which is erroneous, but to insist on undifferentiation would make certain objects more vulnerable to forms of violence not easily recognized as anti-blackness (i.e. what we call 'heterosexism' or anti-gay violence might be a particular *form* of anti-black violence). This is the double-bind that renders 'black queers' non-existent in both registers of thought.

This is more than an inquiry of whether "black queers" are black. The issue of internal exclusion is an important issue that overlaps significantly with the agenda here and others have addressed this issue quite powerfully. [10] The "black queer" cannot claim an ontology outside of blackness, outside the non-ontological space of crude object form. If we settle the question, at least theoretically, and answer in the affirmative (black queers are in fact black), we still face the problem of grammar—a grammar of suffering. It is the particularity of injury that cuts the object in multiple ways, and this injury, or "suf-

dent and mutually productive," but indissociable at times. We might ponder the ethical implications of this collapse and the way that the collapse itself serves to distort the antagonism that, as she insightfully notes is "the foundation of ethics and politics, even of modern sociality itself" (361). Jackson relies on Siobhan Somerville's important work "Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body" to argue that sexologist relied on racist fantasies and prepossessions to invent the homosexual body; the exteriority of race became the "evidence" for interiority—for the moral and spiritual degeneracy of the homosexual. For both Somerville and Jackson, the emergence of scientific racism with the invention of the homosexual body compels us to think race and sexuality together. It is here that we seem to slide between blackness as a structural position of non-ontology and the sociology of race (as an identity). In this analysis, blackness becomes a "type" much like sexologist created the "homosexual" as a type. Instead of thinking about blackness as the ontological horizon that fractures epistemology, we locate blackness within the Symbolic Order of scientific discourse and sexology. Blackness, then, oscillates between an identity, a marker of the Symbolic order, and an ontological position, the "Real" that ruptures and preconditions symbolization. This sliding between identity and structure is a symptom of what Wilderson would call 'the ruse of analogy.' [22] Whenever we equate an ontological position with an identity formation, we perform the very violence that sustains the antagonism. Put another way, ontological violence sustains itself through strategies of displacement, equivalence, and neutralization. In relating blackness to queerness, we can only speak in *distorting similes*—the rhetorical practice of likening one thing to another.

My analysis is predicated on the belief that 'queerness' is an experience of unfreedom and not an ontological position. Jackson rightfully critiques identity and argues, instead, for a rigorous examination of 'identification.' She argues that "queerness" exceeds identity and that queerness could be thought "as the ontology of blackness" (361). We might ask how *anything* could serve as the ontology of blackness? Queerness becomes a synonym for ontology itself (we might also ask, given this synonymity, *what is not queer*?). It is equated with the object-position of blackness and not the liminal form of humanity within the antagonism. Liminality and object-status are not interchangeable, equivalent, or synonymous. Frank Wilderson insightfully notes that any rider that we attach to blackness is a con-

the *ontological itinerancy* and unmappability of the "black queer." This violence serves both as a vicious allegory and instantiation of the onticide structuring New World antagonism.

In a beautiful meditation on the important work of David Marriott "Waking Nightmares—On David Marriott," Zakiyyah Jackson describes such violence ontologically. It sustains itself through the "collective disavowal of the violence subtending the production of blackness. This collective disavowal exists despite or because of the centrality of anti-blackness for the production of the world's sociality." [21] Jackson presents the term "existential negation" to explain the paradox of blackness that emerges from such violence. It is the condition of "[having] subjectivity while one's subjecthood is constantly negated, one's voice made audible by cultural fantasy, and one's ego assailed by an Other that is inseparable from the self" (358). Existential negation, here, assumes the vicious pull between a constituted subjectivity and the constant negation of this subjectivity---the movement between subject and negated subject (tarrying with the negative as Zizek might call it). We might inquire how this subjectivity is constituted, initially, in a context that renders blackness "the absolute index of otherness" and what conditions sustain "the self" that is under constant assault by the Other? Jackson presents a sophisticated analysis that advances an understanding of blackness as an ontological problematic, instead of an identity that can be deconstructed and, consequently, displaced in a post-modern/post-identity oriented theoretical apparatus.

The essay is quite significant in its rigorous linking of the imbrication of sexuality and blackness, but it is at this critical nexus, the pressure point between "blackness" and "queerness," (and queer theory) that we can think through the distinction between an extreme position of unfreedom and a position of non-ontology. She suggests that "we think of black queerness as an existential matter, rather than as an attribution that accompanies only *some* black subjectivities" (360). I agree that "black queerness" is indeed an existential matter, it exceeds the strictures of identity formation, but the "existential matter" that preoccupies Jackson's inquiry here is one that reduces the ontological position of blackness to the experience of unfreedom, or human suffering—a grammar of suffering, which we call "queerness." Queerness, here, assumes a problematic interchangeability with blackness, such that the two are not just "structurally interdepen-

fering," is compounded by the fact that the "black queer" does not exist either as a human-subject or a "distinct" homogenous-object. Any particular injury directed at this object is incomprehensible and unthinkable—symbolically and ethically. The "black queer," then, is a catachresis. The problem I am laying out here is not merely the impossibility of folding the black queer into humanity (humanism) or the 'community' of objects (internal exclusion), but whether the injury directed at this being is registered as anti-blackness at all. The prevailing problem is that the injury sustaining this catachresis is so incomprehensible that it is doubly erased, and this is what I will call 'onticide.'

III

In March 2000, police found Steen Keith Fenrich's dismembered body in Alley Pond Park, Queens (NYC). His severed flesh (i.e. 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 might call a "hieroglyphics of the flesh," or what psychoanalysts might call a "corporeal letter"—these markings record the intoxication of unchecked power and destructive maneuvering over the captive body. [11] It also "[creates] the distance between a cultural *vestibularity* and a *culture*," [12] placing Steen's body outside the cultural space of Ethics, relationality, and the sacred, and inserting it into the deadly pre-cultural space of pure drive and unrestrained fantasy—the blue tub becomes the material embodiment, or extension, of the murderer's unconscious. [13]

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" (Arendt), 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. [14]

Apparently Steen's white stepfather murdered his stepson out of rage. John Fenrich killed his son because he was gay police claim. According to Steen's boyfriend, John treated them with contempt and, when he asked about Steen's whereabouts, John told him that Steen " went away for a couple of weeks"—a departure without a return. This event, in which the white stepfather murders his "gay black son," 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 Freud's myth—a "racialized primal murder" that sets anti-black violence into motion and renders the "moral law" destructive and internecine.

This brutal murder, I would argue, repeats what has already been done to Steen within the Symbolic Order. As an expulsed object, lacking subjectivity, Steen was dead *before* the murder so his physical demise merely rearticulated his Symbolic death—the physical act of brutality was redundant. What Steen Fenrich's murder illustrates is the fatal collision between an irresolvable conflict (Blackness) and an experience of 'unfreedom' (Queerness). This fatality marks the site of a double exclusion, or "murderous ontology" (Onticide). The epithet "Gay Nigger #1" written on Steen's skull attempts to capture this collision through language. The juxtaposition of a non- ontology with the extremity of 'unfreedom' creates what Alain Badiou might call "the inexistent existence." [15] This is a situation in which existence assumes such a low intensity, that its very appearance undermines it and makes it obsolete. The "inexistent existence" is so inconceivable that it becomes somewhat "speculative," or purely conceptual. The

a space foreclosed to Steen, and this foreclosure is a premier feature of onticide and the violence it engenders. Unlike Matthew Shepard, the space that Steen inhabits is outside of public memory, culture, and ethics—it is the "unthought" space cut by the blunt edges of anti-black 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 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 Steen 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 that which 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.

What we can say, then, is that overkill is the materialization of onticide. It is not a phenomenon that is generalizable, or applies widely to the 'queer' population. What is crucial about Stanley's theory of overkill is that it is a violence that cannot be recuperated into the existing grammar of ethics and justice. It ruptures intelligibility because it is the precondition for the intelligible—it is its necessary kernel of nonsense. It is a violence lacking utility, and unlike Bataille's theory of expenditure, its recipient lacks a subjectivity to 'enjoy' (in the psychoanalytic sense of enjoyment) the symptom of divestiture and transgression. Overkill cuts the "black queer" into an infinite array of ontological fragments. The missing heads, legs, hands, and limbs, 'unlocatable' and unrecoverable by police and investigators, mime

What structured the process of empathy that made Matthew Shepard a potential "referent for all queer violence" and facilitated the "relative ease of mourning him"? If we pause at the prepositional phrase "although this might be true," we realize that this "truth" makes all the difference between the liminal subject and the object—between the national identification with Matthew Shepard and the ungrievable (and incommunicable) "loss" of Steen Keith Fenrich. Matthew 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 reminds us, a life must be registered as liveable to be mourned at all; [18] 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 Matthew Shepard cannot properly be said to inhabit the "nothingness" of the onto-existential horizon. 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 of national meaning. The same cannot be said for Steen Keith Fenrich, or many of the other "people of color" whose murders are ungrievable because they are inconceivable. These being are excluded from the synecdochal play between "part" and "whole" and reside in the vacuous space of what Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson call the "unthought." [19] As Thomas Glave 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 Shepardhood. In the context of a race-ist United States, no black person ever can be. [20]

Matthew Shepard assumes a "hagiographic" place within public memory, and this place is not democratic, inclusive, or universal. It is

black queer's (Gay Nigger #1) existential cartography is 'unmappable.' Because the juxtaposition forces a conceptual contradiction, the "black queer" is nonexistent, or, more precisely, does not appear within the horizon of existing entities. If the black queer can be said to "exist" at all, as many will undoubtedly insist, he/she possesses such a low frequency that this existence is rendered inconsequential. It is this violence—anti-gay violence as a "form" or iteration of anti-blackness—that makes it difficult to develop a coherent phenomenology or ethics of violence and reduces the "existential frequency" of the black queer to inconsequential degrees.

In "Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture," Eric Stanley provides a perspicacious reading of this brutality as "overkill." 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, etc.), 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. [16] Given the impossibility of the existential "ends" that sets this violence into motion, the brutality must continue past death, outside of "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—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," etc.). 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 not so much the spectacular violence of mutilated flesh, but that any "solution" or "corrective" to this problem would also have to reside "outside of the normative times of life and death" and outside of reason itself. Overkill is the violence that sustains society, and without it, liberal democracy and its institutions would cease to exist. This, I believe, in the final analysis, is the conundrum that frustrated Frantz Fanon, and it is the lingering problem of humanism in society.

In thinking about Steen Keith Fenrich and the non-utilitarian "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 Unites States are of color," and in the footnote accompanying this passage, the National Coalition of Anti-violence Programs claim that "of those murdered 79 percent were people of color." [17] 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 non-ontology and an extreme condition of unfreedom? 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—to "do violence to *nothingness*"(10). It is the relationship between beings considered as "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 blackness in the antagonism is one of non-ontology (negative existence) is no mere coincidence. "Queer" here conceals and preserves the humanity that it proclaims to disrupt. We might suggest that the "different relationship to violence," and concomitantly, the different relationship to "nothingness" is the limit between "being-for-the captor" (object) and the 'subject' experiencing unfreedom. Queer, as a conceptual term, collapses these positions and inappropriately

applies the position of "object" and "nothingness" to a structure of unfreedom. 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 and Matthew Shepard. The brutality of "anti-queer" violence often distorts the onto-existential horizon and collapses the positions between "liminal subject" and "object." This is not to suggest that "non-people of color" 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 unethicality. Stanley cogently limits 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 Matthew Shepard's brutal murder:

> There are also instances when anti-queer violence erupts onto the   social screen, for example the 1999 murder of Mathew 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).