Blackness, Disposability, and the Black Spirit

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The most recent struggle for Black lives, is really a struggle for the recognition of Black people's humanity and the possibility of a free life unadulterated by the ongoing violence of the anti-Black world of racial capitalism. Black Lives Matter! is at once a declarative scream that Black people are human and a demand that Black humanity be seen, recognized and accorded without question. And yet, the very fact that Black people's humanity is not a given is a damning indictment of contemporary societies and the supposed emancipatory politics of humanism and liberal democracy. It is an indictment of the very way in which we define and construct humanity. If our humanity as Black people were unquestioned, we wouldn't have to remind others that our lives, our being, our existence mattered. Black people are seen as disposable and perhaps not fully human. Black humanity in an anti-Black world, is at the heart of the books From *#BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Taylor 2016) and *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Warren 2018). What is Black being in an anti-Black world? How does Black lives matter in a world where Black abjection is the norm? How do we resist regimes of disposability continuously deployed in an effort to subjugate Black-ness?

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explores the pursuit of Black humanity and Black liberation, through the instrument of politics, by a new generation of movement organizers. Frustrated by the continued oppression of Black people within the liberal democratic order, epitomized in the casual

brutality of Black people by the police, young people organized to resist all forms of anti-Blackness under the banner of #BlackLivesMatter. For Taylor, the appearance of the movement when it did, during the presidency of America's first Black president, is significant. Police brutality against Black folks has been an ongoing issue since the emergence of police forces in the post-emancipation period. However, the expansion of the Black economic elite, and the rise of a Black political class in the post-Civil Rights era, was incongruous with the concurrent sustained state-sanctioned oppression and violence of everyday Black people.

The watershed moment was the murder of 18 year old Michael Brown by Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014. Taylor speculates that this might have been the tipping point because of the inhumanity of having Brown's body lay for four and a half hours festering in the hot sun while Black folks looked on, and his parents kept away from his body at gunpoint and with police dogs. Or the militarized response to the protests that emerged the days following the murder. For Taylor, the recent waves of protests and movement organizing for Black lives is a call to re-examine the structural roots of racism, Black inequality and anti-Black policies as previously articulated by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) and the Kerner Commission (1968). It is a demand to abandon the justification for the inhumanity Black people experience on their moral failings, and to stop uplifting colorblindness and a supposed Black culture of poverty, while also supporting the economic and political advancement of a few Black folk who function to maintain a vision of America as a place where social mobility, freedom and the pursuit of happiness is possible for all.

Taylor takes cause with this vision of America, where anyone, if they were capable of it, could attain a high standard of living regardless of their background. To give credence to the impression that America was a place of infinite possibilities, in the post-war period, massive amounts of government subsidies, such as interest-rate deductions and government-guaranteed mortgages were made available to American families. The American suburban life that blossomed, away from the agitating and Black cities, helped evoke an image of America as a land of plenty. However, these subsidies were unevenly distributed and Black people weren't deemed worthy of and were excluded from these affirmative-action-type policies (Katznelson 2006). It was politically necessary then to point to something fundamentally wrong with Black culture, something innate to Black folks that did not allow them to thrive and prosper under America's booming capitalist economy. And with the raging "red scare" and anti-communist movement of the post-war period, Black resistance organizing was stymied.

The liberal social sciences, with their "objective" ways of explaining social phenomenon, did not point to biology as a reason for Black people's inability to move flourish during America's heyday—that was biological racism and too close to the eugenics programs of the Nazis. Instead, they blamed Black poverty on Black folks' inability to assimilate into American culture (because apparently, Blacks still aren't Americans), Black people's lack of impulse control and weak ego structures, and a myriad of other psychological and behavioral traits. Structural obstacles such as housing and residential segregation and discrimination, leading to Black people's inability to move out of expensive deplorable housing conditions (homes owned by whites who refused to maintain

those homes), employment discrimination, underfunding of public schools in Black communities, voting discrimination, and sustained police brutality, were ignored. This concerted effort to reduce Black economic and social inequality to issues of culture and morality meant that the solutions to overcome them required Black folk to undergo a personal transformation—a change in who they are—rather than programmatic or fiscal solutions. In this metric, if Black folks are overpoliced, it is not because they have been targeted, it's due to their lack of personal responsibility.

In the Civil Rights era, many articulated the structural roots of poverty in the Black community. The Kerner Commission made up of predominantly white elected officials, plainly stated that white racism was responsible for Black poverty. The Black Panther Party inspired by Malcom X, and Martin Luther King pointed to the intricate link between racism and capitalism and American imperialism which was at the core of Black poverty in America. The orientation to individual moral failings as the cause of Black folks' inability to flourish in America, took root not least, according to Taylor, due to Black people themselves internalizing and accepting this view. Taylor gives a searing indictment of the Black political and economic elite for their part in this. Elites like President Barak Obama who lauded America as a place of possibilities like no other, or his My Brother's Keeper program that sought to place the onus of Black success squarely on the Black *man*.

Black people's continued protest and resistance to deplorable conditions contributed to the turmoil and upheaval of the sixties and this took a toll on American life and America's reputation abroad. Taylor argues that Black insurgency particularly in the workforce, affected everyone and between 1967 through 1974, the total number of labor strikes per year surpassed that of previous decades, costing hundreds of millions per day. Particularly with the postal strikes of the seventies, Black labor organizing played a significant role in improving worker conditions, but Taylor notes those strikes would not have been as effective had white workers not taken action too. The unified front of all workers was a real threat to the capitalist order. The following decade saw the beginning of the decline of American hegemony and domestically, a concerted effort was made to change the discourse around racism that included narrowing down the very definition of racism. Richard Nixon pivoted public discourse away from issues of race and America as an open society where anyone could succeed. In fact, he claimed, America was a better country because of its cultural diversity, but each person needed to *choose* to pursue their own economic success; no one could choose success for another. All Americans were free and America was colorblind.

Again, there is a shift to individual ability and away from systemic or institutional forms of suppression or racism. Black protest then, was met with "law and order" policies and the conflation of "civil rights protests and Black demands with criminal activity" (Taylor 2016: 65). Colorblindness gave the impression that America was a place where hard work was all it took to be successful. For Taylor, colorblindness was a powerful tool that pointed to personal transformation as the key to Black affluence. Racism was narrowly defined as an explicit racial insult, and race could not factor in any explanation for the lack of Black upward mobility. As a socially constructed racial group, Black people were and are treated as less than.

In the chapter *Black Faces in High Places*, Taylor (2016) gives a searing indictment of Black socio-economic and political elites. From Carl Stokes, the Congressional Black Caucus, Charles Hamilton of *Black Power* fame, to Alderwoman Lona Lane who claimed that Black men walking with their pants lowered down was a sign of a lost generation, all embraced programs or ideologies that harmed every-day Black people. Taylor argues that Black political control of urban spaces was a "preventative measure against urban uprisings" which worked to effectively change the Black political class' focus away from the everyday Black folk and on electoral politics. Fundraising, reelection campaigns, satisfying lobbying groups, representing everyone, became more important than the Black struggle for advancement. The movement away from grassroots freedom struggles was devastating for Black folk.

Taylor (2016) writes, "even as a movement against police brutality unfolded, Black elected officials' gazes were so trained on electoral politics that they could only articulate political gains through the calculus of elections." Their inability to make inroads in the plight of every-day Black people was due, according to Taylor to their complicity in the worst aspects of American politics and that complicity was the price for being admitted into the political establishment. Black insurgency, allowed for the rise of the Black political class but over time, the distance between them only increased. The Ferguson Uprising exposed police brutality but also shone a bright light on Black elite complicity in the subjugation and continued disposability and abjection of ordinary Black folk. The class difference is remarkable. The gap between the rich and poor Black Americans is extremely pronounced—the wealthiest Black families have two-hundred and fifty times more wealth than the average Black family; the richest whites have seventy-four times more wealth than the average white family. Both situations are tragic but the class differences in the Black community is staggering.

The double standard of justice in the Black community is a known fact but Taylor's (2019: 109) discussion, brings it to crystal clarity. Racism and modern policing, she writes are "mutually constitutive in reinforcing the subjugated status of Blacks" and laws like the Black Codes fostered the naturalization of Black criminality. The Thirteenth Amendment loophole that allowed for convict leasing made the imprisonment of Black people a lucrative enterprise that supported the American economy particularly in the South and so the assumption of Black criminality was not only about the degradation of Black humanity through the discourse of Black inferiority but also about the exploitation of Black labor. Black elites engaged in "respectability" politics, turning a structural issue into an individual behavioral one. Housing segregation led to overcrowding and deterioration of the quality of housing which landlords exploited but whites blamed those poor conditions on Black people's inferior hygiene instead of racist manipulations of housing markets. Throughout American history we see a reification of Black-ness. They are portrayed as lacking human-ness, inferior and requiring subjugation and at best they are some-thing to be taken care of because of their inherent flaws.

This means increased policing. Black resistance to increased policing was met with the professionalization and eventually the militarization of police forces and worse, an increase in Black police officers ran by a Black political elite. It is a perfect example of the types of the absurd

policy responses that get implemented when underlying causes of social problems are ignored and, in this case, the conflation of poverty and its effects with that of criminality.

And even as violent crime decreased, the narrative of being tough on crime became more and more prominent. Talor notes that during the Clinton era, the Pentagon donated surplus military equipment to police departments to and their "truth in sentencing" provisions allowed for increased federal funding to states that sentenced people to jail with no possibility of parole. The "three-strikes law" and its variations that appeared in California and twenty-seven other states, suddenly wasn't only about "criminality" but also the economics of the carceral state. It is known that Black people are stopped, searched, and arrested and imprisoned at higher rates than any other racialized groups. This would have one believe that criminality is synonymous with Blackness. Taylor provides more than sufficient evidence to refute this but the connection she makes between the over-policing of Black folk and the profiteering from this over-policing is damning. For example, in Ferguson, where the #BlackLivesMatter movement started, fines and fees (most of which were based on traffic violations) were the second highest source of revenue for the local government. Black people made up 67% of the population but 89% of traffic stops and 92% of all arrests originating from traffic stops. St. Louis County, where Ferguson is a municipality, relies completely on judicial fines and fees, and will go as far as rigging traffic lights to boost traffic stops. Taylor is clear that these fines and fees impact all poor and working class people, but Black folk were the most affected and police "function primarily as agents of social control in a society that is fundamentally unequal" (2016: 133). The Black Lives Matter movement in Ferguson unmasked the kleptocratic heart of municipal operations in Ferguson with Black folks as its main target.

The new movement for Black lives have forced us to confront Black disposability and how it supports the capitalist system of oppression and inequality. Michael Brown's dead body lying in the street in Ferguson, and the Ferguson police's multiple destruction of a memorial laid for him, including having a police dog urinate on it, attests to the lack of respect for Black lives, Black existence. How we view the causes of and solutions to Black oppression (structural or moral; personal transformation or system overhaul) is important as it determines how we organize against this oppression. The #BLM movement see the root of Black suffering as systemic and we must therefore address it with a return to community-based organizing, horizontally, from the ground up. A theme that runs through Taylor's narrative is that the racism that Black people face in America, conceals the broader capitalist oppression of much of everyday Americans' lives; it prevents the much-needed solidarity work necessary to resist the oppression. All poor people are abused by the policing system. Black people are incarcerated at an obscenely higher rates than any other racialized group in America, which speaks to racial disparities in policing and incarceration but at the global scale, white people in America are policed at a significantly higher rate than white people elsewhere in the world. Taylor (2016: 194) argues that "Black people in America cannot 'get free' alone… and Black liberation is bound up in the project of human liberation and social transformation." Taylor (2016: 206) also makes it clear that racism is not simply a function of

capitalism but we must recognize the "dynamic relationship between class exploitation and racial oppression in the functioning of American capitalism."

Manufactured scarcity of resources under capitalism triggers and sustains, in the non-elite classes, a race to the bottom that hinges on the death grip of anti-Blackness. For Calvin Warren, we must address why this overwhelming and pervasive anti-Blackness in America and all over the world exists in the first place. Warren (2018: 9) writes, "a mentor once asked me a terrifying question: why are blacks hated all over the world? Stunned, I remained silent but the question remained with me." And why is it that the degradation, callous and casual murder, violence and pain of Black people continues with no end in sight, even when a few are able to climb the socio-economic and political ladder? Warren returns to the declaration of Black Lives Matter and decorticates the notion of being and existence to expose the terror of anti-Blackness. His approach to anti-Blackness is a metaphysical one, and insists that we must ask the metaphysical question of what is Black being before we can understand the persistence of anti-Blackness.

Black Lives Matter is a declaration that is rooted in the notion of being-ness, a being-ness which supposedly allows us to be human and assert that Black lives do matter! But as stated before, if we are human why do we have to repeat it over and over again? This question is terrifying. Warren argues that humanists have attempted to repair the pre-emancipation ideas of Blackness and inferiority through a discourse of political participation, and universal principles of freedom, liberty and justice. But this proves futile, particularly when one realizes that Black being, exist simply so that the human (read: non-Black) can exist or that the very instruments that are to be used to bring Black folk into the American community are steeped in anti-Blackness—"an accretion of practices, knowledge systems, and institutions designed to impose nothing unto Blackness and the unending domination/eradication of Black presence *as* nothing incarnated" (Warren 2018: 9, emphasis in original).

To ascertain Black being-ness we must turn to metaphysics, but metaphysics itself, with its insistence on being-ness rooted in rationality, its schematizations, calculations, technology, etc, is steeped in anti-Blackness. It is with metaphysics after all, that you find the "scientific thinking" that classifies being along racial difference and biology[1]. Yet, postmetaphysics which argues that to construct humanity or human-ness around pure rationality diminishes human-ness, is not helpful as it assumes freedom as central to human-ness. And, the matter of freedom is an open ended one for Black people.

A disruption in metaphysical or postmetaphysical being-ness is brought to the fore when we consider the "free Negro" in the antebellum period. How can you be free, if your freedom can only be represented by a piece of paper, if absent relegates you back to the status of "not-free." How can you be truly free if your freedom *to be* and *to exist* is completely dependent on a human (read non-Black) declaring it so. Warren suggests that for Black thinking and Black epistemologies, we

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[1] See Anibal Quijano (2011) who also decries this mode of thinking.

must begin by asking a "proper metaphysical question"—what is Black being, or how is it going with Black being[2]?

In approaching this question, Warren reads Martin Heidegger's work on metaphysics through the lens of Hortense Spillers arriving at a slightly different question, why is the Negro Black? Asking that question, Warren argues, compels us to think about the function, status, utility, and necessity of Black within an anti-Black world. He argues that the Negro is an invention of modernity, that is stripped of its existence (defined as: to *be*; standing forth and abiding or enduring) during the transatlantic slave trade, through the "systematic concealment, descent and withholding… through technologies of terror, violence and abjection" (Warren 2018: 13). Worse yet, a Negro is supposed to gain a sense of human-ness by displaying reason through writing which is prefigured as the ultimate sign of reason, but displaying reason through writing has not afforded the Negro humanity. Through the Atlantic Slave Trade, African existence, which is an identity, is stripped from the Negro and he becomes Black; Black being then, becomes a structural position which anchors human identity—an "inclusive-exclusive that subtends human identity but is not incorporated into it" (Warren 2018: 39). Considering Black-ness as a structural position removes anti-Blackness from the realm of the mental.[3] "Violence against Black folk, is gratuitous precisely because an anti-Black world will continuously and relentlessly attempt to eliminate the nothing that is the evil, black Negro" (Warren 2018: 59).

In the chapter *Outlawing*, Warren lays bare how the law is an inadequate avenue to secure human-ness. It is an instrument of terror that renders Black being unprotected. Contract Law, foundational for modern jurisprudence, through its discourse of property, divided the world into humans entitled to protection and enforcement of their human-ness, and things, without human-ness but necessary for the human to operate within the world. In other words, contract law reinforced the non-being of Black people; it rendered Black people property. Property and contract law were able to expand because of slavery and in the process, naturalized the non-being of Black people. Chattel law was not only about regulating property, it also functioned as assuring that American society did not see Black being. Warren contends that the free Black in the antebellum period exposes the presumptions that ethics and freedom are universal for being. The Dred Scott case is revealing. How does property gain human-ness? Put differently, is free Black still property and if so, whose property? Worse, how can a free Black be free while also being unable to participate fully or be fully part of the political community?

For Warren emancipation does not equate freedom (an ontological necessity for human-ness, at least metaphysically) and he derides humanists for collapsing the two concepts. Emancipation, he maintains, assumes that human-ness already existed. And if that is the case, then emancipation is unnecessary. Emancipation becomes a space of ontological terror. Further, if humanity is only

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[2] Throughout the text, Warren crosses out being (e.g., Black ~~being~~) to demonstrate the erasure of being-ness for Black people.

[3] Barbara Fields and Karen Fields (2012) make a similar argument about racism noting that it is a theory and practice of applying a double standard based on ancestry and the ideology that helps to support this double standard. They argue that it is not an emotion or state of mind like intolerance or bigotry; if it was, it would have been easily overcome.

being given by another human, "the human is still a being-for another, which is antithetical to a being-for-itself. If the master decides to rescind his gift [of humanity], what then?" (Warren 2018: 92). This is calamitous for the formerly enslaved, whose existence is grounded on the master's generosity, but also demonstrates the ontological instability of human-ness. The free Black is only free to the extent that he can produce his freedom papers, but "having to produce, or prove, freedom is not freedom, it is emancipation" (Warren 2018: 100). Emancipation without freedom is ontological terror; the freedom papers become a form of dispossession—the free Black's freedom is dependent on the existing human (read: non-Black) to give meaning or significance to the freedom papers. Reading the declaration that Black Lives Matter in this context, is terrifying because it implies Black being has yet to be fully established.

In *Scientific Horror*, Warren explores the violence of scientific rationality against Black-ness. Black suffering, the "metaphysical violence, the violence of schematization, objectification, and calculative thinking" (Warren 2018: 9), is woven into the fabric of civil society, and Black-ness is something to be eradicated. And, to eradicate Black-ness, it must be made white (hence calls for assimilation, and denigration of Black culture). Therefore, solutions to eliminate anti-Blackness fail because those very solutions rely on the destruction of Black-ness. Black being in modernity, punctuates the presumptions of humanity and biofuturity. The census of 1840 provides an example of how this plays out in the context of psychiatry. According to the census report, one out of every Northern Black was insane or feeble-minded, compared to one out of every nine-hundred and ninety-five Norther white; but in the South, only one out of every 1,555 Black was insane or mentally feeble. In Maine, one in every fourteen Black was insane. There was no clear definition of insanity and census takers reported insane Black folks even in towns where there weren't any Black people. Supposedly, the census revealed a causal relationship between emancipation and insanity. But, it also provided whites the opportunity to assume a sick paternalistic justification for slavery. They saw "slavery not only was essential to preserving civil society and its various economic institutions, …but was also absolutely necessary for maintaining the psychic stability of the slave" (Warren 2018: 132). And despite statistical inconsistencies of the census, the Secretary of State, John C. Calhoun averred that the statistical errors did not affect the truth of the census that there was a prevalence of mental disease among the free Black.

Through images of Black-ness throughout the 1800s, *Catachrestic Fantasies* reveals the "zone of non-being" à la Frantz Fanon, as the site of complete destruction for Black being. For Warren, the images are visual signs of a particular philosophical practice wrapped up in violence. Visual displays and signage work as one of the many modes used to destroy Black-ness. As Achille Mbembe (2001) notes, pictographic signs do not only belong in the field of seeing, they also figure in speaking, and therefore serve to strategically persuade an audience and can even be violent. One of the images Warren uses is particularly illustrative of the lack of being afforded the free Black, as well as the violence of certain humanist attempts at repairing this lack of being. The cartoon is of a free Black man who is addressing farm animals. He is declaring himself a man as the animals watch in mockery and disbelief. The violence is two-fold. Not only does it interrogate the equation of emancipation with freedom and the transformation of "property into personhood or chattel into

human being" (Warren 2018: 152), but it also highlights the ontological tyranny of emancipation as the free Black who is supposedly no longer "sentient property" looks not to another human to insist upon his being-ness but on farm animals. And the animals mock him!

The images, in *Catachrestic Fantasies*, propagate an untruth told by humanists. The untruth "that black being will be incorporated into the human family and its political community once emancipated, and this incorporation is the sign of freedom…The cartoon is a philosophical response to black freedom dreams" (Warren 2018:154). Again, emancipation does not equate freedom and Warren seems to argue that even today, we as Black folk, continue to be in a zone of non-being. It is why we are still demanding to be shown humanity and declare that our lives matter. It is why we are unable to be incorporated into the political community and we are still fighting against voter suppression. It is why anti-Blackness exists. Where Taylor views racism as an integral part of capitalist oppression which in part can be overcome through class consciousness, Warren sees Black-ness as invented to constitute the object of a global pursuit of nothing. Humanist dreams of freedom and metaphysical being-ness has escaped Black people for so long, Warren suggest that it may be time to abandon those dreams.

"We've tried everything from marches to masochistic citizenship (giving our bodies to the state to brutalize[4] in hopes of evoking sympathy and empathy from humans), to exceptional citizenship and respectability, to protest and armed conflict; in the end, either we will continue this degrading quest for human rights and incorporation or we will take a leap of faith… and reject the terms through which we organize our existence" (Warren 2018: 170). This does not mean that we accept inferiority, it means reconsidering the hegemonic framework of human-ness. Black thinking, philosophizing, poeticizing, Warren argues, must imagine Black existence without Being, without humanism or the human. This type of thinking will lead us to the Black spirit and developing a phenomenology of the Black spirit is an enterprise we must begin to explore.

But while we embark on this journey, we must live in an anti-Black world. A world in which we must contend with regimes of disposability, in service of a hegemonic mode of being and existing, deployed throughout history, that upholds the modern capitalist world-system. It is meant to maintain a specific hierarchy of being that supports the economic power of the capitalist elite. It is manifested in law (via dual systems of justice); in politics (via disenfranchisement tactics); in art (via cooptation of music/visual art/dance); science (via eugenics, genomics, scientific racism and racial categorization); and academia and knowledge production (via devaluation of non-white epistemologies). The anti-Blackness of these disposability regimes extend beyond the geographical boundaries of the United States because our global structures are rooted in coloniality (Quijano 2011).

Perhaps some of this work toward redefining Black existence outside of humanism and its ontological terror, has been initiated in the works of Octavia Butler and other Black creative writers and artists. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson argues that African diasporic cultural products do not rely on animal abjection to define human-ness. They create and imagine worlds from the perspective of a

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[4] The use of citizenship as a form of violence is discussed at length in Necropolitics (Mbembe 2019).

history of Blackness' bestialization and thingification. Unlike Warren, Jackson (2020: 3) views Black-ness not as denied humanity but "as the violent imposition and appropriation… black(ened) humanity in the interest of plasticizing that very humanity, whereby 'the animal' is one but not the only form blackness is thought to encompass." Jackson (2020: 129) contends that Butler's *Bloodchild*, for example, is a "meditation on the possible conditions and terms of mutual adaptability, communicability, and reciprocal responsibility across lines of radically discontinuous speciated embodiments and sensoria." Butler's work perturbs theories of subjectivity that are grounded in imperialist history, colonialism and slavery. It demands, and permits us to stare into the abyss of nothing.

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