

White Suicide & Ontological Exertion Shannon Winnubst (Ohio State University)

A Prefatory Note

Pulling myself through the haze of three unbearably long years, I returned to the Position Paper I wrote for our last *Terra Critica* meeting in London in the Summer of 2019. The thread is there, dangling and thankfully also inviting.

The framework for that meeting, “Critique and Society: Whose Society?” seems almost quaint in the onslaught of profound societal changes since 2019. We are living, now, with grave and urgent challenges we could not have imagined as we sat in the lovely rooms of Kings College together. The tectonic plates beneath us are quaking: a global pandemic is still raging; fascism has entered the military form of violence, war; white supremacists are attaining lasting power and unleashing all forms of xenophobia into the public arena; and the reality of the Anthropocene now issues daily evidence, often with devastating losses of life. The pace and demands of institutions have not really slowed or eased, despite the opportunity and promise of doing so. As animals must, we are seeking new habits and ways of persevering amidst this immense stress. The ever-growing mental health crisis, especially among the youth (10-24 years old), tells us what we older ones are straining to hear: this is not tenable.

The dangling, inviting thread

Among the common readings for our 2019 Core Group Meeting in London was a section from Fred Moten’s *Black and Blur*, “The Blur and Breathe Books.” Engaging Moten’s text, I brought my longstanding obsession to bear in my 2019 Position Paper:

I worry intensely about how I am reading the book—and sometimes about whether I should be reading it at all. There are moments when readers are clearly positioned as Black and others when we are everyone. For an example of the text opening to anyone, Moten asks: “What if the theater of refusal were ours, for us, whoever and whatever we are?” (257). But how to enter that theater of refusal as refuge as a Euro-descended colonizing sovereign subject? . . . Or, more bleakly and problematically politically, might the incipient tyrannies of global fascisms push more and more of us into this refuge—in the name of being refused? How to enter as one whose deepest habits are to continue the paths that benefit ourselves, however capaciously conceived—that is, whose deepest habits are, despite any delusions otherwise, to continue to colonize?

My obsession with how whites read the work of radical Black studies continues unabated. The dangling, inviting thread from that 2019 musing was the invitation of Moten into an intensely slowed mode of perceiving, reflecting, living—into a temporality that would not be recognizable or knowable, in which we Euro-descended colonizing sovereign liberal subjects could not “do” anything, through which we might finally feel the weight of these long six centuries since 1415. It is an invitation towards what I am now naming “ontological exertion.”

(Tellingly, Moten conjures this slowed perceiving through his grieving of the death of his friend, José Esteban Muñoz.)

White Suicide & Ontological Exertion

Across radical Black studies and Black feminist studies, the reframing of anti-Blackness as ontological has become standard practice, if also a practice of intense debate and contention. To follow this complex literature is to bring my whiteness front and center: much of the conversation, if not all of it, is intermural. As Joy James once said to me, “What if Afropessimism is Black folks throwin’ it down in the back alley at 3 a.m.?!” Point taken. But to read with the awareness of not being the audience of the text is not impossible. (Nor is it foreign to any woman or queer trained in the discipline of Philosophy, in the early 1990s anyway.) When whiteness, which is symbiotic with but also distinct from anti-Blackness, is the cause and function of the impossibility, however, we are in particularly treacherous, tricky, and slippery territory. It is impossible to interrogate this structure of being, anti-Blackness, from within the metaphysics of modernity, which it birthed and sustains. Put differently, not even the most astute and adroit white reader is to be trusted.

My suggestion is that this complex problem of reading—namely, the white reading of anti-Blackness as ontological¹—offers an example of how “critique” should move in the early 21st century. Ideally, I would demonstrate this reading as a practice, complete with failure and mistrust at that practice’s core. In this brief format, I offer the following clunkier schematic of the literature and a white reading of it: “white suicide” and “ontological exertion”

I divide the literature in a crass binary: at one end, the diagnosis of the singular, totalizing world-breaking and world-making of anti-Blackness;² at the other end, the opening onto forging new worlds, new metaphysics.³ I argue that the former is the sharp object that whiteness must encounter, if it is to be ethical: it functions as a kind of inverted Categorical Imperative, a singular

¹ While this is the position rightfully associated with Afropessimism, it is not reducible to that school of theory.

² Central authors include Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton, Calvin Warren and their general ilk.

³ Central authors include Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Dionne Brand, Christina Sharpe, Fred Moten, C. Riley Snorton and a very long list of Black feminists.

regulative touchstone. To signify its totalizing scope, I name this labor “white suicide,” where the abolition, dismantling, and undoing occurs across all scales: individual, interpersonal, affective, familial, communal, institutional, sociological, political, economic, conceptual—and ontological. The latter, which animates the most interesting work, is profoundly racializing and must be approached and engaged with a vigilant awareness of that racializing function: this work of Black intellectuals—writers, creators, musicians, poets, visual artists, and so on—in this forging of new worlds—new affects, new concepts, new dispositions, new habits, new and radical notions of what it might be to live meaningfully—is not directed at white audiences. And, yet, I argue this work is the venue through which we white intellectuals might find our way to forging new worlds—new affects, new concepts, new dispositions, new habits, new and radical notions of what it might be live meaningfully—in the wake of our 600 year-long complicity in the world-breaking and world-making naked greed and violence of anti-Blackness. I name this labor “ontological exertion.”

These two forms of labor are deeply entangled, with each feeding the other in distinct manners. “White suicide” is indispensable to the “ontological exertion,” while the “ontological exertion” provides the stamina to sustain the “white suicide.” White persons and institutions are not to be trusted, ever, about the suicide mission, which is constant and unending. It is the necessary pathway into the alluring labor of “ontological exertion,” the rewiring of conceptual apparatus and affective habits. The stark, sustained cathexis with the ontology of anti-Blackness as the ontology of modernity is imperative. The interplay between these two modes of labor is recursive, with white suicide always anchoring the ontological exertion and the ontological exertion providing the stamina to sustain the constant and unending white suicide.⁴

For this work, we need creative genius. We need, as bell hooks tells us so often, unfettered and decolonized imaginations. I find this, along with so many others, in Dionne Brand’s iconic *A Map to the Door of No Return*, a work that not only names the unnameable, but stretches and pulls and energizes it into a fullblown world-making.

The Door of No Return refers literally to the historical doors through which enslaved African bodies were forced from the barracoons into the holds of ships embarking on the Middle

⁴ To sustain thinking and especially affective explorations of suicide requires remarkably firm grounding—so as not to actually kill oneself. Writing about suicide as a way not to commit suicide is dangerous stuff. The second vignette in Hopkinson’s *Skin Folk* (with the beautiful rendering of the sweet relief of breathing water and eventual suicide) feels like sustenance, especially as it is beyond recognition to anyone in the scenes. McKay’s *Don’t Look Up* literalizes the white suicide of contemporary politics on the right—a literalism clearly initiated by Trumpism and the refusal of Covid at the expense of one’s actual life. (bell hooks, by the way, never watched the news: it will drive us to literal, individual suicide and this is not the work of white suicide.) I hope we talk about the interplay of comedy and literalism in the film; also interested in its connection to other recent representations of grotesque whiteness, such as *Succession* and *White Lotus*, as well as the genre of climate disaster porn, especially *Melancholia*.

Passage. These doors proliferated along “the Gold Coast” of west Africa, where dozens of so-called “slave castles,” such as Elmina Castle or Gorée Island, warehoused African bodies in dungeons until the slave ships arrived. This violent, forced exit, which initiates modernity, takes on mythical proportions through Brand’s poetic renderings. As she writes of it, the Door of No Return is “a place, real, imaginary, and imagined” (19). Pushing it beyond a mere metonym for the catastrophe of the transatlantic chattel slave trade, Brand stretches and enlivens this historical moment into its mythical power. The Door of No Return, in Brand’s rendering, becomes “the door of a million exits multiplied” (19). The Door of No Return is not located on any map. Yes, it is always historical. But, writing from and towards the will to survive in the African diaspora, Brand renders the Door of No Return a foundational space of Black consciousness. As she puts it, “I think Blacks in the Diaspora carry the Door of No Return in our senses” (48). Both an historical and material phenomenon, “the door signifies the historical moment which colours all moments in the Diaspora” (24). The Door of No Return—that historical threshold that only moves one direction from the barracoon to the slave-ship—functions “as consciousness” for Brand. Rarely brought directly into focus, the Door of No Return “exists without prompting” (72). Both its material and symbolic force permanently altered the world.⁵ It is the structure that gives meaning, the background that enables recognition—but it only does so through the complete suppression of its existence. Confounding European philosophy, the Door of No Return is a material transcendental condition for the modern world. Brand does not locate it on any map. Describing it as “ocular” and “propitious” (72), she tells us: “the Door is on my retina” (89).

The Map of the Door of No Return, as the work of a radical Black thinkers and creator, is written from and towards the survival and flourishing of Black lives. As a white reader, I implore myself and other white readers never to forget this: we are not, have never been, and will never become the audience of this work. Brand’s exertion towards an ontological transformation is not directed at me, a white person. Nor is it excluding me. It is an invitation, but one never sent to my address. It is the ongoing labor of Black intellectuals, especially Black feminists, of surviving and stepping beyond survival into thriving and flourishing—to create Black metaphysics. Not a transgression, but a stepping beyond the system of white metaphysics, the naming of the Door of No Return exerts an ontological transformation on the scale of its original, historical design, construction, and implementation. The labor of engaging this as a white person is the work of “critique” that is opening in the twenty-first century.

⁵ Its power traverses the realms of material force and symbolic meaning-making, rendering it a kind of material transcendental condition that confounds most of western philosophy. The Door of No Return functions, that is, as a transcendental condition of possibility for what Saidiya Hartman calls “the afterlife of slavery:” it signifies the historical event of the foundational violence of anti-Blackness—an event that carries an ontological singularity, rendering it a past that is never past.