

Don't Exist

EVA S. HAYWARD

Abstract This note represents an effort to think together Afro-pessimism and trans studies.

Keywords transsexual, cut, Afropessimism, ontology, psychoanalysis

“Don’t exist” is an imperative, a sanctioned foreclosure. “Don’t exist” is not “nothingness”—the social death Eric Stanley so ardently articulates as queer (2011)—not exactly. Nothingness is no-thing (Martin Heidegger’s [2013] “thingness”), an exclusion from mattering (see Fanon 2008), whereas “don’t exist” indexes a plot, a social condition for making killable (see Haraway 2008), an insistence on not-existing such that killability is unnecessary to articulate or make conscious. “Don’t exist” articulates an attack on ontology, on beingness, because beingness cannot be secured. Talking about trans nonexistence, Laverne Cox (2013) writes in the *New York Times*, “At the heart of the fight for trans justice is a level of stigma so intense and pervasive that trans folks are often told we don’t exist—that we’re really just the gender we were assigned at birth.” This “stigma,” Cox continues, is “a state of emergency” that results in “many gay, lesbian, and bisexual brothers and sisters” not wanting anything “to do with us.” And yet, Cox says, the paradoxical consequence of this nonexistence is violence, unemployment, and lack of housing and health care, especially for black trans women and trans women of color. You do not need to read the article’s comment feed to recognize the conundrum: terrible violence directed at the nonexisting, the never having existed. Cox’s critical call is uncannily echoed in the recent antitrans work of Elizabeth Grosz, who writes:

However queer, transgendered, and ethnically identified one might be, one comes from a man and a woman, and one remains a man and a woman, even in the case of gender-reassignment or the chemical and surgical transformation of one sex into the appearance of another. . . . Sexual difference is still in play even to the

extent that one identifies with or actively seeks the sexual organs and apparatus of the “opposite” sex: at most one can change the appearance and social meaning of the body, but the sexually specific body that is altered remains a sexually specific, if altered, body. (109–10)

Specificity, sexed ontology, and materiality, for Grosz, resist transition, transfiguration, and ultimately trans. Not surprisingly—perhaps because her resistance aims to make trans nonlife, a void, cut life, an alteration without substance—I stumble at the threshold of her argument. While trans is not Grosz’s only target—so too are the “queer and ethnically identified”—she defines trans as little more than an iterative identificatory gesture with regard to the ontological order of male and female difference, which, she argues, is of an order unto itself. Working with Luce Irigaray and Gilles Deleuze, Grosz argues for a feminist renunciation of identity and its various politics, arguing for a reinvestment in the materiality of sexual difference—what she has called the return of the real Real.

Putting Jacques Lacan’s alienation and Frantz Fanon’s antiblack violence into conversation, Frank Wilderson argues that while Lacan attends to how alienation is essential to the formation of the subject in relation to the Imaginary and Symbolic, Fanon insists on how racial violence is at work at the level of the Real. He writes, “Whereas Lacan was aware of how language ‘precedes and exceeds us,’ he did not have Fanon’s awareness of how violence also precedes and exceeds Blacks” (2010: 96). Blackness, Wilderson argues, is structured through gratuitous violence—a matrix of suffering that is illegible to “Humanist discourse [that] can only think a subject’s relation to violence as a contingency” (68). Blackness exposes the white supremacy at work in the ontological, in the beingness of “the human,” revealing that the divide is not the human/the animal but, as Wilderson excellently diagnoses, “the Human/the Black” (73). What of the black trans woman, the position from which Cox speaks? As Cox writes, trans women are dying because they don’t exist—for black trans women, this equation reveals a matrix of “gratuitous violence” forged in relation to “don’t exist” (2013). The “don’t exist” of trans is not equivalent to the racist refusal of “the human” for blacks—if institutionalized trans only indexes desire for change as disfigurement of, or reification of, sex/gender, then trans is still human oriented. Following Wilderson’s critique of “the human” as white beingness, might we ask: is beingness the problem, rather than the solution, for addressing antitrans violence?

Rather than refusing Grosz, what if we say that she is right, that trans ought to refuse “the human” (see Hayward 2008), and, in doing so, refuse Grosz’s racist and antitrans arguments, boycotting the humanist (antiblack) project of the ontological (sex centrism)? Might this trans negativity help expose how the order of the subject, and the matter of ontology, are what make black trans women, in

particular, vulnerable to violence? In this way, trans negativity turns against liberal (white) transgender projects about visibility, accessibility, and progressivism, to expose how these political logics are predicated on racialized humanism (Weil, in progress; Gossett 2016; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013). We can say that trans cuts the technology of sex/gender; yet and still, the logic of sex and gender are given coherence and meaning through the Middle Passage, through slave making (see Spillers 2003). Rather than building a political and intellectual project on the bodies of dead black trans women—the ongoing project of slave making—trans negativity asks how trans identity, representation, and politics have needed the murdered bodies of black trans women and trans women of color to constitute “the transgender tipping point.” It is no surprise that *Time* magazine’s “tipping point” cover features Laverne Cox; conscripted labor of black trans women is the inevitable violence that institutional trans/sexual/gender projects (broadly imagined here) need in order to become, in order to potentialize the politics of identity. These projects, then, are an effect of progressive humanism, with white uplift as their aim.

Eva Hayward received her PhD from the University of California, Santa Cruz, in the history of consciousness. Hayward has previously taught courses on film/video, aesthetics, science studies, and feminist/queer theory at the University of California, Santa Cruz; University of New Mexico; Uppsala University (Sweden); Duke University; and University of Cincinnati. Currently, she is an assistant professor in gender and women’s studies at the University of Arizona, Tucson. Her research focuses on aesthetics, environmental and science studies, and transgender theory. She has recently published articles in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *Parallax*, *differences*, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, and *Women and Performance*.

References

- Cox, Laverne. 2013. “The Bullies Don’t Draw a Distinction.” *New York Times*, October 15. www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/10/15/are-trans-rights-and-gay-rights-still-allies/the-bullies-dont-draw-a-distinction.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove.
- Gossett, Che. 2016. “Žižek’s Trans/gender Trouble.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 13. lareviewofbooks.org/article/zizeks-transgender-trouble/#!.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 2011. *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Haraway, Donna. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hayward, Eva. 2008. “More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves.” *WSQ* 36, nos. 3–4: 64–85.
- Heidegger, Martin. 2013. “The Thing.” In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 161–83. New York: Harper Perennial.

- Snorton, Riley, and Jin Haritaworn. 2013. "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife." In *Transgender Studies Reader 2*, edited by Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, 66–76. New York: Routledge.
- Spillers, Hortense. 2003. *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stanley, Eric. 2011. "Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture." *Social Text*, no. 107: 1–19.
- Weil, Abraham. In progress. "Trans*versality: The Mattering of Political Life." PhD diss., University of Arizona.
- Wilderson, Frank. 2010. *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.