

Black Nihilism, Existentialism, and Political Struggle

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Abstract: This paper explores Calvin Warren’s conception of black nihilism as a potentially legitimate response to the prevalence of antiblack violence. I discuss the notion of antiblackness in an American context and the applicability of black nihilism to this context. I address the basis of the existentialist dismissal of nihilism in general and demonstrate black nihilism’s rejection of the existentialist foundation. Specifically, I analyze Warren’s usage of Heidegger’s metaphysics as the foundation for his conception of antiblack violence and its result, the inevitability of black suffering. I consider Devonya Havis’s response to antiblack violence as a challenge to this inevitability and propose Havis’s Black Vernacular Phenomena and Performative Utterance as a form of meaning-creation that addresses the metaphysical foundations of Warren’s black nihilism. I argue that Havis’s Black Vernacular Philosophy is a stepping stone towards destabilizing the antiblack foundations of metaphysics while also following in Warren’s skepticism of the rhetoric surrounding action, progress, and liberation.

Introduction

Calvin L. Warren’s essay titled “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope” is centered around the defense of black nihilism against the dismissive viewpoint that believes that the nihilistic attitude is a problem that should be solved and addressed. For Warren, black nihilism should be understood as one of the possible responses to antiblack violence, specifically in the American historical context. It involves a movement of spiritual hope away from the assumed necessity of political investment, concrete action, and progress.¹ The essay discusses the philosophical foundations of the black nihilist position, placing it in conversation with relevant existentialist views

¹ It is my intention that Warren’s philosophy be used as a criticism of existentialist philosophy.

and theories of black thought.

My goal is to analyze the philosophical moves that Warren makes in his defense of black nihilism in relation to the claims of some existentialist authors. Specifically, many existentialists assert that nihilism is an undesirable, indeed dangerous mindset to have, and that the creation of particularized meaning is possible, necessary, and actionable. I consider the specific relevance of Beauvoir’s existentialist view of action and struggle to black nihilist theorizations of antiblackness in the American context and apply the existentialist logic of action and struggle to Fanon’s theorization of black struggle and his own existentialist views. I then detail Warren’s specific use and criticisms of Heidegger that ground his theories around political progress, metaphysics, and antiblackness. Along these lines, I consider Devonya Havis’s use of Levinas as a link to Warren’s use of Heidegger to compare their two perspectives of meaning-creation. Ultimately, I argue that one can view Devonya Havis’s Black Vernacular Phenomena and Performative Utterance as a form of reconfigured spiritual hope that is not nihilist but still destabilizes the metaphysical foundations of the Political that Warren criticizes.²

Antiblackness in the American Context

In order to discuss black nihilism, one must understand how Warren conceptualizes antiblackness and how he relates it to epistemic and metaphysical conditions. Warren is thinking within the specific historical context of the United States, although he asserts that the analysis is a gateway for thinking about antiblackness globally. More specifically, Warren believes that the transatlantic slave trade was not merely a historical event that came and went but irreversibly imposed a condition of black suffering that continues to structure society.

Warren locates the Political as the site of black suffering because it is simultaneously where black suffering occurs and is channeled for a notion of betterment. Warren defines the Political as that which “constitutes an episteme of metaphysics, as a way to think being through a particular set of predispositions—progress, bio-futurity, change, betterment, and so forth. The ‘political’ (the uncapitalized ‘p’) docket the *programmatically* effort

² It is important to clarify my position. It is difficult to make value judgments on a topic like this because of my positionality. I am not black, nor is my positionality particularly “blackened.” Furthermore, Warren and other black philosophers criticize how academia may commodify and objectify black suffering, turning it into an object of analysis or mere intellectual reflection. I am also indebted to the “Queering Masculinities” discussion group’s conversation around Tommy Curry’s *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood*. It gave me important perspective into what black suffering entails and the material conditions surrounding it, and what a healthy philosophical discourse looks like when discussing topics such as these. As put forth by the group, “What happens when social projection becomes so powerful that morality is no longer operable?” In what way am I capable of making value judgments of the positions and attitudes of others when I do not have even a fraction of the experience they have?

to materialize metaphysical sensibilities.”³ He identifies a litany of political programs and perspectives that demonstrate this view of black suffering and the impossibility of progress. He specifically cites the political failings of the Reconstruction Era (such as poll taxes, grandfather clauses, literacy tests, and extra-legal and legal violence), the convict leasing system sidestepping the 13th Amendment, and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s centering of black suffering and sacrifice as part of the black struggle for progress. In contemporary times, Warren cites the numerous murders of black people as signifiers of how the logic of the Political is haunted by the destruction and suffering of black bodies, as well as to highlight the failings of the Political to ameliorate the various injustices that black people face. Furthermore, Warren makes reference to a congregant from the Civil Rights era specifically stating that “we already heard that and tried that. Nothing has changed.”⁴ In this way, Warren critiques the Politics of Hope, which is how spiritual hope is necessarily placed within the political realm insofar as there is a political hope or the possibility of a could-be temporality that involves emancipation.⁵ Warren seeks to reclaim this spiritual hope through the black nihilist position, arguing that the politics of hope reconfigures hope in a way where black people begin to invest in an impossible political project. Beyond his empirical evaluation of the American historical context, Warren also advances a theoretical approach to describing the contemporary condition of black suffering, using both to describe the impossibility of a political solution.

Black Nihilism and Political Movements

Broadly, the “threat” of nihilism is one that can be construed as global, in the sense that anyone may have an attitude of nihilism towards their circumstances. Warren asserts that Nietzsche’s notion of nihilism is as “a particular crisis of modernity. The universal narratives and grounds of legitimation that once secured meaning for the modern world had lost integrity.”⁶ If political institutions both domestically and globally are thought of as being grounded in modernity, then in any case, one’s attitude may be nihilistic towards their institutions or material conditions. For example, Tommy Curry in *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* agrees with Warren. The fundamental problem that faces blackness is that “the Black man is not a normative subject; there is no ‘should’ question that does not imply his death. . . . The problem posed to the thinker aiming to describe and animate the Black man as a political subject capable of political life and social participation . . . [is that] he is asked to respect laws that do not respect him. . . . The consequence of this ‘nonbeing’ is dire, as there are no historical patterns of rationality or ethicality that project Black male existence into futurity.”⁷ While Curry

3 Calvin L. Warren, “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope,” *The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 1 (2015): 246, <https://doi.org/10.14321/crnewcentrevi.15.1.0215.arren>. Emphasis in original.

4 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 216–17, 228.

5 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 222.

6 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 224.

7 Tommy J. Curry, *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (Temple University Press, 2017), 189.

explicitly identifies this problem with the black man’s experience, Warren generalizes this to all black people. At face-value, the problem that is identified is the same. Black people are expected to invest their spiritual hope into political or existential programs that promise progress and liberation, while these emancipatory goals do not even account for blackness itself.

A core assertion that Warren makes in his theorization of black nihilism is that “the Political and anti-blackness are inseparable and mutually constitutive. The utopian vision of a ‘not-yet-social order’ that purges anti-blackness from its core provides a promise without relief—its only answer to the immediacy of black suffering is to keep struggling.”⁸ For Warren, the action and inaction are placed in a dichotomy where action always entails black struggle and inaction always entails black suffering. Furthermore, the black struggle is the only response to black suffering, and black struggle also always entails black suffering. This formulation of the Political effectively locks in the condition of black suffering. A forthcoming discussion of the existentialist view on action and struggle will help inform Warren’s assertion that black suffering is inevitable. Black nihilism is the refusal to engage in the Political, to reclaim the hope for an end to metaphysical violence by disrupting the action/inaction dichotomy.

Broadly, this theorization of the inseparable nature of the Political and antiblackness is considered Afropessimist, which considers contemporary society and black existence to be continually structured by slavery. The nuances between Warren’s theory of black nihilism and Afropessimism are beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth discussing the broader context of other political thought that will elucidate black nihilism’s position among other theories.

Among these include political movements centered around black joy as an act of resistance, as well as Afrofuturism, which concerns itself with the reimagination of black futures, identity, and agency, often through cultural aesthetics. These movements converge and diverge in various theoretical and practical moments. For example, Afrofuturists also seek to destabilize traditional notions of linearity and temporality,⁹ like the black nihilist’s critique of the Political use of the progress of betterment. Similarly, Black Joy acknowledges how past events and narratives may devalue black and brown individuals today.¹⁰ However, these movements offer different responses to these conditions. The nuances of these responses are out of the scope of this paper, but a question that these diverse perspectives raise is how it is possible for similar views on a set of circumstances can lead to divergent responses, such as the Black Joy movement’s emphasis on survival and development as opposed to black nihilism’s notion of black-sacrifice.

The goal, then, is to analyze the philosophical moves in Warren’s argument, which

8 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 233.

9 Daylanne English, “Afrofuturism,” Oxford Bibliographies, last modified October 24, 2024. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0004.xml>.

10 Elaine Nichols, “Black Joy: Resistance, Resilience and Reclamation,” accessed February 24, 2025, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/black-joy-resistance-resilience-and-reclamation>.

will illuminate both what it means for him to reclaim spiritual investment, hope, into an antiblack political program and how black nihilism interacts with alternative political movements. In this case, Devonya Havis demonstrates how her use of Levinas aligns and deviates in very specific, demarcated ways from Warren's use of Heidegger that make these interactions explicit. Furthermore, one can trace black nihilism as a response to the European form of existentialism, which emphasizes the importance of action and struggle. Additionally, Frantz Fanon's political and existentialist work sheds light on how antiblackness and humanism may relate to action and political struggle. Investigating these traces of existentialism and humanism will develop a better picture of the black nihilist's critique of action, struggle, and suffering.

The Black Nihilist's Critique of Existentialism

An inspiration for Warren's defense of black nihilism comes from a conversation he has with a black woman on a train, where he was struck by her attitude towards her skeptical non-engagement with the Political.

She began to talk about the government shutdown. "They don't care anything about us, you know," she said. "We elect these people into office, we vote for them, and they watch black people suffer and have no intentions of doing anything about it." I shook my head in agreement and listened intently. "I'm going to stop voting, and supporting this process; why should I keep doing this and our people continue to suffer," she said. I looked at her and said, "I don't know ma'am; I just don't understand it myself." She then laughed and thanked me for listening to her—as if our conversation were somewhat cathartic. "You know, people think you're crazy when you say things like this," she said giving me a wink. "Yes they do," I said. "But I am a *free* woman," she emphasized "and I won't go back." Shocked, I smiled at her, and she winked at me; at that moment I realized that her wisdom and courage penetrated my mind and demanded answers.¹¹

There are two important qualities to this conversation. The first is the observation that "people think you're crazy when you say things like this." The second is the cathartic and freeing effect of the conversation itself. For Warren, the importance of the first quality is that it indicates there is an opposition to nihilism, viewing it as a "'disease of the soul' that produces callousness, meaninglessness, and masochism," wherein attitudes of nihilism are "pathological" and "immature" responses to one's circumstances.¹² The second quality will be explored later as a justification for the black nihilist position.

Many existentialist philosophers share a similar attitude in their opposition to nihilism. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, asserts that the problem with the nihilist is that they do not recognize "the importance of that universal, absolute end which freedom itself is."¹³ For Beauvoir, freedom is the end towards which one must always be oriented, and this freedom must be devoted towards the freedom of others as well. To understand Warren's objection to this view of nihilism, it is necessary to analyze

11 Warren, "Black Nihilism," 245. Emphasis in original.

12 Warren, "Black Nihilism," 224.

13 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Kensington Publishing, 2002), 57–58.

Beauvoir's view of freedom, ambiguity, and the liberation from oppression. Beauvoir asserts that "freedom realizes itself only by engaging itself in the world: to such an extent that man's project toward freedom is embodied for him in definite acts of behavior."¹⁴ This is to say that to put forth one's freedom, one must act. Action becomes privileged for Beauvoir when she argues that only through action can one be free. Furthermore, Beauvoir says this about action: "through his own struggle he must seek to serve the universal cause of freedom."¹⁵ In this quote, Beauvoir explicitly references the need to struggle for freedom, that this struggle must always be oriented towards the removal of oppression for others. Notice here the emphasis on struggle; in the face of immediate suffering and oppression, it is only through struggle for oneself and others that one can be free.

Warren criticizes this obligation that Beauvoir puts forth. This commitment to action, to a project with an end in which the world is bettered, is exactly how a "logic of struggle, then, perpetuates black suffering by placing relief in an unattainable future, a future that offers nothing more than an exploitative reproduction of its own means of existence. Struggle, action, work, and labor are caught in a political metaphysics that depends on black-death."¹⁶ This logic of struggle towards an unattainable future finds its roots both in Warren's empirical evaluation of the American historical context as well as his philosophical foundation in Heidegger and its application to the Political. More specifically, the Politics of Hope involved in the logic of the Political configures black political action towards an impossible object that ignores the historicity and metaphysical formation of political progress.¹⁷ It is important to note that this analysis of action and existentialism is not meant to singularly critique the work of Beauvoir, nor is it to set her philosophy up as the token example of existentialism. However, insofar that the existentialist project asserts that one must always create their own meaning and that the thrownness of a situation ensures that one must always contend with themselves, then struggle and action are the ways in which one asserts themselves into the world from an existentialist perspective.

The Black Nihilist and Fanon

In Warren's essay, he draws upon much of Fanon's analysis of the black experience. Furthermore, Fanon's emphasis on the psychological impact of systems of colonialism in *Black Skin, White Masks* serve as an example of the historical analysis of antiblackness that Warren uses. In line with Warren's analysis of the paradoxical nature of the Political, Fanon finds that for "the black Frenchman the situation is unbearable. Unsure whether the white man considers him as consciousness in-itself-for-itself, he is constantly preoccupied with detecting resistance, opposition, and contestation."¹⁸ Warren sees Fanon as correctly

14 Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 78.

15 Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 89–90.

16 Warren, "Black Nihilism," 233.

17 Warren, "Black Nihilism," 221.

18 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2008), 196–97.

identifying the dilemma in which black people find themselves, that they are expected to always be struggling, to invest themselves into the political system in which past generations fought so intensely to be included. In the conclusion of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon shares his sentiment that he no longer wishes to be chained by history, by the wrongs of white people, and by the suffering of black people. However, Warren would take issue with the orientation of his sentiment. For Fanon, “if the question once arose for me about showing solidarity with a given past, it was because I was committed to myself and my fellow man, to fight with all my life and all my strength so that never again would people be enslaved on this earth.”¹⁹ Fanon privileges action and struggle even in his more existential work. In this way, he is oriented towards a “utopian” dream where black people are no longer constantly existing in relation to white destiny. Warren argues that this orientation is not only harmful but also implicates the destruction of the world itself. The same argument against Beauvoir applies here, where the expectation of struggling to solve the immediacy of black suffering is problematic. The caveat here is that this commitment to struggle only exists to an extent. Fanon’s personal acceptance of a racialized history was done to form a politically efficacious response to colonialism.²⁰ In other words, I assert that Fanon’s philosophical move is two-fold. He believes that political response is important only in the way of creating the conditions in which a new, non-Western form of humanism would be possible. It is this belief that is the foundation of his existentialist position. He emphasizes the psychological condition of colonialism as justification for the need to dismantle the system to resolve the racism associated with it.

The Black Nihilist’s Position on Metaphysics

The previous section’s analysis of the existentialism in the backdrop of black nihilism leads to the question of how black nihilism is different from traditional nihilism. Additionally, it brings up important points of analysis regarding black existentialists, such as Havis and Fanon. In what ways do Havis and Fanon align with the fundamental problem of antiblackness that Warren describes? Do they implicitly or explicitly criticize positions of nihilism? Do their solutions to antiblack violence fit within Warren’s theoretical framework?

The key feature of Warren’s black nihilism is the introduction of Heidegger’s criticism of metaphysics. I argue that the explanatory power of Warren’s use of Heidegger is what puts forth antiblackness as this insurmountable obstacle to the black nihilist. The pertinent question here for Warren is “can we think at all without anti-blackness?”²¹ Here, we should draw upon Heidegger’s notion of anxiety and Nothing and Warren’s analysis of Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics.

Warren simultaneously draws upon Heidegger’s understanding of metaphysics

19 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 202.

20 Robert Bernasconi, “Situating Frantz Fanon’s Account of Black Experience,” in *Situating Existentialism: Key Texts in Context*, ed. Jonathan Judaken and Robert Bernasconi (Columbia University Press, 2012), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/juda14774.15>, 353.

21 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 237.

from “What is Metaphysics?” while also critiquing it. Heidegger’s analysis begins with the Nothing and anxiety. For Heidegger, there is no specific object of anxiety. Rather, it is the Nothing that structures Being through the feeling of anxiety. In other words, anxiety does not involve being anxious about something, but rather about no-thing (Nothing). When one is anxious, Being is held out into the Nothing, as Dasein. Dasein is the specific term that Heidegger uses to describe human beings as “being-in-the-world,” in which one encounters the Nothing. This interaction with the Nothing is essential for the meaning-creation of Dasein.²²

For Warren, the Political’s encounter with antiblackness is analogous to Being’s encounter with Nothing.

For the black nihilist, anti-blackness *is* metaphysics. It is the system of thought and organization of existence that structures the relationship between object/subject, human/animal, rational/irrational, and free/enslaved—essentially, the categories that constitute the field of Ontology. Thus, the social rationalization, loss of individuality, economic expansionism, and technocratic domination that both Vattimo and Heidegger analyze actually depend on anti-blackness. Metaphysics, then, is unthinkable without anti-blackness. Neither Heidegger nor Vattimo explores this aspect of Being’s oblivion—it is the literal destruction of black bodies that provide the psychic, economic, and philosophical resources for modernity to objectify, forget, and ultimately obliterate Being (nonmetaphysical Being).²³

In this way, the epistemological categories on which modernity depends, the way morality and thought are rationalized, and indeed, the “organization of existence” itself is reliant on continued antiblackness. In order for society as we know it today to continue to exist, the destruction of black bodies is necessary. Society sustains itself on black bodies to ground “its institutions, economic systems, environment, theologies, philosophies.”²⁴ For example, black bodies are used as capital via incarceration.²⁵ Furthermore, society uses antiblackness to self-actualize, where the black body is the vehicle for social betterment, and similarly sustains the logic of modernity and metaphysics.²⁶

Warren focuses on the interaction with the Nothing and its importance for meaning creation but locates the function of the Nothing within antiblackness. By doing so, he questions the ability for the black-as-object to act as Dasein, or in other words, have access to meaning creation. For black subjectivity, then, there is no access to anxiety, no access to the Nothing that structures being, because black bodies themselves are rendered as *nothing*. Black subjectivity has no meaning-creation because the condition of antiblackness prevents them from doing so. This is their ontological death. Indeed, Curry

22 Martin Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?” in *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (Harper & Row, 1977), 92–93.

23 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 237. Emphasis in original.

24 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 239.

25 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 243.

26 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 218.

asks whether hope can “even be justified in a white-supremacist society that murders Blacks to maintain its social order.”²⁷ Warren continues to say that it’s not only the case that metaphysics is predicated on antiblack violence, but it also relies on black suffering and struggle itself to sustain itself. “The struggle is presented as a spiritual virtue, and the spiritual concept of hope is contaminated with the prerogatives of a political order.”²⁸ It is here that we can refer back to the critique of existentialism. Political metaphysics relies not only on black suffering, but also black *struggling* to uphold civil society. With this in mind, the existentialist solution for meaning creation becomes poisoned by its reliance on antiblackness to even make sense of the notion of “meaning creation.”

To go further, Warren’s criticism of the Political does not just extend to the traditional modes of governance that we see in the contemporary United States. It also applies to the notion of progress and liberation itself. Warren asserts that “it is a discourse of hope, a politics of hope that advances the belief that we can weaken metaphysics and reduce suffering, violence, and pain. When it comes to black suffering, however, we are compelled to hold up the mirror of historicity and inquire about the possibilities of emancipation for the black-as-object.”²⁹ Warren draws upon Heidegger to claim that the nexus of antiblackness is now beyond level of human existence.³⁰ In other words, black people have been “thrown” into a situation where the effects of the transatlantic slave trade are no longer considered merely an event, but a conditioning of existence itself that has been tied directly to blackness. Because of this, black people do not have access to *Dasein* because *Dasein* itself is reliant on antiblackness in its “movement toward Being.”³¹ This analysis is caught up in the fundamental question that Warren poses for existentialists and the advocates of the Political. Here, he criticizes not only the political institutions of modernity, but also the discourse surrounding the possibility of liberation for existentialists. In other words, existentialists assume that liberation is possible, but for the black nihilist, it isn’t. It is Warren’s unique usage of Heidegger that allows him to put forth this argument. Liberation does not exist for the black-as-object because metaphysics itself and the way metaphysics conceives of liberation fundamentally treats black people as *nothing*. Furthermore, because metaphysics is so dependent on antiblack violence, to imagine an end to antiblack violence is to imagine an end to metaphysics, and thus the end of the world itself.³² As such, fundamental projects of life and the creation of meaning both individually and universally are predicated on black suffering and thus are inaccessible and inconceivable for the black body.

The Black Nihilist and Havis

27 Curry, *Man-Not*, 181.

28 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 229.

29 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 238.

30 Parisa Vaziri, “Black Execration: A Review of Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*,” *Postmodern Culture* 29, no. 3 (2019): <https://doi.org/10.1353/pmc.2019.0009>.

31 Vaziri, “Black Execration.”

32 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 238–39.

The question of the possibility of liberation and meaning creation is approached differently by Havis’s *Performative Utterance*. It is her reference to the possibility of liberation as “the move from *Performative Utterance* to Black Philosophy, which seeks Black liberation,” opening “up an interrogation of the stakes of ‘truth’ and ‘liberation’ with respect to the management of Black bodies” which Warren continues to problematize.³³ At the same time, Havis demonstrates an understanding of black suffering that coincides with Warren. Havis is sympathetic to the notion of the impossibility of traditional political progress. She asserts that “denial concerning how impossible it is to produce the required proof for universal Black humanity continues to fuel even more rigorous attempts to ascertain redemption through letters.”³⁴ Both Havis and Warren criticize the notion of black liberation as a re-appropriation of humanism. In this case, Havis and Warren are speaking of a European form of humanism that originates in Enlightenment-period conceptions of reason and the self as a basis for defining humanity, with Warren focusing more on the political recognition that humanism grants. They view this humanism as one of the justifications that allowed for the transatlantic slave trade. In this case, the logic of the Political goes beyond Fanon’s understanding of the black man’s destiny as the white man’s destiny. The formation of a black humanism is untenable for Warren and Havis. For Warren, humanism involves a metaphysical violence that revolves around the use of a humanist grammar and political discourses of betterment that colonize the spiritual practice of hope to sustain an antiblack organization of existence.³⁵ For Havis, this focus on humanism is bankrupted by Modernity and Western paradigms of what it means to be human, insofar as the focus on humanism has traces of a crypto-Enlightenment tendency that treats the Black as an object of knowledge. Havis asserts that this definition of reason renders the Black subhuman and that a humanistic enterprise is bankrupt because it is “unable to produce a Black reason” in the context of the paradigms of Western philosophy like the Enlightenment.

In light of these problems with humanism, Havis identifies the Black Vernacular Phenomena as a shift away from humanism in which a Performative Utterance disrupts Western binaries that are sourced from metaphysical organization. She begins this analysis with an excerpt from *Alice in Wonderland* and describing the “play” that occurs in Wonderland.

The adventure of wonderland is the “play” that springs forth in an active indeterminacy without the pursuit of resolution. *Black Vernacular Phenomena*, and the specific modalities that share its character, create a “wonderland” in which what seemed obvious and given fades into perpetual traces upending the given and pointing toward the illusion of mastery. In *Black Vernacular Phenomena* we come face-to-face with an otherwise, a beyond which, that exceeds our capacity to be thought. It is an asking that cannot be completely answered, a rhythm that exceeds the utility of mechanical time. These *traces*, noted in a peculiar excess,

33 Devonya N. Havis, *Creating a Black Vernacular Philosophy* (Lexington Books, 2023), 11–12. Emphasis in original.

34 Havis, *Creating a Black Vernacular Philosophy*, 14.

35 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 242–43.

mark an ever-present gap between thought and its containment in concept.³⁶ There are many points where Havis aligns with Warren when she refers to the importance of “play.” Throughout her project, she refers to the “play” in various different contexts alongside a litany of other terms that she describes as unable to be contained by concept. Broadly, these terms have their foundation within Levinas’s concept of alterity, so it is worth giving some examples of how Havis herself uses the word “play” and how it relates to Levinas as a theoretical foundation. The “play” refers to a dynamic process that is open to possibility, or an *otherwise*. For example, the adventure of wonderland engages in “play” because the concrete notions that one might take as given, are actually dynamic in their meaning. As such, “play” explores these multiple meanings through *alterity*. “Play” also occurs between the gaps in traditional hierarchical limits that do not fully encompass reality. It is worth briefly grounding this within the philosophical foundation of Levinas. For Levinas, the relationship of the self and the “Other” and alterity is privileged instead of a concrete notion of the self. Furthermore, the relationship with alterity has a structuring effect that allows for possibility beyond the self, including sociality. It is precisely this theorization of alterity and Havis’s notion of a black Other that demonstrates the difference in philosophical foundation between Havis and Warren, and Levinas and Heidegger accordingly. Whereas Heidegger is concerned with the Nothing as structuring Being via Anxiety, Levinas uses the Other as alterity to demonstrate that the recognition of the unknowable other allows spaces for possibility. That is, one does not need to be oriented towards Nothing but rather exploring differences and possibilities in the Other. This ontological distinction has political ramifications when we relate it back to “play.” The “play’s” “active indeterminacy without the pursuit of resolution,”³⁷ is something that would disrupt the Political because there is no notion of completeness and no promise for betterment for Havis. Black Vernacular Phenomena also is unable to be coded by traditional Western metaphysics, as it “exceeds our capacity to be thought.”³⁸ There is no linear temporality that forces blackness to give answers for antiblack futurity because there is “a rhythm that exceeds the utility of mechanical time.”³⁹ In these ways, Havis seems to adequately respond to the oppressiveness of the Political by placing the metaphysical problem with Levinas instead of Heidegger. By doing so, she is able to reimagine blackness by “playing” in the gap, in alterity, instead of Warren’s ontologizing of the black condition itself through Heidegger.

The question, then, is whether Havis’s Performative Utterance adequately removes itself from the ontological problems that Warren puts forth. Havis’s Performative Utterance is a disruption to Western philosophy’s binary oppositions. Here, it is essential to point out their common verbiage of metaphysical “residue” and epistemological meaning. Havis asserts “that in the *performance* there is a distinction between the *Black* and *Blackness* which entails a distance, a tracing of what could have been there, but has now passed away leaving residue in its wake. *Performative Utterance* is the *play* emerging in the

36 Havis, *Creating a Black Vernacular Philosophy*, 7. Emphasis in original.

37 Havis, *Creating a Black Vernacular Philosophy*, 7.

38 Havis, *Creating a Black Vernacular Philosophy*, 7.

39 Havis, *Creating a Black Vernacular Philosophy*, 7.

observation that vision is biased, that meanings are multiple.”⁴⁰ For Havis, the Black is a reified and essentialized notion of what it means to be black, whereas Blackness is the open-ended notion of this meaning,⁴¹ indicating a gap between a definite characterization of the Black and dynamic sense of Blackness. The analysis of the gap between the Black and Blackness is not found in Warren. Havis finds that the performance is what “plays” in this gap, while Warren does not find a gap, but a paradox. Warren’s paradox is society’s destruction of the black body while positing the black body as a requirement. As such, any “performance” from the black body is rendered pathological for blackness itself.

Havis’s theorization of the gap between the Black and Blackness is important because within it lies the possibility of escaping the social projection of Modernity. To make sense of this social projection, Curry provides a framework of study. “The Man-Not grows from the incongruity I observed between what theory claims to explain and the *actual* existence of Black men and boys—an *actual* reality that remains excluded from its purview.”⁴² In other words, the Black male is “projected” onto as a disease to society, similar to Warren’s analysis, but there is a gap between the projected Blackness and the existence of the black body. Curry’s analysis focuses on the contradictions that produce this gap, then uses the Man-Not as coined by Sylvia Wynter. Havis focuses on what to do with the gap. Havis finds that “the vernacular *play* is an oscillation between what *the Black* is presumed to be (i.e., not a lady, not articulate, not clean) and Blackness as a dynamic experience that clears the way for possibility in the practice of interrogation.”⁴³ In this way, the Performative Utterance’s play in the gap between the Black and Blackness is destabilizing to traditional Western metaphysics and categories. It does so by refusing to be static, to always be changing in ways that render the meaning it creates unintelligible to Modernity. If we translate Performative Utterance to the verbiage of Warren, then Performative Utterance would be a form of anti-grammar to the language of metaphysics, something that sits in the contradictions that the West has created for antiblackness. If we look back at the “multiple meanings” that arise from Performative Utterances, then it follows that it combats the “translation of this anti-grammar into a system of understanding that is designed to exclude it. This tension between grammatical exclusion and compulsory inclusion is part of the violence of captivity.”⁴⁴ Warren finds the contradiction to be violent, but for Havis, it is generative in ways that antiblack epistemology cannot even capture. The social projection, or the collection of antiblack expectations that are put on the black body, is rejected in the Performative Utterance. Havis describes Nina Simone and Thelonious Monk as rejecting the logic of the Political and playing oneself respectively, which rupture the very way that the Black is inscribed in the black body via an invocation of Black Difference.⁴⁵ Here, Havis draws upon both Fanon and Derrida to ground her argument. Havis replaces Fanon’s analysis of the epidermalization of an inferiority complex with

40 Havis, *Creating Black Vernacular Philosophy*, 12. Emphasis in original.

41 Havis, *Creating Black Vernacular Philosophy*, 4.

42 Curry, *Man-Not*, 7. Emphasis in original.

43 Havis, *Creating Black Vernacular Philosophy*, 23.

44 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 241.

45 Havis, *Creating a Black Vernacular Philosophy*, 23. Emphasis in original.

the epidermalization of the Black. Then, Havis defines Black Difference as “a dynamic process of engaging difference, *alterity*, and playing in and through those differences,”⁴⁶ which destabilizes the static concept of the self, i.e., playing oneself. This playing oneself is irreducible to Western understandings of ontology and reflects the function of engaging with alterity to disrupt and look beyond the binary oppositions and traditional conceptions of the “*self*, liberation, revolution, and ethics.”⁴⁷ Black Difference, then, is a vehicle for engaging in alterity in ways that deconstruct the meaning of concepts.

In these ways, Havis presents a convincing way of *doing* philosophy. There is an interplay of pessimistic attitudes towards the Political with optimistic attitudes towards rethinking liberation, solidarity, and action. It is here that Havis and Warren once again depart. For Havis, “the dialogic quality of these performances place one always in a context of discursivity where the greater appeal to the individual comes from the Other. These vernacular performances characterize the *Black Difference*. *Performance* allows direct expression or indirect commentary and serves to motivate participants to action.”⁴⁸ Havis finds herself once again at the nexus of action. Even after a complete rethinking of what it means to act, the Performative Utterance still situates itself in terms of the other. Action is towards the betterment of material conditions, which for Warren will never come to fruition. Warren’s critique of metaphysical violence does not stop at the logic of the Political, which Havis deconstructs. The black nihilist’s position is that “putting an end to metaphysics will also put an end to the world itself—this is the nihilism that the black nihilist must theorize through. . . . The black nihilist has as little faith in the metaphysical reorganization of society through anarchy than he does in traditional forms of political existence.”⁴⁹ Even the notion of action itself is part and parcel of the biopolitical ordering. As such, “the nihilist does not promise redress within the structure of the political, for this is impossible, but offers, instead, *rejection* of the political as a spiritual practice itself.”⁵⁰ Warren’s stance here is radical and uncompromising. By placing the black body as the no-thing that Heidegger theorizes for being, “it is impossible to end metaphysics without ending blackness, and the black nihilist will never be able to withdraw from the Political completely without a certain death-drive or being-toward-death.”⁵¹ Reading this in relation to Havis and Fanon, there is no universal humanism, nor is there a movement from Performative Utterance, to Black Vernacular Phenomenon, to black philosophy that can adequately “liberate” the black body from the destruction that Modernity necessitates without already being towards death. In other words, the unfortunate situation that the Black finds itself in is that it must orient itself towards its own death in order to free itself from death.

Curiously, Warren laments that there is a “lack of a coherent grammar to articulate

46 Havis, *Creating a Black Vernacular Philosophy*, 15. Emphasis in original.

47 Havis, *Creating a Black Vernacular Philosophy*, 9.

48 Havis, *Creating a Black Vernacular Philosophy*, 95.

49 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 244.

50 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 229. Emphasis in original.

51 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 244.

these dilemmas.”⁵² We know that Fanon’s grammar involves, in the end, a universal humanism that assuredly fails in Warren’s view. But it seems that Havis’s view formulates a grammar, Performative Utterance, in which these dilemmas are able to be articulated. “Recalling in these lines the ongoing tension between the *proper* and the *Black*, Simone’s performance generates the critical trace as *critique*. The listener experiences, insofar as it is possible, a phenomenon that cannot be captured in concept or word—the Black Vernacular that at once states what appears and in the same moment turns it around to refashion it anew.”⁵³ Furthermore, “The silent commentary which leaves the critical trace is performed by Simone in what she never says but implies. This is called signifying. As Ellison writes, “signifying” here meaning, in the unwritten dictionary of American Negro usage, “rhetorical understatements.””⁵⁴ Here we already see that Warren’s critique of signifying as something that is always a Western metaphysical organization is itself being destabilized by the ambiguity that Havis embraces via the Performative Utterance. In this way, is Havis’s approach to Black Philosophy, while still rooted in liberation and betterment, an alternative to black nihilism? In other words, does the end to antiblackness necessarily mean the end of the world? Is black nihilism the only way to rescue hope from political investment? If it is true that Havis’s Performative Utterance provides a way to disrupt antiblack epistemology, then the notion of “progress” that is unintelligible by Western metaphysical organizations is indeed viable at least for the individual. Because of Havis’s difference in the metaphysical theorization of antiblackness, she can conceive of “solutions” to antiblack violence that still fit within the theoretical framework that Warren provides. This does not delegitimize black nihilism as a position but rather puts forth a possible alternative to direct spiritual hope. While Warren objects to even using the term “solution,” Havis nevertheless represents an optimistic orientation towards antiblack violence.

The Consideration and Clarification of Black Nihilism

Calvin Warren’s response to the prevalence of antiblack violence and the perceived lack of political progress culminates in a critique of the Politics of Hope and the theorization of black nihilism that retrieves the spiritual concept of hope. This analysis is done in the American context, where the contested historicity of movements, progress, and political solutions reveal the necessity to clarify the philosophical foundations of black nihilism. This is because alternative political movements, such as Black Joy as resistance and Afrofuturism, demonstrate both converging and diverging viewpoints on the condition of black suffering as well as the possibility for emancipation.

To clarify how Warren defends black nihilism from those who criticize it as a pathological reaction to antiblackness, I argued that tracing the philosophical foundations and lineages of various thinkers provide insight into how Warren treats antiblackness and the impossibility of progress. This tracing involved using existentialists to understand how Warren conceptualizes black suffering as inevitable in the context of black struggle, action, meaning-creation, and political betterment. Then, I discussed Fanon to show how Warren

52 Warren, “Black Nihilism,” 245.

53 Havis, *Creating a Black Vernacular Philosophy*, 24. Emphasis in original.

54 Havis, *Creating a Black Vernacular Philosophy*, 23.

was both influenced by and critical of the political praxis and existentialist tendencies of Fanon's analysis. It demonstrated the impact of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade on Warren's understanding of the contemporary conditions of black suffering, as well as how Warren differs from Fanon's own understanding of black struggle for political progress.

After discussing the role of action and struggle in Beauvoir's existentialism and applying it in the context of Blackness with Fanon, we then discussed Warren's Heideggerian influence and criticisms. In short, Warren uses Heidegger's analysis of the Nothing and Dasein as a foundation for understanding how antiblackness structures the fabric of metaphysics, including the Political and society in general. This provided a line of comparison to Devonya Havis's Performative Utterance through her own use of Levinas as a philosophical foundation. This foundation was the theorization of the "Other" as a Black Other. This, alongside the theorization of the Performative Utterance as capable of destabilizing traditional Western metaphysical concepts like the self and linear temporality via the "play," demonstrated the capacity to conceive of Havis as a possible alternative to black nihilism without outright pathologizing or rejecting it. This was because Havis's use of Levinas and Warren's use of Heidegger provided the philosophical foundation to draw distinctions between the two arguments on the possibility of meaning-creation and a world without antiblackness while also providing a common ground in order keep them in conversation with one another.

Finally, the goal of this essay was not to definitively decide on the "correct" approach to understanding antiblackness, but rather to illuminate the different ways in which people may conceive of it. The aim is for one to walk away from this with a clearer understanding of how competing perspectives on the possibility of change and the conditions of black suffering came about. By grounding these perspectives within the relevant veins of philosophical thought, it is my hope that the reader can better interpret the claims that black nihilism makes in order to seriously consider its arguments when thinking of the nature of political struggle. The essay also serves as an example of this consideration by putting Havis's Performative Utterance in conversation with the black nihilist without an immediate rejection of its perspective.

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