

# (Non)Presence: The Hole of Metaphysics

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*"...the end of metaphysics is unthinkable without the end of colonialism and Eurocentrism..."*

September 8, 2017: Tourists arrive at Lynden Pindling Airport in Nassau, Bahamas. They are greeted by Black steel drum players and Bahamians dressed in Junkanoo costumes, dancing and welcoming them to Paradise. The tourists smile and dance, take pictures and move on to their hotels on the neighboring—and aptly named—Paradise Island, accessible by bridge: a metaphorical crossing of the tracks. When they reach the hotel's main entrance, Black doormen smile, greet them, and take their bags. They are checked-in by Black front desk agents. They unlock their rooms, freshly cleaned by an entirely Black housekeeping staff. They drink. Their bartenders are Black. They head to the Straw Market on West Bay Street with all the other white tourists to buy handmade bags, fans, and coasters made from straw. They walk to Fish Fry and eat conch salad and red snapper. They snorkel, they jet-ski, they swim with the dolphins. They dance to that same steel drum music and go back to the hotel, with its black doorman, black desk agent, and black housekeepers.

September 9, 2017: HURRICANE WARNINGS REMAIN IN EFFECT FOR THE NORTHWEST AND CENTRAL BAHAMAS AND RAGGED ISLAND. THIS INCLUDES THE ISLANDS OF GRAND BAHAMA, ABACO, BIMINI, THE BERRY ISLANDS, ANDROS, NEW PROVIDENCE, ELEUTHERA, EXUMA, LONG ISLAND, CAT ISLAND, RUM CAY, SAN SALVADOR, AND RAGGED ISLAND. A HURRICANE WARNING MEANS THAT HURRICANE CONDITIONS ARE AFFECTING OR CAN AFFECT THE AFOREMENTIONED AREAS WITHIN 36 HOURS.

White flight. This is no longer Paradise.

Geneva Cooper, senior director of hotel licensing in Nassau Bahamas, announced that all cruise lines due to arrive in the country had been diverted to "other destinations" in anticipation of the Category 4 storm (Hurricane Matthew).

My mother calls. Her husband is in Barbados doing a carpentry job. She is not allowed to check into Atlantis, the hotel on Paradise Island. She doesn't have access

to Paradise. She says that they are not allowing Black Bahamians to check into the hotel.

In times of catastrophe, The Bahamas' (non)presence constitutes a shifting existence from Paradise (presentable) to shithole (unpresentable). Presentable as that which is desirable, but presence as that which undergirds and constitutes Being in the world. Presence is the violent structure of metaphysics that allows for U.S. to imag(in)e itself.

In January 2018, while discussing immigration and the visa lottery system, United States President Donald Trump referred to Haiti as a “shithole” country. “Why do we need more Haitians, take them out.” He continued by “questioning” why the United States would want immigrants from “all these shithole countries,” if presented with immigrants from Scandinavian non-“shithole” countries, like Norway.

Trump, along with other wealthy white Americans, owns property in the Caribbean—specifically, a \$28 million estate in St. Martin. The Caribbean is understood in terms of excess: at once a site of consumption and leisure, and waste, a “shithole.” This coexisting mode of relation undergirds the fungibility of Black place. By Black place, I am referring to places like The Bahamas that are transformed into infinitely usable spaces. Catastrophes, like hurricanes and earthquakes, reveal the multiple ways Blackness is captured within language and structures of thought—maintaining and sustaining antagonistic systems of antiblackness that impact islands like The Bahamas and Haiti. Mediocre infra-structure—lack of proper emergency communications center (help!), desalination units (water), generators (light), proper water drainage (hygiene)—fails those who are most vulnerable, thereby reinforcing the naturalized distinctions between Blacks and whites. It is this “world-constituting violence,” as Calvin Warren puts it, that maintains the force of distinction between the presence of the U.S. and the non-presence of The Bahamas.

In the ensuing lines, I will outline the antagonistic systems of functionality—a term used by Warren to evoke the equipmental character<sup>2</sup> of Blackness—between the U.S. and The Bahamas that are revealed after catastrophe, and emerge through the structure of presence, the metaphysical concept that frames living, recognition, and Being. In doing so, we will see the violence of presence that structures thought and why non-presence accounts for the ways that Black spaces like The Bahamas are instrumentalized and erased, preconditioning the presence, realization, and recognition of the U.S.

### **Shit-holes**

When Trump referred to “shithole” countries, we understood this to be code for “countries where mostly black people live.” In David Marriott’s essay, “On

Decadence: Bling Bling,” he opens by quoting a piece of graffiti he saw in a bathroom of his school when he was younger, it reads: “What’s the difference between a nigger and a bucket of shit? The bucket.”<sup>3</sup> Black is “shit,” that which is excess, surplus, unthinkable, undesirable, and unintelligible. Blackness is consumed, digested, and shat out. The product of white consumption is black shit. Black is ‘hole’, a “terrifying hole.” Black is nothing, Black is the abyss, Black is that which “is not heard, [that which] remains silent, secret, and discreet as a tomb...”<sup>4</sup> This excess (shit) silence (hole) is the “tomb of the proper in which is produced...the economy of death.”<sup>5</sup>

The economy of death of *différance*, as Jacques Derrida puts it, “cannot be apprehended in speech, and...also bypasses the order of apprehension in general.”<sup>6</sup> It is that which is “read but cannot be heard” between the *e* of difference and the *a* of *différance*.<sup>7</sup> *Différance* for Derrida exists as temporization and spacing. A temporal deferment and spatial arrangement. Perhaps this can also extend to the movement that is Blackness. Blackness circulates in the body of language through displacement. The Bahamas moves from the site of relaxation (Paradise) until it becomes time again for it to become the site of repulsion (shit). Blackness must be evacuated. The meaning is infinitely deferred to accommodate the infinite assemblages of Black existence. This deferral is felt by Black Bahamians like my mother, who are turned away when there is no more accommodation (in Paradise) except for at the door, behind the desk, or behind the toilet.

Derrida so accurately captures the impossibility of presence for Blackness when he asks us to think *différance* as twofold, “economic detour...and...an impossible presence, as expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy, that is, as the death instinct, as the entirely other relationship that...interrupts every economy.”<sup>8</sup> The denial of resources to Bahamians, the deferral of means of subsistence, the irreparable loss of life, the usage of labor and land, that is Blackness’ place in the economy.

Through Afro-Pessimism, we come to learn that Blackness is unintelligible, an object—dead. That which is “read but cannot be heard,” is perhaps the Black body buried in the hole; only the tombstone remains to be read. Blackness is the remainder. “To be Black is to exist in exchange without standing in the modern world system.”<sup>9</sup> Blackness exists in an economy of death with society at-large, wherein the death of the Black object is always already in an order of exchange.

I am shit

I am hole

“Consumption [of the Black is driven by] domination and sadistic pleasure.”<sup>10</sup> The white tourist reduces the Black in the Bahamas to a hole to be penetrated and shit to be disposed of.

Blackness is doubly consumed by society in order to fill itself with representation and subjectivity. “Blackness persists as the always already retrievable (bucketed) figure of human being emptied of its humanness: and this evacuation is itself the separation of human being from a black phenomenal matter that is shitty and abject.”<sup>11</sup> White tourists consume Black labor, Black land, Black flesh, Black place. They come to have us serve them in hotels, have us call them “ma’am,” and have sex with them. They come to feel whole, to allow their somethingness to emerge from the nothingness. As racially abject, the resemblance of Blackness to human being is a resemblance that antiblackness has to dispose of: it has to be evacuated.”<sup>12</sup>

## Presence

Presence: “ousia, Parousia (origin and end)...The founding principle as that toward which one moves.”<sup>13</sup>

“Antiblackness: an accretion of practices, knowledge systems, and institutions designed to impose nothing[ness?] onto blackness and the unending domination/eradication of black presence as nothing incarnated.”<sup>14</sup>

Being Human means that one can be-come present. To be present is to “be.” Thus, the history of philosophical thought has endowed an “extraordinary right” to presence—giving way to the structures of reason, meaning, and the Good.

If we are to engage with metaphysics and the no(n)-thing of Blackness, we must engage with the concept of the metaphysics of presence. Presence within the tradition of metaphysics has been used as both a spatial and temporal signifier. *I am present and I live in the present*. It is what metaphysics has assumed to be an integral part of the Being of beings (ontology).<sup>15</sup>

Calvin Warren argues that Being is “the grand aperture that has provided the conditions for relationality for epochs...”<sup>16</sup> and beings instantiate themselves temporally and spatially. It is important that we grapple with the two dimensions that condition Being and being in the world. Derrida quotes Heidegger’s note on Being: “The relation to what is present that rules in the essence of presencing itself is a unique one (*ist eine einzige*), altogether incomparable to any other relation. It belongs to the uniqueness of Being itself (*Sie gehört zur Einzigkeit des Seins selbst*).”<sup>17</sup> Derrida uses Heidegger here to illuminate the presence that is always already

present in Being. “Beings are grasped in their Being as ‘presence’; this means they are understood with regard to a definite mode of time—the ‘Present.’”<sup>18</sup> The character of Being, that which constitutes beings, is one of presence which always already *belongs* to being present. Being and Presence are *general* conditions of *particular* present beings.

As noted above, Being has provided the conditions for relationality for epochs. If this is true, then Presence must be taken seriously as a fundamental condition of Being. Thus, this/the metaphysical condition of Being, the fact of Being as situated in the present, is specific to the Human.

Derrida explains, “...that which bears within it a certain *no-thing*, that which accommodates nonbeingness, cannot participate in presence, in substance, in beingness itself (*ousia*).”<sup>19</sup> This no-thing acknowledges the metaphysical lack of space for Blackness within the spatio-temporal limits of Presence and reveals that presence is itself a metaphysical vector that gives way to a destructive mode of functionality. “Metaphysics gives birth to black being through various forms of antiblack violence, and this birth is tantamount to death and worldlessness.”<sup>20</sup> To have the power to come into the present and present your self is an ontological privilege inconceivable for Blackness. In this case, the U.S. is present because it utilizes the nothingness of The Bahamas to emerge as Being-Present.

Derrida notes, “one grants to the ‘living present’ the power of synthesizing traces and incessantly reassembling them.”<sup>21</sup> To be present is to be endowed the power to reassemble nothingness, to render nothingness fungible. He continues by noting that “this privilege is the ether of metaphysics, the element of our thought that is caught in the language of metaphysics.”<sup>22</sup> The living, in this case, are those that are not entombed in Blackness. The living are present and synthesize the (non)being or being<sup>23</sup> of those who are dead and not present. Trump (living) synthesizes the (non)being of Blackness when he articulates the phrase “shithole” countries. It is this utterance that traps Blackness in its metaphysical prison of not *being* present and being excluded from this metaphysical privilege.

### **A Note on Relation**

Returning to the idea that Being serves as a condition of relation, we must acknowledge the idea of the relational to further grasp the violence of metaphysics and its structural hold on Black existence. One could argue that Édouard Glissant would be a more appropriate thinker within this conversation given his analysis of the poetics of relation in the Caribbean and the difference that emerges through this relation. However, because this piece serves to move away from the tradition

of metaphysics and Humanism, Glissant's optimistic idea about the positive chaotic mode of difference that emerges via relation will not suffice to account for the nothingness that is Blackness. I am rather taking up Calvin Warren's argument from *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, where he gives us a more fundamental critique of the onto-metaphysical status of black being. He argues that Blackness does not engage in relation because "black being's function within metaphysics is to inhabit the void of relationality."<sup>24</sup> Black being serves as *pure function* rather than relation because Blackness is merely there to "help the human being re-member its relation to Being through [Blackness'] lack of relationality."<sup>25</sup> While Warren invests in Being and its (mis)use of Blackness, my critique of presence emerges from the necessity to continue to acknowledge the remainder that metaphysics has left behind.

### **(Non) Presence**

"This is catastrophic! I used to come here for summers as a young boy, I know these families, my God, look at this place, you wouldn't believe it looking at it now, but this place was paradise..."—Robert Carron (white) president of The Tribune Media Group in Crooked Island, Bahamas Post-Hurricane Joaquin in 2015.

"Time is not non-Being and non-Beings are not in time."<sup>26</sup>

"This place used to be Paradise." This is how the fungibility of the Bahamas' presence comes into "relief" after a catastrophe. What was once "Paradise" is quickly transformed into a shithole. The question we must ask is, *What is Black existence without presence?* (Just as Warren asks, "what is Black existence without Being?") For Warren, Blackness is nothing because it is objectified as nothing through the structure of metaphysics. His critique is that metaphysics and Blackness are incompatible in that, "objectification, domination, extermination of blacks [keeps] the metaphysical world intact."<sup>27</sup> Essentially, metaphysics is a double bind for Black existence, it refuses to grant humanity while also utilizing Blackness as a constitutive force for Humanity. "The world needs the Negro, even as it despises it."<sup>28</sup>

The Bahamas is the spatio-temporal remainder, it is excess and nothingness all at once within the metaphysical structure.

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Given the all-encompassing nature of presence, presencing, and the present as the de facto mode of Being in the world, it is of great import to acknowledge that those whose remains lie outside of presence, are spatially and temporally unstable and fungible within metaphysical systems of thought. Simply, the spatio-temporal metaphysical structure is unable to accommodate Blackness as such. The Bahamas cannot be in the world without being vulnerable to catastrophe, the U.S. maintains its stability and presence as impenetrable by rendering Black places like The Bahamas hyper-vulnerable and (non)present. This is because metaphysics, as Warren notes, gives way to a metaphysical Holocaust. “The metaphysical holocaust is violence without end, violence, constitutive of a metaphysical world. It is a ‘violence that continuously repositions the Black as a void of historical movement. This void and stasis of temporal linearity is precisely the nothing that blacks incarnate.”<sup>30</sup>

The void is the hole in which the Black lies and through which Blackness exists. Blackness is a-voided. The Bahamas is repositioned and repositioned and repositioned...temporized and temporized and temporized...spaced and spaced and spaced.

“Fresh water has been a problem on Crooked Island for years, ever since hurricane Irene damaged the r/o systems years ago. It would really be good if they could leave that here and we could rebuild water and sewerage around that, it could solve a lot of problems for this island.”<sup>31</sup>

This space given by time exposes the violence of neglect after the storm. There is no repair except for those who inhabit Paradise, those who are on the fringes are left barely standing and relief never comes.

The violence of the Being-through-presence is a spatial and temporal one, such that presence becomes a “vector of terror for black being...producing and sustaining the destruction of black being in its own way.”<sup>32</sup> Becoming through presence is reserved for those who have the possibility to develop meaning, for those for whom a humanist self can adhere. The human necessitates a (non)relational body, the Black as (non)presence. This violence emerges linguistically when we are regarded as ‘shit,’ a catalyst for national pride in the U.S. The U.S. produces the destruction of the Caribbean by exploiting its resources with \$28 million estates, naturalizing catastrophes like Hurricane Irma, and sustaining the injuries of its aftermath through neglect.<sup>33</sup>

The Negro, and more specifically, the Negro in The Bahamas, exists in a temporal mode of non-presence. Non-presence appropriately captures the “black time” of Black existence. Black time exists in the wake of a thousand storms of colonization and recolonization. Blackness can never be-present. The rubble is a reminder, the storm surge is a reminder (remainder), nothing fades into the past. While white tourists relish in the moment, their worries fading away into the past, the past haunts the ruins of buildings and homes in the Bahamas. We in ruin.

Black existence does not adhere to a presence/absence binary that defines the metaphysical structure. Warren writes, “The Negro is born into absence and not presence.”<sup>34</sup> What then, is Black existence without presence or absence? How do we account for the *making* of the tool and the *use* of the tool? Because absence does not appropriately account for the multiple ways in which islands like The Bahamas come in and out of existence for the sake of function, we must take up (non)presence as a fundamental mode of existence. Blackness can never be absence because absence *is*. Derrida writes of absence, “As such it remains essentially related to what is presently present, inasmuch as it either comes into the expanse of unconcealment or withdraws from it. Even what is absent is something present, for as absent from the expanse, it presents itself in unconcealment.”<sup>35</sup> Absence cannot account for the remainder of Blackness. Absence implies former presence and thus, can still be accounted for. The localizing force of “shithole” is imbued with the fragmentation of Black place. Paradise and death coexist in the catastrophic zone of non-presence. And given the metaphysical Holocaust under which the Black is born, (non)presence accurately describes the ways in which Blackness is suspended between presence and absence, unaccounted for and positioned in the void.

Antiblackness is inherent in metaphysics and Warren suggests that “antiblackness provides the instruments and framework for binary thinking, the thinking of being as presence.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, he writes in “Onticide: Afro-pessimism, Gay Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence” that, “[Blackness] is rendered absent because it is muted and denied, but also present because it structures society.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, (non)presence

accounts for this both-and structure of Black existence. It is the deferred meaning of The Bahamas that allows it to be fungible—destination, Paradise, and ‘shit-hole.’ These multiple constitutions of The Bahamas are undergirded by the fact that “the world *needs blacks*, even as it tries to eliminate them [actively through brutality and passively through neglect] (this is the tension between necessity and hatred).”<sup>38</sup> According to Marriott, “the desire to turn black resemblance into shit appears to be constitutive of whiteness.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, The Bahamas ultimately functions as a site for pure consumption, one that reaffirms the distinction between those who consume and those that are shit, those who are whole and those that are hole.

The structure of metaphysics is such that Blackness exists in the intermediary and for our purposes here, “between presence and absence. Between form and formlessness, animal and man, property and human...nothing and something,”<sup>40</sup> this is the spatio-temporal mode of Blackness, the mode of (non)presence.

Returning to Derrida, we know now that Presence cannot hold the body of Blackness, the body of the island, the body of The Bahamas. To account for the antiblack logics that adhere to the metaphysics of Presence in Being, Derrida’s conception of *différance* provides us with a phenomenological account of spacing and deferral within the linguistic structure that does not adhere to the binary structure of absence and presence, while simultaneously revealing the violence of presence. “It is the determination of Being as presence or as beingness that is interrogated by the thought of *différance*.”<sup>41</sup> We can take this phenomenon up, while also accepting Warren’s critique that “we will never gain equivalence to humanity by inversion and displacement” through the procedure of Deconstruction. Because, as we know, the inversion and displacement that takes place during reverse peristalsis merely changes the hole, but the shit nonetheless remains the same. *Différance*, here, will serve to articulate the spatiotemporal mode that Blackness operates under within the metaphysical logic of Presence, giving way to a more accurate concept offered here as the (non)presence of Blackness.

*Différance* for Derrida is twofold in its nature, spatial and temporal. It is in constant motion, never grounded, never present. (Non)presence functions similarly, it accounts for the unstable temporal mode of Blackness and the spatial void of Blackness. As Warren notes, “time rebounds upon itself in a space of ontological terror—there is only temporal circularity or black time, an abyss of time.”<sup>42</sup> Like the mode of (non)presence of Blackness, “*différance* (is) (itself) other than absence and presence...”<sup>43</sup> Derrida writes that “What presents itself as non-present is what is absent.”<sup>44</sup> However, what we have seen above is that (non)presence is not equivalent with absence, but in between it. (Non)presence, like *différance* “is not. It is not a present being.”<sup>45</sup> Further, “It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority.”<sup>46</sup> This is the (non)presence of which I speak. The Bahamas

has no authority, it exists merely as shit and hole, existing to be “unceasingly dislocate[ed]...in a chain of differing and deferring substitutions” for civil society.<sup>47</sup> The dislocation of shit during bowel movements and reverse peristalsis is just the motion of shit, deferred to other locations, repositioned. Différance “has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent.”<sup>48</sup> The (non)presence of The Bahamas exists in this mode of (non)being, no category of being, just the category of “shit-hole.”

Again, the impossibility of presence for Blackness must be thought twofold, “economic detour...and...an impossible presence, as expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy, that is, as the death instinct, as the entirely other relationship that...interrupts every economy.”<sup>49</sup> This is what the concept of (non)presence asks of us, to think the existence of Blackness without Presence as an entirely other relationship that interrupts every economy. It encompasses the manifold ways in which Blackness can be used to metaphysically constitute everything that experiences Presence. This is the economy of death under which the The Bahamas exists. And ultimately, this is the hole of which we must continue to speak, even if we won’t ever have the words.

## Endnotes

1. Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, ed. Santiago Zabala, trans. William McCuaig. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 35.
2. A Heideggerian notion of use. He has two terms: ready-to-hand and present-at-hand. Ready-to-hand is something like a tool that serves a function for someone, it becomes useful.
3. David Marriott, “On Decadence: Bling Bling,” *e-flux*, no. 79 (February 2017), 3.
4. Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982, 4.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 3-4.
7. Ibid., 3.
8. “Différance,” 19.
9. Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Power and the Police Culture After Slavery*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009, 1.
10. Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, 25.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Derrida, “Différance,” 9.
14. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 9.
15. For Heidegger, the question of the meaning of Being is answered through temporality. Heideggerian Being is to be there, is to be present in space and time, and this is what Heidegger refers to as Parousia. When Heidegger refers to Presence, he intends to make clear that beings are in time and Being is beholden to being present. It is the “onto-theological determination of Being.”
16. Ibid., 11.
17. Derrida, “Différance,” 27.
18. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row, 1962, 39.

19. Jacques Derrida, "Ousia and Gramme," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982, 39-40.
20. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 38.
21. Derrida, "Différance," 16.
22. Ibid.
23. Derrida utilizes sous rature, a method originating with Heidegger, to emphasize the dislocation of meaning when referring to différance. Warren throughout *Ontological Terror* performs a method of sous rature, an act he calls Onticide (Black Being), a form of ontological erasure (sous rature) that acknowledges the (non)being of Blackness.
24. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 32.
25. Ibid.
26. Derrida, "Ousia," 62.
27. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 6.
28. Ibid.
29. Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, 151-152.
30. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 16.
31. Mr. Bonamy, senior man at Water and Sewerage Corporation from Crooked Island.
32. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 22.
33. The naturalizing of "natural" disasters is a move by countries like the U.S. to divert the conversation away from the effects of capitalist modes of production (fracking, coal mining, oil drilling and pipelines, and overdevelopment of land) on climate change and vulnerable countries like the Bahamas and towards a conversation of monetizing disaster through companies who provide "relief" (port-a-potties, generators, cots, mobile homes), all the while calling places that are ravaged by these disasters "shit-holes" and blaming them for lack of infrastructure.
34. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 42.
35. Derrida, "Ousia," 34.
36. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 10.
37. Calvin Warren, "Oncicide: Afro-pessimism, Gay Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence," *GLQ* vol. 23, no. 3, (2017): 397.
38. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 10.
39. Marriott, "On Decadence," 3.
40. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 36-37.
41. Derrida, "Différance," 10.
42. Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 23.
43. Derrida, "Différance," 23.
44. Derrida, "Ousia," 34.
45. Derrida, "Différance," 21.
46. Ibid., 22.
47. Ibid., 26.
48. Ibid., 6.
49. Derrida, "Différance," 19.