Ontological Terror

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ONE

THE QUESTION OF BLACK BEING

This essent, through questioning, is held out into the possibility of nonbeing. Thereby the why takes on a different penetration.

HEIDEGGER, Introduction to Metaphysics

A question whose necessity is so fundamental that it must be unasked—the question of the meaning of black being, the question of the meaning of (black) things. We study in the sound of an unasked question. Our study is the sound of an unasked question. We study the sound of an unasked question.

FRED MOTEN, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)”

BUILDING A WAY

One must ask a certain question of black being, a question that opens us onto a horizon of representational and conceptual crisis. This question emerges within a context of urgency: the intensity of black suffering, spiritual and physical deprivation, political demoralization, and the proliferation and permanency of necropolitical agendas. The question, its urgency, and the crisis that it engenders recycle historically in various guises, and in each (re)incarnation, it demands an address—an address that seems impossible, since the discursive material we use to formulate an answer is also called into question. Hortense Spillers meditates on certain facets of this redoubling problematic when she suggests that in any investigation of black being, “we are confronted by divergent temporal frames, or beats, that pose the problem of adequacy—how to reclaim an abandoned site of inquiry in the critical discourse when the very question that it articulates is carried along as part of
the methodological structure [or metaphysical structure], as a feature of the paradigm that is itself under suspicion, while the question itself foregrounds a thematic that cannot be approached in any other way.”

The “unasked question,” as Fred Moten would call it, is this “abandoned site of inquiry.” My objective in this chapter is to return us to the abandoned, arid ontometaphysical space—the space and place of the question in ontometaphysics. I use the unasked and unanswerable question to “build a way,” as Heidegger would describe it, through the treacherous terrain of ontometaphysics and antiblackness.

What follows is a tracing of this question through the discourses of ontometaphysics and the paradigm of the free black. My propositions attend to the important function of the Negro, or black being, in ontometaphysics: (1) The Negro is the incarnation of nothing that a metaphysical world tries tirelessly to eradicate. Black being is invented precisely for this function ontologically; this is the ontological labor that the Negro must perform in an antiblack world. (2) The Negro is invented, or born into modernity, through an ontometaphysical holocaust that destroys the coordinates of African existence. The Negro is not a human, since being is not an issue for it, and instead becomes “available equipment,” as Heidegger would call it, for the purpose of supporting the existential journey of the human being. Black being is the evidence of an ontological murder, or onticide, that is irrecoverable and irremediable. The condition of this permanent severing between black being and Being is what I call the “execration of Being.” In this sense, Being does not withdraw from the Negro, as it does from the human, for what withdraws can reemerge. Instead, Being curses black-being by creating an entity unintelligible within the field of ontology. (3) The Negro Question that becomes the obsession of antebellum culture (“What do we do about our free blacks?”) masks the ontological stakes involved in answering the question, since what the question is really about, as I propose, is what we do about the nothing that terrorizes us, that destabilizes our metaphysical structure and ground of existence. The terms free and black do not just present political problems of citizenship, rights, and inclusion, but also present serious ontological problems, since the boundaries of ontology—between human and property and freedom and unfreedom—are thrown into crisis with the presence of the free black. Ultimately, I propose that the Negro Question is a proper metaphysical question, since the Negro is black and
black(ness) has always been a terror for metaphysics. These propositions unfold through an engagement with different ontometaphysical discourses in the black radical tradition alongside and against Heidegger, since Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics, as the disavowal, forgetting, and contempt of Nothing assists us in understanding how metaphysics engages the nothing that it despises but needs (the tension between hatred and necessity). I, however, depart from Heidegger, since black being is not human being (or Dasein) but available equipment, equipment in human form, that Heidegger does not consider because of his Eurocentric perspective.

BLACK, NOTHING, AND THE NEGRO

We can consider the Negro Question a proper metaphysical question. Heidegger reminds us that every metaphysical question always grasps the whole of the problematic of metaphysics. A proper question emerges within a context of urgency, but the investigation of the context and the question itself destabilizes the entire edifice within which the investigatory procedure is carried out, since the answer becomes a symptom of a larger problem. It is this larger problem (the “whole of the problematic of metaphysics,” as Heidegger calls it) that the proper question is designed to address through a series of questions that, as they unfold, open the horizon of an empowered thinking. The proper question exposes an abyss, a black hole within the ontometaphysical tradition and its attendant discourses or, as Nahum Chandler aptly describes it, “the black in the whiteness of being, in the being of whiteness.” The philosophical conditions that enable the tradition are themselves brought forward, questioned, and thrown into relief. To present a proper metaphysical question of black being, however, our question, and procedure, must align with the philosophical instruction of Hortense Spillers to “strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time; over time, assigned a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of [our] own inventiveness.” The objective of this question and our questioning is precisely to strip through layers of metaphysical baggage and attenuated meaning as they violently encrust over deep time and history. We can describe the whole problematic of black being, then, as the aggregate, or collection, of these burdensome layers, which are traumatically
imposed during the initiation of the transatlantic slave trade. But since “a genuine question is not done away with by finding an answer to it,” according to Heidegger, the question remains as a feature of our own inventiveness. In other words, the question remains at the heart of black being. And we must ask this question, since there is no getting rid of it, despite the marvelous power of our inventiveness. We can think, then, of Spillers’s protocol of stripping through layers of attenuated meaning as the correction to Heidegger’s Eurocentric Destruktion, or the “destructuring of the history of ontology,” as he describes it in Being and Time. This is to say the destructuring of metaphysics must address the concealment of the Negro—buried deeply beneath layers of metaphysical violence. Our questions bring us to this concealment, within the history of ontology, as that kernel of antiblackness sustaining both metaphysics and ontology.7

The question has been with black being, as a constitutive feature of it, since black being was invented—since modernity gave birth to it through dispossession and abjection. We have grappled with this fundamental question for centuries, in various forms. Dubois asked a variation of this question: “What does it mean to be a problem?”8 This is, indeed, a proper metaphysical question, since it requires us to strip through layers of pulverizing meaning to arrive at a kernel of (non)meaning, or meaninglessness, as the answer to the question of black being. The question that Dubois presents, “What does it mean to be a problem?,” is both a metaphysical riddle and a formulation of black being—black being is this riddle. The question of black being must, then, start with the ontology of the problem. To be a problem is the being-ness of blackness. It is this problem that will preoccupy our concern here—the question of black being as the problem of ontometaphysics (put differently, we can rewrite Dubois’s question as “what does it mean to be the problem of ontometaphysics?” What is the condition, or inhabitation, of this problem?). It is impossible to uncouple black being from this problem. Exactly how does one be a problem? Or “inhabit” a problem, as Nahum Chandler might suggest is the riddle of blackness in modernity. When Hortense Spillers suggests that the black body is “reduced to a thing, to being for the captor,”9 we can understand this being as the problem itself. Black being embodies an ontometaphysical problem for the captor. Black being becomes a site of projection and absorption of the problem of metaphysics—a problem that the captor would wish to ignore or
neglect by imposing it onto black being. Thus, black being is not only necessary for involuntary labor and pornotroping, but also necessary ontologically; it inhabits the problem of metaphysics. This inhabitation is the space and place of the Negro Question—our proper metaphysical question.

Thinkers from the antebellum period presented this problem as the “Negro Question.” The question of the Negro is precisely the question of this problem. For Sylvia Wynter, the Negro Question cannot be a proper object of knowledge, given that the ruling episteme does not accommodate this strange being. Thus, the question itself and the metaphysical problem that it carries are positioned outside the frames of epistemology and its attendant discourses. For Wynter, the Negro is that being, or more accurately entity, that is excluded from the discourse of man and its overrepresentation of being otherwise. The problem that the Negro Question opens up is this position outside of man. We can present a reformulation of this proper metaphysical question, following Wynter: why does this outside position constitute a problem for the whole of metaphysics (and its paradoxical answer)? This problem is spatialized as the outside, which preconditions the metaphysical architecture of man, the privileged inside. But given that this outside position is actually an intimate aspect of the inside, since it provides the inside’s condition of possibility, the problem is at the heart of the ontometaphysics of man. Black being is the absent center of the whole of metaphysics, and it, cartographically, constitutes the paradoxical inside/outside position of metaphysics. This begins to provide a path of investigation toward this proper metaphysical question. Why is black being a problem? Why is this problem constitutive of an inside/outside paradox? Answering these questions, however, inevitably leads to more questions, or what I will call a fundamental question: How is it going with black being?

In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger presents the question “How is it going with Being” [*Wie steht es um das Sein?*] to indicate that this question is the fundamental question, even more fundamental than “why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” The importance of this question resides in the philosophy of the remains of Being, as Santiago Zabala has persuasively argued. Since being has become “just the sound of a word, a used-up term,” Heidegger argued that we must destroy, or dismantle, the structure of metaphysics to renew a forgotten relation to Being, not as
presence or object, but as the opening of existence itself—what Heidegger will later call “appropriation.” Thus, the proper metaphysical question “How is it going with Being?” emerges after the destruction, or dismantling, of metaphysics; and after we have worn out the term, we must re-member Being by recollecting the fragments—the ontological pieces left after the destruction. “How is it going with Being?” is a way of inquiring about the status of Being after it has been thoroughly dismantled—what is left? Ontological investigations must now start with this fundamental question, according to Heidegger, to contend with the being abuse that has plagued the philosophical tradition from Plato onward. Reading Heidegger through Spillers, then, we could suggest that the task of Destruktion is to strip through layers of attenuated meaning, made in excess through the procedures and practices of metaphysics. The Heideggerian enterprise here is postmetaphysical to the extent that it urges us to twist metaphysics and instigate its self-consumption. This postmetaphysical movement marks the end of philosophy as we know it and inaugurates a thinking otherwise [Andenken] to arrive at a more fruitful understanding of the relation between Being and Dasein. “How is it going with Being?” dockets an uncovered or re-membered relationship between Dasein and Being, and it is the task of philosophy to illumine it.

If the aim of this postmetaphysical enterprise is to urge us to twist metaphysics to ask a more appropriate ontological question (i.e., the move from what is being to How is Being, as event and happening), it assumes that the metaphysics of being, its ontic science, has been settled and we can now get over metaphysics (even though we are still entrapped). Black being, however, does not easily afford this postmetaphysical movement, since the metaphysical question of black being—what is it?—has not been resolved, and thus, the ontological question, if one can be truly posed, what is the relationship between black being and Being (or How is it going with black being?) is an unanswerable one (which, again, is why we must continually write black being under erasure). Put differently, the problem with the Negro Question is that we can never truly arrive at an appropriate ontological question, since black being is not ontological, but something other, something that lies outside of epistemology and ontology. This makes the Negro Question unanswerable on the register that Heidegger proposed for Dasein. The Negro Question is situated on a plane within/without metaphysics, but
also outside the precincts of ontology. The *space* and *place* of the Negro Question are a *problem* for the whole of metaphysics, but a *problem* that provides the condition of possibility for human being to ask its fundamental question, “How is it going with Being?” The unpresentability of the Negro Question is the necessary ground for Dasein’s ontological presentation.

To suggest that black being constitutes the *problem* at the center of ontometaphysics, in the form of an unanswerable question, is to suggest that Heidegger’s *Destruktion* relies on the *indestructibility* of antiblackness in modernity. Metaphysics can only be dismantled for Dasein because a primordial relationship between it and Being exists that metaphysics cannot pulverize, even though it tries with science, schematization, and technology, according to Heidegger.\(^{15}\) Thus, the dismantling or destruction of metaphysics is really the opening of a primordial relationality between Dasein and Being. But even though we can destroy metaphysics, in terms of twisting it and instigating its self-consumption [verwunden], we can never completely destroy it; a remainder or remnant will always persist within the very heart of the destructive enterprise. This remainder, this intransigent entity, is indestructible and, in fact, *structures* the project of destruction. It is indeed a paradoxical formulation that destruction depends on the kernel of *indestructability* at its core, but when we consider that something must remain for the philosophical enterprise to continue, then we understand that this remainder keeps the destructive movement going—it is its metaphysical fuel. I would also present another audacious claim and suggest that black being is the *name* of this indestructible element because black being’s function within metaphysics is to inhabit the void of relationality—relationality between it and Being and relationality between it and human-being-ness and the world itself.\(^{16}\) Thus, we must reconceptualize black being ontometaphysically as *pure function* and not relation (put differently, black being emerges in modernity primarily to inhabit this treacherous position as *function*, which enables human beingness to engage in its projectionality into the world and to restore its forgotten relationship with Being. In a word, black being helps the human being re-member its relation to Being through its lack of relationality. The essence of black being, like the essence of technology, is to open up an understanding for Dasein, it is always being for another. Black being, then, is precisely the metaphysical entity that must remain for the postmetaphysical enterprise of freedom (the loosening up of
metaphysical strictures) to occur for human beingness (or Dasein). This indestructible remainder is a problem for metaphysics, since it retains the trace of objectification that restricts complete freedom for Dasein, but it is also the answer to metaphysics, given that it serves as the catalyst for the self-consumption that engenders greater freedom, if not complete freedom, for Dasein. But this formulation presents more questions, proper metaphysical questions, that chart the course to the abyss of metaphysics, which is black being: why is black being indestructible? Why has metaphysics been unable or unwilling to dismantle its remainder? How do we articulate the problem of black being, which is the problem for the whole of metaphysics?

Alain David provides a guide through these difficult questions in his philosophical meditation “On Negroes.” David poses a proper metaphysical question of his own: why are Negroes black? I describe this as a proper metaphysical question because the juxtaposition of black and Negro in his inquiry (Negroes are black, as a copula proposition) opens us onto a paradox of black being understood through the Negro. I would formulate this paradox as this, following David: the Negro is the excess of form in an antiblack world, but also the interruption of form, the formless, given that the Negro is blackness within metaphysics. What could this mean? For David, metaphysics encounters a crisis. On the one hand, it attempts to move beyond form, the specificity of beings into the realm of Being (the formless); on the other hand metaphysics cannot seem to free itself completely from anthropologizing metaphysics, of a metaphysics that organizes ontological imagining around differences of race and skin complexion; thus, the purported formless, indifferent field of ontometaphysics is predicated upon anthropological differences, and this interplay between formlessness and form is what David would call “race.” For him, “race is that hyperbole of form affirming itself over against that which would prevent form. Race is like a transcendental condition of the ontological argument.” When it concerns the Negro (as black being), then, the distinction between the indifferent metaphysician and the anthropologist obsessed with difference collapses. But the collapse, I would argue, is necessary given the function of black being, of the Negro. The question “Why are Negroes black?” can be approached through the metaphysical question “Why is there something rather than nothing?” for David. It is the status of this nothing that preoccupies the metaphysician, since, according to David, it is this nothing that interrupts
form for metaphysics. Nothing occupies the paradoxical position (as Heidegger also argued in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*) of indexing formlessness, the breaking of metaphysics, at the same time conceptualized through metaphysical form (as a something). This leads David to appropriate a childhood riddle for philosophical purposes and ask: what is nothing while being something? The answer to this riddle is black for David:

Black means nothing, nothing means black. Or, rather, nothing does not exactly mean black, since in nothing positivity is erased. Why is there something rather than black? According to this formulation, “black” is something, and yet, as I’ve said it is nothing. Nothing other than dazzlement. Light itself. And this black that is nothing, without this nothing being nothing, is the something that prevents any something from belonging to the whole. One must, then, wonder what this positivity is that, inscribed in the nothing—an inscription of the nothing—converts the nothing into its enigmatic nuance of black.  

Black, here, is not the color black, but is the index of formlessness, since color would assume a sensible form within metaphysics. Despite indexing this formlessness, black assumes form as a something: positivity. The function of this something that is also a nothing is designed to “prevent any something from belonging to the whole,” as David argues. In other words, this something serves as the precondition for the whole itself, as its inclusive exclusion (or excluded inclusion); its function is to fracture the whole through its exclusion, which constitutes the center—the absent center. Black is the something that is also nothing, a nothing that cannot be adequately captured within the precinct of metaphysics, but a something upon which metaphysics depends. But David also wonders “what [is] this positivity that, inscribed in the nothing—an inscription of the nothing—converts the nothing into its enigmatic nuance of black?” How, then, is nothing converted into black? How does that which interrupts metaphysical form (its grammar and conceptualization) appear as form, as a translation from the ineffable to the conceptual or worldly?

These inquiries return us to David’s proper metaphysical question: why are Negroes black? He suggests that this question could be reformulated as “How does the interruption of form appear as form?” Although David
reaches a limit with this metaphysical question, since the philosophical exercise reaches a limit—of both meaning and knowledge (and he begins a discourse of what he calls “imaginary Negroes” to make sense of the senseless)—I would propose a response to David’s inquiry: the Negro is black precisely because, within an antiblack world, the Negro is forced (through forms of terror and violence) to inhabit the position of black within metaphysics and to provide form for the formlessness of the interruption (which is why we can call the Negro “black being”). If, as Heidegger insists, metaphysics attempts to transform everything into an object so that it can dominate and control it, nothing would become another object that metaphysics desires to dominate—an ultimate object. How does metaphysics transform nothing into something, so it can dominate this nothing? Through the Negro—it gives a form for the formless, but a form that perplexes and threatens. Perhaps this is why Negroes, historically and philosophically, have served as the “intermediaries between animal and man,” as David describes it. The Negro is the interstice of metaphysics, the formless form between man and animal, property and human, whose purpose is to embody formlessness as a corporeal sign. As an intermediary, its position within metaphysics is paradoxical, as an excluded inclusion, an untranslatable entity without a proper referent (a catachresis within metaphysics). As Ronald Judy argues, “The Negro cannot enable the representation of meaning, [since] it has no referent.”

The Negro, then, is pure function; this function is to be black, but a being that is not (or Fanon’s n’est pas). And this is why the invention of the Negro is so essential to metaphysics. When, for instance, Afro-pessimists assert that black(ness) is unbearable or that black suffering is illegible, it is a way of articulating blackness as function—black being as pure function, metaphysical utility, nothing more. It is the function of bearing the nothing of metaphysics, black as formless form, that is unbearable and also the crux of black suffering. The world is antiblack because it despises this nothing, this nothing that interrupts its organization of existence, its ground of intelligibility and certainty (which is why antiblack violence is a global problematic). Returning to Wynter, we can understand why the Negro Question can never serve as a proper object of knowledge, since the Negro, as black being, constitutes a nothing, a formless form, that epistemology cannot accommodate—nor can ontometaphysics.
How does metaphysics provide form for this formlessness, form as knowledge? This has been the task of postmetaphysical thinking (from Heidegger onward) to encourage a thinking outside of metaphysics in order to open up a horizon of the unknowable—unknowable within the grammar and logic of metaphysics (a philosophy against the dominance of form). But (post)metaphysical thinking has forgotten the Negro, much like man has forgotten Being. This forgetfulness is necessary, since to re-member or integrate the Negro would require a contention with this dreaded nothing. Vattimo suggests that “the end of metaphysics is unthinkable without the end of colonialism and Eurocentrism.”

I would argue that colonialism and Eurocentricism are antiblack strategies for attempting to obliterate, and to forget, dreaded nothing—since black bodies, cultures, and existence are assigned this unbearable formlessness within modernity. Put differently, the human cannot re-member Being (or its primordial relationship with Being as Dasein) without re-membering the Negro. The Negro is invented precisely to absorb the terror of this nothing, of the interruption of time and space, within modernity. This is why it is unthinkable to end metaphysics without ending the various systems of antiblackness within the world. Antiblackness and its technologies of destruction are designed to obliterate nothing: nothing as formlessness, nothing as interruption, nothing as black, and, ultimately, nothing as the Negro.

But our original, proper metaphysical question, “How is it going with black being?,” opens up the dread of this nothing in an antiblack world. The world and its institutions must mute this question, rendering it absurd and irrational, to sustain the whole of metaphysics (or the world itself, as black nihilism would assert). This question is the fundamental formulation of proper inquiries that have guided our thinking: “Why is the Negro black?” “Why is there something rather than nothing?” “What does it mean to be a problem?” The question “How is it going with black being” exposes the problem of metaphysics, the problem with “black” and “nothing” because it compels thinking about the function, status, utility, and necessity of black within an antiblack world. It forces us to entertain the strange juxtaposition between being and black(ness), between formlessness and form colliding on the existence of the Negro. The disruptive question that Dubois posed, then, “What does it mean to be a problem?,” invites us to consider the unbearable suffering of inhabiting this problem for metaphysics—what metaphysics
despises, what it hates. What it means to be a problem is to exist as an intermediary between form and formlessness, animal and man, property and human, and nothing and something—to “straddle Nothingness and Infinity,” as Fanon would say. What it means to be a problem is that this being (being as a problem) renders both “meaning” and “being” impossible and inadequate. The Negro is the limit of both meaning and being and embodies ontological terror (the terror of the nothing within an antiblack world). Moreover, it means that one must embody a nothing that the world works tirelessly to obliterate—which means that the violence directed toward the Negro, black being, is gratuitous and will never end as long as metaphysics remains (and postmetaphysics admits that it is impossible to destroy metaphysics. We can only twist it, but there will always be a remainder). It means, to rephrase the perspicacious insight of Hortense Spillers, “The [world] needs [the Negro], and if [the Negro] were not here, ['it’] would have to be invented.”

THE INVENTION OF THE NEGRO AND THE NECESSITY OF BLACK BEING

What is this Negro? Negro as black being; Negro as nothing. We return endlessly to this metaphysical question and the tension of the copula (the “is-ness” of a [non]being) that sets the metaphysical inquiry into motion. Perhaps this question cannot be answered with apodictic certainty, since the Negro is neither a proper object of knowledge nor a proper referent (catachresis). What we can propose, however, is that function, or utility, requires an instrument, and instruments are invented for the purpose of fulfilling the agenda of utility. I have suggested thus far that the Negro serves the function of embodying metaphysical nothing(ness) for modernity—a weighty, burdensome, and dangerous function. The world needed a being that would bear the unbearable and live the unlivable; a being that would exist within the interstice of death and life and straddle Nothing and Infinity. The being invented to embody black as nothing is the Negro. An antiblack world desires to obliterate black as nothing—nothing as the limitation of its dominance—so that its schematization, calculation, and scientific practices are met unchecked by this terrifying hole, nothing. With the Negro, metaphysics can
triumph over this nothing by imposing black(ness) onto the Negro and destroying the Negro. The Negro is invented precisely to be destroyed—the delusion of metaphysics is that it will overcome nothing through its destruction and hatred of the Negro. The Negro, then, is both necessary and despised.

But it is important to remember that this Negro, the cipher of metaphysics, is the invention of a desperate world. The Negro is not a human being that is simply mistreated, but is, instead, an invention designed to embody a certain terror for the world. I say this because thinking in this way will require us first to discard naturalism and the conflation of human being with black being. This is a difficult task because of the ruse of resemblance (the Negro looks human, so must be one). But as Lindon Barrett taught us, modernity produces “anthropomorphic uncertainty” by which “racial blackness overwhelmingly disappoints the modern resemblance of the human, signaling instead the unleashing of the inhuman that specifies the ‘human’ population of the modern state.” Biological and visual resemblance does not render the Negro a human being—these are nothing more than ontic illusions. Ontologically and metaphysically, the Negro is anything but human. Hortense Spillers might call this an “altered human factor.” In describing the transport of Africans to Europe, she suggests that they embodied a radical otherness and alterity for the European self. “Once the ‘faithless,’ indiscriminate of the three stops of Portuguese skin color, are transported to Europe, they become an altered human factor.… The altered human factor renders an alterity to European Ego, an invention, or ‘discovery’ as decisive in the full range of its social implications as the birth of a newborn.” Once on European soil (and in the hold of the ship), the African ceases to exist and instead becomes “other,” an alteration of humanity. Something new emerges with the transport of the African. The African becomes black being and secures the boundaries of the European self—its existential and ontological constitution—by embodying utter alterity (metaphysical nothing). Metaphysics gives birth to black being through various forms of antiblack violence, and this birth is tantamount to death or worldlessness. The invention, emergence, and birth of black being are not causes for celebration, however, since this invention is pure instrumentality and function (not the existential freedom, self-actualization, or sacred natality of Hannah Arendt and Jean-Luc Nancy, for example). Black being follows a different
trajectory than the celebrated human being of metaphysics and ontology. Its birth is death—death as nothing, death as the Negro, death as blackness, death as the abyss of metaphysics.

It is also important to reiterate that black being and African existence are not synonymous, although we might argue that African existence is transformed into black being through violence, transport, and rituals of humiliation and terror. Bryan Wagner clarifies the distinction:

Perhaps the most important thing we have to remember about the black tradition is that Africa and its diaspora are older than blackness. Blackness does not come from Africa. Rather, Africa and its diaspora become black during a particular stage in their history … blackness is an adjunct to racial slavery … blackness is an indelibly modern condition that cannot be conceptualized apart from the epochal changes in travel, trade, labor, consumption, industry, technology, taxation, warfare, finance, insurance, government, bureaucracy, communication, science, religion and philosophy that were together made possible by the European system of colonial slavery…. To be black is to exist in exchange without standing in the modern world system.26

To “exist in exchange without standing” is pure instrumentality, a being that is not human being, but something other, something unlike what modernity had known before. The disjuncture between being and black being is the gulf of metaphysical and ontological violence. Black being, then, does not originate from Africa but is invented in a (non)temporality that we might call the transatlantic slave trade. Put differently, African existence is an identity, whereas black being is a structural position or instrumentality.27 Identities circulate within the symbolic of humanity; they are discourses of the human (or genres of man, if we follow Sylvia Wynters). Identities provide symbolic covering for the human and differentiate his/her existence, or mode of being, from other human beings. A structural position, on the other hand, ruptures the logics of symbolic identity and constitutes function or instrumentality. Black being is a structural position and not an identity because it exists, or is invented, precisely as an anchor for human identity (human self adequation); the anchor is an inclusive exclusion and subtends human identity but is not incorporated into it. To be positioned structurally
and not symbolically means that structural existence is a preconditioned instrument for the maintenance of the symbolic—the symbolic here meaning the signs, symbols, and relationalities of the world itself. A structural position is pure use value (or function), and it lacks value outside its utility and the antiblack symbolic that determines the matrix of value (axiology). This, of course, is in contradistinction to human being, whose ultimate value resides outside the matrix of symbolism and into the esoteric or the horizon of Being-as-event. Black being is the zero-degree position of nonvalue but, paradoxically, is all too valuable because it enables the very system that excludes it (it is valued because of its utter valuelessness). Thus, black being is not birthed into presence through the generosity of Being, contrary to the genealogy of human being articulated by Heidegger and Jean-Luc Nancy, for example; black being is introduced as the execration of Being; its ultimate withholding of generosity, freedom, and care.

Moreover, the distinction between African existence and black being is the site of onticide, or a murderous ontology. What I am suggesting is that black being is the execration of Being because it emerges through a death sentence, through the death of African existence (“existence” is the best we can do grammatically because of the double bind of the copula formulation inherent in language). Black being is the evidence of an onticidal enterprise. Ronald Judy describes this as “thanatology.” In describing the coming-into-being of Equiano (an African captive transformed into black being, or the Negro), Judy suggests that the death of African materiality and the African symbolic body (or existence) provides the condition of possibility for the transformation. In short, black being emerges through the murder of African existence and not its generosity:

The death that is emancipating is the negation of the materiality of Africa. Writing the slave narrative is thus a thanatology, a writing of annihilation that applies the taxonomies of death in Reason (natural law) to enable the emergence of the self-reflexive consciousness of the Negro … writing the death of the African body is an enforced abstraction. It is an interdiction of the African, a censorship to be inarticulate, to not compel, to have no capacity to move, to be without effect, without agency, without thought. The muted African body is overwritten by the Negro, and the Negro that emerges in the ink flow of Equiano’s pen is that which has overwritten
itself and so become the representation of the very body it sits on.²⁸

Judy’s argument here is that the Negro is thought to gain a sense of subjectivity by displaying Reason through writing, since writing is prefigured as the ultimate sign of Reason, and Humanity, within an antiblack symbolic order. But to gain this subjectivity, this Negro-ness, he must first kill the African body (African existence). But, I would argue, if reason and humanity are the purported payoffs for a murder, then the Negro has indeed been defrauded. For displaying reason through writing (slave narratives and otherwise) has not folded the Negro into the family of the human [Mitsein] or rendered him a subject—there is nothing the Negro can do to change its structural position. Writing, reading, philosophizing, and intellectualizing have all failed as strategies to gain inclusion into human beingness (despite the hopeful insistence of black humanists). Instead, the Negro remains the nothing that metaphysics depends on to maintain its coherence. With the death of African existence, the Negro, or black being, is indeed nothing or no-thing that translates into any recognizable ontology. To say that the Negro is nothing is also to say that the Negro lacks ontological ground. The human being grounds its ontology in the beautiful relation between Being and Dasein (or the “space of existence,” as Heidegger would call it). Black being, however, lacks any legitimate ground, outside the oppressive logics of use value, for its being. Since it emerges through the execration of Being and not the gift of Being, it can lay recourse neither to Being nor to a primordial relation (since this primordial relation has been annihilated or murdered as the condition of its existence).

I would also suggest that the Negro is not responsible for this murder. Metaphysics (or the world and its symbolics) systemically murders this relationality, so that to be born black within modernity is to have always already been the material effect of an ontological murder. In other words, antiblackness is the systematic and global death of this primordial relation, and whether the Negro attempts to write him/herself into existence or not, this death has already occurred. When it comes to the Negro, subjectivity is a fraudulent hoax or ruse.

What do I mean by the “execration of Being”? I simply mean the death or obliteration of African existence. This obliteration provides the necessary condition for the invention of the Negro, or black being—black as
metaphysical nothing or groundless existence. One anchors one’s existence in this primordial relation, but the Negro is precisely the absence of such relationality, a novelty for modernity (or a “new ontology,” as Frank Wilderson would describe it). The Negro is born into absence and not presence. We can also describe this death of a primordial relation as a “metaphysical holocaust,” following Franz Fanon and Frank Wilderson. For Fanon, “Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man … the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man … his metaphysics, or less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they are based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him.”

Ontology provides intelligibility and understanding for the human being because she is embedded in a primordial relation with Being (as freedom and care). We can describe the entire field of ontology as the history, evolution, and maintenance of the various customs and resources that the human being needs to secure this relation. But “ontology … does not permit us to understand the being of the black man” because ontology is intended to preserve the customs and resources of human beingness and not black being. We will always experience tensions, contradictions, and impasses if we attempt to gain intelligibility for black being from a field that excludes it by necessity—because blackness is outside ontology as this nothing but most intimately situated within ontology as its condition of possibility (its inclusive exclusion). Ontology, then, does not provide the resources to understand this paradoxical thing—blackness is the abyss of ontology. But what is worse is that the customs and resources that once served as grounding for African existence were wiped out. This wiping out of the ontological resources to ground this primordial relation is the thanatology or onticide of African being. This metaphysical holocaust is the execration of Being—it is a particular process of producing black being through the murder of African existence.

The execration of Being also conveys Being’s curse and denouncement of the Negro as black (I would also suggest that the pseudo-theological term Hamitic curse is a variation of this execration in a different register). Rather than thinking of Being as having abandoned us and that this abandonment can be addressed through temporality, thinking anew, and a renewed relation
(as is the position of Heidegger and neo-Heideggerians), the execration of Being is beyond abandonment. It indexes the obliteration of the relation to Being and the absolute irreconcilability between the Negro as black and Being. Thus, the nothing that black being incarnates is not a celebratory portal or opening up onto Being for blacks—as if rejecting metaphysical thinking will reunite us, as it were, with Being as nothing. This only works for the human (and the “black is not a man” within an antiblack metaphysics, as Fanon insists). The essence of black suffering, then, is this very execration, to inhabit permanently the “zone of nonbeing,” as Fanon might call it. This zone is a spatiotemporality without a recognizable name or grammar within the philosophical tradition. The problem of black being is precisely the inhabitation of an execrated condition. This is the new ontology that modernity brings into the world—a being that is not one (available equipment in the guise of human form). Black being is paradoxical—it is a metaphysical entity that is invented to illumine something beyond metaphysics, a nothing that metaphysics hates and needs. Within the Negro, metaphysics wages its war against the nothing that terrorizes its power and hegemony.

This, again, explains why the Negro is black, to return to Alain David’s proper metaphysical question. The Negro is black because the Negro is the physical manifestation of an ontological puzzle: black as nothing. The field of ontometaphysics does not have the resources to explain nothing; in fact, it works earnestly to forget and avoid it. This is because the field of ontometaphysics is really the imposition of metaphysical prerogatives and investments. Given this arrangement of resources, nothing is not a proper object of knowledge within ontology as metaphysics because it cannot be explained through its episteme (put differently, the incorporation of nothing would destabilize the metaphysical episteme). Or, to echo Fred Moten, “Blackness and ontology are unavailable for one another.” This is to suggest that the problems of nothing are transposed onto the Negro, since it is embodied nothing within an antiblack world.

When Fanon suggests that the civilization “imposed itself” on the Negro, I interpret this to mean that the imposition is an ontometaphysical imposition; the Negro does not have ontological resistance because of the metaphysical imposition of black and nothing. Furthermore, we can describe the “two frames of reference,” as Fanon would call it, within which the Negro has had
to place himself as “nothing” and “black” in an antiblack world. This imposition is the execration of Being or the metaphysical holocaust that produces black being. For nothing and the terror that it brings to metaphysics can only manifest itself through this holocaust; and this wiping out is not an event of the past, but is a condition of the world. The world needs it to continue. Antiblackness is the name for the continuous destruction of this primordial relation and the structural position of the Negro as black and nothing.

Hortense Spillers also proffers a phenomenological iteration of this metaphysical violence that is very useful to think alongside Fanon’s metaphysical holocaust and the imposition of black and nothing:

But I would make a distinction in this case between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated positions. In that sense, before the “Body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities in concert with the African “middleman,” we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and males registered the wounding. If we think of the “flesh” as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or “escaped” overboard.”

Although Spillers borrows the concepts of “flesh” and “body” from the traditions of phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and theology, she repurposes them to understand the modern invention of black being. I would suggest that “flesh” and “body,” read through this register, are philosophical allegories, or metaphors, for the execration of Being. The flesh, here, is the primordial relation that antiblackness works tirelessly to destroy. For Spillers, the flesh is a “primary narrative.” This primary narrative is the grounding of African existence, the various customs and resources that provide the proper understanding of this existence—what is wiped out during the metaphysical holocaust that we can call the “transatlantic slave trade.” The body, however, emerges from the ashes of this holocaust. It is not strictly corporeality (or
physicality), but the signification of nothing that the black body comes to mark in an antiblack symbolic (or, as Spillers describes it, “a category of otherness”). Thus, high crimes against the flesh are the murderous operations that set modernity into motion and produce the black body (or black being); these crimes are murders that the discourses of crime and punishment can only approach, but remain unintelligible within its precincts. These crimes are ongoing, and since the guilty party is the world itself, redress or justice is impossible. The flesh, the primary narrative, is the ground of an African existence that is irrecoverable within an antiblack world—it is “seared, divided ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole,” or “escaped overboard.” This, in essence, is the execration of Being. It is the primordial relation between the African and Being that is ripped apart, seared, and severed; this obliterated relation is the high crime against the flesh. We come to another understanding of black being: it is the offspring of an obliterated primary narrative that we can call the flesh. Spillers’s “flesh” and Judy’s “African body” are thus synonymous articulations of this primordial relation.

In this schematic, the body is a metaphor for instrumentality or abject use value. Spillers suggests that this body “is reduced to a thing, to being for the captor.” With the death of African existence (the flesh) an oppressive mode of existence is imposed on the Negro. This existence is unlike human being. The human being’s mode of existence is to be for itself, and this being for itself is the structure of care between Dasein and Being. Black being is invented, however, precisely to secure the human’s mode of existence. Reading Spillers’s metaphysical schema through Heidegger’s, we could suggest that the black body or this “thing, being for the captor,” is invented to serve as the premier tool or equipment for human being’s existential project (and I would argue that this equipment is not equivalent in form to the human, even if the structure of tool-being, as Graham Harman would call it, provides a general explanatory frame). In other words, the mode of existence for black being is what Heidegger would call “availableness.” Availableness is “the way of being of those entities which are defined by their use in the whole.” To exist as “a thing, being for the captor” is to inhabit a mode of existence dominated by internecine use and function. Black being, then, is invented not just to serve the needs of economic interest and cupidty, but also to fulfill the ontological needs of the human. This thing is something like Heidegger’s equipment—an object that when used with such
regularity becomes almost invisible, or transparent, to the user (blackness is often unthought because the world uses it with such regularity; antiblackness is the systemization of both the use of blackness and the forgetting/concealment of black being). Utility eclipses the thing itself. We must, then, understand antiblackness as a global, systemic dealing with black bodies, as available equipment. Heidegger considers dealings the way the Being of entities, or equipment, is revealed phenomenologically through the use of this equipment. Antiblack dealings with black bodies do not expose the essential unfolding, or essence, of the equipment; rather, the purpose of antiblack dealings is to systemically obliterate the flesh, and to impose nothing onto that obliterated space—care and value are obsolete in this encounter. Therefore, equipment structure is predicated on the premier use of blacks within the network of equipment. In other words, black use cuts across every equipmental assignment, making it the ultimate equipment. Why does black equipment cut across all assignments, and why is it the tool Dasein relies on to commence its existential journey? We might say the answer to these difficult questions is that the essence of black equipment is nothing—being is not there. If Heidegger assumes that equipment will reveal its being through its usage, then he did not anticipate the invention of the Negro—equipment in human form, embodied nothingness. Using black equipment reveals existence but not being (existence as non-being for Greek philosophers, according to Heidegger in Introduction to Metaphysics). This puzzle is what black philosophy must investigate, must think through, to understand the continuity of antiblackness.

Spillers describes black being as a “living laboratory,” and we can conceptualize this laboratory as the source of availableness for modernity. A living laboratory is a collection of instruments for carrying out ontological experimentation, or the construction of the human self. Black beings constitute this irresistible source of availableness for the world. Saidiya Hartman meditates on the ontological utility of black being for the human when she states:

The relation between pleasure and the possession of slave property, in both the figurative and literal senses, can be explained in part by the fungability of the slave—that is, the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity—and by
the extensive capacities of property—that is, the augmentation of the master subject through his embodiment in external objects and persons. Put differently, the fungability of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master’s body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion.40

Instruments, tools, and equipment are interchangeable/replaceable; this is starkly different from human being, whose existential journey in the world renders it incalculable and unique. When I suggest that black being is pure function or utility, I mean precisely the way this being is used as a site of projection for the human’s desires, fantasies, and ontological narcissism. The body that Spillers presents is a necessary invention because it is through the human’s engagement with instruments (tools and equipment) that the human comes to understand the self. To be for the human is to serve as the empty vessel for the human’s reflection on the world and self. In short, what I am suggesting is that black being is invented as an instrument to serve the needs of the human’s ontological project. This use, or function, exceeds involuntary labor and economic interest. It is this particular antiblack use that philosophical discourse has neglected. The Negro, as invention, is the dirty secret of ontometaphysics.

If we follow Heidegger’s understanding of the human being as Dasein (being there) and thrown into the world, then black being emerges as a different entity: the Negro is precisely the permanence of not being there [Nicht Da Sein], an absence from ontology, an existence that is not just gone away (as if it has the potential to return to being there) but an existence that is barred from ever arriving as an ontological entity, since it is stripped of the flesh.41 To assert that black being is not of the world is to suggest, then, that black being lives not just outside of itself, but outside of any structure of meaning that makes such existence valuable. Black being is situated in a spatiotemporality for which we lack a grammar to capture fully. Spillers’s body, then, is the symbolic and material signification of absence from Being. To be black and nothing is not to serve as an aperture of Being for the Negro; rather, it is to constitute something inassimilable and radically other,
straddling nothing and infinity. The Negro is the execration of Being for the human; it is with the Negro that the terror of ontology, its emptiness, is projected and materialized. This is the Negro’s function.

Inventing the Negro is essential to an ontometaphysical order that wants to eradicate and obliterate such ontological terror (the terror of the nothing); and since ontometaphysics is obsessed with schematization and control, it needs the Negro to bear this unbearable burden, the execration of Being. To return to our proper metaphysical question “How is it going with black being?,” we can say that neither progressive legislation nor political movements have been able to transform black being into human being, from fleshless bodies to recognized ontologies. Spillers also seems to preempt the question when she states, “Even though the captive flesh/body has been ‘liberated,’ and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter … it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show movement, as [the flesh] is ‘murdered’ over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise.”

This onticide, the death of the flesh/African existence, continues impervious to legal, historical, and political change. This is to say that the problem of black being, as both a form of ontological terror for the human and a site of vicious strategies of obliteration, remains. To ask the (un)asked question “How is it going with black being?” is to inquire about the resolution of the problem of black and nothing, ontometaphysically, as it imposes itself onto the Negro. The answer to the Negro Question, then, is that the ritualistic and repetitive murder of the flesh, the primordial relation, is absolutely necessary and indispensable in an antiblack world. And as long as the world exists, this murder must continue.

**THE FREE BLACK AS A PARADIGM OF ONTOLOGICAL TERROR**

If the essence (the essential unfolding) of politics is nothing political, as Miguel de Beistegui has argued, then we must look elsewhere for this essence, this center of politics that engenders various organizations of existence. The essence of the political (and the law, as I will argue) brings us back to the question of ontometaphysics; for if we follow the thinking of postmetaphysical thought, then politics is an ontic articulation of Being itself.
—perhaps a structure through which the human inhabits a particular relation with Being through care. This is to suggest that the question of Being is at the very heart of politics; rather than thinking of politics as disinterested in ontology, it is necessary for us to resituate politics as a premier ontological enterprise—although politics will disavow and suppress such interests. Antebellum politics is no exception. The various debates about black citizenship, freedom, and slavery in the nineteenth century are deceptively philosophical—deceptive precisely because a surface reading of these issues can present them as merely part of the evolution of politics, its bloody and contentious process. But to suggest that the question of Being is at the very heart of these debates is to suggest the essence of these debates must return us to the question of Being itself. Furthermore, the question of black being, the problem at the center of ontometaphysics, is the essence of antebellum politics in the nineteenth century. Antebellum politics circulates around the problem of black being, the ontological terror that black being is forced to bear in an antiblack world. Antebellum politics is a structure of antiblackness, designed to discipline and obliterate black being. Although we can correctly identify certain legislation, writing, and political maneuvers as unjust and inhumane—one only needs to think of the Dred Scott decision, Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia, or the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850—I want to understand this injustice as absolutely necessary; necessary because black being is the target of gratuitous violence within an antiblack world, a violence that is essential to the world itself. Thus, the violence that we register as unjust or inhumane—the laceration of the whip, the canine patrol, exclusionary procedures, disenfranchisement, anti-literacy laws, and routinized humiliation and invasion, for example—are ways a metaphysical organization of existence (antebellum politics) contends with black as nothing.

Nahum Chandler, in his beautiful philosophical meditation X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought, would describe antebellum politics, law, and culture as resting on a certain “metaphysical infrastructural organization” that is often “not so recognized and is far less often thought.” Any discussion of a historical subject, white subject, and especially the Negro is enabled by this infrastructure, which bears the weight of the culture in question and its devastating violence. In other words, this metaphysical infrastructure already presumes certain pure ontological positions, and these
positions enable the unjust and inhumane. Chandler would argue that the Negro brings into relief the problem of purity—since its ontological constitution presents a problem for thought. Purity, then, constitutes a metaphysical fiction (and a racial privilege), and we could argue that ontological terror is precisely the threat the Negro poses, as always undoing ontological purity with contamination. But the project of purity, I would argue, is a response to the problem of black as nothing—where purity becomes a discourse of this nothing, its symptom or materialization. Antebellum culture deploys the discourse of purity (and its anxiety concerning amalgamation and integration) as a cover for the ontological terror at the heart of the metaphysical infrastructure. Put differently, this infrastructure is precarious and always at risk by its own invention, black being, stripped of its primary narrative (the flesh). This, then, is the double bind of the metaphysical infrastructure (or the “whole of metaphysics,” as Heidegger would call it): black being is a necessary invention because it bears the nothing, which is uncontrollable with metaphysical instruments, but black being is also hated because its presence is a reminder that the human being itself is a metaphysical fiction—the very ground of humanity is precarious and unreliable (or, as Fanon avers, “Man is nothing, absolutely nothing”). It is at this tension (between necessity and hatred) that ontological terror turns into forms of physical, emotional, and psychic devastation. But we must also take very seriously Chandler’s statement that this metaphysical structure is “not so recognized and is far less often thought.” This structure is often not recognized and unthought because we think politics, law, and culture on its surface and not its depth (its essence), the structure upon which it rests—thus, we rarely understand that politics is the symptom of this tense metaphysical structure. Ontological Terror is an attempt to expose this infrastructure and its presumptions. But to do this, we must think otherwise, or, as Miguel de Beistegui argues, we must look elsewhere for the essence of politics, law, and culture.45

It is with this strategy of thinking otherwise, of being mindful of the metaphysical structure that goes undetected, that I understand the antebellum free black as a paradigm of ontological terror. For at least syntactically, the term free black holds the tension of this metaphysical infrastructure: to be free is much more than a legal status (although it is often reduced to this); it is an onto-existential condition in which the human can engage in its
primordial relation (between self, Being, and its unique project of care). Freedom, then, is the condition of the free, and it indicates a certain ontological orientation in an antiblack world. “Black,” however, is the being stripped of this primary narrative, a being that is the target of antiblack violence, since black and nothing become synonymous. In an antiblack world, black being can never be free but can be emancipated—but emancipation fails to resolve the metaphysical problem of black as nothing, which is necessary for anything like black freedom to exist. As long as a metaphysical world exists, a world that obliterates nothing, blacks will never be free. The free black presents syntactical devastation in that it knots human being with black being and freedom with unfreedom. If we read this syntactical chaos as a symptom of the tension at the heart of the metaphysical infrastructure (necessity and hatred), then we understand that the concept of the free black is a problem for thought. One cannot think the free black within an antiblack world without resorting to the fantastical and the absurd.

The free black threatens metaphysical purity by releasing this nothing into the realm of the human—which, of course, is exactly what an antiblack world is designed to prevent. This signifier terrorizes, and the beings inhabiting the position “free black” also terrorize, as they become the materialization of this threat to human being. When I suggest that the free black is a paradigm of ontological terror, I do this as an attempt to think otherwise, to think the metaphysical infrastructure that often goes undetected. Thinking through paradigms provides a strategy for this type of thinking. The strategy of the paradigm, according to Agamben, is to juxtapose two entities until at a point of concentration, or intensity, so that they reveal aspects of each other. Entities within a paradigmatic analysis become allegories of each other. One example, or instance, is used to provide insight into another. I think about the free black as an allegory of the problem of metaphysics and the problem of metaphysics as an allegory of the free black. Thus, although the free black marks a particular phenomenological and historical instance (as distinct from other forms of black existence), we can read the free black allegorically to provide insight into the metaphysical infrastructure that goes unnoticed.

Free blacks were situated in diverse geographical locations—the upper South, the deep South, the North, the Midwest; despite these diverse geographical locations and the different forms of antiblack violence each location deployed, the problem of antiblackness and the problem of black
being remained a constant.\textsuperscript{47} The discourse and debates concerning antebellum free blacks orbit around a tension, an unanswered question, that irrupts in forms of paradox and impasse. The Negro Question, then, presents itself as a political discourse, one obsessed with black citizenship, political inclusion, and rights. But the Negro Question is rooted in a metaphysical infrastructure that attempts to police the boundaries between the white human and its black equipment. This infrastructure is threatened, however, with the presence of the free black, and it is the free black that becomes the obsession of this question. Since the free black knots freedom with unfreedom and human with nonhuman, the boundary between the ontological entities (white human and black slave) unravels. What I am suggesting is that the political discourse about free black citizenship is the articulation of a metaphysical anxiety, one that threatens antebellum culture. Moreover, the Negro Question is, as I have suggested, a proper metaphysical question, since at its core it inquires whether black being can transform into human being. The free black brings this question to the fore in a way that the slave does not. The condition of the slave is one of property, the condition of invention and perverse utility. This, of course, is what modernity intended for black being—that it would serve the world as pure function, property, and use. But the word \textit{free} in the term \textit{free black} is more than a legal designation; it is an inquiry into the metaphysical structure itself. For if black being is brought into the world as utility (as Justice Roger Taney would argue in the Dred Scott decision), then a free black would index a different mode of black being. Is such a different mode of being possible in an antiblack world? The word \textit{free} absorbs all these metaphysical inquiries and anxieties.

This is precisely why the free black is such an important paradigm of ontological terror: because the free black resituates politics and exposes the metaphysical infrastructure. Thus, when Humen Humphrey, the second president of Amherst College, writes in \textit{The African Repository} that free blacks “are not looked upon as men, in the true and proper sense of the term,” he is responding to the proper metaphysical question: can black being transform into human being?\textsuperscript{48} Following Humphrey, freedom indexes the “true and proper” sense of man; the truth of man can be located in his primordial relation to Being. But black being lacks this properness, as it marks the execration of Being, and the metaphysical transformation that the word \textit{free} is designed to indicate utterly fails. The free black is a problem for
an antiblack world in that his challenge to the metaphysical structure leaves him without a proper place or any metaphysical position that is intelligible.

This lack of properness and metaphysical truth is a symptom of the nothing, for nothing lacks any proper place in metaphysics and cannot be understood through its episteme. Black being as nothing, then, will always be out of place and improper in an antiblack world. It is the terror of the metaphysical infrastructure, and one can never be a true or proper man when one bears the weight of nothing. Through this analysis, we can understand the anxiety concerning black being, placement, and nothing in antebellum culture.

In August 1842, for example, the free black population of Philadelphia held a parade commemorating the abolition of slavery in the West Indies. An angry mob of white citizens disrupted the parade, attacked participants, and commenced to destroy black homes and property. Seeking redress through the courts for loss of property and injury, the free black population realized that justice within such a context was impossible, as the grand jury acquitted the rioters and blamed free blacks for inciting this violence. Robert Purvis, a leader in the free black population of Philadelphia, responded to the grand jury’s decision with dismay: “The measure of our suffering is full.... From the most painful and minute investigation, in the feelings, views and acts of this community—in regard to us—I am convinced of our utter and complete nothingness in public estimation [emphasis mine].”

What sparked the riot, this devastating expression of antiblackness? We can locate this eruption of violence at the metaphysical fault line between necessity and hatred. Black being is both a necessary instrument for the human’s self-constitution and an object of ferocious hatred, since it bears the nothing of a metaphysical order. In other words, the riot is the symptom of a metaphysical problem: the public celebration of black freedom sparks a terror in that ontological boundaries are challenged and the transformation from black being, as invention/instrument, to human being, as free, is not only considered but celebrated. It is also no surprise that the grand jury blamed the victims for the riot, since black freedom is a form of violence for the human, a violence that must be met with extreme force. The riot is a response to ontological terror. “Free,” when paired with “black,” is recast as a weapon against the human and the metaphysical structure that sustains the human. We are dealing with two registers of violence—one is an ontological violence
and another is a physical form of antiblack destruction.

But Purvis’s response to the violence is perspicuous. He is “convinced of our utter and complete nothingness in public estimation.” If we read this statement as a mere political lamentation, that blacks constitute a political cypher (nothingness) within the law and political processes, then we limit our understanding of the riot as event. The riot, within this reading, is just a form of cruelty or irrational intolerance or a political-economic strategy of subjection. With political readings of antiblack violence, violence is not gratuitous but must be linked to some type of recognizable transgression; when antiblack violence cannot be linked to recognizable transgression, it is considered cruel or irrational—a form of individual pathology and not systemic necessity. If, however, the essence of politics is nothing political, then we might read Purvis’s political commentary as a response to the proper metaphysical question. His answer is that black being is nothingness in public estimation. We can understand nothingness as the condition (-ness) of bearing nothing in an antiblack world. Antiblack violence, then, constitutes the structure of this nothing. Black being is always already under attack; peace, within an antiblack world, is a fallacy (much like freedom). The metaphysical infrastructure that supports the fiction of the white human is sustained by antiblack violence. The riot is an ontological necessity, not just political cruelty. We can understand the grand jury’s decision philosophically: Being black is both the cause and effect of violence, and when this being claims freedom, extreme violence is always justified and necessary.

After the egregious Dred Scott ruling, free blacks protested the decision. But one response to the decision in the Liberator intimates the lack of proper place within both politics and law: “[It is] already [a] well known fact that under the Constitution and Government of the United States, the colored people are nothing, and can be nothing but an alien, disfranchised and degraded class [emphasis mine].”

The nothing that black being constitutes here is what Jared Sexton would call a “null status.” The alien is precisely this improper position, as out of place and, in essence, inhabiting no place within the world at all. This, perhaps, is what it means for black being to ek-sist, not just outside of one’s self but outside of the world. Degradation and unfreedom are the manifestations of this nothing, a status within law and politics that is empty—
void of the flesh and any substance of biofuturity. Again, on one register we could identify this nothing that the “colored people” constitute as the political cypher, a pariah class within an (un)democratic arrangement of power; but what undergirds this political reading is an ontological reading—since the political reading takes the metaphysical infrastructure for granted and builds upon it. In other words, the null status that translates into political forms of disenfranchisement and degradation depends on the exclusion of black being from the realm of humanity. The “colored people” are nothing precisely because they are not viewed as men in the “true and proper sense,” as Humphrey argued (indeed, nothing could never be a proper man within science and philosophy—only a hologram of sorts). The response in the *Liberator* provides an answer to the metaphysical question: the transmogrification between property and human, what we would call “freedom” politically, is deceptive; it is merely a political procedure that is unable to resolve an ontological problem. The problem of black being remains, despite the nominal status “free black.” Political oppression is a symptom of the metaphysical dilemma of knotting black being with human freedom. This conceptualization is so threatening and catachrestic that it can only be described as “nothing.” But this nothing is not synonymous with nonexistence—once we have put existence by the wayside, as Fanon would suggest—but it is an index of a lack of ontological resistance. *Free* in the term *free black* does not restore ontological resistance (the flesh); it relegates black being to the abyss of the metaphysical infrastructure, the nothing that preconditions politics and law.

The response, then, could also be read as juxtaposing two grammars—the political/juridical and the ontological—to articulate the dilemma of black being within these two registers of existence. The “alien, disfranchised and degraded class” is an index of political violence, but the nothing interposes the ontological register. Neither register provides safe haven or existential (biofuturistic) possibility for black being. If the human can at least make recourse to the ontological, the primordial relation, to ground being against political violence, black being is unable to find any resolution in the ontological, as the ontological does not provide an explanation for its being—if we follow Fanon. The free black is the sign of a double violence, an onticide, on two registers of existence that would provide value and meaning for being. This fundamental lack of value and meaning is the crisis, or
urgency, that the Negro Question is designed to invoke. We get a sense of this in another submission to The African Repository: “Introduced among us by violence, notoriously ignorant, degraded and miserable, mentally diseased, broken spirited, acted upon by no motive to honorable exertions, scarcely reached in their debasement by heavenly light the [free blacks] wander unsettled and unbefriended through our land, or sit indolent, abject and sorrowful, by the streams which witness their captivity.”

This wandering assumes a metaphorical and literal instantiation, since black being, lacking grounding in both ontology and politics/law, moves and floats throughout the world, without a proper place or any geography that could be identified as home. The free black, unbefriended, indolent, “abject,” and “sorrowful,” lacks political constituency that is recognized by politics and law (as Justice Roger Taney argued) and is situated in an abyss that is “scarcely reached … by heavenly light” (i.e., the Negro as black metaphysically).

Another author, keen to this movement, describes it this way in The African Repository: “They [free blacks] remain as a floating body in our midst, drifting, as the census table shows, hither and thither, as the effects of climate at the North, or foreign emigration at the East, or prejudices at the South, repel it from the points. It is an interesting subject of investigating to watch the movements of the colored population, and ascertain where they are tending and whither they will find a resting place [emphasis mine].”

The “floating body” is an allegorical sign of the nothing that lacks form or placement within a political/ontological landscape (a sign of formlessness). It floats “hither and thither” in the interstitial crevices of existence, without a resting place. A certain liquidity marks the existence of the free black, and the Census attempts to capture something that is difficult—the problem of black being. The conjoining of the words free and black, the domain of the human and the domain of the ontological instrument, opens up this problem discursively and presents it as an incessant movement between established properties (or the “in-between” as Nahum Chandler would call it). The North, South, East, and West are not only geographical regions in the United States, regions that have either barred free blacks from entry or made their residence miserable, but also allegories of livability and the world itself. To ek-sist outside oneself and the world means that one lacks a space of life, meaning, and futurity. Black being is barred from cartographies of livability in much
the same way the free black is excluded from states and localities.\textsuperscript{55}

We must also remember that this floating body is also a form of terror, ontological terror. For nothing terrorizes the human by rendering the metaphysical infrastructure fallible; its claim to truth is secured only though tremendous violence—antiblack violence. We can read the danger that the free black presents to antebellum culture as particular terror for the human. A contributor to \textit{The African Repository} urges readers to contend with this danger:

In order to estimate correctly the magnitude of the evil, which will come upon us, unless we take steps in time to arrest the danger, we need only consider the paid increase of the black population in the United States since 1800 … the free blacks are also increasing with fearful rapidity, especially in the Southern states. We should not shut our eyes to the danger until it comes upon us in all its fearfulness, but with a wise foresight and manly resolution we should now take the necessary steps to avoid it. It is our duty, then, to commence an early and energetic and systematic movement to prevent the danger … it is evident that we must devise some scheme to get clear of the free black population, which is becoming an incubus upon all the states…. Tennessee at this time, has not a very large free black population, and we can, if we will commence in time, get rid of them at but little expense, but if we defer the matter much longer the evil will grow upon us in a fearful manner.\textsuperscript{56}

This danger assumes a theological and ethical dimension, an evil of tremendous magnitude. For the contributor, the increase in the free black population is a danger to the nation—black presence and danger assume a pernicious interchangeability in this calculus. The objective is for the nation to get rid of them before the danger grows. Part of the contributor’s thinking is embedded in the strategy of relocation—in particular, the colonization scheme. Removing the free black presence from U.S. soil becomes an ethical and theological imperative, since this presence threatens to destroy the nation, a political eschatology in which blackness is refigured as the end of days, the end of the order of things. But what about the black presence is so threatening? It seems that freedom and blackness are incompatible concepts for many antebellum thinkers; in particular, blacks are incapable of bearing
the burden of freedom. This incompatibility unravels society and produces blacks that are “notoriously ignorant, degraded and miserable, mentally diseased, broken spirited, and acted upon by no motive to honorable exertions.” What the contributor is intimating is that the transmogrification between ontological instrument (or equipment) and the human is a destructive enterprise, since it defies the function of black being in modernity. Reading the contributor, it is almost as if emancipation creates monsters from within the laboratory of culture (or what Hortense Spillers would call the “cultural vestibularity”). And the ethical and theological implication of this monstrosity can only be captured through the sign of evil. Sylvia Wynter remarks that the Negro must stand in for “all that is evil” to provide the axiological and theological grounding for the human, along skin difference. As available instrument, without flesh or ontological resistance, the Negro stands at the threshold between heaven and hell, a position without any ethical or moral equivalent—a nothing within the symbolic of ethics, morality, or theology. It is this position, as the wretched threshold, that constitutes the evil the contributor imagines. The nation, then, must excise the danger to restore itself. What the author describes as an evil is the ontological function of black being: to absorb the anxieties, the violation of sacred boundaries, and the execration of Being.

In other words, we might formulate a link between the discourse of evil and that of the nothing. For nothing is pure execration itself—cursed by Being and by God. Having been cursed, the wretched (non)thing of metaphysics, stained by blackness, terrorizes moral and ethical boundaries of properness. Because the Negro violates sacred boundaries between freedom and humanity, righteousness and whiteness, and blackness and abjection, it is evil. Or the Negro is out of place (and without a place) and collapses metaphysical meaning, as Julia Kristeva would understand abjection. And according to Wynters, this evil cannot serve as a proper object of knowledge or, might I add, a proper object of politics and law.

The condition of the antebellum free black, one in which the technologies of antiblackness render it an object of hatred, mimes or allegorizes the condition of the nothing in an antiblack world as the hated thing that must be destroyed at all cost. The paradigm between the antebellum free black and the (non)metaphysical nothing reaches a point of intense intersection and saturation in which the antebellum free black must embody the nothing of this
metaphysics. Antebellum culture is an instance of an antiblack organization of existence, a microcosm of an antiblack world; and the anxiety and hatred that it directs against the free black is its attempt to contend with nothing in its historical instantiation. The free black and antebellum cultures constitute two aspects of a war without end. The war is much more pernicious than antebellum society’s desire to maintain white supremacy and dominance; it is but one global example of the obsession with destroying this nothing, manifested as the black Negro.

Citizens of Illinois also expressed similar sentiment in that the situation with free blacks was so dire that “[they] would take the matter into [their] own hands, and commence a war of extermination.” A participant at an Indiana convention was explicit about the necessity of the violence against the free black: “It would be better to kill them off at once, if there is no other way to get rid of them. After all, we know how the Puritans did with the Indians, who were infinitely more magnanimous and less impudent than the colored race.” Extermination and brute force are the responses to the terror that is the free black. The terror that interrupts and fractures the metaphysical infrastructure—the formless nothing that disturbs the form of the human’s existential meaning and grounding—must be removed or eliminated. If we rely on a mere political reading of this desire for extermination, we end up in the terrain of the irrational and the cruel. But this reading misses the crucial point that violence against black being is gratuitous precisely because an antiblack world will continuously and relentlessly attempt to eliminate the nothing that is the evil, black Negro (i.e., there isn’t a solution or analysis of the violence that aligns with political reasoning or calculus). The gratuity of violence—in all its manifestations—is an ontological problem.

CODA: THE NEGRO QUESTION

What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to nestle into the philosophical crevices of an “unasked question,” as Fred Moten describes it in the opening epigraph. Perhaps the question of the meaning of black being is unanswerable because we’ve lacked a philosophical tradition that would provide refuge and clarity—this is the ultimate meaning of ontometaphysical homelessness. Given that ontology does not provide the resources to understand the being of
the black (Fanon) and epistemology is unable to present this being as a proper object of knowledge (Wynters), the question is a profound conundrum, one that we must continue to sing or orbit around. What I have proposed is merely a path toward an exploration of this great abyss. The Negro Question, as I have argued, is an ontometaphysical question, or as Heidegger has called it, a “proper metaphysical question.” For the Negro Question gets at the bottom of the ontometaphysical infrastructure, since it is the Negro that, paradoxically, both enables and disables such a structure. But if an answer to a proper metaphysical question does not do away with the question, then the path that I have laid out will produce more questions, more discomforts, and more anxieties. This is unavoidable, given the position of black(ness). My proposition is this: to approach this abyss, the Negro Question, we must first understand the ontological dimensions of terror—for it is this terror that sustains the ontometaphysical infrastructure. In an antiblack, metaphysical world, the object of this terror is nothing. But since nothing itself is impossible to target, given that it fractures the ontic sciences and its instruments (and is not an apprehensible object through these discourses), this nothing must be imposed onto bodies (ontological instruments). Black being is the embodiment of this nothing, and it is black being that is targeted with an unending violence (gratuitous violence). Antiblackness is essentially anti-nothing. Ontological terror, then, is antiblack technologies, tactics, and practices of nothing eradication. But this enterprise attempts an impossible task, and because it is impossible, it will continue obsessively after its impossible object (like the Lacanian drive). Violence against black being will continue until metaphysics itself is destroyed.

Approaching an ontometaphysical form of terror is a difficult enterprise, but I have chosen a paradigmatic approach (following the example of Agamben) to lead me in this direction. The antebellum free black is important, since (1) the Negro Question has often centered the free black as the problem, a problem that must be resolved with forms of violence (any analysis of the free black [historical or philosophical] will carry this question with it as part of the investigation); and (2) the free black both allegorizes ontological terror and itself is an instance of ontological terror. Paradigms allegorize an example by taking the example out of its context, but it also brings the allegorical parallel structure to an intense point of saturation and intersection, thus rendering the decontextualized example an instance of the
very thing it is intended to allegorize. This, for me, is the necessity of the free black, since what emerges from the tension between the terms free and black is precisely the terror of nothing. The free black is catachrestic and imaginary ontologically for antebellum thinkers. The semantic confusion masks a more insidious terror—the free black as the destabilization of the metaphysical structure. If the human is to maintain its fiction of ontological coherence, it must exterminate the problem. But extermination is not a solution because, as Frank Wilderson has persuasively argued, “Without the Negro, capacity itself is incoherent, uncertain at best.” This is the tension between necessity and hatred (and the same tension between metaphysics and nothing). Without the Negro, the narcissistic coherence of the human being dissolves, but with the Negro the terror persists. There is no out to this deadlock. And this is why the Negro Question is unanswerable and has often remained unasked philosophically and historically.

What follows is my attempt to ask the unasked question, a proper metaphysical question—which will inevitably lead to more questions. Each chapter is a meditation on an aspect of this question through the paradigm of the free black.