“Nothing”—what can it be for science except a horror and a phantasm?

HEIDEGGER, *Introduction to Metaphysics*

Blackness is (always already and only) cast inside the mathematics of unlivingness (data/scientifically, proven/certified, violation/asterisk).

KATHERINE MCKITTRICK, “Mathematics Black Life”

Science abhors *nothing*. It works tirelessly to avoid it, to disavow it, to dominate and control it. Metaphysical procedures and practices structure scientific thinking—calculation, schematization, predictability, objectification, and numerical supremacy. But nothing resists such metaphysical strictures, and because it is not capable of capture within scientific webs, it is a horror. Heidegger claimed that nothing is but “a horror and a phantasm” for scientific thinking. Nothing is a monstrous thing, which, paradoxically, provides the condition of possibility for scientific thinking. In other words, nothing is the essence of science—the void, the abyss, the unruly thing is the repressed ground of scientific inquiry. How do you quantify nothing? How do you render nothing tangible, an object for observation? How do we predict and isolate this nothing? How do we differentiate it from the “something” metaphysics rules with an iron fist? Undergirding these inquiries is the most horrifying of them all: why is there something *rather* than nothing? Or what if there *really* is just nothing? In other words, science poses a proper metaphysical question through its avoidance of nothing—a nothing it must disavow and embrace all at once.
But this is not the entire story. If for Heidegger science is horrified of nothing and must repress this nothing to proceed scientifically, then science has also found substitutes or embodied projections of this nothing. In this way, it comes close to the horror of nothing but can remain at a safe distance by turning this nothing into a something.\textsuperscript{1} This, I would argue, is the function of black being for science. Blackness enables a scientific encounter with the horrors of an entity that is nothing and something at the same time. This brings us back to Alain David’s childhood riddle: “What is nothing while being something?” David’s answer, of course, is blackness. It is both nothing and something. This leads him to inquire, “Why are Negroes black?”\textsuperscript{2} Scientifically, we can suggest that Negroes are nothing incarnated because they are black. Much like black holes and other scientific mysteries, blackness functions to index the limit of science, that which it is unable to dominate through its schematized reasoning.\textsuperscript{3} But with its will to power and its will to know, metaphysical science still desires to engage this mystery, even though it horrifies.

We will present a few propositions that meditate on the relation between blackness, nothing, and science: (1) Science projects nothing onto black bodies as a way to engage the horror and disavow it simultaneously. (2) Life and death lose distinction and coherency for black being as nothing. Once this distinction is displaced or otherwise destabilized, the scientific imagination is boundless in its conquest over blackness as nothing. (3) Science performs important philosophical work in that it suspends the ethical relation to recast physical, emotional, and spiritual torture as objective scientific methodology. (4) Science is obsessed with conquering blackness—constantly searching for ways to either eliminate it, through practices such as bleeding or rubbing away, or to keep it in a netherworld of horrors to sustain brutality. (5) Science relies on numeracy or the calculating mind to carry out its brutal obsession. Numbers are not neutral or innocuous but are weapons of pulverization and subjection. (6) The discourse of insanity is a particularly vicious framework for making ontometaphysical arguments about blackness.

The free black will serve as our paradigm for understanding the relation between science and black being. Antebellum society often envisioned this nothing through the juxtaposition of freedom and blackness. Freedom and blackness are recast, insidiously, as scientific terms for the purpose of performing ontological work. Thus “free black” provided a conceptual frame
for applying scientific procedures to work through an ontological crisis—what is this black thing? Is it property? Is it human? Is it animal? Does it lack taxonomy? Is it nothing?

THINKING WITH JOE, BLACK DEATH, AND METAPHYSICAL SCIENCE

Dr. W. T. Wragg published “Remarkable Case of Mental Alienation” in the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal in 1846. He informs us that he is treating a young Negro named Joe (twenty years of age), and Joe has taken ill with “fever of a bilious type” on a Charleston plantation. What stunned Dr. Wragg, however, was that Joe pronounced himself dead, and word of his death traveled throughout the city. Although Dr. Wragg claimed he was not dead but was, in fact, living and breathing when he discovered him, “his case was of so serious a character as to call for most careful attention.” Joe became more “delirious” and “pressed with the belief that he was dead.” Dr. Wragg initiated treatment of this “irrational contention,” which was predicated on “unsound premises.” According to Dr. Wragg, “[Joe] said that, being dead, his flesh would soon begin to rot and drop from his bones; remonstrated at being kept so unburied; earnestly demanded that his grave clothes should be prepared and put upon him, and that he be laid out in the usual form. He looked anxiously for the company to assemble, which was to follow his body to the grave, and would chant in touching language, a final adieu to his mother.”

Joe’s delirium assumed a joyous constitution as he sang songs and gave witness about his death and burial. This troubled Dr. Wragg, and he diagnosed Joe as having “mental alienation,” a fracture between a fantastical (or delirious) perception of reality and reality itself (the “real world”). This fracture, the irrational gulf between reason and the deadly imagination, needed suturing. Dr. Wragg’s treatment, then, proceeds to suture perception with reality—to use medical science to create a place for Joe among the living, among human beings. Joe’s cure entailed “repeated bleeding, both general and local, blistering, purging, hot pediluvia with mustard, and other means of depletion and deprivation,” and as a result “his madness became more calm, but he never said anything rational.”
I would suggest that Dr. Wragg used medical science to address an ontometaphysical condition. The symptom treated is the nihilistic answer to the proper ontometaphysical question “What is black being?” Joe’s answer to the question appears resolute: black being is an always already dead thing, and this thing is worldless. Although it might appear to be alive (within the precincts of biology and scientific reasoning), this life is but an illusion—a scientific/ontic illusion. The black body is just an encasing for a primordial death (the destruction of the flesh, thanatology). The black body, then, is a breathing tomb—a corporeal casket, containing a primordial death.

Joe’s death is not a physical death, however (we might call this, after Heidegger, “perishment”). He makes a distinction between death and the corrosion of the body (perishment). Dr. Wragg’s astonishment is really a misunderstanding; in fact, the entire treatment procedure is predicated on a fallacy—blurring the distinction between metaphysical death and biological death—a blurring that is necessary as a form of disavowal, a not seeing of the metaphysical destruction Joe endures. Thus, Joe’s self-diagnosis, his madness, is an ontometaphysical condition. He is, indeed, already dead, awaiting his physical demise. Death is an ontological murder. The body is the least of Joe’s concerns (in fact, he is all but happy to get rid of the corporeal casing). The metaphysical holocaust is a blind spot (anamorphic) to the scientific eye and its hegemonic vision, despite its purported acuity. Again, this is not a Heideggerian death—where death is actually an aperture onto life, authentic life with Being—but is an onticide, a destruction of all ontological grounds and relation to Being.

What we have, then, is the limit of science and the beyond it cannot fully broach, but can only medicalize away. Had Dr. Wragg actually taken Joe seriously, actually listened to what antiblackness muffles, he would understand that mental alienation is the only condition possible for black being in an antiblack world. The term alienation is but an inadequate placeholder for onticide, which severs the flesh from the body. Science can neither suture nor cure this fracturing. And it is this death, reconfigured as the nothing of a metaphysical world, which constitutes the limit of scientific thinking. Indeed, this type of death is a horror for science, since it is unable to transform it into an object of knowledge. This untranslatability is recast as madness. Joe’s madness is the nihilistic condition of the metaphysical holocaust, of living in perpetual obliteration.
David Marriott provides a contrast to the Heideggerian understanding of death (as the authentic opening up onto Being through the mood anxiety). For Marriott, black death is “having lived without ever being truly alive; dead because never alive … black life is meaningless and so black death is meaningless—a legacy in which death is nothing … it is a death that cannot ever die because it depends on the total degradation and disavowal of black life. Ipso facto: death emerges as a transcendental fact of black existence but without transcendence (similarly, black existence is one condemned to live without the possibility of being) [emphasis mine].”

Black death is nothing (existence without the possibility of being). It is not only that black death is nothing in the sense that it is meaningless or pointless (rather than paving the way for human freedom, it paves nothing), but also that it is metaphysical nothing, an entity without being. Black death is the symbolic form of nothing that Dr. Wragg could not understand (he needed to think philosophically). For what he pathologized and attempted to treat was nothing itself. Joe’s pronouncement is really about this nothing and not his physical perishment. He was never alive, and any life perceived is erroneous. The treatment, then, inverts the ontometaphysical problem: if Joe were to pronounce that he was alive and well, that would be a disjuncture between reality and perception. Dr. Wragg’s cure, then, is the true symptom in the diagnosis. We might call Joe’s ontometaphysical condition “the already dead,” following Eric Cazdyn. But in this case, black death is a chronic condition of modernity, without cure. Abdul R. JanMohamed would consider this disjuncture a “death bound subject,” which constitutes “a zone between the status of ‘flesh’ and that of ‘meat,’ neither quite alive nor quite dead.” Joe’s body is meat, the object of a rapacious, antiblack appetite. What is the ontological status of this interstice between flesh and meat? Or, what is the status of the zone of indistinction between metaphysical death and biological life? This is the proper metaphysical question that science broaches from a distance.

We can also consider the “Remarkable Case of Mental Alienation” as an allegory of sorts, or a paradigm for thinking science with black being. For science cannot understand black death, or the nothing that is black death. When science reaches its limit, when its episteme is unable to comprehend, it diagnoses the impasse as madness. Madness, I would argue, is the name for answering the proper metaphysical question, nihilistically. One is mad
because one is always already dead, although appearing fully alive. Joe also allegorizes the plight of black being: it is vulnerable to the viciousness of scientific thinking and its devastating procedures.

Hortense Spillers identifies medical science as a particularly terroristic field in relation to blackness. Reading through the work of William Goodell, she traces out the vicious profit motive, which creates an economy of selling and purchasing diseased, damaged, incurable, disabled, and otherwise worthless black bodies. She suggests, “This profitable ‘atomizing’ of the captive body provides another angle on the divided flesh: we lose any hint or suggestion of a dimension of ethics, of relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between human personality and cultural institutions. To that extent, the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory.”

What Spillers describes here is a metaphysical procedure: what is totally objectified is more than just the captive’s body. The real object of analysis is nothing. (It is the attempt to make nothing an object through the captive’s abject body.) Thus, the essence of science is not scientific. This nothing horrifies science, and, consequently, the black body also horrifies science. This horror, however, translates into both a will to know and a process of disavowal (the Heideggerian conflict), and both reinforce/generate each other. In other words, black bodies become living laboratories because these bodies hold the secret of science—what it most wishes to know and what it most wishes not to know. This play between knowing and not knowing, desiring and detesting, hating and admiring would seem to land us in Lacanian territory, something like a scientific unconscious. Science is obsessed with this nothing—its limit and its possibility. As Heidegger asserted, when science attempts to explore its own essence, it relies on this very nothing it rejects and detects for the exploration. The atomizing Spillers describes is a philosophical procedure under the guise of scientific objectivity.

Andrew Curran would describe this scientific atomization as a textualization of the African through discourses such as anatomy. Textualizing the black body would require a vicious hermeneutical-semiotic practice of reading blackness as a sign of abject nothingness. The black body, then, is a scientific mediator of sorts between the dreaded nothing and a
scientific field determined to calculate, schematize, and dominate this nothing. This is precisely why black being is so valuable to science: black being enables the total suspension of limits (ethical, moral, and spiritual), and this suspension leaves the scientific imagination unbounded in its antiblack quest for knowledge, truth, and power. A living laboratory has no rights that a white scientific mind is bound to respect, no limitations on scientific creativity, and no resistance against scientific objectification. As equipment in human form, black being broaches infinity, nothing encased in a body. Our aim, then, is to understand the function of science in this metaphysical holocaust and to dispel the myth of objectivity, which masks metaphysical cruelty behind the auspices of scientific discovery.

In its schematization, science also relies on the mathematical mind and its procedures to give numerical form to the formless—the infinite and the nothing. Katherine McKittrick calls this the “mathematics of unlivingness,” where metaphysical thinking deploys numbers and calculative thinking to perpetuate the metaphysical holocaust. This is to suggest that numbers are weaponized against black being, mobilized to create a destructive calculus. She understands the invention of black being as emerging through numbers and the crude economy of commerce: “This is where blackness comes from: the list, the breathless numbers, the absolutely economic, the mathematics of the unliving.” The purpose, then, of metaphysical arithmetic (schematized, calculative thinking) is to produce the unliving, the very death that Joe so insisted to Dr. Wragg. Once situated on the ledger, financial documents, and wills, black being is cast outside Dasein. These numbers provide space to black being without an ontological place—this is how numbers contribute to the metaphysical holocaust. Numbers conceal this devastation behind purported objectivity, but the number and its calculus are far from innocuous. The ledger is precisely the reification of this non-place (this nothing), and it is the way metaphysics can in fact contend with it.

Heidegger’s critique of calculative thinking entails the destructive use of numbers to quantify man, to restrict his spontaneity and capture him in predictability. Badiou revisits this critique and revises it to dethrone “1,” which metaphysical philosophy uses to understand the subject and being. We might say, following Badiou, that “1” begins metaphysical violence: man is reduced to this “1,” a quantifiable thing of science. But, if we read McKittrick through Badiou’s critique, we understand that the purpose of
antiblack schematization is to deny black being metaphysical “1.” As an ontological designator, mathematics of the unliving must begin with unending subtraction of the nonexistent—a calculus that takes us into imaginary numbers, purely functional but lacking tangibility. (Badiou’s theory, then, leaves power and violence un theorized in relation to mathematics, and this is why McKittrick’s conceptualization is essential to Badiou’s revelation that “ontology is mathematics.”) What I am suggesting, here, is that mathematics of the unliving does not calculate a metaphysical “1,” which can be infinitely multiplied and added—this is the mathematics of humanism (and Badiou’s infinitely multiplicable set theory cannot help us in this calculation; since black being is impossible to factor, it is both infinity and nothing [or something else], and the operational procedure rebounds into nonsense. Perhaps blackness enables ontological operation, as mathematics, by its exclusion from both metaphysical “1” and the null set). We might say the drive of black humanism, its endless romance with metaphysics, is to translate this nonsense number (whatever it is) into a quantifiable “1”—the indivisible human. This entails the ontological component of what Patricia Cline would call numeracy—the obsession with numbers, quantifying, and calculation in antebellum society.\(^6\)

The metaphysical violence of the Three-Fifths Compromise, for example, is purportedly resolved by adding the alienated two-fifths to this fractioning; and somehow, we finally arrive at this metaphysical “1.” (Most of romantic humanism and emancipatory logic is the attempt to reunite black being with this “1.”) But I read a certain impossibility in McKittrick’s term *mathematics of the unliving*, since such an additive procedure is a fantasy. Why is this the case? I would argue that the fractioning/fracturing is the mathematical component of the metaphysical holocaust—the alienated two-fifths is the severing of the flesh, the primordial death. It is irretrievable. Black being is precisely this three-fifths (the ontometaphysical remainder, its refuse), not a metaphysical “1”—no multiplicative procedure can produce this fantastical “1” (the three-fifths is, in fact, the numerical stand-in for nonsense, since the human cannot be fractioned from the “1.” Thus, the black is not a metaphysical human, following this mathematical scheme, but something other—equipment). And since we lack a calculus to arrive at this “1,” the promises of emancipation are but a ruse. Black being remains a nonsense sign within metaphysical arithmetic, even when one is holding freedom papers.
Black being is an untranslatable variable (if we can even call it that) mathematically—it is imaginary and is used to perform the function of settling the limits of humanism (the function of imaginary numbers is to resolve an irresolvable equation). Emancipation is predicated on faulty mathematical ontology: it cannot incorporate black being into the “1” metaphysics uses to determine and identify a human.

Postmetaphysics might rejoice at this fracturing, arguing that it sets the stage for thinking [Andenken] outside metaphysical violence—that because blacks are inassimilable within metaphysical mathematical schema, they somehow are free. But this postmetaphysical logic denies the supreme privilege metaphysics holds over life; furthermore, the option to reject this privilege for some illusive freedom is also a power-laden privilege. Outside the metaphysics of the human, I would argue, is only vulnerability and violence—ontological terror. Being will not unfold in this arid space—even within the interstices between sets, Badiou’s operations. We cannot twist [verwunden] this violence into something productive for Being. Blackness cannot look to Being for hope, that it will somehow save us from ontological terror if we assume an authentic posture toward Being’s unfolding. The destructive/deconstructive solutions of postmetaphysical thinking will continue to fail us—only death is there. Joe’s death, the death of black being. A meaningless death, a (fore)closure of Being—anxiety without any reprieve. This is the terror postmetaphysics continues to refuse, and this not seeing secures thinking and freedom for the human being.

Scientific and mathematical thinking “calculates and factors blackness,” as George Yancy might suggest. And our task is to expose the essence of these calculations as the terror of nothing, black as nothing. Scientific thinking needs blackness because blackness is the living laboratory—a laboratory that functions biologically, but is dead ontologically. We will investigate a few instances of this thinking and how they contend with nothing in various forms.

**RUBBING AWAY NOTHING**

For several years certain laboratories have been trying to produce a new a serum for “denigrification”; with all the earnestness in the world, laboratories have sterilized their test tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on researches that might make it possible for the
miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction.

—FRANTZ FANON, Black Skin, White Masks

Benjamin Rush’s “Observations Intended to Favor a Supposition That the Black Color (As It Is Called) of the Negroes Is Derived from Leprosy” presents a fantastical solution to the problem of blackness, its terrifying phenomenology, and the nothing it encases. Rush’s “altruistic” intention in this study is to prove “that all the claims of superiority of the whites over the blacks, on account of their color, are founded alike in ignorance and inhumanity. If the color of the Negroes be the effect of a disease, instead of inviting us to tyrannize over them, it should entitle them to a double portion of our humanity, for disease all over the world has always been the signal for immediate and universal compassion.”

The color black, then, provides a metaphorical form for thinking formlessness, dreaded nothing. And Rush medicalizes this formlessness as leprosy. To consider nothing an abject disease enables Rush to capture and schematize it. The discourse of epidemiology provides the distortion, or vehicle, for the real work of engaging this horror.

Because black being contaminates civil society by embodying the collapse of sacred boundaries, it is impossible to incorporate black being into civil society and maintain this society at the same time. This startling reality perplexed many “abolitionists”—I use scare quotes here because abolitionists really did not abolish the problem of blackness in modernity; they merely advocated for blacks to inhabit a space of ontological terror. The conundrum of black being and civil society came to be known as “the Negro Question,” and this question served as the limit of abolitionist fantasies of black freedom, equality, or retribution. The Negro Question is the proper metaphysical question “What is black being?” Trying to figure out what this thing is that contaminates civil society and lacks placement in the domain of the human is the problem abolitionists attempted to resolve. Black being, whether as captive or as emancipated, would always threaten to unravel the fabric of an antiblack civil society. One solution to the problem was simply to remove blacks physically from the United States. Colonization societies emerged in the United States and advised masters and the state to encourage free blacks to emigrate and settle in Africa. This solution was not quite successful, owing to the cost of the enterprise and difficult logistics.
was colonization benevolent, as Grant Walker would suggest—it became a convenient strategy for ridding society of its unwanted waste. Dr. Benjamin Rush, the father of American psychiatry, provides an absolute solution to the problem of black being: eliminate it. This solution belongs to a class of genocidal discourses that seek to eliminate blackness itself, although Rush disavows such internecine implications. (He claims his aim is to generate compassion for the diseased, helpless black leper—black genocide recast as compassion.) “Observations” is not the typical genocidal enterprise, although there was discussion about literal genocide against free blacks in the mid-nineteenth century. William Andrew Smith, in his Lectures on the Philosophy and Practice of Slavery (1856), for example, argues that an accumulation of free blacks would make extermination the only reasonable and humane option for frustrated white humans. Rush, rather than exterminating the physical black body to resolve the tension between blackness and freedom, as Smith might suggest, simply wanted to remove blackness from the individual (a different type of destruction). In essence, he desires to transform the abject black into salubrious white (the “natural” color of humans, as Rush would suggest). Thus, the answer to the problem of black being is transmogrification. Rush desires to end a metaphysical holocaust with physical transformation. The gap between corporeality and ontology is one he sutures with lightening the skin. Rush believed that leprosy caused the skin to become black, the lips to become big, the hair to become woolly, and the nose to become flat, and if left untreated, it would pass along through generations. The danger of black leprosy (“Negritude,” as he called it) is apparent for Rush, since “a white woman in North Carolina not only acquired a dark color, but several of the features of a Negro, by marrying and living with a black husband.” Blackness is the ultimate pathogen. It not only threatens to injure blacks (by concretizing abjection) but also whites, if whites come in close contact with blacks.

Leprosy, then, is the scientific name of metaphysical execration—nothing. Leprosy provides a conceptual space, within which Rush’s scientific imagination luxuriates in its narcissism and its will to power over black as nothing. For the epidemiologist as philosopher, leprosy is indispensable; without black lepers, how would Rush test his scientific power and quench his thirst for omniscience of black being? Put differently, the physical ailments of leprosy are not really Rush’s concern at all; they are merely
justifiable means for reaching his romantic end, the eradication of antiblackness (and for Rush, the extreme means certainly justify his redoubtable ends). He uses leprosy to treat the ontometaphysical death the diseased black body entombs (or as Rush would call it, “tyrannizing over them”). Rush, then, rewrites himself as a metaphysician in “Observations.”

Rush insisted that black being could be cured if the leprosy were treated. The case of Henry Moss convinced him that blackness could be eliminated. According to medical historian Harriet Washington, Henry Moss noticed that his skin began to whiten (what we now call “vitiligo”), and he began to display his body across the country to mystified audiences. Rush became fixated on Moss and “hungered to understand and hoped to duplicate the process by which the Negro skin lost its color, and he theorized that ‘pressure and friction’—violent rubbing—could banish color from the rete mucosum.” As part of Rush’s proposed solution to rub away blackness, “depletion, whether by bleeding, purging, or abstinence has been often observed to lessen the black color in Negroes.” The desire to rub away blackness, to deplete it from the world, became Rush’s occupation. For he could not envision a political good life in which black being would be recognized as human being. Rush’s solution is a sign of philosophical desperation, since he finds it impossible to transform an antiblack world, and it is impossible for black being to achieve freedom. What I am suggesting is that the leprosy diagnosis is philosophically illuminating; the fact that Rush could think of no other solution to the problem of antiblackness indicates that emancipation/freedom dreams are mere fantasy—one’s emerging from an active imagination. Only an extreme failure, recast as a compassionate solution, could put an end to the metaphysical holocaust and its lingering question for Rush.

All solutions fail to eradicate antiblackness, since solution-oriented thinking depends on antiblackness. But the success within the failure is precisely the exposure of this double bind. Rush’s compassionate solution to the problem of antiblackness must rely on antiblack strategies to realize the solution—and this solution is just another antiblack formation. Antiblackness is both the problem and the solution. This is a dizzying and tortuous cycle, but one that does not seem to fatigue a romantic humanist. For as Mark Smith astutely remarks, despite Rush’s altruistic intentions, his “Observations” “inadvertently helped perpetuate the notion that blacks were irretrievably
different and inferior.”

We can return to Alain David’s proper metaphysical question, “Why are Negroes black?” Rush’s answer is leprosy; it is an execration articulated through a physical symptom (Fanon’s “malediction”). But simply changing the skin color of blacks will not restore the flesh, the severed primordial relation. This, perhaps, is what legislation like the “one-drop rule” is designed to preempt. Lightening skin color will not change the blood, even if it is drained. The blood is but a metaphor for an execration of being, which is unalterable. What Rush wishes to avoid, what horrifies him, is the nothing that black being incarnates. Transforming skin transforms this formless nothing into a physical sign of hope for him. But this hope is but a ruse—the world needs black being.

**DRAPETONAMIA/DYSAESTHESIA AETHIOPICA**

Dr. Samuel Cartwright published “Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race” in *DeBow’s Review* (1851); it attempted to recast problems of metaphysics as problems of epidemiology. The essay, then, could be read as an exercise in translation—in which the grammar of science is imposed onto the syntactical terrain of the ontometaphysical. Cartwright is writing at the treacherous interstice between the ontometaphysical and the psyche; in his analysis, one informs the other until the distinction between psychic life and metaphysics is eradicated. We might call this interstice between the ontometaphysical and interior space of the subject “the black psyche.” The black psyche is the metaphysical space of imagining the nothing that black being contains. In other words, science provides form for the terror of formlessness through this psyche—which is both abstraction and tangibility for science. As an abstraction, the black psyche articulates the symptoms, which emerge at the fault line between the two discourses. It also dissolves the distinction between the two, so that ontometaphysical commitments are predicated on it. Thus, the abstraction serves a vital philosophical function—it is science’s alibi for metaphysical violence and domination. And because it is an abstraction, the black psyche is boundless in its probative power—its ability to get at the truth of black being.

We are reminded here of Foucault’s work on the production of the soul
and the psyche in *The History of Sexuality*. For him, the invention of the confessional and clinical room, for example, depend on the apparatus of soul and psyche as a vehicle for truth, knowledge, and power. The psyche, for Foucault, allows medical science to make its gaze boundless, and it reaches to the essence of the human’s truth. What Foucault uncovers in his genealogical excavation, I would argue, is the ontometaphysical labor the psyche and the soul perform for the world—the metaphysical will to power. The soul and the psyche are portals for the metaphysical and not just instruments of governmentality or biopower. This labor also enables the production of knowledge about the human so that truth and knowledge marshal diverse fields at the site of the human—this relation is what Foucault would call “power.”

Cartwright’s scientific technique requires a supplement to Foucault’s confessional technique in relation to black being. The problem, then, is that Foucault relies on an interiority that is not universally applicable (biopower is not exclusive to interiority, but it is still an essential aspect of the working of power through the human). In *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, Denise Ferreira da Silva defines Foucault’s subject as the Transparent I—the ontological figure consolidated in post-Enlightenment European thought. Interiority is the site of self-determination for this I, and scientific knowledge deploys productive nomos—reason as universal regulator—to secure the boundaries of this interiority in relation to self-determination that grounds scientific knowledge. But, the Transparent I is produced against the Affectable I—the scientific production of non-European minds as exteriority, non-self-determining and nonrational. I would suggest that the Affectable I is the black psyche and the Transparent I is the mind or Hegelian Spirit. For da Silva, Foucault’s analysis of biopower and modern genealogy does not go far enough because it is still wedded to interiority. Biopower must rely on interiority as its privileged site of subjection, after the body. Had Foucault been willing to question or give up interiority, he would have provided space for those who lack scientific interiority because of global domination and violence against the others. Again, for me, the black psyche is not the mind—but an antiblack invention of domination. What da Silva’s masterful work does is present the coeval production of the “I” complement—the Affectable I. It is the Affectable I that Cartwright and other antebellum scientists are producing with the invention of the black psyche. And the black psyche
reverses the triad structure of interiority-extraction-truth, since interiority is replaced by exteriority and exteriority determines the truth of black being. Extraction is no longer necessary. Everything the scientist needs to know about blackness is shown on the outside. Cartwright determines the truth of black being, not by penetrating the depths of the black mind through confession and discourse, but by assembling a catalogue of external actions that he then inculcates into his invented black psyche. He then assigns the signifier truth to the end of the process of inculcating external interpretations to black being.

Our concern here is not biopower, however. For the black psyche is designed not to fold blacks into humanity and the human sciences, but to situate black being outside these discourses. The black psyche is not about the manipulation of life or forced living, but about maintaining the meaningless of death and the obliteration of life. Put differently, for Cartwright, his black psyche holds the truth of the metaphysical holocaust: black being is without ontological ground, without any metaphysical security, and is malleable in the destructive hands of the scientist. As an abstraction, the black psyche is also his intermediary between a nothing that must be controlled and a black body that needs to be disciplined. Physical brutality and metaphysical violence are both justified by using this black psyche as a ground of truth. In essence, the black psyche holds diverse myths together in a knot, a nodal point. The knotting of inferiority, ontological groundlessness, insensitivity to pain, uninjuriability, theological execration, and physical contamination are the diverse discourses that enable Cartwright’s science to proceed—it could not without the invention of the black psyche. Furthermore, as an abstraction, Cartwright can deploy the capaciousness of his imagination and impute anything into this psyche. The black psyche does not contain any limits that the scientific gaze is bound to respect.

We can also suggest that the symptom provides the material evidence of this psyche. Cartwright attributes antiblack symptoms to the very apparatus he creates. Any symptom just becomes further evidence of the truth of the black psyche. This creates something like a closed hermeneutic circle for him (an unbreakable cycle); interpretation feeds off truth that itself is grounded in interpretation. Antiblackness must render the scientific procedure a hermetically sealed circle of myths recast as truth, abstractions recast as symptomatic materiality.31
But if there were any hesitations about the legitimacy of this circle, any attempt to tear through its closure, Cartwright grounds his scientific hermeneutic and procedure in theology—as the ultimate ground of truth. The black psyche just articulates the will of a “white, western-god-man,” as theologian J. Kameron Carter would describe it. Theology, metaphysics, and science are knotted in the space of the black psyche. The black psyche, in other words, is nothing, and as nothing it is infinitely pliable—as a toy in the hands of the white scientist.

Cartwright medicalizes this knotting with two terms: drapetomania (the disease causing Negroes to run away) and dysaesthesia aethiopica (hebetude of mind and obtuse sensibility of body—“rascality,” a disease peculiar to Negroes). In his encyclopedic imagination, he invents instruments of execration that render being impossible for blackness. Drapetomania, or the disease causing Negroes to run away, is an assemblage of antiblack theology, epidemiology, and political critique. This “disease,” according to Cartwright, “is as much a dis-ease of the mind as any other species of mental alienation, and much more curable, as a general rule. With the advantages of proper medical advice, strictly followed, this troublesome practice that many Negroes have of running away, can almost be entirely prevented” (“Report on the Diseases”). For Cartwright, the medical field is boundless because its grammar can be appropriated to diagnose any aspect of the social—social phenomenon is vulnerable to the medical gaze. Reclaiming the purloined black self is recast as mental alienation, so that a strange syntactical relationship is established between redemption and alienation. Self-possession is an injurious self-loss, and the idea of a coherent black self is caught within a deadlock of impossibilities. For blacks, fracture is the state of mental health, and the traditional terms of salubriousness are inverted within an antiblack order. If a fractured self, a dispossessed self, is the healthy state of blackness, then any attempt to suture this self through self-manumission precipitates death—the death of that which is already dead. Cartwright is not, then, attempting to save the life of blacks (which is the oath of humanist physicians); rather, he wants to save the death of black being, to preserve ontological terror, which renders biological functioning a form of torment. These diseases are designed to prevent the violence from ending—which is what he considers the true objective of running away and all freedom dreams.

Cartwright’s essay proffers a political theology as the etiology, or root, of
this disease—he replaces biological antigens with theological transgression: if the white man attempts to oppose the Deity’s will, by trying to make the Negro anything else than “the submissive knee-bender” (which the Almighty declared he should be) and raising him to a level with himself (turning equipment into human being), or by putting equality with the Negro; or if he abuses the power that God has given him over his fellow man by being cruel to him, or punishing him in anger, or by neglecting to protect him from the wanton abuses of his fellow servants and all others, or by denying him the usual comforts and necessaries of life, the negro will run away (“Report on the Diseases”). Violating the divine execration of blackness—which we might also call the “Hamitic Myth”—is responsible for this disease of running away. Cartwright’s naturalism is a theological fiction from which he establishes the “order of things,” as Michel Foucault would describe it. The Negro is the eternal knee bender, and if the white man attempts to make this being upright through equality, then the black will run away. Cartwright neglects a neurological exegesis for this condition, how exactly theological transgression impairs the brain or how equality distorts normal brain functioning—other than to capitalize on the implied rigor of the terms mental and disease to do this work for him. Theology and science are indistinct discursive fields for Cartwright, and the lack of scientific specificity provides a level of mysticism to the disease, which heightens its danger.

Cartwright also identifies abusive power as another potential cause of this disease (“being cruel to him, punishing him in anger,” “Report on the Diseases”), although this cruel abuse of power, ultimately, becomes Cartwright’s cure for the disease. In essence, cruelty is the cause and the cure of the disease, which creates a dizzying circuit of cause and effect that is unbreakable:

If any one or more of them, at any time, are inclined to raise their heads to a level with their master or overseers, humanity and their own good require that they should be punished until they fall into that submissive state which it was intended for them to occupy in all after-time, when their progenitor received the name Canaan or “submissive Knee-bender” (“Report on the Diseases”).

It is here we begin to see the metaphysical necessity of the cure, since it is
imperative for humanity that they be punished. Perpetuating a metaphysical violence translates into forms of physical brutality; it is a human necessity. Without this violence, the precarious ground of human ontology is exposed as fraudulent. This exposure, then, is the death of humanity, and this cannot occur.

In The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry describes the devastation of intense bodily pain. It is designed to “disintegrate the contents of consciousness” and to destroy the symbolic world of the captive. It unmakes the symbolic universe and produces what Agamben would call a “decreated being”—a husk of corporeality without the substance of consciousness. In this sense, we understand why Cartwright presents extreme cruelty, what masters call “beating the devil out of them,” as the cure to this disease. When one’s symbolic universe collapses with the laceration of the whip, the cropping of ears, the burning and amputation of limbs, the mauling of the canine patrol, it is difficult to sustain political desire or future aspirations. The experience of torture overwhelms black being such that the world outside the sadistic plantation ceases to exist—there is no longer a place to run. One inhabits space without a place in the world. Torture keeps black being worldless.

But along with the experience of corporeal pain comes the dissolution of ontological boundaries (ontological terror); any previous sense of a coherent self dissolves, and the self becomes merely an object of pain. Ontological terror provides the possibility for the experience of pain. Cartwright proffers a solution to the metaphysical problematic. When all else fails, simply dissolve the boundaries of the world such that the symbolic world and signification collapse. In such a context, only nothing exists.

The disease dysaesthesia aethiopica (hebetude of mind and obtuse sensibility of body, rascalitity) impacts both mind and body, and skin lesions are its primary physical symptoms. This disease is much more prevalent among free blacks, according to Cartwright, who “do not have some white person to direct and to take care of them” (“Report on the Diseases”). It causes blacks to become destructive, stupid, ravenous, lazy, narcoleptic, and abusive. Dysaesthesia aethiopica is a cornucopia of vicious prepossessions about blackness, particularly free blacks, and the disease is “the natural offspring of Negro liberty—the liberty to be idle, to wallow in filth and to indulge in improper food and drinks” (“Report on the Diseases”). Liberty debilitates the mind and makes the free black unmanageable.
We could suggest, then, that dysaesthesia aethiopica becomes somewhat of a “crypt signifier” (as Abraham and Torok would describe it) for antebellum society, and it encapsulates, or contains, a social trauma—the disruptive function of blackness in an antiblack world. The function of this signifier is to maintain an oppressive symbolic order, making dysaesthesia aethiopica another name for an antiblack phallus. Put differently, a crypt signifier absorbs trauma (trauma as a metaphysical problematic) within its discursive structure; it performs a necessary function of containing what is unbearable or unmanageable for the subject. Within this analysis, Cartwright’s lexical properties assume this crypt function; dysaesthesia aethiopica is much more than just a neologism of racist pseudoscience. It absorbs the metaphysical anxiety about black being as nothing, the impossibility of incorporating this nothing into the world.

Thus, the spurious science does not really matter much; the function of the signifier to symbolize a metaphysical problem is what renders the disease absolutely irresistible. The syntax of epidemiology provides a necessary smoke screen, or covering, for the abjection of the ontological exception, and the disease becomes a repository of anxieties and fears concerning nothing in modernity.

Freedom is the terrain of the human being, and, according to Cartwright’s science, any attempt to bring blacks into the fold of humanity creates dis-ease that is only curable with extreme forms of violence. Antiblack violence in modernity is reenvisioned as curative, as a necessary corrective, which renders it something other than violence, as we traditionally understand it. Antiblackness inverts the ethico-axiological structure so that black freedom becomes the name for absolute violence and antiblackness is the name for sociopolitical restoration. It is this perverse inversion of value and ethics that stains the metaphysical holocaust of blackness with abjection and devastation.

Jonathan Metzl coined the term protest psychosis to describe the pathologization by medical institutions of black men protesting during the Civil Rights movement. We might suggest that Cartwright’s diseases provide the discursive precursor for the twentieth-century political psychosis that characterizes black dreams of freedom. For Cartwright is really describing a certain psychosis, or maddening disjuncture, that would convince free blacks that they could actually operate as subjects instead of
objects of property and accumulation—in much the same way that black protest for equality was considered so maddening and absurd that it could only be described as psychosis during the Civil Rights movement. In this way, Cartwright’s writing prefigures twentieth-century medicalization of black equality and political incorporation.

Cartwright, then, provided us with two of the most powerful metaphors of black being in modernity; and he can be read, in my opinion, as a metaphysician using science to articulate the ineffable. Drapetomania and dysaesthesia aethiopica capture the impossibility of living for black being. Modernity offers only two choices of death that are recast as life. Blacks live through social, metaphysical, and psychic death—the third choice of freedom is a fatal myth, one that antiblack violence is designed to eliminate.

CALCULATING BLACK BEING: THE CENSUS OF 1840

In Ideology and Insanity: Essays on the Psychiatric Dehumanization of Man, Thomas Szasz rejects the phenomenology of insanity, the traditional view of insanity as a coherent/valid scientific entity existing in the world, and thinks of it, instead, as man’s struggle with the problem of how he should live. What undergirds insanity, for Szasz, is biofuturity—how man continues existence into the future, and how he can navigate the treacherous terrain of the world to maximize this existence. Insanity, then, would name the inability to resolve the riddle of existence and futurity. If Szasz thinks of insanity as the problem of life, then the term becomes somewhat problematized when we apply it to black being because the presumptions of humanity and biofuturity do not easily translate. We would have to revise Szasz’s brilliant intervention into the ideology of insanity and suggest that for black being, insanity names a certain metaphysical deadlock, an impasse in relation to the metaphysical holocaust or perpetual onticide.

We could describe the deadlock as this: if one accepts that one is already dead (as in the case of Joe), one is deemed insane (humanism’s hegemony deploys the term to invalidate metaphysical violence); conversely, if one assumes that one is a human being, with the ontological freedom this designation entails, one is always deemed insane—this is the understanding of Cartwright, for example (humanism exposes its utter hypocrisy and
dishonesty through this term when black being attempts entry into the political community). Thus, black madness is a double structure of impossibilities—the impossibility of human freedom and the impossibility of metaphysical resolution for black being. Insanity is not an aberration from mental health (as if mental health is an option for severed flesh and body) but is the only existential (and metaphysical) condition for black being in modernity. Salubriousness for black being in an antiblack world is as preposterous as freedom.

Insanity, then, becomes more of a philosophical discourse than a scientific object in this regard. It borrows its semantic energy from the scientific, but its aim is to describe the parascientific, the ontometaphysical. The Census of 1840 provides a gravid site to investigate the way insanity functions as an ontological structure in an antiblack world. The census was not merely a medico-historical document (one we can review through a historical gaze), but also a significant philosophical articulation—rendering the free black both a medico-historical variable and a profound philosophical allegory. My aim, here, is to think about the free black and insanity as paradigmatic of ontological terror. If we read the mathematical/scientific document as saying something philosophical, it will supplement the historical reading. I will argue that the census is a commentary on this nothing black being bears, and the term *insanity* is the medical name for this metaphysical condition. Black insanity is not the inability to resolve the dictates of biofuturity, as Szasz would assert, but it is the inability to resolve the deadlock of black being—which is unresolvable. In this sense, black insanity is not something that can be cured, since the only cure is the destruction of the world itself.

The sixth U.S. decennial census of 1840 is a peculiar document. For the first time in U.S. history, the federal government attempted to enumerate the “mentally defective”—“insane and idiots” (census nomenclature)—as a feature of racial difference. According to Albert Deutsch, the information was collected through the “discerning” eye of inexperienced state agents, marshals, who were instructed to “conduct their inquiry from house to house, leaving no dwelling or institution uninspected, and to record the number of white and colored inhabitants of each—how many were lunatics or idiots, how many were supported by their own estates or friends, and how many were supported at public charge.” These agents of the state apparatus received very little training concerning methodological procedures, reporting
techniques, and medical literacy—statistics as “science in the making,” as Bruce Curtis would call it. In fact, marshals were unable to delineate between those individuals considered mentally insane and those individuals considered idiots, as insane patients and idiots were lumped together on statistical tables.

The Census of 1840 received national attention because of the startling information collected. The most unexpected development of the census indicated that the rate of insanity was greater in Northern states:

The “insane and idiots” in the United States totaled 17,456. Of these, 14,521 were listed as whites and 2,935 as Negroes. There was little difference between the mentally handicapped rate among Northern and Southern whites. In the North, one out of 995 white persons was recorded as insane or idiotic; in the South the ratio was one to 945.3. Of the 2,788,572 Negro inhabitants of the slave state, 1,734 were insane or idiotic—making a ratio of one to every 1,558. In the Northern, or Free states, on the other hand, 1,191 Negroes out of 171,894 were found to be insane or idiotic—a ratio of one in every 144.5. The rate of mental disease and defect among free Negroes was about 11 times higher than it was among enslaved Negroes. In the free state of Maine, every fourteenth Negro was afflicted with mental disease or defect, in Michigan every twenty-seventh, in New Hampshire every twenty-eighth, in Massachusetts every forty-third. In contrast, in the deepest South, where slavery was most firmly entrenched, the rate of mental handicap among the Negroes ranged from one in 2,117 in Georgia to only one in 4,310 in Louisiana. Finally, New Jersey, with the lowest Negro insanity rate among Free states of the North, had twice the rate of its neighbor Delaware, just below the Mason and Dixon line, which had the poorest showing of all the slave states.

According to the census findings, 1 out of every 144 Northern Negroes was insane or feeble-minded, as compared with 1 out of every 995 Northern whites. But in the South, only one in every 1,558 Negroes was mentally handicapped. In the state of Maine, for example, it was reported that 1 in every 14 blacks was insane!

These statistics adumbrated a causal relationship between emancipation and insanity. Northern states experienced a higher rate of black insanity than
in the Southern states, where the “peculiar institution” was more entrenched. Moreover, black insanity was reported highest in Northern states where blacks were emancipated.

This geopolitical understanding of blackness and insanity inadvertently created a psychic-cartographic imagination; by this, I mean the way that insanity is spatialized politically. Within a psychic-cartographic imagination, a map reveals much more than geopolitical configurations and landscapes. It also locates the origination and concentration of insanity and mental death for antebellum thinkers—in essence, it exteriorizes what is considered most interior. The Mason-Dixon Line not only delineated between free and slave territory, but also marked the limit of sanity along geopolitical configurations. The Mason-Dixon Line represented the liminal and unthinkable transition between conscious/unconscious, sane/insane, and manageable/unmanageable. Spivak, writing in another context, has called this permutation of geography, power, and knowledge an epistemograph, the peculiar way that the geographic imagination configures epistemic production. In a word, the construction of the psychic cartographic imagination, an American epistemograph (the mapping of medical knowledge and antiblack domination in antebellum America) is perhaps one of the greatest achievements of this census report.

Pro-slavery advocates immediately used the census as scientific proof of the dangers of black freedom. This paternalistic discourse was articulated with a logical twist: slavery not only was essential to preserving civil society and its various economic institutions, a popular line of reasoning, but was also absolutely necessary for maintaining the psychic stability of the slave, a line of reasoning that was novel and difficult to combat. This social altruism, withholding self-possession for the sake of the slave, relied on a complex political-philosophical argument: sanity and the public sphere were mutually exclusive for black being (both slave and free). Civil society must always already remain a fragmented impossibility if life was to be maintained (life as onticidal death). The pro-slavery argument reconfigures black livability as the inhabitation of death—social, political, emotional, spiritual. Black life is crudely reduced to biological functionality, much like equipment’s existence is reduced to its functionality. Put differently, pro-slavery advocates understand black bodies as equipment, and what they were saving was the maintenance of equipment—aside from use value, black bodies lacked
biofuturity (outside the time of man and the world). The census, thus, provides scientific legitimacy for rationalizing antiblack violence.

Frank Wilderson perspicuously argues that “civil society is held together by a structural prohibition against recognizing and incorporating a being that is dead, despite the fact that this being is sentient and so appears to be very much alive.”

Civil society depends on a prohibition on blackness to function—and we can suggest that this prohibition supplants the taboo prohibition that Freud claimed grounded civilization, since antebellum law permits incest and murder through the “chattel distinction,” as Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks suggests. If death “structures political life in terms of aversion as well as desire,” according to Russ Castronovo, and “produces bodies whose materiality disturbs the impersonality of citizenship, but whose remove from socio-political life also idealizes the unhistorical and abstract nature of state identity,” then the materiality and non-ontology of blackness, as the embodiment of death, desanitizes civil society.

The Census of 1840 articulates, through numerical signifiers, this very prohibition on blackness as death, and insanity provides the necessary grammar of prohibition. Nothing contaminates civil society and must be contained and removed. This is the metaphysical impetus behind antiblackness.

The Census of 1840, heralded as a beacon of truth to the world concerning the necessity of slavery, actually was one of the most striking “statistical falsehoods and errors ever woven together under government print.” An ambitious statistician, Dr. Edward Jarvis, discovered the embarrassing errors while confined to his bed with a broken leg. Reviewing the official Census of 1840, Jarvis exposed internal contradictions and statistical inaccuracies within the census and concluded that the sixth census has contributed nothing to the statistical nosology of the free blacks, and furnished us with no data wherein we may build any theory respecting the liability of humanity, in its different phases and in various outward circumstances, to loss of reason or of the senses…. Such a document as we have described, heavy with errors and its misstatements, instead of being a messenger of truth to the world, to enlighten its knowledge and guide its opinion, is, in respect to human ailment, a bearer of falsehood to confuse and mislead. So far from being an aid to medical science, as it was the intention of the government on ordering these
inquiries, it has thrown a stumbling block in its way, which it will require years to remove.48

The statistical inconsistencies were so grossly apparent that Dr. Jarvis demanded an official correction of the census. Jarvis discovered the following startling inconsistencies in the census report:

We found that the town of Worchester, Massachusetts, is stated to contain one hundred and thirty-three coloured lunatics and idiots, supported at public charge. These we know are the white patients in the state hospital, situated in that town. This single mistake multiplies the coloured lunatics of this state three-fold, and if it were corrected, it would reduce the proportion of coloured insane from one in forty-three to one in one hundred and twenty-nine. Warned by this example, we examined the statements respecting every town, city, and county, in all the states and territories, and compared on each one of these, the total coloured population with the number of coloured insane … the number of coloured insane in these towns and counties, carries on its very face its own refutation; no one who thus studies this report, can possibly be misled.

But these palpable errors are by no means all. There are others almost as gross, and to observers of society almost as self-evident—In many towns all the coloured population are stated to be insane, in very many others, two-thirds; one-half, one-fourth, or one-tenth of this ill-starred race are reported to thus be afflicted, and as if the document delighted to revel in variety of error, every proportion of the negro population from seven-fold its whole number, as we have shown in some towns, to less than a two-thousandth, as is recorded of others, is declared to be a lunatic.…

We examined the details of that document in regard to these disorders among the coloured population in every town, city, and county of the Free states, and found in many of these places, the record cases of blindness and deafness and dumbness without subjects. These disorders exist there in a state of abstraction, and fortunately for humanity, where they are said to be present, there are no people to suffer from them.49

Although these inconsistencies presented the social scientist with violations of scientific inquiry, these errors actually highlighted interesting philosophical moments concerning black insanity, moments articulated
through the manipulation of statistical signifiers.

One of the errors that most disturbed Jarvis was the reporting of insanity, deafness, and dumbness among Northern free blacks in areas in which free blacks did not reside. For example, Jarvis discovered that “many Northern towns were mysteriously credited with insane Negroes although they were entirely without Negro residents. Many other localities were listed in the census having more Negro madmen than were there Negro inhabitants. Thus the town of Scarsboro, Maine, which had a lily-white population, found itself charged with six insane Negroes. The town of Dresden, Maine, which boasted but three Negro inhabitants, found census-takers crediting it with double that number of insane blacks.” These statistical errors prompted Jarvis to remark that “we examined the details of that document in regard to these disorders among the coloured population in every town, city, and county of the Free states, and found in many of these places, the record cases of blindness and deafness and dumbness without subjects. These disorders exist there in a state of abstraction, and fortunately for humanity, where they are said to be present, there are no people to suffer from them.”

How do we account for these statistical errors, philosophically? If these ontological errors (the false reporting of being) were confined to one locality, or if entire populations of Negroes were not reported insane (or if black bodies were not utilized as surrogates for white insane patients), it would be simple to excuse these errors as mere reporting glitches, but the fact that these errors were pervasive throughout diverse geographical locations merits further interrogation.

These statistical inconsistencies present a very interesting philosophical proposition: for black being, insanity is an ontometaphysical structure, and the presence of the black body is irrelevant to the application of the diagnosis. In other words, the Census of 1840, along with the emphatic defenses of it, implicitly makes a distinction between blackness as a (non)ontological feature and blackness as a phenomenal entity (a body). This seems a rather odd proposition, given that insanity is usually applied to a particular person, a body that we can easily identify, discipline, and treat. But the census departs from this commonsense understanding of insanity. Marshals could account for black insanity in places where physical black bodies did not exist because one does not need the physical body to make the
claim that black insanity is a problem. Why is this the case? I would suggest that this error is only an error within the ontic science of statistical reasoning; but when we are really trying to describe an ontological condition of blackness using statistical instruments, then “error” must be reconfigured. Blackness becomes a ubiquitous threat, always already existing and floating throughout civil society as a phantom-like danger. Because this danger is ubiquitous, any state, city, or locality can claim the presence of black insanity. Within this logic, black bodies are decentered and black ontometaphysics assumes centrality. This also explains why white insane patients were recorded in census data as black; insanity is an ontometaphysical feature of blackness in an antiblack world. So a “white insane patient” was somewhat of an oxymoron lexically for marshals, and they simply corrected this error.

Thus, the errors that Jarvis described in detail were ontological truths. The census allowed antebellum society to participate in a collective discourse about the dangers of black freedom. We are dealing more with ontology as the *ultimate science* concerning blackness (ontology becomes a science for antiblackness) and less with psychiatry and statistics as rigorous sciences. If Jarvis had been able to think philosophically about blackness, instead of merely social-scientifically, then he would have understood why these defenders embraced the census with such urgency. Defending the census became *self-preservation* against the encroachment of nothing for antebellum humans.

Needless to say, the census report was never corrected—despite Jarvis’s insightful critique of its validity (the census was valid on an entirely different register). His demands, however, prompted Congressman John Quincy Adams to introduce a resolution in the House of Representatives to investigate the legitimacy of the census (in 1844). Adams instructed the Department of State to inform the House “whether any gross errors have been discovered in the printed Sixth Census … and if so, how those errors originated, what they are, and what, if any, measures have been taken to rectify them.”51 The Secretary of State was none other than John C. Calhoun, who was actually responsible for administering the Census of 1840, and he appointed William Weaver (who was actually superintendent of the Census of 1840) to review himself. Of course, Weaver found no errors, and the census was considered statistically valid.
Within an antiblack scientific procedure or process, truth and error lose integrity and become indissociable fictions. This is what Jarvis could not understand, but Calhoun adumbrated the arbitrariness of truth and error as scientific realities when it concerns free blacks:

That it [the Census of 1840] may contain errors, more or less, is hardly to be doubted. It would be a miracle if such a document, with so many figures and entities, did not. But that they have, if they exist, materially affected the correctness of the general result would seem hardly possible. *Nothing but the truth itself is so* would seem capable of explaining the fact that in all slave-holding states, without exception, the census exhibits uniformly, a far comparative prevalence of these diseases among the free blacks than among the Slaves of another State [emphasis mine].

Calhoun presents a tautology to discount the inaccuracies that Jarvis exposed: “Nothing but the truth itself is so would seem capable of explaining that in all slave-holding states, without exception, the census exhibits uniformly, a far comparative prevalence of these diseases among the free blacks than among the Slaves of another State.” As Jarvis argues, since the reporting is flawed throughout the study, from the very beginning, all conclusions must be questioned. Calhoun’s rejoinder insists that the conclusions are correct because they are correct—they were always correct, even before the census was compiled. Any errors are just subsumed (Hegelian *Aufhebung*) into the truth, such that errors become truth and truth becomes the errors that were always truth. This dizzying tautology appears to defy logic, or contravene the principles of science, but, in essence, antiblackness inverts logic for its own end. This illogic, expressed in the tautology, translates into the logic of death. The displacement of truth and error is a strategy of metaphysical warfare. The tautology is designed to concretize the deadlock of black being: one is insane if one desires freedom or one is sane if one accepts social/political death. Either way, the tautology ensures the inevitability of death, as scientific truth/error.

Thus, the errors—reporting black insane patients in localities where blacks didn’t physically exist, for example—are eternal truths when black being and freedom are thought together. The syntagm “free black” is the discursive materiality of insanity; civil society collapses when the boundary between
death and life, filth and purity, human and property is violated. The free black is insane precisely because of this unthinkable collapse.54

The insane represent the threshold of humanity, the not fully human transitioning into “rational inertia” or mental death, that zero degree of humanity, as a living and breathing waste object, wasting away into irrational obscurity. The mad represent a certain paradox—they exist in a state of nonexistence. It takes the free black, however, to realize fully this paradox because this being is situated at the threshold of ontometaphysics. Since its ontological borders are porous and unprotected by metaphysical and juridical discourses, the free black dissolves into the abyss of insanity. Insanity, then, is the index of being as nothing. In Madness and Civilization, Foucault describes madness as a particular void within which reason recedes into the darkness of infinity. What renders madness so disruptive is precisely this vacuous space that “has become man’s possibility of abolishing both man and the world.”55 As somewhat of a dystopic dreamscape, insanity becomes the repository of unbearable exceptions, and the free black is the material embodiment of this nightmare. But if we follow the thought of Kant, Hegel, and most pro-slavery advocates (and some abolitionists, as well), blacks are situated outside of reason; they are the infants of reason’s historical movement. How can a being purportedly void of reason, innately, become insane? If insanity assumes a becoming for the human, an unfortunate fall from the mountain of reason into the abyss of unreason, then this becoming is completely absent in the insane black. Blackness is insane from its very appearance in the world—its appearance is the evidence of insanity. Insanity identifies appearance without Being in an antiblack world. Given the existential positioning of blacks in an antiblack world, insanity is the only ground available. Blackness is born in this abyss within modernity.

If we read the census as just another piece of pro-slavery propaganda, then we miss the deep philosophical presumptions that engender (and sustain) the census; in particular, mathematics is philosophical writing otherwise. Unlike the Platonist, who believes that “mathematics is the discovery of truths about structures that exist independently of the activity or thought of mathematics,” according to Benacerraf and Putnam in Philosophy of Mathematics,56 the census expresses an Aristotelian (or Nietzschean) perspective in which mathematics is a fictive or linguistic formation, and it becomes more like “a rigorous esthetics. It tells us nothing of real-being, but it forges a fiction.”57
The census is a tapestry of antiblack aesthetics; the numerical signs create a canvas of the beautiful and the good life in an antiblack order. This is why the census was too good to give up because of its philosophical beauty—which translates into an unbearable ugliness for black being. Statistics is ontological poetry in this case, and its validity exists in a register outside ontic accounting and verification. Put differently, the Census of 1840 invites us to think about mathematics not as an objective reflection of the external world, but as a premier tool for fantasies, power, and imaginings.

Antiblackness relies on mathematics when guns, knives, and whips reach their limit of destruction—mathematics’ weapons are metaphysical and just as deadly.

CODA: THE FREE BLACK AS PARADIGM OF SCIENTIFIC HORROR

Here is proof of the necessity of slavery. The African is incapable of self-care and sinks into lunacy under the burden of freedom. It is a mercy to give him guardianship and protection from mental death.

—JOHN C. CALHOUN, quoted in Deutsch, “The First U.S. Census of the Insane (1840) and Its Uses as Pro-Slavery Propaganda”

What type of life is even possible in the metaphysical holocaust? Are the terms life and death even appropriate to describe the condition of the being situated within this ontological lacuna? Theorists have approached these inquiries with unavoidable paradoxes: social death, necro-citizenship, living corpse, and living dead, just to name a few. The antebellum free black—a being situated between slave and citizen, human and property, political death and social life, and subject and object—constitutes such an exception for antebellum U.S. society. Writing about the antebellum free black raises particular theoretical and philosophical problems, since the humanist grammars of being and existence fracture around the term free black and endlessly encircle it with paradoxes, contradictions, and puzzles. The juxtaposition of free and black collides two disparate grammars into chaotic signification and conceptual devastation: freedom is the terrain of the living, of the being we call human, and black is the territory of existential dread, nonfreedom, and the being we might call object. With the term free black, we
are forced into a permutation of conceptual ground that is unstable, and it desiccates beneath itself as a self-consuming oxymoron. Within this grammatical, syntactical, and conceptual chaos, even the terms life and death must be reconfigured and reorganized to capture the being situated within this unending violence. Indeed, what does it mean to live or to die when one’s living is a form of death, and one’s death is a gift of life? Because biology does not exhaust the fields of life and death, the problem at hand is more profound than we can imagine, especially when we analyze the condition of being that we call blackness.

It is this conceptual density that gets trafficked into, unknowingly perhaps, the debates about free blacks in antebellum society. The epigraph raises these concerns without explicitly making bare the philosophical presumptions about blackness that anchor it. For John C. Calhoun, freedom for blackness is death, a form of death worse than mere biological expiration—mental death, or insanity. Since the human being names a relationship of care between the self, Being, and its projection into the external world (freedom), claiming that the black is incapable of such care places him outside the realm of freedom and into the domain of the unfree, the care-less, and the unthought. But this realm of unfreedom is also a form of death, according to Marriott, because antiblackness strips black being of this fundamental existential relationship by objectifying this self and presenting this relationship to the captor for his pleasure. Thus, we have a strange play between deaths, deaths reconfigured as life, which seems to be the only existential option for blackness in modernity: freedom engenders mental death and unfreedom engenders social death. Because social death is a form of mental death to the extent that the mind is pulverized by routinized pain and terror, and mental death is a form of social death to the extent that consciousness cannot actualize or move throughout the field of the social, there is no escaping this condition of death as life and life as death for Calhoun. “Free black” names this existential deadlock.

The antebellum free black has primarily become an object for historiography and, concomitantly, has been analyzed through humanist presuppositions and conceptual paradigms (e.g., that there is a subject of the historical process; that a clear distinction between life and death exists historically; that blacks are human, capable of transforming space through time). Because Western historiography takes humanism for granted and
applies the notion of human agency and existence to its objects of analysis, the ontological crisis of blackness is often overlooked in historiography. In other words, can we have a historiography that does not presume the human as the subject of history and the various capacities that this human possesses (e.g., freedom, temporal change, time/space capacity)? I would argue that the humanist grammar of “subject,” “human,” “agent,” and “freedom” does not quite apply to the antebellum free black, and thus, the antebellum free black is more of a philosophical allegory than a historical agent.

Reading the free black as a philosophical allegory, as a paradigm for ontological terror, enables us to expose the function of science and mathematics in the destruction of black being. Indeed, the antebellum free black is a particular historical figure (according to historiography), but the particularity of this figure exposes a larger paradigm of terror continuing in the present—and that will extend into the future as long as the world exists. Diagnosing free blacks as insane, even though their bodies are absent from the examination, proposing physically rubbing away blackness as the only solution to antiblackness, beating the “devil” out of blacks until the symbolic constituents of existence crumble, and bleeding out black bodies are scientific procedures for articulating the truth of the metaphysical holocaust (i.e., “one is already dead”). They serve as allegories of the condition of black being in a metaphysical war. The free black’s relation to science and mathematics has been one of utter terror and ontological insecurity.

Whether we are talking about the experiments conducted on captive female flesh (e.g., Dr. J. Marion Sim’s viciousness), the torture and humiliation of blacks during the Tuskegee Study on syphilis, the forced sterilization of black females, the fictions of the Bell Curve and other genres of antiblack scientific mythology, or the forced experimentation on prisoners, antiblackness mobilizes science and mathematics to inflict unspeakable harm. Thus, what I want to convey with the paradigm of the free black, here, is that the particularity of the antebellum free black unveils a vicious paradigm of terror for all blacks—no matter the time period, the geographical location, or the insistence of romantic humanism importuning us to accept that we are free and human like everyone else. Thinking these diverse particularities together enables us to penetrate the depths of scientific horror.