Ontological Terror

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ADIEU TO THE HUMAN

The Department of Justice released its report (2016) exposing disturbing practices in the Baltimore Police Department. It details the persistence of antiblack violence, abuse, inveterate neglect, and routinized humiliation. Graphs, statistics, and anecdotal narratives create a vicious tapestry of signs and symbols. This tapestry requires a deciphering, for what it says is more than just persistent injustice; it articulates something else, which requires a different grammar. Rev. Heber Brown III, speaking to the New York Times (August 10, 2016) about the report, recounts a disturbing instance. A teenage boy was stopped and strip-searched in front of his girlfriend. After he filed a complaint with the police department, the officer, it seems, wanted revenge and stopped the young boy again, strip-searched him, and this time grabbed his genitals. The officer, intoxicated by unchecked power over black bodies, wanted to injure something else, not just the teenager’s body. Rev. Heber Brown III states, “What that officer did is not just violate a body, but he injured a spirit, a soul, a psyche. And that young boy will not easily forget what happened to him, in public with his girlfriend. It’s hard to really put gravity and weight to that type of offense.”

The violation that Reverend Heber Brown III describes is ontological terror—it is the systemic destruction of “a spirit, a soul, a psyche.” Ontological terror is not a phenomenon we can relegate to an unenlightened past; it remains with us. What I have argued throughout this book is that black being constitutes the nothing in an antiblack world, which is continually degraded, dominated, and violated. Antiblackness is anti-nothing.
A “spirit, a psyche, a soul” marks symbolic forms of a nothing (something not quite translatable within metaphysical schemes). It is precisely this nothing that ontological terror targets, and black existence is precisely the condition of unending nothing-destruction. This, of course, is a metaphysical fantasy, since nothing can never be destroyed, but it provides a metaphysical world with a devastating will to power. Black being is invented precisely to constitute the object of a global drive—the endless pursuit of nothing.

Postmetaphysicians and romantic humanists neglect this global drive — either by celebrating the emancipatory potential of nothing or by clinging, desperately, to metaphysical humanity and freedom. Both strategies have consistently failed to realize freedom, progress, or redress. It is time to discard these fantasies and face the terror of antiblackness.

What I am suggesting, ultimately, is that black being begins to get over the human and its humanism fantasies. We’ve tried everything: from marches, to masochistic citizenship (giving our bodies to the state to brutalize in hopes of evoking sympathy and empathy from humans), to exceptional citizenship and respectability, to protest and armed conflict; in the end, either we will continue this degrading quest for human rights and incorporation or we will take a leap of faith, as Kierkegaard might say, and reject the terms through which we organize our existence.

By abandoning the human, human-ness, and the liberal humanism that enshrouds it, we can better understand the violent formations of antiblackness, particularly ontological terror. To abandon the human does not mean that one accepts the terms of inferiority or worthlessness. We do not have to abandon within the axiological framework of humanism; we can reject that framework as well. In other words, we have invested unbelievable value in the human—it constitutes the highest value in the world. And for this reason, we are terrified of letting go of it because we believe this value will protect us against antiblackness (it will not). As long as we continue to invest in the value structure that renders the human the highest, and most important, being within the world, we will continue to plead for recognition and acceptance. It is this terror of value, of not possessing this value, that keeps us wedded to the idea of the human and its accouterments (and I must say, constantly revisiting the human, reimagining it, expanding it, and refashioning it does nothing but keep us entangled in the circuit of misery). This entanglement of value and ontology produces tremendous misery and
disappointment for blackness. As Rinaldo Walcott perspicuously states, “What it means to be Human is continually defined against [blacks]. The very basic terms of social Human engagement are shaped by antiblack logics so deeply embedded in various normativities that they resist intelligibility as modes of thought and yet we must attempt to think them.”

We must question the antiblack logics grounding the human, even if such thinking is rendered unintelligible by metaphysical knowledge formations and traditions. Black thinking, then, must think what is impossible to think within the constraints of metaphysics and ontology. Our enterprise broaches the unknown, the place where we can no longer ask questions, and there sits in this space.

Perhaps what I am suggesting constitutes an ontological revolution, one that will destroy the world and its institutions (i.e., the “end of the world,” as Fanon calls it). But these are our options, since the metaphysical holocaust will continue as long as the world exists. The nihilistic revelation, however, is that such a revolution will destroy all life—far from the freedom dreams of the political idealists or the sobriety of the pragmatist.

The important task for black thinking (philosophizing, theorizing, theologizing, poeticizing) is to imagine black existence without Being, humanism, or the human. Such thinking would lead us into an abyss. But we must face this abyss—its terror and majesty. I would suggest that this thinking leads us into the spirit, something exceeding and preceding the metaphysical world. We are still on the path to developing a phenomenology of black spirit, but it is an important enterprise. I will continue this work in subsequent writing, but I can say for now, the aim is to shift emphasis from the human toward the spirit. The spirit enables one to endure the metaphysical holocaust; it is not a solution to antiblackness. The spirit will not transform an antiblack world into some egalitarian landscape—the antiblack world is irredeemable. Black nihilism must rest in the crevice between the impossibility of transforming the world and the dynamic enduring power of the spirit. In the absence of Being there is spirit. Heidegger understands spirit commingled with Being, and the question of Being (“How is it going with Being?”) “is the spiritual fate of the West.”

Heidegger is both correct and incorrect. The spiritual degradation, routinized violence, and suffering around the globe is a consequence of Being and its hegemonic, Eurocentric violence. So, for humans to continue to ask the question of Being is to perpetuate a spiritual violence of black torment. The
answer to misery is not Being; rather, it is only by obliterating Being by dis(re)placing Heidegger’s question with “How is it going with black being?” that we can have access to the spirit. Being is enmity to the spirit. Contending with black as nothing will set us on this spiritual path. Along this path, we can experience something akin to Ashon Crawley’s concept of breath (without the promises of universal humanism), as the possibility for thinking and breathing otherwise (we can push this thought to its limits and suggest that for black thinking, spiritual breath and thinking are “identical” rather than thinking and being).

Black studies will have to disinvest our axiological commitments from humanism and invest elsewhere. Continuing to keep hope that freedom will occur, that one day the world will apologize for its antiblack brutality and accept us with open arms, is a devastating fantasy. It might give one motivation to fight on, but it is a drive that will only produce exhaustion and protest fatigue. What is the solution? What should we do? How do we live without metaphysical schemes of political hope, freedom, and humanity? I would have to suggest that there are no solutions to the problem of antiblackness—there is only endurance. And endurance cannot be reduced to biofuturity or humanist mandates. Endurance is a spiritual practice with entirely different aims.

*Ontological Terror* seeks to challenge metaphysical and postmetaphysical solutions. The paradigm of the free black teaches us that such solutions sustain the metaphysical holocaust. Let our thinking lead us into the “valley of the shadow of death,” and once there we can begin to imagine an existence anew.