INTRODUCTION: THE FREE BLACK IS NOTHING

1 Throughout this book, I will use the terms Negro and black interchangeably to docket an ontological problem of Being and blackness. I am not as much interested in historicizing the terms or engaging in the contentious debates concerning identity; rather, I understand these terms as pointing to the same problematic, which is beyond individual identity.

2 The term ontological terror appears in many scholarly texts, primarily as an undeveloped term but expressing a poetics of fear or anxiety. Much of this work is done in theological studies in which the lack of ultimate foundations (i.e., the Death of God thesis) leaves the subject unnerved. Most of this work, however, assumes humanism as its ground of investigation, meaning that the human subject is precluded from exercising its ontological capacity. My use of ontological terror is designed to foreground not only the terror the human feels with lack of security, but also that this fear is predicated on a projection of ontological terror onto black bodies and the disavowal of this projection. Thus, humanism does not exhaust ontological terror, and an antimetaphysical understanding of it is necessary to analyze antiblackness. My use of ontological terror is more along the lines of Julius Lester’s description of it as “the terror of nonexistence, the unending trauma of being damned in the flesh” in his Lovesong: Becoming a Jew, 25. For examples of ontological terror as a human/humanist experience, please see Anthony B. Pinn’s wonderful Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion; Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair’s Secularism and Religion-Making; and Louise Morris’s master’s thesis, “The Spectre of Grief: Visualizing Ontological Terror in Performance,” which understands the artistic representations of terror as a veil—something concealing trauma. I will argue something similar in chapter 4, but argue that representations expose and uncover rather than serving as a veil.

3 In his The Question Concerning Technology: And Other Essays, Heidegger understands that the overcoming of metaphysics [überwunden] is impossible, since a remnant will always remain and one must go through metaphysics to ask the ontological question; but the thinker must aspire to verwunden, the surmounting that restores metaphysics (technology as instrumentalization and domination in this instance) “back into its yet concealed truth,” 39.

4 What does black thinking entail without being? This is an exceptionally difficult question, but one that sets all black critical enterprises into motion. Heidegger, for example, believed being and thinking were the same. If this is the case, then black philosophy’s presentation is not thinking in this familiar sense, but something for which grammar fails us. In other words, the question put to black nihilists, and Afropessimists, “what are you doing?” cannot be answered apodictically within the horizon of metaphysical and postmetaphysical thinking. Black thinking is unthought because its activities are unrecognizable philosophically—thus, black thinking is the process of destroying the
world.

5 See Grant Farred’s *Martin Heidegger Saved My Life* for a Heideggerian approach to thinking race.

6 This seems to be the crux of Martin Heidegger’s critique (and those of postmetaphysicians): that metaphysical procedures set the ground for tremendous acts of violence, since Being is so crudely reified. He suggested in “Letter on Humanism” (in *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger*) that our metaphysical ideas of the human, representation, and objectification limit freedom.

7 I use the signpost of the transatlantic slave trade to indicate an emergence or event of metaphysical horror. Michelle Wright cautions against “Middle Passage Epistemology” in which other spatial formations (i.e., other oceans) are excluded from the narrative of African slavery. I certainly agree that antiblackness is a global event and that multiple oceans transported black commodities. My use of *transatlantic slave trade* here is not to posit it as the only passageway, but to provide a signifier for metaphysical holocaust and its commencement. Please see Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*.


9 Vattimo describes Heidegger’s term *Ge-Schick* as “the ensemble (*Ge*) of the *Schicken*, the sendings or apertures of Being that have conditioned and made possible the experience of humanity in its historical phases prior to us. Only by inserting our current sending (our *Schickung*)—that is: present significance of ‘Being’—into the ensemble of the *Ge-Schick* do we overcome the metaphysical oblivion of Being, breaking free of thought that identifies Being with beings, with the order that currently obtains.” See his *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*.


12 It is not within the scope of this project to conduct a genealogy or a history of Being [*Geschichte des Seins*]. But the concept *Being*, particularly Dasein, certainly has a development in Western thought not as a universal but as a Eurocentric field of inquiry. Heidegger condenses his antiblackness in the concept “primitive Dasein,” which is “not conscious of itself in its way of being” (*The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 138), and thus cannot pose the ontological question—being is not an issue for it. Or when Heidegger suggests in *The Introduction to Metaphysics*, “The Greeks become in principle better kind of Hottentot, in comparison to whom modern science has progressed infinitely far. Disregarding as the particular absurdities involved in conceiving of the inception of Western philosophy as primitive, it must be said that this interpretation forgets that what is at issue is … great can only begin great … so it is with the philosophy of the Greeks.” What exactly is this primitive caught between human being and animal? What determines the “betterness” of the Greeks against the Hottentot, for whom philosophy proper is absent? How does the “particular absurdity” of black thinking (Hottentot philosophy)/black existence engender Heidegger’s question of being itself? How do we break the antiblack tautological circle “great begins great” to create space for black thinking—that dejected and debased enterprise cast out of historical movement? Any history of Being would need to work through the exclusion of the primitive from Dasein and the *use* of this primitive in the existential journey of the human. For indeed, non-Western cultures provide a temporal backdrop for Heidegger to commence his philosophical thinking. My argument here is that the concept develops as an antiblack field that is exclusive and violent. It posits European Dasein as the guardian of Being and the rest of the globe as dependent on European thinking. Rather than thinking of Being as a universal field (i.e., everything *experiences its happening*), we can understand the development of the concept as an instrument of European global domination. Thus, whatever the black *is* lacks explanation within Being, and it is the task of black thinking to imagine black existence *outside* Being and its arrogant universalizing tactics. Please also see Nelson Maldonado-Torres’s “On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept,” 240 – 70, for a similar
argument about the violent development of the concept. Richard Wolin asked the provocative question “What is the role to be played by politics in the historico-metaphysical process whereby the truth of Being is historically recovered?”; see Wolin, The Politics of Being: The Political Thought of Martin Heidegger. Along these lines Ontological Terror inquires, “What is the role of antiblackness in the forgetting of Being and its historical recovering?” Throughout this book my answer is that remembering Being is dependent on remembering the Negro.

13 Martin Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, 67.
14 David Marriott. “Waiting to Fall,” 214.
15 I use “black thought,” “black thinking,” and “black philosophy” interchangeably to signal a certain intellectual labor, one designed to investigate the abyss of black existence without ontology. Thus, my approach will seem foreign to analytic philosophical traditions (and its scientific reasoning and metaphysical logic) and equally foreign to Continental philosophy, or even what John Mullarkey (Post-Continental Philosophy: An Outline) would call “post-Continental Philosophy,” as I do not assume that Being is universal in its difference or manifestations. Both analytic and Continental approaches rely on Being, and black thought/philosophy is charged with thinking against Being itself—even if we can never get completely outside of it. This means black thought is the “other of philosophy,” as William Desmond would call it in his Philosophy and Its Others: Ways of Being and Mind, and even the other of Heideggerian Andenken. Black thought has not overcome metaphysics, since antiblackness is what remains, what anchors metaphysics within Destruktion. For this reason, black thought is the only thinking capable of entering the abyss of nothing. Cornel West defines Afro-American philosophy as “the interpretation of Afro-American history, highlighting the cultural heritage and political struggles, which provides desirable norms that should regulate responses to particular challenges presently confronting Afro-Americans.” The question embedded in this beautiful definition is how does the black philosopher interpret existence (as history)? Is being the “ground” of such interpretation? In other words, the definition of the noetic function of Afro-American philosophy neglects the question of being itself—can we interpret “culture” without presuming the “isness” of culture, which would bring us back to the question of being? I would argue that black nihilism, as a philosophical formation, does not neatly fall into any of the categories West uses to map black thought: rationalism, existentialism, humanism, or vitalism—since the ontological ground anchoring these traditions is unreliable and is thrown into crisis. The question of black being unravels these traditions. Please see his magnificent essay “Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience” in A Companion to African-American Philosophy.

16 Jean-Luc Nancy might argue that freedom is the dissolution of grounds and, especially, the labor of experience and/as necessity. It is the utter exposure to groundlessness that is the experience of freedom as such. I agree that groundlessness is important, but would mention that Nancy’s postmetaphysics introduces a form of terror that is left unacknowledged, and this is precisely what the metaphysical holocaust does: it leaves black without any ontological grounds. Does this mean black is free? We could only answer in the affirmative if we also suggest that antiblackness is necessary for black freedom. Such a formulation—in which freedom is groundlessness and antiblackness dissolves ground—would sustain the metaphysical holocaust as the condition of experiencing freedom for blacks. This is why black freedom is incompatible with postmetaphysical presentations of freedom because they, inadvertently, would rely on antiblackness to incorporate blacks into its narrative. If, then, freedom is antiblackness for blacks, what good is freedom? It, indeed, is not freedom at all—only the human can celebrate groundlessness. (Because this groundlessness is sustained by Being’s gift of unfolding, such is not the case for blackness.) Please see Nancy’s The Experience of Freedom.

18 I would also suggest that our ideas of freedom originate from a political theory/philosophy in which
it becomes indistinguishable from liberty. For example, Isaiah Berlin’s “Two Conceptions of Freedom” presents freedom as the twin axes of negative and positive vectors. Positive freedom is the actualization of one’s desire for mastery, rationality, opportunity, and capacity. Negative freedom is the overcoming, or removal, of interference on one’s mastery or reasoning will. Hannah Arendt, along this vein, offers a theory of freedom as action—in particular, political action (deriving from the Greek polis). These theories, by placing freedom squarely in political action or mastery, leave the question of what is free unattended because it is assumed to be a human. Once this ontological ground is questioned, however, we realize that Being must be secured before we can even engage in a question of action, reason, will, mastery, or interference. This approach to black being is unproductive because the ontological humanism, which grounds political philosophy/theory, does not transfer to the black thing outside ontology. This is the conundrum before us. The legal and historiographical literature applies this humanism to free blacks when the problem of blackness is that it lacks this ground to begin with. Thus, freedom is not an issue for it. We can speak of liberty, rights, and, as I will argue, terroristic emancipation, but these are not freedom, but ontic substitutes. Or, in the case of black being, emancipation is what is left when freedom and ontology are no longer options.

20 Maurice S. Lee, Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature.
21 Orlando Patterson offers a voluminous study of freedom in his Freedom, vol. 1: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture. His objective is to present a sociological analysis of freedom’s evolution—from antiquity to modernity. He argues that valuing freedom evolves through devaluing the condition of slavery. I definitely agree that slavery renders freedom intelligible, but again, the ontological question is circumvented. His analysis presents freedom not as an aperture or horizon of ontology, but as an evolving object (a metaphysical entity) that moves through history in relation to slavery. Conceiving freedom in this way collapses it into practices of value and exchange—not something that provides the condition of possibility for any valuation because it enables the human to ground itself. Moreover, the ontological condition of both slave and master is not synonymous or merely a legal distinction—as if gifting the slave with freedom will make him a master.
22 Vittorio Possenti, Nihilism and Metaphysics: The Third Voyage, 8.
23 Please see Ira Berlin’s Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South.
25 As an example of skirting the ontological question in romantic narratives of black humanism, we can examine Ira Berlin’s The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States. He raises the question, “If black people were not to be slaves, what exactly would they be?” This question should compel an investigation of the word be, a question of existence when humanist ground is not secure. For indeed, the “transformation from person to property,” as he describes it, is more than just a change in legal status; it is also a change in the meaning and condition of existence. We are led, however, into a romantic narrative about slavery’s supposed demise and the function of multiple forces in achieving it—through emancipation. It seems as if the question dies alongside slavery’s demise. I am arguing that this is far from the case. Slavery is still very much with us to the extent that slavery signifies the exclusion of black being from humanist ontology. We have not accomplished the demise of slavery, only variations of its viciousness.
26 Again, this is to reiterate that I am not suggesting the voices or opinions of free blacks do not matter. This is to say, however, that we want to interrogate the ontological ground and presumptions from which that voice emerges. There are many contemporary historiographies that grapple with the concepts of freedom and free blacks. In Forging Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston, for example, Amrita Chakrabarti Myers uncovers archival material of free black women in Charleston, South Carolina. She presents freedom as an
experience, one that depends on resources and opportunity. The ground of ontology, however, is never broached; thus, freedom is removed from ontology and relegated to sociolegal context. The problem with this is that ontology is not reducible to experience, and the author proceeds as if free black experience is an ontological claim of freedom—however fickle it was or how tenuously the freedom might be experienced. I focus on the conflation of experience with (human) ontology because the problems that orient the text—systemic terror, risk of reenslavement, routinized violation—are ontological problems. Experience cannot eradicate these problems, no matter how free someone feels. These problems persist after sociolegal freedom because they are symptoms of the ontological condition of nonfreedom. Sociolegal and affective experiences leave the fundamental problem unresolved. There is a tendency in historiography to neglect the ontological foundation of the systemic violence it uncovers, since avoiding ontology and focusing on affect and experience allow us to incorporate blacks into a humanist fantasy (with synonyms like agency, liberty, voice, power). My issue is, then, that assuming human freedom is precisely the problem, which free blacks experienced as tension between a legal status and a nonplace in an antiblack world. This tension is an ontological violence, which not labor, family, resources, wealth, nor community can rectify. A nonmetaphysical historiography would proceed from the lack of ontological ground and read the archive through this violence. My hope is that historiography will begin to question and challenge the humanism upon which it is predicated to understand the capaciousness of antiblackness. For similar elisions of ontology in historiography, see Max Grivno’s Gleanings of Freedom: Free and Slave Labor along the Mason-Dixon Line, 1790 – 1860, and Damian Alan Pargas’s The Quarters and the Fields: Slave Families in the Non-Cotton South.

29 Tommy Curry, “Saved by the Bell: Derrick Bell’s Racial Realism as Pedagogy,” 36.
31 See Vincent Woodard’s brilliant analysis of consumption, cannibalism, and homoeroticism through historical archives in his The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism with U.S. Slave Culture.

CHAPTER 1: THE QUESTION OF BLACK BEING

1 I use the word being in the term black being simply to articulate the entity of blackness that bears the weight of unbearable nothing. Since ontology cannot provide the ground for understanding the being of blackness, terms like being, existence, and freedom applied to blackness become nonsense. But given grammatical paucity and the lack of intelligible language to describe the indescribable, I must make use of it, even as I undermine the very terms that I employ. I write the term being under erasure to indicate the double bind of communicability and to expose the death of blackness that constitutes the center of being.
2 Hortense Spillers, Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture, 406.
3 In Martin Heidegger’s Introduction to Metaphysics, he recovers Plato’s nonmetaphysical understanding of polis not simply as the geographical location of the city-state, but as “the place, the there, wherein and as which historical being—there is. Polis is the historical place, there in which, out of which, and for which history happens” (170). I am arguing that black being lacks precisely this historical place (there-ness) that situates the human being in the world. Black being, then, lacks not only physical space in the world (i.e., a home) but also an existential place in an antiblack
world. The black is worldless in this way, bordering on something between the worldlessness of the object and the world poorness of the animal. Please see Kevin Aho’s “Logos and the Poverty of Animals: Rethinking Heidegger’s Humanism” and Matthew Calarco’s Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida for an engagement with Heidegger’s fraught distinction between the world-poor animal and the world-forming human and his anthropocentrism.

4 Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, 3.
5 Nahum Dimitri Chandler, X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought, 2.
6 Spillers, Black, White, and in Color, 203.
7 In The Remains of Being: Hermeneutic Ontology after Metaphysics, Zabala suggests, “Heidegger undertook his destruction of the history of ontology in terms of the history of Being in order to destroy layers covering up the original nature of Being, those layers that metaphysical thinking has constructed.” I am arguing that we cannot proceed with this destruction without the Negro’s exclusion from history in Hegel, Kant’s black, stupid Negro, Heidegger’s primitive, unthinking Hottentot, etc. These are the layers of metaphysical violence that enable philosophy to develop notions of time, progress, freedom, and reason. Spillers would urge us, in my reading of her, to adopt a destructive protocol attentive to the violence undergirding the ontological question itself.
8 W. E. B. Dubois, The Souls of Black Folk, 1. Dubois also suggests in Dusk of Dawn that this problem is “the central problem[s] of the world’s democracies and so the problem of the future world.” I would also argue that this problem is the central problem of ontometaphysics. Philosopher Nahum Chandler provides a definitive reading of Dubois as broaching the problem of ontometaphysics through a “deconstructionist” practice in X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought. My analysis, however, is situated at the limit of deconstruction and Destruktion—blackness as the “undeconstructable” core of ontometaphysics.
9 Spillers, Black, White, and in Color, 206.
10 I interpret Hortense Spillers’s term pornotroping as the appropriation and use of the black body as a text, a sexualized text for fantasy, prurient othering, and unchecked gratification. Within an antiblack grammatical context, black bodies are pressed into the service of a sexualized semiotic and hermeneutic procedure or, as Spillers describes it, “externally imposed meanings and uses.” How one interprets and makes meaning of the black body as a sexual sign in an antiblack grammar is the function of pornotroping. Alexander Weheliye understands pornotroping as translating into a scopic economy, where the hieroglyphics of the flesh are sexualized through vision. Although I am in full agreement with his presentation of the scopic dimensions of pornotroping, I depart from his diacritical analysis as it concerns the productive potential of it. I understand pornotroping as an antiblack strategy in the metaphysical holocaust and not as a site for self-making or freedom; see Weheliye, Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human.
12 Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, 1. The phrase Wie steht es um das Sein?” might also translated as “How is it going with Nothing?,” as Heidegger seems to suggest in his lecture “What Is Metaphysics.” The question “How is it going with Nothing?” is the question of black(ness) for me in metaphysics, since “Black” and “Nothing” are articulations of the problem of Being—that for which ontology cannot adequately account.
14 Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, 77
15 In particular, Heidegger’s discussion of calculative thinking in his Introduction to Metaphysics, 216.
16 The idea of relationality is essential to the work of postmetaphysics (and romantic humanism).
example, Arendt posits freedom as occurring between men; a relation between men engenders freedom in *The Human Condition*. Jean-Luc Nancy would claim that “singular plurality” or a relation within an open/undefined community determines both existence and the possibility of freedom in his *Being Singular Plural*. Heidegger would also posit a Mitsein or a “being-with” as constitutive of a collective “world-forming” in his *Being and Time*. In short, part of the postmetaphysical project is to center relationality as essential to existence. But when such relation is nonexistent for black being, meaning that there is only a unilateral use and not bilateral relation, all such grounds of existence, freedom, and being for blacks are thrown into fundamental crisis.

19 Philosopher François Laruelle also provides a similar metaphysical reading of blackness through the concept *uchromia*—thinking blackness as the determination and limit of color and understanding itself; please see Laruelle, *From Decision to Heresy: Experiments in Non-Standard Thought*.
20 Ronald Judy, *(Dis)forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular*, 107.
21 David Marriott presents the reading of Fanon’s *n’est pas* as reducible not to simple negation but to that which ruptures both negation and positivity. This, I would argue, is another articulation of the formless form that is the black Negro; please see Marriott, “Judging Fanon.”
24 Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 212.
25 Arendt understands natality as the ontological anchor of human freedom (and the “central category of political thought”). In essence, the beginning is a state of capacity, a capacity she will later develop as political action. Jean-Luc Nancy has a similar conception of natality as a figuration for the way Being unfolds into existence (e.g., existence is the house of Being). For both Arendt and Nancy, natality and birth are conceptual ways of embracing possibility: either as the unfolding of Being or as the potential for political action and freedom. For black being, I am arguing, such a natality is absent. Paradoxically, we can say that black being is born into death—the emergence of black being is a death sentence, not the domain of action or the unfolding of being. This paradox is the blind spot of postmetaphysical thinking, and it cannot accommodate a being whose emergence is without innate human freedom or being. In other words, the object lacks a substantial narrative of natality in both of these theories; it is just present and used. See Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, and Arendt, *The Human Condition*.
27 I do not have the space to delve into the problem of identity within the continental philosophical tradition, but this “problem” seems, at least in my mind, to reach a standstill concerning blackness. If the great problem of identity is metaphysical unity, or grounded sameness, according to Heidegger and Deleuze, then it seems that black being is a doubling or fracturing that displaces the logic of identity. Black being can never attain adequacy, as self-sameness—it is always being for another. Split between being for another and the form of formlessness, blackness is not identity (which is the error of black identity politics). Our task is to present black existence without the grammar of identity, unity, adequation, and metaphysics. This, perhaps, is an impossible task, but the presentation of the impossible is all one can do with a catachresis. Given this difficulty, we must be weary of appropriating the terms and concepts of metaphysics and ontological imaginations, as tempting as they might seem. Gavin Rae provides an exquisite analysis of the way Heidegger and Deleuze approach the problem of identity (ultimately reformulating the philosophy of becoming as difference or groundlessness). Neither of these strategies account for blackness. Please see his
Ontology in Heidegger and Deleuze: A Comparative Analysis.

28 Ronald Judy, (Dis)Forming the American Canon, 89.
29 Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 110.
30 Fanon describes it as the “vast black abyss”; Black Skin, White Masks, 14.
31 Again, “African-being” here is merely a signifier for a primordial relation that antiblackness destroys. In Fanon’s case he experiences this destruction from Martinique, while Equiano experienced it from Africa. The metaphysical holocaust is global in reach; I use “African being” to describe a variety of geographical specificities that produce blackness.

32 This, of course, is not to say that blacks do not exist, as Fanon intimates, as a phenomenal entity that can be encountered through the senses, but it is to suggest that this phenomenal existence does not equate to an ontology. How to describe this existence outside ontology is the problem of blackness—the problem for the whole of metaphysics.

33 I would also point this criticism to Jean-Paul Sartre’s celebration of nothing in Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology. His existentialism critiques the transcendental ground of human nature and the restricting teleology this ground engenders by arguing that there is nothing (no ultimate ground outside the self); therefore, we can choose, out of this nothingness, the form our lives will take. Ultimately, his existentialism uses this nothingness to place ultimate responsibility for one’s life on the individual (on this subject). Thus a Sartrean existentialism would celebrate nothing/nothingness as the occasion for productive action and transformation. I cannot disagree with this celebration more strongly, since, in my opinion, it assumes a transcendental ontology of a human capable of transforming nothing into a productive something. This is not the case for black being. For black nihilism, nothing restricts human freedom with a terror it attempts to control and project onto black being. Put differently, if nothing for Sartre enables the celebration of agency and choice, it is only because the terror of nothing is first projected onto black bodies in a metaphysical world. The rejoinder that my position is bad faith relies on the very metaphysics (or philosophical anthropology) that destroys the flesh. Put differently, without the flesh, one cannot act authentically or experience radical freedom, since the ground of the human is absent. Sartrean existentialism only applies to the human subject (embodies flesh) in a metaphysical world. This critique carries over into the important work of black existentialism and its reliance on Sartrean ontology. Black nihilism and black existentialism, then, although agreeing on the viciousness of antiblack racism, would part ways as they concern philosophical anthropology, since humanity is not the ground of black being, and this ground is necessary for a celebration of nothing and a rejection of bad faith; see Lewis Gordon’s groundbreaking work Bad Faith and Antibilack Racism (in particular the critique of Deconstruction and the analysis of the living dead), and Sartre’s Being and Nothingness.

34 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 8.
35 Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness,” 749.
36 Spillers, Black, White, and in Color, 206.
37 I must address the inventive work of object-oriented ontology, particularly Graham Harman’s speculative realism. Harman provides a rigorous critique of Kant’s correlationism (as Quentin Meillassoux would describe it in After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency. He suggests that tools have “tool-being,” and this being (or dare I say “essence”) is withdrawn or distorted (allure) in the relationality between objects and human and objects such that we never truly know this being (we never really know a tree), only the distorting presentation of the tool as it appears to us during certain context. The being of the tool “lies beneath the manifest presence of the object,” according to Harman. Thus, we circulate various simulacra or distortions of all objects—and this distortion is what also plagues our encounter with Dasein, since its being also withdraws or is distorted ontically. I would argue, however, that the tool-being and the human being are
differentiated through the work of violence and power. This is to say that even if the black, as tool, has a *being*, that has been distorted or concealed, this being is forever lost, inaccessible, and ultimately inconsequential in the face of antiblack violence. The tool-being will not protect black objects from violent relationality and exploitative use. Antiblackness constitutes a global alluring function: to commence to destroy the being of black objects and to place nothing in the space of that destruction. My argument is simply that object oriented ontology or speculative realism does not acknowledge the violent structuration of objects in relation to humans—even if we reject correlationism. Whatever lies beneath the black body will not provide freedom, escape, or refuge from the metaphysical holocaust; please see Harman’s *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*.

38 Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time*, Division I, 63. In Basic Problems: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964), Heidegger also states that it is the “in-order-to” that determines the “isness” of the equipment. It is utility for the human. “What and how it is an entity, its whatness and howness, is constituted by this in-order-to as such, by its involvement” (293).


41 Wynter also suggests “the nonsupernatural but no less extrahuman ground (in the reoccupied place of traditional ancestors/gods, God, ground) of the answer that the secularizing West would now give to the Heideggerian question as to the who, and the what we are”; in “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom Towards the Human after Man, Its Overrepresentation —An Argument,” 264.

42 Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 208.


45 Beistegui, *Heidegger and the Political*.


47 Distinguished historian Ira Berlin makes a geographical distinction between the upper, middle, and lower South. These distinctions are designed to challenge the conception of the South as a homogenous space. Although I agree these distinctions might allow us to conceptualize different legal, social, and political occurrences, they are immaterial to the question of being. No matter the geographical location or the different strategies of destruction, the metaphysical holocaust is a constant across diverse variables. There is not a space void of antiblack violence; please see Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*.


49 In *But One Race: The Life of Robert Purvis*, Margaret Hope Bacon presents a searing biographical witness. According to Bacon, Purvis’s inherited wealth and lighter skin afforded him the opportunity to spend time thinking through the contradictions of blackness and freedom (e.g., the “irrational logic” of colonization society) and to challenge antiblack injustice. Purvis is one of many prominent leaders who worked tirelessly to address antiblackness.

50 Robert Purvis to Henry C. Wright, August 22, 1842, Weston Papers, Boston Public Library.


CHAPTER 2: OUTLAWING

1 I am using the rather awkward construction (non)relation to signify that the idea of relation is always already infused with metaphysical presumptions (i.e., it presupposes a relation is comprises discrete entities that can be differentiated and brought together within space/time). Since Being is neither an entity nor subordinate to the scientific constraints we place on it (space/time), we cannot properly call the presencing of Being a relation, but for lack of a more sufficient grammar, I will call it a (non)relation to indicate the happening [Ereignis] between Being and being. This, then, is how I interpret Giorgio Agamben’s rereading of Heidegger and Nancy when he suggests, “The being together of being and Being does not have the form of a relation,” in his Homo Sacer, 60.

2 Oren Ben-Dor, Thinking about Law: In Silence with Heidegger, 145.

3 Ben-Dor, Thinking about Law, 150.

4 Ben-Dor, Thinking about Law, 378.

5 Jean-Luc Nancy, The Birth to Presence, 44.

6 Nancy, Birth to Presence, 43 – 44.

7 Nancy, Birth to Presence, 47.
I am using “place” here to indicate the there-ness within which Dasein stands forth and appears by emerging through its concealment. This standing forth requires a place, as Martin Heidegger argued in *Introduction to Metaphysics*: “The place belongs to the thing itself. The various things each have their place. That which becomes is set into this placelike ‘space’ and is set forth” (69). This isn’t the metaphysical-geographical space bound to ordinary modes of appearance, but the inhabitation of becoming. Since black *being* does not become or appear through Being, such a place is absent. Luce Irigaray makes a similar argument with the place-lessness of woman (her proper place is absorbed by man as envelope, used for his existential unfolding), in her rereading of Greek philosophy and Heidegger. Please see her *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.

Jurisdiction, then, determines who has standing before the law and who lacks such standing. Taney considers Scott’s writ erroneous because he lacks the standing jurisdiction bestows. We can also read in this legal concept the essence, or essential unfolding, of law itself, since for Heidegger, in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Being, understood through the Greek *Phusis*, “is the event of standing forth, arising from the concealed and thus enabling the concealed to take its stand for the first time” (16). Furthermore, “This standing-there, this taking and maintaining a *stand* that stands erected high in itself, is what the Greeks understood as Being” (63). What I am suggesting here, by reading Taney’s legal reasoning alongside Heidegger’s understanding of Being, is that the law’s *purpose* is to illumine the human’s emerging through its *standing*. In other words, to have legal standing is to have one’s Being recognized by the law. Taney ultimately argues that blacks lack standing because they lack Being—merchandise never emerges or appears but must remain concealed in the opening, or light, of law.

The belief that the position of blacks was fixed was also advanced by many, but Dr. Josiah Nott probably presented the strongest presentation of this arguments. For him, slavery was a moral obligation; see Paul Finkelman’s “The Significance and Persistence of Proslavery Thought,” 95 – 114.

I think Chief Justice Taney’s use of the term *axiom* is quite revealing of the philosophical agenda he has in mind: not just to establish a set of truths by which an antiblack society must orient itself, but
also that axioms are themselves ontological and the idea is the “ontic translation of ontological axioms. The subject draws on the symbolic resources of its world in order to represent to itself and others the axioms of being-in-the-world that are simultaneously transcendent and immanent, trans-immanent, in relation to this world,” according to Sergei Prozorov. In other words, Taney uses an axiom to express, or symbolize, an ontological truth, but this ontological truth must translate into an idea. I would argue that the symbolization of an antiblack axiomatic is precisely the idea itself. Taney’s opinion is the representation (idea) of something ontological—which is why legal decisions are deceptively ontological; please see Prozorov, Theory of the Political Subject: Void Universalism, vol. 2, Interventions, 29.

31 It is well rehearsed in academic and legal circles that Dred Scott was one of the Supreme Court’s greatest errors. I, however, think that the opinion was the most realistic ruling in an antiblack world. Taney performs a vitally important task here: to unravel the romantic narrative of universal humanism, which captivates the legal imagination.

32 Wilderson, Red, White, and Black, 22 – 23.

33 Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death, 211. Patterson even goes as far to say, “Even when the slave pays, he is really not paying for his freedom. It is usually conceived of as making a gift offering in gratitude for the master’s freely given decision to release him from slavery, however that release is arranged.” This is the extremity of black humanism, and it translates into a disturbing avoidance of the domination within the manumission itself—manumission as a strategy of narcissistic power and control.

34 Alan Nadel, Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon, 13.

35 Agamben, The State of Exception.

36 Nancy, Birth to Presence, 95 – 96.

37 Niklas Luhmann, “Law and Social Theory: Law as a Social System.”


39 Howington, “Property of Special and Peculiar Value,” 312. This split was designed to “balance the rights of the slaves and masters against those of the body politic.” Saidiya V. Hartman brilliantly articulates another duality of being for the captive—the split between chattel object and reasoning criminal. This flexible ontology served the interest of the master as well as the State. Thus, the duality that Howington and Hartman explore is in essence quite similar; see Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America.

40 In 1852, Tennessee attempted to re-enslave free blacks who had not received the consent of the state. “The statute mandated that when a slave was freed without the state’s consent, the county court was to appoint a trustee for the slave. This trustee was tantamount to a master”; see Howington, “Property of Special and Peculiar Value,” 315.


42 Helen Tunnicliff Catterall, ed., Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro, 479.

43 Howington, “Property of Special and Peculiar Value,” 314.

44 Howington, “Property of Special and Peculiar Value,” 315.

45 The term reification has a rich philosophical tradition originating from György Lukacs’s History and Class Consciousness. Lukacs insists that the process of commodity exchange and the commodity fetishism that it produces distorts human praxis so that it becomes something like a second nature. Humans begin to transfer their “thingification” of the commodity and its use value to other humans, the intersubjective experience, and, ultimately, to themselves. Only a true human praxis could reverse this distorting stance, a structurally false praxis. My use of the term borrows the sematic energy of “thingification” and the crude praxis of conceiving of beings as mere means. I do not, however, share Lukacs’s belief in the efficacy of true praxis, nor do I identify the source of antiblackness as the distorting practice of unchecked commodity-fetishism transference. My
conception of reification is not tethered to capitalism because I believe antiblackness is a problem for any economic organization of the social. Reification is more in alignment with Martha Nussbaum’s objectification, but I do not propose an ethical or moral framework within which to situate reification/objectification, since antiblackness renders every ethical and moral framework ineffective. Given this philosophical difficulty, I do not retain fealty to the original intent of the term. I do find it useful, however, for understanding the process of reducing immateriality into material substance. For lack of a better term (since “objectification” entraps me in the subject/object division of metaphysics), I have chosen “reification.” Please see Martha Nussbaum’s Sex and Social Justice, and Axel Honneth’s reformulation of reification through recognition in his “Reification: A Recognition-Theoretical View.”

46 Rebecca Scott and Jean Hébrand, Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation, 3.
47 Agamben, The Signature of All Things: On Method.
48 Carol Wilson, Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America 1780-1865.

CHAPTER 3: SCIENTIFIC HORROR

1 In “What Is Metaphysics,” Martin Heidegger states, “If science is right, then one thing is for certain: science wants to know nothing of no-thing [vom Nichts wissen]. In the end, this is the scientifically strict comprehension of no-thing. We know it in wanting to know nothing about the no-thing”; in Heidegger, Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964), 96. This wanting to know nothing about nothing is the source of scientific knowledge, for all scientific procedures conceal the dreaded desire for nothing. My contention here is that science resolves this tension between refusal and embracing nothing with black being. It uses black being to explore the metaphysical mysteries of nothing by projecting the dread onto black bodies. This projection provides an ideal site of scientific disavowal.


3 Evelynn Hammonds conceptualizes black holes in relation to black female sexuality and absent-presence (or silence). She suggests that a black hole brings two problematics to the fore: detection and compositional knowledge (i.e., “What is it like inside a black hole?”). The first is answered by attentiveness to distortion (the distorting impact of a black hole on two stars, for example) and the second by geometry, a geometry still yet to be formulated by mathematical/ scientific thinking. I find this analysis exceptionally generative in understanding the relation between blackness and nothing. How do we detect and understand the composition of nothing? These two questions pose a certain horror for science, given their unanswerability. Whereas black holes might be rendered comprehensible by positing being as a condition of studying them (i.e., detection and composition), black as nothing (i.e., formlessness) cannot rely on the ontological ground of being, so we reach a limit with the two procedures Hammonds lays out; please see Hammonds, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” in African American Literary Theory: A Reader, 492 – 93.

4 W. T. Wragg, “The Remarkable Case of Mental Alienation,” 34, 16.

5 Please see Heidegger’s Being and Time on the distinction between perishing, demise, and death. I have been arguing that black being can lay no claim to ontological grounds, and this includes the existential meaning of death. Thus, within this ontometaphysical schema, Joe would simply perish—much like any biological organism. Only the human experiences authentic death or inauthentic
dying. Black being cannot die, since this death assumes an inauthentic relation to being that can be corrected (through anxiety).


7 Please see Eric Cazdyn’s *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness*.


10 In “What Is Metaphysics?,” Heidegger ruminates on the essence of science: “Science wants to know nothing of ‘no-thing.’ But even so it is nonetheless certain that, when it attempts to talk about its own essence [Wesen], it calls on ‘no-thing’ for help. It claims for its own what it has rejected. What sort of conflicted essence unveils itself here?” (33). The black body facilitates the unveiling, or working through, of this conflict for science.


14 Please see Stuart Elden’s remarkable study on Heidegger’s critique of calculative thinking in *Speaking against Number: Heidegger, Language and Politics of Calculation* (especially the chapter “Taking the Measure of the Political”).

15 Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*. Ricardo L. Nirenberg and David Nirenberg also trace the relation between the Heideggerian critique and Badiou’s departure and supplement of this critique; please see their “Badiou’s Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology,” 585 – 614. Although set theory does not provide an ontological framework within which to ground black being (is there a pure procedure to understand that straddling of nothing and infinity?), his critique of the violence performs is essential to understanding the “mathematics of the unliving.”

16 Patricia Cline Cohen, *A Calculating People: The Spread of Numeracy in Early America*.

17 George Yancy, *Look, a White!: Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*.


19 This understanding departs from aspects of abolition historiography that view abolition as a radical activity, one bringing the questions of labor and black humanity to the fore. For an example of this understanding of abolition, please see Manisha Sinha’s *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition*. Steven Best and Saidiya Hartman argue in “Fugitive Justice” that abolition was “incomplete,” and I understand the incompleteness of the enterprise as the inability to resolve the ontological crisis of black being. It is antiblackness that needs abolition, and a change in legal status does not change ontological death; please see Jared Sexton’s “Don’t Call It a Comeback: Racial Slavery Is Not Yet Abolished.”

20 I might also add the Negro Question, or “Nigger Question,” as Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill call it (Carlyle and Mill, *The Nigger Question and the Negro Question*), remains even after emancipation—the ontological question of Negro Humanity is never really resolved (our proper metaphysical question). Thus a relentlessly antiblack study such as *Some Phases of the Negro Question*, penned by Charles Wesley Melick, pursues this question with the understanding that it isn’t yet resolved in the twenty-first century.

21 Allen Yarema documents the negrophobia that necessitated the emergence of the colonization movement. The unwillingness of Americans to treat blacks as equal (or human), even when possessing limited rights, convinced many that colonization was the only option for blacks. Black freedom remained an ideal that only relocation could realize, but even relocation failed to provide freedom from antiblackness. African settlements were often not acknowledged as serious international actors, and those relocating faced very dangerous conditions, such as disease; see Yarema’s *American Colonization Society: An Avenue to Freedom*?
Please see Grant “Sylvester” Walker, *A Conspiracy to Colonize 19th Century United States Free Blacks in Africa by the American Colonization Society*.


Rush actually conducted his own experiments on Moss on July 27, 1796. He used the results of this experiment as the basis for his presentation to the American Philosophical Society entitled, “On the Color of the Negroes.” He would expand this into “Observations.” See Katy L. Chiles’s *Transformable Race: Surprising Metamorphoses in the Literature of Early America*, 196. Moss’s body, then, is precisely a living laboratory—biologically functional but ontologically dead—and Rush builds an entire career from the open vulnerability of black bodies to the scientific gaze. For could Moss refuse Rush’s experiments? His body belonged to a public trust of prurient knowledge accumulation for science.


Samuel Cartwright even proffers “Cholera of the mind” to explain the splintering of the mind unique to blacks diagnosed with cholera—the symptoms are “dreams, prophecies, or any idle thing.” The choleric black mind is not a mind at all, but a black psyche within which Cartwright unloads antiblack reasoning and beliefs. Please see Katherine Bankole’s *Slavery and Medicine: Enslavement and Medical Practices in Antebellum Louisiana* for Cartwright’s discourse on blackness and cholera.

J. Kameron Carter, “Christian Atheism: The Only Response Worth Its Salt to the Zimmerman Verdict.”

For a reading of the Hamitic myth as an antiblack Christian fantasy and a retooling of this fantasy by black Christians, see Sylvester Johnson’s *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God*.

One of the most fervent rejoinders to Cartwright came from a black physician, Dr. James McCune Smith. He worked with orphans in New York and used his findings to make general claims about the misuse of science to make antiblack claims. He asserted that “he hoped much from science,” but this humanistic hope—that science could operate objectively for the improvement of all beings—remained unrealized, a tortuous fantasy. Please see Gretchen Long’s *Doctoring Freedom: The Politics of African American Medical Care in Slavery and Emancipation*, for more analysis on Dr. Smith’s scientific desires.


Albert Deutsch, “The First U.S. Census of the Insane (1840) and Its Uses as Pro-Slavery Propaganda,” 471.


Deutsch, “First U.S. Census of the Insane (1840),” 471.
CHAPTER 4: CATACHRESTIC FANTASIES

1 In Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness, Nicole Fleetwood understands the black body as troubling scopic regimes through performativity. The idea of troubling, then, indicates a certain resistance to antiblackness through the visual. I agree that the black body troubles but part ways with Fleetwood’s iteration of resistance and agency. In other words, troubling does not yield ontological or transformative results—rather, it translates into an incorrigibility that antiblack violence works to subdue. Michael Chaney also offers a reading of the visual and the “alternate field of vision” fugitivity engenders in Fugitive Vision: Slave Image and Black Identity in Antebellum Narrative.

2 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Outside in the Teaching Machine, 127.


4 Ronald Judy, (Dis)forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular, 107.


6 Dirtiness is a metaphysical sign, one designed to configure white as morally pure and blackness as evil—a moral abyss. Douglas Sharp avers antiblackness, “needs ‘dirty’ persons to alleviate and clarify [its] own sense of moral ambiguity; [it] needs a baseline in relation to which [it] can measure moral righteousness and purity”; see Sharp, No Partiality: The Idolatry of Race and the New
Jacques Lacan reinterprets Heidegger’s fable of the vase to argue that the nothing of the vase (the empty space) provides the vase with its existence. The vase, then, is a material contour around nothing. According to Lacan, “This nothing in particular that characterizes it in its signifying function is that which in its incarnated form characterizes the vase as such. It creates the void and thereby introduces the possibility of filling it”; Lacan, Seminar VII in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959 – 1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, 120.

It is also important to note that nothing also terrorizes the Lacanian subject with the threat of aphanisis (the disintegration of the symbolic covering over of this nothing). In fantasies of the body in bits and pieces and other ruptures of the real, the subject tries its best to avoid this nothing at the core of its being. Through repression and disavowal, the subject tries to eliminate nothing, but is, of course, unsuccessful. I use this as a heuristic frame for understanding the way the human being hates (and is fascinated by) this nothing and projects this hatred onto black being; see Lacan, “Some Reflections on the Ego,” in *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 140.

Toni Morrison also suggests that the Negro is a plaything for the literary imagination, a putative object for the human; see her *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).


See Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*.


Please see Vicky Lebeau’s “Psycho-Politics: Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks,” in *Psycho-Politics and Cultural Desires*, for an elaboration on Fanon’s real fantasy contra Freudian/Lacanian understandings of it.


In “Decline and Fall: Ocularcentrism in Heidegger’s Reading of the History of Metaphysics,” David Michael Levin argues that Heidegger challenged the ocularcentrism, which defines modernity’s rationality, with his metaphors of vision and seeing—as a challenge to metaphysics. His seeing is not predicated merely on the eyes, but with a thinking anew. I agree with Levin’s insightful reading and would suggest that the seeing and not seeing of black being does not end with the eyes, but with antiblack thinking, which broaches other senses, as well.

Illustrated journalism had become a popular mode of leisurely entertainment and political education by 1857. Through the use of vivid illustrations, sketches, and eventually photography, this medium engaged in national debates and concerns. According to historian William Fletcher Thompson Jr., in *The Image of War: The Pictorial Reporting of the American Civil War*, “Recurring crisis in national affairs in the decade preceding the [civil] war established the market for news illustrations. Publishers, artists, and engravers solved the necessary technological problems of mass-printing woodcut engravings of hand-drawn illustrations. By such methods it was possible to print pictures within two or three weeks of the events portrayed—a ‘marvel of the times’ in comparison to earlier standards.” These technological advances provided artists with the means to portray politically salient issues efficiently.

Much as the minstrel shows constructed racial identity through theatrical production, illustrated journalism constructed racial identity through print. Whereas the minstrel show was often confined
to a certain space, owing to the physical demands of the stage, illustrated journalism was not limited by the constraints of a physical stage and could circulate images widely and quickly. In *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America*, Joshua Brown discusses the lexicography of these images: “They were intended for immediate social use, conveying to the American reading public the people, places, and events that composed the news of the day” (6). Part of the “social use,” I argue, is an ontological one—a way of playing with nothing.


22 Following Jacques Derrida’s *Disseminations*, we could also suggest that what the image is articulating is black being as spacing—the gap in between established properties. For Derrida, this spacing constitutes nothing itself. Spacing ruptures the metaphysics of presence and being, since it is a formlessness that preconditions the structure itself (grammar, language, semiotics). In this way, emancipation is a spacing of blackness. This spacing is the nothing of metaphysics.


24 The in-between status of the speaking ape problematizes the humanistic presuppositions of the communicative project in Jürgen Habermas’s work. The illustrators show us that perhaps the joke is on the belief in the universality of grammatical and syntactical rationality; not everyone could participate in the repository of grammatical conventions and reasoning. Thus, there is a fundamental exclusion at the very heart of communicative rationality that African American history exposes; please see Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Even if modernity’s project is unfinished (as is metaphysics’), its evolution will not bridge the gap between emancipation and freedom for black being.

25 Judy, *Dis*Forming the American *Canon*.


27 I am thinking here of postmetaphysical works such as Agamben’s *The Open: Man and Animal*, which deconstructs the metaphysics of the binary man/animal to understand something like being or existence. The deconstruction is the site of tremendous violence for black being—it is not productive.


29 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity*. He reads the destructive strategies of antiblackness through Levinas’s critique of ontology—ontology as war. I agree with both Torres and Levinas that ontology is a pugnacious enterprise, but I don’t think that ethics is any less violent. In fact, ethics is probably more violent, since it disavows the antiblack violence that sustains it. In other words, antiblackness enables both ontology and ethics. Neither discourse is clean.


32 For a diacritical engagement with blackness and the question of value in its various iterations, please see Lindon Barrett’s *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*. In particular, Barrett argues that value is a social formation, and this formation is always already cut by race. I would agree with Barrett, but would only add that the social formation is antiblackness, such that value is produced through antiblack axiology.

33 I would also agree, along with Heidegger, that technology enables enframing. Technology reveals the essence (essential unfolding) of the human, the revelation that is the unfolding of being. Black weapons facilitate human enframing by revealing the nothing at the core of the human. But unlike Heidegger, this enframing is not a source of freedom or potential; it is a vicious aspect of antiblackness. Blacks are used for the ontological evolution of the human; see Martin Heidegger’s
The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, 287.

34 See Slavoj Žižek’s *The Plague of Fantasies* for his discussion of interpassivity. For him, interpassivity is a process of transference in which the subject projects enjoyment onto the object—and the object carries out the projected enjoyment the subject passively, vicariously enjoys. The illustrations are forms of interpassive enjoyment, an enjoyment with the terror of nothing. The subject projects this terror onto black bodies so that one can enjoy passively from a distance. Žižek notes that this may also produce aggression if the object disrupts the transference. We might say that freedom dreams are a form of disruption that antiblackness checks with extreme aggression (111 – 13).

35 Lewis R. Gordon, “Through the Hellish Zone of Nonbeing: Thinking through Fanon, Disaster, and the Damned of the Earth,” 11.

36 Heidegger makes a distinction between perishment, demise, and death in *Being and Time*. Dasein does not perish. Lower forms of life perish where expiration does not have significance or meaning for being. Dasein experiences either authentic death (being-toward-death) or inauthentic demise (being at an end). In other words, death is bound up with a relation to Being. Since I have argued that this is not an issue for black equipment, perishment is closer to what happens to black weapons.

37 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*.

38 Darieck Scott also argues for the agential potential of subjection and fantasy in his *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*. Amber Jamilla Musser suggests that masochism as a set of relations, converging on the site of freedom and agency, in *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*. Both Scott and Musser suggest that masochism can serve as a strategy or tactic of resistance to domination—by undermining the terms of subjection and pleasure. I, however, do not find agency within masochism—pleasure is no more a strategy against antiblackness than voting or metaphysical romance. Pleasure reaches its limit when the body is literally destroyed, and pleasure in destruction just produces a dead black body. Antiblackness is not moved by black death or deterred through black pleasure.


43 Monica L. Miller reads resistance and disruption in the look: “Highlighting the foreignness of the gaze upon him, Mr. Augustus points out here a real change in the history of self-fashion. Whereas Clay’s earlier Philadelphia series had been voyeuristic—one in which the viewer, presumably white, ridicules the black pretensions to high society by eavesdropping on blacks’ social follies and foibles—this print is confrontational. Mr. Augustus’s ‘look’ at the viewer, through the monocle, magnifies concern about the viewer’s own sense of self and forces a comparison of this self with that of the nattily clad black man.” I would argue, however, that the look is rendered powerless because it is fraudulent—only the eyes of the white man matter in an antiblack world. The confrontation, then, is between the white subject and nothing; this is what the image stages—not black resistance; please see Miller’s *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*, 105.

44 In *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century*, Jasmine Cobb argues persuasively that the black woman in the image is presented as both ignorant and buffoonish. Her inquiry is designed to present her as blithely unaware of her surroundings and the deadly white gaze. The problem of gender is one that compounds the issue of nihilism, since it requires us to think about the way gender is the structure through which black as nothing is represented. I would argue, however, that gender is precisely one form of vicious humor, since blacks do not have the privilege of gender intelligibility in an antiblack society. In other words, the free black woman
pretends to be a woman (as she is pretending to be a human). This pretending was a source of great comedy for white spectators. Thus, her feminine comportment and stylish dress are props for comedy—nothing wrapping itself up in human gender.

45 Gordon, “Through the Hellish Zone of Nonbeing,” 3.

46 We might answer Spivak’s provocative query “Can the Subaltern Speak?, in Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader by saying that it doesn’t matter whether black being can speak or be heard—given that language and discourse will not end the metaphysical holocaust. So even if black being can speak, write, and be heard, onticidal destruction will continue. The black nihilist must write, speak, and broach the metaphysical question to illumine the process of destruction. To say that the enterprise is meaningless is only potent if such a thing as meaning can be recuperated for black being. Meaning is lost along with the flesh. This is the crux of black suffering in an antiblack world.

47 Ivy Wilson, Specters of Democracy: Blackness and the Aesthetics of Politics in the Antebellum U.S. Wilson argues that political aesthetics constitutes a web of practices engendering subversion and inversion. I definitely understand that art provides a vehicle for expressivity, but an artistic practice is unable to resolve an ontological issue. In Specters of Democracy, the ontological problem of blackness is neglected, and it proceeds as if the ontological ground of black humanity is self-evident. It is this very self-evidence that black nihilism seeks to unravel. In other words, political aesthetics never broaches the ontological problematic, even if it forges a sense of belonging or collective affirmation.

48 Marriott, Haunted Life, 7.

CODA: ADIEU TO THE HUMAN


3 Martin Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, 40.

4 Ashon T. Crawley, Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility.