



Calvin L. Warren

ONTOLOGICAL TERROR

*Blackness, Nihilism,
and Emancipation*

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BLACKNESS, NIHILISM, AND EMANCIPATION

TERROR

Calvin L. Warren

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DEDICATED TO

Fannie Warren, Lurene Brunson, and Jane Elven

(my three mothers)

For their love, patience, and unending support

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INTRODUCTION

THE FREE BLACK ~~IS~~ NOTHING

When we got about half way to St. Michael's, while the constables having us in charge were looking ahead, Henry inquired of me what he should do with his pass. I told him to eat it with his biscuit, and own nothing; and we passed the word around, "Own nothing" and "Own nothing!" said we all.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

OWNING NOTHING

A deep abyss, or a *terrifying question*, engenders the declaration "Black Lives Matter." The declaration, in fact, conceals this question even as it purports to have answered it resolutely. "Black Lives Matter," then, carries a certain terror in its dissemination, a terror we dare to approach with uncertainty, urgency, and exhaustion. This question pertains to the "metaphysical infrastructure," as Nahum Chandler might call it, that conditions our world and our thinking about the world. "Black Lives Matter" is an important declaration, not just because it foregrounds the question of unbearable brutality, but also because it performs philosophical labor—it *compels* us to face the terrifying question, despite our desire to look away. The declaration presents a difficult syntax or an accretion of tensions and ambiguities within its organization: can blacks have life? What would such life *mean* within an antiblack world? What axiological measurement determines the mattering of the life in question? Does the assembly of these terms shatter philosophical coherence or what metaphysical infrastructure provides stability, coherence, and intelligibility for the declara-

tion? These questions of value, meaning, stability, and intelligibility lead us to the terror of the declaration, the question it conceals but engages: what *ontological* ground provides the occasion for the declaration? Can such ground be assumed, and if not, is the declaration even possible without it? “Black Lives Matter” *assumes* ontological ground, which propels the deployment of its terms and sustains them throughout the treacheries of antiblack epistemologies. Put differently, the human *being* provides an anchor for the declaration, and since the *being* of the human is invaluable, then black life *must* also matter, if the black is a human (the declaration anchors mattering in the human’s *Being*). But we reach a point of terror with this syllogistic reasoning. One must take a step backward and ask the fundamental question: is the black, in fact, a human *being*? Or can black(ness) ground itself in the *being* of the human? If it cannot, then on what bases can we assert the mattering of black existence? If it can, then why would the phrase need to be repeated and recited incessantly? Do the affirmative declaration and its insistence undermine this very ontological ground? The statement declares, then, *too soon*—a declaration that is really an unanswered (or unanswerable) question. We must trace this question and declaration back to its philosophical roots: the Negro Question.¹

This question reemerges within a world of antiblack brutality, a world in which black torture, dismemberment, fatality, and fracturing are routinized and ritualized—a *global*, sadistic pleasure principle. I was invited to meditate on this globalized sadism in the context of Michael Brown’s murder and the police state. The invitation filled me with dread as I anticipated a festival of humanism in which presenters would share solutions to the problem of antiblackness (if they even acknowledged antiblackness) and inundate the audience with “yes we can!” rhetoric and unbounded optimism. I decided to participate, despite this dread, once students began asking me deep questions, questions that also filled them with dread and confusion. I, of course, was correct about my misgivings. I listened to one speaker after the next describe a bright future, where black life is valued and blacks are respected as humans—if we *just* keep fighting, they said, “we’re almost there!” A political scientist introduced statistics and graphs laying out voting patterns and districts; he argued that blacks just did not realize how much power they had (an unfortunate ignorance, I guess). If they just collectively voted they could change antiblack police practices and make this world a better place. The audience clapped enthusiasti-

cally; I remained silent. Next, a professor of law implored the audience to keep fighting for legal change because the law is a powerful weapon for ending discrimination and restoring justice. We just needed to return to the universal principles that founded our Constitution, “liberty, equality, and justice!” (I thought about the exception clause in the Thirteenth Amendment, the Three-Fifths Compromise, and the way the sharecropping system exploited the Fourteenth Amendment in order to reenslave through contract. I continued to sit in silence.) The audience shouted and applauded. I felt a pit in my stomach because I knew what I had to do; it was my time to step up to the podium—it was my *nihilistic responsibility*. I told the audience there was no solution to the problem of antiblackness; it will continue without end, as long as the world exists. Furthermore, all the solutions presented rely on antiblack instruments to address antiblackness, a vicious and tortuous cycle that will only produce more pain and disappointment. I also said that humanist *affect* (the good feeling we get from hopeful solutions) will not translate into freedom, justice, recognition, or resolution. It merely provides temporary reprieve from the fact that blacks are not safe in an antiblack world, a fact that can become overwhelming. The form of antiblackness might alter, but antiblackness itself will remain a constant—despite the power of our imagination and political yearnings. I continued this nihilistic analysis of the situation until I heard complete silence.

A woman stood up after my presentation and shouted, “How dare you tell this to our youth! That is so very negative! Of course we can change things; we have power, and we are free.” Her voice began to increase in intensity. I waited for her to finish and asked her, “Then tell us how to end police brutality and the slaughter of the youth you want to protect from my nihilism.” “If these solutions are so credible, why have they consistently failed? Are we awaiting for some novel, extraordinary solution—one no one had ever imagined—to end antiblack violence and misery?” Silence. “In what manner will this ‘power’ deliver us from antiblackness?” How long must we *insist* on a humanity that is not recognized—an insistence that humiliates in its inefficacy? “If we are progressing, why are black youth being slaughtered at staggering rates in the twenty-first century—if we are, indeed, humans just like everyone else?” People began to respond that things are getting better, despite the increasing death toll, the unchecked power of the police state, the lack of conviction rates for

police murdering blacks, the prison industrial complex and the modern reenslavement of an entire generation, the unbelievable black infant mortality rate, the lack of jobs for black youth and debilitating poverty. “This is *better*?” I asked. “At least we are not slaves!” someone shouted. I asked them to read the Thirteenth Amendment closely. But the intensity of the dialogic exchange taught me that *affect* runs both ways: it is not just that solutions make us feel good because we feel powerful/hopeful, but that pressing the ontological question presents *terror*—the terror that ontological security is gone, the terror that ethical claims no longer have an anchor, and the terror of inhabiting existence outside the precincts of humanity and its humanism. *Ontological Terror* engages this question and the forms of terror it produces.²

The event also put the metaphysical infrastructure into perspective for me. Two philosophical forces were colluding (and at times conflicting) to orient the solutions proposed and the audiences’ responses, and both presented “free black” as a concept with meaning: black humanism and postmetaphysics. I use these two terms to docket a certain posture toward metaphysics—and the ontological ground metaphysics offers. Black humanism enters into romance with metaphysics. It appropriates schematization, calculation, technology, probability, and universality—all the instruments of metaphysical thinking—to make epistemological, ethical, and ontological claims concerning blackness and freedom. Freedom is possible, then, because metaphysics provides it with ontology; from there, all sorts of solutions, policies, and practices emerge to address antiblackness. Scientific reasoning, technological innovation, and legality are tools black humanists use to quantify suffering, measure progress, proffer universal narratives of humanity, and reason with antiblack institutions. All problems have solutions for black humanists, and their task is to uncover the solution the problem conceals, as this uncovering equates to an eradication of the problem. Black humanism relies on an eclectic approach to antiblackness—Hegelian synthesis, Kantian rationalism, Platonic universals/idealism, Cartesian representation, and empiricism. In short, black humanists lay claim to the *being* of the human (and the human’s freedom) through metaphysical thinking and instruments.

Postmetaphysics, in contrast, attempts the surmounting or twisting [*verwunden*] of the ground and logic of metaphysics.³ It insists that metaphysics reproduces pain and misery and restricts human freedom. Rep-

resenting the human as an object of scientific thinking (e.g., biology, economics, law) destroys the spontaneity and uniqueness of the human—things that make the human special. The *ground*, then, upon which metaphysics relies is problematic, and this ground must be destroyed (i.e., twisted) and deconstructed (i.e., displaced) to free the human. Postmetaphysics would advocate for a self-consumption of this ground through hermeneutical strategies, unending deconstructions, and forms of plurality (such as hermeneutic nihilism). The *post* is rather a misnomer, if we think of *post* as an overcoming [*überwunden*]; the postmetaphysician will never overcome metaphysics. A residue will *always* remain, but the postmetaphysician hopes to reduce this metaphysical residue to render it inoperative. The postmetaphysician understands antiblackness as a problem of metaphysics, especially the way scientific thinking has classified being along racial difference and biology. The task of the postmetaphysical project is to free blacks from the misery metaphysics produces by undermining its ground. Hermeneutical strategies, which contest ultimate foundations, would question the ground of race (racial metaphysics) and its claim to universal truth.

Black humanism and postmetaphysics, however, leave the question of being unattended as it concerns black(ness). Both assume being is applicable and operative—black humanism relies on metaphysical being and postmetaphysics relies on multiple interpretations or manifestations of being. In other words, the human's *being* grounds both philosophical perspectives. Although postmetaphysics allows for a capacious understanding of the human and Being, it still posits being *universally* as it concerns freedom; no entity is without it, even if it manifests differently, or as difference, if we follow Deleuze. This is to suggest that both discourses proceed as if the *question* of being has been settled and that we no longer need to return to it—the question, indeed, has been elided in critical discourses concerning blackness. *Ontological Terror* seeks to put the question back in its proper place: at the *center* of any discourse about Being.

Ontological Terror meditates on this (non)relation between blackness and Being by arguing that black ~~being~~ incarnates metaphysical nothing, the terror of metaphysics, in an antiblack world. Blacks, then, have function but not Being—the function of black(ness) is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing). Being claims function as its property (all functions rely on Being, according to this logic, for philosophical pre-

sentation), but the aim of black nihilism is to expose the unbridgeable rift between Being and function for blackness. The puzzle of blackness, then, is that it functions in an antiblack world without being—much like “nothing” functions philosophically without our metaphysical understanding of being, an extraordinary mystery. Put differently, metaphysics is obsessed with both blackness and nothing, and the two become synonyms for that which ruptures metaphysical organization and form. The Negro ~~is~~ black because the Negro must assume the function of nothing in a metaphysical world. The world needs this labor. This obsession, however, also transforms into hatred, since nothing is incorrigible—it shatters ontological ground and security. Nothing terrifies metaphysics, and metaphysics attempts to dominate it by turning nothing into an object of knowledge, something it can dominate, analyze, calculate, and schematize. When I speak of function, I mean the projection of nothing’s terror onto black(ness) as a strategy of metaphysics’ will to power. How, then, does metaphysics dominate nothing? By objectifying nothing through the black Negro.

In this analysis, metaphysics can *never* provide freedom or humanity for blacks, since it is the objectification, domination, and extermination of blacks that keep the metaphysical world intact. Metaphysics uses blacks to maintain a sense of security and to sustain the fantasy of triumph—the triumph over the nothing that limits human freedom. Without blacks, I argue, nothing’s terror debilitates metaphysical procedures, epistemologies, boundaries, and institutions. Black freedom, then, would constitute a form of *world destruction*, and this is precisely why humanism has failed to accomplish its romantic goals of equality, justice, and recognition. In short, black humanism has neglected the relationship between black(ness) and nothing in its yearning for belonging, acceptance, and freedom. The Negro was *invented* to fulfill this function for metaphysics, and the humanist dream of transforming invention into human *being* is continually deferred (because it is impossible). *Ontological Terror* challenges the claim that blacks are human and can ground existence in the same being of the human. I argue that blacks are introduced into the metaphysical world as available equipment in human form.

METAPHYSICS, HEIDEGGER, AND DESTRUKTION

Black thinking, then, must return to the question of Being and the relation between this question and the antiblack violence sustaining the world. It is my contention that black thinking is given a tremendous task: to approach the ontological abyss and the metaphysical violence sustaining the world. *Ontological Terror* suggests that black thinking cannot be overcome—we will never reach the end of black thinking or its culmination, unlike the end of philosophy describing postmetaphysical enterprises.⁴ In other words, postmetaphysics has broached the question of being and has commenced the destruction [*Destruktion*] of the metaphysical infrastructure, which systemically forgets being. Postmetaphysics, then, is a project of remnants, as Santiago Zabala suggests. After we have used hermeneutics, deconstruction, rhizomes, and mathematical sets to devastate metaphysics, we are left with ontological rubble—a trace of metaphysics and a reconstructed being. Postmetaphysics, then, must ask, “How is it going with Being?” Or what is the state of Being in this contemporary moment, and how does the world remain open to Being’s unfolding and happening (as well as its withdrawal and abandoning of *Dasein*)? “How is it going with Being?” is the fundamental question of our era, according to postmetaphysics; only the twisting and severe rearranging [*verwunden*] of metaphysics can usher this question into the world.

Both metaphysics and postmetaphysics, however, have forgotten the Negro, just as they have forgotten Being—*to remember Being one must also remember the Negro*. The Negro Question and the Question of Being are intertwined. Postmetaphysical enterprises reach a limit in destruction, since it is the Negro that sustains metaphysics and enables the forgetting of Being (i.e., metaphysics can forget Being because it *uses* the Negro to project nothing’s terror and forget Being). In a sense, the global use of the Negro fulfills the ontological function of forgetting Being’s terror, majesty, and incorrigibility. The consequence of this is that as long as postmetaphysical enterprises leave the Negro unattended in their thinking, it inadvertently sustains metaphysical pain and violence. *This*, I argue, is why we will *never* overcome [*überwunden*] metaphysics because the world cannot overcome the Negro—the world needs the Negro, even as the world despises it.

This is, of course, a Heideggerian approach to the thinking of Being and Nothing. More than any other philosopher, Heidegger pursued meta-

physical violence and the question of Being relentlessly, and for this reason I find his philosophy indispensable and necessary. *Ontological Terror* thinks with and against Heidegger, since I believe Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics can assist black studies in the tremendous task of *thinking* Being and blackness, as Grant Farred has suggested.⁵ Heidegger's *Destruktion* covers a wide range of philosophical issues, and it is not my objective to address all of these complexities; my interest is the relation between Heidegger's critique of metaphysical violence, available equipment, and the task of remembering as it concerns blackness. What I hope to broach in this book, with all the aporias such as broaching encounters, is that the Negro is the missing element in Heidegger's thinking (as well as in that of those postmetaphysicians indebted to Heidegger, such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Gianni Vattimo). If, as we learn in *Being and Time*, Dasein uses tools to experience its thrownness in the world (establishing its facticity) and to develop its unique project oriented toward the future (projectionality), the Negro—as commodity, object, slave, putative backdrop, prisoner, refugee, and corpse—is the *quintessential* tool Dasein uses. The *use* of the Negro metaphysically and ontologically, as a tool, is what *black* thinking is tasked with pursuing. Thus, black thinking (and postmetaphysics) must ask the unasked question “How is it going with black *being*?” Without broaching this question, all forms of destruction are just reconstitutions, since the world continues to use the Negro (as black and nothing) to forget Being and the sadistic pleasure of this forgetfulness.

I shared this argument with a good friend at a conference, and he politely whispered to me, “You know Heidegger was sympathetic to Nazism, don’t you?” I immediately whispered back, “Even more reason for black studies to read and engage him!” Heidegger might well be the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century, since the question of Being resides at the crux of every philosophical enterprise, and he raised this question relentlessly. For me, this means that we cannot escape Heidegger; his *Destruktion* of Being has left its trace on all our thinking—whether we admit it or not. We cannot escape Heidegger because we cannot escape the question of Being. If the trace of Heidegger has left an indelible impression, despite the attempts to purge him/his thought, contemporary thinking still bears the abhorrent, the unforgivable, the disaster, the devastation. The *question*, then, is not just whether Heidegger was

a Nazi (or antiblack for my purposes), but what his critique of metaphysics can teach us about systemic violence and devastation.⁶ Turning a blind eye to Heidegger will not resolve anything, although *affect* might make us feel ethically enlightened. Confronting/engaging Heidegger, I argue, helps us understand the relation between black suffering and metaphysics, slavery and objectification, antiblackness and forgetfulness, thinking and remembering. (*Heidegger's philosophy, in many ways, can be read as an allegory of antiblackness and black suffering—the metaphysical violence of the transatlantic slave trade.*)⁷ To broach the insatiable question “Why are blacks continually injured, degraded, pulverized, and killed?” would require, then, an understanding of metaphysical violence and pain—since black suffering is metaphysical violence, the violence of schematization, objectification, and calculative thinking Heidegger spent his entire professional career exposing. Perhaps Heidegger was *really* talking about black(ness) and black suffering all along.

BLACK NIHILISM AND ANTIBLACKNESS

A mentor once asked me a terrifying question: why are blacks *hated* all over the world? Stunned, I remained silent, but the question remained with me. This book, in many ways, is a return to my mentor’s question, a question that might lack any sufficient answer, but a question that must be presented nonetheless. We can call this hatred *antiblackness*: an accretion of practices, knowledge systems, and institutions designed to impose nothing onto blackness and the unending domination/eradication of black presence *as* nothing incarnated. Put differently, antiblackness *is* anti-nothing. What is hated about blacks is this nothing, the ontological terror, they must embody for the metaphysical world. Every lynching, castration, rape, shooting, and murder of blacks is an engagement with this nothing and the fantasy that nothing can be dominated once and for all. Therefore, unlike Heidegger, nothing is not a cause for celebration in my analysis; it is the *source* of terror, violence, and domination for blacks. Heideggerian anxiety transforms into antiblack violence when Dasein flees the anxiety nothing stimulates and projects it as terror onto blacks. The unfolding of Being for Dasein, through the aperture of nothing, is predicated on the imposition of nothing’s terror onto blacks. This is why,

I argue, the world *needs* blacks, even as it tries to eliminate them (this is the tension between necessity and hatred).

Ontological Terror insists, then, that Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*, for example, be read to understand the antiblack strategies the world employs to avoid nothing (as Heidegger says, "The world wants to know nothing of nothing") and its terror—how Dasein deals with its "own oppression by its own nothingness," as Oren Ben-Dor might call it.⁸ Dasein's freedom is contingent on avoiding this nothing metaphysically—even though Heidegger would insist that nothing provides the opening for a new thinking about Being. Thus, calculative thinking, as I will argue in chapter 3, is a strategy for imposing nothing onto blacks. In understanding the particular way metaphysics oppresses, we get a better understanding of antiblackness *as* metaphysics. Antiblackness provides the instruments and framework for binary thinking, the thinking of being as presence (e.g., the obsession with physicality and skin complexion), the objectification of Being (one only needs to think of slave ledgers as the extremity of Heidegger's metaphysical nightmare, for example), and technocratic oppression (e.g., racial surveillance, police warfare equipment). The aim of postmetaphysicians, then, is to *weaken* metaphysics; this is the nihilistic strategy of the enterprise—to first weaken philosophy and its rigid foundations. Nihilism is important because it undermines the metaphysics, which sustains extreme forms of violence and destruction. But it reaches its limit when antiblackness is left unchecked.

The Italian nihilist Gianni Vattimo has revived and developed the philosophical tradition of nihilism in gravid ways that speak to contemporary threats of annihilation and destruction. His project is important because it permutes the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and in doing so, it not only offers an important critique of modernity but also puts this critique in the service of a politico-philosophical imagination—an imagination that conceives of the weakening of metaphysical Being (nihilism) as the solution to the rationalization and fracturing of humanity (the source of modern suffering or pain). In short, this project attempts to restore dignity, individuality, and freedom to society by remembering Being (proper Being, not metaphysical Being) and allowing for the necessary contextualization and historicization of Being as event.

In *The End of Modernity* (1988) and *Nihilism and Emancipation* (2004), Vattimo reads Heidegger's destruction of ontology as a philosophical com-

plement to Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God. Both Nietzsche and Heidegger offer trenchant critiques of metaphysics, and by reading them together, he fills in certain gaps—in particular, the relationship between metaphysics and social rationalization, foundations and ontology, and sociological philosophy and thinking itself. We can understand both Vattimo's and Heidegger's projects as the attempt to capture the relationship between what we might call *metaphysical Being* (fraudulent Being as object) and *Being* (in its proper contextualized sense). This relationship, indeed, has been particularly violent and has produced various forms of suffering. This suffering is the essence of metaphysics, or what Vattimo would call "pain," and it is sustained through the will to power, violence (e.g., physical, psychic, spiritual, and philosophical), and the destruction of liberty. The metaphysical tradition has reduced *Being* (an event that structures historical reality and possibility itself) to an object, and this objectification of *Being* is accomplished through the instruments of science and schematization. The result of this process is that *Being* is forgotten; the grand aperture that has provided the condition for relationality for many epochs is now reified as a static presence, a presence to be possessed and analyzed. In this sense, we lose the grandeur of *Being* and confuse it for being, the particularity of a certain epoch. The nihilist, then, must overcome the oblivion of *Being* through the weakening of metaphysical *Being* (what Vattimo will call "weak thought"). Vattimo recovers Heidegger's term *Verwundung* (distorting acceptance, resignation, or twisting) as a strategy to weaken metaphysical *Being*, since the nihilist can never truly destroy metaphysics or completely overcome it (*überwunden*). This strategy of twisting and distorting metaphysics helps us to remember and re-collect [*andenken*] the grandeur of *Being* (*Ge-Schick* as the ultimate gathering of the various epochal presentations of being)⁹ and to place metaphysical *Being* back in its proper place as a particular manifestation of this great historical process. Only by inserting our present signification of *Being* into the grand gathering of *Being* (*Ge-Schick*) can we properly contextualize our own epoch—the epoch of social rationalization, technocracy, metaphysical domination.¹⁰

For the black nihilist, however, the question is this: will the dissolution of metaphysical *Being* that Vattimo and Heidegger advance eliminate antiblack violence and redress black suffering? What would freedom entail for black objects (as distinct from the human that grounds Vattimo's

project)? Antiblackness becomes somewhat of an unacknowledged interlocutor for Vattimo: “Philosophy follows paths that are not insulated or cut off from the social and political transformations of the West (*since the end of metaphysics is unthinkable without the end of colonialism and Eurocentrism*) and ‘discovers’ that the meaning of the history of modernity is not progress toward a final perfection characterized by fullness, total transparency, and the presence finally realized of the essence of man and the world.”¹¹

Vattimo adumbrates a relationship between metaphysics and colonialism/ Eurocentrism that renders them coterminous. If, as Vattimo argues, “the end of metaphysics is unthinkable without the end of colonialism and Eurocentrism”—which I will suggest are varieties of antiblack violence—then traditional nihilism must advance an escape from antiblackness to accomplish its agenda. Furthermore, if philosophy follows paths created by sociopolitical realities, then we must talk about antiblackness not just as a violent political formation but also as a *philosophical orientation*. The social rationalization, loss of individuality, economic expansionism, and technocratic domination that both Vattimo and Heidegger analyze actually depend on antiblackness.

Ontological Terror opens a path of black nihilistic inquiries. The objective, here, is to trouble the ontological foundations of both postmetaphysical and black humanist discourses. In chapter 1, I argue that the question of black *being* constitutes a proper metaphysical question, and this questioning leads us into the abyss of ontology: blackness lacks Being (which is why we write being under erasure in relation to black). Unlike humanists and postmetaphysicians, I argue that Being is not universal or applicable to blacks. Now, some might offer the rejoinder that everything has Being—even an object.¹² It is here that I will introduce a distinction between ontology and existence, one that Fanon insisted in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Blacks have an existence in an antiblack world, but ontology does not explain this existence, as Fanon argued. Furthermore, we might also gain clarity from Heidegger’s rereading of Greek philosophy. He suggests:

For the Greeks “Being” says *constancy* in a twofold sense:

1. Standing-in-itself as arising and standing forth (*phusis*)
2. But, as such, “constantly” that is, enduringly, abiding (*ousia*)

Not-to-be accordingly, means to step out of constancy that has stood-

forth in itself; *existasthai*—“existence,” “to exist,” means, for the Greeks, precisely not-to-be. The thoughtlessness and vapidity with which one uses the words “existence” and “to exist” as designators for Being offer fresh evidence of our alienation from being and from an originally powerful and definitive interpretation of it.¹³

My presentation of black existence, then, reworks this Greek understanding of existence *as* non-being (or more precisely “not-to-be”), according to Heidegger (since this Greek presentation of the human’s being, I will argue, has already excluded the Hottentot, the black thing). To allow Being’s unfolding, or *to be*, is the melding of standing-forth and abiding, or enduring, such standing. In an antiblack world, such standing forth, or emerging/becoming, is obliterated, and this is what we will call the “metaphysical holocaust”—the systematic concealment, descent, and withholding of blackness through technologies of terror, violence, and abjection. To exist, as black, is to inhabit a world through permanent “falling” (in the Greek *ptosis* and *enklisis*). David Marriott might describe this as an interminable fall, in which

there is neither event nor becoming; indeed the falling figures [black ~~being~~] do not come to their end, nor is there any possibility of destination . . . these falls are unending, and precisely because they fall into nothing . . . these falls inaugurate nothing but waiting, a sort of non-event, an event of nothing which both calls for and annuls repetition.¹⁴

To be, according to Heidegger, is to become, to emerge and move within Being-as-event. But what happens when such becoming does not occur? When the event of Being does not stimulate a productive anxiety of actualization, but gets caught in a repetition of event-less demise and nothingness? To inhabit such a condition is to exist as perpetual falling, without standing-forth, without Being. This, then, is the devastation of the metaphysical holocaust: black ~~being~~ never becomes, or stands forth, but exists in concealment, falling, and inconsistency. When I say, then, that blacks lack being but have existence, I mean that they inhabit the world in concealment and non-movement (this is the condition of objects, despite the work of object-oriented ontologists who project humanism onto objects). Thus, the task of black thinking is to limn the devastating distinction between “existence” (inhabitation) and “being.”

What is black existence without Being? This is the question black thought orbits—the question that emerges through urgency, devastation, or the declaration “black lives matter.”¹⁵ It is a question that, perhaps, cannot be answered adequately—or any answer resides outside the world, in an unimaginable time/space horizon. My objective, then, is to build a way into an abyss—without recourse to the metaphysical finality-teleology of an answer. (Even the term *existence* is inadequate to describe what is black *being*, as it still retains metaphysical resonance.) The lack of language and grammar to describe what preconditions Being makes the enterprise a difficult one—inevitably encountering explanatory impasses. We, however, attempt to undermine metaphysics as we deploy it.

The concept “nothing” provides a paradigmatic frame for describing this black thing without ontology. For nothing constitutes a mystery or ontological exception. We cannot reduce it to Being completely, but it is something outside metaphysical ontology (and at its very core), and, at the same time, it is what enables Being (humans experience Beings unfolding through the anxiety nothing presents in death or the breakdown of symbolic functions/meaning). What is nothing? This metaphysical question undermines itself from its very deployment, since it debilitates every copula formulation. Heidegger argued that the metaphysical copula formulation (what is) provided the frame for our metaphysical domination of Being, but nothing is precisely what lacks isness, by providing it with its condition of possibility. To claim, as I do throughout this book, that black *being* is nothing is to read the ontological puzzle of blackness (the unanswerable copula query) through the puzzle of nothing. There is no coincidence, then, when philosopher David Alain or Afro-pessimist scholars argue that black is nothing. Blacks are the nothing of ontology and do not have being like those beings for whom the ontological question is an issue (i.e., human being). In chapter 1, I read Hortense Spillers, Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Ronald Judy, and Nahum Chandler through and against Heidegger to present this ontological puzzle. Even though it can never be answered apodictically, since this would mean the death of the world, my presentation will lead to more questions, complications, impasses, and silences; this is unavoidable when broaching the question of black *being*. Philosophy lacks a grammar and a tradition to explain accurately the Negro Question. Thus, *Ontological Terror* wrestles or tarries

with critical traditions designed to exclude black(ness), including, most of all, Being and ontology.

PARADIGM, HISTORY, AND THE FREE BLACK

The term *free black* carries tension within its structure; it brings two disparate grammars into collusion and produces an ontological catastrophe. The term *black* is precisely the puzzle, the great abyss, of something outside the precincts of ontology. It is a metaphysical invention, void of Being, for the purpose of securing Being for the human. It has something like existence but no recourse to the unfolding of Being or the revelation of its withdrawal. It is *nothing*—the nonhuman, equipment, and the mysterious. Freedom, however, is the site of this unfolding for the human; it is the *condition* of caring for Being and embracing its withdrawal and unfolding.¹⁶ Freedom, in other words, is a (non)relation to Being for Dasein—it propels its project (projectionality) into the world. Freedom is ontological. As Heidegger insisted in his critique of Kantian freedom (metaphysical causality), “The question concerning the essence of human freedom is the fundamental question of philosophy, in which is rooted even the question of being . . . freedom is the condition of the possibility of the manifestness of the being of beings, of understanding of being.”¹⁷ Humanism often conflates freedom with liberty, rights, and emancipation, but this conflation undermines the ontological ground, which makes any claim to freedom possible. In other words, reducing freedom to political, social, or legal conceptions leaves the question of being unattended. Freedom exists *for* Being—it enables the manifestation of Being through Dasein. Our metaphysical notions of freedom also reduce antiblackness to social, political, and legal understandings, and we miss the ontological *function* of antiblackness—to deny the ontological ground of freedom by severing the (non)relation between blackness and Being. What I am suggesting is that our metaphysical conceptions of freedom neglect the ontological horrors of antiblackness by assuming freedom can be attained through political, social, or legal action. This is a humanist fantasy, one that masks subjection in emancipatory rhetoric.¹⁸

“Free black,” then, stages an impossible encounter: between the on-

topological (non)relation and the mysterious abyss of nothing. Put differently, it expresses a Hegelian desire of synthesis between “two warring ideas,” as Dubois might call it. We might, then, envision the encounter as a form of war, an ontological disaster from which various forms of antiblack violence emerge. “Free Black” is a grammatical and syntactical battlefield upon which dead bodies—Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Michael Brown, among countless others—are displayed. We can also call this disaster the “metaphysical holocaust,” as Frantz Fanon describes it. It is the systemic and relentless wiping out of black cosmologies, histories, and frames of reference/orientation. The metaphysical holocaust is violence without end, violence constitutive of a metaphysical world. It is a “violence that continuously repositions the Black as a void of historical movement,” as Frank Wilderson describes it.¹⁹ This void and stasis of temporal linearity is precisely the nothing blacks incarnate. The term *free black*, then, is the syntactical reflection of the metaphysical holocaust, the violence between the terms *free* and *black* that is unresolvable.

Throughout this book, I use the term *free black* in two ways: (1) as a philosophical concept capturing the continuous metaphysical violence between black *being* and human being/ontometaphysics and (2) as a particular historical figure that allegorizes metaphysical violence. Thus, the free black here is both philosophical allegory and historical figure. But, the problematic that the latter presents (i.e., the free black as historical figure) is that such a figure does not exist. It is impossible for any black to be free in an antiblack world.

The term *free black* is a misnomer for describing a historical condition, or particularity, of blackness, since the ontological relation is severed. It is precisely this misnomer, a taxonomic necessity of sorts for historiography and legal studies, that is of interest to me. The struggles and challenges that free blacks experienced in antebellum society were really ontological problems. The free black presents or forces confrontation with the Negro Question. It is through the free black that the Negro Question emerges with ferocity. Can black “things” become free? What is the status of such *beings*? These questions are not merely legal questions or questions of legal status, but primarily ontological questions, I argue. The debates concerning free black citizenship were deceptive in that antebellum society mobilized them to answer the ontological question, “How is it going with black *being*?” Has the metaphysical world evolved such that blacks can

ground existence, indisputably, in the being of the human? Thus, it made little difference whether one was born free, received the “gift” of freedom from a master, purchased freedom, resided in the North or South; the ontological question, the Negro Question, remained. The intransigence of the question and its continuity across diverse space and temporalities is what concerns me. For we might look to the historical figure of the free black to understand the birth of the proper metaphysical question, since society could not resolve the tension between human freedom and black objects. As Maurice S. Lee suggests, philosophical perspectives on blackness and metaphysics were articulated in many ways before the Civil War (in particular the literary form for him).²⁰ My objective here is to read the Negro Question as a philosophical site of anxiety, terror, and metaphysical sensibilities.

Although engaging the historiographical figure “free black” (the invention of the historiographer), this book is not intended to contribute to historiography; rather, my objective is to question the ontological ground or metaphysical infrastructure upon which such historiographies proceed.²¹ Antebellum free-black historiography is rich with archival discoveries, and to this my research is indebted. But we reach a problem with historical narration, or what the historiographer does with the archival material retrieved. Historiographical narration is not a philosophically neutral enterprise; it is loaded with philosophical presumptions, primarily metaphysical humanism. As Possenti asserts, “it is precisely metaphysics that keeps watch over history; not because it engulfs or digests history as irrelevant, but because it can direct history toward its goal.”²² It often proceeds without broaching the ontological question—or taking the historian Ira Berlin’s phrase slaves without masters seriously.²³ When historian Dr. John Hope Franklin remarks, “The free negro as a subject for historical treatment abounds in elusive and difficult problems,” I understand these problems not just as archival but also as an inherent problem of narrating within a humanist framework.²⁴ The research acknowledges tension between blackness and freedom (freedom often described as a set of liberties and rights, not an ontological position) but resolves this tension into a synthesis of metaphysical humanism—that is, blacks are still human, even though they experience captivity and systemic discrimination. What ground enables the historiographer to make such a claim or presume apodictically this black humanity? The research carries a philos-

ophy of universal humanism into its reading and narration practices. Historiography reinforces philosophical humanism. It is precisely these presumptions that *Ontological Terror* intends to unravel. I bring the Negro Question to historiography to suggest that the metaphysical holocaust destabilizes such humanism.²⁵ We need to imagine an antimetaphysical historiography (a thinking against metaphysics), one that proceeds from the puzzle of black *being* and confronts the ontometaphysical question.

Thus, my objective in this book is to introduce an ontological complication that exceeds, but also engenders discriminatory law (mandatory emigration laws in Southern states, for example), surveillance, and physical brutality (the free black whipped just like the slave) of free blacks. These antiblack tactics have been well documented, as it concerns the disciplining and subordination of free blacks. What has been neglected, however, is an analysis of what exactly happens to blacks once emancipated, or free—the transubstantiation between property and something else. Did the black become a human once free? If we answer in the affirmative, does the freedom paper undermine the being of the human, given that without it, such claim to humanity cannot be sustained? Are “masterless slaves,” as free blacks have been called, still property—property of whom? What determines the distinction between human masters and masterless slaves? Is emancipation ontological creation, and what enables the malleability of black *being*? These questions, questions still remaining, build a path into a discussion of ontological complications the free black presents. *Ontological Terror* broaches these questions to illumine something more sinister about the condition of black *being*, a condition that impacts all blacks in an antiblack world, not just the antebellum free black. The historical singularity of free blacks knots together a deep philosophical conflict between Being, blackness, and freedom—it is an extraordinary paradigm for black thinking. My hope is that historians, philosophers, and theorists will consider the free black, much more than an anomalous population, a speculative frame within which the foundations of humanism and metaphysics in general are challenged.

Furthermore, my concern is not to fetishize agency or will. It is certainly the case that those *beings* we call “free blacks” experienced the world through bonds, courage, despair, friendship, and hope. These cannot be denied, but I do not think these render these beings human or answer the metaphysical question in the affirmative. No matter the bond,

the act of courage, the indefatigable fortitude, or the institutions established, the metaphysical holocaust remains consistent. No political action has or ever will end it—it is necessary for the world. Thus, if we bundle certain capacities into something we call “agency,” this bundle does not undermine metaphysical violence or the exclusion of blackness from Being. The existence that provides the condition for something we might call “agency” is not human ontology and not freedom. Our desperation to incorporate blacks into a narrative of humanistic heroism often results in a disavowal of the problem of ontology, which engenders the condition against which the courageous fight in the first place. Black thinking, then, must explore what existence without Being entails. Free blacks do not inhabit the world in the way the human does—historiography proceeds as if the problem of existence has been resolved. It has not.²⁶ My focus, here, will be on the condition of the metaphysical holocaust or its manifestations and not on individual narratives of free blacks. That work is certainly important, too, but in this project I want to read the archive to understand an ontological condition of execration.

Ontological Terror confronts both the ontological puzzle (metaphysical holocaust) and the historical figure we call “free black” through a paradigmatic approach. In *The Signature of All Things*, Agamben describes the paradigm as not obeying

the logic of the metaphorical transfer of meaning but the analogical logic of the example. Here we are not dealing with a signifier that is extended to designate heterogeneous phenomena by virtue of the same semantic structure; more akin to allegory than to metaphor, the paradigm is a singular case that is isolated from its context only insofar as, by exhibiting its own singularity, it makes intelligible a new ensemble, whose homogeneity it itself constitutes. That is to say, to give an example is a complex act which supposes that the term functioning as a paradigm is deactivated from its normal use, not in order to be moved into another context, but on the contrary, to present the canon—the rule—of that use, which can not be shown in any other way.²⁷

A paradigmatic approach uses the structure of allegory—juxtaposing two singularities—for the purpose of illuminating a new ensemble of relations, or what we can call “paradigm.” The singularity must be *deactivated*, meaning it must be momentarily extracted from its usual context

and conceptualized in another way. The deactivation is necessary because we can only understand or illuminate the paradigm by extracting, deactivating, and juxtaposing the singularity, or example. It is a paradoxical figure: both example and other than example. *Ontological Terror* approaches the problem of *black as nothing* through a paradigmatic juxtaposing of the free black and the critique of metaphysical violence Heidegger and others (including Agamben and Jean-Luc Nancy) present. Since nothing is also a paradox, both *outside* Being and as an opening for Being, one could *only approach it through a set of allegories*. In other words, we can never fully understand nothing with our metaphysical instruments, even with the most rigorous destructive or deconstructive procedure—something of nothing always escapes. *Ontological Terror* deactivates the antebellum free black (and the general concept *free black*) to set it alongside metaphysical violence to illuminate the paradigm of black nothingness or ontological terror. The free black, then, serves as a historical allegory for metaphysical violence, and metaphysical violence serves as an allegory for the tension between free and black that the historical figure *free black* experiences. My objective is not to rob or neglect the singularity of the free black—although the category itself is under suspicion—but to demonstrate how this singularity is much more than traditionally thought by historians.

Given this, my objective in *Ontological Terror* is also to address what I consider a form of philosophical antiblackness: the neglect of black archives. Rarely, if ever, do nihilistic or postmetaphysical philosophers engage black archives. A philosophy of history or a philosophical anthropology very often proceeds with an archive (i.e., *Homo sacer*, Nazi concentration camp, Greek polis) to illuminate a paradigm. The choice of archive is also a philosophical statement; it reflects what body of knowledge is worthy of philosophical examination and what experiences contribute more to thinking than *just* singularity. Black archives are often reduced to mere singularity, perhaps an interesting singularity, but never taken up paradigmatically. Or as Alexander Weheliye cogently states the problem, there is “a broader tendency in which theoretical formulations by white European thinkers are granted conceptual carte blanche, while those uttered from the view point of minority discourse that speak to the same questions are almost exclusively relegated to the jurisdiction of ethnographic locality.”²⁸ As distinguished philosopher Tommy Curry has argued, “Tra-

ditionally, in philosophy, the only limitation of philosophical concepts is the extent to which the conceptualizer imagines; however, when the task placed before whites entails a philosophical encounter with the realities of Blacks, philosophy is suddenly limited—incarcerated by the white imagination’s inability to confront its corporeal reflection.”²⁹ *Ontological Terror* confronts philosophy’s vapidly when confronted with blackness. Furthermore, the fact that post-metaphysics claims to destroy metaphysics, but leaves the *triumph* of metaphysics unattended (antiblack violence) is disturbing and befuddling (especially when Vattimo claims that destroying metaphysics is unthinkable without addressing Euro-centrism). What this reveals to me is that antiblackness is a juggernaut that must be fought on *many* battlefields—including philosophical formations.

Thus, I read postmetaphysics alongside the free black archives (such as *The African Repository*, freedom papers, and *The Census of 1840*) in order to illuminate the philosophical richness of the black experience in an antiblack world.

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The book builds upon the arguments that blacks incarnate nothing in a metaphysical world and that the world is both fascinated with this nothing and terrified of it. Antiblack violence is violence against nothing, the nothing that unsettles the human because it can never be captured and dominated. Blacks, then, allow the human to engage in a fantasy—the domination of nothing. By projecting this nothing as terror onto blacks, the human seeks to dominate nothing by dominating black *being*, to eradicate nothing by eradicating black *being*. The free black, as the conceptual/embodied intersection between nothing and blackness, is absolutely essential to a metaphysical world desperate to avoid the terror of nothing. The book proceeds by engaging the projection and terror of this nothing. As I have mentioned before, the field of free black historiography is capacious, and there are numerous issues to investigate. I proceed, here, by choosing four fields of inquiry, in which the free black presents ontometaphysical problems: philosophy, law, science/math, and visuality. I chose these fields to demonstrate what Foucault might call a polymorphous relation.³⁰ By this, I mean that philosophy, law, science/math, and

visuality constitute intersecting vectors of terror for black *being*—each producing and sustaining the destruction of black *being* in its own way, but accomplishing the same objective (i.e., severing of the flesh or the metaphysical holocaust). I hope to demonstrate that ontological terror unites these diverse fields, and the proper metaphysical question (i.e., “What is black *being*?/How is it going with black *being*?”) constitutes the vehicle of movement between the fields. Ultimately, I suggest that these fields expose a deep problem: given the failure of postmetaphysics to twist [verwunden] antiblackness severely and black humanism’s romance with metaphysical schemas of humanity and freedom, black thinking can only ask a metaphysical question, the question that remains after destruction.

In chapter 1, “The Question of Black *Being*,” I present the Negro Question as what Heidegger would call a “proper metaphysical question.” The aim is to understand how the problem of metaphysical blackness and the concept of nothing converge on the Negro as a way of resolving the tension. I read Hortense Spillers, in particular, as an ontometaphysician who describes metaphysical violence as the “severing of the flesh.” In reading Spillers through and against Heidegger, I intend to show how the transatlantic slave trade realized the horror Heidegger dreaded and sought to destroy in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, *Being and Time*, and *The Question Concerning Technology*, among others. But Spillers also questions the process of *Destruktion*, I argue, because no such twisting, or reconfiguring, of metaphysics is possible for blackness—the ontological relation is severed permanently—no recourse to Being is possible.

In chapter 2, “Outlawing,” I present two notions of law: the Law of Being (the law of abandonment determining the relation between the human and Being) and the being of law (the metaphysical instantiation of law as rights, amendments, judicial opinions, legislations). Building off postmetaphysical work, I argue that the being of law is subordinate or subject to the Law of Being—ontic distortion conceals this fact. Turning to *Dred Scott*, freedom papers, and emancipation, I suggest that the legal problems free blacks presented to antebellum society were not merely problems for the being of law (the restriction of rights, liberties) but a deeper problem with the Law of Being (the nonrelation between blackness and Being). In other words, the reification of black *being* in materiality (freedom papers), the terroristic space of emancipation, the uncertainty of what *free black* constituted legally were all symptoms of ungrounded

black **being**. The being of law merely reflects the exclusion of blacks from Being and into a space of ontological terror.

In chapter 3, “Scientific Horror,” I think through the way scientific and mathematical thinking relies on blacks to explore nothing. It is both a horror and a fascination and perhaps the only way science can contend with nothing. The chapter reads the writing of Samuel Cartwright, Benjamin Rush, and the Census of 1840 as philosophical discourses hiding behind epidemiology, vital statistics, and neurology. The aim is to strip through scientific presentations to expose the metaphysical obsession with blackness as nothing.

In chapter 4, “Catachrestic Fantasies,” I argue that nothing is visualized through fantasies and catachresis (the lack of a proper referent), thus enabling boundless fantasizing about blacks. I turn to illustrated journalism and the artwork of Edward Clay as visualizations of black as nothing. The question “What is black **being**?” is answered in different ways through different illustrations. I suggest that philosophy relies on fantasy to make philosophical statements when it reaches its limits of rationality and proofs. Because the free black **is** nothing, one can only approach this philosophical puzzle with fantasies. I turn to Lacanian psychoanalysis because it provides a frame for understanding fantasy, nothing, and projection in a way I think is productive. The aim is to think of psychoanalytic theory allegorically as it relates to black **being**. I also find it productive in thinking about the unconscious fantasies of humans and the way that black-as-nothing centers these fantasies. In short, the chapter is about human fantasizing of a catachrestic entity through illustrated journalism.

The coda, “Adieu to the Human,” argues that the metaphysical holocaust and its question are still with us. Police shootings, routinized humiliation, and disenfranchisement are symptoms of this unending war. Part of the aim, then, is to dethrone the human from its metaphysical pedestal, reject the human, and explore different ways of existing that are not predicated on Being and its humanism. This is the *only* way black thinking can grapple with existence without Being.

This book begins and ends with a question: “How is it going with black **Being**?” This structure reminds us that temporal linearity and narratives of progress are deceptive ontologically. Time rebounds upon itself in a space of ontological terror—there is only temporal circularity or black time, an abyss of time. I challenge linearity (the invention of metaphysics

and historiography) throughout this book by defying chronology (I, indeed, have an irreverence for it). Thus, I begin in one period and move to another and then back again, or I begin with the antebellum period and move to the Civil War and back again. This strategy, I hope, will demonstrate that no matter the time period, the metaphysical question remains. Our obsession with chronology and linearity is no more than a humanist fantasy of resolution and movement, which I hope to unravel. I also reject the humanist fantasy (or narcissism) that anything humans have created can be changed. Some creations are no longer in the hands of humans, for they constitute a horizon, or field, upon which human existence itself depends. Antiblackness is such a creation. Thus, chronology provides no relief with its obsession with change concerning antiblackness. What many proponents of the agency thesis (i.e., we have power to change anything we create) are actually doing is comparing different forms of antiblackness and neglecting the terror that antiblackness remains as a consistent variable, despite variations in form. Variations in antiblackness do not signal progress; rather, they are ontic distortions of the underlying ontological problem—blacks lack Being.

We can begin our paradigmatic investigation and end our introduction with a literary allegory, one demonstrative of ontological terror. In Edward P. Jones's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Known World*, we encounter ontological terror.

The scene begins with Augustus, a free black man, returning home from a business transaction by wagon. Patroller Harvey Travis, the symbol of the law, stops Augustus in a routine inspection of the wagon. Travis has stopped Augustus many times before and knows that Augustus is a free black and, as such, has the right to travel and the freedom of movement. Travis demands Augustus's freedom papers, although he's read them many times and basically has them memorized. When Augustus insists that it is his prerogative to travel as a free person, Travis sardonically replies, "You ain't free less me and the law say you free." Travis expresses animus about Augustus's refusal to act obsequiously before white people, to assert a right he does not indeed possess. As Augustus continued to assert his freedom, Travis began to eat the freedom papers. Starting at the bottom right corners, he chewed and swallowed them. After eating the freedom papers, Travis mockingly retorted, "Thas what I think of your right to do anything you got a right to do." Travis licked his fingers in sat-

isfaction and wiped his mouth. “Right ain’t got nothing to do with it,” he said. “Best meal I’ve had in many Sundays.”

Oden, one of Travis’s companions, laughed at him and said, “I wouldn’t want to be you in the morning when you have to shit that out.” Travis responded, “I don’t know. It might make for a smooth run off. Couldn’t be no worse than what collard greens do to me.” Darcey, a kidnapper of free blacks, purchases free blacks from Travis and sells them as captives for a handsome profit. Travis explains to Darcey that his timing is fortuitous because he has “a nigger who didn’t know what to do with his freedom. Thought it meant he was free.” Travis sells Augustus to Darcey. Unable to prove his freedom, Augustus becomes the property of Darcey, instantly losing the very rights he was so certain freedom ensured.

Augustus thought that his freedom paper meant he was free, but as Travis demonstrates, this freedom was not freedom at all. What exactly does Travis consume when he eats the freedom papers? Consumption allegorizes the metaphysical holocaust—reducing the free black to a reified object (freedom paper) and it can be eaten (e.g., put between a biscuit and swallowed, as Frederick Douglass instructed) or destroyed at any time or place. Consumption is both a form of domination and sadistic pleasure, as Vincent Woodard would describe it.³¹ We, then, must investigate the manner of consuming black flesh and *not* just the body, consuming the flesh *as* consuming the primordial relation itself. *Ontological Terror* exposes the insatiable appetite of antiblackness.

NOTES

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 Afroessimists, “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 passage-way, but to provide a signifier for metaphysical holocaust and its commencement. Please see Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*.

8 Oren Ben-Dor, *Thinking about Law: In Silence with Heidegger*, 105.

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*.

10 Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, 1–13.

11 Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, 35; emphasis mine.

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 “bitterness” 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 historicometaphysical 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 Marriot. “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 an-

alytic philosophical traditions (and its scientific reasoning and metaphysical logic) and equally foreign to Continental philosophy, or even what John Muldarkey (*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 *being* without any ontological grounds. Does this mean black *being* 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*.

- 17 Heidegger, *The Essence of Human Freedom: An Introduction to Philosophy*, 203–5.
- 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.
- 19 Frank Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 38.
- 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*.

24 John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790–1860*, 3–4.

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*.

- 27 Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, 18.
- 28 Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, 13.
- 29 Tommy Curry, "Saved by the Bell: Derrick Bell's Racial Realism as Pedagogy," 36.
- 30 Michel Foucault, "Questions of Method," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, 77.
- 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