

The Catastrophe

*Black Feminist Poethics, (Anti)form,
and Mathematical Nihilism*

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You can always identify the trauma of white sovereignty, in brief,
with the extent to which it derives its essence and suffering
from the prosopoeia of black catastrophe.

David Marriott

Ontology is mathematics.

Alain Badiou

Mathematical reasoning grounds the modern knowledge program.

Denise Ferreira da Silva

Mathematics and Thinking

If “ontology is mathematics,” as Badiou would insist, is mathematics *also* life?¹ What is the relation (or nonrelation) between mathematics, life, and being? Do they constitute an indissoluble entanglement, one necessary for thought itself? Is mathematics the repository of conflicts, axioms, principles, and impasses found within being and

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thinking? In other words, are the solutions to the problems of life, being, and thinking found in mathematics, just waiting to be un(dis)covered with a rigorous procedure? Would the *end* of mathematics result in the end of life or the impairment of thought? Or, if we desire to “end the world,” would dismantling mathematics entail the most effective strategy of world destruction? Moreover, is blackness already antimathematical within the scene of arithmetical procedures and ontological calculations of existence (in an antiblack world)? These questions bring us to a nodal point of thought and knowledge: why is mathematics so important to life, being, and thinking? To address these inquires, we must turn our *thinking* toward mathematics and somehow render the indissociable chain of “life-being-mathematics-thinking” fragile, sociable, and dissectible.

But what exactly is mathematics? Which mathematics preoccupies our presentation? Mathematics is an assemblage of practices, operations, and procedures designed to *formalize* knowledge, ethics, value, ontology, and philosophies of life and death. Even though the operations, calculations, and procedures vary—geometry, set theory, calculus, algebra, statistics, and so on—formalization unifies these diverse fields of mathematical inquiry. To put things differently, mathematics is the *formalization of thinking itself*. The modern world, then, requires form to think both abstraction and practicality, ethics and politics, being and appearance—in short, all the indispensable concepts and fields of modern knowledge. Rather than presenting mathematics as a particular operation or scientific protocol, mathematics, here, is *modern thinking as formalization*. The world is a formalized thought experiment, an attempt to unify through a regulatory fiction, as Kant might have it. Form preconditions something like a world to exist at all, as a concept distinct from the earth. And since much of our thinking involves a conception of the world, we often reproduce form and employ formalization as a necessary condition for thinking life, value, knowledge, and so forth. In other words, mathematics is thinking. Regardless of genre, the purpose of mathematics in a metaphysical world is to give form to abstractions and impasses. Our difficulty, then, is to foreground form, extract it from mathematical operations, and (un)think its relation to the world, blackness, and being. This essay attempts to demonstrate a relation

between form and mathematics and how such relation engenders anti-black violence. Mathematical nihilism, or the (un)thinking, demystification, and destruction of form (and matter), might set us on a catastrophic path of existence anew.

Doing the Math

In “Do the Math on #AllLivesMatter and It Equals White Supremacy,” Sean Eversley Bradwell presents #AllLivesMatter as a dissimulating and violent signifier, one operating under the guise of universal humanism, even as it preserves and justifies antiblack exclusionary logics:

All language is contextual, and at face value, this particular hashtag, #AllLivesMatter, seems to be an affirmation of . . . “everyone.” We are reminded that the Founding *Fathers* used the same language of humanity. We do, indeed, “hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” In the language of U.S. politics, “all” has never meant everyone. #SomeLivesMatter.

More important, #AllLivesMatter does not have an organic origin. . . . #AllLivesMatter is a rejoinder. It is a retort. It originates in direct response to the creation of the hashtag and movement #BlackLivesMatter. And it is here that we find its promotion of white supremacy.²

Technology transforms the mathematical “number sign” into a discursive/philosophical announcement—#. The hashtag symbol carries the mathematical presumptions of *facticity* within its announcement. For what comes after the hashtag is, purportedly, facticity—the crude facticity that numbers as signs, for example, are designed to convey. The announcement relies on mathematical facticity, as the legitimate ground to introduce truth claims. It is this facticity that Bradwell wants to turn inside out, since the hashtag is also mobilized to perpetuate myths, commence epistemic warfare, and justify destructive agendas. #AllLivesMatter not only circulates the myth of universality but also distorts numbers and political arithmetic. In other words, #AllLivesMatter harbors a mathematical myth, or impossibility, the “set of all sets”—the one set that entails every variable,

every life, All life. For Bradwell such a set is not only historically inaccurate and mythical but also a form of antiblack destruction. The “All” is a mathematical sleight of hand, a philosophy of the One, concealing its exclusionary operations and historical violence.

Once Bradwell exposes the dissimulation of “#All” as “#Some,” he importunes us to “do the math,” to present diversity and black death as mathematical equivalents. Diversity is another signifier operating to support universal agendas; it is “the new form of racism,” and “racism equals death,” according to Bradwell. Whereas diversity is often deployed to secure this universal set, it actually perpetuates “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death—shortened life expectancies, higher asthma rates, closer proximity to contaminations, and less access to health care, quality food and water.”³ Diversity conceals the ubiquity of *vulnerable particularity*, since its impetus is to fold difference into sameness (the All of universal humanism). The result of this analysis is a mathematical equation: “If diversity equals racism, and racism equals death, then diversity equals death. Or diversity kills.”⁴ This syllogistic rationale is designed to support the necessity of #BlackLivesMatter or *black mattering*.

Thus the injunction “Do the math” expresses a certain *promise* of mathematics. The mattering of black life, its axiological validity, relies on a mathematical rationale—value, life, blackness, and death constitute an interdependent equation. What, then, is the promise of mathematics? What does mathematics offer that necessitates turning to it when analyzing black life, black death, and black value? Doing the math not only exposes the dissimulation of “All” but also captures thinking itself, or the possibility of thinking. For what mathematics promises, I would argue, is *form*—a form that reaffirms being within a context of antiblack brutality. Doing the math, then, is *doing life and doing death* by manipulating and reshaping form, the vessel of facticity. Mathematical form, then, absorbs ontological, epistemological, axiological, and ethical concerns in its structure.

Mathematical reasoning grounds the modern knowledge program, as da Silva would suggest, and this program *weaponizes* mathematics to conquer and subordinate.⁵ Doing the math, then, is an activity of complicity, an activity unable to delink its operations from

the modern violence it supports. Can we deploy violence to undermine violence? Although this question is quite old, it presents a problem for thinking mathematics as liberating (the proper activity to express the “mattering” of blackness). Why this turn to mathematics, given this difficulty? What is its hold on the imagination?

The turn to mathematics, I suggest, is an attempt to preserve black life *through* form. It is form that renders mathematics irresistible and infinitely pliable. Agamben argues that life assumes form—“form of life”—and that sovereignty works to wrench life from its form, rendering it bare and vulnerable. Following Agamben, we can understand the turn to mathematics in black thought as the struggle against antiblack sovereignty—a strategy to reunite black life with its form.⁶ #Blacklivesmatter is *only* factual if it can reunite black life with a *valuable form*, a valuation determined by political calculus. But what if reuniting black life and form is impossible? What if blackness is always already dead—the “perfection of death,” David Marriott would call it—so black life-form is but a fantasy?⁷ Can we think of blackness as incontrovertibly formless? Considering the contrary position—the futility of reunion—exposes mathematical deployment as a fraudulent activity. It cannot redeem the promise of *mattering* (life and form).

I argue that the decision to destroy mathematics or to do mathematics is the tension between form and antiform. Mathematics is seductive for thinking because it is *form*, and if life is to assume form—to contest antiblack sovereignty—then mathematics offers the promise of reunification. Antiformalism, by contrast, suggests that antiblack violence depends on form to reproduce itself. Pure form is the consequence of perfect death, black death. Black death preconditions form, mathematical or otherwise. Thus a turn to mathematics must be a turn toward destruction—if there is any hope of imagining black existence beyond this order of knowledge. The consequence of such destruction is *pure matter*. Black feminist poethics is situated at the fault line between antiform and form and works through ontological and axiological difficulties through its engagement with mathematics. I turn to the work of Katherine McKittrick and Denise Ferreira da Silva as exemplary of such tension. McKittrick presents “numerical burst,” an unexpected form much like Badiou’s

Event, to preserve black life, while da Silva offers the destruction of mathematical form to arrive at *plenum*, pure matter. Is it possible, however, to destroy both matter and form to think otherwise or to arrive at a new organization of existence outside this dualism? I offer catastrophe theory as one way of imaging such an alternative.

Numerical Bursts and the Event

For Bradwell, “the way that institutions and universities practice ‘diversity’ has become a new *form* of racism.”⁸ To defy this new form requires calculating different forms, those forms capable of supporting black life. How does such a new form emerge? What type of form interrupts antiblack formations, the calculus of death? These questions concerning black life, its proper formation, and the ontology of change present mathematics as deeply philosophical. To do math is also to do philosophy—since our mathematical orientation carries entrenched philosophical presumptions. The possibility of new forms emerging preoccupies contemporary thinking of both black study and continental philosophy.

Alain Badiou offers “set theory” as a mathematical innovation capable of formalizing novelty, change, and newness. Reading Badiou alongside Black feminist poethics enables us to foreground the stakes involved in turning to math. Badiou considers mathematics ontology; properly presenting ontology requires *pure form* and the limitation of formalization relying on phenomenology or identity. In “Toward a New Concept of Existence,” Badiou states:

If ontology is the science of the thing, of the pure “something,” we must conclude that ontology is mathematics. The Thing is formalized set; the elements of this set are sets; and the point of departure of the whole construction is the empty set. . . . If ontology without qualities is mathematics, phenomenology as a theory of appearing and objectivity concerns the relationship between qualitative differences, problems of identities and or existence.⁹

What renders mathematics, particularly set theory, so necessary for Badiou is the capacity to formalize “the Thing”—the empty set, or the set without identities and determinations. Because “a thing is

nothing other than a multiplicity. Not a multiplicity of objects, not a system of qualities, a network of differences, but a multiplicity of multiplicities, and a multiplicity of multiplicities of multiplicities,” mathematics can provide form without falling into phenomenology, the science of appearance and consciousness.¹⁰ Mathematics enables thinking pure form, a set of nothing. It is this Thing, or empty set, that preconditions every set (or every situation), and from within this emptiness, change and newness can emerge (what Badiou will call “the Event”). The Thing is prior to difference, objects, and qualities, and mathematics re-presents this, even as such re-presentation docks the limitation of the enterprise as such—how do we present emptiness? Following Badiou, we could argue that antiblackness is a situation, a set of oppressive/destructive objects, differences, and identities. What #BlackLivesMatter imagines is the emergence of “something,” a liberating form, emerging from the empty set within the situation. Antiblackness, then, attempts to conceal and repress this null set, so its violent phenomenology organizes political arithmetic uninterrupted. What set theory also does is contest the One in the metaphysical tradition—a transcendence horizon—and embrace an immanent procedure of multiplicity. If we remain trapped in phenomenology without studying ontology, we reduce existence to what Badiou calls “democratic materialism,” which presents existence as merely bodies and language organized by the situation.¹¹ Furthermore, “what explodes every One from within is not a complexity which subverts its unity, but the fact that a void is a part of every One; the signifier-One, the signifier unifies/totalizes a multiplicity, is the point of inscription into this multiplicity of its void.”¹² Each One contains the kernel of its own explosion, since the null set is attached to the One—the situation subtracts such a void.

The Thing preconditions form; it is the unspoken/repressed in every form of One, but also in the limits of form, since the Event emerges as an unanticipated force within sets. Pure form, the null set, is the *hope* of every oppressive mathematical situation. Doing the math, in this instance, is a thought practice of pure form and limitation. It is in math that we find this possibility for Badiou. He expresses the stakes involved in this theory. It is worth quoting at length:

I believe that if all creative thought is in reality the invention of a new mode of formalization, then that thought is the invention of a form. Thus if every creative thought is the invention of a new form, then, it will also bring new possibilities of asking, in the end, “what is a form” . . . —Like Plato, who first thought this, thinking is the thinking of forms, something that he called ideas but they are also the forms. It is the same word, *idea*. It is different from Aristotle’s thought where thinking is the thinking of substance. His paradigm is the animal. For Plato, it’s mathematics. Mathematics holds something of the secret of thinking. . . . This is the first point. I think I hold a fidelity to this idea, but, at the same time, the heart of the most radical experience is politics. Politics itself, in a sense, is also a thinking through forms. It is not the thought of arrangements or the thought of contracts or the good life. No. It is a thinking of form.¹³

Mathematics “holds the secret of thinking,” since it presents the purity of forms. Presenting the situation or the Event requires form. Following this argument, political transformation only occurs through the thinking of form. Without this thought, all political mobilization merely rearranges current objects and opines the good life, but is incapable of disrupting the set (if we think of politics as the consolidation of entities within a set). Bradwell’s injunction “Do the math,” for instance, uses mathematics to intervene in white supremacist situations in hopes of forcing something new, an Event of black *matter-ing*, into the situation. Doing the math, then, promises to lead us to “the Thing.”

Black feminist poethics, however, presents the secret of mathematics as an unspoken *contamination* of purity, a noetic sequela—as opposed to the purity of Badiou’s null set. The history of antiblack violence is precisely the *imbrication* of phenomenology and ontology, and it is difficult to disentangle pure form from a violent situation. In “Mathematics Black Life,” Katherine McKittrick identifies one location of this mathematical drama—the archive. The archive of slavery produces “the mathematics of unliving,” by reifying and objectifying captives within an arithmetic logic of commerce and finance. Employing and manipulating numbers produces fractioned

black being; the archive overrepresents black death as the limit of blackness within this situation, if we read her through Badiou. Mathematical thinking always carries a certain phenomenological violence with regard to blackness. McKittrick understands the entanglement of ontology and phenomenology as the *epidermalization* of math. Furthermore, “the seeming neutrality of mathematics . . . is trusted as innocuously objective, thus providing an alibi for racism.”¹⁴ This neutrality—contamination masquerading as pure form—is complicit in reproducing antiblack violence. To “do the math” within McKittrick’s theory acknowledges that epidermalization contaminates every “pure form” and thinking mathematically requires protocols for addressing this contamination. This protocol, unlike Badiou’s, approaches mathematics through *skepticism*—“believing the lie,” as she would state.

What is at stake for McKittrick, I would argue, is how to negotiate between a form of violence and a form of possibility—the fault line between archival death and undetectable black life. Thus she does not reject mathematical formalism; rather, she reads all form through skepticism (and not Truth-form, as Badiou might call it), and this skepticism is the precondition for the emergence of the “new.” If black study tends to reproduce antiblack violence by overrepresenting black death in the archive, as she would claim, her protocol of mathematical thinking is to uncover the unsaid within the number, or the lie attached to every archival presentation. She states:

Indeed, numbers, like the archives, are truthful lies that can push us toward demonic grounds. . . . We might emphasize how the demonic—in physics and mathematics—is a nondeterministic schema; it is a process that is hinged on uncertainty and non-linearity because the organizing principle cannot foresee the future. . . . The methodological and intellectual work of black studies, I am suggesting, is embedded with this organizing principle precisely because the mathematics of blackness and white supremacy are seemingly knowable (because accountable and counted) and always laden with chaotic uncertainty. This schema understands arithmetical-epidermal history as a violent unfinishing with *numeric bursts* [emphasis mine].¹⁵

Uncertainty and indeterminacy constitute the possibility of mathematical skepticism. Doing the math, in this sense, reads the arithmetic of white supremacy as uncertain of itself, even as it presents apodictic certainty of its knowledge formation. It is the tension within form itself that allows black study to arrive at a different calculus.

Badiou's Event and McKittrick's Numerical Bursts think transformation as a consequence of the unknown, unpredictable, and indeterminate. Badiou's Event is *demonic* in this way, as the possibility of a new form within a violent formation. A black feminist poethics contaminates the Truth-form with truthful lies, since it is impossible to isolate ontology from phenomenology completely (even if our philosophical protocols desire such separation); the Thing is always already a contamination of the thing it interrupts. We can also think of mathematics as the violent history of *suturing* ontology and phenomenology, resulting in every multicity predicated on mendacity. If mathematics is ontology for Badiou, this ontology cannot be trusted—immanence is still tethered to the lie, along McKittrick's formulation. Numerical bursts, then, leave the "epidermal-arithmetic" unfinished.

Although McKittrick would argue that these bursts signal the *possibility* of black life, such life is *but* a possibility. Since for McKittrick "numbers signify measurable items, but also invite chaos," we cannot *determine* black life as a consequence of numerical chaos.¹⁶ Such determinacy would undermine chaos itself—rendering the *hope* of black life another mathematical lie. Chaos bifurcates black life, just as it does the number. Within every mathematical deployment of black life, every rejection of the analytics of violence, black death presents a hole. But we have arrived at a certain *mathematical nihilism*, one that presses against Badiou's Event and McKittrick's Numerical Bursts: if the mathematical burst is chaotic and indeterminate and the Event is unpredictable rupture, what if they both present black death as the destruction of form itself? In other words, how can Badiou and McKittrick place the "new" on the side of life and futurity, apodictically? Determining the impact of the Burst and the Event undermines the *purported indeterminacy* of each philosophy. The stakes of mathematics are raised if black death assumes the position of the Thing, rather than the hopeful emptiness of attributes or a burst of life. *We must approach Numerical Bursts and Events*

with just as much skepticism as the mathematics of unliving. Black feminist poethics, however, offers another (un)thinking of mathematics, which aims to destroy form.

Antiformalism and the Destruction of Mathematics

For Denise Ferreira da Silva, a black feminist poethics decomposes formalization, releasing the destructive potency of blackness. In “Speculations on a Transformative Theory of Justice,” da Silva argues that justice, equality, and legal rationality are predicated on formalization; but such formalization only works by excluding racial violence, since form cannot accommodate such violence:

The formal principle of equality combined with raciality (that is its formalization of colonial violence as natural defect) renders racial subjugation . . . as well as the effects of colonial violence it transubstantiates, irrelevant to the plan for their realization. This is so because both moments of formalization—which refers to the workings of determinacy in juridical universality (in the courts) and in scientific universality (in knowledge)—are contingent upon moments of occlusion, namely, of the colony as a modern juridical framework and of raciality as a modern ethical and political concept.¹⁷

As a critique of both Rawls and Badiou, formalization and violence are inextricable; they will not yield anything like justice, life, or futurity for blacks—only death. A black feminist poethics, then, must decompose form by turning form against itself, so racial violence and the value subtending it are disassembled. Any hope predicated on the reproduction of form will just reproduce racial violence, which creates a repetition of injury. *Pure form, then, is pure violence.* Rather than reproducing form, da Silva redefines the Thing as *blackness without value*. For Badiou, the Thing (null set) places *potential* within the reproduction of forms because emptiness yields novelty that disrupts situations (Badiou would consider the Event inaugurating “Justice” within an oppressive situation). Pure form is intrinsically valuable for him, since its emptiness is not bound by oppressive determinations, differences, or identities. Da Silva, by contrast, presents the

Thing as pure matter: “Blackness refers to matter—as The Thing; it refers to that without form—it functions as a nullification of the whole signifying order that sustains value in both its economic and ethical scene.”¹⁸ She presents the Thing as the *destruction* of form rather than its creation. Black feminist poethics, here, works to dissemble the situation—the organization of antiblack form—so the Thing is released. It is matter opposed to form.

Blackness “in the raw,” as “the Thing as referent of undeterminacy or *materia prima*, hails blackness’s capacity to release the imagination from the grips of the subject and its forms, which is but a first gesture in regard to a mode of thinking that contemplates virtuality and actuality all and at once.”¹⁹ Releasing the imagination is not the promise of life; rather, it separates anything we might call “life” from form, releasing pure matter.²⁰ The separation imagines existence anew, an existence that vital philosophy and the human sciences cannot capture and re-present, since it is outside form. Black rawness exists without value in an antiblack world as always already dead. Or, as David Marriott suggests, “every black death has the dual property of zero and surplus—since it can be established as servile, it can be destroyed as valueless.”²¹ Raw “(in)existence” lacks relation between other identities and differences, presenting a whole in Badiou’s presentation of existence, and this rawness lacks the intrinsic value of the empty set.²² Given this nonplace of blackness, da Silva suggests we turn to matter rather than situating blackness in form.

The procedure works to separate form (by breaking it up) from matter (that which is composed). As a strategy, decomposition deploys form to destroy form. To begin this procedure, da Silva identifies mathematical reasoning as grounding “the modern knowledge program.” Formalization (through Kantian Categories, the Subject without qualities, the Cogito, etc.) depends on mathematical form—logic, calculation, proofs, and so on—to reproduce antiblack violence. She begins with the “Equation of value,” a form that posits life (1) as ultimate value and negative life (-1). Within an antiblack world, “blackness occupies the place of negative life—that is, life that has negative value, that *does not matter*.”²³ Next, through a series of arithmetical procedures, she uses form to expose how blackness

has “the capacity to unravel modern thought without reproducing the violence housed in knowledge and in the scene of value.”²⁴

$$1[\text{life}] + (-1)[\text{blackness}] = 0$$

This equation brings us to the nullification of life when blackness is factored in. I would suggest that the addition sign marks the operation of *inclusion or incorporation* in political philosophy and programs. Thus philosophies of democratic idealism and pragmatism, for example, will also fail to distribute life *equally* because the non-value of black life nullifies the operation.

Since mathematical thinking, and modern thought in general, relies on determinacy and effectivity (cause-and-effect reasoning, or “effective causation” as she would call it) to understand value, da Silva uses multiplication and division to express a relation of power (or imposition). The relation between cause and effect is one of power, since one element assumes a powerful (or positive) position as the “origin” (cause) of another’s emergence (effect). It is also a relation of determinacy, because the result of such a relationship imposes a unilateral *possibility* on another element. Thus value is both an effect and a determination, creating a mathematical tautology of power. This produces two additional equations:

(a) $1[\text{life}] \times (-1)[\text{blackness}] = -1[\text{a negative sublation of form, unlike Hegel's dialectical synthesis}]$

(b) $1[\text{life}] \div (-1)[\text{blackness}] = -1$

In both equations, when a relation of efficient causality is formalized, blackness remains as a negative value. She then returns to the nullifying power of blackness (0) to demonstrate the devastating potential of blackness. This is to suggest, again, that negative life (-1) is without value (0). If we then apply the procedure to blackness’s non-value, mathematical form unravels:

(c) $1[\text{life}] \times 0[\text{blackness}] = 0[\text{the obliteration of form}]$

(d) $1[\text{life}] \div 0[\text{blackness}] = \infty - \infty[\text{infinity minus infinity}]$

The result of da Silva’s mathematical experiment is to reveal black destruction within a relation of power and value formation: obliteration

and unthinking. With the multiplicative procedure, blackness engulfs value, such that the form is nullified. In other words, blackness invalidates relation itself, since its value overwhelms the equation. Antiblackness cannot yield a positive sublation for blackness in the dialectic, much to the chagrin of democratic idealists. Dividing by blackness, however, yields complete nonsense, “something” without form, or more precisely, a “something” that form cannot accommodate. Mathematically, dividing by 0 exposes the inability to preserve the sense of form (its thinking) through its procedure of power. Da Silva states: “Instead of the sublation or obliteration of the form, this procedure [the division] has no result because it is impossible to divide something by zero. I have chosen (infinity – infinity) or (infinity/infinity) to picture the result because it is undeterminable, it has no form, or *materia prima*—that which has no value because it exists without form.”²⁵ What form cannot accommodate is *pure matter*—the condition in which the imposition of value is rendered nonsense and unthinkable. Mathematically, the knowledge program of modernity imposes value on all life-forms (form of life) as either positive or negative. Value, then, is a *source* of antiblack violence. To put it differently, in answer to the question “Does black life matter?,” a black feminist poethics might respond, “Let’s hope not!” (not to suggest inferiority but to steer us away from formal violence). Not *matter*, remaining entangled in the scene of value imposition, is the only possibility for “another world: namely, that which exists without time and out of space, in the plenum.”²⁶

Da Silva imagines the complete destruction of form as a possibility for blackness. We might call her destructive approach an “immanent critique” of sorts in which mathematical reasoning is turned against this very reasoning to obliterate form. But is such a complete separation possible? Perhaps it is impossible to disentangle matter from form, especially since modern violence binds these together in devastating ways. That is, $\infty - \infty$ (or infinity minus infinity) is the *formalization of mathematical nonsense* or the form destruction assumes in calculative thinking. Thus the presentation of pure matter (plenum) can be *thinkable* only through form itself. Thinking pure matter still requires pure form—form as oxymoron, nonsense, impasse, or impossibility (or form as Badiou’s empty set). If we cannot

completely wrest form from matter, if we cannot sanitize formal violence yet simultaneously maintain the “purity” of matter, we are caught in a mathematical fantasy of reproduction and redeployment. I would propose that we destroy both matter and form—a mathematical nihilism. This represents another mathematical fantasy, one that resists the discourse of purity and separation, one that desires the destruction of modernity’s dualism (form/matter). If, as I suggest, form and matter are inseparable and purity is but a fantasy of separation, I would like to envision destroying both—since we will never achieve pure matter apart from form. Such nihilism would employ the destructive approach to mathematics da Silva brilliantly introduces, by turning mathematical reasoning against itself, but would not aim to preserve matter (or form). It would require (un)thinking existence. If we destroy both matter and form, what is left? The aftermath, or remnants of destruction, is not something I can present with apodictic certainty. But this is the risk of destruction: a risk into an abyss of the unknown, contravening mathematical compulsions of certainty, calculation, and predictability. Such nihilism presents destruction as *the only hope for blacks contending with regenerative and inexhaustible antiblackness through form and matter*. Mathematical nihilism requires the “end of the world,” since the form/matter dualism sustains the world, its knowledge, and possibilities. This fantasy of total destruction promises neither an Event, a Numerical Burst, nor purity, since such promises just reproduce and codify antiblack violence. A catastrophe is necessary not only to disabuse us of purity myths and numerical transformation but also to open a space for imagining a different existence.

Catastrophe Theory

Badiou, McKittrick, and da Silva present us with a choice: pure form/suspicious form, or pure matter. Should we perfect our mathematical reasoning by “doing the math” or decompose mathematical reasoning by “undoing it”? I wonder, however, whether this choice between form or matter exhausts the field of possibility. What would happen, for example, if we render both form and matter unthinkable or obsolete? This would entail a *mathematical nihilism* that attempts

to escape the rigid organization of existence, noting that both matter and form are caught in antiblack imaginations.

To close, I would like to present another experiment, or unthinking. The obsolescence of both matter and form might be called “the catastrophe.” The catastrophe opens a horizon of the unthinkable, where life, death, value, and nonvalue are displaced. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, catastrophe theory, developed by the French topologist Rene Thom, is “a set of methods used to study and classify the ways in which a system can undergo sudden behavior as one or more of the variables that control it are changed continuously. Catastrophe theory is generally considered a branch of geometry because the variables and resultant behaviors are usually depicted as curves or surfaces.”²⁷ This theory enables us to understand the dynamic relation between variables, as they press against each other. It allows us to think what a sudden change in any relation might entail—it is often a catastrophic occurrence. Social scientists use this theory to predict the impact of natural disasters, social movements, discontinuous ruptures, or even benign changes. What struck me in this elaboration of catastrophe theory, however, was the example given: “A simple example of the behavior studied by catastrophe theory is the change in shape of an arched bridge, as the load on it is gradually increased. The bridge deforms in a relatively uniform manner until the load reaches a *critical value*, at which point the shape of the bridge changes suddenly—it collapses [emphasis mine].”²⁸ I would suggest that *purity* is a myth—one that sustains the violent arrangements of knowledge, power, value, and being, as Nahum Chandler has proposed.²⁹ If we do or undo math to arrive at purity, we invest in a concept that just reproduces violence. Catastrophe theory, however, enables us to speculate on the dynamic relation of two variables and on the impact of pressure on those variables—without the promise of purity or interminable skepticism. If we think about the bridge as “form” and the load (weight of cars, for example) as “matter,” then we can call the destructive violence between the two “antiblackness.” Our experiment, then, considers the *critical value* the moment of catastrophe—when *both* bridge (form) and load (matter) are destroyed—when the bridge collapses and the cars are ruined. I reread the term *critical value*

not as the affirmation and reproduction of value, but as a critique of value itself. It is *critical* because it destroys the condition of possibility for value circulation, since its aim is total destruction.

The catastrophe can be thought of as “anagrammatical,” a term Christina Sharpe uses to designate the failure of language or a rearranging of its terms to introduce something new.³⁰ The collapse of the bridge, then, is a metaphor for a certain failure—the failure of the logics and grammar of modernity to sustain black existence; the collapse of the modern world. Whatever is left from the catastrophe is precisely anagrammatical because we are forced to think outside form and matter—an anagrammar unrecognizable and terrifying. Rather than rearranging existing terms to imagine the new, mathematical nihilism seeks to destroy such terms, rendering rearrangement impossible and inoperative. It would stress the prefix *ana-* as “against” rather than “renewed” or “back.”

The collapse of mathematical reasoning, formalization, and matter would also necessitate a displacement of the terms *life* and *death*, such that black existence is not exhausted by these terms. This displacement would not reinforce what Deleuze would term “a morphology of living matter,” in his rereading of René Thom’s geometrical interventions.³¹ Not only life/death would require displacement; so would inside/outside, external/internal, immanence/transcendence, and actual/virtual. Such dualisms retain form and matter in ways that reproduce violence, since these dualisms have served as anti-black weapons. In other words, the virtual, although not captured by the actual for Deleuze, is just another *form* of thinking in which fantasies of separation are reconfigured as ideality and immanence. The anagrammatical would destroy such morphologies, and I contend that fantasies of virtuality and immanence are just as violent as form and matter. The catastrophe leads into a nihilistic abyss.

We might call this collapse “the end of the world,” a catastrophe in which the two orientations sustaining the world (matter and form) are both destroyed. In short, preserving either matter or form provides no *certainty* of futurity or empowered existence. At the very least, however, the catastrophe might bring us to another definition of the “Thing”—that without form or matter—in all its terror.

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Notes

1. Badiou, "Toward a New Concept of Existence."
2. Bradwell, "Do the Math on #AllLivesMatter."
3. Bradwell, "Do the Math on #AllLivesMatter."
4. Bradwell, "Do the Math on #AllLivesMatter."
5. Da Silva, " $1 \text{ (life)} \div 0 \text{ (blackness)} = \infty - \infty \text{ or } \infty/\infty$."
6. See Agamben, *Highest Poverty*.
7. Marriott, "Perfect Beauty of Black Death."
8. Bradwell, "Do the Math on #AllLivesMatter."
9. Badiou, "Towards a New Concept of Existence."
10. Badiou, "Towards a New Concept of Existence."
11. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*.
12. Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*.
13. Badiou, *Century*, 102–3.
14. McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," 23.
15. McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," 25.
16. McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," 23.
17. Da Silva, "Speculations on a Transformative Theory of Justice."
18. Da Silva, " $1 \text{ (life)} \div 0 \text{ (blackness)} = \infty - \infty \text{ or } \infty/\infty$."
19. Da Silva, "In the Raw."
20. Although da Silva does not directly critique Agamben, there is a dynamic debate between his notion of "bare life" and da Silva's "pure matter." Da Silva might argue that delinking life from form is violence *only for the human*—who already has positive value. But since blackness is without such value from the start, blacks do not have "life" (as the union between form and life) the way the human does—form of life is a racial privilege. The only hope for blackness is to destroy such form, and racial privilege with it, by releasing blackness *in the raw*.

21. Marriott, "Perfect Beauty of Black Death."
22. I am using the term (*in*)existence as a nod to Badiou's *inexistent*, since the *inexistent* has such a low intensity between identities that this relation is rendered obsolete. It is not clear whether, for Badiou, the *inexistent* moves us closer to the Thing, but I do think that this is the point of da Silva's intervention—we must strive for the *inexistent* as rawness without formal identity.
23. Da Silva, " 1 (life) \div 0 (blackness) = $\infty - \infty$ or ∞/∞ ."
24. Da Silva, " 1 (life) \div 0 (blackness) = $\infty - \infty$ or ∞/∞ ."
25. Da Silva, " 1 (life) \div 0 (blackness) = $\infty - \infty$ or ∞/∞ ."
26. Da Silva, " 1 (life) \div 0 (blackness) = $\infty - \infty$ or ∞/∞ ."
27. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Catastrophe Theory."
28. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Catastrophe Theory."
29. Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro*.
30. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 76–78.
31. Deleuze, *Fold*, 16–17.

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