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## Nothingness without Reserve: Fred Moten contra Heidegger, Sartre, and Schelling

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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary critical theory and black studies have witnessed a surge in theoretical accounts of “blackness” as “nothingness”. Drawing on the work of the poet and cultural theorist Fred Moten, this article offers a reading of this recent postulation of blackness as “nothingness” in light of some of the similar theoretical endeavors in post-Kantian European philosophy. By comparing Moten’s “paraontological” conception of nothingness to Heidegger’s self-nihilating nothing, Sartre’s relative nothingness, as well as Schelling’s notion of absolute nothingness, this article argues that Moten’s paraontology presents a more robust and systematic conception of nothingness than those of Heidegger, Sartre, and Schelling. By way of this comparison with these “canonical” accounts from European philosophy, this article highlights not only the unique features of Moten’s sophisticated formulation of nothingness, but also some of unacknowledged presumptions and prejudices of traditional metaphysics which Moten’s work calls into question.

### KEYWORDS

Fred Moten; Heidegger; Sartre; Schelling; nothingness; blackness

In his landmark work *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (2008, 1, 82) strikingly asserts that “the black is not a man” and that “ontology ... does not permit us to understand the being of the black man”. Fanon’s ontological account of the difference between black and white human existence – which Frank Wilderson (2010, 57) later posits as “the unbridgeable gap between Black being and Human life” – has prompted much interest among contemporary critical theory and black studies in questions of ontology and metaphysics and how they may inform one’s understanding of the notion of “blackness” (see Hart 2020; Sharpe 2016; Chandler 2014). With this growing interest in ontology, a number of black critical theorists have turned to Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics as a source of inspiration to develop “ontological” critiques of “anti-blackness” (see Warren 2018; Jackson 2020). For if the human being (Dasein) is – as Heidegger submits – the being who has a unique relation to Being itself, and that the very notion of “human” – as Wilderson argues – is premised on anti-blackness, then the discourse of Being itself is to be associated with “anti-blackness”.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, just as traditional

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ontology or “metaphysics” is to be understood as a philosophical expression of anti-blackness insofar as the notion of “Being” is normatively associated with “anti-blackness”, “blackness” is to be construed in terms of “nothingness”.<sup>2</sup>

However, while the recent “ontological turn” in black studies has received much attention in the humanities as well as the broader academy, there has been relatively little traditional philosophical engagement with the distinctiveness and significance of these bold metaphysical and ontological claims.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on the influential works of the leading black studies theorist and poet Fred Moten and particularly his programmatic essay “Blackness and Nothingness” (Moten 2013a), this article offers a reading of the postulation of blackness as nothingness in recent black studies not merely as a rhetorical effort to present social and cultural critiques through metaphysical terminology, but as a speculative philosophical endeavor which presents an affirmative conception of “nothingness” at a level of theoretical sophistication comparable to the celebrated accounts in recent continental philosophy.<sup>4</sup> While Moten’s scholarly work is developed partly in conversation – and in continuation – with notably non-European intellectual traditions such as the Black Radical Tradition and the Kyoto School (see esp. Moten 2003; 2016, 21–22; 2018b, 205–7, 213–4), as this article demonstrates, his “paraontological” construal of blackness as nothingness can very much be understood as a critical response to the conceptions of “nothingness” in post-Kantian European philosophy.<sup>5</sup> By comparing Moten’s articulation of nothingness to a number of “canonical” accounts in the history of philosophy, particularly those of Heidegger (section one), Sartre (section two), and Schelling (section three), this article not only presents a formal systematic philosophical reading of Moten’s “paraontology”.<sup>6</sup> It moreover seeks to highlight the unique insights

<sup>1</sup>Following conventional (post-)Heideggerian philosophical terminology, “Being” is capitalized throughout this article when it pertains to the Being of beings.

<sup>2</sup>See Moten (2018a, 21): “Blackness is ... nothingness ... Blackness names what is not (there).” See also Sharpe (2016); Silva (2017); Warren (2018).

<sup>3</sup>See Sharpe (2012): “For some people in and outside of the U.S. academy black studies is, still, the antithesis of theory, the antithesis of thinking.” See also Warren (2017, 220): “Fred Moten’s work has become central in discussions of blackness, esthetics, and sociality, but very rarely do scholars engage his work as philosophy.”

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of the ontological accounts of nothingness in recent continental philosophy, see Leung (2021).

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Moten’s (2018a, 1–32) engagement with Kant.

<sup>6</sup>Given that Moten engages directly with Heidegger in a number of his work, and Sartre was one of Fanon’s central conversation partners in *Black Skin, White Masks*, which is a key influence for Moten, it is not surprising that there are certain philosophical affinities not only between Moten and Heidegger, but also between Moten and Sartre. As noted by Schelling scholars such as Gardner (2008), Frank (2004), and Andrew Bowie (1993, esp. 25, 63, 111–12, 151–52), there are also some remarkable parallels between Sartre’s and Schelling’s philosophies: that despite Sartre’s unfamiliarity with Schelling’s work, “Sartre’s attempt to build a counter-ontology to Hegel’s ... involves an unwitting discovery of Schelling’s alternative path of development of German idealism” (Gardner 2008, 263). By extension, even if Moten does not explicitly engage with Schelling, his post-Fanonian reflections on “nothingness” may similarly involve “an unwitting discovery” of Schelling’s counter-Hegelian idealism. Additionally, Schelling’s post-Kantian metaphysical speculation of that which is “in itself” also resembles Moten’s interest in Kant’s understanding of “the black and the thing (*das Ding*)” as “anti- or ante-intentional” structures which disrupt the laws of understanding – that “blackness” is something akin to an “animaterial, metaphysical thing in itself [*Ding an sich*] that exceeds itself” (Moten 2018a, 15–16). Moten’s post-Kantian account of blackness as a supra-phenomenal or even metaphysical “in itself that exceeds itself” notably resonates with early Schelling’s post-Kantian (and post-Fichtean) conception of Nature (which carries certain traits of his later notion of the Absolute) that is unconditioned and absolute in itself but nonetheless “exceeds itself”. Indeed, for early Schelling, Nature “exceeds itself” since it is not inanimate but autonomous and productive – as Bowie (1993, 36) puts it: “The ‘productivity’ [of Nature] is not, then, a separate, inaccessible thing in itself (even though it is not an object of knowledge), because it is also at work in the subject, as that which moves the subject beyond itself.” See Bowie (1993, 30–44, esp. 31–36). Note also the surprising parallel between what Bowie (1993, 47) calls “the resistance of the object world” in Schelling’s early philosophy and Moten’s (2003, 1–24, 233–254) account of blackness in terms of what he calls the “resistance of the object” (see especially the discussion of Kant’s *Ding* in Moten 2003, 243–50).

Moten's work can offer to the perennial philosophical reflections on questions pertaining to Being and nothingness as well as some of the unacknowledged presumptions – what Sartre (2003, 265) would call “intellectual prejudices” – that underlie many traditional accounts of ontology within the European tradition.

## The Ontological Priority of Nothingness over Being

At the heart of Moten's rendition of blackness as nothingness is what he calls the “para-ontological distinction” between blackness and black beings, which is modelled after Heidegger's ontological difference between Being and beings (see Moten 2008a, 1744; 2008b, 179–80).<sup>7</sup> To quote Moten:

The paraontological distinction between blackness and blacks allows us no longer to be enthralled by the notion that blackness is a property that belongs to blacks ... but also because ultimately it allows us to detach blackness from the [ontological] question of (the meaning of) being. (Moten 2013a, 749–50)

For Moten (2013b, 242), this demarcation between blackness and black people is a point where he diverges from the Afro-pessimism of Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton which has gained much traction in recent critical theory and cultural studies. However, Moten's thesis that blackness is distorted by traditional ontology is very much in continuation with Fanon's (2008, 82) aforementioned proposition that “ontology ... does not permit us to understand the being of the black”, which Wilderson (2010, 57–58) identifies as a key commitment of Afro-pessimism.

Although Moten shares with Afro-pessimism this emphasis on the intricate relationship between blackness and ontology, as a professed “black optimist” he differs from the Afro-pessimist claim that the status of blackness as a “void” or “non-being” is produced and structured by the anti-blackness of a “new ontology” introduced through modern transatlantic slave trade (see Wilderson 2010, 17–18; Moten 2013a, 737–38, 742, 773–74, 778–79; cf. Moten 2008a, esp. 1745–47). As opposed to seeing blackness as an ontological status that is introduced or even produced by anti-blackness, Moten (2013a, 739) argues that “blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulative power that is supposed to have brought it into existence”. For Moten (2013a, 739), blackness is not only prior to the “new ontology” of modern slavery, but is in fact prior to *all* ontology: “blackness is prior to ontology ... blackness is the anoriginal displacement of ontology, that it is ontology's anti- and ante-foundation, ontology's underground.” In other words, blackness precedes anti-blackness, and must not be determined by any traditional “ontology” that is informed by the “intellectual prejudices” of anti-blackness. Because, in Moten's view, to do so would effectively be formally subordinating blackness to the traditional ontological discourse of Being *qua* anti-blackness, thereby re-instating the anti-black normative gaze of the white man in which, as Fanon puts it, “not only must the black man be black; but he must be black *in relation to the white man*” (Fanon 2008, 82–83, emphasis added; see Moten 2016, 19–20).

Accordingly, we can see why Moten places much emphasis on the ontological priority of blackness/nothingness – an emphasis which finds much resemblance in Heidegger's

<sup>7</sup>See Moten (2007): “blackness or the thinking of blackness, which must be understood in what some not so strange combination of Nahum Chandler and Martin Heidegger might call its paraontological distinction from black people.” Cf. Chandler (2014).

notion of nothingness or “the nothing” (*das Nichts*) in his 1929 Freiburg inaugural lecture *What is Metaphysics?*. As Heidegger (1993, 97) notes in this much-debated lecture:

Is the nothing given only because the “not”, i.e. negation, is given? Or is it the other way around? Are negation and the “not” given only because the nothing is given? ... We assert that the nothing is more original than the “not” and negation.

Just as blackness/nothingness is for Moten not the product of some operation undertaken by Being (e.g. negation), nothingness is for Heidegger not an outcome of the negation of beings but rather “more original” and indeed ontologically prior to negation.

Following this insistence that nothingness is not conditioned or produced by negation or anything else (but is rather the ground which makes negation possible),<sup>8</sup> Heidegger (1993) controversially proposes that nothingness is constituted by nothing other than its very own *sui generis* operation of “nihilation”:

[T]he action of the nothing ... is the essence of the nothing: nihilation. It is neither an annihilation of beings nor does it spring from a negation. Nihilation will not submit to calculation in terms of annihilation and negation. The nothing itself nihilates [*Das Nichts selbst nichtet*]. (103)

Without entering the debate over the meaning of Heidegger’s thesis that “nothingness nihilates” (see Inwood 1999), it suffices here to note that Heidegger (1993) associates the self-nihilation of nothingness with “the Being of beings” insofar as “the originally nihilating nothing ... makes possible in advance the revelation of beings in general” (103). To quote Heidegger one last time:

Only on the ground of the original revelation of the nothing can human existence approach and penetrate beings ... For human existence, the nothing makes possible the openedness of beings as such. The nothing does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings; rather, it originally belongs to their essential unfolding as such. In the Being of beings the nihilation of the nothing occurs ... The nothing does not remain the indeterminate opposite of beings but reveals itself as belonging to the Being of beings. (103–4, 108)

Insofar as there is this ontological coincidence of the nothing and the Being of beings, Heidegger notes that Hegel’s proposition that “Pure Being and pure Nothing are therefore the same” (108) is correct (while explicitly dissociating himself from Hegel’s argument from indeterminateness).

It is beyond the scope of this article to expound Heidegger’s differences from Hegel, but it is worth observing here that Moten would take issue with Heidegger’s and Hegel’s formal identification of Being with nothingness.<sup>9</sup> Because for Moten (2013a, 749), as for the Afro-pessimists, the very point of speaking of blackness in terms of nothingness is to highlight the “unbridgeable” gulf between blackness and humanness/whiteness *qua* anti-blackness – a gulf so “unbridgeable” that it can only be understood in terms of the mutually exclusive dichotomy between nothingness and Being. This is of course

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<sup>8</sup>See Heidegger (1993, 105): “negation is grounded in the not that springs from the nihilation of the nothing. But negation is also only one way of nihilating, that is, only one sort of behavior that has been grounded beforehand in the nihilation of the nothing.”

<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of the notion of nothingness in the philosophies of Hegel, Heidegger, and Nishida Kitarō (who is also one of Moten’s influences for his formulation of nothingness), see Krummel (2018).

not the only place where Moten differs from Heidegger's (notably) Eurocentric outlook.<sup>10</sup> But this divergence from Heidegger (and Hegel) is worth mentioning as it highlights some of Moten's key insights on the issue of the relation between Being and nothingness, which becomes clearer as we compare his paraontology to Sartre's phenomenological ontology in the following section.<sup>11</sup>

## Between Relative and Absolute Nothingness

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (2003) famously presents two ontological categories: being in-itself (*en soi*) and for-itself (*pour soi*), which are respectively Sartre's characterizations of "Being" and "consciousness". These notions are the two named in the title of Sartre's masterwork *Being and Nothingness*: Whereas "Being" corresponds to the in-itself, "nothingness" (*néant*) refers to consciousness or what Sartre calls for-itself. According to Sartre, his characterization of consciousness as nothingness is simply a definitional outworking of Husserlian phenomenology: "All consciousness, as Husserl has shown, is consciousness of something. This means that there is no consciousness which is not a *positing* of a transcendent object, or if you prefer, that consciousness has no 'content'" (7). To the extent that consciousness is by definition always conscious of something that is outside of itself, consciousness is structurally "nothing" because it does not – and cannot – have any substantial innate content: "Consciousness has nothing substantial ... because it is a total void [*vide*] (since the world is outside it)" (12, translation modified). For Sartre, consciousness for-itself is always conscious of that which "is", what he calls the in-itself or sometimes simply "Being itself".<sup>12</sup> Given that consciousness is by definition always conscious of something that is *outside of* itself (i.e. conscious of something that is *other than* itself), Sartre argues that there is always an "original negation" underlying all acts of consciousness and the very constitution of consciousness for-itself: "the for-itself constitutes itself as *not being* the thing" (197, cf. 239). It is this negative relation between consciousness (the "for-itself") and the being which it is conscious of (the "in-itself") which underlies Sartre's entire ontological schema (196–7).

This ontological opposition between the in-itself and for-itself – or indeed between "Being" and "nothingness" – provides the basis for Sartre's critique of Heidegger's aforementioned assertion that "nothingness nihilates itself":

We can not grant to nothingness the property of "nihilating itself". For although the expression "to nihilate itself" is thought of as removing from nothingness the last semblance of being, we must recognize that only *Being* can nihilate itself; however it comes about, in

<sup>10</sup>See Moten (2003, 147): "for Heidegger, to be is to be ... a *European* thing, perhaps even, at the end of this declension, European Man."

<sup>11</sup>As alluded to above, Heidegger argues that traditional metaphysics has focused on beings (instead of the Being of beings) and thereby have forgotten Being itself – which is why he argues that the reflection on "instead of nothing" could help one re-orientate oneself to attend to the meaning of Being itself. In a sense, Moten's paraontology of nothingness may be regarded as a critique of traditional metaphysics that goes further beyond Heidegger's. Unlike Heidegger, Moten's critique would be that, by focusing exclusively on beings *and* Being itself instead of nothingness, traditional ontology has effectively overlooked nothingness and consequently "forgotten" blackness *qua* nothingness. Cf. Warren (2017, 227): "according to Moten ... We forget blackness because we are unable to disentangle our investigations from the thinking and procedure of Western ontology and metaphysics."

<sup>12</sup>See Sartre (2003, esp. 21–22). Although Sartre's conception of Being admittedly differs from Heidegger's, as shown below, his critique of Heidegger's treatment of Being and nothingness is still instructive for our analysis of Moten's paraontology.

order to nihilate itself, it must *be*. But Nothingness is *not*. If we can speak of it, it is only because it possesses an appearance of being, a borrowed being ... Nothingness does not nihilate itself, Nothingness “is nihilated”. (Sartre 2003, 46)

Following a philosophical position that can be traced back to Parmenides’ assertion that “for it *is* for Being, but nothing is *not*”,<sup>13</sup> Sartre holds that since Being and nothingness are two incompatible and mutually exclusive categories, it is not possible for nothingness (which is *not*) to nihilate itself, for only Being – something that *is* – can nihilate itself” (see Leung 2020).

While Moten would agree with Sartre’s postulation of an unbridgeable gap between Being and nothingness, he would presumably object to Sartre’s account of nothingness as possessing “a borrowed being”. For whereas Moten (2013a, 739) insists that nothingness is “ontologically prior to” Being as its ground or foundation, Sartre (2003) argues that:

Being is prior to nothingness and establishes the ground for it. By this we must understand not only that Being has a logical precedence over nothingness but also that it is from Being that nothingness derives concretely its efficacy ... nothingness, *which is not*, can have only a borrowed existence, and it gets its being from Being. (40)

For Sartre, not only does nothingness exist only by way of a borrowed existence from Being, nothingness *qua* consciousness for-itself is more specifically “defined ontologically as a *lack of being*” (586). Insofar as nothingness is defined as a “lack” or indeed a “privation” of being (638), Sartre’s account of nothingness is always understood *in relation to* Being: nothingness *qua* consciousness for-itself always exists *in relation to* – indeed it exists *for* (*pour*) – the in-itself that it is conscious of (112, 182, 475). To this extent, Sartrean nothingness is what one would call a *relative* nothingness, as opposed to an *absolute* nothingness like the one advanced by Moten (see Frank 2004, 157–59; cf. Moten 2013a, 741–73, 749–751; Moten 2018a, 26, 244).

Indeed, as Moten (2016, 21–22) writes: “Relative nothingness is the nothingness we usually associate with Existentialism, with Camus or Sartre. Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* is concerned with ... relative nothingness.” As opposed to Sartre’s “relative” account of nothingness as a “lack” or “void”, Moten (2017, 241) insists that “blackness [is] misunderstood if it is merely understood as void; nothingness [is] misunderstood if it is understood as relative” and not absolute.<sup>14</sup> According to Moten, the distinction between “relative” and “absolute” nothingness is what fundamentally distinguishes his paraontology from Afro-pessimism:

Nothingness is [often] too simply understood to (as if it were some epidermal livery) (some higher) being and is therefore relative as opposed to absolute ... From [this commonly] assumed position, blackness is nothing, that is, the relative nothingness of the impossible, pathological subject and his fellows. I believe it is from that standpoint that Afro-pessimism identifies and articulates the imperative to embrace that nothingness which is, of necessity, relative. (Moten 2013a, 755, 741; cf. 2018a, 197)

<sup>13</sup>Fragment 6.2 of Parmenides’ poem, as translated by Barnes (1982, 124).

<sup>14</sup>Moten’s statement here could also be understood as a critique of the Afro-pessimist portrayal of black existence in terms of “void” (see Wilderson 2010, xi, 19, 38, 80, 109–111, 141–42, 236).



But if blackness or nothingness is indeed “ontologically prior to” Being or anti-blackness, then it must not be defined *in relation to* Being as a *relative* nothingness (*à la* Fanon’s critical remark on how black existence “must be black *in relation to* the white man” [Fanon 2008, 82–83, emphasis added]). Thus, as opposed to “the condition of relative nothing” which Fanon (in Moten’s reading) “takes to be the white man’s manufacture of the black” (Moten 2013a, 751), Moten (2018a, 26, 244) maintains that blackness must be understood in terms of *absolute* nothingness, as “what Fanon refers to as ‘absolutely nothing’ – a nothingness without reserve” (Moten 2013a, 761; citing Fanon 2008, 12).

As we further consider what Moten envisions as “absolute nothingness” in the next section, let us turn to Schelling’s metaphysics to see how his conception of the Absolute *Ungrund* can help us further appreciate the rigor and robustness of Moten’s paraontological articulation of blackness as nothingness.

### Nothingness as the “Anti- and Ante-Foundation” of Being

Schelling’s speculative metaphysics is notoriously complicated and difficult; instead of examining the various complex philosophical systems he produced over his long career which spans over 60 years, this section focuses on works of his middle period, offering snippets from his famous *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809) and *Ages of the World* (1811–15) as points of comparison to explicate Moten’s paraontology. Although Schelling is not a name that appears in Moten’s published work, a number of the conceptual structures and motifs of his speculative account of nothingness of his middle period are very much echoed by some of the metaphysical claims of Moten’s paraontology. For instance, across a number of his works, including his 1810 Stuttgart seminars delivered between composing *Of Human Freedom* and *Ages of the World*, Schelling speaks of two kinds of nothingness following the ancient Greek distinction between “*ouk on*” and “*mē on*”,<sup>15</sup> which may be understood respectively in terms of “absolute” and “relative” nothingness.<sup>16</sup> According to Schelling, whereas relative nothingness or non-being [*das Nichtseyende*] (*mē on*) exists only as a privation in relation to a being that *is* (or even to Being itself), absolute nothingness [*das Nichts*] (*ouk on*) is absolutely *nothing* in and of itself.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps Schelling’s most striking account of absolute nothingness (*das Nichts*) is found in his 1815 draft of *Ages of the World*, where he describes the Absolute – which he also names “the pure Godhead” – as an absolute nothingness that is above and beyond all being:

[T]he highest is exclusively above all being... What then could be thought above all being [*über allem Seyn*], or what is it that neither has being nor does not have being

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Schelling (1994, 209). See also Seidel (1976, 121–22, 125–26); cf. Frank (2004, 160–62).

<sup>16</sup>The following rendition of *ouk on* and *mē on* in terms of “absolute” and “relative” nothingness follows Manfred Frank’s (2004, 160–62) and Paul Tillich’s (1967, I:172, I:179, I:188, I:232–253, II:20–21) interpretation of Schelling’s distinction.

<sup>17</sup>See Schelling (2009, 14, 86–87); cf. Schelling (2001, 131–33). It is worth adding here that Moten explicitly designates his work as a “paraontology” that is concerned with *nothingness per se*, and not (just) a “meontology” (or what Wilderson [2010, 5] calls the “non-ontology” of blackness in Afro-pessimism) that is concerned *non-being* (*mē on*) that is always defined in relation to Being by the prefix “non”.



[*weder seyend sei noch auch nichtseyend*]? And they answer themselves modestly: Nothing [*das Nichts*].

It certainly is nothing, but in the sense that the pure Godhead is nothing [*das Nichts*] ... it is above all nothingness because it itself is everything [*über allem Nichts, weil sie alles selbst ist*]. (Schelling 2009, 23–24)

According to Schelling (2009, 25), the Absolute is said to be “nothing yet everything” because it is beyond all oppositions and distinctions – including the very dichotomy between Being and non-being, for it is an absolute nothingness that is not (negatively) defined by “Being” or “everything” by being its opposite or its negation.<sup>18</sup>

Although the formulation of the Absolute as “nothingness” is not exactly found in *Of Human Freedom*, the Absolute is described by Schelling as “non-ground” or indeed an “un-ground” (*Ungrund*) in this much-celebrated earlier work:

There must be a being *before* all ground and before all that exists, thus generally before any duality—how can we call it anything other than the original ground [*Urgrund*] or the *unground* [*Ungrund*]? (Schelling 2006, 68–69, original emphasis)<sup>19</sup>

To the extent that Schelling’s (2006, 69) “unground” is one “that precedes any ground”, this formulation of the Absolute clearly resembles Moten’s (2013a, 739) paraontological account of black nothingness as the “anti- and ante-foundation” of Being. For the Absolute is not only the “ante-foundation” that is “before all ground and before all that exists” (Schelling 2006, 69), as the “unground” of all being it is moreover an absolute nothingness (*Nichts*) or even “not-Being” (*Nichtseyen*) which operates as an “anti-foundation” that grounds – and simultaneously ungrounds or *anti*-grounds – Being itself.<sup>20</sup>

In light of these parallels between Moten’s paraontology and Schelling’s metaphysics, we can see how Moten appears to go beyond Schelling – and also Heidegger and Sartre – in his postulation and affirmation of the primacy of nothingness.<sup>21</sup> Whereas Schelling (2006, 69) still describes the Absolute here as “*a being*” – as opposed to a “nothing” or nothingness – that is “before all ground and before all that exists” which suggests an inadvertent prioritization of Being over nothingness,<sup>22</sup> Moten explicitly posits blackness *qua* nothingness as *both* the *ur*-ground and the *un*-ground of Being – or indeed what he calls

<sup>18</sup>One may further compare Schelling’s formulation of the Absolute’s transcendence beyond opposites to Moten (2015: 268–69) account of “the undercommon”: “[With regards to] the difference between the negation of P (here called the not-P) and Q ... what is excluded here is a (de)generative, expansive, invaginative, and imaginative totality – given in the undercommon intellectual works and lives of the ones who are constrained to mind their Ps and Qs – that is, neither the negation of P nor Q.”

<sup>19</sup>Love and Schmidt’s translation of *Ungrund* as “non-ground” is here rendered literally as “unground” instead (see the following note below). Schelling (2006, 69) continues his description of “the Absolute” in terms of nothingness and not-Being: “Since it precedes all opposites, these cannot be distinguishable in it nor can they be present in any way. Therefore, it cannot be described as the identity of opposites; it can only be described as the absolute *indifference* of both ... [This] indifference is its own being separate from all opposition, a being against which all opposites ruin themselves, that is nothing else than their very not-Being [*Nichtseyen*] ... for this reason, [the Absolute] also has no predicate, except as the very lacking of a predicate, without it being on that account a nothingness or non-thing [*ein Nichts oder ein Unding wäre*]”.

<sup>20</sup>The notion of “unground” (*Ungrund*) also appears in Schelling’s 1811 first draft of *Ages of the World*, where he defines it as “eternity” itself. See Schelling (2019, 154), where *Ungrund* is translated literally as “unground”.

<sup>21</sup>In addition to their views on absolute nothingness, there are further parallels between young Schelling’s and (early) Moten’s interest in art and aesthetics as a source for theoretical inspiration and between later Schelling’s and (the more recent) Moten’s engagement with mysticism. See, respectively, Schelling (1978, esp. 219–36); Moten (2003); Schelling (2007, 171–80); Moten (2013a, 750, 753–54).

<sup>22</sup>Here one may recall the affinities between Schelling’s and Sartre’s philosophies (see Gardner 2008; Frank 2004).

the “(under)ground” of all things: “Blackness is the in/audible, in/visible, subterranean, and submarine focal point” that is “the ground, the earth, the dirt, under the feet and the institutions” of the ontological discourse of Being *qua* anti-blackness; yet at the same time it is also “the buried, hidden, underground that undermines what it is supposed to uphold” (Moten 2018a, 14; cf. 2013a, 739). With this formal identification of nothingness with blackness and of Being with *anti*-blackness, Moten’s paraontological outlook not only maintains an axiomatic opposition between Being *qua* *anti*-blackness and blackness *qua* absolute nothingness, with the latter as the *anti*-foundation or *unground* (*Ungrund*) of former.<sup>23</sup> Moten’s black nothingness is moreover *also* the primal ground (*Urgrund*) or *ante*-foundation of Being itself: It is Being *qua* anti-blackness that is defined by – and *in relation to* – blackness *qua* nothingness, and not vice versa (*à la* Sartrean relative nothingness).

Indeed, Moten’s (2013a, 739) assertion that blackness/nothingness is “ontologically prior to the logistics and regulatory power” of Being *qua* anti-blackness is directly opposed to the traditional position of Sartre’s (2003, 40) aforementioned insistence that “Being is prior to nothingness and establishes the ground [*fond*] for it”. As though reversing Sartre’s formulation of nothingness as a relation to Being (and echoing Fanon’s aforementioned critique of the ontological definition of “black[ness] in relation to the white man”), according to Moten (and Stefano Harney), “Whiteness is nothing but *a relation to* blackness” (Harney and Moten 2013, 55, emphasis added). Being *qua* anti-blackness can only *be* as a negation of blackness itself; without blackness, Being would not be at all because it would no longer exist as “*anti*-blackness” – as the negation and product of blackness. What we find in Moten’s paraontology is thus a reversal of the traditional metaphysical or even onto-theological privileging of Being over nothingness, where nothingness becomes the center or even “ground” of everything. Being only “is” by virtue of being in an antithetic relation with absolute nothingness; it only exists as “anti-nothingness” (as anti-blackness) or what Schelling calls “not non-being” (*nicht nicht Seyenden*). In other words, Being as *anti*-blackness is always merely relative, whereas blackness *qua* nothingness is *absolute*: as if echoing Schelling’s speculative notion of the Absolute, blackness is what Moten (2013a, 751) calls “the absolute, or absolute nothingness”.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to offer a philosophical reading of Fred Moten’s construal of blackness as nothingness in light of the ontologies of Heidegger, Sartre, and Schelling. Where Heidegger’s postulation of “the Nothing” as the “ground” makes possible the “essential folding” or “revelation” of beings involves a fundamental identification of Being and nothingness, Moten maintains that nothingness is not and cannot be identical to Being, but remains ontologically prior to Being. While Moten’s commitment to the non-identity of Being and nothingness is shared by Sartre, contrary to Sartre’s “relative” account of nothingness as a privation of Being, Moten’s post-Fanonian outlook presents

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Warren (2017, 226, emphasis added): “[For Moten,] blackness is not the property of black people. Blackness becomes what philosopher Mary-Jane Rubenstein might call ‘strange wonder’ – a wonder that Heidegger described as the *groundlessness* of Being. Because it is *without ground*, this wonder cannot be objectified or owned as the property of this or that group of persons.”

a more robust and affirmative account of nothingness where Being is understood *in relation to* nothingness, and not versa: it is Being that is relative and nothingness that is absolute. In this regard, Moten's paraontological conception of "a nothingness without reserve" not only resembles the account of "absolute nothingness" in Schelling's speculative metaphysics, but his characterization of nothingness as the "anti- and ante-foundation" of Being also echoes Schelling's conceptions of the *Ungrund* and *Urgrund*. However, in comparison to Schelling's account of the Absolute *Ungrund* as "a being" which reflects an implicit ontological prioritization of Being over nothingness, Moten's explicit conception of nothingness as the "anti- and ante-foundation" of Being upholds the ontological priority of nothingness in a more rigorous and consistent manner. To this extent, Moten not only goes beyond Schelling (and Sartre) in his development of a more systematic and affirmative account of absolute nothingness as the ground of Being. Moreover, Moten's paraontology can be seen as taking a further step beyond Heidegger's attempt to overcome metaphysics by calling into question the presumed "onto-centric" character or prejudice of traditional ontological reflection (including Heidegger's) which places Being in a privileged metaphysical position akin to the divine in an onto-theological manner.<sup>24</sup>

The foregoing focus on the formal aspects of Moten's rendition of blackness as nothingness is of course not a comprehensive analysis of Moten's rich and multifaceted work which, as mentioned in the introduction, draws on a diverse range of intellectual traditions beyond modern continental philosophy.<sup>25</sup> This article's reading of Moten's paraontology in light of Heidegger's, Sartre's, and Schelling's celebrated accounts of nothingness is by no means intended to portray Moten as – or indeed reduce Moten to – a thinker who is derivative of post-Kantian European philosophy (which itself cannot be reduced to the works of Heidegger, Sartre, and Schelling). Instead, by bringing his work into conversation with these "canonical" accounts of metaphysics from the history of European philosophy, this article has sought to highlight how Moten's paraontology presents a vision of "nothingness" which is arguably more affirmative and theoretically rigorous than the accounts of Heidegger, Sartre, and Schelling. Indeed, if Moten's theoretical construal of nothingness is, as this article has argued, more robust and creative than those of Heidegger, Sartre, and Schelling, then it may be said that this article is not an exercise in situating Moten's work "*in relation to*" the works of these white philosophers in a problematic manner parallel to what Moten (following Fanon) critically sees as defining black existence "*in relation to* the white man", but rather one which situates the "onto-centric" philosophies of the white men "*in relation*

<sup>24</sup>While Schelling's association of the Absolute with God could certainly be seen as a kind of "onto-theology" (Gardner 2008), Schelling's critique of previous metaphysics as "negative" philosophy in his final period of work on "positive" philosophy could be seen as an attempt to overcome traditional metaphysics with a particular emphasis on the relation between Being and nonbeing: For the later Schelling (2007, 137), negative philosophy can only have a "a *negative* concept of that which Being itself is ... it has no concept of the being that is other than that if what is not nonbeing".

<sup>25</sup>As mentioned above, one inspiration for Moten's account of absolute nothingness is Nishida Kitarō's Kyoto School philosophy, particularly his account of "the contradictory identity of objectivity and subjectivity" which leads to absolute nothingness within what Nishida calls "the paradoxical logic of the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*" (Nishida 1987, 95–96; cited in Moten 2013a, 750–51). It is undoubtedly beyond the scope of this article to engage with Moten's interpretation of Nishida as well as Nishida's very own interpretation of Buddhist logic (not to mention their relation to Schelling's account of the absolute identity of subject and object). However, reading Moten's account of blackness as nothingness with reference to Nishida and the Buddhist logic of dependent origination may highlight further ways in which Moten's paraontology departs from – and calls into question – the unacknowledged presumptions of traditional western metaphysics. I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for this important insight.

to” Moten’s reflections on blackness and nothingness. Accordingly, *re-reading* the “canonical” ontological outlooks of Heidegger, Sartre, and Schelling *in relation to* Moten’s inversion of the traditional privilege of Being over nothingness can not only highlight the theoretical sophistication as well as unique insights of Moten’s conception of nothingness. It can moreover expose some of the unacknowledged presumptions or what Sartre (2003, 265) calls “intellectual prejudices” of traditional metaphysics and ontology, such as the philosophical prioritization of Being and the existent and the corresponding widespread intellectual prejudice against the non-existent, the absent, and indeed nothingness (cf. Morris 2008, 46–48).<sup>26</sup>

In her reading of Sartre, Katherine Morris (2008, 52, 55–56) suggests that intellectual prejudices are comparable to everyday prejudices such as racism since they cannot be addressed simply by rational arguments or other traditional philosophical modes of reasoning. Perhaps this is one reason why Moten (2018b, x) does not adhere to traditional forms and norms of philosophical argument or presentation in his attempt to articulate blackness as absolute nothingness “outside the proper philosophical enclosure”, beyond the conventional confines or “intellectual prejudices” of traditional ontology which he associates with “anti-blackness”. Indeed, Moten’s “paraontological” construal of blackness as nothingness is not simply a philosophical or metaphysical thesis, but also pertains to social life, cultural practices, and other issues and areas that are often not directly considered within the traditional theoretical study of ontology and metaphysics.<sup>27</sup> In this way, although Moten’s highly rhetorical style and markedly interdisciplinary approach to theorization may not conform to academic philosophical conventions, engaging traditional metaphysics and ontological inquiry with Moten’s innovative work – and with contemporary black studies more broadly – can not only foster further reflections on the relation between traditional speculative metaphysics and social critique but also between European philosophy and contemporary black studies. Moreover, it can call into question the different intellectual (or even everyday) prejudices – not least anti-blackness and various forms of racism – that may have inadvertently shaped and influenced traditional ontological inquiry, and in turn uncover new imaginative ways of approaching perennial philosophical questions of metaphysics and ontology.

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<sup>26</sup>While Morris (2008, 57n9) rightly notes that “the intellectual prejudice in favor of existent” is also critique by Sartre’s phenomenology of absence as well as Heidegger’s and Derrida’s respective critiques of “the metaphysics of presence”, this article argues that such a critique is more thoroughly carried out in Moten’s paraontology (cf. Moten 2018a, 244).

<sup>27</sup>For Moten (2013a, 754, 778), blackness is not simply an abstract notion of speculative theory but moreover *also* what he calls “a concrete social logic”: “blackness is ... another way of living in the world, a black way of living.” In this regard, Moten’s paraontological account of black nothingness is very much in line with the emphasis in Schelling’s (2007, 135, 191) later work on positive philosophy that “the highest speculative concepts are always simultaneously the most profound ethical concepts”, that philosophy must bear “significance for action [and] for the ethical life” (*für die Praxis, für das sittliche Leben*).

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