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James Monroe Whitfield’s “The Vision”:
Apocalypse and the Black Periodical Press

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Readers of the June 24, 1853, issue of Frederick Douglass’ Paper encountered a new poem by the celebrated James Monroe Whitfield in the leftmost column of its last, fourth page, next to an installment of Charles Dickens’s Bleak House. The poem’s title, “The Vision,” hints at a prophetic, anti-realist work, quite different from Dickens’s social realism. The words “Canto Second” underneath the author’s name indicate that the text is part of a larger whole, although the preceding issues of Douglass’s Paper did not publish a first canto. The opening lines, addressed to an allegorical Superstition, establish a bleakly dysphoric affect and totalizing scope:

Oh! Superstition! sovereign dame,
We praise and bless thy glorious name,
Who from thy all prolific womb,
Us, thy true children, did'st bring forth,
To spread a dark and fearful gloom
O'er the inhabitants of earth.¹

This apostrophe, uttered by an unknown but manifestly evil speaker, introduces an apocalyptic vision of society’s annihilation, which ends abruptly at the bottom of the newspaper’s page with the announcement of its continuation in a further installment. “The Vision” depicts Superstition’s horrid fertility as the cause of imminent social collapse: her monstrous children—War and Slavery—have gathered their armies before her altar-throne to contrive forms of bloodshed and abuse that will
cast humankind into permanent abjection. Their plans are revealed to the poet in his vision, which unfolds across the poem's three installments and ends with the three infernal figures' flight to enact the destruction they have foretold.

Today, readers familiar with Douglass's firm hope for Black emancipation and full citizenship may be surprised that he chose to publish “The Vision.” Its vehement pessimism is likely without parallel in African American literature of the period, and it far surpasses the deep melancholia readers had encountered in Whitfield's earlier newspaper poems. Yet like other African American editors, Douglass recognized that the Black public sphere could include a variety of political views and affective registers, and he supported Black authors' creative expression across differences of opinion. His Paper reflected the heterogeneity of Black intellectual thought by embracing disagreement and debate, which helped attract more Black readers and encouraged them to develop a sophisticated political consciousness. A canny editor who had published Whitfield's poetry before, Douglass would have appreciated the appeal of “The Vision.” With the growth of the African American emigration movement, which he strongly opposed, Douglass' Paper's contributors speculated about possible Black futures in and outside the United States. “The Vision” carries this speculative turn to an anti-realist extreme by drawing on the prestigious tradition of visionary poetry. Although scholars have begun to examine how early African American fiction uses speculation to envision a future of freedom, we have not yet recognized the speculative tendencies of early African American verse, a tradition “The Vision” exemplifies.

“The Vision” harnesses speculation to depict and theorize the brutal conditions of Black life in the early 1850s. The Fugitive Slave Act made slavery a national institution by mandating the capture of self-emancipated African Americans and legitimizing racial terror against free Black Americans. Coupled with the election of Franklin Pierce, a proslavery Democrat, as president in 1852, these conditions fueled the growth of Black separatism and the African American emigration movement, which Whitfield had embraced by the time the poem was published. But “The Vision” was also a prophetic text, anticipating with grim certainty further proslavery legislation, increased violence, and escalation of antiblackness. A year after its publication, the Kansas-Nebraska Act allowed slavery in the territories, and in 1857 the Dred Scott decision denied African Americans citizenship and legal rights. In Whitfield's apocalyptic imagination, these calamities exist in the realm
of what will have been. He mobilizes speculation as a vehicle of an unflinching pessimism that asks Frederick Douglass’ Paper’s free Black readers to reconsider what kind of future they might be able to create for themselves in an imperialist nation founded on enslavement.

This essay builds on the foundational work on early African American poetry and print culture by Frances Smith Foster, Ivy Wilson, and Eric Gardner to put Whitfield’s newspaper poems at the center of his writings. While today he is mainly recognized as Martin Delany’s ally in advocating for emigration, Whitfield was the most famous Black poet of his era, dubbed “Afric’s favor’d bard” by fellow poet Joseph Holly. However, his poetry has received little critical attention, and the existing scholarship has focused on texts from his single volume, *America and Other Poems*. This scholarly focus reflects the privileged position of the book in nineteenth-century literary studies. But Whitfield’s poetry—and antebellum African American poetry more broadly—requires a more expansive view of literary publication. Most of this poetry was published in the periodical press, which, as Foster and Elizabeth McHenry have shown, was the primary site of cultivating the Black literary tradition. Periodical publication allowed poets to respond to current issues and quickly reach a large audience. Read in its print context, “The Vision” shows how newspaper poetry simultaneously speaks to the contingencies of the historical moment and relies on the printed page to concretize its sometimes ambiguous topical references. Never reprinted in book form until Robert Levine and Ivy Wilson’s modern edition of Whitfield’s works, “The Vision” is Whitfield’s most ambitious poem and, at nearly six hundred extant lines, the earliest African American poem of such length. However, it has been overlooked by scholars, possibly both because its apocalyptic pessimism disrupts Black abolitionist narratives of progress toward emancipation and because its fragmented condition, frenetic excess, and veiled dramatic structure present a degree of difficulty we do not expect in canonically minor antebellum poetry.

Given that it is little known, I begin with an overview of “The Vision” as a literary and material text. As we will see, the poem and its print context have a dynamic, reciprocal relationship: while the printed page provides its anti-realist plot with historical specificity and activates its latent racial meanings, the poem’s apocalypticism simultaneously introduces a chilling corrective to the newspaper’s celebration of Black organizing and the progress of the anti-slavery cause. To clarify how the poem works, I offer a definition of apocalypse as a cultural and
aesthetic category that circulated in antebellum African American and
Euro-American print culture as a vehicle for spiritual encouragement,
political critique, and religious exhortation. In the sections that follow,
I examine how Whitfield mobilizes this category to theorize and enact
the oppressive regimes of Superstition, War, and Slavery. Using an alle-
gorical frame, Whitfield explores various systems of false belief, all
of which culminate in violence. I end with a discussion of the haunting
absence of Canto First as symptomatic of the fragmentation of the Afri-
can American archive, suggesting that the second canto’s prophecy of
social annihilation already implies the possibility of the poem’s loss.
Making a case for recognizing the pessimist strands in antebellum Black
intellectual thought, I also encourage broader scholarly engagement
with the largely unexamined archive of nineteenth-century African
American poetry as a site of speculation about possible futures.

“The Vision” on the Printed Page

First an overview: Canto First of “The Vision” is lost. Canto Second
appeared in three roughly two-hundred-line installments on June 24,
July 1, and July 8, 1853. Across these installments, the poem presents
monologues by War, Slavery, and Superstition, allegorical figures whose
monstrous kinship echoes Paradise Lost’s trio of Satan, Sin, and
Death and Macbeth’s “weird sisters.” Vying for Superstition’s praise,
War and Slavery each present a scheme to incite sexual abandon, treach-
ery, and violence. Their recursive monologues proliferate scenes of
bloodshed and abjection, relying on repetition to create a loosely orga-
nized narrative—which develops through cumulation rather than em-
plotment—of the collapse of the social world. In War’s monologue,
vio lence spreads from the private to the public sphere, from fratricide
to bloody conquest and abuse of political power. Slavery’s monologue
envision s the total subjugation of humanity that extends beyond chattel
enslavement to ignorance and intemperance. In her response, Supersti-
tion commends her sons’ cleverness and joins their flight to corrupt hu-
mankind. The poem’s conclusion returns readers to the narrative frame
that may have been established in the lost Canto First: as the apoca-
lypse is about to begin, the poet-seer’s vision ends, leaving him alone in
a desolate landscape.

The loss of Canto First thus haunts “The Vision.” While the poem’s
monologue-driven structure is highly theatrical, it can be hard to dis-
cern, partly because its opening frame no longer exists. The situation of
speaking is not revealed until the end of the poem, and the extant Canto
Second does not specify who is speaking until well into the second installment. Because the poem's division into installments in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* was determined by the layout of the printed page rather than the text's internal logic, the first installment ends abruptly in the middle of War's monologue, interrupting the procession of political leaders who abuse their power. The second installment—in which the poet-seer introduces the second speaker, Slavery, who in turn identifies the first speaker as War—is cut off halfway through the description of the atrocities of chattel slavery. The poem's structure is further obscured by the absence of any typographical features, like quotation marks or stanza breaks, that might signal the beginning or ending of the characters' speeches. With its fragmented condition, serial format, and lean typography, the poem's dramatic structure is overshadowed by its violent content.

For Whitfield's Black readers, the print context of Douglass's *Paper* surely conveyed the mounting tensions that compelled him to write the poem. The first installment of Canto Second shares the page with *Bleak House* as well as the reprint of a proslavery article with scathing editorial commentary, an applauding note on the Maine law prohibiting the sale of alcohol, articles on formerly enslaved George Menard's construction of the first artesian well in Louisiana and on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s visit to England, and several advertisements for books, businesses, and medicinal cures. Underneath “The Vision,” the bottom of the leftmost column is taken up by the news that Liberia reelected its African American president, who ordered the decapitation of two local leaders in a revolt against the settler government. The June 24, 1853, issue of the *Paper* also included a call for the Black National Convention in Rochester, a lengthy report of the Supreme Court decision to grant a free Black father custody of his child born into slavery, and a critique of the proslavery underpinnings of US imperial expansion to Mexico and Cuba. The issue's heterogeneous content embeds Whitfield's poem in the dense fabric of African American history at mid-century: Black organizing, abolitionism and its connections to the temperance movement, Black Americans' scientific experimentation and “Anglophilia,” the institution of racial slavery and the white supremacist discourse on Black inferiority, and, last but not least, the African American colonization and emigration debate and the complex, often violent conditions of Black freedom outside the United States. Although “The Vision” eschews historical specificity, preferring a panoramic approach that conveys the totality of the imminent catastrophe to depictions of
Figure 1. Last page of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, June 24, 1853, with the first installment of Whitfield’s "The Vision" in the leftmost column. Library of Congress, Serial and Government Publications Division.
singular acts of violence, the printed page charts a terrain on which catastrophe may easily erupt.

The poem's serialization in Frederick Douglass' Paper corresponds with the height of Whitfield's productivity, reflecting his growing reputation in the African American public sphere. In the same summer of 1853, he published his only poetry volume, *America and Other Poems*, and engaged in a prolonged debate with William J. Watkins, rebutting Watkins's attacks on the African American emigration movement. Whitfield's contemporaries celebrated his Byronism with its emblematic melancholia and anguished outcasts roaming austere landscapes of nature or the mind. Julia Griffiths included in her review of *America* a poem from the volume, “Yes! Strike Again That Sounding String,” which, in her words, “forcibly remind[s] us of BYRON.” But the pessimism of much of Whitfield's verse may explain why he remains relatively unknown despite the recent surge of interest in early African American poetry and print culture, for his bleak view of the future falls outside of prevalent scholarly narratives of Black resistance and Black hope in the antebellum period.

**Apocalypse as Aesthetic Category**

Whitfield's turn to apocalyptic prophecy dramatizes the massive scale of “human sacrifice” in a nation founded on enslavement and colonial domination. It is an aesthetic and philosophical choice, driven by the sociopolitical crises of a particular historical moment and informed by the era's preoccupation with the end of the world. Apocalypse circulated through a variety of social contexts in the Atlantic world, both as a cultural category—that is, a conceptual structure for making sense of individual and collective experience—and an aesthetic category, a widespread, recognizable mode of cultural expression. Unlike the sublime and the beautiful, the apocalyptic is one of what Sianne Ngai terms “vernacular aesthetic categories,” which originate in cultural practice rather than philosophical aesthetics. In its narrow sense, “apocalypse” refers to the revelation of events at the end of time, recorded in the last book of the New Testament. However, in common use “apocalypse” describes any catastrophe, often ecological disaster or social cataclysm, that decimates the human race. Both the religious and the secular apocalypse carry the sense of a violent rending of the ordinary that irreversibly ends things as we know them. An overwhelming, powerful, and solemn aesthetic, the apocalyptic thus shares characteristics
with the sublime. However, while a sublime experience as described by Kant and Burke culminates in the subject’s imaginative mastery of the awe-inspiring object, the apocalyptic is unmasterable, linked to agency beyond the subject’s control—such as supernatural events, natural disaster, or global war—and to the potential imminent destruction of the subject itself. The apocalyptic is fundamentally concerned with power and antagonism. In its religious sense, apocalypse reveres God’s omnipotence mobilized on behalf of those who suffer, his righteous punishment of sinners, and his defeat of evil as a means to restore harmony and justice. In its secular sense, apocalypse condemns the abusive power of systems and institutions and the human propensity for violence. No matter how it originates, the apocalyptic is invariably imbued with moral judgment.

From its prototype in Revelation, the apocalyptic inherits a propensity for anti-realist imaginaries and narrative formulations. The biblical vision of God’s final triumph over Satan includes such events as the adoration of the Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes by four six-winged beasts, the pouring of the seven vials of God’s wrath and the terrible natural disasters that ensue, the appearance of a pregnant woman clothed with the sun, and the defeat of the evil beast with seven heads and ten horns, culminating in the advent of a reborn world. Later figurations of apocalypse similarly use anti-realism to confront forces and phenomena that defy realist description, but in so doing make disturbingly fluid the boundary between the real and the fantastic. Its preoccupation with the end of the world renders the apocalyptic a vehement aesthetic that traffics in destruction, enmity, and murderous chaos. With its movement toward the final catastrophe that is at once imminent and always already in progress, the apocalyptic intensifies, accelerates, and unsettles time, collapsing the future into the present. If, as Ngai argues, aesthetic categories mobilize specific kinds of emotional and cognitive response, then the apocalyptic demands a response that combines fear of catastrophe with a sort of euphoria, or jouissance, provoked by lifting the taboo on imagining and consuming the most horrifying violence. The tension between these emotions mirrors the external social or spiritual antagonism that the apocalyptic dramatizes.

Whitfield’s apocalypticism in “The Vision” is concerned with society’s collapse into violent chaos, rife with malice and horrific abuses of power. It rejects the Christian theology of apocalypse, instead depicting the triumph of evil and the inability of good to restrain it: “honesty,
and sterling worth . . . / Shall swell in woe and want obscure" (170); "wisdom, virtue, right, / Give place to lawless power and might" (172). Whitfield refuses the idea that God will destroy the unjust world to establish harmony and order, suggesting instead that God is either powerless or unwilling to stop the abuse of his laws. “The Vision” thus complicates Kevin Pelletier’s understanding of antebellum apocalypse as the threat of divine wrath. Discussing abolitionist writers’ use of apocalyptic terror to prompt anti-slavery action, Pelletier argues that “apocalypse is a warning that God will scourge reprobates for their sinful ways but never an actual depiction of this scourging.” “The Vision” falls outside this paradigm, however: although it situates destruction in the future-to-come, it makes no reference to God’s impending judgment. Instead the poem posits religion as yet another instrument of oppression and depicts violence inflicted by humans on other humans. That some of Whitfield’s poems of revolt do invoke divine retribution underscores the conceptual pivot represented in “The Vision.” Note, for example, the following lines from “How Long”:

Oh Lord! in vengeance now appear,
And guide the battles for the right . . .
[Till] all mankind from bondage free,
Exult in glorious liberty.20

Poems like this one imagine divinely sanctioned violence as emancipatory, a means of attaining a Black future of freedom rather than an always imminent but never fulfilled threat. Joshua Bennett identifies yet another kind of apocalypse in Whitfield’s “The Misanthropist”: an ecological strain of “black apocalypticism” grounded “in rigorous study of the relationship between blackness and the earth.”21 Indeed, Whitfield’s poetry suggests that apocalypse is a capacious and multifarious concept whose manifestations range from sacred to secular, realist to anti-realist, hopeful to despairing, hortatory to bleakly descriptive.

The apocalyptic aesthetic of “The Vision” emerges from the interaction of its thematic, affective, and formal components. The poem rehearses tropes of extreme violence, corrupted affect, and interminable suffering: “deadliest slaughter” (171), “the foulest passions known in hell” (170), “anguish, woe and pain” (180). Apocalypticism gives it a strong future orientation, foregrounded by the future tense of War, Slavery, and Superstition’s monologues: “We’ll quench each ray of dawning light, / Till Superstition reigns alone” (187). The world’s acceleration
toward its apocalyptic future, described in a tone of despair that forecloses redemption, is enacted by the poem’s stylistic and prosodic qualities. The unrelenting sequence of end-stopped iambic tetrameter lines propels breathlessly long sentences in which subjects are separated from verbs, obfuscating pronoun references. The obsessive, irregular, often inexact repetition of lines and phrases seems to lie just beneath the threshold of intentionality, as in variations on the lines “The shades of discord, hate and strife” (170) and “And thus make wisdom, virtue, right, / Give place to lawless power and might” (172). Whitfield’s overpowering, recursive style forces readers to surrender to the poem’s frantic pace, flood of dysphoric feelings, and apocalyptic imagery. The encroachment of chaos on signification and structure both performs society’s devolution into mayhem and reflects the “conditions of urgency and contingency” under which Whitfield wrote the poem.²² Combined with its future tense and totalizing scope, these elements establish Whitfield’s poem as a visionary epic that critiques the regimes of oppression shaping the antebellum social order.

**Antebellum Apocalyptic Thought**

Besides surrendering to the poem’s affective impact, Whitfield’s Black readers could draw on shared cultural context to mitigate the difficulties of its fractured signification and abrupt beginning. In the 1840s and 1850s, US culture was broadly preoccupied with the end of the world, and Whitfield’s apocalypticism resonated with several nineteenth-century traditions of apocalyptic thinking.²³ Apocalyptic prophecies circulated in pamphlets and on broadsides, accompanied by a rich iconography based on the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation. In religious tracts under titles like *End of the World*, *Armageddon*, and *The Fulfilment of Prophecy*, evangelicals exhorted readers to prepare for the final judgment, while Unitarians countered that biblical eschatology was a metaphor, not a depiction of events to come.²⁴ The most notorious prophecies came from the Millerites, a religious sect led by William Miller, who set the apocalypse to October 22, 1844. It was announced in the broadside *The End of the World* (n.d.), illustrated with an image of the righteous being separated from the sinners. The Millerites’ calculations of the exact date of the apocalypse—postponed when it inevitably failed to occur—were widely ridiculed. The broadside *Grand Ascension of the Miller Tabernacle!* (1844) depicts Miller’s followers falling out of their sanctuary as it rises into heaven. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* mocked the movement too; the November 3, 1854, issue
reported that “the Millerite newspaper, at Lowell, fixed the period for the end of the world on the 31st of Oct., or the 1st day of November.” Thanks to cheap printing formats, sketches and descriptions of famous artworks depicting the apocalypse circulated among audiences who could not travel to see the originals. These visual and ekphrastic representations reveled in lurid detail, as in the account of Benjamin West’s painting Death on the Pale Horse: “His horse rushes forward with the universal wildness of a tempestuous element, breathing livid pestilence, and rearing and trampling with the vehemence of unbridled fury.” This description encapsulates the sensationalist blur of terror and pleasure that subtends the affective pull of the apocalyptic in the antebellum era.

While Euro-American representations of apocalypse conveyed a general sense of foreboding, African American authors often mobilized apocalyptic discourse to condemn slavery. David Walker threatened that God would destroy enslavers and their supporters: “O Americans! Americans!! I call God—I call angels—I call men, to witness, that your DESTRUCTION is at hand, and will be speedily consummated unless you REPENT.” Frederick Douglass uses the apocalyptic trope of the serpent to describe how slavery poisons the republic and to exhort white Americans to defeat it by vote: “Oh! be warned! be warned! a horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation’s bosom; the venomous creature is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful republic; for the love of God, tear away, and fling from you the hideous monster, and let the weight of twenty millions, crush and destroy it forever!” White abolitionists too invoked fear of divine retribution to impel anti-slavery reform. Biblical eschatology offered these writers a lexicon for describing the enormity of enslavement’s crimes.

Educated Black readers of Frederick Douglass’ Paper would also have been familiar with the apocalyptic strain in British romantic poetry, which decoupled the end of the world from eschatology. Well versed in classic and contemporary British literature, free Black Northerners especially admired Lord Byron, whose revolutionary sentiments resonated with the anti-slavery cause. The bleakest of Byron’s apocalyptic poems, “Darkness,” which may have been one of Whitfield’s direct inspirations, envisions an ecological catastrophe caused by the extinction of the sun, leading to famine, cannibalism, the cessation of natural rhythms, and the extinction of the human race.

Finally, although “The Vision” develops a secular version of it, Whitfield could easily have been influenced by the apocalypticism in
African American spirituality, which, as Maxine Montgomery observes, blends the secular and the spiritual, interpreting everyday experiences in terms of biblical events. For enslaved African Americans, the immanence of apocalypse made it the ultimate horizon of freedom, celebrated in spirituals that self-emancipated people brought north, such as “God’s Gonna Set Dis World on Fire.” Apocalypse featured prominently in Black organized religion as well. The hymnal compiled by Richard Allen, the first bishop of the AME Church of Philadelphia, featured many songs about the Last Judgment and Christ’s Second Coming. The spiritual reckoning was often signaled by violent rupture of the natural world:

The falling stars their orbits leave,
The sun in darkness hide;
The elements asunder cleave,
The moon turn’d into blood.

Hymns like this kept eschatology at the forefront of collective worship, at once exhorting the faithful to correct their ways and reminding them that God will restore justice to the world.

The convergence of these diverse strands of apocalyptic thought—from African American religion to abolitionism to popular culture to British romanticism—in Whitfield’s “The Vision” demonstrates how nineteenth-century African American writers engaged larger cultural and literary trends while cultivating a distinctive tradition. Influenced by his cultural milieu and developed in the context of his leadership in the African American emigration movement, Whitfield’s apocalyptic pessimism disrupts Black abolitionist narratives of racial uplift and progress toward emancipation. In his polemic with Douglass’s and William J. Watkins’s anti-emigration stance, Whitfield challenges the key assumption of Douglass’s integrationism, that African Americans will achieve equality through racial uplift: “By what kind of reasoning [Douglass] expects us to succeed in the higher employments, when the prejudice is so invincible . . . I am at a loss to know.” Instead, Whitfield argues that antiblack racism in the United States irrevocably excludes free Black Northerners from nationhood: “The fact is, I have no country, neither have you, and your assumption that you are an integrant part of this nation, is not true.” Against Douglass’s hope for social mobility, Whitfield suggests that being Black in the United States involves
an antagonistic relationship to land that constrains African Americans within servitude: “While the negro servant is viewed with a certain degree of complacency, the negro gentleman is regarded with unmitigated hatred... This prejudice meets him at every step, and contests with him every inch of ground.” The social immobility imposed by white supremacist prejudice necessitates the radical geographic mobility of emigration. The allegorical representation of Superstition, War, and Slavery in “The Vision” allows Whitfield to theorize prejudice and the inherent antagonism it generated for Black Americans.

The Grammar of Superstition

The relationship between the three agents of destruction is allegorized in reproductive terms: War and Slavery are the fruit of Superstition’s “all prolific womb,” her “true children” (169) who execute her desire for subjugation. Whitfield uses Superstition to dramatize how a system of false belief engenders violence. Rather than a mere disposition, Superstition functions as what Black studies scholars from Hortense Spillers to Tiffany Lethabo King have called a grammar—a generative set of rules structuring the experience and articulation of reality. Accordingly, Whitfield emphasizes the operations of superstition over its denotative meaning, defined only toward the end of the poem as “stupid faith in senseless creeds” (186). The generative work of Superstition’s grammar is dramatized through recursive images of abjection, such as the anguished sounds of

the heart-wrung groan,
And mourning wail, and bitter cries,
Which make sweet music to [Superstition’s] ear. (177)

In extending Superstition’s entrapment of mental and moral faculties to control over feelings and life itself, Whitfield suggests that Superstition operates at a metaphysical level that determines ways of being, knowing, and acting toward others.

It may seem surprising that “The Vision” designates Superstition as its main villain, since we tend to think of attacks on superstition as the domain of Enlightenment thinkers. However, free Black intellectuals also vehemently denounced superstition as an obstacle to building a just world in which all could think for themselves, prosper, and hold equal rights. The Black periodical press linked superstition to credulous
acceptance of anything irrational, from supernatural phenomena to magical remedies to racial hierarchies. “There is a species of superstition which inclines men to take on trust whatever assumes the name of science,” warned one article. In a news item under the cautionary title “Death from Superstition,” Frederick Douglass’ Paper lamented the death of a Black man in Maryland who mistook a severe cold for an evil spell and sought the help of a fortune teller. At the same time, African American writers often celebrated progress toward a future built on scientific principles. North Star contributor J.D. wrote that belief in spirit rapping and the evil eye were “sufficiently melancholy illustrations of superstition in the nineteenth century” but predicted that the advances of science would dispel such falsehoods: “Mind is everywhere asserting its power over matter; truth is everywhere claiming the victory over error.” If these forms of superstition could be combated with education, so could antiblack racism, many writers stressed. Arguing that “prejudice against color” resulted from ignorance, William J. Watkins hoped that “the triumphs of science over ignorance and superstition” would eliminate this prejudice too and secure full rights for African Americans. William Wells Brown advocated for racial uplift as the solution to superstition. In a correspondence from Oxford, England, he rejoiced at seeing Black male college students in the streets of London and urged African Americans similarly to “apply themselves to learning” in order to “[break] the chains of ignorance, and superstition, which has so long fettered the human mind.”

Whitfield dissents from such faith in progress. Instead, he exposes the violence of superstition as it leads to conflict, tyranny, abjection, and enslavement. In “The Vision,” Superstition is at once a cruel sovereign who demands bloody sacrifice and a mother who births agents of destruction. Its etymological root in the Latin superstes, which refers to “a soldier standing over the prostrate body of a defeated enemy,” carries associations with subjugation and militant triumph. At the level of language, the violent workings of superstition are enacted by the poem’s overdetermined hypotactic syntax, sentence structures that include multiple dependent clauses expressing relationships of causality and time. Hypotaxis registers the burden of temporality under conditions of imperialism and antiblackness and, like apocalypse itself, is emphatically future oriented: it anticipates the denouement while foregrounding the tension of waiting. “The Vision” is written in long, complex sentences that can continue for more than thirty lines of verse. The following is one of the shorter examples:
'Neath my black flag each noxious vice  
Shall flourish and grow proud and strong,  
While many a cunning, false device  
Shall so confound the right and wrong,  
That men, unable to discern  
The principles of truth and right,  
Shall yield to Slavery’s mandate stern,  
And bow to lawless power and might. (178)

This passage describes Slavery’s intent to conquer humankind through corruption and moral confusion. Its emphasis on lowering and placing under—from “’neath my black flag” to “yield” and “bow”—is enacted by the hypotactic syntax, which performs humankind’s surrender to Slavery and Superstition.50

Grammatical subordination formalizes the chain of causality that culminates in humanity’s thoughtless acceptance of “lawless power and might” (178). Almost every sentence of Canto Second includes one or more temporal clauses introduced by the connectives “while” or “when,” indexing the conquest of time by War and Slavery. In the passage above, the main clause “’Neath my black flag each noxious vice / Shall flourish and grow proud and strong” is followed by a temporal clause, which is then followed by two result clauses introduced by “so . . . that” and linked by the coordinate conjunction “and.” The subject of these two clauses, “men,” is modified by an interpolated reduced clause, “unable to discern / The principles of truth and right.” This gradation of hypotaxes both anticipates and defers syntactic resolution, producing an effect of acceleration that, augmented by the pounding iambic tetrameter, mimics the social world’s movement toward destruction. An example of the political and theoretical work of poetic form, the stylistic enactment of Superstition’s subordination of humankind reminds us to pay closer attention to the formal qualities of canonically minor poems, which are often read solely for their thematic content.

War’s Affective Economy of Violence

As the metaphysical principle underlying multiple forms of domination, Superstition engenders the twin regimes of War and Slavery. Positing these two orders of oppression as allegorical entities and material realms allows Whitfield to expose both the affective and the political economies of violence. Indeed, by dramatizing their kinship, Whitfield joins other Black intellectuals who saw them as interconnected. James W. C.
Pennington contended that “slavery has literally been a War of Minds” waged by enslavers against those enslaved. Pennington noted that “the proud and selfish Anglo-Saxon seized upon the Negro to be used merely as a beast . . . [but] he was soon alarmed to find that he must undertake the difficult task of forging chains for a mind like his own.” While Pennington foregrounded the intellectual antagonism inherent in slavery—anticipating Cedric Robinson’s argument that the slave ships brought a rich African consciousness that resisted enslavement—other Black abolitionists denounced US imperial expansion and military conquest as an extension of slavery. Douglass argued that the US invasion of Mexico was “a means of extending that great evil and damning curse, negro slavery.” A writer for Frederick Douglass’ Paper cataloged multiple betrayals of liberty by the Whig and Democratic Parties, listing in one breath instances of military aggression and proslavery legislation: “From the Seminole robbery and massacre, the conquest and purchase of Texas, the Mexican robbery, to the Compromise and the Fugitive Slave Law, those parties have dragged the country down . . . and nothing but an external resistance can now prevent them from descending still to the lowest depths of dishonor, injustice and oppression.” The tone of this vehement critique of the United States’ devolution, complete with prediction of further decline, resonates with Whitfield’s apocalypticism.

Whitfield’s concept of War as an agent of apocalyptic destruction thus extends its denotation of an armed conflict between nations. Rather, War is the most explicit realization of what I earlier described as the antagonism inherent in apocalypse—a structural conflict that governs psychic and sociopolitical life, causing interpersonal and imperial violence. The term “antagonism” was commonly used in Whitfield’s time to describe a conflict between ideas or social and political entities. In “The Vision,” antagonism allegorized as War invades every aspect of psychic life—from feelings to thoughts to desires—before erupting in a spectacle of material violence that encompasses the totality of social relations. Wielding a scarlet flag over his army of destroyers, War does not directly ignite violent actions but instead corrupts the affects and cognitive judgments that motivate these actions. Thus, War provokes feelings of anger and hatred that lead people to murder:

Stir in each breast a deadly ire,
Kindle a fierce, devouring fire
Of bitter discord, hate and strife,
Appeased by naught but human life (169)
At the level of judgment, War “scatter[s] in the minds of men . . . lessons of deceit and guile” (170) that similarly result in material forms of oppression: “scenes of war and woe / Which from those dark deceptions flow” (170, emphasis mine). Violence spreads from the private realm, where it erupts as conflict between individuals of equal power, to the sociopolitical realm, where it occurs at the systemic level. The pure sentiments of family life turn into “the foulest passions” that lead to sexual excess and fratricide, unraveling the domestic foundation of social order: “The brother by the brother’s arm / Slaughtered in deadly feud shall fall” (170). War then corrodes the public structures of government, organized religion, and political process, represented by four political and religious leaders who abuse their power. The Warrior “spreads deadliest slaughter through the land” (171); the Monarch’s ambition leads him to “spread . . . the tide of battle, blood and brand” (172); the Bigot enforces his “blasphemous rite” by “fire and steel” (173); the Demagogue’s deceitful speech conceals his tyrannical intentions. Their pursuit of carnage resonates with Achille Mbembe’s claim that “war . . . is as much a means of achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill.” But while Mbembe suggests that political sovereignty embraces bloodshed as its instrument, Whitfield offers an even grimmer analysis, in which political and religious supremacy—the objects of the tyrants’ “ambition,” “pride,” and “zeal”—are less the end goals that legitimize bloodshed than excuses for a dark euphoria of unrestricted violence.

Whitfield’s analysis of the mechanisms of war reflects his disillusionment with reform movements, powerless to oppose the expansion of violent rule: “the truly good and great . . . who labored to reform the State” (171–72) surrender without a fight. The degradation of social institutions culminates in a violent cycle of rebellion against despotism and reinstatement of despotic rule, which leads to the evacuation of liberty:

Thus will we bring each wild extreme,
Successively to bear the rule,
Till real liberty shall seem
An idle visionary dream,
Vain, as the babblings of a fool. (176)

Whitfield’s poems of revolt, such as “Prayer of the Oppressed,” often end with a vision of freedom to come: “From every land and every clime, / Paeans to Liberty shall rise!” By contrast, “The Vision” dismisses
such dreams as pointless, a poor substitute for the experience of freedom and one that makes its absence all the more acute.

**Slavery without Race**

While the allegorical War revels in murderous conflict, Slavery redistributes apocalyptic violence from sites of death to sites of subjugation, boasting that he will cause more devastation than will War by manipulating the most exploitive human tendencies:

> Though men may sate their vengeful ire,  
> And for a time lay war aside,  
> Of our foul deeds they'll never tire,  
> We'll pamper so their lust and pride. (178)

Rooted in everyday terror and the monstrous pleasure of what Saidiya Hartman terms “routinized violence,” slavery is more perverse than war’s strenuous bloodshed. But although Whitfield has been described as an abolitionist poet and a bard of enslaved people, his understanding of slavery does not end with chattel slavery. Instead, he distinguishes three manifestations of slavery that control different aspects of social life. The first, ignorance, is ideological; the second, chattel enslavement, is institutional; the third, intemperance, is libidinal, concerned with the inability to control one’s impulses and desires. Ignorance enslaves the mind, constructing an ideological foundation for the physical enslavement of human beings. Intemperance enslaves the will, prompting “many a vile excess” (183), from the consumption of alcohol to the unbridled pursuit of sexual pleasure, power, and revenge. While this broad compass of slavery in “The Vision” may be surprising, it reflects the fact that, as Foster argues, free Black Northerners generally did not identify with enslaved people and that the abolition of slavery was only one part of their broader activist agenda.

By inflicting various forms of subjugation, Slavery forces humankind to surrender to Superstition. Whitfield describes the ignorance propagated by Slavery as the inability to discern “the principles of truth and right” that in turn leads to servile acceptance of hierarchical power:

> Gross ignorance throughout the earth  
> Shall spread abroad its sable pall,  
> And thus shall fetter from their birth  
> In darkest gloom the minds of all. (178)
This identification of enslavement with ignorance resonates with Black activists’ argument that slavery produces its own justification by eroding citizens’ mental, moral, and affective faculties. The “Report of the Committee on Abolition” signed by Douglass, Alexander Crummell, John Lyle, and Thomas Van Rensselaer, states, “This monstrous crime . . . has perverted the judgment, blunted the moral sense, blasted the sympathies, and created in the great mass . . . a moral sentiment altogether favorable to its own character, and its own continuance. Press and pulpit are alike prostituted, and made to serve the end of this infernal institution.” In “The Vision” this form of slavery is embodied by the priest, who deludes youth with “the fetters of his creed” (178) to turn them into instruments of his religious tyranny.

With the shift to chattel enslavement, “The Vision” replaces the future tense of prediction with the present tense of reporting. This shift, in tandem with the poem’s turn from anti-realism to realism, bespeaks an apocalypse already in progress, a prophecy already fulfilled. However, while Whitfield offers a realist representation of chattel slavery’s brutalities, he never as much as alludes to its victims’ race or skin color. I suggest that this refusal of racial specificity is a critique of mapping blackness onto subjugation in the national imaginary. On the one hand, Whitfield relies on the print context of Frederick Douglass’ Paper to concretize chattel slavery in “The Vision” as racial slavery in the United States. On the other hand, he disrupts this concretization by speculatively challenging readers to imagine enslavement as decoupled from race. “The Vision” offers a world in which race—which Alexander Weheliye defines as “a set of sociopolitical processes of differentiation and hierarchization”—does not determine who is vulnerable to subjugation. If blackness is not the reason for subjection, then whiteness does not guarantee what Christina Sharpe terms “an exorbitant freedom to be free of the marks of . . . subjection.” Such disruption of the protective power of whiteness was unthinkable to white abolitionists, who circulated images and descriptions of light-skinned enslaved people with European features to gain more support for the anti-slavery cause among white Northerners. Richard Hildreth’s novel The White Slave (1852) builds its case against slavery on the clash between the protagonist’s whiteness, which distances him from “an ignoble and degraded race,” and his enslaved status, which brings him into an unbearable proximity with blackness. Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner circulated a daguerreotype image of Mary Mildred Williams, a formerly enslaved light-complexioned girl, and had her appear in his lectures as
a real-life example of enslavement’s scandalous encroachment on whiteness. Whitfield’s refusal to inscribe blackness into slavery not only exposes white abolitionists’ self-serving hypocrisy but also strikes at the very roots of nineteenth-century racial hierarchy.

While the poem meticulously catalogues the atrocities of slavery, Whitfield does not display the assaulted bodies of the enslaved but instead scrutinizes the acts of domination, referring to victims of the enslaver’s violence metonymically by their attributes: “weak youth and hoary age,” “virgin purity,” “female chastity” (180–81). He censures enslavers for selling their own children on the auction block. The brutality of this practice, which Spillers terms the “invasion of kinship by property relations,” prompts an eruption of infernal imagery in a failed comparison between enslavers and devils in hell:

Wretches so steeped in vice and shame
That all the fiends from heaven that fell,
And expiate in endless flame,
Their guilt may from hell’s dungeons peep,
And in such scenes exulting see
That there is still a lower deep
Of shame, if not of misery. (181)

The convoluted syntax of this passage—with inversions, ambiguous pronoun reference (their guilt), and the long clause’s grammatical completion resting uncomfortably on the verb peep—reflects the difficulty of representing the horrors of slavery and the pressure they exert on language and poetic form. Peep rhymes with deep, but its levity seems inadequate to the weight of the subject matter, and the strained rhyme necessitates an awkward anastrophe. The apocalyptic annihilation of the social, already underway, invades language as well.

Between Prophecy and Fulfillment

The poet-seer’s role as an observer of War’s and Slavery’s schemes dramatizes the foreclosures faced by a Black writer in a white supremacist society. Evie Shockley has argued that Black aesthetics exceed a thematic focus on race, instead encompassing “strategies that African American writers . . . use to negotiate gaps or conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing.” Whitfield’s choice to de-emphasize the poet-seer’s narrative voice is one such strategy. In particular, the
ending of the poem both foregrounds and counteracts the limitations of Whitfield’s prophetic agency. The poet’s vision ends when War, Slavery, and Superstition fly off to execute their plans:

They took their flight o’er land and sea
To work their dark iniquity.
Quicker than flies a ray of light
Each form had vanished from the sight (187)

However, unlike the prototypical seer, John of Patmos in Revelation; Adam in book 11 of *Paradise Lost*; or the speaker in Byron’s “Darkness,” Whitfield’s poet has not witnessed the future apocalypse as it unfolds but has only overheard War, Slavery, and Superstition’s prediction of it. This dramatic design deemphasizes the poet’s voice: he does not speak until halfway through the poem’s second installment, when he relates the infernal crowd’s enthusiastic reaction to War’s plans and introduces Slavery’s speech. He speaks again to introduce Superstition’s approving reply and then to announce the end of his vision. His part takes up less than a tenth of Canto Second, or 56 out of its 596 lines, while the remaining 540 are filled by the voices of the agents of destruction.

However, genre and apocalyptic tone take precedence over the poet-seer’s circumscribed voice, imbuing the poem with the authority to proclaim the imminent catastrophe. The prestigious genre of vision developed in response to the ending of *Paradise Lost*, in which the archangel Michael shows Adam the biblical future of humankind. By appropriating it, Whitfield refutes the hegemonic assumption that visionary narratives of humanity’s future belong exclusively to Euro-American poetry. According to Jacques Derrida, apocalyptic writing is defined less by content than by tone, which hinges on the certainty of what will have been, demanding that the listener recognize the speaker’s authority over the future. The apocalyptic tone of Canto Second performs Whitfield’s claim to visionary agency, asserted in the final lines of “The Vision”:

And as I stood in wonder there,
The scene melted into air—
Mountain and lake, and throne were gone,
And I in silence stood alone. (187)

Solitude is at once the prerequisite of the poet-seer’s visionary agency and the source of the poem’s apocalyptic pessimism, for it severs him
from the Black community with its sustaining, insurgent sociality. This separation—explored in Whitfield's shorter poems of anguished individualism, like “The Misanthropist” and “Yes! Strike Again That Sounding String”—stands in sharp contrast with War, Slavery, and Superstition's monstrous collective, united by kinship and a shared purpose. Immanent to the genre of visionary poetry, the poet-seer's singularity enables his insight by insulating him from the demands of social life, but the only vision it affords is that of the world's descent into violent mayhem. For an African American poet in an antiblack world, such singular visionary agency comes at the expense of hope, anticipating Fred Moten's argument that singularity entails tragedy and the inability to create change. The end of “The Vision” leaves the poet motionless, powerless, and acutely alone with the burden of knowledge about the impending catastrophe.

By foregrounding the poet-seer's finite I, Whitfield reminds us that the site of the vision is his subjectivity. He thus posits the impending apocalypse as both total in scope and contained, both inevitable because revealed to the poet-seer as the truth and optative because contingent on his inner world, both imminent and still separated from the present by the ever-narrowing caesura between the prophecy and its fulfillment. Although the agents of destruction have left “to work their dark iniquity,” the annihilation of the social world is still in the realm of the future-to-come. This caesura, I suggest, opens up an infinitesimal, speculative possibility of an alternative future, a future shaped by Whitfield's immersion in the Black community and the African American emigration movement. Extending Moten's reflection on “spatio-temporal discontinuity” as “a generative break, one wherein action becomes possible,” I read the caesura at the end of “The Vision” as the site of the emergence of a localized we that will replace the abstracted I of the solitary poet's introspection. This we provides the conditions of possibility for collective struggle, a struggle that draws on communal outrage instead of individual indignation. The caesura is where the other apocalypse, that of revolt preceding regeneration, may be ignited. This caesura, then, links “The Vision” with Whitfield's poems of revolt, reprinted in Delany's Blake as expressions of a revolutionary consciousness.

Conclusion: The Archival Apocalyptic

The totalizing scope of the extant Canto Second of “The Vision” and the fraught potentiality of its ending do not erase the haunting
absence of Canto First, however. Recent years have witnessed exciting archival discoveries of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s poetry and fiction, but the opening half of “The Vision” remains lost without trace. Thus, the poem begins with a lacuna, a loss that—as Hartman writes of archival gaps—at once challenges us to imagine what may have been and reminds us that we may never know. Retrospectively and asymmetrically, this lacuna echoes the caesura at the end of the poem. One intentional, the other unintended, one a formal device, the other a material gap, one generative, oriented toward possible abundance, the other oppressive, a signifier of systemic violence and neglect, both index the unknown, encouraging speculation about the irrecoverable past and the possible future.

Canto Second provides few clues about the first canto’s possible content. Perhaps it outlined the circumstances in which the poet received the revelation. Maybe it described the fantastical location and introduced the poem’s actors. Because Canto Second consists of War’s and Slavery’s long speeches, Canto First may have included Superstition’s speech and her demand that her two sons subjugate humankind. Levine and Wilson hypothesize that it may have been serialized in the earlier issues of Frederick Douglass’ Paper, which were destroyed in the fire at Douglass’s house in 1872. However, the Paper survives in an almost complete run for the twenty-one months leading up to the serialization of the second canto, from September 25, 1851, through June 24, 1853; the only missing issue is that of January 4, 1853. If Frederick Douglass’ Paper did print the first canto, it could have done so only before September 25, 1851, almost two years before the publication of the second canto. Given the urgency with which Whitfield wrote “The Vision,” such a long break between the two cantos seems unlikely. Instead, the first canto may have been printed in a less prominent periodical or, given the unstable social conditions in which African American literature was produced and published, it may have never appeared in print. Perhaps Whitfield decided to send Douglass the second canto because it was more satisfying to him as an aesthetic artifact or because it more thoroughly indicted imperialism and enslavement. He might have hoped to publish the whole poem in book format later. If the first canto remained in manuscript, it almost certainly would have been lost—perhaps left behind when Whitfield moved to California in the early 1860s—like the manuscripts of most African American writers of that era who had to prioritize their livelihood and basic security over the preservation of their handwritten work.
Such speculation about the content and history of the missing first canto highlights the gaps that haunt the extant section of the poem. Still, the poem’s prophecy of social destruction already anticipates the possibility of its loss. The apocalypticism of “The Vision” encompasses the violence of the archive that results in the fragmentation of the African American literary tradition. The poem’s lost beginning recalls other early African American texts that are not extant, including the never-published first version of Henry Highland Garnet’s “An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America” delivered at a Black national convention in Buffalo in 1843, the possibly unwritten ending of Delany’s *Blake*, serialized in the *Weekly Anglo-American* in 1861–62, and several chapters of Harper’s novels *Minnie’s Sacrifice* and *Sowing and Reaping*, serialized in the *Christian Recorder* in 1869 and 1876–77, respectively. The apocalyptic exposes the structures of power that determine who enjoys freedom and the right to live, who owns resources, who has access to the education and leisure necessary to write, whose lives and experiences are recorded, and who benefits from the infrastructures and institutions that preserve those records. Put differently, the apocalyptic inhabits the racial politics of the archive that deem materials authored by Black Americans unworthy of systematic preservation. But if we can retrospectively read “The Vision” as an allegory of the violent fragmentation of Black print, then the caesura that momentarily disrupts the poem’s pessimism might gesture toward archival expectancy, an orientation toward what has been and will be found. A tentative opening that invites new ways of being to emerge through collective action, the caesura evokes Black feminist scholars’ collaborative ethos of recovery and speculative reconstruction. It evokes the vibrant print culture of early Black organizing and collective worldmaking at regional and national conventions and what Derrick Spires describes as “massive collections of [early African American] poetry that have yet to be ‘fully explored or theorized.’” “The Vision” thus reminds us that despite the losses caused by institutionalized neglect, the aleatory archive of early Black print is nevertheless a site of abundant possibility.

**Notes**

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Notably, the phrase “sacrifice of human life” appears three times in “The Vision” (171, 172, 173), and the word “sacrifice” appears multiple times.


17. Ibid., 16.


22. Rusert, Fugitive Science, 19.


26. Carey, Death upon the Pale Horse, 3.

27. Pelletier, Apocalyptic Sentimentalism.


44. “Credulity,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, April 8, 1852.

45. J.D., “Where are We?” *North Star*, September 22, 1848.


52. Ibid.


54. “Speech of Frederick Douglass,” *Liberator*, June 8, 1849.

55. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, May 6, 1852, quoted in Ortiz, “Anti-imperialism,” 143.

56. A search in the *North Star* and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* returned sixty-seven articles that refer to antagonism. *Accessible Archives*, accessed September 5, 2020.

57. See Christina Sharpe’s distinction between “violence that occurs between subjects at the level of conflict” and “gratuitous violence that occurs at the level of structure” in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 48.


62. This agenda included mutual aid, moral reform, education, and temperance in addition to the abolition of slavery. Foster, “Narrative,” 715. In Whitfield’s case, it also included African American emigration.


64. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 5. In this way, Whitfield anticipates Weheliye’s argument that Black studies has to concern itself with the category of the human because an exclusive preoccupation with blackness reinforces the not-quite-human status of Black subjects (19).


68. On the spectacle of antiblack violence, see Hartman, *Scenes*, 3; Sharpe, *In the Wake*.


75. Ibid., 99.


80. An example of non-sequential serialization is Delany’s *Blake* in the *Anglo-African Magazine*. It began in the first issue with chapters 28, 29, and 30, which, according to editor Thomas Hamilton, were the only ones Delany allowed the magazine to publish. Editorial note, *Anglo-African Magazine*, vol. 1 (1859, rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1968), 20. The second issue resumed serialization of Delany’s novel from the beginning.


