Special Issue on Georges Bataille and the Sacred

Between Ecstasy and Abjection: Black Studies and the Excessive Sacred

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In the past decade, a set of debates has emerged within black studies between Afro-pessimists and those who identify as black optimists. Exemplified by the work of Frank Wilderson, the Afro-pessimist contends that the Human and the Black exist in an antagonistic relationship. To put th is differently, civil society and the realm of recognition is defined over and against black people; the very coherence of the Human depends on structural violence against black subjects. According to Wilderson, only the end of the world as we know it can bring about the dissolution of anti-black racism. In other words, Afro-pessimism harbors an apocalyptic vision. Black optimism, represented by Fred Moten, also contends that blackness has been positioned at the edges of the Human. Yet Moten defines blackness as a tumultuous drive that both antecedes and incites strategies of containment. While blackness is constantly under surveillance and duress, Moten expresses a "faith" in the excessive quality of blackness, in that which cannot be captured or reduced into an object, instrument, or slave. Consequently, Moten underscores, more than the pessimist, the forms of sociality that have enabled black people to endure a legacy of terror and living death.

The opposition between the pessimist and optimist can become rigid and reified (and not necessarily by the main authors affiliated with these positions). In response to this predicament, this paper argues that we can better understand the affinities and differences between authors like Wilderson and Moten by introducing the category of the sacred, and a particular genre of the sacred. Although Agamben's notion of *homo sacer* might come to mind when thinking of the doubleness of the sacred, I consider the work of Durkheim and Bataille. Émile Durkheim reminds us that there are two forms of the sacred—one that signifies health, safety, and protection, and another that stands for disorder, opacity, and impurity (See Durkheim 1995, 412; See also Biles 2007, 3). The latter form, the "left," self-shattering sacred, is taken up by Georges Bataille in texts like *Theory of Religion* and *Accursed Share*. For Bataille, the sacred names those energies, drives, and experiences that interrupt investments in order, coherence, and durability. The sacred, experienced in art, erotic life, and mysticism, is a site of heterogeneity, of that which cannot be incorporated into the order of things, which is why the heterogeneous often incites so much violence in the attempt to contain, assimilate, or contain it. In other words, because figures of excess appear so dangerous to the order of reason and accumulation, these figures tend to precipitate gratuitous forms of violent containment. In light of the ways in which black people have been marked as excessive, dangerous, and unruly, the left sacred provides one way to examine blackness and its relationship to the Human.

In this essay, I draw on the left sacred and religious thought more generally to think between and beyond the optimism/pessimism binary. I contend that while Moten underscores the excessive feature of blackness, Wilderson draws attention to the inability of civil society to assimilate blackness, demonstrated by cinema's failed attempt to reconcile racial antagonisms. To put it succinctly, Moten is committed to the extravagance of blackness and Wilderson is committed to examining where blackness causes the order of things to break down. I suggest that these authors both gesture toward the volatilely sacred quality of blackness but approach it in rather different ways.

Calvin Warren has recently suggested that it is more productive to affiliate Moten's intervention with mysticism than with optimism or hopefulness (See 2017, 2019–29). For my purposes, "mysticism" names a spiritual experience or encounter in which the very notion of a coherent self is overwhelmed by the Other, an experience that cannot be captured by ordinary language, or that requires alternative grammars to name and describe it. For Warren, Moten provides grammar to think about "blackness without Being," blackness as a kind of spirit or aspiration that eludes form, objectness, and possession. Here we might think of the opening scene of *In the Break*, where Moten describes blackness as "the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that arranges every line" (2003, 1). Here blackness is in part an indication that objects or commodities *resist*—even, or precisely, at the moment of objection/subjection. Thinking of Frederick Douglass's aunt's cry, in a call and response with Saidiya Hartman's refusal of the nonchalant ways that Douglass's primal scene is often registered, Moten is

after an "aurality that disrupts and resists certain formations of identity" Ibid, 6). To put it simply, the sound of the shriek (extended throughout time) is irreducible to "verbal meaning or conventional musical form" (Ibid, x). Some-thing escapes even as what escapes is an indication of anguish, carrying the trace of terror, of what is always trying to eradicate blackness.

In later essays, Moten develops this notion of blackness as rupture and excess, verging toward what Warren calls a "phenomenology of black spirit" (See Warren 2017). In his essay "The Case Of Blackness," Moten associates blackness with a kind of impurity, a contamination, or a tumult that smears stable distinctions and demarcations. For Moten, blackness names a kind of reticence that emanates from what is kept, held, and contained, and yet it is also a reluctance that "disrupts [the logic of] grasping and framing, taking and keeping—as epistemological stance and as accumulative activity" (2008a, 179). Here I take it that Moten is circling around a set of questions: What is the form of life that unravels the very insistence on form? How does blackness gesture toward a field beyond the opposition between form and formlessness? How might blackness offer an alternative to the logic of accumulation and settlement even as, or because, blackness has been the underprivileged target of these operations?

If Moten gestures toward the spiritual and mystical aspects of blackness in previous essays, he makes an explicit connection in his powerful essay "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)." In conversation with the Afro-pessimist (particularly Wilderson and Jared Sexton), Moten makes two key moves in this essay. Riffing on Orlando Patterson's work, Moten makes a distinction between political and social death. While the slave might endure political death—insofar as s/he is barred from the field of recognition, from the field of rights, ownership, and property—this means that the slave is relegated to a position of relative nothingness from the perspective of the subject that occupies a position within civil society (2013, 741). But for Moten nothing matters, nothing really matters. For Moten, the legacy of blackness gestures toward a sociality of those who have been owned, who own nothing, who have been dispossessed of something like home. This sociality can be found in the fantasies and wounded intimacies in the hold of the slave ship, bush arbor meetings, juke joints, hip hop cyphers, greetings in the vestibule of the church after service, or all black women gatherings discussing Beyonce's new video over wine and other libations. While lingering on this position of nothingness, Moten turns to Korean Buddhism, particularly the idea of Mu, of dispossession, of not having, as a way to think about a form of sociality among the un-settled, among those who find their beginnings in the break, the middle, the oceanic. And if there is something celebratory about this mysticism in the flesh, celebration is necessary because black life is so painful, it hurts so much (2017, xiii).

For Moten, blackness, articulated through music, the cry, or through its alliances with mysticism, indicates a disruptive excess, an unassimilable energy that haunts ontology, sovereignty, property, and the urge to possess. Drawing on Nahum Chandler's work, Moten makes a distinction between blackness and black people. Blackness is an-original and antecedent to being, to what can be rendered determinate and objectified. Consequently, black people do not own blackness but have a special and necessary relationship to the opacity and non-capturability of blackness. As Moten and Stefano Harney write, "There is an an-originary drive whose fateful internal difference is that it brings regulation into existence.... The an-originary drive and the insistences it calls into being and moves through, that criminality that brings the law online,...is blackness which must be understood in its ontological difference from black people who are, nevertheless, (under)privileged insofar as they are given (to) an understanding of it" (2013, 47). Blackness is a testament both to a legacy of constitutive violence and relentless containment and a legacy of what slips through, what breathes on, and what cannot be completely converted into an object. Similarly, blackness acts as a kind of pathogen that promises to bring about the end of the world as we know it. For Moten, black study, or the study of blackness, is a sacred and secular endeavor. This is why he associates black sociality with "a *marginal church* in which we gather together to be in the name of being otherwise" (2008b, 1747).

While Moten's relation to mysticism and the religious is explicit in the aforementioned essay, Wilderson's connection to the religious is more tenuous (although in "Wallowing in Contradictions," an interview with Percy Howard, he does confess that he has a babalou who helps him connect with the ancestors) (See Wilderson and Howard) (2010). In addition, Wilderson does not focus so much on the distinction between blackness and black people or the black spirit that eludes capture and objectification through performance and sociality. Rather, he wants to keep our attention and attunement fastened to the violence that brings the black, or the slave, into the lowest levels of existence. Wilderson's work stays with the violence that provides the coherence for civil society, the Human, and the world more broadly. Afro-pessimism resists the positive or celebratory move because of the ways in which blackness is constantly being mobilized to recuperate and affirm a social order that relies on black anguish. As Wilderson laments, "So often in black scholarship, people consciously or unconsciously peel away from the strength and terror of their evidence in order to propose some kind of coherent, hopeful resolution to things" (2003, 183). In agreement with Saidiya Hartman, Wilderson refuses "the desire to look at the ravages and brutality of the last few centuries, [and] to still find a way to feel good about ourselves" (Ibid, 185). Here we might think of how black people in Charleston after the Emmanuel AME church massacre in 2015 were praised for being forgiving and for embodying America's democratic virtues in the face of white supremacist terror. Before the blood could be removed from the church, black death and resilience were utilized to reaffirm US exceptionalism. Wilderson's pessimism should be understood as a response to this ethos of affirmation.

But let us linger a bit on Wilderson's definition of Afro-pessimism. According to Wilderson, "though blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the entire world's semantic field—regardless of cultural and national discrepancies—is sutured by anti-Black solidarity" (2010, 158). Whereas other groups relate to the social world through conflict and alienation, conflict that can be resolved or reconciled, blacks (and to some extent Native peoples) are positioned in an antagonistic relationship to the world. To put it differently, the very coherence of civil society and the legal order depends on structural and excessive violence directed toward black people, not to mention the disavowal of this "gratuitous violence" in the name of progress, the post-racial, and US exceptionalism. This means that the end goal for black freedom struggles cannot be recognition or inclusion within the domain of the Human. According to Wilderson, "Whereas Humans exist on some plane of being and thus can become existentially present through some struggle for, of, or through recognition, Blacks cannot reach this plane" (Ibid, 38). As I take it, the distinctions that the Afro-pessimist makes between antagonism and conflict, alienation and accumulation, and recognizability and abjection, indicate that there is an excess that civil society cannot assimilate or incorporate. While Moten seems to celebrate and exalt this excess—a necessity because black life can be so painful—Wilderson prioritizes the violence that sustains this antagonistic relationship between the world and blackness, the anguish involved in being held out into the Nothing, the terror of being the permanent inside/outside that the world defines itself over and against.

And even as civil society attempts to diminish or disavow this racial antagonism, through converting the antagonism into a resolvable conflict, Wilderson shows that this strategy of structural adjustment does not always work. As the subtitle of his 2010 book *Red, White, and Black* indicates, Wilderson identifies cinema as a primary example of the tendency to depict black-white relationships as reconcilable conflicts—think of the interracial buddy film or the white savior film. At the same time, Wilderson finds a flicker of possibility within film, moments when the attempt to contain racial antagonisms breaks down and fails. These are moments when "cinematic strategies" such as lighting and sound design enable "the grammar of antagonism [to] break in on the mendacity of conflict" (Ibid, 5). These are flashpoints when the violent relationship between the human and blackness erupts onto the screen. One example for Wilderson is the lighting contrasts between Billy Bob Thornton and Halle Berry's characters at the end of Marc Forster's *Monster's Ball*. In this concluding scene, the cinematic strategies enable racial antagonisms to haunt the depiction of interracial intimacy and reconciliation. Although Wilderson is a bit more reticent than Moten in giving attributes and predicates to blackness—blackness as excess or rupture—he does suggest that there are moments in cinema and civil society when the violence attached to black flesh interrupts the regularly scheduled program.

So what does all of this have to do with the sacred, with what I refer to as the "volatile sacred"? I imagine a skeptical listener wondering why we would even want to retain this category in the context of black optimism and Afro-pessimism. Hasn't a conventional notion of the sacred, as what needs to be protected and safeguarded through divisions and borders, been the source and justification of so much terror, theft, and erasure? With regard to racial and gender regimes, Frederick Douglass in his second slave narrative claims that blacks on the plantation are disciplined to treat the Master, or white male subjectivity, with a kind of sanctity, and the master's house as a "sacred precinct" (1969, 107). Hortense Spillers describes the formation of racial hierarchies, or the interplay between European transcendence and African degradation, as a "symptom of the sacred" (1987, 71). And Sylvia Wynter shows us that coloniality and modern racial formations were made possible by the rearticulation of theological categories and divisions—Spirit and flesh, redeemed and unredeemed, or Christian and pagan (See 1995, 5–55). Consequently, a certain grammar of the sacred has contributed to the racial ordering of the globe.

But what are we to make of this idea of the sacred, a phenomenon that spills over the secular/religious divide? How do we begin to understand how sacrality works, especially in spaces and practices that dismiss the sacred as metaphysical, ahistorical, and so forth? How might we think about the multiple senses and ways of practicing the sacred? As mentioned above, Durkheim is helpful on these matters. According to Emile Durkheim, religious life does not necessarily involve belief in gods and deities. In fact, these powers are not essential to religious life. What is essential is the distinction between the sacred and the profane. The sacred is that which is set apart through taboos and prohibitions as a source of communal value, meaning, and cohesion. The sacred is designated for objects (flag), ideas (progress), and spaces (football stadium) that contribute to the formation of community, that groups can rally around. But Durkheim acknowledges two genres of the sacred, the ambiguity of set-apartness—what scholars like Jeremy Biles refer to as the right-hand and left-hand sacred (2007, 3). The former invokes feelings and desires for security, protection, and order; the latter refers to forces, energies, and beings marked as dark, dangerous, and disordering; those qualities that need to be set apart and confined in order for communities to imagine themselves as coherent. To be sure, there is some fluidity between these two genres of the sacred. For instance, ancestral spirits can protect humans in certain circumstances and harm them in others (especially when ancestors are not being honored properly). The same black athletic body that is venerated for being superhuman can be coded as monstrous in another setting and under different modes of surveillance.

Georges Bataille takes up the ambiguity of the sacred in his work. In *Theory of Religion*, where Bataille lucidly develops these ideas, the French author seems to make a rather stark

distinction between the sacred and the profane modes of being. For Bataille, the profane realm is marked by what he calls discontinuity or lack of intimacy, instrumental reasoning, and the deferral of pleasure. Within this domain, human selves treat human and non-human beings as useful objects for future-oriented schemes and projects. In other words, I relate to and interact with others insofar as they support and buttress my sense of becoming a coherent self, enduring into an endless future. While this investment in a coherent self that treats the world in an instrumental manner is all too human and inescapable, Bataille suggests that it prevents the kind of intimacy that humans long for. For Bataille, the sacred realm is associated with the possibility of intimate relationships with others, self-undermining encounters that are marked by excess, vulnerability, and anguish. Whereas profane existence is all about production, accumulation, and self-preservation, sacred existence includes events, interactions, and practices that lead to the loss/expenditure of the coherent self and an opening to the painful contradictions that mark our lifeworlds. For Bataille, intimacy between self and other is not devoid of pain and anguish; it is a "disheveled [form of] communication" that includes "despair, madness, love and even more: laughter, dizziness, vertigo, nausea, loss of self to the point of death" (1988, 37). Bataille is very much invested in identifying practices and activities that re-connect us to sacred existence, which provide a sense of intimacy through loss, ecstasy, and anguish. While he in-famously celebrates pre-modern rituals of sacrifice (an occasion where the sacrificing community identifies with the death/loss of the sacrificed body), he is aware that these practices are no longer legitimate in most contemporary communities and contexts. In fact, he claims in *Theory of Religion* that "the most solemn sacrifice may not be bloody" (1989, 48). For Bataille, sacrifice alludes to those experiences and events that disrupt our inclination to render the world intelligible, to place these events in some meaning-producing scheme or telos that would preserve form and order. As he puts it, "Sacrifice is the antithesis of production, which is accomplished with a view to the future; it is consumption [expenditure] that is concerned only with the moment" (Ibid, 49). And the dissolution of self, form, and commitment to duration leads to a moment of opacity, of what he calls a beclouded or black consciousness.

For Bataille, as I read him, there is an exuberance that is internal to the flow and movement of energies in the world. While human subjects are connected to this exuberance, humans are also tethered to projects and meaning-making, qualities that take form in the self, community, nation-state, etc. Because of this necessary investment in form, meaning, and boundary, this aforementioned exuberance will always carry a sense of monstrosity, deformation, and anguish. The work of Bataille (and Durkheim) leave us with some haunting questions: If Bataille focuses on the separate individual's encounter with deformation, how does his understanding of the sacred change when we shift to the perspective of bodies and subjects have come to signify excess and disorder? To put it differently, does Bataille assume access to something like a coherent self (or the fantasy of a self), and how is this position defined against blackness and other qualities? In Bataille's fiction and non-fiction, how does the figure of the black appear and how does blackness serve as an available companion to the dissolution-seeking subject? While these questions open up future paths of inquiry, we can be confident that juxtaposing Moten, Wilderson, and Bataille invites new ways of thinking about blackness, religion, and the excessive quality of the sacred. Finally, this conversation generates a range of dispositions and affects that cannot be reduced to hope *or* despair, celebration *or* mourning, (social) life *or* death.

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