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LOCATING THE OCEANIC IN SYLVIA WYNTER'S "DEMONIC  
GROUND"<sup>1</sup>

As a demonic island, black studies lifts the fog that shrouds the  
laws of comparison, particularity, and exception to reveal an  
aquatic outlook 'far away from the continent of man.'

--Alexander Weheliye, "After Man" (citation from Walter  
Benjamin)

In recent years, the vast and expansive oeuvre of Caribbean cultural critic and theorist Sylvia Wynter has received enthusiastic response from a seemingly ever-increasing group of scholars. Profoundly transdisciplinary, her work has been engaged to think in and across fields and disciplines as diverse as post- and decolonial studies, Black studies, Caribbean critical theory, literary studies, curriculum studies, posthumanism and, increasingly, religious studies and theology. Drawing from and contributing to this great interest in Wynter's writings, this essay seeks to further elucidate and build upon an often-referenced concept in her work: "demonic ground."<sup>2</sup> Despite Wynter's use of

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<sup>1</sup> The initial idea for this essay sprang from my doctoral dissertation: I am incredibly grateful to my advisor Anthony B. Pinn and the dissertation committee for their help, guidance, and support during the years it took me to complete my PhD. Many thanks, too, to my postdoc supervisor Anya Topolski and the other participants of the Race-Religion Constellation research group at Radboud University Nijmegen for their critical, constructive, and supportive feedback. It's been an immense pleasure to work with a group of such careful, nuanced thinkers. Michiel Bakker, Alison Glassie, Nathanael Homewood, David Kline, and Jonathon O'Donnell helped me to sharpen my arguments about Wynter and the blue humanities and for that, I am very grateful. Special thanks to Adrienne Rooney, whose brilliant interventions, questions, and catchy acronyms—s2l—improved the quality of this essay immensely.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Michelle Jarman, "Race and Disability in US Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, ed. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 155–69; Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Sneha Krishnan, "Speaking from Other Demonic Bases of Partiality," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 9, no. 2 (July 1, 2019): 154–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820619850269>; Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women And The Cartographies Of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2006); Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Laura McTighe and Deon Haywood, "Front Porch Revolution: Resilience Space, Demonic Grounds, and the Horizons of a Black Feminist Otherwise," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and*

the terrestrial term "ground," I argue that the concept is fundamentally oceanic; I then build on this insight to coin "demonic ocean" as an alternative vantage point of Black study.

Wynter introduces "demonic ground" in her well-known and controversial essay "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman,'" which served as the After/Word for *Out of the Kumbula: Caribbean Women and Literature*. Published in 1990, this edited volume offered one of the first comprehensive accounts of writings by Caribbean women and sought to open up a conversation about a specific "Caribbean feminist theoretical position."<sup>3</sup> Here's Wynter, in a characteristically long sentence, packed with meaning and implication:

I want to argue in this After/Word, from its projected "demonic ground" outside of our present governing system of meaning, or theory/ontology in [A.T.] de Nicolas' sense of the word that is precisely the variable 'race' which imposes upon these essays the contradictory dualism by which the writers both work within the "regime of truth" of the discourse of feminism, at the same time as they make use of this still essentially Western discourse to point towards the epochal threshold of a new post-modern and post-Western mode of cognitive inquiry; one which goes beyond the limits of our present "human sciences," to constitute itself as a new science of human life.<sup>4</sup>

It will take the space of this essay to fully explicate this passage; for now, three things are noteworthy. First, Wynter conceived her essay as written from the "demonic ground." Two, this "demonic ground" exists outside of the hegemonic, structuring episteme. Three, she arrives at this outsider position by building on but also moving beyond the "Caribbean feminist theoretical position" outlined in the essays that she reflects on. While I will explicate the term over the course of the essay, we may therefore define "demonic ground," for now, as the

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*Society* 44, no. 1 (September 1, 2018): 25–52, <https://doi.org/10.1086/698276>; Kate Siklowski, "'Dr. Livingstone, I Presume?': The Demonic Grounds of M. NourbeSe Philip's Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence," in *Spatial Literary Studies*, ed. Robert Tally (New York: Routledge, 2021), 103–16; Alexander G. Weheliye, "After Man," *American Literary History* 20, no. 1–2 (March 1, 2008): 321–36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajm057>; Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Carole Boyce-Davies, "Occupying the Terrain: Reengaging 'Beyond Miranda's Meanings,'" *American Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2018): 841.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman," in *Out of the Kumbula: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce-Davies and Elaine Savory Fida (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990), 356. Emphasis mine.

"position of the unthought" and the locale of and for radical epistemic innovation.<sup>5</sup>

Why does Wynter use the term "demonic" to denote such a vantage point? Counterintuitively, she does not borrow the phrase directly from (Christian) theology; rather, she turns to scientific texts, where the demon, as Jimena Canales shows in her book *Bedeveled* (2020), also has a long, storied presence.<sup>6</sup> Wynter writes that she borrowed the term from "physicists who seek to conceive of a vantage point outside the space-time orientation of the humuncular observer."<sup>7</sup> I unpack this phrase below; for now, it suffices to note that this explanation is not accompanied by a specific reference. In fact, the precise source of inspiration remains – despite helpful and more recent clarifications by Katherine McKittrick and Sarah Haley<sup>8</sup> – unknown. This essay addresses this lacuna.

To start, I trace Wynter's explicit reference to philosopher A.T. de Nicolas in the long quote above to a previously ignored or overlooked source for Wynter's "demonic ground:" the writings of Alex Comfort (the essay that Wynter references is a review of one of Comfort's books).<sup>9</sup> Comfort is best known as author of the famous manual *The Joy of Sex* (1972). The idiosyncratic scientist and physician has, however, a transdisciplinary oeuvre that includes books on physics, philosophy, and religion. It is certainly possible that Wynter simply liked and borrowed the concept of the "demonic" and did not buy into (or even consider) Comfort's larger epistemological argument. However, tracing the concept back to Comfort encourages us to pay attention to the subaquatic traces embedded in the concept. After all, Comfort links the "demonic" not only to quantum physics, but also to what he consistently

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<sup>5</sup> I take the "position of the unthought" from the title Frank Wilderson III gave to his interview with Saidiya Hartman. In the interview, Hartman develops the term in reflecting on her immensely important *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), noting: "on the one hand, the slave is the foundation of the national order and, on the other, the slave occupies the position of the unthought"; Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 184–85. Scholars like Ashon Crawley expand the term to include, for instance, twentieth-century and contemporary people immersed in Blackpentecostalism; Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Jimena Canales, *Bedeveled: A Shadow History of Demons in Science*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings," 364.

<sup>8</sup> Haley, *No Mercy Here*; McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

<sup>9</sup> While I initially identified Comfort as a possible source for Wynter's "demonic ground" through tracing Wynter's citation of De Nicolas' book review of Comfort's *Reality and Empathy* (see fn 1 on page 367), I should note that Wynter includes Comfort's article on the demonic in the Reference list of "Beyond Miranda's Meanings." It is important to emphasize, however, that she does not cite him or his writings in the main text or the footnotes. Precisely because his work is only included in the Reference list, the influence of Comfort's essay on Wynter's work remained obscured and overlooked.

refers to as "oceanic experiences:" altered states of consciousness in which the boundary between self and other disappears. The second part of this essay follows these traces to Fred Moten's oceanic "mysticism of the flesh."<sup>10</sup> I understand Moten's mysticism as an example of a "demonic model" that parallels those explored by Comfort but that, in line with Wynter's "demonic ground," offers a critique of and alternative to epistemologies that subjugate and oppress those racialized as Black. Engaging Moten also allows me to inflect the largely metaphorical turn to the ocean in Comfort's writings more materially; after all, he develops "mysticism of the flesh" through engagement with the Middle Passage. Bringing Moten and Wynter in conversation around the notion of the oceanic, I aim, in the third and last part, to develop the notion of "demonic ocean." Thinking with Alexander Weheliye, whose writing serves as an epigraph to this essay, I will argue for and theorize "demonic ocean" as an offshore vantage point from which *Black Study* – in Ashon Crawley's expansive sense of the word<sup>11</sup> – imagines anew.

### Demonic Ground

Beginning with her 1984 essay "The Ceremony Must be Found," Wynter has published a series of interlinked essays that sought to answer two ostensibly straightforward questions.<sup>12</sup> Why and how does the Du Boisian "color line" – which Wynter would recast as a differentiation between "Man" and "Human Other" – exist? And how can we imagine and develop modes of knowing that trouble, challenge, and ultimately transcend it? Wynter's argument takes us back to medieval Europe.<sup>13</sup> Assuming Europe's overwhelming cultural and epistemological

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<sup>10</sup> Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 737–80.

<sup>11</sup> "I use Black Study," Crawley writes in the first footnote of his monumental *Blackpentecostal Breath*, "as opposed to black studies to intimate a relation between what gets institutionalized in the university as black studies, African American studies, Africana studies, ethnic studies, and multicultural studies beginning with the student protests on college campuses in 1968 with an intellectual practice that is always collective and resists institutionalization"; *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 275fn1. He, in turn, encountered the term first in Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons* (2013), a text I will also briefly turn to below.

<sup>12</sup> Wynter has published extensively since the 1960s. I would argue that the period between 1984 and 2015 marks the second stage in her work, in which she shifts from mainly writing about (Caribbean) cultural production to primarily presenting a more general and global analysis of the emergence of modernity.

<sup>13</sup> It takes us back even further, in fact, to what Wynter calls the "Third Event" and locates somewhere between 50,000 and 200,000 years ago: the emergence of human beings as "hybrid-auto-instituting-languaging-storytelling species" or *homo narrans*, which was the result of the "co-evolution of the human with (...) the emergent faculties of language, storytelling"; Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 25.

dependency on Christianity, she identifies a series of epistemic shifts, or what she calls "cognitive breakthroughs," that would gradually "free" human beings from the stronghold of supernatural explanations of the universe – free "us," most importantly, from supernatural answers to the question of "the who, and the what we are."<sup>14</sup>

For Wynter, the enslavement of the first Africans by the Portuguese in 1444, represents the first in a series of early modern changes that would cause what she would later call a "rupture" in the European social order and its conceptualizations of being human.<sup>15</sup> Subsequent ruptures include Copernicus's 1453 discovery of the heliocentric model, which thoroughly reorders the relationship between human beings and the divine, the re-discovery of Plato by Marsilio Ficino (in 1474), Christopher Columbus's so-called "discovery" of the Americas in 1492 and, finally, the Valladolid debate (from 1550-1) between humanist Juan Ginés Sepúlveda and theologian Bartholomé De Las Casas over the "proper" treatment of Native Americans that would lead to chattel slavery. These changes catalyzed a fundamentally racialized modernity. For Wynter, however, they also forged an epistemological shift that made the guiding structuring principle of medieval European Christian theology – a "master code" of Redeemed Spirit/Fallen Flesh that hierarchically distinguished between clergy and laity – untenable.<sup>16</sup>

Importantly, Wynter also uses the term "demonic" when discussing this early modern context. She argues that the "lay intelligentsia" (which included Columbus), who were disempowered in relation to the church, used a "demonic model" to instigate the rupture.<sup>17</sup> She argues, too, that such disempowerment was "ontological:" the supposed inferiority of lay peoples legitimated and functioned as foundational structure to the power of the clergy. While the term "demonic ground" could be understood, in this particular instance, as connected to Christian theological discourse – to the extent that "lay intelligentsia" were potentially framed as demonic by the clergy in power – Wynter's usage, as I noted above, is explicitly based in scientific demons. Again, the term "demonic ground" identifies a locale of epistemological innovation, inhabited by those that hegemonic powers mark as somehow inferior "other" but that, precisely for this reason, are foundational to and structure hegemonic order. "Demonic ground" is the liminal space that is

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<sup>14</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 364.

<sup>15</sup> Wynter, 276.

<sup>16</sup> Wynter, 274-83.

<sup>17</sup> Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings," 264.

opened up by the persistent but ultimately always futile desire for pure and absolute difference.

However, and crucially, the early modern epistemological shift identified above did not change the structural logic that underlies *how* human beings go about formulating an answer to "the who, and the what we are." Wynter argues that human behavior is instituted in and through cosmogonies – "origin stories" – which include ways of meaning-making and behavioral schemas that groups of people live in and by. Such cosmogonies, in other words, ground and enforce a particular community with shared values and meanings – or what Wynter calls a "genre of being human."<sup>18</sup> These cosmogonies are structured around what Wynter calls a "master code." Master codes name binary systems that, based on a set of interrelated distinctions, hierarchically differentiate human beings. As such, each cosmogony functions to produce boundaries: a "We/Us" over and against a "They/Not Us", a group that is "in" and a group that is "out."<sup>19</sup> In the medieval scholasticism that forms the starting point of Wynter's analysis, these distinctions included spirit/flesh, heaven/earth, habitable/uninhabitable. These codes are invented by human beings but supposedly instituted by an "extrahuman agency."<sup>20</sup> Humanly created "stories" and its attendant categories, differentiations, and distinctions, thereby transform into "codes" that function as "lawlike" in that they are deemed to be eternal, fixed, divine.<sup>21</sup> This twofold grammar of distinction and displacement is what constitutes, for Wynter, the "phenomenon of religion."<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the rational human subject – or "Man1" – that was invented in the wake of European colonialism, enslavement, and expansion, remained supposedly mandated by an extrahuman agent: Nature, or more specifically, the divinely instituted Great Chain of Being, a hierarchical structure that ordered life from supposedly highest to lowest forms.<sup>23</sup> Importantly, not all human

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<sup>18</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A New World View," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 5–57.

<sup>19</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overtturn, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition," in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*, ed. Jason Ambrose and Sabine Broeck (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 220.

<sup>20</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom." 273.

<sup>21</sup> Wynter, 300.

<sup>22</sup> Wynter and McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species", 27. I develop this argument in my contribution to *Words Made Flesh: Sylvia Wynter and Religion*, a volume I am co-editing with David Kline that is currently under contract with Fordham University Press. See also: Justine Bakker, "COP26 and the Need for Parareligion", *Counterpoint: Navigating Knowledge*, 23 November 2021. <https://www.counterpointknowledge.org/on-cop26-and-the-need-for-parareligion/>

<sup>23</sup> Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Losing Manhood: Animality and Plasticity in the (Neo)Slave Narrative," *Qui Parle* 25, no. 1–2 (2016): 99.

beings were thought to have equal access to reason, a property supposedly uniquely endowed to white Europeans. Black and indigenous peoples were thought to have limited or no access. As such, Wynter writes, "race" became the "answer that the secularizing West would now give to the Heideggerian question as to the who, and the what we are."<sup>24</sup> I highlight, once more, the constitutive nature embedded in this claim. It is not simply the case that racialized peoples were "excluded" from "Man" but, rather, that they were integral to its emergence and reign (and therefore, too, in a unique position to critique and think anew from the liminal position of the "demonic ground"). Those who were once invented as "Untrue Christian Other" now came to be understood as fundamentally other to the human project itself. As Christianity became increasingly more "secularized," the meaning-making systems of Europe's "others" were no longer cast as manifestations of a "false" religion, but as "evidence" of their supposedly "subhuman" nature.<sup>25</sup>

In the nineteenth century, another "cognitive breakthrough" took place, which Wynter grounds, symbolically, in the work of Charles Darwin and Thomas Malthus. Human nature came to be understood in fully biocentric terms – "Man2" – while the market economy took over from the political as the foundational order in and through which invented human differentiation was both legitimated and executed. As "Man2" is embodied by the white bourgeois, Black people were, once again, seen as the fundamental, ontological other to "Man2," although Wynter is careful to note that the (neo)liberal market economy also pushes the "jobless," "global poor" and LGBT folks to the margin.<sup>26</sup> Once again, this new order is thought to be natural and given, as it is believed to be instigated by yet another "extrahuman" agent: Evolution, capitalized by Wynter to highlight its structuring power.<sup>27</sup>

It is at this point that we return to the concept at hand, "demonic ground." Wynter stresses that we remain locked in a cognitive model that hides the invented nature of the current dominating order and its constitutive categories and differentiations – i.e. the invented nature of antiblack white supremacy. She therefore identifies the need for a new "cognitive breakthrough" that parallels those that instituted "Man1" and

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<sup>24</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 264.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin G Robinson, "Racialization and Modern Religion: Sylvia Wynter, Black Feminist Theory, and Critical Genealogies of Religion," *Critical Research on Religion* 7, no. 3 (December 1, 2019): 261.

<sup>26</sup> Wynter, "1492: A New World View," 34.

<sup>27</sup> In calling "Evolution" a story Wynter is not denying evolution but, rather, 1) suggests that the conceptualization of the human as purely biocentric that followed in its wake is incomplete, as human beings are both bios and mythos and 2) underscores the subjective nature of the scientific enterprise. See, on this latter issue, also Katherine McKittrick's *Dear Science and Other Stories*.

"Man2" and thereby freed human cognition from the strongholds of supernatural Christianity.<sup>28</sup> She locates the beginnings of this new perspective in Fanon's innovative work on race and consciousness in *Black Skin/White Masks* (1952). However, she takes a step further by identifying the central importance of master codes in the constitution and legitimation of human social orders.<sup>29</sup> In so doing, Wynter herself launches a critique and alternative from the "demonic ground."

### Demonic Physics

Why, I ask again, does Wynter utilize the term "demonic"? This question becomes particularly relevant and necessary when we consider that the "demonic" and associated terms are frequently used in the service of racialized oppression and exclusion. Consider the continued stereotyping of African-derived religions such as Vodou and Santeria as "devil worship," a claim that served to legitimize and justify laws that prohibited religious practices.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, there exists an intimate relationship between demonology and racialization that marks those racialized as Black as "demonic" and therefore evil, unworthy, less-than-human.<sup>31</sup> For instance, in a recent and particularly vicious example, police officer Darren Wilson described Michael Brown as looking like a "demon" in the final moments leading up to his fatal shooting of the unarmed Black teenager.<sup>32</sup> Stating "it looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked," Wilson builds on and cements both the demonization and objectification of blackness.<sup>33</sup>

Against this discourse, Wynter's reclaiming of the "demonic" as a vantage point to think against and beyond centuries of antiblack white supremacy deserves careful scrutiny. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006), McKittrick riffs on the etymology of the term: the

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<sup>28</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 364.

<sup>29</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience," in *National Identities and Socio-Political Changes in Latin America*, ed. Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana (New York: Routledge, 2001), 30-66.

<sup>30</sup> Danielle N. Boaz, *Banning Black Gods: Law and Religions of the African Diaspora* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2021).

<sup>31</sup> Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Adam Kotsko, *The Prince of This World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); S. Jonathon O'Donnell, *Passing Orders: Demonology and Sovereignty in American Spiritual Warfare* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020). The demonization of human beings extends beyond Black people: consider, for instance, the persistent demonization of Jewish people and Muslims.

<sup>32</sup> Damien Cave, "Officer Darren Wilson's Grand Jury Testimony in Ferguson, Mo., Shooting," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2014, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/11/25/us/darren-wilson-testimony-ferguson-shooting.html>.

<sup>33</sup> See also Kotsko, *The Prince of This World*, 1-5.

“demonic is defined as spirits – most likely the devil, demons, or deities – capable of possessing a human being.”<sup>34</sup> She’s quick to add, though, that the demonic “has also been understood in terms that are less ecclesial.”<sup>35</sup> In physics, mathematics, and computer science, writes McKittrick, the term denotes a “system that cannot have a determined, or knowable, outcome.”<sup>36</sup> Demonic systems hinge on uncertainty; they trouble linearity and determination. Wynter, McKittrick argues, develops her concept of the “demonic” in accordance with this second, non-ecclesial strand of thought. As liminal space opened up by and working against the desire for pure difference, the “demonic” suggests, as I noted above, “perspectives that reside in the liminal precincts of the current governing configurations of the human as Man in order to abolish this figuration and create other forms of life.”<sup>37</sup>

However, other than a general reference of “physicists,” it remains unclear who or what Wynter refers to precisely. Sarah Haley observes this as well in *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (2016). She offers a potential reference when she notes that “[t]he demon to which Wynter might refer appears in a mid-nineteenth-century thought experiment pertaining to thermodynamics.”<sup>38</sup> This tiny demon, also known as Maxwell’s demon, is the product of Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell. In an 1867 thought experiment, Maxwell speculated about the possibility of a violation of the second law of thermodynamics, which postulates that entropy always increases as time passes. In the experiment, a demon who could effortlessly “follow every molecule in its course” would control a “vessel” that is “divided into two portions, A and B.”<sup>39</sup> By quickly opening and closing a “small hole” between A and B, the demon could ensure that faster molecules would pass from A to B and slower molecules from B to A, allowing B to heat up and A to cool down. This would decrease entropy and frustrate the possibility for equilibrium, thus violating the second law. Canales helps us to understand the importance of this experiment when she notes that Maxwell’s demon demonstrated that the second law had only “statistical certainty”; sometimes, “nature does

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<sup>34</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

<sup>35</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xxiv.

<sup>36</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xxiv. Interestingly, however, scientific demons are not completely divorced from theology. When Descartes invoked his “all powerful” “evil genius” in 1641 to imagine the limitations of the human senses, he was quickly accused of heresy, a claim he countered by clarifying that the term “evil genius” did not refer to a power that equalled that of God, but rather to a lesser demon with limited powers, along the likes of pagan demons (Canales, *Bedeveled: A Shadow History of Demons in Science*,” 25. This claim also divorced the term demon from its immediate, and fully Christian, association with evil, as pagan demons were often quite benevolent.

<sup>37</sup> Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 229.

<sup>39</sup> Canales, *Bedeveled: A Shadow History of Demons in Science*, 56.

follow the path less travelled."<sup>40</sup> As Haley notes, this "demonic challenge" theorizes an outside observer who disrupts the supposedly natural "progression of energy."<sup>41</sup> If Haley's interpretation is correct, embedded in Wynter's "demonic" would not be simply that the "demonic ground" opens up the possibility of the unknown, the contingent, the non-deterministic, but also that such models actively disrupt and challenge what we may call hegemonic proceedings.

Haley's theory helps to fill in the more abstract references to "physicists" offered by McKittrick and Wynter. However, Wynter does not refer to Maxwell's demon and my own search pointed in a different direction: Alex Comfort's article "Demonic and Historical Models in Biology," published in 1980 in the *Journal of Social and Biological Structures*. I should note that Wynter does not cite Comfort's article (or any of his works) directly (although she does include the article in her list of references, see fn 9). However, it includes the phrase "a time-and-place oriented homuncular observer" (1980, 208), a phrase that sounds quite similar to that used by Wynter when she explains how she came to the term demonic in her 1990 essay (a quote already cited above): "physicists who seek to conceive of a vantage point outside the *space-time orientation of the humuncular*<sup>42</sup> *observer*."<sup>43</sup>

With his iteration of the phrase, Comfort refers to the Cartesian "little man" inside human brains who supposedly "initiates the actions of thinking, willing, and the like."<sup>44</sup> "Western scientific ontology," he argues in a 1979 essay that formed the explicit starting point for the 1980 article, assumes that this homuncular observer is "real" to the extent that it presupposes an objective, indeed mechanistic, universe that can be studied by a human subject. It assumes a distinction between subjective experience and "the objective word," between self and environment, between mind and matter. This "observing I" is, moreover, assumed to be located in a specific point in space and time, where space – and here Comfort references Kant's *a*

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<sup>40</sup> Canales, *Bedeveled*, 55, 54.

<sup>41</sup> Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 229.

<sup>42</sup> Please note that the spelling is slightly different in the two texts: Wynter uses the phrase "humuncular" while Comfort speaks of "homuncular."

<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Wynter does cite two other articles that were published in the same 1980 issue of the *Journal of Social and Biological Structures* that included Comfort's article, which could suggest that she's read the entire issue with great interest. One of these is the already referenced review article by Antonio T. de Nicolas which is, in fact, a review of Comfort's book *I and THAT': Notes on the Biology of Religion* (1979). It could be worthwhile, therefore, to explore why and how Comfort uses the "demonic." Importantly, I am not suggesting that Wynter would agree with all aspects of Comfort's argument and neither, I think, should we; rather, I study Comfort's work to better understand and build on the potentially hidden traces in the concept of "demonic ground."

<sup>44</sup> Alex Comfort, "The Cartesian Observer Revisited: Ontological Implications of the Homuncular Illusion," *Journal of Social and Biological Structures* 2 (1979): 211.

*prioris*—is assumed to have three dimensions and time is assumed to be constantly elapsing. The Cartesian "little man" is, essentially, what Wynter conceptualizes as "Man1" (even if her writings omit explicit reference to Descartes). It was Descartes, after all, who roughly a century after the rupture initiated by Columbus, Ficino, and others, theorized and cemented human nature as, essentially and fundamentally, rational—and did so while espousing a fully mechanistic worldview that viewed nonhuman animals as machines. It is important to note, however, that while Wynter's study of "Man" underscores and explores the racialized nature and implications of the distinction between rational and irrational, subject and other, Comfort does not seem to recognize or acknowledge the racialized nature of the "Western scientific ontology" he identifies and critiques.

What Comfort does note, however, is that the idea of positional identity "biases" our conception of how the world works, biases the models that we create to understand the world. Can we think of a model, he therefore asks in 1980, that is not determined by the necessarily limited temporal-spatial positionality of a human observer? Comfort arrives at this question through his studies of quantum mechanics which, he argues, demonstrates that there are levels of reality that are not understandable or even perceivable within the limits of human perception, within the limits of space-time. Consider, Comfort writes, theoretical physicist David Bohm's "implicate reality."<sup>45</sup> Bohm argued that an "implicate reality" (or "order") should be differentiated from the "explicate order" in that it is a deeper, more fundamental order of reality that is not and cannot be normally perceived by humans. Bohm essentially argued that the "implicate order" consists of an infinite number of overlapping waves that generate what appear to human beings, in the explicate order, as particles. To study or even begin to comprehend this, Bohm argued that we must do away with the mechanistic worldview that has dominated Western science and philosophy since Descartes.<sup>46</sup> As Ashon Crawley writes in a beautiful exploration of what quantum thought can offer Black Study, "[t]hings that occur on the quantum level go against common knowledge regarding time and space."<sup>47</sup> On the quantum level, the relationship between cause and effect is upended and troubled, in favor of a radical—if, admittedly, largely theoretical—randomness, uncertainty. The interconnectedness that quantum mechanics has been able to observe between two particles over a great distance should, in addition, not be able to exist within 4-space. At the quantum

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<sup>45</sup> Alex Comfort, "Demonic and Historical Models in Biology," *Journal of Social and Biological Structures* 3, no. 2 (1980): 207, 214.

<sup>46</sup> Comfort, 214.

<sup>47</sup> Ashon T. Crawley, *The Lonely Letters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 5.

level, it's all just so radically different and pregnant with possibility.

Speculating about such alternatives, Comfort lands on the concept of "demonic," a term that, he presses emphatically, does not refer to "an imaginary demiurge" but is used "to imply logical and intelligent but not human and therefore not homuncular."<sup>48</sup> If "we program them correctly," he writes in *Reality and Empathy* (1984), these "imaginary demons... will ask very awkward Socratic questions."<sup>49</sup> As indicated above, Comfort's use of the term "demon" to describe such models is not out of the ordinary. In her aforementioned and aptly titled *Bedeveled* (2020), Jimena Canales writes that demons have populated science for centuries where they function as a kind of threshold or limit case: in developing scientific theories, scientists imagined powerful demons that could break, challenge or trouble these, thereby allowing them to uphold, strengthen, or discard a hypothesis.<sup>50</sup> Invoked in 1641, Descartes' demon – an "evil genius" that could take control over our sensations and whom, incidentally, sprang out of his dualistic understanding of the relationship between mind and matter – warned, for instance, about the limitation of the senses in perceiving reality.<sup>51</sup> In line with this, Comfort describes the aim of "demonics" as detecting "the constraints on what we can think, so as to extend them and move towards experimentally testable predictions."<sup>52</sup> Importantly, it is precisely in relation to this issue – *testable* predictions – that Wynter's demonic is rather different from that of Comfort. While Wynter shares with Comfort a commitment to the necessity of experimentation and study, for Wynter (and this is of course what McKittrick already outlined) the value of "demonic" lies in that it opens up the possibility for ways of critique and thinking "otherwise" that value and reside in – rather than try to *resolve* – the unpredictable, the unknown.<sup>53</sup> After all, as I noted earlier with reference to the early modern demonics of the "lay intelligentsia," what was once "demonic"

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<sup>48</sup> Comfort, "Demonic and Historical Models in Biology," 211.

<sup>49</sup> Alex Comfort, *Reality and Empathy: Physics, Mind, and Science in the 21st Century* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1984), 65.

<sup>50</sup> Even though several scientists involved in developing quantum mechanics referred to demons in their work, including Max Planck and Max Born (see: Canales, *Bedeveled*, 112-4), Comfort's "demon" is not the same as those of quantum physics. In other words, Comfort uses the term "demon" as a kind of catch-all to describe the ways in which models inspired by quantum physics could challenge the positional identity bias in mainstream science; he did not, however, develop his own demon à la Maxwell or LaPlace.

<sup>51</sup> Canales, *Bedeveled*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Comfort, *Reality and Empathy*, 194, 85.

<sup>53</sup> I take the term "otherwise" from Ashon Crawley, who writes in *Blackpentecostal Breath*: "Otherwise, as word – otherwise possibilities, as phrase – announces the fact of infinite alternatives to what *is*. And what *is* is about being, about existence, about ontology"; 2.

can become hegemonic – and, indeed, oppressive, stifling, destructive. In this way, Wynter may help us to avoid the desire for predictability that we continue to find in Comfort.

However, to the extent that Comfort remains committed to a version of positivistic science, there are other moments that his quest to push beyond the Cartesian "little man" takes him to less well-travelled terrain. In his effort to think outside the box, Comfort invokes a fair number of esoteric, spiritual and "religious"<sup>54</sup> worldviews that, he argues, already query a priori conceptions of space, time and positional identity. In the 1980 article that I argue inspired Wynter to take up the term "demonic," he invokes these tentatively, skeptically, with several references to "telekinesis," "telepathy," and "vitalism"<sup>55</sup> which he four years later also captured, rather derogatory, as "Californianism,"<sup>56</sup> thereby falling in the trap of relegating such practices to the realm of "rejected knowledge."<sup>57</sup> However, in several other writings he invokes such alternative worldviews explicitly and with seemingly sincere and great interest – and it is in these writings that he establishes a link between "demonic models" and "oceanic experiences."<sup>58</sup> Importantly for our present purposes, these writings also include *I and That*, the book that is the topic of the review cited by Wynter, which devotes, as reviewer De Nicolas also notes, an entire chapter to "oceanic experiences."

In an article published in 1979, Comfort proposes a shift from a "Cartesian positional identity ('homuncular I-ness')" to an "oceanic," "nonpositional observer" modeled on "Buddhist and Hindu ontology."<sup>59</sup> Why? Because in such models, both the "I" and the "objective world" are experienced as an illusion, rather than a fact – an experience, he notes, confirmed by modern physics. And while Comfort is particularly interested in Buddhism and Hinduism, he universalizes the oceanic in *Empathy and Reality* (1984), referencing "oceanic Christians" such as Meister Eckhardt, the oceanic experiences "studied and indeed experienced by William James" and, more generally to "altered

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<sup>54</sup> I use the phrase "religion" or "religious" in scare quotes to signal well-known critiques of the term – critiques that demonstrate that "religion" is not a universal but a colonial category that was (re)invented in asymmetrical power relationships between Europeans and the peoples they encountered overseas.

<sup>55</sup> Comfort, "Demonic and Historical Models in Biology," 211–12.

<sup>56</sup> Comfort, *Reality and Empathy*, 23.

<sup>57</sup> On "rejected knowledge" see: Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Flip: Epiphanies of Mind and the Future of Knowledge* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2019).

<sup>58</sup> Alex Comfort, *I and That: Notes on the Biology of Religion* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1979); Comfort, "The Cartesian Observer Revisited"; Comfort, *Reality and Empathy*.

<sup>59</sup> Comfort, "The Cartesian Observer Revisited", 211.

states of consciousness (oceanic states)" facilitated by drugs, meditation or other rituals, or occurring spontaneously.<sup>60</sup>

While Comfort does not explicitly point to a specific source for his use of "oceanic" as a catch-all phrase to study such varied altered states of consciousness, he seems to locate it not, perhaps surprisingly, in the work of Sigmund Freud (who in turn borrowed the term from the French mystic Romain Rolland), but in the Sanskrit term samādhi. Samādhi is somewhat of a contested term, difficult to translate, but Comfort's definition will do here: a "state in which Reality is experienced as seamless and without distinctions."<sup>61</sup> Such a state, he notes early in *Reality and Empathy*, can be translated as "oceanic experience."<sup>62</sup> What connects all these experiences, for Comfort, is that I and other, self and environment, perceiver and that which is perceived, are "experienced as non-different."<sup>63</sup> Such experiences suggest for Comfort that the hard-and-fast distinction between subjective and objective that underlies "Western scientific ontology" is only one way – and not the only way – of experiencing "reality." It is precisely for this reason that "oceanic experiences" help to visualize ways of thinking not determined by the "observer bias."<sup>64</sup> On the level of both quantum waves and oceanic experiences, Comfort's writings thus suggest, things occur that go against conventional understandings of the relationship between inside and outside, subject and object.

It remains, of course, entirely possible that Wynter was unaware of the link between the demonic and such alternative ontologies although this seems, for reasons explained above, unlikely.<sup>65</sup> If my theory is correct, moreover, we can conclude that implicitly embedded in the notion of "demonic ground" is not merely or only that these "parallel" systems in physics with an unknowable, indeterminate outcome (as McKittrick would have it). Nor does the term, in its original usage, refer primarily to those experiments that institute an active challenge to or disruption of hegemonic natural processes (as Haley's analysis adds). Indeed, the notion of "demonic ground" also includes systems that "parallel" that which is perhaps most fundamental to Comfort's demonic: epistemologies that explicitly push thinking beyond well-worn philosophical and scientific

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<sup>60</sup> Comfort, *Reality and Empathy*, 38, 4, 65.

<sup>61</sup> Comfort, *Reality and Empathy*, 260.

<sup>62</sup> Comfort, *Reality and Empathy*, 4.

<sup>63</sup> Comfort, *Reality and Empathy*, 4.

<sup>64</sup> Comfort, *Reality and Empathy*, 65.

<sup>65</sup> It is important to emphasize (once more) that Wynter does not explicitly discuss Comfort's writings – let alone his oceanic alternatives – nor does she advance a "genre of being human" grounded in an undifferentiated understanding between self and environment, although she does push for a radically contingent epistemology. See, for this latter point, in particular: Jonathan Goldberg, *Tempest In The Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2003), 65–69.

understandings of the relationship between self and other, subject and object. This becomes particularly important when we consider, with scholarship in Black studies, that it was precisely the distinction between subject and object that, embodied and expressed along racial lines, formed a foundation and legitimation for racist violence, oppression, subjugation and exclusion.<sup>66</sup> It is for this reason that the second part of this essay turns to Fred Moten's "mysticism in the flesh," which allows me to bring the implicit oceanic traces in "demonic ground" and its insistent critique of the racialized nature of the distinction between subject and object to the surface.

### Oceanic Mysticism<sup>67</sup>

Moten began to develop his mysticism in 2013, in his article "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," in explicit conversation with and critique of Frank Wilderson's Afro-pessimism. While he never defines mysticism, he seems to arrive there by way of poet Nathaniel Mackey and his concept of "mu." "Mu" conveys a multitude of meanings: the state in-between fantasy and reality or a movement as "wheeling, spiraling runs" without beginning or end.<sup>68</sup> Most important here is his conceptualization of "mu" as denoting the hold of the slave ship. Significantly, however, the "hold of the ship" does not only refer to this specific historical place and event, but also signals a continuing state, temporality, and condition.<sup>69</sup> In Mackey's work, mu thus signals something in-between, unfinished, unfolding, becoming, a "radical unsettlement."<sup>70</sup> Moten then links this insight to the apophatic Buddhist philosophy of Nishida Kitarō, more specifically his reflections on "mu," a term that, Moten writes, has been variously translated as "no, not, nought, nonbeing, emptiness, nothingness, nothing."<sup>71</sup>

Taken together, Nishida and Mackey allow Moten to develop an alternative to Wilderson's assertion of the "relative nothingness of blackness and black people."<sup>72</sup> At the risk of oversimplifying, we might conclude that Wilderson's

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<sup>66</sup> See, among many others: Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics Of The Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2003); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>67</sup> I also discuss and employ Moten's mysticism in the flesh in another article manuscript I recently submitted to a journal. While I do so towards different ends, some of the wording and argumentation overlaps.

<sup>68</sup> Nathaniel Mackey, *Splay Anthem* (New York: New Directions, 2006), ix-x.

<sup>69</sup> See, for a particularly important exploration of the expansive nature of the hold, also: Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016).

<sup>70</sup> Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness", 750.

<sup>71</sup> Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness", 750.

<sup>72</sup> Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness", 750.

Afro-pessimism begins and ends its thinking from the standpoint of the political subject, or, the transcendental subject that is knowing and self-possessed. Seen from that standpoint, blackness occupies the relative position of the pathological object, which does not possess itself, that is seen as unknowing. For Afro-pessimism, you therefore have two relative positions, the transcendental subject and the pathological object, who need each other for their survival. Blackness thus always already exists in, through, and as the unified pairing of Human/Slave, White/Black, Civic Life/Social Death. With the help of Mackey and Nishida, Moten is after a nothingness that is absolute; for him, blackness is not defined in and through its relationship with white civil society (that is, in and through "sovereignty and relational ontology"<sup>73</sup>) but exists appositionally, outside of the endless desire for categorical distinction. Blackness – which Moten conceives of as force rather than category of identity<sup>74</sup> – names the always already fugitive escape from the white social order that always already tries to impose itself on blackness, capture blackness, imprison blackness.<sup>75</sup> It is unbounded, fluid, becoming. Oceanic, as it were.<sup>76</sup>

Such seemingly abstract theorizations become clearer, and more immediate, when we consider that Moten ties his understanding of "mu," mysticism, and the oceanic quality of blackness to Hortense Spillers' idea of the flesh; after all, his mysticism is a "mysticism of the flesh." Spillers famously distinguished the flesh from the body in her 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book."<sup>77</sup> In theorizing this distinction, Spillers writes that the African, as cultural subject, was "murdered" on the slave ship, a "theft of the body" that left nothing but the flesh.<sup>78</sup> Understood in this way, the flesh is thus anterior to, or 'before,' the body. It exists prior to racialization, violence, and enslavement, yet remains concealed

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<sup>73</sup> Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness", 750.

<sup>74</sup> In making this argument, Moten makes a paraontological – a term he takes from Nahum Chandler – distinction between Black being and Black beings, or "between Blackness and the people (which is to say, more generally, the things) that are called Black" (Fred Moten, "Black Op," *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1741.). Blackness is not reducible to Black people, although they are "(under)privileged insofar as they are given (to) an understanding of it" precisely because Black people have been subject to the most violent and destructive forces of antiblack white supremacy (Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 47.)

<sup>75</sup> Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness", 750-1.

<sup>76</sup> In thinking about mysticism of the flesh as oceanic, I have learned much from Jackie Wang's insightful reading of Moten: Jackie Wang, "Oceanic Feeling and Communist Affect.," *Giulia Tofana The Apothecary* (blog), December 3, 2016, <https://loneberry.tumblr.com/post/153995404787/oceanic-feeling-and-communist-affect>.

<sup>77</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67.

<sup>78</sup> Spillers, 67.

"under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography."<sup>79</sup> This is instructive for another distinction between Moten and Wilderson: where the latter argues that blackness is created through slavery, Moten remains convinced that blackness (again, as force, not identity or position) existed prior. But the flesh, in Spillers' writings, is also the site of absolute, horrific violence: the "hieroglyphics of the flesh," the whipping, branding, wounding and scarring of Black flesh, continued to find discursive force in what Saidiya Hartman calls the "afterlife of slavery," marking Black people, over generations, as "being for the captor."<sup>80</sup>

And yet, for Spillers, the flesh is also the site for resistance: existing outside the grasp of "Man," whose persistent efforts to fully capture the flesh in and through order, categorization, and differentiation ultimately always, if violently, fail, the flesh is the locale for potentiality. The flesh is an "intruding tale," the locus for finding new meanings and significations that lie outside of the structures of white, antiblack patriarchal society.<sup>81</sup> In the flesh, Spillers locates the possibility for a kind of sociality that is grounded in yet exceeds suffering and violence of centuries of antiblack white supremacy – a kind of sociality, importantly, that consistently resists the persistent efforts of "Man" to subjugate, oppress, capture.

We find an example of such forms of sociality, Moten theorizes in conversation with Spillers, on slaving vessels.<sup>82</sup> In thinking with Spillers, Moten's turn to the ocean thus pushes beyond metaphor in that he ties it directly to the very real history of the transatlantic slave trade. In a text co-written with Stefano Harney, he notes:

Never being on the right side of the Atlantic is an unsettled feeling, the feeling of a thing that unsettles with others. It's a feeling, if you ride with it, that produces a certain distance from the settled, from those who determine themselves in space and time, who locate themselves in a determined history. To have been shipped is to have been moved by others, with others. It is to feel at home with the homeless, at ease with the fugitive, at peace with the pursued, at rest with the ones who consent not to be one.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Spillers, 68.

<sup>80</sup> Spillers, 67. Hartman develops the term "afterlife of slavery" in her *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 6.

<sup>81</sup> Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe", 72.

<sup>82</sup> Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 177–218.

<sup>83</sup> Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 97.

Moten's mysticism thus conveys a feeling or state but one that is explicitly affective, material, and intimate: the "hold of the ship" offered "the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you."<sup>84</sup> Emerging in and through categorization, through differentiation, through "master code" (to return to Wynter's term), "Man" is unable to understand, let alone participate in, such feeling. Moten thus turns to mysticism to denote the possibility for a fugitive way of sentiment, existing, experience, feeling, touch, communication, and sensing, outside of the realm of white civil society, sovereignty, political ontology, and the subject. As radical sociality, his mysticism conveys potentiality outside of the political ontology of the coherent human-as-subject, thereby refusing hegemonic "western" ideations of the subject in favor of sociality, an always already togetherness.<sup>85</sup>

Denouncing the bounded subject, Moten's mysticism is, that much is evident, reminiscent of the experiences that Comfort brings together under the rubric of "oceanic." And yet, where Comfort's broad rubric universalized such experiences, I underscore the significance and originality of, and certainly the need for, the specificity of Moten's project. Moten is not just speaking of any subject – dissolved or not – but is developing his argument about and plea for mysticism in regard to the very precise context of en fleshed Black existence, in the context, that is, of centuries of oppression and objectification that were propelled by and grounded in a very particular understanding of the human: "Man." It is this constructed and racialized "human" that Moten both critiques and offers an alternative to. In other words, rather than advocating for the inclusion of Black people in "Man," Moten's "mysticism of the flesh" – which, in and through its specific reference to the flesh, lodges mysticism in a particular historical, experiential, and material reality – proposes to leave it behind. To the extent that his challenge to the subject-object distinction echoes that of Comfort (in that both turn to a form of oceanic mysticism), it takes on a more precise, more immediate, more social meaning that links us right back up with Wynter's "demonic ground" – and towards "demonic ocean."

### **Demonic Ocean**

Thus far, this essay has sought to accomplish two things. First, I identified a heretofore ignored source of inspiration for Wynter's "demonic," which also showed that to the extent that Wynter

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<sup>84</sup> Harney and Moten, 98.

<sup>85</sup> Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," 743–57; Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 98; Calvin Warren, "Black Mysticism: Fred Moten's Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit," *Zeitschrift Für Anglistik Und Amerikanistik* 65, no. 2 (June 27, 2017): 224.)

borrowed the term from "physicists," she did so specifically from quantum physics. This becomes particularly relevant when we consider that contemporary Black studies scholarship has also turned to quantum physics to think anew the possibilities of Black social life in the face of continuing manifestations of antiblack white supremacy.<sup>86</sup> Quantum physics, at least on a theoretical level, purports the existence of radical randomness, non-predictability, non-determination, non-locality and is, precisely for this reason, used to speculate about possibilities for Black existence outside or beyond the overdetermination of blackness in and through race. Black studies' interest in Wynter's "demonic ground" and the turn to quantum physics happened almost simultaneously; it's fascinating to entertain the possibility that the two were already linked thirty years ago. Locating this source demonstrated, too, that even if Wynter, as McKittrick notes, did not ground her notion of the demonic in the ecclesial meaning of the work, the term does carry "religious" traces, in the form of so-called "oceanic experiences" that, like quantum physics, demonstrate the limits of Kantian space-time in understanding our "reality." Second, and following the link between the oceanic and demonic expressed in Comfort's work, I turned to Moten's mysticism of the flesh as an example of an oceanic "demonic model" that parallels those explored by Comfort but, in line with Wynter's "demonic ground," is particularly attuned and offers an alternative to Man. This turn to Moten also keyed us into an interesting but previously hidden "link" between Wynter's writings and Black studies scholarship: as Tiffany Lethabo King also notes (and, indeed, critiques), many scholars in Black studies have turned to the ocean and other "watery metaphors" to theorize blackness.<sup>87</sup> In addition to Moten, we may emphasize here the work of the two other scholars discussed above, Spillers and Wilderson.

Building on these two sections, this final section coins the concept of "demonic ocean." Seemingly paradoxically, this concept reconfigures the dominant relationship between the oceanic and demonology as espoused in Christian theological discourse, where the "primordial chaos" of the ocean is – often in and through its embodiment in Leviathan – seen as demonic.<sup>88</sup> If Wynter, drawing from physics, reclaimed the "demonic" from its

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<sup>86</sup> Denise Ferreira da Silva, "To Be Announced: Radical Praxis or Knowing (at) the Limits of Justice," *Social Text* 31, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 43–62; Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2015); Crawley, *The Lonely Letters*; Ashon Crawley, "Resonance: Neutrinos and Black Life," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3, no. 1 (2017): 48–58. In the context of this article, Crawley's *The Lonely Letters* is particularly interesting, because it explores the link between quantum and mysticism.

<sup>87</sup> King, *The Black Shoals*, 4.

<sup>88</sup> Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002); O'Donnell, *Passing Orders*.

(racialized) theological association with evil, the concept of "demonic ocean" brings those writings in conversation with Black studies to reclaim the ocean itself from demonization.

The shift from "ground" to "ocean" is more than semantic. For all its epistemological usefulness, the term "ground" remains undeniably wedded to land, soil, territory. I have come to wonder if Wynter's commitment to "ground" could be indebted to the profoundly land-based orientation that, until recently largely undetected, *grounds* virtually all our ways of knowing, thinking, imagining.<sup>89</sup> As a decade of scholarship in the blue humanities has demonstrated, we've had, to use Dan Brayton's apt phrase, "our backs toward the sea."<sup>90</sup> The recent shift from green to blue, from surface to what lies below, from nation state to transnational crossings and dwellings, has revealed, however, that the ocean constitutes a materiality and phenomenological experience that is different from that which is encountered on land.<sup>91</sup> On land, there exists the opportunity to ground oneself in relation to a fixed point; the ocean, in contrast, is unfixed, fluid, mobile.

But where Steinberg, Peters, and others configure the open sea in a general way, such different phenomenology creates an immediate problem for those who were enslaved and their descendants. Moten depicts this in a devastating way in "Blackness and Nothingness." "It's terrible," he writes, "to have come from nothing but the sea, which is nowhere, navigable only in its constant autodislocation."<sup>92</sup> Immediately afterwards, however, Moten identifies this fundamental liquidity as the starting point for thinking, writing, imagining Black social life: the "absence of solidity seems to demand some other ceremony of hailing that will have been carried out on some more exalted frequency."<sup>93</sup> In Moten's mysticism, the oceanic – precisely because of its fluid, indeterminate nature – forms the vantage point to think and be anew.

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<sup>89</sup> Jonathan Howard, "The Inhabitants of the Deep': Water and the Material Imagination of Blackness" (Durham, Duke University, 2017), 2.

<sup>90</sup> Dan Brayton, *Shakespeare's Ocean: An Ecocritical Exploration* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012). Coined by Steve Mentz in 2009, the blue humanities is an emerging interdisciplinary field of research that takes the ocean as a starting point. A good, comprehensive introduction has yet to be written, but interested readers may want to consult: Brayton; Hester Blum, "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies," *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (2010): 670–77; Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene," *Comparative Literature* 69, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 32–44.

<sup>91</sup> Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33, no. 2 (April 1, 2015): 248. For "crossings and dwellings" see: Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>92</sup> Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," 744.

<sup>93</sup> Moten, 744.

More recently, scholars such as Jonathan Howard and Joshua Bennett have explicitly turned to Black literature and poetry situated in the oceanic environment of the Middle Passage to provoke epistemological interventions and alternatives to "Man."<sup>94</sup> Of course, Édouard Glissant and Derek Walcott already wrote about and theorized with the ocean decades ago. Glissant, to invoke just one example, linked his conceptualization of the rhizome to the entangled possibility of the ocean by way of the mangrove, while Walcott's most famous poem, "The Sea is History," reflected on the transformative nature of salty water. Indeed, not denying the reality of the recent influx in the "west" of conferences, books, special journal issues, and book series pertaining the so-called blue humanities we find, as Elizabeth DeLoughrey also writes (2017), a longer, consistent, and extended concern with the oceanic in Afrodiasporic writings. Such a concern also warrants that we approach the "oceanic turn" with a bit of caution: as Alice Te Punga Somerville reminds us, the term "turn" suggests a renewed interest while some peoples – Somerville writes specifically of the Pacific – "have not needed a 'turn to the sea' because [they] were already there."<sup>95</sup>

The writings of Bennett, Howard, Glissant, and others form the foundation for my notion of "demonic ocean."<sup>96</sup> Specifically, "demonic ocean" makes explicit the implicit traces of the oceanic that we find in "demonic ground" and denotes the various ways in which Black intellectual, religious, and cultural production has turned to the ocean as material, physical entity<sup>97</sup> in order to

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<sup>94</sup> Howard, "'The Inhabitants of the Deep': Water and the Material Imagination of Blackness"; Joshua B. Bennett, "Beyond The Vomiting Dark: Toward a Black Hydropoetics," in *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field*, ed. Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2018). See also: Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2-3 (June 1, 2008): 191-215.

<sup>95</sup> Alice Te Punga Somerville, "Where Oceans Come From," *Comparative Literature* 69, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 28.

<sup>96</sup> In developing the term "demonic ocean," I build on the innovative work of previous scholarship that considers the role and nature of the deep blue in Afrodiasporic cultural thought, in particular the work of Joshua Bennett and Jonathan Howard. See: Anissa J. Wardi, *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective*, Reprint edition (University Press of Florida, 2016); Bennett, "Beyond The Vomiting Dark"; Howard, "'The Inhabitants of the Deep': Water and the Material Imagination of Blackness"; Jonathan Howard, "'Gone with the Ibos' The Blueness of Blackness in Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," *Callaloo* 39, no. 4 (2016): 898-918. Black studies scholarship often thinks with the ocean (although often in more metaphorical ways, as Natasha Tinsley has also argued and critiqued). See, in particular: Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"; Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness"; Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997). Tiffany Lethabo King offers the concept of "black shoals" – an intermediate space between land and sea – to challenge "that Black diaspora studies is overdetermined by rootlessness and only metaphorized by water" (*Black Shoals*, 4). King queries the "watery metaphors" that dominate Black studies.

<sup>97</sup> Not merely, and here I invoke Hester Blum's worries, as metaphor (2010).

critique and offer an alternative to Man. In the past two decades alone, such Afrodiasporic oceanic alternatives were expressed, for instance, in the films of The Otolith Group, the artworks of Ellen Gallagher, Kara Walker, Christopher Cozier, and Maria Magdalena Campus-Pons, the writings of M. NourbeSe Philip, Fred D'Aguiar, Xandria Philips, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs and, finally, the music of Drexciya. I discuss many of these artists, writers, and intellectuals in a current book project, tentatively titled *Demonic Ocean: Parareligion in the African Diaspora* (based on my dissertation). There, I work from Wynter's aforementioned conceptualization of the "phenomenon of religion" to establish and develop my theory of parareligion and name these works *parareligious stories*, a nomenclature that seeks to denote the ways in which these inhabit and then critique the categorical distinctions that ground, produce, and reinforce antiblack white supremacy – including, of course, the distinction between subject and object that Comfort also takes issue with, if for different reasons.<sup>98</sup> After all, the "Western scientific ontology" that, beginning with Descartes, assumed a hegemonic status does not only, as Comfort laments, limit the possibilities for thought: it also legitimates the continued subjugation of Black people through its attempts to capture, contain, and categorize the generative possibilities of flesh, of blackness.

In all these works, moreover, the oceanic takes on difficult, complicated meaning as at once the last resting place of hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans that were forced to undertake the journey from Africa to the Americas and as a place of refuge, "however remote or submerged," as Bennett notes, where "black life can flourish."<sup>99</sup> Bennett's claim is important: in works like these, the oceanic environment of the Middle Passage becomes a place of utopian potential, a shift that also highlights that such works are, to the extent that they imagine new forms of life, often future-oriented. These works exemplify the position of the unthought, certainly, but also identify the ocean as a locale of profound epistemological critique – a demonic ocean, "far away," to return one last time to the quote of Weheliye that served as my epigraph, "from the continent of man."

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<sup>98</sup> See on parareligious stories also: Bakker, "COP26 and the Need for Parareligion".

<sup>99</sup> Bennett, "Beyond The Vomiting Dark," 109.