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Article

Blue Black Ecstasy: Ellen Gallagher's Watery Ecstatic, Oceanic Feeling, and Mysticism in the Flesh

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ABSTRACT

Since 2001, visual artist Ellen Gallagher has been working on "Watery Ecstatic," an ongoing, expansive project that depicts real and imaginary underwater life through drawings, films, reliefs, and paintings. Thus far, this series—indeed, Gallagher's oeuvre—has not been studied by scholars of religion. Arguing that the series provokes an extended conversation about mysticism, (para)religion, and constructions of blackness, humanness, and animality, this article addresses this lacuna. Placing the series in conversation with Sigmund Freud and Fred Moten, I argue that "Watery Ecstatic" displays a particular kind of mysticism that I call *blue black mysticism*: an experience of sociality that, in and through the oceanic, refuses the categorical distinctions and modes of identification that ground and mark normative and racialized ideations of humanness and subjectivity. I suggest, further, that blue black mysticism, because it engages the alterity of the ocean, offers a prime site to trouble the racialized, hierarchical boundary between human and nonhuman animals.

IN THE SUMMER of 2005, the Freud Museum in London, UK, hosted *Ichthyosaurus*, a solo exhibition of contemporary visual artist Ellen Gallagher. Displaying her drawings, films, and objects in Sigmund Freud's former office and alongside various of his collected art works,

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the exhibition allowed Gallagher, as more than one scholar has remarked, "to ask questions of psychoanalysis" (Malik 2006, 29; see also Chan 2013).[1] Yet, most of the works referenced an earlier period in Freud's life, as the exhibition made explicit: the press release noted that a collection of Gallagher's drawings with the title "Watery Ecstatic" was "inspired by Freud's lesser-known early period of research into neuroscience and marine biology from 1876–1896."[2] The title of the exhibition already hints at this: *Ichthyosaurus* refers not only to Ichthyosaura, the code name a young Freud used for a girl he had fallen in love with, but also to an extinct ocean reptile that lived 200 million years ago ("Ellen Gallagher - Ichthyosaurus" n.d.). In his early twenties Freud worked in a marine zoology laboratory in Trieste, Italy, where he studied and drew the nervous system of the lamprey, a small jawless fish (Malik 2006, 30). Fifteen of these images were displayed, for the first time, during *Ichthyosaurus*, alongside a variety of works by Gallagher that depict real and imagined underwater life. Installation photos show the surprising commonalities between these scientific and artistic works, a point to which I return below. Among Gallagher's works were three glass specimen jars with fictious marine creatures; two videos—one of specimens displayed in the Natural History Museum, the other of seaweed and other forms of oceanic life—made with frequent collaborator Edgar Cleijne; and three images from the aforementioned "Watery Ecstatic," an ongoing series of reliefs, paintings, drawings, and films that Gallagher began in 2001.

The works in the "Watery Ecstatic" series commemorate those who lost their lives during the Middle Passage, the journey from the coast of West Africa to the Americas that twelve million Africans were forced to undertake during the centuries of the transatlantic slave trade. Gallagher pulled from an eclectic mix of influences: in addition to Freud, she was inspired by the provocative Middle Passage mythology of 1990s techno-duo Drexciya as well as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), a book Gallagher considers an "Afrofuturist text" (Miranda 2017). Mimicking the drawing techniques of natural history, the series brings us images of familiar flora and fauna such as clownfish and angelfish, lionfish and whales, sea anemones and octopuses. It also, in works such as *Watery Ecstatic* (2005; figure 1), introduces strange, mesmerizing human-nonhuman formations that invoke, trouble, and challenge the long-held hierarchical—and racialized—boundary between human and nonhuman animals.

One of the underlying aims of this article is, therefore, to explore Gallagher's "Watery Ecstatic" series as a parareligious story that simultaneously seeks to reveal and exhaust the relationship between antiblackness and human-animal distinctions, thereby opening up to modes of being/feeling/knowing beyond the world of what Sylvia Wynter (2003) would call "Man."[3] I will engage scholarship in religious studies, Black studies, the blue humanities, and critical animal studies to develop my theory of parareligion, explore precisely how and where Gallagher's series intervenes, and highlight the significance of this intervention, thereby paying particular attention to the importance of her use of the jellyfish as the locus for human-animal relations. More specifically, however, I will place the work in conversation with Sigmund Freud and Fred Moten to argue that Gallagher's art displays a particular kind of mysticism, which I call *blue black mysticism*. Blue black mysticism engages the ocean and offers, as such, a central affective site to

[1] The exhibition included two works that explicitly referenced Freud: *Abu Simbel* (2005), an Afrofuturist reworking of the image of the Egyptian temple that hung above Freud's couch in Vienna, and *Odalisque* (2005), a reinvention of a 1928 Man Ray photo of Henri Matisse sketching a model for his "Odalisque" series. In the version that Gallagher created for the exhibition, Freud replaces the painter, while Gallagher now takes the place of the model.

[2] I sincerely thank Bryony Davies, curator at the Freud Museum, for providing me with this document, as well as installation photos and other documentation relating to the exhibition.

[3] My use of the phrase "exhaust" is inspired by Fred Moten's article "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)" (Moten 2013), to which I return at length in this article; the phrase "being/feeling/knowing" comes from Sylvia Wynter's essay "Beyond Miranda's Meanings" (Wynter 1990, 364).

trouble the racialized, hierarchical boundary between human and nonhuman animals. It is a prime site, too, for imagining a deeply felt, intimate, and immanent mystical sociality.

SETTING THE STAGE: PARARELIGION, MYSTICISM, OCEAN

Parareligious stories, to put it succinctly, wrestle with ontological and existential questions in such a way that they distort and exceed *religion*'s insistent drive toward distinction and displacement. I develop this phrase in my current book project *Demonic Ocean: Parareligion in the African Diaspora* to name and theorize the intervention of a particular set of cultural imaginations, including that of Gallagher, M. NourbeSe Philip, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Kara Walker, Magdalena Campus-Pons, and Christopher Cozier, in and for the study of religion.[4] The prefix para- indicates that these stories exhibit a relation to *religious* stories in the sense that they wrestle with the who, what, why, and where of our existence and, in and through this wrestling, produce new concepts of humanity. However—and this is where the importance of their intervention lies—these also distort and exceed *religion*.

As my succinct conceptualization suggests, the phrase is ground in a particular understanding of *religion* and a particular understanding of *para*.[5] *Religion*, in this context, does not name

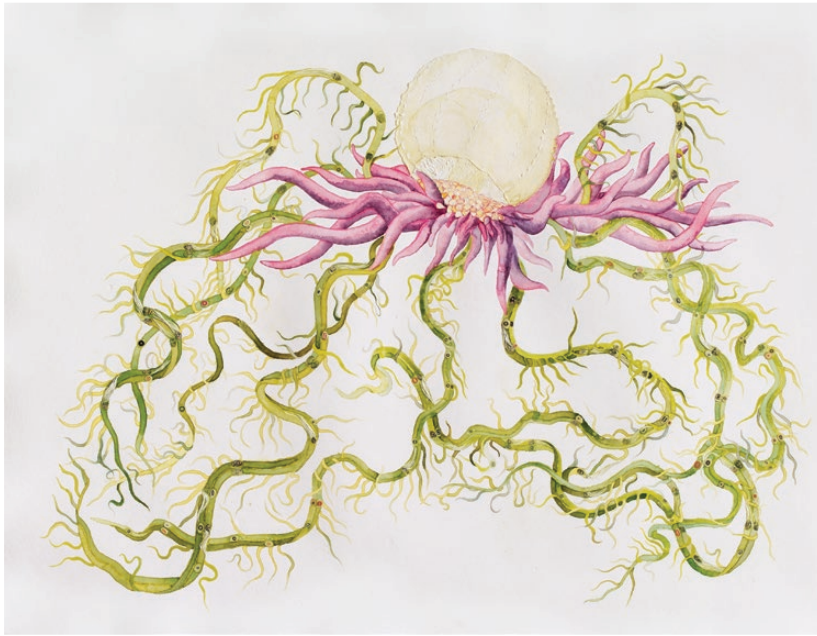

Figure 1. Ellen Gallagher, *Watery Ecstatic*, 2005. From "Watery Ecstatic" Series (ongoing, since 2001). Watercolor, ink, oil, varnish, collage, and cut paper on paper. 32 5/8 × 42 3/8 inches. Art Institute of Chicago: Nancy Lauter McDougal and Alfred L. McDougal. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Mike Bruce.

[4] I first developed this concept in my dissertation, "'The Vibrations Are Different Here': Parareligious Stories in the African Diaspora," which I defended at Rice University in May 2020. See also Bakker (2021 and 2022).

[5] As will become evident, my theory of parareligion differs from earlier iterations of the term by anthropologist Jonathan Benthall and religious studies scholar Pete Ward (Benthall 2008; Ward 2017). Most importantly, they understand *religion* in terms of movements, institutions, worship, and doctrine (rather than a social function that involves a grammar of distinction and displacement) and *para* as naming "next to," "something like," "sort of," or "religious parallels" (rather than distortion and excess).

institution, creed, or doctrine but a particular structure or, to use a phrase I borrow from Ashon Crawley, an "epistemological substratum" in and of the so-called West (Crawley 2020, 93; he borrowed the term in turn from Cedric Robinson). I take my cue here from Wynter's transdisciplinary oeuvre, specifically her ideas on the "phenomenon of religion" (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 27), which she develops as part of her expansive, highly original search for the origin of what W.E.B. Du Bois called the"color line," her reframing of this color line as an ontological distinction between Man and Human Other, and, ultimately, her hopeful exploration of the nature of being human.[6]

Wynter (1984; 2003; 2015) understands *religion* to be a social function. It is a collective wrestling with ontological and existential questions that, in turn, produces "origin stories" that inscribe and subscribe what it means to be human (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 10). This happens because such stories are performed and expressed in and through various texts and discourses, whether theological, legal, scientific, philosophical, literary, or artistic. What makes this wrestling *religious* and different from other ways of thinking about the human condition, for Wynter, is that it involves a particular grammar, which I call the grammar of distinction and displacement. *Religious* stories revolve around a set of interlinked distinctions—between human and nonhuman animals, for instance, subject and object, flesh and spirit, habitable and uninhabitable, rational and irrational—that in turn ground and legitimate certain conceptualizations of being human and, importantly, attendant processes of group cohesion and exclusion (Wynter 2015, 220; Wynter 2003, 287). Often messy, incomplete, or ambiguous, these distinctions are nevertheless perceived as categorical, pure, and absolute (see also Crawley 2016; Chandler 2013). Moreover, though these are invented by humans, *religious* stories claim that they are mandated by something that lies outside of the human—God is the most obvious example here, but Wynter also names Nature as an invented "extrahuman" agent (Wynter 2003, 273).[7] Human agency is, in other words, displaced onto something "extrahuman"—which is why Wynter calls this process *religion*. These distinctions and ways of being human are therefore construed as eternal, fixed, or natural (Wynter 2003, 273; 2015, 223–34).[8] What makes Wynter's work particularly exciting and innovative is that, although she first observes this grammar of distinction and displacement at work in medieval Christian Scholasticism, she extends it to subsequent philosophical, literary, and even current scientific discourses in the so-called "West" (Wynter 2003). The distinction between *theological* and *secular* frameworks and approaches, so central

[6] This is another way of saying that Wynter is not, first and foremost, a scholar of religion, but rather finds use in the concept of religion to understand the emergence and development of race and racism and make sense of the nature of being human. That said, Wynter also develops a more expansive theory of religion that takes us beyond (what would become) the "West." In the space of this article, I cannot do justice to the intricacies of this broader argument. Together with David Kline, I am currently editing a volume on Wynter and religion, *Words Made Flesh: Sylvia Wynter and Religion*, which is under contract with Fordham University Press.

[7] Please note that this does not imply that Wynter categorically denies the possibility of something we may call "transcendent." I reflect on this in my essay for the forthcoming *Words Made Flesh* volume (see footnote 6): "Parareligious Traces in Wynter's 'Demonic Ground.'"

[8] Although I am in specific conversation with Wynter here, the idea that *religion* involves or revolves around distinction is not unique to her work. We find, for instance, an early iteration of such thinking in the functionalism of Emile Durkheim, even if he is more concerned with social cohesion and less so with how *religion* produces oppressive structures and boundaries (Durkheim's rigid distinction between sacred and profane has, of course and rightfully so, been subject to forceful criticism, in particular from scholars studying indigenous forms of religion). We find it too in critical genealogies of religion that have demonstrated, in a wide variety of ways, that the modern category of *religion* is perhaps best understood as, to speak with Tomoko Masuzawa, a "discourse of othering" (Masuzawa 2005, 13). Likewise, functionalist theories like that of Peter Berger have reflected on the ways in which human beings have "externalized" the "products of human activity," such that human beings experience the products of their imagination as "something other than a human product" (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 78; but see footnote 7). Wynter's intervention lies in the fact that she underscores the interrelated nature of these two mechanisms and convincingly demonstrates that we find this grammar of distinction and displacement also in discourses and modes of thought we often deem *secular*, including that of Renaissance humanism, whose ideal type of the human is precisely the ideal type that Gallagher's work challenges and rethinks, and even modern science.

to (if often also troubled by) scholarship in religious studies, therefore no longer holds, as both are grounded in something we may call *religion*.

It is precisely this grammar of distinction and displacement that works like that of Gallagher reveal. "Watery Ecstatic" invites us to understand, with Wynter, *religion* as a differentiating machine, but it also underscores the importance of stories that go against, above, beyond, through, after, before, and ahead of *religion*. In conversation with other recent iterations of *para*—Monique Allewaert's parahuman (2013) and Nahum Chandler's paraontology (2013; 2018; 2022), the latter of which also formed a starting point for J. Kameron Carter's paratheology (2013)—I use the prefix *para* to name these interventions. *Para*, in this context, specifically indexes distortion and excess. Although the phrase *parareligion* runs the risk of reifying the problematic category of *religion*, I use and develop it precisely because it allows me to trace and theorize how these stories intervene, what they do differently, where they go beyond.[9] Thinking parareligion, my goal is not to produce or name a new category—although, ironically, this is ultimately what happens of course—because persistent categorization and distinction is precisely the practice central to *religion* that forms of parareligion critique. The nature of parareligion thus lies in that it breaks up, distorts, troubles, and asks questions of *religion*. Using Jacques Derrida's term (1976), we may conceive parareligion as the *trace* of *religion*, always and everywhere deferring its narratives of hegemony and conditioning the possibility of something new. Indeed, what the prefix *para* names, most of all, is what Chandler in his exploration of paraontology calls "desedimentation" (Chandler 2018; see also Bey 2020), a fundamental dissolution of the ground (or what I call the grammar) of *religion*. The decidedly ambiguous, open-ended nature of the term parareligion cuts through many of the binaries that, despite several efforts to the contrary, often continue to shape and ground the field of religious studies, such as *secular* and *religion*, *sacred* and *profane*, *natural* and *supernatural*, and *animate* and *inanimate*. To borrow once more from Chandler: it desediments the ground on which these distinctions stand, thereby rendering them diffuse.

Parareligious stories like that of Gallagher, then, are stories that upend and trouble the distinctions produced through *religion*; that highlight that these distinctions are humanly invented; that, in inhabiting such distinctions, explode them, thereby challenging the normative conceptualizations of being human that are produced in and through such distinctions and creating room for new, alternative, obscured, and ignored iterations. Considering the context of the Freud Museum, the title of the series invites, however, also a conversation in yet another, and more explicitly *affective* register: mysticism.[10] After all, the combination of "watery" and "ecstatic" could signal a preoccupation with—and at the very least allows us to think Gallagher's work with and through—Freud's engagement with mysticism in his writings on the "oceanic feeling,"[11] a concept that did not follow from his early interest in the oceanic but that was offered to him by the French mystic Romain Rolland (see Parsons 1999).

Following this path, the current article places the series in conversation with the nature and meaning of the "oceanic feeling" in Freud's thought. Gallagher's work keys us into several varied but important aspects of Freud's work—his interpretation of the oceanic feeling as pre-Oedipal, the misguided universality in his exploration of the Oedipus complex, his theory of subjectivity, the racial undertones in his diverse explorations of religion, and his role in the then-developing

[9] I want to thank Reviewer 1 for encouraging me to clarify this issue.

[10] In one of the essays in the exhibition catalogue for Gallagher's show AxME in the New Museum (2013), historian Robin D. G. Kelley also wrote about the "Watery Ecstatic" series in a section entitled "That Oceanic Feeling" (Kelley 2013). However, Kelley does not take up this concept in a substantial way.

[11] Gallagher has never explicitly engaged mysticism, nor has she expressed verbal interest in Freud's theory of mysticism, yet the combination of "watery" and "ecstatic"—the latter a term that relates to both intense excitement and mystical experience and that features frequently in academic studies of mysticism; the former, in turn, a metaphor that is used in much mystical literature—invites such explorations.

new discourse of animality—which allows me to consider and intervene in conversations about the influence of Freud in religious studies and the complex and difficult relationship between blackness, humanness, and animality. Convinced that Gallagher's work posits numerous challenges to Freud, I then turn to another oceanic rendering of mysticism, offered by Black studies scholar Fred Moten in his article "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)" (2013). Where Freud ultimately dismissed the "oceanic feeling" as rather insignificant—at least when it came to the "mental assets" of civilization and thus the necessary development of subjectivity—Moten harnesses the generative power of oceanic mysticism to think and write blackness as the *avoidance* of both subjectivity and the desire for sovereignty. For Moten, blackness is "irreducibly social"; it names the "consent not to be a single being," a phrase he borrows from Édouard Glissant (Moten 2013, 769, 745). Thinking with and beyond Freud and Moten allows us to see, in turn, that Gallagher's parareligious re-imagining of the boundary between human and nonhuman animal in *Watery Ecstatic* (2005) refuses not only their hierarchical, categorical, and racialized distinction but also the stability of the bounded, separate, impermeable, and coherent human-as-subject that liberal humanism puts forth as the ideal type. It offers, in contrast, a radical and felt mystical sociality, a togetherness, a spilling over and into the other.[12]

Proposing blue black mysticism, this article seeks to intervene, first and foremost, in the study of religion. However, this research also draws from and brings together the fields of Black studies, critical animal studies, and the emerging field of the blue humanities.[13] In doing so, it is in conversation with scholars such as Joshua Bennett, whose careful study of three poems by twentieth-century and contemporary Black writers brings together precisely these three fields, thereby offering a model for the kind of interdisciplinary scholarship that I am after (Bennett 2018). Bennett shifts the focus from green to blue, from reflections on African American writings about the land to those on the ocean (see also Gumbs 2019; 2020; Walcott 2021; Howard 2016; 2017). He suggests, as I do here by way of Gallagher, that the oceanic is at once marked by the terror of the Middle Passage yet simultaneously pregnant with possibilities to think blackness otherwise, beyond the stifling and destructive norms of hegemonic understandings of being human (see also Howard 2017; cf. King 2019). More particularly, Bennett writes of oceanic poems that undo, trouble, frustrate, transcend, or rethink the categories of *human* and *animal* and their hierarchical boundaries (see, furthermore, Allewaert 2013; Bennett 2020; Chen 2012; Frazier 2016; Gossett 2015; Jackson 2013, 2016, 2020; Johnson 2018). This article follows Bennett but places, with and through Gallagher, a particular emphasis on mysticism—always already prone to undoing the categorical distinctions that mark and ground hegemonic understandings of subjectivity and being human—as an alternative register and indeed central site to explore the generative possibilities of the ocean. In so doing, it also argues for the *ocean*—which has, except for a few significant but sporadic interventions (Long 1999; Patton 2006; Callahan 2013; Rambelli 2020; Chidester 2018; Verrips 2015), largely remained outside of the purview of most scholars in the field—as a critical category of analysis in the study of religion.

[12] This line of thinking is inspired by Moten's "mysticism in the flesh" (Moten 2013), to which I return below, and Jackie Wang's insightful reading of Freud and Moten (Wang 2016). From Wang's article, I also borrowed the language of "spill."

[13] The phrase "blue humanities" has been attributed to Steve Mentz, who first used it in 2009. Since then, the number of journal issues, books, conferences, workshops, and articles dedicated to the ocean has been on the rise—so much so, in fact, that some speak of an "oceanic turn"—although a comprehensive introduction to the field has yet to be published (but for introductory texts, see Gillis 2013; Mentz 2009; Blum 2010; and the 2017 *Comparative Literature* Forum: "Oceanic Routes: an ACLA Forum"). Certainly, academic interest in the ocean existed before Mentz's neologism—for instance and importantly, in Caribbean intellectual discourse—and we must always be on the lookout for Eurocentrism when using a phrase like "oceanic turn" (Somerville 2017), but there is, this cannot be denied, a (re)newed commitment to look beyond green and land in the academies of "the West." See, for an insightful and necessary critique of the blind spots of the blue humanities and embrace of the field of "critical ocean studies," the work of Elizabeth DeLoughrey (in particular DeLoughrey 2019 and 2022).

WATERY ECSTATIC

The works in the "Watery Ecstatic" series are all titled "Watery Ecstatic," most often followed by simply the year in which they were made (although a limited number of works carry a more descriptive title, such as *Watery Ecstatic (Whale Fall)*, a work from 2010). I am concerned here, mostly, with a set of works in the series that were produced in the 2000s in a style reminiscent of natural history illustrations. Whether "real" or "imagined"—a unified pairing that Gallagher's work troubles and frustrates at every turn—the creatures are placed against a white background, either painted in watercolors, or cut out from the white paper. Although many depict oceanic life forms, some of these works are exceedingly difficult and risky: these invoke the well-documented racist deployment of animality to oppress and exploit Black people (see, in particular Boisseron 2018; Gossett 2015; Kim 2015, 2017; Jackson 2020) even as they also profoundly destabilize the epistemological structures that ground such destructive linking.

Although much of her oeuvre now considers the oceanic, Gallagher became famous in the 1990s with a somewhat different set of works: large-scale abstract paintings that explore and deconstruct racial stereotypes, often by invoking signs of blackface minstrelsy, such as bulging eyes and thick lips. Minstrel shows became an immensely popular form of entertainment in the nineteenth century—although its roots lay further back—in the United States (as well as in Europe). Depicting life on the plantation, the shows featured white actors on stage performing in blackface, thereby further stereotyping, caricaturing, and objectifying people of African descent. In the "Watery Ecstatic" series, Gallagher superimposes such racialized signs onto advertisements she cuts from magazines such as *Ebony*, *Sepia*, and others directed at African American audiences, marking the black-and-white photos from the ads with big red lips and wide open eyes. She did this too in the "Watery Ecstatic" series image that is central to this article, *Watery Ecstatic* (2005). A large drawing, *Watery Ecstatic* (2005) depicts a bright pink and yellow jellyfish, with tentacles in varying shades of lighter and darker greens. Gallagher replaced the receptors of the jellyfish with the disembodied heads of Black women she constructed from collages of black-and-white advertisements and then superimposed with signs of blackface minstrelsy.

When asked in an interview about her use of minstrelsy, Gallagher pressed that she is not interested in simply recapturing these racist depictions; rather, she wants to "reactivate" them in her work. In doing so, she seeks to reveal these as artificial depictions of Black physique that distort "the African body into American blackface" (Gallagher and Kaplan 2006). Gallagher uses the signs of minstrelsy to subvert their racist meanings and implications, thereby destabilizing their authority. She takes a cue from the early twentieth-century performer Bert Williams, a Black man who performed in blackface and reanimated, Gallagher observes, "something that was meant to be static" (Gallagher and Kaplan 2006).

In the context of the "Watery Ecstatic" series, however, we may attribute additional meanings to Gallagher's use of minstrelsy. Minstrelsy invokes the taxonomies that wrote Black people out of the category of *the human* and demonstrates how pervasive and destructive these are. In combining the signs of minstrelsy with images that invoke the drawings of natural history, Gallagher's series helps us to see that in both minstrelsy and the taxonomies of natural history, human difference is "explained" in and through static, fixed, overdetermined categories. Her work invites us to reckon with the ways in which natural history, a discipline that emerged in the wake of exploration and colonialism, excluded Black people from the category of fully human at the precise moment that it included human beings as part of the animal world (Irmscher 1999). Both natural history and minstrelsy—if, of course, in very different ways and through different means—invented and consolidated essentialized, racialized depictions of Black people.

Moreover, in superimposing the signs of minstrelsy on the images that she takes from magazines published in the 1960s and 1970s, the series makes painfully clear too that racist stereotyping and objectification continued to exist into the twentieth century—and, indeed, today. Black studies scholar and literary critic Hortense Spillers also speaks to this when she posits the objectification of Black people during the Middle Passage as locus for the terror and violence that marks Black people as "being for the captor" (Spillers 1987, 68). "It is," Spillers writes, "as if neither time nor history, nor historiography or its topics, show movement, as the human subject is 'murdered' over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise" (Spillers 1987, 68). Gallagher includes these racist depictions of Black physiology in images that depict human-nonhuman formations, in images that riff on, amplify, ridicule, and ultimately explode the analogous relation between Black people and nonhuman animals in favor of "becoming with" (Haraway 2016). In so doing, her work refuses the simplistic idea that the shift toward the more-than-human, interdependence, and mutual becoming automatically involves the destruction of antiblack white supremacy.

But I am getting ahead of myself: let us first return to Sigmund Freud.

OCEANIC FEELING

Freud first came to theorize mysticism as a favor for a friend, the French mystic, poet, and novelist Romain Rolland. In a December 1927 letter, Rolland asked Freud to shed light on the "oceanic feeling." Rolland, Freud writes, was "inclined to call" this feeling "a sense of 'eternity,' a feeling of something limitless, unbounded—as it were 'oceanic'" (Freud [1930] 2002, 1–2). Rolland wrote the letter as a response to Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), which dealt with—and was critical of—the religion of the "common man," which "roughly corresponds" to "present-day white Christian civilization" (Freud [1927] 1961, 24). Although Rolland agreed with Freud's conclusions, his letter expressed the need to distinguish this type of religion from another thoroughly religious phenomenon that, Rolland worried, Freud had neglected: the "oceanic feeling." This feeling was, he wrote, "independent of all dogma, all credo, all church organization" and the "true subterranean source of religious energy" (Parsons 1999, 9). Freud engaged Rolland in the first chapter of *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), although he notes from the outset, somewhat dismissively, that it is difficult to study feelings "scientifically" (Freud [1930] 2002, 2). Focusing, therefore, on the "ideational content," he takes Rolland's description to imply "a feeling of being indissolubly bound up with and belonging to the whole of the world outside oneself" (Freud [1930] 2002, 2).

Whereas most interpretations of Freud read this theory of mysticism as conveying a "regression" to this state of primordial unity, religious studies scholar William Parsons convincingly argues that this is a mistake. In *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling* (Parsons 1999), Parsons provides a meticulous reading of the correspondence between Freud and Rolland that demonstrates that both men thought of the oceanic feeling as a continual phase, a "continues mystical state" (Parsons 1999, 39). Rolland, who confessed to be "familiar with this sensation" of the oceanic feeling (Parsons 1999, 4), distinguished it from earlier, transient experiences of mysticism, which invites Parsons to conclude that it is possible to distinguish both an "episodic" and a "process" mysticism in Rolland's writings (Parsons 1999, 7, 39). Rolland's earlier, transient mystical experiences gave way to a "constant state" that stayed with him throughout his life (Parsons 2013, 53–54). That Freud, in turn, understood that Rolland was speaking about a continuous feeling—and not episodic experiences—is, Parsons writes, clear from the fact that he characterizes it "as consisting of a peculiar feeling, which he [Rolland] is never without" (Parsons 1999, 39). And whereas episodic experiences could be explained in terms of the unconscious, Freud had to turn to his developmental theory to explicate these more enduring mystical states.

The feeling, this much is sure, presented Freud with a strange case: "normally," the ego "appears to us autonomous, uniform and clearly set off against everything else" (Freud [1930] 2002, 3). This is a delusion, Freud reminds his reader—the ego does not have clear boundaries but extends into the id, the unconscious—but, and this is important for Freud and for our reading of Gallagher's work, it *seems* clearly demarcated (Freud [1930] 2002, 3). Freud evidently thought highly of Rolland (see, on this point, Rooney 2007), so what could cause this seemingly "abnormal" (if seen from Freud's theory of the ego) experience? It must be, he concludes, a residue of primary narcissism:

> The ego is originally all-inclusive, but later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present sense of self is thus only a shrunken residue of a far more comprehensive, indeed all-embracing feeling, which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world around it. (Freud [1930] 2002, 5–6)

The oceanic feeling, then, is a residue of a state or condition in which a child is not yet capable of distinguishing between a subjective self and the objective outside world. It relates, then, to a pre-Oedipal "memory of unity" between mother and child (Parsons 1999, 39).

Now that we have a better understanding of Freud's understanding of mysticism, we can move to our interpretation of Gallagher's work. Before I do so, however, I want to flag two points that will help us, over the course of this article, to weigh and assess the significance of the challenge *Watery Ecstatic* (2005) posits to Freud's interpretation of mysticism.

First, Freud would ultimately dismiss the oceanic feeling as the fundamental source of religion. Although he does not deny that people may have this feeling, he remains convinced—as he was in *The Future of an Illusion*—that religion emerges from a feeling of helplessness as a child and a desire for protection. For the "common man," protection came in the form of "an immensely exalted father" (Freud [1930] 2002, 13). Freud thus invokes the "oceanic feeling" in the context of an argument that sought to reinforce his sociohistorical and evolutionary ideas about the past, present, and future of the religion of the "common man." Briefly engaging these ideas helps to underscore the significance of parareligious stories, like that of Gallagher, that embrace entanglement and relationality and resist categorical distinction. After all, Freud's argument began in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) with a racialized comparison of the psychology of "neurotics" and the supposed "savages" or "near savages" that E. B. Tylor and George Frazer wrote about. Like them, Freud identified totemism as the origin of religion, as the first response to the primal deed of "killing the father." His socio-evolutionary take on civilization simultaneously let him deny, however, that these "primitives"—he looks specifically at the Aborigines in Australia—had religion, because they did not recognize the existence of higher beings. He linked these "pre-religious" formations to the pre-Oedipal developmental stage (Parsons 2021, 67–68). Religion, or the existence of such beings, suggested in contrast a sharp separation between self and other and would thus be linked to the Oedipal phase of development. Once again, albeit in a different context, *religion* functions here as a differentiating machine. This underscores, too, the importance of thinking through *Watery Ecstatic* (2005) as a performance of parareligion.[14]

Second—and Caroline Rooney makes this point too (Rooney 2007, 22)—Freud dismisses the feeling as a real experience. "The fact remains that the retention of all previous stages, together with the final shape, is possible *only* in the mind," Freud writes, a point he seeks to

[14] That said, Freud's thoughts on the oceanic feeling form the opening pages of a book that, otherwise, argues that religion outlived its purpose. Even as it (once) functioned as a "mental asset" to civilization's relentless attempt to curb human instinctual urges like aggression and sexuality (more on those in the final section of this article), it must be overcome because it increases a sense of guilt and "stunted the intellect" (Parsons 2021, 97, see also 133–50).

underscore by comparing the mind to the human body and, more surprisingly, the "demolition and replacement of buildings" in cities like Rome or London (Freud [1930] 2002, 10; emphasis mine). This matters for the context of my argument because it underscores, I think, that the development of a separate, distinct, and demarcated ego would remain the goal (even if it also relies on a delusion); for Freud, subjectivity relies on achieving a separation between self and other. Differentiation, in other words, is central.

In an article that also uses Freud's work to think through *Watery Ecstatic* (2005), art historian Suzanna Chan argues that the jellyfish functions as a kind of primordial womb of unity, a womb that allows for the collapse of the subjective self and the outside world such that they become, in a way, one and the same (Chan 2013). The autonomous self, or the "I," gives way to a "we" in which jellyfish and Black women are one, a unity that does not resolve the differences between jellyfish and these figures but that links sameness and otherness to express a deep connection between the two. Gallagher's image, then, may be understood as visually rendering the deconstruction of the human-as-subject as a bounded, separate entity, a contemporary visual representation of what Freud, via Rolland, theorized as the oceanic feeling.

However, as Chan observes, we can also use *Watery Ecstatic* (2005) to venture a critique of Freud's thought (Chan 2013, 110–12). Although the "oceanic feeling" for Freud relates a "memory of unity" between mother and child, Gallagher's images explore this memory in a devastating way by invoking maternal death. After all, Gallagher found inspiration for her art in Detroit techno-duo Drexciya, who developed a mythology about the Middle Passage. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the duo's numerous releases took their listeners deep below the surface of the ocean toward a subterranean city they called Drexciya. In this "bubble metropolis," the Drexciyans, an underwater race that descended from pregnant enslaved Africans that the crew of slaving vessels had thrown overboard during the Middle Passage, continued to thrive, having mutated in the deep blue into a technologically advanced, "webbed" new race (Gaskins 2016, 70). In Drexciya's world, the ocean—that same ocean that forms the last resting place of hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans—becomes a place of immense potential, where those formerly enslaved, adapted and mutated, live life, as Ashon Crawley might say, "otherwise" (Crawley 2016).

Moreover, as enslaved Africans were placed outside of the moral law and kinship structures that ground Freud's Oedipal structure, Gallagher's underwater creatures are radically non- or extra-Oedipal (Chan 2013, 112). The traditional kinship structures that ground Freud's Oedipus complex, his theory of religion, and the Freudian subject—that is, the nuclear family—were all but absent for enslaved African adults and children. Spillers's monumental essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (Spillers 1987)—also cited by Chan, if in a different context—helps to understand that enslaved Black women's reproductive capabilities did not allow for or lead to conventional "motherhood," as a child would belong to the enslaver, not to the mother. Birth, then, did not lead to the reproduction of this conventional "motherhood" but to a reproduction of an oppressive, antiblack white supremacist ideology. Much of Spillers's essay is, in turn and therefore, concerned with developing and indexing alternative modalities of kinship, what Moten might call an "exhaustive maternity" (Moten 2013, 744).

Invoking maternal death and, implicitly, the plantation system, Gallagher's images call attention to the fact that the very conditions that produce the Freudian subject are not, and can never be, universal. This, in turn, invites us to revisit the interpretation that was tentatively posited on the previous page: Gallagher's images do not convey a pre-Oedipal memory of unity but an extra- or non-Oedipal narrative of kinship. This argument follows Chan (2013, 112–3; 2017, 254), but I push it further: we can suggest with relative ease that the large jellyfish in *Watery Ecstatic* (2005) functions as a kind of Freudian "womb" and thereby sustains Black life, but we could also make the argument that the disembodied heads sustain the jellyfish. After all, Gallagher places Black figures precisely where jellies have their touch receptors and stinging

cells, both of which are essential to their survival. Gallagher's work not only helps us to offer a critique of Freud's theory of mysticism but also opens up a potential: the nuclear family that is so central to Freud's theory is not the only, and certainly not the ideal, modality of kinship. To speak with Donna Haraway, "kin" does not only have to refer to ancestry or genealogy (Haraway 2016). In fact, it does not even only have to refer to human sociality. To better explore the potentiality of these alternative forms of kinship as they relate to forms of sociality that refuse the stability of the coherent, stable, and impermeable ideal subject of liberal humanism, I turn to a second oceanic interpretation of mysticism, developed specifically in relation to the Middle Passage: Fred Moten's "mysticism in the flesh."[15]

MYSTICISM IN THE FLESH[16]

The first thing to note about Moten's mysticism is that he never explicitly defines it. Where Freud offered, by way of Rolland, a description of a particular feeling, Moten's "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)" (2013) offers no such thing; in fact, other than the title, the word "mysticism" only appears three times in the entire lengthy essay. It is evident, however, that he finds much use in the mystical writings of African American poet Nathaniel Mackey on "mu," Don Cherry and Ed Blackwell's 1982 track "Mutron," and the mysticism of Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō. Some, like his fellow Black studies scholar Calvin Warren (2017), argue that Moten's "black mysticism"—Warren's words, not Moten's—conveys a philosophical orientation, specifically one that seeks to displace the concept of ontology. Warren thinks that Moten turns to mysticism because it allows him to "abandon ontology" (Warren 2017, 220). Informed by the above considerations on the oceanic feeling, I am more interested in thinking through the type of *feeling* that Moten's nomenclature seeks to capture; a feeling that, like that of Freud, indexes a particular kind of sociality. I think that Moten turns to mysticism because it allows him, via poetry and music, an affective register to name, think, and imagine the experience of unmediated, collective feeling, the "touch of the undercommons" (Harney and Moten 2013, 98). Of course, the two—experience/feeling and philosophy—do not, or at least should not, exclude one another (see Hollywood 2021); what I am after is a difference in emphasis that follows from thinking with Moten and Freud together.

To approach this difference, it is necessary to outline—in a somewhat artificial and schematic way that fails to do justice to Moten's poetics—the steps and interventions that precede his essay's provocative declaration that "Mu is a practice of mysticism in the flesh" (Moten 2013, 753). It is in this context that I outline the second thing to note: Moten develops his mysticism in a generative critique of Afro-pessimism. In particular, Moten thinks in this essay with and against the work of Frank Wilderson III and Jared Sexton, even as he began to develop the central building blocks of his interventions already in earlier writings, which is why I will discuss these as well in this section (see, in particular, Moten 2008b, 2003[17]). To understand the nature of Moten's mysticism, we must therefore begin by briefly engaging Afro-pessimism, in particular the ways in which Wilderson and Sexton conceive of (the relationship between) social death, nothingness, and blackness.

[15] Although the connection between Moten and Gallagher is not as explicit as her engagement with Freud, there is some evidence that Gallagher might have read Moten's work. At "Better Dimensions," an exhibition in Bonniers Konsthall in Stockholm that, in 2018, displayed three installations Gallagher made in collaboration with Cleijne, Moten's *In the Break* (2003) was one of only four secondary readings that was displayed "in association with" the exhibition (in addition to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, Antero Pietila's *Not in My Neighborhood*, and Keller Easterling's *Extrastatecraft*). Upon inquiry, I was informed that Gallagher chose these texts in collaboration with the curator.

[16] I also engage Moten's mysticism in the flesh in another article (Bakker 2022). Although I do so toward a different end in the article that lies before you now, and do it here considerably more elaborately, some of the argumentation overlaps.

[17] It is for this reason that Warren sees Moten's "black mysticism" as being developed across his oeuvre (Warren 2017, 221).

We might begin by noting that Afro-pessimism is structured around the concept of social death. Whereas sociologist Orlando Patterson popularized this concept in the context of racialized slavery in his well-known (and criticized) *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), Wilderson brought it to our contemporary moment and radicalized Patterson's claims. For Wilderson, social death—which Patterson defined in terms of a void of kinship structures and being subject to gratuitous violence—is not a metaphor for Black existence, as it was largely for Patterson, but a condition, a condition that, moreover, has never ended. "Slavery," he writes in his *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, "is and connotes an ontological status for Blackness" (Wilderson 2010, 14). His Afro-pessimism takes as a starting point that white and Black people occupy different "ontological positions" in the social order of the United States (Wilderson 2010, 6). This social order is fundamentally structured by and through antiblackness, such that those racialized as Black exist in a condition of "social death," whereas those deemed white can lay claim to and exist in and as civic life. From the very beginning of his essay, Moten is, in contrast, clear that there exists, in his view, "a fundamental theoretical reason not to believe, as it were, in social death" (Moten 2013, 738). This reason lies in Moten's insistence that one must separate the social from the political: although he agrees with Afro-pessimism that "black life is lived in political death," it is simultaneously and perhaps also spurred by this, also "irreducibly social" (Moten 2013, 739).

From the standpoint of Afro-pessimism, as Moten also notes, blackness is and can only be theorized as "nothing" (Moten 2013, 741). Why? Because Afro-pessimism reasons from the perspective of the political, transcendental subject, for whom blackness is an "undifferentiated mass or blob" (Moten 2013, 741). From this standpoint, "difference can only be manifest as the discrete individuality that holds or occupies a standpoint" (Moten 2013, 741). This brings us, momentarily, back to Freud, who also linked individuality with "civilization" and being undifferentiated, in turn, with the "primitive." As Black studies scholar Zakiyyah Iman Jackson writes in conversation with Celia Brickman's famous *Race in Psychoanalysis* (2003): Freud "casts individuality as the mark of civilization and collectivity as the mark of primitivity" (Jackson 2020, 139).

Moten does not dismiss Afro-pessimism's framing of blackness as nothingness; rather, he sees it as an invitation to "consider what nothing is" (Moten 2013, 741). It is this exploration that leads him to a second fundamental difference between Afro-pessimism and his own work. For Afro-pessimism, nothingness is relative. It always exists, Moten demonstrates, in a set of unified pairings that mark blackness as pathological: Human/Slave, Subject/Object, Civic Life/Social Death. Moten's engagement with Cherry and Blackwell's 1982 "extended meditation on nothingness" and the work of Nishida allows him, in contrast, to formulate a conceptualization of absolute nothingness. This is also why Moten is so adamant about refusing standpoint (Moten 2013, 738). What Moten is after is a force that does not exist in opposition to whiteness/civic life but "appositionally": blackness as the "fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic" (Moten 2008b, 179).

I return to the moment in Cherry and Blackwell's "Mutron" that is so central to Moten's mysticism in a moment; here, I want to press the difference between these two iterations of nothingness. If Wilderson speaks of the "unbridgeable gap between Black being and Human Life" (Wilderson 2010, 57; cited in Moten 2013, 749), then Moten is after "the bridge's underside, where the im/possibilities of political intersubjectivity are exhausted" (Moten 2013, 749). Moten is after a nothingness that exists outside of white civil society and its endless desire for categorical distinction. He affirms much of Wilderson's analysis of the destructive implications of centuries of antiblack white supremacy but refuses to stop there: contra Wilderson, he seeks to fully exhaust the political ontological framework that undergirds Afro-pessimism's analysis, a framework in which blackness cannot be other than the product of antiblackness, cannot be

other than lived in social death, cannot be but—because of its exclusive focus on ontology—a thing.

This brings me to the third fundamental difference between Afro-pessimism and Moten's thought: his "mysticism in the flesh" is part of a quest for a different kind of blackness. Moten conceives blackness as a kind of force, not a category of identity, condition, or position (Moten 2013, 750). Where Afro-pessimism is convinced that blackness is created through slavery, is the product of slavery, Moten is after a blackness that is "ontologically prior" to antiblackness (Moten 2013, 739). In fact, as Warren notes, Moten displaces the search for "origins" by dispensing ontology altogether (Warren 2017, 224). "What remains," Moten writes, "is the necessity of an attempt to index black existence by way of what Chandler (2007, 41) would call paraontological, rather than politico-ontological, means," thereby rejecting the main tools of Afro-pessimism (Moten 2013, 749). This means, most fundamentally, that we must separate "blackness" and "black people," make a "distinction between blackness and the people (which is to say, more generally, the things) that are called black" (Moten 2008a, 1744; see also Moten 2008b, 215n3). Why? Because only such a distinction allows Moten to "detach blackness from the question of (the meaning of) being" (Moten 2013, 749).

Moten's rethinking of blackness is thus shaped by his commitment to Chandler's paraontology, a concept that also formed an important building block for parareligion. Chandler tells us that ontology is grounded in the fantasy of and for purity, of and for pure being (see Chandler 2013). Blackness exists outside of ontology, even as it puts pressure on political ontology's framework and parameters (Moten 2013, 749–50; see also Warren 2017). Blackness refuses to be, refuses to be marked, demarcated, or identified. Instead, it is a force, a movement, groundless, ungraspable (Moten 2008b)—oceanic, as it were, as Jackie Wang helps us to see (Wang 2016). This brings us back to nothingness. "Discovering" and "entering"—two terms Moten uses on purpose to signal precisely where he departs from Afro-pessimism's exclusive focus on antiblackness—nothingness means, for Moten, a celebration of an "undercommon, underground, submarine sociality" (Moten 2013, 742).

It is precisely this shift, I think, that we see in the parareligious "Watery Ecstatic" series. With explicit references to minstrelsy and natural history, Gallagher invokes the "unbridgeable gap" that Wilderson's structural theory identifies. Yet, her work is, ultimately, a celebration of that bridge's underside, of submarine sociality, of "mysticism in the flesh" below sea level, of blue black mysticism. Before I turn my attention fully back to Gallagher, however, we must—and can, now that I have laid out the stakes and implications of Moten's argument—first turn to his black mysticism. After all it is here, in at once an affirmation of nothingness and blackness and a radical departure of Wilderson and Sexton's iteration of it, that it first takes hold.

It is evident from the text that Nishida's mystical philosophy inspired Moten's embrace of "absolute nothingness," but he first arrives at mysticism by way of Mackey's concept of "mu" (Mackey was in turn inspired by Don Cherry's "*Mu" First Part* and *"Mu" Second Part*) and a particular moment in the 1982 track "Mutron," which Cherry recorded with Blackwell. Moten first arrives at mysticism, in other words, not through the register of philosophy but that of poetry and music. In the opening passages of Mackey's *Splay Anthem*, which Moten quotes at length, "mu" takes on various meanings (Mackey 2006, ix–x). "Mu" is at once real and imagined, lost and found, sound and movement—and, importantly, exhausts the binary between these seemingly disparate categories.

Most important for our purposes is Mackey's conceptualization of "mu" as the hold of the slave ship, or, as Moten notes with recourse to both Mackey and Wilderson: "fantasy in the hold" (Moten 2013, 742). The "hold" does not necessarily or only refer to the Middle Passage but names a continuing state, temporality, and condition. Referring to the hold as a "radical unsettlement" (Moten 2013, 750), Moten wants to stay in the hold, wants to think the hold with

"properly critical, and improperly celebratory, clarity" (Moten 2013, 738). This, I think, is what he means with mysticism in the flesh, which would suggest that the essay itself—and, indeed, his iteration of Black critical theory—is a practice of mysticism in the flesh.

Moten finds such a "radical unsettlement" in the break between 2'29" and 2'30" in "Mutron," which invokes a "suboceanic feeling of preterition" (Moten 2013, 745). If "*Mu* is a practice of mysticism in the flesh," writes Moten, then Cherry and Blackwell's recording is "their concentration meditation" (Moten 2013, 753; emphasis original). Their duet,

> indexes the specific and material history of the drowned and burned, the shipped and held, as the condition for the release not just of the prevailing worldview but of the very idea of worldview, of transcendental standpoint and Pure Land, Cherry and Blackwell are initiates, who in turn initiate us, in what is to abide in the social materiality of no place, of Having No Place, as a place for study. (Moten 2013, 753)

The practice of "mysticism in the flesh" is material and immanent, a refusal of a transcendental standpoint and marked by an "incapacity" to desire sovereignty. This refusal is intimately connected to the hold, to the oceanic. "It's terrible to have come from nothing but the sea," Moten conveys to his readers, "which is nowhere, navigable only in its constant autodislocation" (Moten 2013, 744). Moten draws here from Spillers, from whom he also takes the concept of "flesh," who famously wrote:

> Those African persons in 'Middle Passage' were literally suspended in the 'oceanic,' if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet 'American' either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all. (Spillers 1987, 72)

Spillers makes reference here to Freud but inflects his largely metaphorical oceanic with cultural particularity and materiality: she is not speaking of any "oceanic" but of the oceanic environment of the Middle Passage.[18] Importantly, as in Moten, Spillers's writings engage the productive potential of such undifferentiated identity, as a resistance to stay with structural antiblackness, a refusal to stay within the stifling confines of the categorical distinctions that mark and dominate life on shore, or what Moten would call, after Nishida, "Pure Land" (see also Howard 2017). Whereas Freud utilized the oceanic as a *metaphor* to denote the disintegration of the subject, Moten invokes the *history* of the transatlantic slave trade.

Moten's mysticism—similar to Freud's—conveys a constant feeling. However, in Moten's iteration of oceanic feeling, it is undeniably 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," he wrote in a book coauthored with Stefano Harney (Harney and Moten 2013, 98). As I note in another recent essay, Moten turns to mysticism to denote the possibility of a fugitive way of feeling—of existing, experience, touch, communication—outside of the realm of white civil society, sovereignty, political ontology, and, indeed, the (Freudian) subject (Bakker 2022, 18). If Freud's theory of mysticism as a dissolving of the autonomous self is, as I explained above, tied to the production of the autonomous, coherent, and knowable subject (see also Mansfield 2000, 25–37), Moten's mysticism resists this (Moten 2013, 743). As absolute nothingness, as sociality, his mysticism conveys becoming outside of—rather than, as in

[18] In the aforementioned article, I reflect more extensively on the role and place of Spillers's argument about the flesh in Moten's "mysticism in the flesh" (Bakker 2022).

Freud, alongside—the human-as-subject. For Freud, coherence and autonomy were a delusion but necessary to strive for; Moten, in contrast, seeks to avoid subjectivity. For Moten, being does not involve (the push or longing for) self-determination or subjectivity (see also Silva 2007), as this would require the possibility of a coherent subject, but rather movement and becoming. He refuses Western ideations of the subject—whether the ideal type of liberal humanism or Freud's rethinking—in favor of sociality, a material and affective togetherness (Moten 2013, 743–57; Harney and Moten 2013, 98; see also Warren 2017). Needless to say, this is where, for Moten, the power and force of blackness reside, in this precise refusal to submit to the fantasy, the myth, of the bounded subject.

What Moten's Black mysticism conveys, therefore, is an antidote to "Man" and the categorical distinctions that ground it. This is also what marks Moten's writings as different from many other apophatic mysticisms: Moten is not engaging the subject—dissolved or not—in any abstract or general sense, but in the specific context of Black life. Rather than demanding inclusion in the exclusionary notions of subjectivity and humanness that grounded and propelled oppression, objectification, and death, his "mysticism in the flesh" identifies and traces moments and possibilities to leave it behind (see also Jackson 2020). Gallagher's "Watery Ecstatic" series can be read as a visual rendering of what Moten conveys: an embrace of the flesh, commitment to absolute nothingness, celebration of undercommon, submarine sociality.

Consider *Watery Ecstatic* (2007; figure 2), another image in the "Watery Ecstatic" series, which depicts eight disembodied female heads whose lips, cheeks, and eyes are in color and exaggerated. The figures seem to be rising from the surface, the entangled tendrils that flow from their heads appear to be fusing with other, less visible or submerged under water creatures that emerge on the page through careful scratching and cutting. These creatures protrude. The tendrils, moreover, bear the resemblance not so much of hair but of rhizomes—some of which

Figure 2. Ellen Gallagher. *Watery Ecstatic,* 2007. From *Watery Ecstatic* Series (ongoing, since 2001). Ink, watercolor, crushed mica and cut paper on paper. 55 1/8 x 74 3/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Mike Bruce.

are painted in watercolor, some of which are collaged with an extra, carved layer of malleable plasticine on the surface. In at least one instance, two seemingly distinct figures are united by these textured rhizomes, which, as we follow them upward, become less visible, slowly making their way up to other creatures. "To have been shipped," Moten and Harney write, "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" (Harney and Moten 2013, 97). I call attention to the tendrils—locking into each other, connecting, feeling, existing in and as sociality.

BLUE BLACK MYSTICISM

Still, Gallagher's images also offer something else, something more, something that takes us beyond Moten's mysticism (which, in turn, took us beyond Freud). As the "Watery Ecstatic" series shifts the focus from slave ships to the ocean below and imagines the oceanic abyss as womb that gives birth to new forms of sociality, Gallagher depicts what Jonathan Howard would call an "ecological vision of human sociality" (Howard 2017, 20). Whereas Moten and Spillers write about alternative networks of relations between and among human beings—beyond the nuclear family, beyond heteronormative patriarchy—Gallagher turns below sea level to think about human-nonhuman formations and relationships. In Gallagher's work, these connections, this interdependence with "the other," form the locus for an alternative construction of human, world, and sociality.

We find this, to be sure, in *Watery Ecstatic* (2005), where jellyfish and Black figures constitute one another. And, of course, in *Watery Ecstatic* (2007), where individual tendrils lock into each other as rhizomes, climbing upward to creatures that, because they are cut out from the paper with a scalpel, are even more submerged. But consider here, for instance, also *Watery Ecstatic* (2001), which, like many of the other images in the "Watery Ecstatic" series, depicts the disembodied heads of Black women, this time as part of large, unidentifiable underwater creature or plant, positioned next to—or connected to—a fish, which is cut into the paper with a scalpel. These images not only throw the hierarchical binary between "human" and "animal" into crisis—although they do this too—but also invite us to rethink what being human may feel like when we dismiss conceptions of the human that suggest it as an independent and coherent subject and replace it with something much more ecological, much more social. Such a "self" would not be separate and independent but, through ontological relationships with nonhuman animals, thoroughly enmeshed with "other" and environment. Indeed, in the "Watery Ecstatic" series sociality does not revolve around two or more "subjects" coming together but about ways of being that consent to be multiple.

What to call this form of mysticism? Gallagher's work can be seen as visualizing the type of feeling that Moten conveyed in his mysticism of the flesh. But it also offers something else, something that seems in need of another rubric (although we must recognize too, of course, the dangers of creating ever-new concepts, rendering that which we study ever-more obscure). A term that includes animality or the animal seems to work well, as it acknowledges in precise and clear ways the kind of connections, the sociality, that Gallagher's work renders visually. Yet, this would obscure the absolute centrality of the oceanic, would obscure the "watery" aspect of Gallagher's title. It is the ocean that is the constant in Gallagher's work, it is the ocean that allows for "otherwise possibilities." And so, I opt for *blue black mysticism*—a mysticism that is reminiscent of Moten's black mysticism but one indebted to and located in the ocean, to the symbolic and material qualities of the ocean. After all, as scholars in the blue humanities have demonstrated in an increasing variety of ways, the ocean's alterity, its nature as a radically different space, catalyzes a different phenomenological experience (see, for instance, Steinberg

and Peters 2015).[19] In Freud and Rolland's writings, the ocean served largely as metaphor to denote a kind of unity, an undifferentiated identity; in Moten's writings, the ocean took on a more particular and material nature, linked as it is to the Middle Passage. Blue black mysticism, in turn, follows Moten's still-tentative shift toward the ocean's physical and material qualities but escalates it. It finds its generative, transformative power precisely in the unfixed, more-than-human, fluid, perpetually mobile nature of the ocean. I define blue black mysticism, then, as a fugitive experience, a way of feeling, of experiencing an ecological sociality that, in and through an embrace of the ocean's altogether different nature, refuses, at every step, the categorical distinctions that ground and mark the Subject/Man/Human.[20] To illustrate this, I return, one last time, to *Watery Ecstatic* (2005).

JELLYFISH

Although I do not know why Gallagher chose a jellyfish as the site for human-nonhuman formations, it is significant that *Watery Ecstatic* (2005), in replacing the receptors of the jelly with the disembodied heads of Black women, is the only image in the series that posits the total amalgamation of a nonhuman animal and human figures. As I noted above, such amalgamation does not erase the differences between human and nonhuman animal, but it does challenge the idea that such differences are absolute or pure, and thus insurmountable. Other images, such as *Watery Ecstatic* (2003), clearly conjure human-nonhuman figures, but here the women are part of a green structure that seems, if anything, much more plant-like than animal-like. And although images such as the aforementioned *Watery Ecstatic* (2007) do imagine human-animal sociality, they do not depict material, immediate conflation or merging. What, then, is the significance of the jellyfish in Gallagher's work?

Historian Robin D. G. Kelley wrestled with this question as well, and I briefly turn to his explanation as a comparative framework for my own. Kelley puts *Watery Ecstatic* (2005) in conversation with some of Gallagher's other works to suggest that the drawing riffs on the idea of regeneration. Regeneration names the process of replacing, restoring, or regrowing damaged or missing tissue, cells, or organs; Kelley draws this natural process into the realm of the sociocultural. He takes cue here from Gallagher herself, who he cites as saying that enslaved Africans who were thrown overboard could have been "carriers of ideas of regeneration and ideas of transhistorical nation" (Kelley 2013, 18). The past is never just the past. In Drexciya's myth, a militaristic webbed amphibian underwater race awaits its change to revenge their ancestors; Gallagher's work brings together the distant (transatlantic slavery) and more immediate past (the 1960s and 1970s beauty advertisements) to conjure underwater creatures for an imagined future. The promise of regeneration, Kelley concludes, informs "the emphasis on botanical,

[19] In thinking through the ocean's alterity, we must of course keep Stacy Alaimo's warning in mind: construing the ocean as "alien," she worries, only heightens the problematic myth that the ocean is wholly different and altogether separate from human beings (Alaimo 2012).

[20] My reading of Moten and approach to mysticism—which I began to develop in a conference paper presented at the annual American Academy of Religion conference in 2017—resonates with that of Biko Gray (2019). Gray relies on Moten (and Spillers) to develop the concept of "traumatic mysticism," an "undifferentiated form of lived experience, characterized by radical relation and identification with others, that entails the perpetual refusal of categorical distinctions" (Gray 2019, 201). This description could work quite well as a description of blue black mysticism. There is, however, one definitive difference: blue black mysticism refuses categorical distinction precisely by and through refusing discourses of identification (I return to this at length in the next section). It is not identification with but rather the alterity of the deep blue that allows for a sustained questioning of the categorical distinctions that mark and ground what Sylvia Wynter (2003) would call "Man." My approach to mysticism also resonates with that of Ashon Crawley in his most recent book, *The Lonely Letters* (2020). Crawley also engages mysticism at the intersection of Black studies and religious studies. Specifically, he draws on his previous study of what he calls Blackpentecostalism (Crawley 2016) to challenge certain Western mystical traditions that advocate renunciation of the social (Meister Eckhardt is a prime example for Crawley) and develop a black mysticism that, like that of Moten—indeed, like the blue black mysticism that I develop here in conversation—is inherently social and multiple (Crawley 2020).

biological and cellular nature of marine life" in Gallagher's work (Kelley 2013, 18). Jellyfish in particular, he continues, "appear frequently in [Gallagher's] work because some species can reproduce asexually by splitting in half" (Kelley 2013, 18). Here, the locus for rebirth is, quite literally, the self.

Kelley's argument about regeneration is convincing, and some of Gallagher's most recent work indicates a continued interest in rebirth and transformation. However, when we interpret Gallagher's work in the context of posthumanist animality studies, it becomes evident that Gallagher's choice of a jellyfish has significant implications that compliment and go beyond Kelley's insightful reading. Animality studies, a concept and approach first coined by Michael Lundblad (2009), explores the ways in which discourses about animality have led to the animalization of nonhuman and human animals, thereby producing and reinforcing "various identity categories within the human" (Lundblad 2009, 498). To demonstrate its usefulness, consider that Lundblad sees Freud (together with Charles Darwin) as central to a discourse on animality that developed around the turn of the twentieth century. Still dominant, Lundblad dubs it the "discourse of the jungle" (Lundblad 2013, 1–5). This discourse rethought animality—within human and nonhuman animals—as "naturally" aggressive ("in the name of survival") and heterosexual ("in the name of reproduction").[21] Kelley's reading that the jellyfish's significance lies in its potential for "asexual" reproduction highlights that Gallagher's work may be understood as a queer "response" or resistance to such a discourse. This statement gains heightened significance when we consider, with Lundblad, that the "discourse of the jungle" was also used, in those days, to hierarchically distinguish between white and Black Americans (Lundblad 2013, 129–30): white humans were thought capable of controlling or repressing their "animal instincts," where Black people were thought to be overdetermined by a "savage" passion and to take delight in torture.

Kelley is thus accurate and insightful when he invokes the anatomical characteristics of the jellyfish while contemplating their significance in Gallagher's work. I add, in turn, something I learned from the work of Eva Hayward (2012, 161) and Stacy Alaimo (2013, 154): jellyfish are, of all nonhuman animals, the species that is arguably the most alien and the most foreign to us. They are, in fact, so radically different that it is all but impossible for human beings to map our own human bodies onto theirs and thus, Hayward argues, to identify with them, to feel sympathy with or empathy for them (Hayward 2012, 161). Although scholars in animal studies, as Alaimo aptly remarks, often point to interspecies relationality by stressing the similarities between and encounters of nonhuman and human animals, this becomes all but impossible when it comes to jellyfish. "As watery creatures who experience their environs in ways that are utterly alien to humans," Alaimo writes, "jellies stretch our ability to even recognize them as living beings" (Alaimo 2013, 154). This conclusion elicits a question: "If the attempt to imagine what it is like to be a bat is fraught with difficulties, how much more impossible is it to imagine being a jelly?" (Alaimo 2013, 154). Of course, we would do well to remember here that such musings do not imply that jellyfish and human beings are not somehow connected: as Hayward writes with reference to Haraway, "we—humans and jellies—are deeply linked in ongoing nature-cultures" (Hayward 2012, 178).

Given the difficulty of "identification" between human beings and jellies, the fact that Gallagher chose a jellyfish may initially come as a surprise: it would have made more sense, one could argue, had she opted for a whale or another animal that is anatomically much closer to the human body to upend the hierarchical relationship between "human" and "animal" in

[21] Freud's writings on homosexuality are, Lundblad admits, ambiguous (Lundblad 2013, 34–35): he did not think that homosexuality was an illness (see also Parsons 2021, 101) yet also followed Darwin in considering the notion of "normal sexuality" as the instinct to propagate the species.

favor of one that emphasizes interdependence. However, when we consider that Black people have historically often been portrayed and treated as animal(-like) or compared to nonhuman animals, the fundamental, insurmountable difference between human and jellyfish becomes instructive, if not necessary.[22] Precisely because human beings and jellyfish are so different, Gallagher's image refuses the destructive use of analogy and identification between human and nonhuman animal. It is for this reason, I suggest, that the image can be used most productively to challenge the racialized depictions of animality used to exploit and oppress Black people.

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2016, 2020), Claire Jean Kim (2015, 2017), and Sylvia Wynter (2003, 2015) help us to understand the epistemological frameworks and discourses that ground and inform the animalization of blackness. Black people were, Wynter writes, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries deemed an "ambiguous species," occupying a position between rational—that is, white European—human beings and the nonrational animal species (Wynter 2003, 301). Echoing Wynter's claim, Jackson adds that blackness, precisely for this reason, was instrumental to and essential for liberal humanism's construct of "the human" (Jackson 2016). She notes that the Great Chain of Being, which emerged in the Middle Ages (and has roots in the work of Aristotle) but acquired a certain hegemony in the eighteenth century, posited a hierarchal relationship between divinity, humanity, and animality. Importantly for my argument, natural historians used the Great Chain of Being to arrange specimen. This chain proved unstable, however, once reduced to individual species, as it was all but impossible to decide whether, say, a cat or an elephant was higher on the ladder. Blackness, Jackson reasons, served as a limit case—as in limit between "human" and "animal"—or a stabilizer that helped liberal humanism to distance itself from all nonhuman animal species (Jackson 2016, 101).

In her more recent *Becoming Human*—a study of Afrodiasporic works that, like Gallagher's provocative series, "creatively disrupt the human-animal distinction" and reconceptualize "being (human)" without seeking inclusion in "liberal humanist conceptions of 'the human'" (Jackson 2020, 1)—Jackson elaborates further. Her brilliant intervention is twofold. First, in contrast to many in Black studies and critical race studies more generally, Jackson argues that the human-animal distinction is not foundational to antiblack racism; rather, she argues, antiblackness is foundational to the production of both "the human" and "the animal" (Jackson 2020, 23). The figure of "the animal" emerged through and in slavery, colonialism, and the plantation and can cut across species lines: discourses on nonhuman animals and "animalized humans" "reflect and refract each other for the purposes of producing an idealized and teleological conception of 'the human'" (Jackson 2020, 23). Second, although previous studies on the racialization of the human-animal distinction have often come to the conclusion that Black people were "dehumanized"—that is, excluded from the category of the fully human—Jackson demonstrates that Black people were in fact included in a "universal humanity" but as "abject" iterations of such humanity (Jackson 2020, 3). Rejecting the language of "dehumanization," then, Jackson speaks of "abject animality" and "bestialized humanization" (Jackson 2020, 23): Black people were selectively included in, rather than excluded from, humanity through

[22] Here, Lundblad's work offers an important caveat, as I hinted at above. Making a distinction between "animality" and "savagery," Lundblad argues that the rationale for lynching Black men was not that they were deemed "animal" but deemed "savage": it was not the case that Black men supposedly raped white women because they could not control their animal instincts but because they took a savage delight in torture. To complicate matters further, the lynching of Black men was not seen as savage torture (despite evidence to the contrary) but was often considered in terms of a "crime of passion," a temporary inability to repress animal instincts, thus "elevating the animal in new and problematic ways" as a discourse that bifurcates across racial lines (Lundblad 2013, 123).

bestialization and animalization.[23] And if, as Jackson argues, antiblack violence and exploitation are predicated on inclusion not exclusion, then the response to antiblack white supremacy should not be predicated on further calls for inclusion; rather, "being (human)" should and indeed has been sought anew. It is precisely this task, I argue, that Gallagher's art takes up.

As the brief discussion in this article, which brought us from the Great Chain of Being to the "discourse of the jungle," already suggests, ideas about the relation of blackness to the categories of "the human" and "the animal" were never stable. Rather, in the "borderland" between human and animal, Black people were variously seen as "subhuman, not-quite-human, animal-like and animal," precisely because the distinction between, and categories of, "human," "animal" and "blackness" were unsteady (Kim 2015, 24, 35; see also Lundblad 2013; Wynter 2003). Yet, although ideas changed—over time, and from region to region—they often relied on a perceived common ground between Black people and nonhuman animals, a possibility for identification or comparison in either action or appearance. It is this grounding idea that Gallagher's "Watery Ecstatic" series ridicules and explodes, thereby also fundamentally destabilizing the epistemological structures that ground the dominant iteration of "the human." As I noted above, jellyfish experience the world so differently from human beings, act so differently, look so differently, that there cannot be a common (physiological) ground—imagined or otherwise. Jellyfish do not have a brain, a heart, eyes, or a nose, and "we" cannot put a jellyfish to work for "us" in the same way that we tend to do with cows or horses. In sum, jellyfish are an ideal site to stage an amalgamation of Afrodiasporic figures and animals precisely because they actively, deliberately, refuse comparison and identification.

Moreover, in Gallagher's drawings, Black people do not become "like" animals, an analogous relation that would possibly reinforce the racialization of blackness vis-à-vis animality. As Chelsea Frazier writes in her analysis of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, "Black studies discourse—particularly in the continental United States—has been extremely critical, if not outright resistant to, the use of analogy between black subjects (...) and animals" (Frazier 2016, 53). And for good reason: even when we leave aside for the moment the outright racist comparisons between Black people and nonhuman animals, analogical comparisons often operate, as William Hart (2014) notes, as if white supremacy does not exist, as if antiblack violence is a "relic of the past." Consider the infamous 2005 PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) exhibit *Animal Liberation Project: We Are All Animals*.[24] Juxtaposing large prints of lynching victims, enslaved Africans, and those that involuntarily took part in the Tuskegee syphilis project with nonhuman animals exploited in scientific experiments and the farming industrial complex, PETA compared the oppression and killing of African Americans to the violent treatment of nonhuman animals. Although the campaign sought to call attention to the horrific circumstances of the lives of animals, it did so by trivializing antiblack racism and ignoring the continued deployment of animality to exploit and "dehumanize" Black people.

Using a jellyfish as the locus for *Watery Ecstatic* (2005) seems to riff on, amplify, ridicule, and ultimately explode the analogous relation between Black people and nonhuman animals in favor of "becoming with." Gallagher's amalgamation of human and nonhuman effectively suggests that human and sea creature, disembodied heads and green tentacles, become with each other. In

[23] In critiquing the language of "dehumanization," Jackson's work is in conversation with that of other scholars in Black studies who have implicitly or explicitly critiqued such discourses. Such critique can take different forms. Some scholars have demonstrated that the objectification of Black people was foundational to the liberal humanist conceptualization of "the human" itself (Wynter 2003; Silva 2007). Scholars such as Saidiya Hartman (1997) show, in turn, that it was precisely the selective inclusion of Black people in the category of the *human*—for instance, certain laws counted enslaved Africans as human if it would lead to legal punishment, as happened when enslaved people were charged for "stealing away"—that formed the foundation of the most pervasive forms of violence during slavery and its "afterlife" (Hartman 2008). Hartman's work forms an explicit point of departure for Jackson.

[24] See, for a critique of this exhibition, in particular, Johnson (2018, 1–5; see also Kim 2015, 283–85). Marjorie Spiegel provided a similar comparison—including images—in *The Dreaded Comparison* (1988); see Hart 2014 for critique.

doing so, *Watery Ecstatic* (2005) finds a particularly interesting and novel way to undo, to throw into crisis, the hierarchical boundary between *human* and *animal* that grounds much of liberal humanism's claims about humanity (and, for that matter, animality). Indeed, the images prompt us to ask what remains of "the human"—what remains of "the animal"—when the hierarchical distinction between *human* and *animal* is traversed, when the "human-animal-black triad" (Kim 2017) is repurposed. Gallagher's project, then, is not "extensionist" but rather "reconstructive," to use Kim's helpful phrasing: she does not extend the category of the supposedly universal (but in reality whitewashed) ideation of "the human" to those groups of people who are denied access or, following Jackson, considered its "abject" form but rather reimagines both human and animal outside of current systems of domination and exploitation (Kim 2015, 287).

CONCLUSION

Whereas the "Black Atlantic" has been part of our scholarly lexicon since the mid-1990s, Gallagher's parareligious "Watery Ecstatic" series explores what potentially, if at the very least mythically, lies beneath the crossings and dwellings that form, according to Paul Gilroy (1993), the foundation of Black culture. The "Watery Ecstatic" series presents us with an unknown, unfamiliar world, a world created through, yet that exceeds, the violence of the Middle Passage. For the 2005 exhibition at the Freud Museum, Gallagher juxtaposed this world with Sigmund Freud's wide-ranging collection of antiques, his library, and his drawings of the lamprey, transforming the museum into a strange, unnerving "cabinet of curiosity" that brings together past, present, and future to posit a forceful critique of the ways colonialism, exploitation, and slavery shaped the production of knowledge—psychoanalysis, natural history, art history, and religious studies in particular—and, more specifically, constructed and reinforced the categorical distinctions that undergird the racialized binary between human and nonhuman animal.

Replacing a portrait of French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot showing a supposedly "hysterical" female patient to his male students that hung prominently above Freud's famous couch, *Watery Ecstatic* (2005) was central to this critique. It is a parareligious story: the entanglement of human and nonhuman animal in this image distorts, exhausts, and exceeds the grammar of *religion*. After all, in and through a clever mimicking and subverting of the techniques and practices of natural history, the image invokes and ridicules the destructive relationship between racialization and animalization, thereby exposing the racialized binary between human and nonhuman animal as a myth, a fiction. Yet, as I have also argued throughout this article by placing the image in conversation with the oceanic mysticisms of Freud and Moten, this image and others in the series do not stop there. Shifting from the bridge to that which lies below—to invoke Moten's metaphor once more—"Watery Ecstatic" offers what I call blue black mysticism as an alternative way of feeling beyond the differentiating machine that constitutes the epistemes of "Man." Such oceanic mysticism is neither utopic—Gallagher's use of the signs of minstrelsy warn of a too-quick embrace of entanglement and becoming—nor otherworldly. It is, rather, profoundly imminent, localized, intimate, social, and specific, a mysticism that sprang from the Middle Passage but, in "entering and discovering" the oceanic—mobile, fluid, more-than-human—refuses the seemingly universal but ultimately stifling and destructive possibilities offered by and in "Man" in favor of a spilling over and into one another.

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