Corpus fractum: Georges Bataille and sacramental theology

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Abstract

Recent work on political theology – most notably that of J. Kameron Carter – has turned to eucharistic theology and its notion of the ‘corpus mysticum’ to explain the political theology undergirding nationalism, white supremacy, and fascism. This article builds on this approach to articulate an anti-fascist sacramental theology through a reading of Georges Bataille’s Summa Theologiae. Against fascism’s fantasy of a pure and purifying sovereign body that can secure the redemption of the threatened body of the nation, Bataille’s Summa risked a ‘new theology’ of the irremediably lacerated body of Christ which might ground a non-sovereign community of fragmentation, dispossession, and vulnerability. By rethinking the Summa’s relationship to one of its main influences – the eucharistic theology of St Angela of Foligno – I argue that it is possible to rethink sacramental theology in a Bataillean key, against political theology and its eucharistic structure.

KEYWORDS: FASCISM; EUCHARIST; COMMUNITY; NATIONALISM; SACRIFICE; VULNERABILITY; SOVEREIGNTY

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Whiteness cannot form a body. Despite this inability, or perhaps because of it, it continually attempts to do so. In a sense, whiteness is the very attempt to form this body, to manufacture a particular type of delimited body. (Sexton 2008:193)

Universal existence, eternally unfinished and acephalic, a world like a bleeding wound, endlessly creating and destroying particular finite beings: it is in this sense that true universality is the death of God. (Bataille 1985d:201)

Recent work interrogating the political theology of modernity has turned to sacramental theologies to explain the constitution of the nation as a ‘body politic’ (see, e.g. Anidjar 2014; Bauerschmidt 1999; Rust 2014; Sanchez 2018). Drawing on Ernst Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies*, this approach finds an analogous structure between, on the one hand, the relationship of the body politic of the nation to the ‘body natural’ of the king or ideal citizen subject, and on the other, the eucharistic relationship of Christ’s ‘mystical body’ that is the church to his ‘true body’ that is the consecrated host (Kantorowicz 2016). J. Kameron Carter, whose work will be considered below, has made explicit the enduring political stakes of investigations like Kantorowicz’s or Henri de Lubac’s into the eucharistic structure of political theology by attending to how the ‘true body’ of the nation is raced and gendered as white and male, and how this White Male God-Man sacramentally instantiates the racial ‘purity’ of the body politic and the rigidity of its borders. De Lubac, Kantorowicz, and Carter together stress the urgency of resisting the eucharistic theology at the heart of ethnonationalist conceptions of the body politic. Heeding their warning, I aim to articulate an anti-fascist eucharistic theology through a reading of Georges Bataille’s *Summa Athelogica*.

In the early 1930s, as the Fascist Party reigned in Italy, the National Socialist revolution was sweeping through Germany, and fascism was on the rise in France, Georges Bataille committed himself fully to revolutionary leftist politics. Yet, as Europe tipped over into war at the close of the decade, he became more pessimistic about the prospects of anti-fascist politics. He turned away from overt political activity and devoted himself to writing his *Summa Athelogica*, a collection of mystical writings documenting his efforts at ‘inner experience’ – moments of ecstatic self-expenditure in which subjectivity is shattered and ‘communication’ becomes possible. Bataille’s contemporaries understood his mystical turn as an abandonment of politics and a wallowing in self-indulgent nihilism. However, more recent readers have come to acknowledge Bataille’s mystical writings as resolutely political, for Bataille sought to ground a new community in a ‘new theology’ that would resist fascism and its political theology.
These recent reappraisals of Bataille’s *Summa* have paid considerable attention to his obsession with the lacerated and dying body of Jesus Christ, highlighting connections between Bataille’s tortured rewritings of the crucifixion and the medieval passion meditations to which he referred throughout the *Summa*. Bataille’s readers have also noted the importance of the sacrificial death of Christ to his notion of ‘communication’ – a term of art for Bataille denoting the intimacy established through a ruinous loss of self in limit-experiences like eroticism, sacrifice, and self-expenditure.

Bataille sought to combat fascism by turning to the crucified body of Christ and imagining a community that might be modeled on that sacred, lacerated, hideous corpse. Bringing together communication and crucifixion, the communal body and the body of Christ, Bataille’s *Summa* might have something to say to the specifically sacramental structure of political theology. His vision of a lacerated community might be leveraged for a reimagined sacramental theology, one that could undermine the eucharistic political theology undergirding fascist and white nationalist political currents.

After looking at more contemporary analyses of the centrality of the eucharist to nationalism and white supremacy, I give a close reading of Bataille’s *Summa* and the works leading up to it, paying particular attention to the relationship between the *Summa* and the eucharistic devotion of the thirteenth century Umbrian theologian Angela of Foligno. Pushing back on Bataille’s reading of Angela, I show that his insistence on the irrevocable fragmentation of Christ’s dying body is not as antagonistic to theology as he claimed, and that his reflections on community speak directly to the political theology analyzed by Kantorowicz, de Lubac, and Carter. I conclude by arguing that reimagining the eucharist along Bataillean lines might point Christian theology toward an anti-fascist theology of sacrament.

**Political theology and the corpus mysticum**

Ernst Kantorowicz’s description of the sacramental structure of political theology was, in his words, ‘ransacked’ from *Corpus Mysticum*, a history of medieval eucharistic theology written by the Jesuit and French Resistance member Henri de Lubac and published (under the eyes of the Vichy censor) in 1944 (Kantorowicz 2016:194, n4). According to de Lubac, in the early church, the term ‘mystical body’ (*corpus mysticum*) denoted the consecrated host of the eucharist, and ‘real body’ (*corpus verum*) the church that was joined to Christ through the performance of this sacrament. Beginning around the twelfth century, however, *corpus verum* came to denote the host, said to be the real presence of Christ’s body and blood,
with the church being this body’s ‘mystical’ – which now meant something more like metaphorical – expression. Given the circumstances of the book’s publication, de Lubac could not comment explicitly on its political implications. But he hinted at the stakes when he noted that this mystical body is made manifest after the pattern of the true body. The thirteenth century saw a feverish regulation of the production of the eucharistic bread and wine, and at the same time ‘the Church … by defending itself against internal and external attack … managed to give itself or to define for itself the characteristics of its exterior constitution’ (Lubac 2007:259). Caroline Walker Bynum has described the ‘almost frantic sense of the wholeness, the inviolability, of Christ’s body’ that gripped Christendom in the wake of the new theology of corpus mysticum and corpus verum (Bynum 1987:63). And Lionel Rothkrug has documented the pogroms of the thirteenth century, in which accusations of desecration of the host were used to justify mass killings of Jews, foreigners, and heretics (Rothkrug 1979:20–86). The church was understood as the mystical body of this pure yet fragile real body. A threat to the corpus verum was a threat to its mystical expression. And just as the host had firm and visible boundaries and a rigidly prescribed interior, so too did the corpus mysticum. Violence against Jews (and the ever-threatening ‘Turk’) defined the borders of the church, and violence against heretics and witches ensured its inner purity. This dynamic would continue even after the corpus mysticum had been ‘secularized’ and had come to refer to the nation.

Kantorowicz took from de Lubac an analysis of ‘the Two Bodies of Christ: one, a body natural, individual, and personal (corpus naturale, verum, personale); the other, a super-individual body politic and collective, the corpus mysticum, interpreted also as a persona mystica’ (Kantorowicz 2016:206). And his text followed the process by which the mystical body was secularized into the body politic of the nation, the process by which ‘the idea of the corpus mysticum was undeniably transferred and applied to the political entities’ (Kantorowicz 2016:267). But Kantorowicz restricted his analysis to the relationship between corpus verum and corpus mysticum in late medieval absolutist monarchies, deliberately sidestepping twentieth-century political formations. More contemporary scholars have asked after the eucharistic structure of secular modernity’s political theology, in which there is not a living king whose individual and visible ‘body natural’ can ground the mystical body of the nation.

Perhaps the most searching of these scholars is J. Kameron Carter. Like Kantorowicz, he has described the political theology of nationalism as structurally eucharistic, as involving a relationship between corpus verum and corpus mysticum. And like de Lubac – although much more explicitly
he has attended to the violence necessary to maintain the internal purity and rigid borders of this body. Most specifically, his work has investigated the ways in which the mystical body of the nation is forcibly shaped according to the imagined whiteness, maleness, cis-ness, and able-bodiedness of its *corpus verum*.

Carter has described the political theology of secular modernity through the figure of the ‘imperial God-Man’ (Carter 2012). Drawing on Étienne Balibar’s notion of ‘fictive ethnicity,’ he described how the national community is bound as an *ethnos* distinct from other foreign *ethnoi*. For Carter, this process has recourse to

an ideal figure of the nation, a *persona ficta*, a ‘concrete universal’ who anchors the process and thus secures the nation’s anthropology … [T]his anthropology aspires towards universality … In this way, by serving as a kind of god-like image (*imago dei*) that represents the ideality of the nation, the concrete universal acts as a fictive mediator. (Carter 2012:177)

Most importantly for my purposes is how this ideal figure grounds the national community. Drawing on the work of Anne Anlin Cheng (2001), Carter wrote that

the White Man as the original, national figure, the exemplar of a citizen … is taken inside … almost eucharistically … In this way the figure is taken into the subject at the deepest levels; it is that which anyone who would be a citizen must internalize so that she can be seen, externally, as measuring up to the national standard. (Carter 2012:178)

In a recent text titled ‘The excremental sacred,’ Carter has extended this critique of the sacramental mechanism of (white) nationalism (Carter, forthcoming 2021). Here, he gives a reading of a cryptic line from Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, in which Césaire describes a French colonial administrator as looking like ‘a communion wafer dipped in shit.’ In Carter’s reading, this scene dramatizes the encounter between the ‘pure’ *corpus mysticum* of the European nation, bound together through the ritual consumption of the purifying blood of Christ, and the others that it consumes and excretes as abject, racialized non-life. Echoing de Lubac and Kantorowicz, Carter writes,

[T]he transformations around the Christian eucharistic liturgy in the European Middle Ages … brought online the very notion of a body and the body politic or the *populous christianus* as animated by an inward-substance that is taken in from the outside … Here proper life comes to be through the ritual eating of an animating and energizing, transcendent subject … Through this communal consuming of an outside or external substance, the body (politic) coheres itself
as a singular unity of purity, theopolitically inoculating itself, as it were, against pathogens or contaminates. This was all keyed to the ritual, cannibalistic ingestion of the communion wine transubstantiated into Christ’s actual blood as inner substance of the Christian (eventually to become Western) body (politic). (Carter, forthcoming 2021:28)

Again, like de Lubac, although more explicitly, Carter ties this shift in sacramental theology to the medieval church’s anxiety to protect itself against Jews and heretics: ‘the transformation of the eucharist with the invention of the idea of theological blood secured by the doctrinal idea of transubstantiation in order to establish the body as a construct predicated upon clear, enclosed boundaries and internal purity occurred as part of a response to dissident and alternative social movements of theopolitical heresy and rebellion’ (Carter, forthcoming 2021:29).

In Carter’s reading, by rhetorically dipping the pure and purifying corpus verum of the imperial God-Man in shit, Césaire joins himself to the dissident heretical movements of the Middle Ages and their practices of ‘sullying the sacrament’ (Carter, forthcoming 2021:33). Carter thus turns to the medieval – and he reads Césaire and the négritude movement as having turned to the medieval – to find in this ‘sullying of the sacrament’ by ‘fugitive, “mystical,” esoteric, and often female-driven movements of rebellion against and refusal of political theology’ an escape from the ‘eucharistic matrix’ (Carter, forthcoming 2021:29). Carter’s chapter opens with an epigraph from Sylvia Wynter (1984): ‘The ceremony must be found …’ He sees in Césaire and in the medieval heretics and Beguines a turning away from the old ceremony of sacrament and an attempt to find a new ceremony in excess to the racializing and authoritarian eucharistic matrix.

Carter turned to the medieval to find a new ceremony, but here I want to take a different approach. Rather than taking leave of sacrament, I want to ask if there is a way to understand its ‘sullying’ not as a rejection of the eucharist, but as itself the logic of the eucharist. Put differently, I want to read the excessive, grotesque, and subversive invocations of the eucharist on the margins of theology not as escapes from a eucharistic matrix but as generative misfirings of the eucharistic rite. Jacques Derrida insisted that a signifying act (such as a ritual) is never a perfect and seamless reproduction of an original act. Rituals, as performative acts, are citational; that is, while ritual certainly involves repetition, each repetition as repetition necessarily involves difference in time and space. A sullying of the sacrament might then not be a clean break with a necessarily pure and correct sacramental performance, but merely another iteration of the sacrament, necessarily different like all other iterations, yet in its difference redounding back upon the sacrament ‘itself.’ After all, it is not a terribly
controversial theological claim that sacrament is less about sacralized and sacralizing objects (as Carter seems to read it) than about signifying acts.\textsuperscript{16} And sacramental signs, as signs, contain within themselves the possibility of signifying otherwise. With an eye toward this possibility of twisting the eucharistic rite against the ‘eucharistic matrix’ of white nationalism, then, let me return to Georges Bataille and his efforts in the 1930s and 1940s to sully the body of Christ.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Georges Bataille and the theology of fascism}

Bataille’s writings across the 1930s insisted on the centrality of the sacred in political life. He drew on the work of Émile Durkheim, who analyzed the sacred in terms of its social productivity, finding in sacrifice and other religious ceremonies a powerful force for social cohesion. But Bataille saw the sacred as also disruptive to the social, describing it as excessive, useless, and violent.\textsuperscript{18}

For Bataille, understanding the excessive sacred was vital to understanding why parliamentary democracies across Europe were giving way to fascism. In a 1933 article, Bataille critiqued liberalism as an expunging of the sacred from collective life (Bataille 1985a). The liberal collectivity is a ‘homogeneous’ one. Every element – be it the commodity, the object of scientific reason, the parliamentary functionary, or the bourgeois shopkeeper – is fungible, having no value in itself but interchangeable with any other element. Liberalism represses or expels the ‘heterogeneous,’ that which is unassimilable to the homogeneous order, everything excessively pure or impure, everything that cannot be assigned an exchange value. Human waste, vermin, royalty, eroticism, violence, the unconscious, the extremely poor, the extremely rich, poetry – all have no place in the flat homogeneity of liberalism.

Bataille went on to associate the heterogeneous with the sacred. What is sacred participates in both ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ heterogeneity: in the sacred, ‘there is an identity of opposites between glory and dejection, between exalted and imperative (higher) forms and impoverished (lower) forms.’ In other writings, Bataille would call these higher forms the ‘right sacred’ and these lower forms the ‘left sacred’ (Bataille 1985a:144–5).\textsuperscript{19}

But of course, these heterogeneous elements are never fully repressed. They live on in the margins of the homogeneous world: as the decadent luxury of the remnants of aristocracy, as the abject non-life needed to keep civil society going, as the excessive violence meted out against this under-class. What accounted for fascism’s ability to fascinate and seduce was that
it tapped into this excessive heterogeneity that liberalism only ever partially repressed.

Recall that J. Kameron Carter described modernity’s political theology as securing the unity and purity of the white body politic through a ‘eucharistic matrix’ that directs excessive and consumptive violence against its abjected non-white others. Bataille’s analysis of heterogeneity similarly noted the centrality of anti-Black violence to the white body politic, in particular that of the United States. In another 1933 article, he wrote that the abjection of the proletariat by the capitalist class is never total; the proletariat is afforded periodic moments of expenditure to keep the workers working. However,

in the Anglo-Saxon countries, and in particular in the United States of America, the primary process [of accumulation and expenditure] takes place at the expense of only a relatively small portion of the population: to a certain extent, the working class itself has been led to participate in it (above all when this was facilitated by the preliminary existence of a class held to be abject by common accord, as in the case of the blacks). (Bataille 1985c:126)20

The excessive violence that fascism promised to its devotees was only ever a turning-inward and an intensification of the racist and especially anti-Black violence in the colonies and the anti-Semitic violence at home, a smashing of whatever pitiful restraints still stood between the body politic’s founding sadism and those ‘held to be abject by common accord.’21 The fascist leader, recruiting from and often himself coming from the miserable underclass of the proletariat, offered to them what liberalism never could: the excessive and irrational passions lurking underneath and at the outer edges of the body politic would be let loose at home in an ‘orgy of blood’ (Bataille 1985a:146).22

In describing fascism as an orgy of blood – one bearing a striking resemblance to the revolutionary ‘great night … [of] death screams in riots’ that Bataille craved – Bataille has often been taken to be a fascist sympathizer, if not an outright fascist (see, e.g. Arppe 2009; Besnier and Reid 1990; Dean 1992). After all, he himself admitted that the sacrificial excess he longed for was the engine driving fascist movements. But an unflinching investigation into how fascism seduces should not be confused with being seduced by fascism. Bataille’s critique of fascism was that, ultimately, its seductions are a lie; it gives vent to the sacred excesses of sacrifice and revolt, only to yoke that energy ever more tightly to the sovereignty of leader and state. In Bataillean terms, fascism transmutes the left sacred into the right sacred.23 The transgression, violence, and mob frenzy that it seems to allow are transformed through the will of the leader into order, domination, and
purity. Fascism involves an ever-deepening spiral of violence and depravity. Curiously, and troublingly, this is not why Bataille opposed it. He opposed it for the paradoxical reason that it is not violent enough, that it covers over the horrifying reality of violence with a fantasy of mastery over violence. He saw its appeal in its making use of the sacred, that excessive heterogeneity excluded by the homogeneous world of liberal capitalism. But this was also the ground for his unflinching opposition to fascism: it makes use of the sacred, instrumentalizing the grotesque and revolting left sacred in the name of the pure and noble right sacred.24

In a 1938 lecture to the Collège de Sociologie on the subject of power, Bataille named fascism’s transmutation of the left sacred into the right as evidence of its Christian theological roots. In the homogeneous world of liberal democracy, sovereignty has been shorn of its sacred power, persisting as a vacuum patched over with the formalism of procedure. In this twilight of the sacred, the dominant class has recourse to ‘immediate violence, the constitution of a new force of a military sort that it links to whatever remains of the sacred forces, particularly the sacred forces that are directly connected with power, such as the fatherland’ (Hollier 1988:136).25 ‘Power’, in Bataille’s restricted sense, is the union of (sclerotic and anachronistic) sacred force and (new) military strength to further the interests of a dominating class.

Bataille contrasted this religio-military power, symbolized by the fasces, with tragedy, symbolized by the cross. However, this was not, of course, a defense of Christianity as somehow inherently resistant to power. Quite the opposite – Bataille in this lecture was interested in linking fascism to Christianity’s rejection of its tragic origin, its transmutation of the left sacred of the cross into the right sacred of the God of omnipotence and immutability. Bataille saw the endpoint of Christianity’s aversion to tragedy in fasces and swastika, in power without tragedy (Irwin 2002:24–9).

Christianity’s opposition to tragedy ultimately turns on its attitude to the cross. The essence of tragedy, for Bataille, is the spectators’ identification with the killers of the king. Conversely, the Christian identifies with the king who is killed. In Christ’s crucifixion, and in the eucharistic rite that repeats this sacrifice, the Christian approaches the left sacred of horror and regicidal crime, only to turn away at the last minute toward the triumph of the resurrected King of Kings. Celebrating the eucharist, ‘each morning … [the priest] does again the work of the sinner: he spills once more the blood of Christ’ (Hollier 1988:143–4). However, this is only a ‘symbolic sacrifice’, impoverished and attenuated – the priest transmutes the daily tearing of Christ’s body and spilling of his blood from the left sacred to the right, from transgression and tragedy to a guarantee of salvation (Hollier 1988:119).
For Bataille, then, the cross and the altar are the sites of Christianity’s ultimate rejection of its left sacred, tragic potential in favor of the right sacred nobility of crown and empire. Yet, precisely for that reason, he thought that returning to the cross and standing before it otherwise might undo Christianity’s valorization of power that put it on the path to fasces and swastika. Christians see the cross as the site at which death was annulled by divine providence, crime was defeated by a higher law, and what appeared to be shameful tragedy was revealed to be the triumph of glory. But Bataille saw in it a fleeting moment, immediately stamped out, in which God puts Godself at risk, in which Jesus goes to death, ‘identifying himself in this way with the left and immediately repulsive form of the sacred’ (quoted in Irwin 2002:27).

Christianity did not take this path, however. Instead, it taught itself to look past the left sacred corpse of Jesus and see an immutable and omnipotent God, in whose image the world could be shaped. In an article in his journal Acéphale roughly contemporaneous with the lecture on power, Bataille gave a genealogy of fascism that connected its ‘monocephalic’ theology of submission to the leader to the dominant strand of Christianity going back to Augustine:

The search for God, for the absence of movement, for tranquility, is the fear that has scuttled all attempts at a universal community. Man’s heart is uneasy not only up to the moment when he finds repose in God: God’s universality still remains for him a source of uneasiness, and peace is produced only if God allows himself to be locked up in the isolation and profoundly immobile permanence of a group’s military existence. (Bataille 1985d:201)

Bataille consistently returned to the theme that fascism is an outgrowth of a Christian theology that takes God to be transcendent, complete, perfect. The Christian flees to this ‘monocephalic’ God out of fear for the world as it really is: incomplete, dirty, dying (Jordan 2015). The desire for completion and tranquility in an incomplete, chaotic world ultimately drives the Christian to find God in the transmuted and disavowed violence of a military parade. Fascism takes to its totalitarian and genocidal end the Christian project of shaping the world after the pattern of a perfectly pure, coherent, and stable God.

In September of 1937, Bataille made plans for the secret society Acéphale to circulate an internal issue of its journal. The theme: ‘The Crucified Christ.’ Bataille insisted that they approach the cross not with the servility of Christians looking to be saved by a sovereign master, nor with ‘the kindly irony of men of reason.’ Both would be a refusal to see what is there: ‘we cannot remain so indifferent to such agonies, still less endure
such fear ... Why would we try to eradicate an obsession that is so deeply marked with blood?’ (Bataille 2017:229–30.) Only two submissions for the issue have survived, neither of which is Bataille’s; Acéphale would begin to fracture not long after the seeming failure of this issue, eventually disbanding in 1939. But in the call for submissions, Bataille sketched out what would be the goal of the *Summa*: ‘This is not a matter of starting all over again to criticize Christianity, but of concluding the atheist’s meditation before the cross. Christianity has perverted the best of man’s possessions: it has perverted death, but without entering into any difficult arguments it is time to snatch back its final treasures by violent means.’ (Bataille 2017:230.) This violent snatching back of Christianity’s treasures, this dragging of Christianity back to the foot of the cross so that it might wallow in the transgressive left sacred, is the project Bataille gave himself in his *Summa Theologica*. And if Bataille thought it was possible to stand before the cross otherwise, so too might it be possible to eat the flesh and spill the blood of Christ otherwise.

**Fractus Christus**

The *Summa Theologica* is a fragmentary text. Primarily composed of diary entries written during the Second World War, its parts were collected and published out of order together with later appendices and prefaces. The first diary entry (which would become the opening passage of the second volume, *Guilty*) situated the text in its context while tying it, like Carter’s ‘Excremental sacred,’ to an earlier medieval model:

> The date I begin writing (5 September 1939) is not a coincidence. I begin because of the events, but not to speak of them. I am writing these notes incapable of anything else ... Standing in a crowded train, I started reading Angela of Foligno’s *Books of Visions*. I am copying, unable to say how excited I am: the veil is torn, I’m coming out of the fog of my thrashing impotence. (Bataille 2011:9)

Bataille went on to copy out passages from Angela’s similarly fragmentary *Book*, interspersed with his own excited comments. Readers of the *Summa* have noted Angela’s deep influence on Bataille’s text. Her *Book* is replete with visions of Christ’s lacerated body and Angela’s own attempts to take on in her flesh and in her text the suffering of the crucified Christ. In one typical passage, she wrote:

> Once, when I was meditating on the great suffering which Christ endured on the cross, I was considering the nails, which, I had heard it said, had driven a little bit of the flesh of his hands and feet into the wood. And I desired to see at least that small amount of Christ’s flesh which the nails had driven into the wood. And
then such was my sorrow over the pain that Christ had endured that I could no longer stand on my feet. I bent over and sat down; I stretched out my arms on the ground and inclined my head on them. Then Christ showed me his throat and his arms. (Angela of Foligno 1993:145–6)

Angela associated this rending of Christ’s body with the sacrament of the eucharist. Immediately after this passage, her Book described visions of Christ’s body that she saw during the celebration of the eucharist:

Under pressure from me [wrote her scribe], she began to talk: Sometimes I see the host itself just as I saw that neck or throat, and it shines with such splendor and beauty that it seems to me that it must come from God; it surpasses the splendor of the sun … She also told me that sometimes she sees the host in a different way, that is, she sees in it two most splendid eyes, and these are so large that it seems only the edges of the host remain visible. (Angela of Foligno 1993:146–7)

Bataille’s Summa rewrote and intensified Angela's passion meditations. He saw in her Book a way to ‘imagine God himself succumbing to the desire for incompletoin, to the desire to be a man and poor, and to die in torture’ (Bataille 2011). The Summa lingered over the dissolution of this tortured body, repeating and intensifying Angela’s own repetition and intensification of the crucifixion. Angela had a vision of Christ taken down from the cross, in which ‘the joints and tendons of his blessed body were torn and distended by the cruel stretching and pulling of his virginal limbs at the hands of those who had set upon him to kill him on the gibbet of the cross’ (Angela of Foligno 1993:245). Bataille, for his part, described the crucifixion as reducing God to ‘bloody meat’ and set down his own kind of vision, in which ‘the skull of God bursts … and no one hears.’ (Bataille 1988:41; 1994:132) The Summa is filled with meditations before the cross, meditations on that ‘night of death wherein Creator and creatures bled together and lacerated each other and on all sides, were challenged at the extreme limits of shame: that is what was required for their communion’ (Bataille 1994:18).

Yet Bataille saw Angela as ultimately falling prey to the same transmutation of the left sacred into the right that he sought to combat. ‘Speaking of God, Angela of Foligno speaks as a slave,’ insofar as the suffering and death of Christ that she described so gruesomely were only ever apparent, being ultimately recuperated into a logic of completion and redemption (Bataille 2011:14). Once again, the lacerated corpse becomes the redeeming God.

As mentioned above, Bataille’s rejection of theology’s God extended to the sacrament to which Angela indexed her passion meditations. He saw the eucharist as a merely ‘symbolic sacrifice,’ in which the rending of
Christ’s body and the shedding of his blood were transmuted into guarantees of wholeness and purity (Hollier 1988:143–4). In Bataille’s reading, the torn piece of Christ’s body gnashed by Angela’s teeth was in fact for her the *totus Christus*, the whole and invulnerable body of the Lord; the blood she guzzled was in fact that which washed her soul white as snow.

The project Bataille gave himself in the *Summa* was to snatch back Christianity’s treasures by violent means, to perform devotion to the cross free of the salvific recuperation he saw at work in theologians like Angela. One of the ways he tried to do this was by attempting communication with lacerated bodies other than the crucified Christ. Such all too human bodies, not overdetermined by narratives of resurrection or the eucharistic logic of *totus Christus*, would get Bataille beyond the ‘servility’ of Angela’s devotion and grant him communication with ‘what is there.’

Most famously, and most troubling for a reading of Bataille against white supremacy, was his attempt to communicate with photographs of a Chinese man undergoing gruesome torture, ‘his chest flayed, arms and legs cut off at the elbows and at the knees. His hair standing on end, hideous, haggard, striped with blood, beautiful as a wasp.’ (Bataille 1988:119.) He did not reproduce the photographs in the *Summa*, nor did he give any context for them other than that the man was probably killed in Bataille’s lifetime. Instead, he claimed to commune with suffering stripped bare:

> I had not chosen God as an object, but humanly, the young, condemned Chinese man that photographs show me streaming with blood, while the executioner tortures him (the blade going into the knee bones). I was linked to this unfortunate by bonds of friendship and horror. But if I looked at this image to the point of an accord, it suppressed in me the necessity of being only myself: at the same time this object that I have chosen disintegrated in an immensity, losing itself in the storm of pain. (Bataille 2011:40)

Bataille insisted that he ‘loved him with a love in which the sadistic instinct played no part.’ He did not look at the photographs to take pleasure in them, but ‘to ruin in [himself] that which is opposed to ruin’ (Bataille 1988:120). And he omitted any information as to the context of the photographs and refused to reproduce them in the *Summa*. Some have read Bataille as protesting too much here, as giving himself over to a sadism that he disavowed. But even if we take Bataille at his word – which I think we should – his meditation on the photographs partakes of an orientalizing gaze that undermines his claim to commune with suffering stripped bare.

Against the cross, burdened with millennia of theological baggage, Bataille gave a description of a suffering body stripped of all narration or information. All, that is, except for this body’s being Chinese. As Amy
Mac Loftin

Hollywood has rightfully pointed out, Bataille saw the victim through Orientalist eyes, as a ‘castrated and feminized other’ through which he claimed to experience self-loss while still maintaining a distance between his own self and that of the (Oriental, castrated, feminized) other (Hollywood 2002:90). Bataille turned to the photographs to find a suffering body not overdetermined by Christian salvation or redemption. But in his attempt to meditate on a supposedly de-theologized, bare suffering, he in turn overdetermined this body with the Orientalist tropes of castration and immediacy to the real. In the end, Bataille’s attempt to communicate with abject suffering ended up by re-abjecting the racialized other through the very racist gaze that Bataille wanted to shatter.

This Orientalism is a serious limitation for reading the Summa against white supremacy. What led Bataille to these photographs was the need for a left sacred that would not be co-opted by the right sacred of Christianity and fascism, a co-opting that he saw at work even in Angela’s passion meditations. However, I think that Bataille badly misread Angela at the most crucial point in her theology. That misreading drove him to seek an ostensibly ‘pure’ suffering – a search guided by the Orientalist fantasy of the Chinese man’s body as the site of castration, lack, and immediate access to the real. Correcting this misreading is thus crucial for a reading of the Summa against white supremacy.

Bataille read Angela as falling prey to the Christian desire for wholeness and plenitude that gave birth to fascism. However, a close reading of Angela’s Book shows that, in fact, her theology of the eucharist refused the recuperation of fragmentation into wholeness. Her meditation on the bits and pieces of Christ’s body embedded in the wood of the cross was tied to a vision of Christ in the eucharist, in which she saw only his throat or his eyes. As mentioned above, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw an increasing anxiety around the fragility and corruptibility of the eucharistic bread and wine, insisting that each bit and piece of the host nonetheless contained the full and unbroken body of Christ. But Angela insisted that Christ is present in the eucharist as bits and pieces: a severed throat, enucleated eyes. And further, she twisted her sacramental theology of fragmentation back on itself, seeing in real experiences of abjection and laceration the sacramental presence of Christ. Her Book relates a visit that she and her companion paid to a nearby leprosarium:

‘Let’s go,’ I told her, ‘to the hospital and perhaps we will be able to find Christ there among the poor, the suffering, and the afflicted.’ ... And after we had distributed all that we had, we washed the feet of the women and the hands of the men, and especially those of one of the lepers which were festering and in an advanced stage of decomposition. Then we drank the very water with which we
had washed him. And the drink was so sweet that, all the way home, we tasted its sweetness and it was as if we had received Holy Communion. As a small scale of the leper’s sores was stuck in my throat, I tried to swallow it. My conscience would not let me spit it out, just as if I had received Holy Communion. (Angela of Foligno 1993:162–3)

Bataille understood the eucharist as Christianity’s pale and servile echo of deicidal sacrifice, a flight from the perishable and incomplete universe to prostration before the immutable and immortal King of Kings. But Angela’s eucharistic theology reveals that for her, Christ’s divinity is not in the promise of a final recuperation, but rather in the vulnerability to fragmentation and abjection of bits of skin embedded in a cross or a leper’s scab floating in a bowl of bloody washwater.

Bataille’s work up to and through the Summa was fueled by a contradictory desire: to ‘conclude the atheist’s meditation before the cross’ (Bataille 2017:230). He wanted to conclude it and have done with the cross with a laugh, yet that concluding could only be accomplished by returning to the foot of the cross and communicating in compassion, anguish, and love with the suffering man nailed to it. His attempts to combat fascism by stripping the cross of all its theological baggage fell flat – in the supposedly bare suffering of the man in the photographs came smuggled all the baggage of Orientalist fantasy.

But if Bataille’s complete stripping of theology from the cross failed, perhaps we can be more discerning about what to strip and what to leave. In other words, perhaps we can read Bataille’s God reduced to ‘bloody meat’ through Angela’s eucharistic theology – a theology that does not valorize plenitude or wholeness but accepts fragmentation and loss. Such a Bataillean sullying of the sacrament would bring the Summa to bear against the eucharistic structure of political theology described by de Lubac, Kantorowicz, and Carter. If we read the lacerated body of Christ invoked by Bataille, like Angela’s scab, as a eucharistic corpus verum, what kind of mystical body might this fragmentary true body ground?

Corpus fractum

Writing of the drawing of the ‘acéphale’ by André Masson for the cover of the Acéphale journal, Alexander Irwin gave a concise description of the kind of anti-fascist community Bataille hoped to found:

A community without domination, united at once by the demand for a mad freedom and by the awareness of shared vulnerability to tragedy. From the conjunction of freedom and tragic consciousness springs a paradoxical, nonhierarchical, permanently wounded sovereignty. Such sovereignty separates
people from each other irrevocably in the very moment that it exposes them to each other in the nakedness of tragic compassion. (The Acéphale stands naked and isolated, with his heart in his hand and a death’s head lodged in his groin.) (Irwin 2002:24)

What exactly Bataille meant by ‘community’ has been debated, most famously by Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot (see Blanchot 1988; Nancy 1991, 2009). The Nancy-Blanchot debate focused on Acéphale and hinged on the question of whether Bataille’s secret society was an attempt to ‘embody’ a community. Nancy read Bataille as trying to embody a sacrificial community, and faulted him for coming too close to fascism’s fantasy of community as immanent fusion. Blanchot, for his part, insisted that Acéphale was not an attempt to embody community at all, but was instead an affirmation of the impossibility of community, of community as absence and withdrawal.

Reading Bataille through Angela of Foligno’s fragmentary eucharistic theology, and alongside analyses of political theology by de Lubac, Kantorowicz, and Carter, allows us to avoid the debate over whether Bataille called for a crypto-fascist politics of fusion or an impossible to imagine and thus ill-defined dissolution. Rather, it permits us to read Bataille as offering a rigorously defined and concretely imagined body politic, and yet one that is a lacerated body, a sacrificed, vulnerable, withdrawing body. Following Angela, I would say a eucharistic body.

As I have shown, work in political theology on the corpus mysticum has detailed how eucharistic theologies shape modern Western notions of community. Recall that according to de Lubac, the ideal corpus verum of Christ, that which is ‘really’ present in the consecrated host, is what determines the interior and exterior constitution of the community that is Christ’s ‘mystical body.’ And recall that according to Carter, this process became secularized in the birth of the modern nation-state, with the ideal (white, male, able-bodied, cisgender) body of the citizen-subject fueling sovereign decisions over the interior and borders of the body politic.

Instead of the pure and immutable corpus verum of Christianity and the fascism to which it gave rise, Bataille offered the fragmentary ‘acéphale’: a headless, ruptured, incomplete body, its intestines pulled out and exposed, its skull in its groin and its heart in its hand. And in the Summa, Bataille gave to his readers the body of Christ as a burst skull and a ribbon of bloody meat. A closer reading of Angela showed that this left sacred body of Christ might not be as conflictual with eucharistic theology as Bataille supposed.

We might thus reimagine sacramental theology in a Bataillean key. Imagining Christ’s corpus verum as irrecoverably fragmented can push us to imagine a corpus mysticum that is no less fragmented.
Bataille’s own work constantly pushed toward such a fragmentary communal body. While the secret society Acéphale was, at least at the start, a visible community, the *Summa* gestured toward a dispersed community, bound only by a shared vulnerability to chance. This is not a definite community, visible and with rigid borders. It is rather the chance encounter between Bataille and the unknown reader of the *Summa*, a community itself given over to chance in the uncertain future in which Bataille’s text might be read:

Thus we are nothing, neither you nor I, besides burning words which could pass from me to you, imprinted on a page: for I would only have lived in order to write them, and, if it is true that they are addressed to you, you will live from having the strength to hear them ... You could not become the mirror of a heart-rending reality if you did not have to be broken. (Bataille 1988:94, 96)

The vulnerability to chance ‘is a state of grace, a gift of the heavens; it permits a throw of the dice, without response or anguish’ (Bataille 2011:68). Bataille’s community is broken like the left sacred corpse hanging on the cross, like the eucharistic loaf: flung out into an unknown future, shattered on the rocks of history, welcoming with love the grace of an unknown fate. Its fragments are pressed into the hands of unknown communicants, vulnerable to friendship or betrayal.

Bataille was lucidly aware of the risks of chance. The unknown reader to whom he gave himself over as burning words is utterly unknown: ‘History is incomplete: when this book is read, the smallest schoolboy will know the outcome of the current war. At the moment I am writing, no one can give me the schoolboy’s knowledge.’ (Bataille 2011:21–2.) Bataille did not know if this schoolboy would be learning of the defeat of fascism by the Resistance or of the triumphs of the Thousand Year Reich. Giving himself over to the will to chance, Bataille placed his text in the terrifying unknown of the future.

To push the eucharistic reading further, we could say that Bataille’s *Summa* became itself a kind of shattered ‘true body’ grounding a shattered ‘mystical body.’ His body as text is handed over and consumed by the community of anonymous readers, who will become an impossible *corpus mysticum*, irrevocably separated by history, yet united in the grace of a shared vulnerability. It is a ‘[m]essage from one world to another,’ from the ‘dying or dead, decomposing world’ lurching into war to ‘a different world, a world without consideration ... I imagine being silent there, as if absent. The necessity of effacement implies transparency.’ (Bataille 2011:101.)

And like the body of Christ, Bataille’s *corpus* is vulnerable both to compassionate friendship and violent betrayal. He desired the lacerating intimacy
of friends, in which ‘nothing counts but the love which tears them both apart’ (Bataille 1988:94). Yet he understood that this intimacy involves the risk of betrayal. The reader may be uncomprehending and uninterested: ‘I am imagining a man, neither too young nor too old, nor too sharp nor too sensitive, pissing and crapping … This against the drowsy indifference of a reader – putting down the book a little further on, for what? What appointment with himself?’ (Bataille 2011:97, 99.)

But Bataille knew that this betrayal might be much, much worse than simple incomprehension or disinterest. The last volume of the Summa described Bataille’s felt communion with Nietzsche, an intimate friendship across the gulf of history. But this communion was shadowed by Nietzsche’s betrayal by his Nazi-sympathizing sister and the twisting of Nietzsche’s texts by the fascists – a risk to which Bataille likewise opened himself (Bataille 1985e).35

Bataille dramatized this vulnerable communion in the first part of On Nietzsche, titled ‘Mr. Nietzsche.’ The first three sections of ‘Mr. Nietzsche’ intersperse quotations from the Will to Power with an insistence on a direct communication between Nietzsche’s life and Bataille’s: ‘My life with Nietzsche as a companion is a community. My book is this community.’ (Bataille 1994:9.) The fourth section is entirely made up of quotations from the Will to Power, Nietzsche’s life having been dispossessed into a text capable of crumbling to pieces. And the brief final section, less than a page long, consists of just two quotes from a biography of Nietzsche by Daniel Halévy, an erstwhile Dreyfusard who later became a vigorous supporter of the Vichy regime. Nietzsche’s corpus is dispossessed from life to text, and this dispossession makes it vulnerable both to Bataille’s friendship and to betrayal at the hands of fascists like Halévy and Nietzsche’s own sister. Like Nietzsche, and like Christ at the Last Supper, Bataille gave his corpus over into the hands of others, surrendering himself in writing to an unknown community, risking betrayal for the intimacy of friendship. This community, this corpus mysticum, makes no claim to stability or coherence. It guarantees nothing but the gamble that makes it possible. It is marked only by vulnerability to betrayal and fragmentation, the very wounding through which communion might occur.

‘Chance and the will unite in love’

The Summa imagined community mostly as textual – Bataille communicating with Angela’s Book or Nietzsche’s Will to Power and then gambling his own ‘burning words’ on an unknown reader to come. But Bataille knew that communion is not a purely textual affair. It bears out upon the world,
upon what kinds of lived communities one forms. Bataille’s communion with Nietzsche, Angela, and the crucified Christ (and far more troublingly with the Chinese torture victim) changed him, and he wished to change others by communicating his experience to them. He sought not only to form a fragmented communal body with his readers, but for his invocations of the fractured body of Christ to ground real forms of community that might stand against fascism’s monoccephalic body politic.

There has been an increasing call from within theology for Christianity – and following Anidjar, I use the term here to refer to Christendom, the white Western church – to dispossess itself, to break and distribute its mystical body like the mystical body on the altar is broken and distributed (Anidjar 2014). Katie Grimes has criticized liberal ‘sacramental optimism,’ insisting that Christianity cannot sacramentally perform its way out of white supremacy so long as its churches sit on stolen land and live on stolen wealth; proper sacramental performance must entail the dispossession of church land to indigenous communities and the payment of reparations to the descendants of the enslaved (Grimes 2017). And Marika Rose has called for ‘a theology of failure,’ in which Christianity would not seek a purified and stable identity, but would confront directly its inner corruption and excluded others, recognizing that ‘Christ cannot be grasped except in and through the ruptures, the failures of the Church’ (Rose 2019:142).

But let me stay with Bataille just a bit longer. I have argued that his *Summa Attheologica* was not a retreat from the political, but in fact an act of resistance against fascism’s political theology. And I have been reading this resistance in terms of Angela’s fragmentary eucharistic theology, as a violent fracturing of the *corpus mysticum* that admits of no purity and no final recuperation of its loss. Nor was Bataille’s affirmation of vulnerability and dispossession ‘purely’ textual (whatever that might mean), removed from questions of lived community.

Bataille was faulted by his contemporaries and later readers for not engaging in overt Resistance activities like his friends Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus. While Bataille might have written a great deal about risk, his critics said, he refused to throw himself into the risk of resistance, instead waiting out the war in his cottage. Yet Bataille, despite being sick with tuberculosis through the war years, did risk himself in opposition to fascism. Out of all of his friends, he was the only one who used his Paris apartment to hide Jews from the Vichy deportation forces.36 And when his wife Sylvia left him for Jacques Lacan, with whom she then had a child, Bataille and Sylvia remained legally married – she was Jewish, and for her no longer to be married to a non-Jew could have meant deportation to Germany and the camps (Roudinesco 1997:164).
Bataille’s activities during the occupation show a living out of his theology of fragmentation and vulnerability. Along with the Leibowitzes, Bataille placed himself at considerable risk for the sake of an other facing an even greater risk, for the sake of this ‘excremental remainder’ of the rapidly Aryanizing body politic of Vichy France. And with Sylvia and Lacan, he formed a kind of ruptured and dispossessed collective body – a marriage, a bourgeois family, yet one structured by separation and excess. Georges, married to yet separated from Sylvia; Sylvia and Lacan, parents to a child that bore the name Bataille. An impure and heterogeneous family, risking unimaginable violence at the hands of the Vichy authorities, yet a risk experienced as a ‘state of grace’ for love of Sylvia and the Maklès family.

As ethno-nationalist currents, anti-democratic political movements, and unaccountable surveillance technologies rapidly intensify the violence carried out to secure and purify Euro-American bodies politic, and as (white, Western) Christianity continues either to abet this resurgent fascism or to remain willfully powerless in its face, thinking sacramentally along Bataillean lines forces this Christianity to ask itself: Will it continue sacrificing countless others in the name of a fantasmatic tranquility? Or will it have the courage to turn this sacrificial violence upon itself, lacerating its mystical body so that it might stand, wounded and vulnerable and sovereignly powerless, and place the pieces of its tattered body into the hands of those it is no longer willing to devour?

About the author

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Notes

1 For a general portrait of the rise of fascism in France during this time, see Carroll (1995); Schloesser (2005); Sternhell (1996). For Bataille’s political activity in this period, see Bataille (2017); Besnier and Reid (1990); Falasca-Zamponi (2006, 2011); Irwin (2002); Richman (2002); Surya (2002).
Such is Sartre’s famous reading (2010:219–94). In a lecture at the Collège de Sociologie, Bataille suggests that Roger Caillois had a similar reaction. Allan Stoekl hints at a reading along these lines, as he reads Bataille’s postwar novel L’Abbé C—in which a character betrays the Resistance—as Bataille grappling with his own betrayal of leftist politics. See Stoekl (1985:89–103).

The fullest articulation of the political importance of Bataille’s mystical writing is found in Hollywood (2002). See also Connor (2000); Irwin (2002); Jordan (2015:169–81); and the editorial contributions to Bataille (2017).

For the importance to Bataille’s work of medieval theology, and particularly medieval devotions to the crucified Christ, see Biles (2011); Brintnall (2011); ffrench (2017); Hollywood (2002); Holsinger (2005); Hussey (2000).

See, for example, the essays collected in Mitchell and Winfree (2009).

In addition to Hollywood’s work, the relationship between Angela of Foligno and Bataille has been treated in Heinämäki (2012); Mazzoni (1991); Thacker (2015).

For a concise summary of de Lubac’s often sprawling argument, see de Certeau (1995:82–5).

For a history of the increasing regulation of the sacrament in this period, see Rubin (1992).

Even though Kantorowicz wrote The King’s Two Bodies after having fled Nazi Germany in the wake of Kristallnacht, he denied in the preface that his ‘Study in medieval political theology’ was at all motivated by the rise of fascism. And despite ‘political theology’ appearing in the subtitle, he assiduously avoided citing or even mentioning Carl Schmitt.

I am grateful to the author for giving me permission to read and cite this chapter before its publication.

Carter’s insistence that it is the eucharistic blood that binds the European mystical body draws heavily on Anidjar (2014).

Carter curiously does not mention the medieval church’s allegations of host desecration against the Jews, seeming to take eucharistic desecration as something actually performed by dissident and heretical groups rather than as something the church imagined was being performed by Jews without and heretics within as part of its own process of self-definition.

Sylvia Wynter got the title of her essay from the poem ‘Speaking of Poetry’ by John Peale Bishop.

‘A successful performative is necessarily an “impure” performative ... there is no “pure” performative.’ (Derrida 1982:325.)

For a reading of Derrida’s essay that teases out the connections he makes between performative acts and ritual, see Hollywood (2016).

Such is Augustine’s argument (2008). For more recent articulations of this argument, see Potts (2015) and Williams (2000).

The reader may wonder why I focus on Bataille’s work in the 1930s and 1940s, and not the quite literal sullying of the eucharist in his 1928 novel, Story of the Eye (1987). I hope to undertake a reading of the sacramental atheology at work in Story of the Eye in future work. I do not do so in this article not only because of the restrictions of space, but also because the political import of Bataille’s writing on the body of Christ is more clearly seen in his work with Acéphale, with the Collège de Sociologie, and in the Summa. In 1928, fascism had already reigned in Italy for six years and the French far-right leagues posed a legitimate threat to the
Third Republic. But the ascendance of fascism would only accelerate over almost the next two decades, and Bataille’s work after *Story of the Eye* was much more explicit about its target.

18 Bataille’s Durkheimean roots are traced in detail in Richman (2002) and Riley (2005).

19 For earlier works dealing with the left sacred, see his essays ‘Rotten sun,’ ‘Sacrifices,’ and ‘The sacred,’ all published in Bataille (1985b). For later works, see Bataille (1986, 1989a). William Pawlett helpfully explains that while Bataille uses the language of a left and right ‘side’ of the sacred, he does not intend to describe any kind of binary opposition. Pawlett suggests it would be more accurate to speak of them as two ‘charges’ cohering dynamically and unstably. See Pawlett (2017).

20 The idea that Euro-American civil society is unthinkable without the Middle Passage’s (ongoing) transformation of Black life into abject non-life has been extensively explored in recent years. See, among other works, Hartman (1997); Sharpe (2016); Warren (2018); Wilderson III (2010). In ‘The psychological structure of fascism’ (published a few months later; 1985a), Bataille gave as an example of base heterogeneity not the abjection of Black life in the United States, but that of the Dalits in India. While the ‘untouchability’ of the highest and lowest members of the caste system might work as an example of heterogeneity, it reads as out of place in Bataille’s otherwise piercing analysis of the specifically European phenomenon of fascism. Following Carter, Hartman, Sharpe, Warren, Wilderson, and others, I would argue that however caste structures the Indian body politic, the white bodies politic of the Euro-American world are held together by a specific anti-Blackness that cannot be analogized to the caste system. For an insightful criticism of the urge to conflate the Indian caste system with anti-Blackness, see Patel (2016).

21 Of course, it is not new to say fascism was anti-Black violence turned back upon Europe. Already in 1919, Du Bois described the Great War along the same lines (2016). See also Césaire (2000). Much more controversially, Frantz Fanon described the murders of the Shoah as ‘little family quarrels’ between Europeans – a line that Frank Wilderson III glosses as claiming that Auschwitz was ‘a provisional moment within existential Whiteness, when Jews were subjected to Blackness and Redness.’ (Wilderson III 2010:36.) Bataille wrote of the centrality of sadism to politics in ‘Abjection and miserable forms’ (1993:8–14).

22 Bringing colonial violence home was, in fact, an explicit part of how the Nazis understood their own project. James Q. Whitman has documented how the legal architects of the Third Reich drew on Manifest Destiny and the attempted annihilation of the Native Americans to think about their own concept of *Lebensraum* and the emptying of Eastern Europe, as well as how they looked to the United States’ ‘one drop rule’ and anti-miscegenation laws for inspiration when crafting their own race laws. See Whitman (2018).

23 As well as the political left into right: Mussolini was a socialist before founding the Fascist Party, the Nazis termed themselves a ‘socialist workers’ party,’ and fascist movements in France recruited from leftist workers’ movements and trade unions.

24 And ultimately, in the name of forcing society’s heterogeneous elements into an ever more rigid homogeneity: the fascist street mob ends in donning uniforms and learning to march.
The lectures on ‘Power’ were originally written by Roger Caillois but delivered by Bataille when Caillois fell ill. Denis Hollier notes that the discussion of Christianity, and specifically the opposition between the ‘power’ of the fasces and the ‘tragedy’ of the cross, was added by Bataille without Caillois’ knowledge (Hollier 1988:126).

As mentioned above, Bataille’s effort to perform devotion to the cross otherwise has received extensive attention. For some of the fullest readings of Bataille’s relation to the crucified Christ, see Biles (2007, 2011); Brinntall (2011); Connor (2000); ffrench (2017); MacKendrick (2009).

The implicit reference is to the opening lines of Augustine’s Confessions: ‘Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.’

‘What is there’ would come to be a formula Bataille used throughout the Summa to refer to the irreducible particularity of the suffering body of the other.

France had declared war on Germany two days before.

For more on the fragmentary structure of Angela of Foligno’s Book, see Mooney (1994).

Amy Hollywood in particular has shown how Inner Experience (the Summa’s first volume) attempted to rewrite Angela’s mystical experience for the twentieth century, so as to ground a new sacred community in excess to the sacred community of fascism. See Hollywood (2002); Mazzoni, (1991); Surya (2002).

The torture photographs have received an enormous amount of attention in scholarship on Bataille. See, among others, Connor (2000); Brinntall (2011); Hollywood (2002). Sarah Wilson makes the intriguing suggestion that the Chinese torture victim functions in the Summa as a textual stand-in for the victims of Nazi hostage-taking and reprisal shootings that Bataille would have seen in the fall of 1941, but would have been unable to write about due to the Vichy censors. See Wilson (1995).

See also the rest of the essays in MacKendrick (2009), as well as Biles (2011).


Bataille did not merely open himself to the risk of betrayal at the hands of fascists; he fell victim to it. In The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism: An Essay in Atheistic Religion (1992), Nick Land claimed communion with Bataille along the lines of Bataille’s communion with Nietzsche. Land has since gone on to become a major thinker in online far-right circles, writing incoherent screeds calling for accelerationist ‘hyper-racism’ and techno-fascist ‘neoreaction.’

The musician René Leibowitz and his wife. Leibowitz went on to write an article for Bataille’s journal Genèse, and set three of Bataille’s poems to music. See de Beauvoir (1962:572); Kapp (1988); Hollywood (2002:25).

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