

Blood on the Stones: Race, Epidemiology, and Theology

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This paper takes up Gil Anidjar's concept of hemophilia—the love of blood—as a defining relational feature of Christianity and expands his critique through an examination of what blood as symbol, construction, and fiction reveals about the role of the racialized human body in contemporary theological and U.S. secular cultural imaginations. It discursively traces how the symbolism (and reality) of blood informs, sanctions, and responds to notions of race and racialized state violence by thinking through the epidermis and the making of race anthropologically, paying attention to the history of science. It moves on to epidemiological and social constructions of blood purity—emblemized in concepts of disease and contagion—and finally draws on the works of contemporary theologians to examine what it might mean to love blood ethically rather than violently and perversely.

Keywords: racialization, black religion, history of science and medicine, police violence, anthropology of religion, African diaspora, Christianity

Sticks beating, hands beating, the rumble of bass drums so bass they sound for all the world like thunder, the rapid-fire crackling of a stick so sharp on a skin so tight it sounds for all the world like gunfire. You could be anywhere: this is a war zone, this is a party. Sticks beating, hands beating, there's a body underfoot in the middle of the crowd, that's the military police beating a man like a drum, that's blood on the stones.

Barbara Browning¹

“Damn, that's Mike's blood. I'm stepping in Mike's blood. I had to leave. It did something to me.”

Tef Poe²

In the wake of the non-indictment of the police officers, Darren Wilson and Daniel Pantaleo, who in 2014, under the color of the law murdered the unarmed black men, Michael Brown and Eric Garner respectively, the dreams of a post-racial American society have come to fester and ooze as an unsightly and fetid sore. Left in its place are hands beating, drums beating and *blood*. This blood has a long history. In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2014) James Cone invokes Billie Holliday's strange fruit, hanging from the poplar tree with blood soaked leaves and blood saturating the roots. This blood gathers and pools, dries and congeals, erupts and overflows into histories, symbols, interpretations and stories. It is fictional, institutional, mythical and constructed. It is at once a fetish, a sign, a cipher, a citation and a repetition.³ What does blood as symbol, construction and fiction reveal about the role of the body in contemporary theological imaginations? More urgently, how does the symbolism (and reality) of blood inform, sanction and respond to notions of race and racialized state violence? This paper attempts a precursory

¹ Barbara Browning, *Infectious Rhythm: Metaphors of Contagion and the Spread of African Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 1.

² St. Louis rapper, activist and community organizer, at a talk at Harvard's Hip Hop Archive about Ferguson and hip hop activism, December 9, 2014.

³ Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 38.

investigation of the intersection of racialized epidermis, epidemiology and theology through blood.

Gil Anidjar in *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (2014) contends that “beginning with the conception of humans as ‘flesh and blood’ Christianity was the first community to understand and conceive of itself as a community of blood.”⁴ Anidjar argues that this notion of blood is what deepened and congealed Christianity. He goes as far as to state that Christianity’s relationship to blood is one of *hemophilia*—a love of blood. This *hemophilia*, he contends, was instilled in the hearts and minds of Christians and on their flesh by “early techniques of mass social operation.”⁵ The love of blood (arguably bedfellows with bloodlust), according to Anidjar, was a product of a disciplinary revolution that “reshaped the bodies of individuals, the collective bodies of families and classes, ultimately of nations and races.”⁶ Pushing forward Anidjar’s assertion, this paper investigates what Anidjar calls “liquid modernity”⁷ (a term he borrows from Zygmunt Bauman) and the aforementioned “techniques of mass operation” in an attempt to make sense of this *hemophilia*, in contemporary US society, asking what happens when the love of blood is perverted?

In discussing the production of mass death during the Holocaust, Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that genocide is an integral aspect of modernity and modernity allowed for the social engineering necessary for the practice of exterminatory racism.⁸ This exterminatory racism of the Holocaust was one in which an artificial order could be created by eliminating alterity. Building upon the work of Zygmunt Bauman, Uli Linke argues that “violent bloodshed creates an observable physical condition: liquidity, sexual contagion, carnal femininity.”⁹ She asserts that the German discourse of liquidation integrated itself into a discourse that feminized the racialized other into woman. Linke’s insight is keen, and I argue that in the American context of the black racialized other, this liquidation and violent bloodshed create an imagined carnal bestiality, particularly for black men, returning them to a nature—not unlike the feminine itself, which is often tied to nature—that must be dominated and controlled through the techniques of mass social operation that allow for and sanction bloodshed as concomitant with this “liquid modernity.” The paper thinks through the epidermis and the making of race, moves on to epidemiology with notions of blood purity, concepts of disease and contagion and finally examines what it might mean to love blood ethically.

The Epidermalizing of Race

In *Enfleshing Freedom: Body Race and Being*, M. Shawn Copeland quotes Mary Douglas and asserts that the human body functions as a code and image for social reality wherein there is both a physical and social body and “the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived.”¹⁰ The social body’s assignment of meaning and significance to race and/or gender or sex and/or sexuality of physical bodies influences and even determines the trajectories of

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸ Uli Linke, “Gendered Difference, Violent Imagination: Blood, Race, Nation,” *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 3 (1997): 559.

⁹ Ibid., 561.

¹⁰ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 8.

concrete human lives.¹¹ Copeland poses the question: what makes a body black? This question may be confounding as it forces one to come face to face with that which is deemed obvious and common sense—the American axiom that race is self-evident and we inherently know and understand what race means (despite post-racial narratives of color-blindness). When applying to schools, jobs, getting our driver’s licenses or filling out a survey we are required to identify ourselves racially, and even if we choose to opt out of the paper classification we are still interpellated. The question “what makes a body black?” encourages an examination of how race is constructed, specifically how race is constructed through physical bodies. While it is now commonly accepted that race is not a biological fact but a social construction, this does not translate into the freedom to throw off the fetters of race and its implication for the body—since we have both physical and social bodies and, as Erving Goffman posits, *actual* and *virtual* identities. Race, though not biological, is a virtual identity whose construction is interwoven with and impacts the physical body, as well as physiological and epidemiological relations, and social relations specifically.

Copeland theorizes race in terms of skin and investigates how a body comes to be made black. Copeland’s starting point is European Enlightenment, citing Emmanuel Eze who argues that “Enlightenment philosophy was instrumental in codifying and institutionalizing both the scientific and popular European perceptions of the human race.”¹² She points to Kant who located the difference between blacks and whites at the level of their skin pigmentation, which he thought mirrored differences in their mental capacities. The Eurocentric nature of the Enlightenment correlated white skin with reason, civilizations, goodness, purity (especially for women) and intelligence and denigrated non-white skin (the most radically opposite of which was black skin) as savage, depraved, ignorant and only capable of mimicry. Copeland argues that “these evaluations insinuated the idea that white skin functionally accorded absolute supremacy to white men over non-whites and women and legitimated imperial brutality, extermination, slavery, racism and biology as human destiny.”¹³ She also points to what she terms “pornographic pseudoscience” that violated the black body to reveal alleged truths, but seemed to be more rooted in perverse curiosity.¹⁴ The pseudoscientific gaze, as she terms it, normalized, hierarchized and excluded some bodies against others and it was decidedly pornographic in that it “positions, handles and fetishizes.”¹⁵

Copeland quotes historian James Sweet who argues that the “racialized habitus [is]based on perceived phenotypical distinctions . . . [and] results in homogenizing processes that reduce social or cultural ‘difference’ to innate traits, or ‘race.’”¹⁶ This reductionist view, as Copeland contends, allows skin to generate a “privileged and privileging worldview”¹⁷ where “skin morphs into a horizon funded by bias.”¹⁸ These biases, she argues, hold potent currency, rendering race the ultimate trope of difference that is “artificially and arbitrarily contrived to produce and

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 10.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹⁷ Ibid., 18.

¹⁸ Ibid.

maintain relations of power and subordination.”¹⁹ Of central importance is her argument that white racially bias-induced horizons work to define, censor, control and segregate non-white, subaltern bodies. These bodies in the normal routine of this white bias-induced horizon are invisible in terms of historical and cultural production, social creativity and representation; however, they become hypervisible should they “step out of place” and are then subordinated and subjected to literal surveillance, inspection, containment and discrimination.²⁰

Bearing the spoiled identity of black skin allows for W. E. B. Du Bois’s famous *double consciousness*—being both American and black, a contradictory position, and always seeing the self through the eyes of the hegemonic other.²¹ Living in black skin reveals a Janus-faced American society wherein freedom and liberty stand alongside historical slavery and its legacy—*laissez-faire racism*, where the hypervisibility of blackness is concomitant with invisibility, where protection in the form of the police and military comforts some as it implicates and arouses fear and suspicion in others, and where freedom of speech and words are powerful for some but have proven dangerous for others making silence the preferred balm. Goffman, at the outset of his project, explains that the term stigma conceals a double perspective, that of the *discredited* and the *discreditable*. The discredited person assumes his or her differentness is known and evident while the discreditable person may assume his or her differentness is not visible, thus not readily apprehended by others. Whether one is discredited or discreditable directly relates to the type of stigma one possesses. Goffman explains the three types of stigma: 1) abominations of the body 2) “blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs and dishonesty”²² and 3) tribal stigmas like race and religion that are transmitted through lineages. This taxonomy of stigma relates to tangible qualities that can be perceived visually, reading the physical body for example, as well as intangible qualities that are also invariably mapped on to bodies. This double perspective of being both *discredited* and *discreditable* defines the stigma of blackness in America. While Goffman points out that a stigmatized individual may have experiences with being both discredited and discreditable, I must underscore that being both discredited and discreditable is a *necessary* part of racial stigmatization. Further, the stigma of blackness is made operational through the three types of stigma Goffman highlights and no one type is discrete from the others. Black skin is an abomination of the body in a society where white skin is deemed beautiful and normal. In her book *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on African Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (2006), Harriet Washington provides an agonizing illustration of this point. In her chapter “Nuclear Winter” she recounts that in the 1900s “doctors touted radiation to blacks as an escape into whiteness.”²³ Skin bleaching through dangerous radiation, which some Blacks underwent, was advertised as “scientific light” that would efface the dark disability of racial difference.”²⁴ While it did not take off as much as expected, the fact that some Blacks underwent the treatment to escape physical blackness and its deleterious effects on social identity, proves that black skin was cast as a physical abomination. Anti-colonialist revolutionary and psychologist

¹⁹ Ibid., 15.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Touchstone, 1963).

²² Ibid., 4.

²³ Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on African Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Anchor, 2007), 226.

²⁴ Ibid.

Frantz Fanon echoes some of these same notions when he laments in *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952):

For several years certain laboratories have been trying to produce a serum for “denegrification”; with all the earnestness in the world, laboratories have sterilized their test tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on researches that might make it possible for the miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction.²⁵

Unfortunately, the desire to throw off the burdensome corporeal malediction of black skin is not merely a misguided fad of a bygone era; it is still a common phenomenon in the African diaspora and the Americas, where radiation is replaced with “whitening creams” with dangerous levels of hydroquinone, and when that does not work Photoshop editing software can lighten one’s skin to a brilliant white, or as white as possible, for commercial purposes. In the same vein, black hair is also a visible marker of difference and abomination and Washington describes how for other non-white ethnic minorities hair also became a marker signaling their abnormality. The other two forms of stigma: blemishes of individual character and the tribal stigma passed through lineage, are also woven into blackness as stigma. Blackness coincides with defective moral character as well as defective cultural characteristics, as argued by Lawrence D. Bobo and Ryan Smith in their article “From Jim Crow Racism to Laissez-Faire Racism,” in which the ideology of laissez-faire racism sees blacks as the “cultural architects of their own disadvantaged status.”²⁶ And more obviously, in the American racial logic, blackness is passed down through lineage, and literally and symbolically through blood, where even “one drop” of black blood taints a person and excludes him or her from the privilege of being a part of the normal. It is here that we turn to blood as the substance that transmits lineage, defines belonging and is the enigma of difference.²⁷

Thinking Blood Epidemiologically

Gil Anidjar discusses blood in his claim that Christianity was the premier community to define itself in terms of blood and argues that blood has come to stand in for community, including Eucharistic ties, kinship and race, and became the “substance, site and marker of collective identity” yet, he is emphatic that neither the Bible nor the rabbis thought of kinship and genealogy in terms of blood.²⁸ He states that “Blood belongs to Christianity, it defines belonging (as membership and as property) in Christianity. It marks and signals Christianity, while governing the way in which it perceives itself as lacking the solidarity of essence.”²⁹ This paper takes Anidjar’s claim that Christianity was the first community to use blood to stand in for community, as an entryway into thinking about the transmission of lineage, notions of belonging

²⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove, 1967), 111.

²⁶ Lawrence D. Bobo and Ryan Smith, “From Jim Crow Racism to Laissez-Faire Racism: The Transformation of Racial Attitudes,” in *Beyond Pluralism: The Conception of Groups and Group Identities in America*, ed. Wendy F. Katkin, Ned Landsman, and Andrea Tyree (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 212.

²⁷ Robert Manning, “Serious Ideas Rooted in Blood: Emmanuel Levinas’s Analysis of the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” in *Postmodernism and the Holocaust*, ed. Alan Rosenberg and Alan Milchman (Amsterdam: Brill Rodopi, 1998), 131.

²⁸ Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 257.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

and difference through blood. Anidjar calls attention to the fact that blood is not a natural carrier of genealogy or sign of community (even though today, particularly because of DNA science, it would appear this way). Blood, he argues, “is only one in an economy of symbols—natural or not—that have appealed to the collective imagination.”³⁰ Blood is constructed and made, and as blood makes us so to do we make blood.

Turning to German racial politics as one of the clearest instantiations of blood as a substance denoting enigmatic difference, Uli Linke in her article “Gendered Difference, Violent Imagination: Blood, Race, Nation” argues that subaltern bodies of outsiders (including foreigners and refugees) in the German political culture became racial constructs that were feminized and claimed as signifiers of race and contagion. Violence thus defined a “new corporal topography, linked to the murderous elimination of refugees and immigrants where ordinary citizens with divergent political commitments participate in the perpetuation of extermination discourses.”³¹ These notions of racial alterity were publicly constructed through what Linke calls “violent iconographic images of blood and liquidation.”³² In order to maintain the health of the German body politic a strict regimen of racial hygiene was enforced and a model of race was employed, not based in skin, but carefully constructed around typologies of blood. She states that “race, disease, and infections were imagined through blood metaphors. Blood became a marker of pathological alterity, a signifier that linked race and difference.”³³ She further argues that a multi-layered discourse of liquidation based in “the consumption by fire and the reduction to blood” was utilized wherein images of blood were invoked genealogically as well as through the “transfiguring of the linguistic construct ‘race’ into its physical signs: blood, pain contagion.”³⁴

Building on Linke’s notion of the iconographic images of blood, liquidation and contagion I turn to how these function epidemiologically in the contemporary American imaginary. While in the American context race largely rests on phenotypical markers (primarily the epidermis), and is wedded to genealogy—evident in the practice of hypodescent, that is the automatic assignment of a child of “mixed-race” (which itself reifies the biological concept of race as referring to actual differences in biology or even species) to the racial category of the parent in the non-privileged group—blood is also a dominant iconographic image marking race. Barbara Browning (1998) argues that the Western account of African diasporic culture relies on metaphors of disease and contagion. She posits that this metaphor is often invoked in the guise of literal threats. Her work focuses on “both vital and violent ways” in which the AIDS pandemic has been associated with African and African diasporic cultural practices. Browning asserts that “while the Western depiction of Africans as virulent and dangerous is certainly not new . . . HIV emerged as a pathogen simultaneously with new anxieties over the risks of these other ‘contagions.’”³⁵ Browning makes use of Arjun Appadurai’s theoretical model of cultural fluidity, which argues that “cultural ‘fluid’ exchanges are also played out in literal fluid exchanges of sexual bodies.”³⁶

³⁰ Ibid., 48.

³¹ Linke, “Gendered Difference, Violent Imagination,” 559.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 560.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Browning, *Infectious Rhythm*, 7.

³⁶ Ibid., 8.

The epidemiological narrative about AIDS—transmitted through bodily fluids, primarily infected blood—is one that presents the U.S. as a body vulnerable to penetration by infected populations, which are largely black and, in the case of AIDS, primarily African and Haitian. The parallels between this narrative and earlier narratives of bestial black manhood penetrating and contaminating white womanhood will be explored later in the paper. Within the United States context HIV is largely painted as a disease overwhelmingly affecting the Black population with daily statistical reminders in commercials and on billboards (whose poster children are often Black women), announcing their vulnerability as well as their status as most likely to be contaminated. While Browning provides that 50% of AIDS cases being reported are among Blacks and Latinos (this was in 1998), she warns that to articulate HIV status is a dangerous thing for minority communities, as articulating the prevalence of HIV infection can result in widespread social discrimination of an already discriminated against group.³⁷ Further, the diseases in these populations, instead of being read as manifestations of “the social atrocities practiced against those afflicted . . . the urban poor, gays, women of color, the African diaspora”³⁸—including inadequate healthcare, lack of access to barrier methods of birth control, the realities of urban poverty leading to substance abuse—are instead interpreted as punishments by the religious or as a result of intrinsic negative characteristics like promiscuity, ignorance and depravity in that group. This harkens back to the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments of the 1930s in which the US Public Health authorities instituted its study of “Syphilis in the Untreated Negro Male,”³⁹ which attempted to study how the disease developed in black males because, according to racially biased pseudoscience, Blacks felt and experienced pain and disease differently from whites. Aside from the many atrocities of the experiments, it is noteworthy that the public health services physicians declared that Blacks were a “notoriously syphilis soaked race”⁴⁰ because “morality among these people is a joke”⁴¹ and the “Negro’s well-known sexual impetuosity may account for more abrasions of the integument of the sexual organs and therefore more frequent infections than are found in the white race.”⁴² It was found that the syphilis tests were nonspecific and a disease called yaws, prevalent in West Africa, caused by a similar bacterium to syphilis, affected many of these men diagnosed with syphilis, and their high rates of yaws was due to the conditions of poverty—malnourishment, injuries from broken skin, lack of shoes, exposure to the elements—not race or inherent moral bankruptcy.

Most recently, with the 2014 Ebola scare (a virus also transmitted through blood) narratives of US penetrability and purity against African virulence and contamination circulated publicly. One *Newsweek* cover titled “Smuggled Bushmeat is Ebola’s Backdoor to America” features a chimpanzee on the cover with the title of the article in bright yellow and, appropriately enough, above the picture one of the advertised articles inside reads “Post Post-Racial America.” The article highlighted on the cover begins:

Less than three miles from Yankee Stadium, the colorful storefronts of African markets lining the Grand Concourse are some of the first signs of a bustling Bronx

³⁷ Ibid., 10.

³⁸ Ibid., 23.

³⁹ Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 157.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 161.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

community that includes immigrants from those West African nations hit hardest by the recent and unprecedented outbreak of the Ebola virus.

We are here today looking for bushmeat, the butchered harvest of African wildlife, and an ethnic delicacy in West African expatriate communities all over the world.⁴³

The article goes on to declare that “bushmeat is ‘a potential vector of diseases such as Monkeypox, Ebola Virus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and other communicable diseases’ Seven years later, the worst Ebola epidemic in history is ravaging West Africa.”⁴⁴ It continues and describes airlines canceling all flights to West Africa and countries prohibiting people from “that part of the world to land on their soil.”⁴⁵ The article takes many questionable twists and turns and states that we don’t know how much bush meat is smuggled into the U.S. but for many Africans it is believed to have medicinal and magical properties, apart from being a delicious delicacy, and “bushmeat is, for many West Africans, a cultural touchstone.”⁴⁶ Most dubiously, the article states:

Though researchers cannot identify with absolute certainty the cause of the current Ebola outbreak, they do know the strain of virus, while being similar to the Zaire strain, is indigenous to Guinea, suggesting bushmeat was the source.

Fruit bats are believed to be the “natural reservoir” of Ebola (meaning the virus can live in the bats for years without harming them), and scientists presume the virus makes its way into primates and other animals when they eat fruits half-eaten by and contaminated with the saliva of these bats. From those infected animals, the virus jumps to humans. “Just under 50 percent of Ebola outbreaks have been due to known handling of primate, great ape carcasses,” says Michael Jarvis, a virology and immunology expert at Britain’s Plymouth University.

The most likely scenario for the jump is when an infected animal is being butchered and blood seeps into a cut on the hunter’s (or butcher’s) hand. “But we don’t know precisely.”

Smoked bushmeat may appear safe, but the flesh inside is still juicy—filled with blood, fresh tissue and more: Simian foamy virus and herpes viruses showed up in the samples of the confiscated meats. The researchers didn’t find Ebola, but they tested only a few samples.⁴⁷

In effect, while scientists speculate that blood from a butchered animal seeped into a cut on the hunter or butcher’s hands, they do not know precisely. The article suggests that researchers cannot identify with certainty the cause of the recent Ebola outbreak, but presume it is from

⁴³ Gerard Flynn and Susan Scutti, “Smuggled Bushmeat Is Ebola’s Back Door to America,” *Newsweek*, 21 Aug. 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/08/29/smuggled-bushmeat-ebolas-back-door-america-265668.html>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

bushmeat simply because the strain is indigenous to Guinea. Less than 50 percent of Ebola outbreaks have been due to the known handling of great ape carcasses. None of the confiscated bushmeat tested by researchers was infected with Ebola; yet, *Newsweek* chose to publish a sensationalized cover story on Africans in the U.S.—highlighting their belief in magic and non-western medicine—smuggling dangerous bushmeat into the U.S. and voraciously consuming bloody bushmeat because of their inability to prepare it safely, thus potentially exposing everyone else to Ebola. These epidemiological images and narrative circulated in mainstream media tying Africanness—a metonym for blackness—to tainted blood, contagion and disease represent the violence embedded in the articulation of blood as a marker of enigmatic difference. This enigmatic difference eventually moves from notions of contamination, which lead to exclusion and discrimination, to a reactionary violent blood shedding where the love of blood is perverted and pornographic and results in a liquidation that transforms humans into carnal beasts that must be conquered and exterminated.

La bête noire

I pulled it a third time, it goes off...he looked up at me and had the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked...and when I grabbed him the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five year old holding on to Hulk Hogan...he turns and when he looked at me he made like a grunting, like aggravated sound and he starts running...I remember seeing the smoke from the gun and I kind of looked at him and he's still running at me, he hasn't slowed down....I shoot another round of bullets...at this point it looks like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I was shooting at him...and the face that he had was looking straight through me, like I wasn't even there, I wasn't even anything in his way.⁴⁸

Removed from the context of a grand jury transcript in which Officer Darren Wilson is explaining how he came to fatally shoot (six times) and kill an unarmed teenager, the previous quote reads like a man under attack by an unearthly beast of colossal proportion and of a mutant variety, much like the gorilla-monster King Kong. The film *Kong Kong* (1933) itself is no stranger to critique based on its racial overtones, with a storyline featuring a gigantic black ape falling in love with a tiny white woman, and the fictive African villagers in cultic ecstasy giving over this frail white woman to the lusty and apish black beast. The fear of miscegenation and the mixing of bloods in black-white sexual relationships is not implicit here. Both James Cone and M. Shawn Copeland have explored the symbolic meaning of the cross of Jesus and the lynching tree. In their explications, they underscore the fact that the lynching of Black men was most frequently tied to accusations of raping a white woman. Cone notes that “sexual intercourse between black men and white women was regarded as the worst crime Blacks could commit against Anglo-Saxon civilization. Even when sexual relations were consensual, ‘race mixing,’ mockingly called ‘mongrelization,’ was always translated to mean rape and it was used as the primary justification for lynching.”⁴⁹ It was the responsibility of Christian white men to protect the purity of their race by exterminating Black men to prevent these relations, and Copeland notes that Southern whites

⁴⁸ Krishnadev Calamur, “Ferguson Documents: Officer Darren Wilson's Testimony,” NPR, 25 Nov. 2014, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/11/25/366519644/ferguson-docs-officer-darren-wilsons-testimony>.

⁴⁹ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 7–8.

“conflated blacks with a “satanic presence” that must be eliminated.” Lynching was the method by which the white body politic was purged.

Returning to Darren Wilson’s testimony, he characterizes Michael Brown as an aggressive, grunting, demon who was supernaturally strong, running through bullets with unstoppable strength, launching ever forward, while grunting and looking through him as if he were nothing. Although many across the nation, and the world, have had access to these transcripts and find this particular aspect most unbelievable, if not absurd, the non-indictment in many ways points to the fact that it *is* believable. Why are stories of Black men (though similarly sized or smaller than their killers, and unarmed, unlike their killers) who are supernaturally strong, grunting demons who can defy multiple gunshots not only believable, but raise no suspicion as to how it is even humanly possible? I would argue, like Linke, that it is through the perpetuation of iconographic images of bloody violent liquidations of black beasts (like in the movies *King Kong* (1933) and *Birth of a Nation* (1915) for example), woven into the social epidermis of Black skin, articulated through racially loaded symbols, and imprinted upon American imaginations, which allow for a public discourse (though often implicit) that allows for these characterizations to be familiar and normal, rendering white fear rational, which in turn makes extermination justifiable.

Regardless of the veracity of Darren Wilson’s testimony, the unsettling aspect is its almost identical reproduction of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century black brute stereotypes, which instead of being relics of the past, are very much flourishing in the contemporary American imagination. James Cone explains that in their justification for lynching it was purported that “it was necessary to protect the virtue of white women from the ‘unspeakable crime’ of the ‘black male beast,’ who no longer had slavery in place to keep his bestial behavior in check.”⁵⁰ Michael Brown was not only Darren Wilson’s personal demon, warranting elimination, but representative of a familiar specter of white American racial projections, ever-haunting and ever needing to be policed and kept at bay, and his non-indictment reinforced this communal agreement. Once slavery ended, “in the white imagination, the image of Black men was transformed from docile slaves and harmless ‘Sambos,’” to menacing beasts.⁵¹ Cone cites historian Joel Williamson who states, “Their blackness alone was license enough to line them up against walls, to menace them with guns, to search them roughly, beat them, and rob them of every vestige of dignity.”⁵² In the new and rebranded era of lynching, white women’s purity is no longer the ultimate justification, but white fear is. White fear of what is painted as a natural predator, *la bête noire*.

In his discussion of the roots of the Ferguson, Missouri murder of Michael Brown, Peniel Joseph argues that this tragedy is emblematic of American anti-Black racism. He states that Black identity is “the identity that has served as America’s literal and figurative *bête noire*.”⁵³ *Bête noire* translates literally in English as “black beast,” and is a heavily weighted term appropriate for the discussion of the Janus-faced American society within which those bearing the stigma of blackness, particularly Black males, must negotiate their involuntary and hypervisible virtual

⁵⁰ Ibid., 127.

⁵¹ Ibid., 79.

⁵² Ibid., 6.

⁵³ Peniel E. Joseph, “Ferguson Opened the Door to a Discussion of Black Equality,” *The Root*, 26 Aug. 2014, <https://www.theroot.com/ferguson-opened-the-door-to-a-discussion-of-black-equal-1790876832>.

identities as black beasts living in a social body while simultaneously attempting to pass for what America deems normal in their physical bodies. Challenging normative notions of race is an arduous task that does not immediately result in wholesale redefinitions of race by the powerful in society. Rather, it is an ongoing process that must be continually worked and reworked with dexterity as people move between their virtual and actual social identities. Laurence Ralph and Kelley Chance argue that the Black male person is made hypervisible and interpellated by “the production of endangerment and fear.”⁵⁴ They note that Trayvon Martin and Rodney King, one shot to death by a white citizen without having committed a crime and the other beaten and broken by the police also in the absence of a crime, are both victims of the mentality that African Americans should be feared and white Americans should be protected from such fears. They argue that Martin and King become invisible as their actual identities are subsumed by an “illicit appearance,” which is the blackness of their epidermis.⁵⁵ They are read through the stereotype of black criminality and their hypervisibility leads to invisibility as stereotypes fill in the gaps for real knowledge of the person. It would seem as though media representations often work to reinforce notions of stigma rather than challenge them, particularly when the stigmatized are not in control of their media representation. Ralph and Chance raise media coverage of Rodney King’s death as an example of how media portrayals rendered him a criminal and deviant in ways that confirmed the fear and deviancy paradigms, and subsequently absolved American society from investigating routine police violence against Black citizens. Barbara Browning also discusses the possession and reproduction of video image of Rodney King being beaten by the police and notes that the shocking thing about the video was not that the beating had occurred; rather, “the absence of a record of other beatings is what made the reproduction of this one so compelling.”⁵⁶ This point is haunting, particularly given contemporary discussions and implementation of body-worn cameras by police officers—notwithstanding the recent non-indictment of Officer Daniel Pantaleo in the illegal chokehold murder of Eric Garner, even though the murder was videotaped; and further still, the acquittal of Officer Jeronimo Yanez, even though the murder of Philando Castile was captured live on a video posted on Facebook.

In the face of video evidence of the beating of King’s body, the response of the stigmatized is not shock that it happened, as it merely archives what is known to happen; meanwhile, for those not stigmatized by blackness, while the video may or may not have been harrowing, the verdict of the trials, which led to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, laid bare the complete invisibility of blackness and the racist logic of the American justice system. The riots of 1992 and the current uprising against police brutality bear many similarities. Analyses of the riots tried to localize it; however, Browning argues that the problems in Los Angeles were not specific and isolated but virulent. One theorist attempted to characterize it as “social contagion,” but in the end it was concluded that it was “real and reasonable social discontent, which was expressed as meaningful black *protest*.”⁵⁷ Similarly, in public conversation and media discourse on “riots” there has been a tendency by some to paint them as uncontrollable black masses (including a Twitter trending topic hashtagged “#chimpingout” in which black people protesting were referred to as apes, chimpanzees and other non-human primates) burning down businesses and

⁵⁴ Laurence Ralph and Kerry Chance, “Legacies of Fear: From Rodney King’s Beating to Trayvon Martin’s Death,” *Transition*, no. 113 (2014): 139.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁵⁶ Browning, *Infectious Rhythm*, 116.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

looting for no other reason than it being an irrational (but typical given “their nature”) response to an “isolated incidence” of a criminal—a thug who stole cigarettes—getting his rightful reward.

Given the ways in which the blood of the racialized Other has been spilled without compunction—assisted by the circulation of iconographic images and following the logic of a “liquid modernity” (a modernity built on notions of race and blood purity)—is the perversion of a racialized *hemophilia* reconcilable? Is there an ethical way to love blood and to deal in blood?

Theologically Revising Blood

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

(1 Corinthians 11:23–25)

Philosopher Enrique Dussel characterizes bread as the fruit of common labor and links this bread to the body of Jesus the martyr as Eucharistic bread. He connects the economy and the Eucharist as the essence of Christianity. He distinguishes between idolatrous worship and Eucharistic worship, warning that “the same group of people, around the same priest, can offer breads that are alike in their real structure. But some will be paying homage to the Idol . . . while others will be communing in the life of the lamb that is slain.”⁵⁸ Idolatrous worship steals bread from the poor and for this reason this bread is the bread of injustice. He clarifies that this is not merely personal, individual or occasional injustice, but structural injustice and “the historical sin of systems.”⁵⁹ The particular system Dussel indicts is capitalism. While Dussel does not focus much on blood (the transubstantiated substance of Eucharistic wine that goes hand-in-hand with bread), I take his point further and argue that one cannot “commune in the life of the lamb that is slain”⁶⁰ if one’s love of blood is vampiristic, perverse and/or pornographic, and if one relies on blood as a means to discriminate and exterminate. Emmanuel Levinas argues that biological notions of society lead to a commitment to truth based on realities of blood. Robert Manning, reading Levinas, states that “societies not based on biology, not based on ties of blood and heredity, societies for example based on ideals of equality or of the essential dignity of human nature, are viewed as fragile and deceitful.”⁶¹ The biological view of man counters this fragility with a “reality” based in body, blood and consanguinity. Levinas further argues that if the concept of race does not exist one has to invent it. For the racialized other the biological notion of society based on “realities” of blood is not only fragile and deceitful, but also death-dealing! It appears as though a modernity based in blood and biology has run its course and has proven beneficial to some and detrimental to others.

Cone tells us that black people partook in the sacrament of Holy Communion raising their voices to acknowledge “a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel’s vein,” this

⁵⁸ Enrique Dussel, *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Theology*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 41–52, 90.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶¹ Manning, “Serious Ideas Rooted in Blood,” 130.

blood from Immanuel’s vein would “never lose its power” and “there is power in the blood, and nothing but the blood.”⁶² He argues that there is a sense of redemption through the Cross of Jesus and this redemption was amazing and salvific because it referenced “an eschatological promise of freedom that gave transcendent meaning to black lives that no lynching tree could take from them.” Cone states that when black folks sang, “Aint you glad, aint you glad that the blood done signed your name,”⁶³ they were singing not only about the blood of Jesus of Nazareth, but also the blood of “raped and castrated black bodies in America—innocent, often nameless, burning and hanging bodies, images of hurt so deep that only God’s ‘amazing grace’ could offer consolation.” He further asserts that “in their spiritual wrestling, black Christians experienced the weakness and power of God’s love revealed in the cross—mysteriously saving them from loneliness and abandonment and ‘the unspeakable violence . . . by blood thirsty mobs.’”⁶⁴ While the blood and biology paradigm has dealt in violent bloodshed, fetishistic worship and unholy sacrifices, it seems as though a critical race theory-focused approach to Jesus’ death, suffering and spilled blood, along with the partaking of Eucharistic blood, might offer a space for an ethical love of blood. This ethical love of blood cannot be rooted in biology, however; rather, it must attend to notions of freedom and community, joined by gratitude for Jesus’ spilled blood while equally committed to not seeing any more blood spilled. Cone suggests that “neither blacks nor whites can be understood fully without reference to the other because of their common religious heritage as well as their joint relationship to the lynching experience . . . we were made brothers and sisters by the blood of the lynching tree, the blood of sexual union and the blood of the cross of Jesus.”⁶⁵ Similarly, Copeland points to freedom and the Eucharist, stating that “Eucharistic solidarity teaches us to imagine, to hope for and to create new possibilities . . . at the table that Jesus prepares, *all* assemble: in his body we are made anew, a community of faith. . . . His Eucharistic banquet re-orders us, re-members us, restores us, and makes us one.”⁶⁶ We must, however, be clear that Cone and Copeland offer a kind of consanguinity that rejects facile understandings of the notion of one-blood, notions that would make it simply another articulation of the fallacious post-racial gospel of color-blindness. This re-ordered relationship with blood, and in blood, rejects virulence, contamination, extermination and contagion and instead embraces intimacies that demand commitment to accountability, courage, community, truth and justice.

⁶² Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 75.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶⁶ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 128.

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