Blue Gums, Black Bodies, White Supremacy: Narratives of Racial Contagion in the Late Nineteenth Century

In the summer of 1887, several newspapers reprinted a story concerning W. J. York, a white police officer in Mobile, Alabama, bitten on the hand whilst arresting an unnamed Black man. Subsequent to this bite, York's hand became "greatly inflamed and swollen." The story compared the incident to the biting, the previous year, of Officer John King by another Black detainee (again, unnamed). "King's hand swelled," the article reported, "and then the inflammation attacked his arms and legs, and for two weeks his life was in danger." Although "slowly recovering," King was "not yet able to put his right foot on the ground." The article went on to claim that the "negroes and some whites declared that the negroe had blue gums, and that only those with blue gums have poisonous bites. This belief is generally held and the colored people have, it seems, an aphorism: 'Don't fight with a blue-gummed coon.'"[1] This piece marked, perhaps, the first appearance in print of the Blue Gum, an imaginary, blue-gummed African American with a deadly-poisonous bite.[2] For the next decade, similar stories circulated the national press, as the Blue Gum gripped the imaginations of white journalists. As the *New York Sun* noted in 1897, with only slight hyperbole, "Every few months the southern newspapers publish accounts of persons being bitten by blue gum negroes."[3] These

[1] "A Human Rattlesnake," *Morning News*, July 8, 1887, 3. The *Courant-American* attributed this story to the *Mobile Register*. "Blue-Gummed Coons," *Courant-American*, July 21, 1887, 2.

[2] To mitigate the risk of reproducing racist discourse, I will refer throughout to "the Blue Gum," rather than using the contemporary labels "blue gum negro" and "blue gum nigger."

[3] "Blue Gum Negroes," *Dickinson Press*, Aug. 14, 1897, 11. *The Dickinson Press* attributed this report to the *New York Sun.*

accounts were an important – and, hitherto, unexamined – component of the nationwide white-supremacist order.[4]

Setting aside the element of poison, narratives of blue-gummed, Black assailants contributed to the racial criminalization of African Americans, which became a "pillar of racism" during the 1890s.[5] They also provided an opportunity for the white press to reinforce notions of Black credulity. As the *Sun* claimed, the belief in venomous Blue Gums was "one of the numerous superstitions of the old plantation days which still linger in the south."[6] Crime and credulity were two sides of the same coin, presented by white supremacists as supposed evidence of the "low grade of intellectuality, combined with a strongly emotional tendency," that rendered African Americans unfit for citizenship.[7] However, although white, middle-class journalists might be expected to scoff at the credulity of African Americans, their attitude to the existence of Blue Gums was, frequently, decidedly ambiguous. The original report of an attack on Officer York concluded with the observation that "as soon as York was bitten an examination of the negro was made, and it was discovered that his gums are of a bright blue color."[8] On this note, readers were left to make up their own minds regarding the reality of the Blue Gum. Introducing the same story, the St. Louis *Globe Democrat*, pointed even less equivocally towards the existence of Blue Gums: "A species of what may be termed a human

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[4] See Desmond King and Stephen Tuck, "De-Centring the South: America's Nationwide White Supremacist Order after Reconstruction," *Past & Present* 194 (February 2007): 213–253.

[5] Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3.

[6] "Blue Gum Negroes," *Dickinson Press*, Aug. 14, 1897, 11. *The Dickinson Press* attributed this report to the *New York Sun.*

[7] Charles Morris, *The Aryan Race: Its Origin and Antecedents* (Chicago: S. C. Griggs, 1888), 24.

[8] "Human Rattlesnake," 3.

rattlesnake is creating considerable interest here, and an incident of two days ago tends to awaken an investigation of scientific importance."[9]

The deliberately ambiguous quality of Blue Gum narratives indicates that they did more than reinforce notions of Black criminality and credulity. The component of deadly venom was critical to the meaning of Blue Gum narratives, allowing them to perform a different, if complementary, kind of cultural work. Journalists latched onto Blue Gums because, as the *Globe Democrat's* allusion to "scientific importance" suggests, stories of venomous, blue-gummed attackers bolstered assumptions of embodied racial difference, stoked fears of Black degeneration, and dramatized the threat of racial contagion.

It was certainly no coincidence that journalistic fascination with Blue Gums coincided with the zenith of racist ideology and the nadir of Black life in America.[10] During the 1890s, as white southerners sought to justify their efforts to efface Black citizenship and eradicate the remnants of Reconstruction, African Americans were subjected to an "unprecedented outpouring of racism."[11] To some extent, this torrent of racism can be situated within an unbroken continuum of "know-your-place" aggression, directed against Black political and economic agency.[12] However, racial thought underwent a marked change as southern white supremacists set about building a social structure upon the foundations of Black segregation, disenfranchisement, debt peonage, and convict labor. As Joel Williamson argued, racism

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[9] "Human Rattlesnake," 3. This Ohioan *Globe-Democrat* report was reprinted by Georgia's *Morning News*.

[10] For the argument that the late nineteenth century marked the nadir of African American life, see esp. Rayford W. Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954).

[11] T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (1981; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 108.

[12] Koritha Mitchell, *From Slave Cabins to the White House: Homemade Citizenship in African American Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 4.

assumed ever more extreme forms as "radical" racists, eschewing the neo-paternalism of postbellum conservatives, insisted that African Americans, "freed from the restraining influences of slavery, were rapidly 'retrogressing' toward their natural state of bestiality."[13] Whilst the Black Congressman George White celebrated the achievements of "a rising people," white supremacists rarely missed an opportunity to compare "old-time Negroes" ("well-behaved, kindly, respectful") with the "new issue" ("intemperate, insolent, dishonest").[14] As Gail Bederman has argued, this new radicalism was connected to an obsessive desire, on the part of white, middle-class men, to "remake manhood."[15] Black agency stimulated this obsession, but it was not its only cause. In the Gilded Age, extant structures of class and gender were disrupted by corporate capitalism, acute economic depression, urbanization, and women's political agency. In race, white men thought they saw an anchor for an entire social order.[16]

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[13] Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 111. For turn-of-the-century racism, see esp. George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); Thomas Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963); Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (Boulder: Westview, 2007). For late-nineteenth-century racism in Atlantic perspective, see esp. Francisco Bethencourt, *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[14] George White quoted in Michael Perman, *The Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888–1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 43; Thomas Nelson Page, *The Negro: The Southerner's Problem* (New York: Scribner's, 1904), 80.

[15] Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 5.

[16] See Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 10–15, and Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 8–12.

Thus the late nineteenth century witnessed the ill-starred birth of a "new racism for a new order."[17] This new racism was distinguished by a rigid biological determinism that drew upon, and contributed to, the Social Darwinist world view dominating American thought between the 1870s and 1920s.[18] Applying Darwin's theory of natural selection to society, Social Darwinists refigured human history as a tale of the "survival of the fittest" individuals and races, at the expense of the weakest.[19] This "Darwinian mood" encouraged the translation of social concerns into biological ones, giving a scientific cast to white-supremacist warnings of Black degeneration.[20] Having formed via natural selection, it was argued, races stood on different rungs of the evolutionary ladder. In this intellectual context, "civilization" was refigured as an "explicitly racial concept," and supposed Black "savagery" presented as a biological inevitability.[21] The Harvard scientist and race writer, Nathanial Shaler, epitomized this worldview when he wrote that the "inherited qualities" of African Americans "unfit them to carry the burden of our civilization." Because their "Americanized shape" was due to the "enslavement of their blood," he asserted, there would be a "strong tendency," under conditions

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[17] Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 224.

[18] Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 33.

[19] Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), 444.

[20] Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 172.

[21] Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 25. See, also, Gregory Michael Dorr, *Segregation's Science: Eugenics and Society in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 36. As the zoologist, eugenicist, and former President of Stanford, David Starr Jordan, declared in 1915, characteristics acquired through "education and training" had "no part in heredity." "The change in hereditary traits," which Jordan insisted was the "essence of race-progress," found "its main if not its sole cause in selection." David Starr Jordan, *War and the Breed: The Relation of War to the Downfall of Nations* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1915), 15.

of freedom, for African Americans to "revert to their ancestral conditions."[22] As the physician and University of Virginia professor, Paul Brandon Barringer, put it, "Scratch the negro you will find a savage."[23]

Social Darwinists gave new life to the conflation of race and species that subtended discourse on Blue Gums. In the antebellum period, polygenists had proffered a theory of separate human origins as explanation of, and justification for, racial hierarchy. This theory, which contradicted the Biblical account of creation, failed to find purchase in the deeply-religious South.[24] However, in the late nineteenth century, Social Darwinists and proto-eugenicists were able to reconcile a common human origin with an essentialized understanding of racial difference.[25] The theory of evolution, coupled with the vast extension of time within which human variation might both occur and become fixed, allowed white supremacists to fuse race and species long after the repudiation of polygenic science.[26] As Christopher Willoughby argues, the scientific legacy of antebellum polygenists "did not relate to the origins of racial difference," but to the depiction of "racial differences as enduring and embodied."[27] Whilst

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[22] Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, "The Negro Problem," *Atlantic Monthly*, Nov. 1884, 703.

[23] Paul Brandon Barringer, *The American Negro: His Past and His Future* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1900), 13.

[24] Drew Gilpin Faust, ed., *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 14–17.

[25] Dorr, *Segregation's Science*, 36–37.

[26] For the increasingly literal use of the word species, see Hawkins, *Social Darwinism*, 34.

[27] Christopher Willoughby, *Masters of Health: Racial Science and Slavery in U.S. Medical Schools* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 3. For other recent works on the notion of embodied racial difference, see esp. Rana Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World, 1780–1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), and Leslie A, Schwalm, *Medicine, Science, and Making Race in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023).

scientists like David Starr Jordan dismissed polygenesis as an idea with "no standing in science," their deterministic, hereditarian, and hierarchical view of race was virtually identical to that of antebellum polygenists.[28] In this respect, as George Stocking contended, polygenesis "did not die with Darwin's *Origin of Species*."[29] Indeed, Blue Gum narratives suggest that, at the level of popular belief, inchoate notions of polygenism swirled alongside hard hereditarian assumptions. This "folk concept" of race both preceded and survived the rise and fall of racial science.[30]

As had their polygenist precursors, Social Darwinist and proto-eugenicist scientists placed a premium on racial purity, issuing dire warnings regarding the results of miscegenation.[31] According to Joseph LeConte, another physician and professor, because the "primary races" were human varieties "so strong that they may be regarded as incipient species, their crossing produced "hybrids" inferior to "either of the pure races."[32] With culture and nature conflated, white racial purity became a precondition for progress.[33] As Virginia's

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[28] David Starr Jordan, *The Factors in Organic Evolution: A Syllabus of a Course of Elementary Lectures Delivered in Leland Stanford Junior University* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1894), 97.

[29] George W. Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the history of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 45. See, also, Robert Wald Sussman, *The Myth of Race: The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 44–47.

[30] Smedley, *Race in North America*, 27. For the survival of hard hereditarian ideas in popular culture after the decline of eugenics as a legitimate science, see Susan Currell, "Introduction," in Susan Currell and Christina Cogdell, eds., *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 1–14.

[31] Here, I use the word "miscegenation" in its historical context. For the coinage and circulation of this term as a component of racial ideology, see Forrest G. Wood, *Black Scare: The Racist Response to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 53–79.

[32] Joseph LeConte, *The Race Problem in the South* (New York: D. Appleton, 1892), 372.

[33] See Dorr, *Segregation's Science*, 3.

Supreme Court concluded in 1878, the "purity of public morals, the moral and physical development of both races, and the highest advancement of our southern civilization," required that the "two distinct races" in the South "be kept distinct and separate."[34]

Anxieties regarding racial impurity were sharpened by the revolution in bacteriology coincident with the Social Darwinist heyday. Segregation gathered strength from the new germ theory, which replaced notions of miasmatical disease with ideas of microbial transmission. Consequently, as Melissa Stein argues, Jim Crow was "very much a scientific project," predicated upon images of the Black body as a vector for disease.[35] The "Negro Problem" became a public health problem, and discourse on disease a "key part" of the "American racial formation project."[36] Moreover, according to eugenicists like David Starr Jordan, diseases

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[34] Quoted in Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 70.

[35] Melissa Stein, "'Nature is the Author of Such Restrictions': Science, Ethnological Medicine and Jim Crow," in *The Folly of Jim Crow: Rethinking the Segregated South*, ed. Stephanie Cole (Arlington: University of Texas Press, 2012), 125. As Khary Oronde Polk notes, the "corporeal reality of black life is the medium through which discourses of inclusion and exclusion find their practice." Khary Oronde Polk, *Contagions of Empire: Scientific Racism, Sexuality, and Black Military Workers Abroad, 1898–1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 5.

[36] Charles Allan McCoy, *Diseased States: Epidemic Control in Britain and the United States* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020), 108. For the "Negro problem" as public health problem, see Dorr, *Segregation's Science*, 38. As Melanie Armstrong notes, by "pinpointing 'other' bodies as sources of pathogens, public health practice expresses racial politics and naturalizes the control of bodies as the management of microbial natures." Melanie Armstrong, "Microbe Culture: Germ Politics and the Unseen Racial History of Nature," in *Historicizing Fear: Ignorance, Vilification, and Othering*, eds. Travis Boyce and Winsome Chunnu (Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2019), 63. For the relationship between germ theory and control of other bodies, see esp. Samuel Kelton Roberts, *Infectious Fear: Politics, Disease, and the Health Effects of Segregation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men.*

transmitted from African Americans to whites were a form of "race poison," corrupting the Anglo-Saxon stock.[37] Consequently, the diseased Black body threatened the health not only of the white individual but also the white race. In the Blue Gum, white writers conjured a vessel for intertwined fears of miscegenation, microbes, and race poison, giving corporeal form to dysgenic menace.

As with other accounts of Black criminality (most commonly, the alleged crimes of lynching victims), Blue Gum narratives traversed the nation. This interregional circulation was made possible by a nineteenth-century "mass media explosion," ignited by developments in communication technology, which allowed discourses of race to cross boundaries of class and region.[38] Telegraphs, railroads, and wire services meant that metropolitan dailies could act as "news aggregators," swiftly republishing reports from rural weeklies.[39] Because anxieties about racial contagion crossed regional lines, identical, or extremely similar, Blue Gum narratives circulated widely. In the North, the first signs of significant Black migration to northern cities stoked fears of Black cultural and biological contamination during the 1890s. Meanwhile, in the West, images of contagious Black bodies resonated with an established

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Women, and the Microbe in American Life (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Choi Tina Young, *Anonymous Connections: The Body and Narratives of the Social in Victorian Britain* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

[37] Jordan, *War and the Breed*, 15.

[38] Claire Jean Kim, *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 111.

[39] W. Fitzhugh Brundage. "The Press and Lynching," in *Journalism and Jim Crow: White Supremacy and the Black Struggle for a New America*, eds. Sid Bedingfield and Kathy Roberts Forde (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 85.

white discourse framing East Asian migrants as "vectors of physical, moral, and sexual contagion."[40]

However, whilst Blue Gum narratives often appeared in the same form, white journalism was not homogenous.[41] Northern and western newspapers were more likely to brandish superstitious belief in Blue Gums as a lamentable example of interracial cultural crossing. Of course, the conflation of cultural and biological impurity allowed journalists to express concerns about interracial cultural influence, whilst capitalizing upon their white readership's terror of bodily contamination. Whites could construct racial credulity and evoke racial contagion, simultaneously. Although more likely to suggest that poisonous Blue Gums were a biological reality, white, southern journalists also sought to have their cake and eat it, mocking Black credulity with one hand, whilst giving credence to Blue Gum tales with the other. Thus, discourse on Blue Gums was aporetic, leaving readers to believe and disbelieve in Blue Gums, simultaneously. This liminality allowed white writers to capitalize upon the space between figurative and literal dehumanization; to suggest, without stating, Black animality.

Crucially, whites did not conjure the figure of the Blue Gum *ex nihilo* but appropriated it from Black folk culture. In presenting a folk myth as a biological reality, discourse on Blue Gums epitomized the superstitious character of race. Stephan Palmié and Barbara Fields have both drawn attention to the magical thinking inherent in racialization, a process that Palmié labelled "racecraft," in order to accentuate the similarity between its workings and witchcraft.[42]

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[40] Edlie L. Wong, *Racial Reconstruction: Black Inclusion, Chinese Exclusion, and the Fictions of Citizenship* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 72.

[41] See Sid Bedingfield and Kathy Roberts Forde, "Journalism and the World It Built," in Bedingfield and Forde, *Journalism and Jim Crow*, 1–27.

[42] See Stephan Palmié, "Genomics, Divination, 'Racecraft,'" *American Ethnologist* 34 (May 2007): 205–222, and Barbara Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2014).

Mingling folk beliefs with medical science, white supremacists created categories of race that were fundamentally magical in that they depended upon the influence of an immaterial, invisible world upon the material and visible.[43] In so doing, they belied the racialized distinction between rational modernity and premodern credulity. Indeed, in their appropriation of the Blue Gum in the service of racism, whites illustrated the symbiosis of dominant and subjugated forms of knowledge in the Atlantic world.[44] Providing inadvertent testimony to the chimerical character of race, authors of Blue Gum narratives reached across the color line in order to draw it.

BLUE GUMS IN FOLK CULTURE

As Blue Gum narratives demonstrate, the desire to dehumanize African Americans impelled some white writers to present a mythical creature as a racial type. The Blue Gum, however, was not a novel invention of white supremacists, but a distorted reflection of Black folklore. Although the documentary evidence of nineteenth-century Blue Gum lore is slight, and whilst it is important not to reproduce segregation by assuming that this lore was exclusive to Black southerners, there is enough to justify an entry on the subject in the *Greenwood Encyclopedia*

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[43] From its inception, Western racial thought was confused: unable to reach a consensus on the number of races, natural scientists remained trapped within a "Babel of conflicting taxonomies." Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 226. As Robert Miles noted, this confusion suggests the inherent error of the concept. Robert Miles, *Racism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 35. See, also, Anonymous, "Slicing Soup," *Nature Biotechnology* 20 (2002): 637; Michael Yudell, *Race Unmasked: Biology and Race in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

[44] Although, as Stephan Palmié notes, an awareness of mystifying ideology does not lead of itself to the recovery of subjugated knowledge. Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 56.

of African American Folklore. The author of this entry, Bruce Bickley, does not mention any relationship between blue gums and poison. Rather, he notes that, in folk belief, the term "blue gum" refers to a "vigorously strong […] bloodline straight back to Africa." For racist whites, this made it an expression of opprobrium; for African Americans, approbation.[45] The term might also denote, according to Bickley, a "dangerous or even supernaturally endowed African or African American."

Bickley's evidence for blue gum lore as a genuine Black folk tradition, however, is drawn largely from the work of two white authors, Stephen Vincent Benét and Joel Chandler Harris. The only cited work by a Black writer is Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which features an enslaved runaway, named Sixo, with "indigo" skin (not gums).[46] Certainly, finding direct

[45] The use of "blue-gummed" as a racist epithet associated with very dark skin probably predated, and certainly survived, journalistic fascination with poisonous Blue Gums. Suggesting, although not proving, an antebellum usage, one widely-circulated newspaper report noted, "It was Jefferson Davis who once said that there was but one thing worse than a 'blue gum' negro and that was hell." "A 'Blue Gum' Negro," *Goldsboro Daily Argus*, N.C., 6 May, 1897, 1. In the late 1930s, the South Carolina Democrat, Ellison "Cotton Ed" Smith could still be found derogating the Black Baptist minister, Marshall Shephard, as a "black, kinky-headed, blue-gummed, slew-footed Senegambian." Quoted in Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965*, 190. Smith made this comment in 1938. Two years earlier, he had stormed out of the Democratic National Convention after discovering that Roosevelt had invited Shephard to provide the invocation. In 1912, New York's *Independent* claimed that, in the cities, the "real, Simon-pure, blue-gum, thick-lip, coal-black negro is passing away […] the fathers of the new generation of negroes are white men, while their mothers are unmarried, colored women." "More Slavery at the South: By a Negro Nurse," *Independent* 72 (Jan. 25, 1912), 198.

[46] Bickley cites Benét's 1927 poem, "American Names," in which Benét declares his intention to "get me […] a blue-gum nigger to sing me the blues." He also cites Harris's 1884 short story, "Blue Dave," whose title character is named for his dark skin, rather than gums. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr., "Blue Gums," in *The Greenwood*

evidence of nineteenth-century Blue Gum lore is difficult. It is mentioned in neither the autobiographies written by fugitive slave abolitionists nor the work of Black folklorists at the Hampton Folklore Society. Meanwhile, Black newspapers, keenly aware of the political implications of credulity, and wedded to an ethos of respectability, sedulously avoided discussion of Black folk beliefs. Not wishing to fan the flames of white condescension, the editors of these papers preferred, instead, to celebrate "liberation from superstition."[47]

The earliest scholarly treatments of blue gum lore appear in two *Journal of American Folk-Lore* articles, published in 1901 and 1914, and written by Roland Steiner and Henry David, respectively.[48] As white southerners, no doubt aware of the references to Blue Gums that had been circulating the press since the late 1880s, these authors presented a heavily mediated version of Black culture. Both referred only fleetingly to Blue Gums, including them as items in lists of folk beliefs, which appear to have been collected second-hand from informants. Henry David alone related blue gums to poison, claiming that African Americans believed the "bite of a blue-gummed negro is absolutely fatal." However, the fact that David's informants included the Social Darwinist physician and scientist, Joseph LeConte, might raise questions regarding the reliability of his work. Meanwhile, whilst sometimes cited as evidence for the existence of Blue Gum lore, Newbell Niles Puckett's discussion of Blue Gums in 1926's

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Encyclopedia of African American Folklore, Vol. 1, ed. Anand Prahlad (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 143.

[47] "White Degeneracy," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 26, 1912, 4. For the politics of respectability within Black thought, see Erica L. Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), and Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

[48] See Roland Steiner, "Observations on the Practice of Conjuring in Georgia,' *Journal of American Folklore* 14 (July–Sept., 1901): 177, and Henry C. David, "Negro Folk-Lore in South Carolina," *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 27 (July–Sept., 1914): 248.

Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro is not unproblematic, considering that it is based entirely upon the articles written by Steiner and David.[49]

Richer and more interesting is the evidence furnished by the Federal Writers' Project. According to "Folklore: The Living Past," a chapter in the Tennessee state guide produced by FWP workers, "[t]housands of Tennesseans still judge character by physical traits catalogued by generations of observations," accounting for the belief that a "blue-gummed Negro is a killer and his bite is as poisonous as a copperhead's."[50] Of more than 2,000 formerly-enslaved people interviewed between 1936 and 1938, four alluded to poisonous Blue Gums. Three of the these – Cora Torian, Annie Boyd, and Mary Wright – resided in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, just north of the Tennessee border. Whilst this may indicate a local concentration of Blue Gum lore, it more probably suggests that the Kentuckians were asked by their interviewer to respond to items on a prepared list of folk beliefs. Tellingly, both Wright and Boyd commented on horseshoes and the number thirteen before alighting upon Blue Gums. Meanwhile, in Beaumont, Texas, Mary Kindred discussed Blue Gums alongside other items of folk culture. At three sentences, Kindred's treatment was longest. The interviewee claimed to have seen

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[49] Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 204. For examples of scholarship reliant on Puckett, see Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 276, and Werner Sollers, "Thematics Today," in *Thematics: Interdisciplinary Studies*, eds. Max Louwerse and Willie van Peer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002), 217–236. For the ways in which palimpsestic representations of African American culture contribute to a gradual accretion of distorted renderings, see Stephan Palmié, "Conventionalization, Distortion, and Plagiarism in the Historiography of Afro-Caribbean Religion in New Orleans," in *Creoles and Cajuns: French Louisiana – La Louisiana Française*, eds. Wolfgang Binder (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1998), 315–344.

[50] *Federal Writers' Project: Tennessee: A Guide to the State* (New York: American Book-Stratford Press, 1939), 135.

"lots" of Blue Gums, "and they say iffen dey bite you dey pizes you." Their hands, Kindred asserted, were "diff'rent from" those of most African Americans. Whereas her own were "right smart white in the inside," the Blue Gum's palms were "browner."[51]

Kindred's mention of "browner" palms echoed another reference to blue gums in the FWP narratives, which appeared in a folk song performed by Lizzie Davis of Marion, South Carolina: "The blackest nigger I ever did see, / He come a runnin down from Tennessee, / His eye was red en his gum was blue, / En God a mighty struck him, / En his shirt tail flew."[52] Here, blue gums are figured as a corollary of an abundance of melanin, itself seeming to signify the ungovernable resistance of the Trickster folk hero.[53] Certainly, the FWP interviews reveal Black culture through a glass, darkly. As Catherine Stewart argues, they were sites of "conflict and complexity," in which competing parties sought to inscribe their own versions of Black identity.[54] The predominantly white interviewers brought their racial preconceptions with them, rendering Black speech in belittling dialect, whilst ignoring irony, metaphor, and

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[51] *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Vol. 16 Texas, Part 2, 237. For Mary Wright, see *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Vol. 7 Kentucky, 64. For Cora Torian, see *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Vol. 7 Kentucky, 106. For Annie Boyd, see *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Vol. 7 Kentucky, 59.

[52] *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project*, Vol. 14 South Carolina, Part 1, 286.

[53] In the 1920s, Langston Hughes employed blue gums as shorthand for what he saw as the earthy authenticity of rural Black southerners: "I can't have no woman's / Got such low down ways, / Cause a blue-gummed woman / Ain't de style now days." Langston Hughes, "Evil Woman," in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: The Poems, 1921-1040*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 99. This trope continued to circulate in Los Angeles South Central in the late 1970s, where "blue gum" was "used both playfully and pointedly to characterize extreme blackness." Edith A. Folb, *Runnin' Down Some Lines: The Language and Culture of Black Teenagers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 30.

[54] Catherine Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 2.

political significance. Whilst it remains impossible to ascertain, with certainty, the significance of Blue Gum lore to informants like Kindred (whose "they say" may suggest a certain ironic distance), it seems to have coursed with an oppositional energy perhaps more unsettling for interviewer than interviewee.

Like the Conjurer, the Blue Gum may well have been a locus of an uncompromising Black agency that was anathema to Jim Crow America. Indeed, the two figures appear to have been related. It is possible that, as Albert Raboteau argued (and as Bruce Bickley suggests in his *Greenwood Encyclopedia* entry) a bluish tint to the gums was sometimes considered a token of magical ability.[55] Accordingly, it is perhaps telling that Roland Steiner coupled blue gums and Conjure. "If conjured by a blue-gummed negro," he wrote, "death is certain."[56] Furthermore, whilst its authenticity is far from certain, a Black folksong published by the *New York Sun* in 1897 may point in the same direction. This song concerned a blue-gummed protagonist who "kin make yo' sick wid a blink ob 'is eye."[57]

Certainly, as a "potent form of spiritual protection," the color blue had long held a special place in diasporic spirituality, a significance rooted in the color symbolism of West and Central African belief systems.[58] In the Lowcountry, enslaved people painted blue on their door and window frames, as defence against malevolent spirits, whilst the blue beads unearthed by

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[55] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 276.

[56] Steiner, "Conjuring in Georgia," 177. It is possible that William Faulkner was aware of a folkloric tradition linking blue gums to magical power; in *The Sound and the Fury*, an enslaved character relates a folktale in which a father is eaten by his twelve "*bluegum chillen"* (who have been born with blue gums because of conjure). William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929; repr., London: Vintage, 1995), 57.

[57] This folksong was appended to the *New York Sun's* 1897 article on Blue Gums, "Blue Gum Negroes," 17.

[58] Linda France Stine, Melanie A. Cabak and Mark D. Groover, "Blue Beads as African-American Cultural Symbols," *Historical Archaeology* 30:3 (1996): 49.

archaeologists on the sites of plantations probably performed a similar function.[59] In 1935, enumerating the paraphernalia of Conjure, the anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston included blue candles as talismans for "success and protection," which were "for causing death also."[60] This process of inversion was precisely what white supremacists hoped for, seeking to appropriate and reverse the oppositional energies of Black culture.

BLUE GUMS, CRIME, AND CREDULITY

From their inception, Blue Gum reports fused crime, superstition, and science in order to transform alleged incidents of violence into narratives of racial contagion. It is telling that references to Blue Gums usually appeared in one of two contexts: in accounts of fights involving biting, or as journalistic color in descriptions of Black criminals. Tales of venomous Blue Gums certainly reflected the sensationalist turn taken, from the late 1880s, by the American press. With declining prices necessitating greater circulation, editors made frantic efforts to grab the attention of readers. Sensational stories of poisonous bites seemed tailor-

[59] Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 619. See, also, Margaret Creel, *"A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 321.

[60] Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 280. I am indebted to Stein, Cabak, and Groover for these examples of color symbolism in Black spiritual culture. For another reference to blue candles in relation to spiritual belief, see A. M. Bacon and E. C. Parsons, "Folk-Lore from Elizabeth City County, Virginia," *The Journal of American Folklore* 35 (July–Sept., 1922): 283.

made to cut through the noise of an intensely competitive market.[61] Sensationalism, however, went hand-in-glove with racial politics. Blue Gums chimed with reports of alleged Black crime that appeared "almost daily" in southern newspapers and were frequently reprinted (often uncritically) by northern and western titles.[62] Epitomizing journalism's soft power over society and culture, Blue Gum narratives reinforced racial criminalization.

During the 1890s, Frederick Hoffman, the German-born statistician and race writer, pioneered this new, behaviouralist approach to race, shifting attention from measurement of the Black body to the quantification of Black crime.[63] As he argued in 1896, Black criminality exceeded "that of any other race."[64] This new paradigm remained rooted, nevertheless, in Social Darwinist notions of racial regression. In consequence of emancipation, argued white supremacists, African Americans were retrogressing towards an atavistic state of savagery, in which the emotional faculty predominated the intellectual and moral. In this context, it is telling that the original, 1887, account of Blue Gum attacks concluded that in "both cases of biting the negroes were very deeply enraged."[65]

As Kathy Forde and Sid Bedingfield have noted, the argument that newspapers, on either side of the Mason-Dixon line, were complicit in the late-nineteenth-century project of white supremacy is a "surprisingly new" one.[66] Whilst attention has been drawn to the role of the print media in sustaining "Jim Crow North" in response to the Great Migration beginning

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[61] For the emergence of sensationalist journalism, see esp. Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), and John Stevens, *Sensationalism in the New York Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

[62] Brundage, "Press and Lynching," 83.

[63] Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*, 51.

[64] Frederick Hoffman, *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro* (New York: Macmillan, 1896), 228.

[65] "Human Rattlesnake," 3.

[66] Bedingfield and Forde, "Journalism and the World It Built," 1.

in the 1910s, northern reporting on Blue Gums certainly suggests that the racial attitudes of many northern papers were hardening by the 1890s.[67] When Officer John King eventually died in 1891, no less a title than the *New York Times* reported that he had succumbed to "the effects of poisoning received from the bite of what is generally known as a 'blue-gum' negro."[68]

Four Blue Gum narratives proved particularly salient, and were picked up by newspapers across the nation. The first, published in January 1891 and originating in Orangeburg County, South Carolina, concerned a fight between Tom Simmons and Nimple Brown. During this altercation, Simmons (a "negro with a 'blue gum'") bit Brown (a "prosperous colored farmer"), who died as a result of gangrenous infection.[69] The second narrative, which circulated in 1892, made explicit the connection between Blue Gums and the dangerous "new negro." The piece concerned an Arkansas "desperado" who had bitten another man's hand during a scuffle, and whose "thieving and fighting tendencies" had seen him "shunned by all right-minded people of his race."[70] The third story, appearing in 1895, recounted another altercation between two African Americans, Jim Pope and William Fuller. The final report focused on Elijah Morton, hanged in Georgia in 1897 for the murder of his wife, son, father-in-law, and mother-in-law.[71]

As with the more frequently invoked "beast rapist," the racial criminalization fostered by Blue Gum narratives (especially when they involved white victims like Officers York and

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[67] See Brian Purnell and Jeanne Theoharis, "Histories of Racism and Resistance, Seen and Unseen: How and Why to Think about the Jim Crow North," in *The Strange Careers of the Jim Crow North: Segregation and Struggle Outside of the South*, eds. Brian Purnell and Jeanne Theoharis (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 1–42.

[68] "The Deadly 'Blue Gum,'" *New York Times*, Sept. 26, 1891, 2.

[69] "Bitten by a 'Blue Gum Nigger,'" *Keowee Courier*, Jan. 29, 1891, 4.

[70] Reprinted as "Bitten by a 'Blue Gum,'" *Buffalo Commercial*, Apr. 27, 1892, 5

[71] "The Fate of a Colored Criminal," *New York Times*, May 5, 1897, 3.

King) legitimized and fuelled the extra-legal violence upon which white supremacy depended.[72] Ultimately, the Arkansas "desperado" reported in 1892 was "taken from jail and hanged to a tree."[73] Indeed, it is telling that these narratives began to circulate in the national press at the zenith of racial lynching in the South.[74] Like spectacle lynching, Blue Gum narratives were methods of racial formation, creating an image of dehumanized Blackness around which notions of white selfhood and solidarity might cohere.[75]

Alongside racialized notions of criminality, Blue Gum narratives offered journalists a chance to reinforce white-supremacist ideas about Black superstition. Repeating a claim made in the original Blue Gum report of 1887, the author of the 1891 South Carolinian dispatch on Simmons and Brown insisted that Black southerners were convinced of the reality of Blue Gums. The "negroes here are wild over the death of Brown," asserted the author, "and with the accustomed superstition peculiar to the race, imagine all manner of strange things. A negro with a 'blue gum' is a terror to them."[76] The same claim was made in the widely-circulated 1897 report of Elijah Morton's lynching. Morton, the author maintained, was "held in universal awe and dread by the balance of his race."[77]

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[72] For the figure of the "beast rapist," see esp. Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, and Diane Miller Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[73] "Bitten by a 'Blue Gum,'" 5.

[74] Over ninety African Americans were lynched in 1892. Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 29.

[75] For the relationship between violence and racial identity, see esp. Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), and Carol Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[76] "Bitten by a 'Blue Gum Nigger,'" *Keowee Courier*, Jan. 29, 1891, 4.

[77] "The Fate of a Colored Criminal," 3.

Like crime, superstition was presented as evidence of an innate racial irrationality, threatening the health of the American body politic and making Black citizenship a folly. In "no other race," insisted the white-supremacist historian Philip Bruce, was this "trait more fully developed."[78] As Paul Brandon Barringer, declared, "To him there is often more virtue in the left hind foot of a rabbit killed in a grave yard after sunset, than there is in all the ballots you can put in his hand."[79] Whilst such logic had long informed conservative arguments in both the English-speaking and Francophone worlds, it was articulated with a new urgency and frequency in the wake of emancipation and Black citizenship.[80] Northern periodicals and publishers stimulated a "sort of craze" for southern, local color literature that both calumniated and drew narrative power from "the weird, uncanny forms which superstition takes in the mind of the negro."[81] Meanwhile, anthropologists and folklorists presented folk belief as the key to understanding the racial character of African Americans who, as the founder of the American Folk-Lore Society put it, "for good or ill, are henceforth an indissoluble part of the body politic

[78] Philip Bruce, *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman: Observations on His Character, Condition, and Prospects in Virginia* (New York: Putnam's, 1889), 111.

[79] Paul Barringer, *The American Negro: His Past and His Future* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1900), 28.

[80] See Diana Paton and Maarit Forde, "Introduction," in *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing*, eds. Diana Paton and Maarit Forde (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 13. See, also, Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012).

[81] Walter Hines Page, "Literature in the South," *Critic* 10 (June 1887): 323. "Haiti: Travels in the Land Where Black Rules White," *New York Times*, March 9, 1901, 2. For a critique of this craze, see Albion Tourgée, "The South as a Field for Fiction," *Forum* 6 (Dec. 1888): 404–413.

of the United States."[82] As criminality and credulity were collocated, white portraits of Black "superstition" were painted in increasingly-sinister hues. To the Virginian author, Thomas Nelson Page, Black regression was "borne out by the increase of crime among them; by the increase of superstition, with its black trail of immorality and vice; by the homicides and murders, and by the outbreak of the brutal crime which has […] spread northward with the spread of the negro ravisher."[83]

Twinned images of criminality and superstition saturated the "Coon Song," an especially mephitic brand of minstrelsy that found greatest favor during the 1890s. The protagonist of these songs was, ordinarily, a Black, hypersexual, razor-toting criminal, another close cousin of the "beast rapist." Inevitably, blue gums made an appearance in this genre, deployed as a sign of embodied, racial difference. Published in 1897, Irving Jones's "Take Your Clothes and Go" hinged upon an argument between a light-skinned woman of mixed heritage and her dark-skinned husband, a "red-eye, blue-gum, flat-foot moke."[84] The following year, A. B. Sloane published "De Blue Gum Nigger."[85] Born in Baltimore, Sloane was a

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[82] William Wells Newell, "On the Field and Work of American Folk-Lore," *Journal of American Folklore* 1 (Apr.–June 1888): 5. For the relationship between folklore studies and racial politics, see esp. Lee Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Simon Bronner, *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1998), 73-140; Daphne Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture, and Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2008). Popular enthusiasm for folklore may explain why an "old plantation ballad" was appended to the *Sun's* 1897 article on Blue Gums. "Blue Gum Negroes," 17.

[83] Page, *The Negro*, 84.

[84] Irving Jones, "Take Your Clothes and Go" (New York: Jos W. Stern, 1897), 5.

[85] For a transcription of this song, see James H. Dorman, "Shaping the Popular Image of Post-Reconstruction American Blacks, The 'Coon Song' Phenomenon of the Gilded Age," *American Quarterly* 40 (Dec. 1988): 461.

successful Broadway composer who moved to New York in 1890, following the route of those Blue Gum narratives he probably encountered in Gotham's press. In his imagining, blue gums do not contain venom, but signify an uncontrollable lawlessness. Clearly, whilst the indomitable hero of the verse sung by Lizzie Davis during her FWP interview embodied resistance, Sloane's intractable villain justified domination.

BLUE GUMS AND RACIAL CONTAGION

Whilst they certainly complemented imbricated racist notions of Black criminality and superstition, Blue Gum narratives were distinguished by the way in which they dramatized and amplified fears of racial contagion. To anxious whites, racial contagion could take the form of cultural or bodily contamination. And invariably, in a cultural milieu dominated by Social Darwinism, evidence of the former raised fears of the latter. Transracial crossings like Blue Gum lore undermined the logic, encoded in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, that segregation was simply the formalisation of "custom."[86] However, by the time Blue Gum narratives began to circulate, the existence of cultural forms shared by Black and white southerners had been widely recognized. The author of an 1884 article on "Negro Superstition" echoed the views of many, averring that "negroes were not alone" in superstitious beliefs: "for the 'poor whites' of the South eagerly believed in signs, forebodings, and dreams, and do to this day, in common with a large majority of the colored people."[87] A few years earlier, William Wells Brown observed

[86] For more on the relationship between representations of Black folklore and *Plessy*, see Shirley Moody-Turner, *Black Folklore and the Politics of Racial Representation* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013). As Stephan Palmié has argued, whites in the Atlantic world sought desperately to dissolve such "concrete historical interrelations" into the "categorical grid" of race. Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, 63.

[87] "Negro Superstition," *Republic*, May 21, 1884, 2.

that "in the Southern States, superstition held an exalted place with all classes, but more especially with the blacks and uneducated, or poor, whites."[88] As Henry David argued in 1914, in the South, where "the races have been in intimate sociological contact," there was "no sharp dividing-line between his [the African American's] lore and that of the whites."[89] It is fitting, then, that David was one of the first folklorists to mention Blue Gums.

Despite journalistic allusions to Blue Gum lore as a "superstition peculiar to the race," several newspaper articles suggested that it was far from unique to African Americans.[90] In 1897, the *New York Sun* claimed that, in the South, belief in Blue Gums could be found in "white persons of intelligence." Appearing to capitalize upon the contemporary vogue for folklore in order to Other the entire South, the *Sun* speculated that belief in Blue Gums: "may have been suggested to the whites by their early experiences with the negroes, may have been developed on the old plantations by the vagaries of the African mind or, what is more probable, imported from the jungles of the Kongo homeland."[91] Some southern papers also recognized the interracial character of Blue Gum lore. As the original, Alabamian, account noted in 1887, the "negroes and some whites" believed in Blue Gums.[92]

Wherever they appeared, suggestions of interracial contact betrayed anxieties about racial purity. Such disquiet explains why Blue Gum narratives gained purchase in northern cities like New York, in which the "growing specter" of northward Black migration began to

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[88] William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home: The South and Its People* (Boston: A. G. Brown, 1880), 68.

[89] "Negro Folk-Lore in South Carolina," 241.

[90] "'Blue Gum Nigger,'" 4.

[91] "Blue Gum Negroes," 11.

[92] "A Human Rattlesnake," 3.

stoke fears of racial contamination during the 1890s.[93] At the turn of the century, the northern press filled with pseudo-ethnographic accounts of urban Black enclaves.[94] In this brand of domestic travel narrative, fears of cultural and social impurity were entwined. As the author of a report on New York's Bowery remarked, "Nowhere in this broad land is the color line so loosely drawn."[95] Such racial discourse also resonated with western fears of the "unassimilable and polluting" Chinese "heathen."[96] As Claire Jean Kim has argued, during the Gilded age, the "Yellow Peril" and the "Negro Problem" met in a "mutually constitutive" process of racialization.[97] Thus, the *Los Angeles Times* could be confident during the 1890s that its readers would be interested in "Voodooism in the North," despite the relatively small Black population at that time resident in the City of Angels.[98]

At the turn of the century, seeking to racialize credulity as the Black counterpoint to the rational white Self, middle-class whites complained, relentlessly, about the persistence of superstition amongst other whites, especially when, as with Blue Gum lore, it exposed the fiction of cultural apartheid. Just such a reference to Blue Gums appeared in a *Chicago Daily Tribune* report on Joseph Lynch's Sanctified Church. A white Virginian, Lynch was part of the southern Holiness movement, seeking sanctification in this life in the face of perceived Methodist backsliding. The members of Lynch's church led a peripatetic existence, hounded

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[93] Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*, 53; Dorr, *Segregation's Science*, 11. See, also, *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective*, ed. Joe William Trotter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

[94] See Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*, 53.

[95] Allan Forman, "New York Niggertown," *Washington Post*, Aug.15, 1886, 6. See also "Folklore of the Negro: Denizens of Darker Washington and Some of Their Superstitions," *Washington Post*, Nov. 9, 1903, 4.

[96] Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian American in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 31.

[97] Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics and Society* 27 (March 1999): 106.

[98] "Voodooism in the North," *Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 1898, 6.

and murdered by local whites outraged by its egalitarian gender roles and "free love" doctrines.[99] The *Tribune* shook its head at Lynch's "lamentably ignorant" followers, "who believe first in the Bible, but who believe equally as firmly in 'hants' and the power of the wild-eyed Southern voodoo and the venom of the 'blue-gummed nigger.'"[100] The interracial character of the Holiness movement stoked the intense enmity that many whites felt towards it. In 1906, casting a disapproving eye over the Holiness churches springing up in its city, the *Los Angeles Times* complained that their congregations "rant and dance and roll in a disgusting amalgamation of voodoo superstition and Caucasian insanity."[101] The repeated propinquity of references to "voodoo" and Blue Gums was telling. In both cases, whites grossly misrepresented Black culture in order to fashion white-supremacist imaginaries.[102]

Tales of "voodoo," however, spoke less directly than Blue Gum narratives to fears of the contagious Black body. Compounded by contemporaneous developments in bacteriology, these anxieties were principally responsible for the wave of interest in Blue Gums. Accounts of poisonous African Americans appeared on the heels of the new germ theory, which supplanted notions of miasma as etiology, and generated a growing uneasiness about

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[99] See Edward L. Ayers, *Southern Crossing: A History of the American South, 1877–1906* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 192–200.

[100] "Arks Are Their Homes," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sept. 6, 1896, 38.

[101] "At the Churches Yesterday," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 24, 1906, 17. The intense enmity felt by many towards the Holiness church was stoked by its interracial character. See "Greed of a New Noah," *Washington Post*, Aug. 30, 1896, 14.

[102] See Michelle Gordon, Michelle Gordon, "'Midnight Scenes and Orgies': Public Narratives of Voodoo in New Orleans and Nineteenth-Century Discourses of White Supremacy," *American Quarterly* 64 (Dec. 2012): 767–786.

"promiscuous minglings with other people's bodies."[103] Capitalising on this disquiet, white supremacists turned to medical metaphors, invoking the "specter of infection" to legitimize Jim Crow.[104] Advocates of deportation insisted that "the negro is a foreign body and we cannot assimilate him," whilst supporters of segregation warned that colonisation was chimerical, "for the parasite, however much he may hate, never leaves his host."[105] Meanwhile, southern Democrats, like Wade Hampton, complained that in "their senseless advocacy of universal suffrage," the Republicans had "injected into our body politic millions of ignorant, uneducated blacks."[106]

As examples of what Gregory Dorr has identified as "eugenic metaphor," such proclamations existed within an established rhetorical idiom, in which the state was figured as a body and social problems as illness. In the Gilded Age, however, this rhetoric assumed an increasingly literal cast as people of color were figured as bearers of "bad blood": dysgenic threats to white racial purity.[107] Of course, it would be difficult to find this threat more literally expressed than it was in Blue Gum narratives. Indeed, recently, scholars have noted the ways in which the white medical profession presented microbes as racialized, gothic monsters. In medical rhetoric, as Melanie Armstrong argues, the "microbe monster" grew "teeth and fangs,"

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[103] Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.

[104] Tomes, *Gospel of Germs*, 11. To Charles McCoy, the "belief that some ethnic minorities […] were filthier and more disease ridden than the Anglo-European population" was a "key part" of "American racial formation project." Charles McCoy, *Diseased States*, 108.

[105] Louis Pendleton, *Sons of Ham: A Tale of the New South* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1895), 43; Paul Barringer, *The American Negro: His Past and His Future* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1900), 21.

[106] Wade Hampton, "The Race Problem," *Arena* (July 1890): 137. See, also, Wade Hampton, "What Negro Supremacy Means," *Forum* 5 (June 1888): 383.

[107] Dorr, *Segregation's Science*, 12, 13.

threatening "human lives."[108] As a racialized, gothic, monster acting as a vector for microbes, the Blue Gum reinforced – whilst strangely inverting – such discourse.

The assumption that Black superstition was pathological was another reason the Blue Gum worked as a congeries for racialized and medicalized fears. Alongside Blue Gum narratives, the press teemed with accounts of African Americans eschewing medicine in favour of magical cures.[109] Such stories evinced a hostility towards autonomous sources of Black authority, complementing efforts by exponents of scientific medicine to tighten the profession's fairly shaky grip on medical authority.[110] As germ theory legitimized state intervention in the lives of marginalized groups, and public health gained traction during the 1880s, medical professionals turned upon competing traditions of healing.[111] Of course, Black distrust of white medicine had less to do with credulity than the fact that it was complicit in racial ideology. For the best part of a century, physicians had objectified and brutalized the Black body.[112]

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[108] Armstrong, "Microbe Culture," 53, 52.

[109] See "Voudouism" "A Colored Woman Made Crazy by the Conjurer – A Tale that Reads Like a Chapter from the Fetich Annals," *Atlanta Constitution*, Aug. 19, 1875, 3. Sara Handy, "Negro Superstitions," *Lippincott's Magazine* 48 (Dec. 1891): 736.

[110] Because of their region's endemic poverty and disease, southern physicians had an especially weak grip on authority, see Gregory Michael Dorr, "Defective or Disabled? Race, Medicine, and Eugenics in Progressive Era Virginia and Alabama," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5 (Oct. 2006): 363.

[111] "Care," as Samuel Roberts argues, "was inseparable from surveillance." Samuel Kelton Roberts, Jr., *Infectious Fear: Politics, Disease, and the Health Effects of Segregation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 16.

[112] For the relationship between racism and antebellum medicine, see Gretchen Long, *Doctoring Freedom: The Politics of African American Medical Care in Slavery and Emancipation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

Attacks on folk medicine, then, were another attempt to define rational whiteness against credulous Blackness. In 1896, the *Atlanta Medical and Surgical Journal* published a letter written by L. H. Ogbourn, who appeared keen to do just this. Ogbourn's letter concerned surgery on a Black patient. Having been bitten in a fight, the patient's hand had become gangrenous, necessitating amputation. Concluding his letter, the physician noted that the "patient said his antagonist had blue gums, and that was the reason why it made a poisoned wound." According to Ogbourn, his patient had told him that the bite of a Blue Gum was "badder den a mad dog's; dey will sho pisen you every time.'"[113] As with press discourse on Blue Gums, however, Ogbourn's motivation for including this anecdote remains ambiguous. Whilst the patient's claim may have been repeated as evidence of Black credulity, it also gestured towards notions of racial contamination and embodied racial difference that dominated American medical science at the turn of the century.

Ogbourn's mention of a "mad dog's" bite evoked the main source of popular awareness of germ theory: fear of rabies. In 1885, public fascination with rabies was catalysed by Louis Pasteur's successful inoculation of six New Jersey children bitten by a rabid dog. This scientific triumph became a media sensation.[114] Relatively rare in humans, rabies held the public imagination in its grip due both to its extraordinary symptoms ("hydrophobia") and fatal results.[115] As *Nature* asserted (in a telling echo of discourse on Blue Gums), "So strange are its

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[113] L. H. Ogbourn, "Gangrene Resulting from the Bite of 'Blue-Gum' Negro," *Atlanta Medical and Surgical Journal* 13 (March 1896): 105.

[114] See Bert Hansen, "America's First Medical Breakthrough: How Popular Excitement about a French Rabies Cure in 1885 Raised New Expectations for Medical Progress," *American Historical Review* 103 (Apr. 1998): 373–418.

[115] Frank Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 219.

symptoms and its course, that it has been asserted to be no real malady but a mere result of fright and superstition. But of its reality there is unhappily no room for serious question."[116] According to Frank Snowden, rabies shocked because it inverted the natural order, resulting in loss of reason and "subhuman" strength.[117] Of course, such symptoms had racial resonances: to white supremacists, animal strength and irrationality were characteristics identified with African Americans. An inversion of the natural order was therefore a reversal of the racial.[118] Appearing on the heels of popular interest in rabies, Blue Gum narratives seemed to fasten the disease to eugenic notions of "bad blood." As the *New York Sun* noted in 1897, these tales brimmed with allusions to "hydrophobia, blood poisoning and numerous other terrible ills."[119]

Horace Smith Fulkerson, a Mississippi newspaper editor and advocate of deportation, capitalized on public interest in rabies in *The Negro; As He Was; As He Is; As He Will Be*. Fulkerson's philippic appeared in 1887, two years after Pasteur's celebrated inoculations and the year that Blue Gum narratives began to circulate the southern press. The Mississippian was swift to grasp the segregationist potential of such stories. "The divinity stirring within these howlers," he wrote, in an attack on advocates of racial mixing, "arouses the suspicion that they had been bitten by a 'blue-gum' darkey and were in the convulsive stage of a genuine case of negrophobia. If this malady be as incurable and as communicable as its prototype, hydrophobia," Fulkerson continued, "all we can do for its victims is to strap them down –

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[116] *Nature*, Nov. 5, 1885, 1.

[117] Snowden, *Epidemics and Society*, 385.

[118] References to hydrophobia appeared in the earliest blue gum tales. In 1890, for instance, several papers reprinted a story from the Birmingham *Examiner*, in which, having been bitten by Henry Davis, one of his farm hands and a supposed "blue gum negro," Aaron Hill was reported to have suffered "for several days symptoms of hydrophobia" before dying. "A Blue Gum Negro," 1.

[119] "Blue Gum Negroes," 17.

impale them, upon the gibbet of public opinion – so that they will not be able to communicate the disease to others, and then let them die."[120] Here, in figurative language pointing unmistakably towards real-world violence, Fulkerson suggested that miscegenation, like rabies, inverted the natural order. Such attempts to pathologize racial egalitarianism were nothing new. Whilst punning on hydrophobia, Fulkerson's neologism, "negrophobia," recalled the title of John Campbell's *Negro-mania*.[121] Published in 1851, *Negro-mania* compiled writings by race theorists and polygenists in order to furnish scientific foundations for racial slavery.

In turn-of-the-century America, scientific notions of embodied racial difference (shorn of the theory of separate origins) continued to bulwark white supremacy. As Ida B. Wells put it, "Having destroyed the citizenship of the man, they are now attempting to destroy the manhood of the citizen."[122] Indeed, the desire to place Jim Crow upon a scientific footing explains the most striking element of Fulkerson's discussion, his straight-faced claim that "the gums of some of the Negro race secrete a poison which makes a bite from one of these almost as dangerous as the bite of a rabid dog." According to Fulkerson, a Vicksburg physician had verified this phenomenon to him, personally, whilst another – Dr Beall of Mississippi – had told him that African Americans were immune to hydrophobia. Again, such claims reproduced proslavery discourse. As Khary Oronde Polk argues, the notion of Black immunity to malaria underwrote Black enslavement, marking "immunity as a physical quality belonging to a lower

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[120] Horace Smith Fulkerson, *The Negro; As He Was; As He Is; As He Will Be* (Vicksburg: Commercial Herald, 1887), 85.

[121] See John Campbell, *Negro-Mania: An Examination of the Falsely Assumed Equality of the Various Races of Men* (Philadelphia: Campbell and Power, 1851).

[122] Ida B. Wells, "Lynch Law in All Its Phases," in *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric(s)*, eds. Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 201.

order of being." Stories of Blue Gums certainly support Polk's contention that germ theory sharpened this "discourse of black invulnerability."[123] Thus, Fulkerson engaged in a calculated credulity, in order to claim that Blue Gums proved that "all mankind are not of one quality of blood."[124]

The part played by Blue Gum narratives in disseminating scientific racism explains why Fulkerson's professed belief in the existence of Blue Gums was less singular than might be supposed. In 1889, Alabama's *Clarke County Democrat* made a similar claim in a report on an alleged biting incident, declaring that the "bite of the blue gummed negro is said to be poisonous, and the following fact would seem to confirm somewhat the truth of the belief."[125] Two years later, the *San Antonio Express* carried a report on Gideon Crane, a Black citizen of Lufkin, Texas, who claimed not only that he was "a living descendent of a crowned monarch of Stanley's dark continent" but also that his bite was "more deadly than the adder of the East or the rattlesnake of the West." According to the *Express*, although Crane was generally "quiet and inoffensive," when "thoroughly aroused" the "venom of his passion is seen in the putrid green of his eye, and woe betide the victim upon whom he concentrates his anger or fastens his fangs." The report concluded with the observation that, "now the humble keeper of a hostelry in our town," when Crane told his customers "'You must take coffee without sugar,' they simply take coffee without sugar."[126] Whilst striving for a humorous tone, and pointing, intriguingly, to the possibility that African Americans might capitalize upon (or reappropriate) Blue Gum tales, the *Express* report epitomized the way in which such narratives dramatized racist notions of Black bodily difference and racial regression.

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[123] Polk, *Contagions of Empire*, 22, 61.

[124] Fulkerson, *The Negro*, 73.

[125] "Venomous Blue Gummed Negroes," *Dade County Weekly Times*, Dec. 14, 1889, 1.

[126] Reprinted as "The Only Blue Gum Negro in Texas," *Daily Times*, Sept. 16, 1891, 3.

Whilst Blue Gum narratives illustrated the ways in which germ theory was attached to white supremacy, they also gestured towards older ideas of embodied racial difference, rooted in anthropometric objectification of the Black body.[127] Consequently, such narratives further complemented the claims of degenerationists like Philip Bruce, to whom African Americans were "fast reverting to the original physical type, and therefore to the original moral."[128] Because they hinged upon the act of biting, drawing attention to teeth and jaws, stories of blue-gummed assailants could not but evoke notions of prognathism as a sign of Black apishness. As Claire Jean Kim argues, racialized groups have never been seen as fully human, occupying, instead, a borderland between animals and humanity. By the nineteenth century, most ethnologists placed Blacks on the lowest rung of humanity, just above the great apes.[129] Darwin gave new life to these ideas, musing in *The Descent of Man* that the "break" between "the Caucasian" and the ape was much wider than that between "the negro or Australian and the gorilla."[130]

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[127] For the relationship between anthropometrics and scientific racism, see Schwalm, *Medicine, Science, and Making Race*.

[128] Bruce, *Plantation Negro*, 129. As the *New York World* put it, "Forty years from now the negroes of the bayou country will be eating each other just as they are today in Africa." Quoted in *Atlanta Constitution*, May 5, 1889, 14.

[129] Kim, *Dangerous Crossings*, 24-25.

[130] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (New York: D. Appleton, 1871), 203. See, Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 31. References to sharp teeth in Blue Gum narratives also echoed the racist notion that Black Africans had been evolutionarily equipped for cannibalism. This notion was articulated in the late eighteenth century by Christoph Meiners, an early advocate of polygenism. See Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 67. Notably, the Sage of Down argued that Caucasian molars were underdeveloped due to a diet of "soft, cooked food," whilst the wisdom-teeth of the "Melanian races" were "usually furnished with three separate fangs." Darwin, *Descent*, 26.

Blue Gum narratives certainly support George Fredrickson's assertion that, to justify lynching, images of Black apishness assumed "new and spectacular forms" at the turn of the century.[131] Some even refused to grant African Americans a place in the animal-human borderland. To Charles Carroll, author of *The Negro a Beast*, all "scientific investigation" proved "the Negro to be an Ape; and that he simply stands at the head of the ape family."[132] Carroll, however, was an outlier. Most scientific racists viewed Blacks as a variety of *homo sapiens*, albeit the most inferior one, closest to apes. As David Starr Jordan told his Stanford students in 1894, intellectual faculty increased "with increasing civilization," being "possessed in slight degree by apes; in not much greater degree by primitive man." Such notions of human gradation, Jordan continued, led to a fascination with the missing link between human and ape. Jordan's lecture notes on the "Search for missing links" said it all: "Earliest human remains; some ape-like, but not more so than Australians and some negroes. Blue-gum negroes, blue-gum apes."[133] Thus, as Blue Gum narratives circulated the press, the idea that blue gums signified Black bestiality enjoyed the highest level of scientific respectability.

Of course, seeking to disavow superstition, some journalists were less willing to endorse notions of poisonous Blue Gums. A few, like the author of the 1897 *New York Sun* piece, dismissed such tales out of hand. There was "no scientific reason why the bite of a negro whose gums happen to be covered with a blue cuticle should be any more poisonous than the bite of a white man whose gums nature has provided with a covering of red." Infection was simply a "result of such conditions as are sometimes known to produce various degrees of blood poisoning from slight wounds or scratches."[134] The *Sun's* diagnosis of "blood

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[131] Fredrickson, *Black Image*, 277.

[132] Charles Carroll, *The Negro a Beast* (St Louis: American Book and Bible House, 1900), 87.

[133] Jordan, *Organic Evolution*, 96, 98.

[134] "Blue Gum Negroes," 17.

poisoning," however, did little to dispel assumptions that African Americans were vectors for disease, threatening white purity. Another skeptical report, from the same year, pointed more directly towards the eugenicist language of race poison. Citing unnamed "physicians," the piece concluded that blue gums might be a symptom of "bad blood and that in such cases the bite would be poisonous and probably fatal."[135] Thus incredulity regarding Blue Gums did not signal a departure from scientific racism. As the *Los Angeles Times* argued in 1913, although the bite of an African American with blue gums was "no more poisonous than the bite of a red-gum negro, or the bite of a red-gum white man," the "blue-gum negro is just a little nearer the animal and gets mad quicker."[136]

Most journalists, however, were neither as convinced as Fulkerson nor as sceptical as the *Sun*. Instead, because white writers across the nation presented Blue Gum lore both as proof of credulity and evidence of disease, much of their discourse was janiform. The *New York Herald's* account of the Arkansas "desperado" was a particularly conspicuous example of such aporia. Beginning in a skeptical tone, the *Herald* noted that "there have been doubts about the existence of a 'blue gum negro.' Many people know of other people who have seen the so-called poisonous negro, but few have ever been found who have actually seen such a person." Directly it made this claim, however, the *Herald* switched register, declaring that the "fact that such an individual really exists and that his bite is poisonous has been fully established among the people along the Saline river, south of Warren, Ark." Here, the *Herald* performed a delicate

[135] "A Blue Gum Negro," 1. See, also, *Austin American-Stateman*, Feb. 25, 1897, 4. Thirty years later, such diagnoses were still made. As the *United States Naval Medical Bulletin* put it, "Work in any clinic will soon show the most wretched conditions and foul mouths among the negroes that can be imagined, and leads one readily to believe the old legend about the bite of the blue-gummed negro being always fatal." *United States Naval Medical Bulletin*, 24:1–4, 1927, 268.

[136] "As a Man Thinks Has Many Terse Epigrams," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 8, 1913, 24.

dance, leaving it to their readers to decide whether it was giving credence to the beliefs of these southern citizens.[137]

The South Carolinian account of Nimple Brown's death, which circulated in 1891, performed a similar trick, deriding the "superstition peculiar" to African Americans, having just claimed that the "doctors who conducted the post mortem examination say that Brown's death was caused by the bite, and that the bite of a 'blue gum' negro in nearly every case proves fatal."[138] Again, it was left to the readers to decide whether they (and the journalist) agreed with these doctors. In the same year, the *New York Times*, reporting on Officer John King's death, engaged in the same *legerdemain*, leaving it to readers to decide whether they discerned any satire in its headline ("The Deadly 'Blue Gum'") and conclusion ("King's assailiant [*sic*] was at the time of the assault described in the papers as a 'blue gum' negro"). This paradoxical rhetoric had much in common with the "artful deception" that, as James Cook argues, was a principal mode of nineteenth-century popular culture. White journalists treated tales of poisonous gums as both "counterfeit and currency," as had audiences for racialized exhibits provided by P. T. Barnum. These exhibits included "What Is It?" in which a series of Black performers posed as a creature purported to be the "missing link" between human and ape.[139] Thus, white writers frequently presented Blue Gums as both real and unreal: a state of affairs encapsulated in one oxymoronic description of the Blue Gum as a "well grounded superstition."[140]

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[137] "Bitten by a 'Blue Gum,'" 5.

[138] "Bitten by a 'Blue Gum Nigger,' 4.

[139] James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3, 15.

[140] "A Blue Gum Negro," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, July 23, 1897, 4.

Such aporia was facilitated by the fact that, frequently, as with much racial rhetoric, discourse on Blue Gums was interstitial, existing within, and drawing power from, the space between the literal and figurative. Seeking to dramatize the "horror of Negro domination," white supremacists routinely capitalized upon the semantic ambiguity of references to beasts and demons.[141] Thus, the South swirled with images of the Black vote as an "incubus," or Fusionist politics as a "vampire."[142] Discussing the lynching of Henry Smith in 1893, the Methodist bishop Atticus Haygood urged his readers to consider Smith's alleged victim, "first outraged with demoniacal cruelty and then taken by her heels and torn asunder in the mad wantonness of gorilla ferocity."[143] As Orlando Patterson argued, it should not be assumed that deeply-religious southerners received such rhetoric in an entirely metaphorical manner.[144] And such images were not confined to the South. In the West, white readers of Blue Gum narratives would have been well-aware of images of East Asian immigrants as demonic bearers of

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[141] Page, *Negro*, 1904, 78. As Jason Haslam notes, proslavery authors painted African Americans as the "demonic other who needs to be defeated." Jason Haslam, "Slavery and American Gothic: The Ghost of the Future," in *American Gothic Culture: An Edinburgh Companion*, eds. Joel Faflak and Jason Haslam (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 47. See, also, Maisha Wester, "The Gothic in and as Race Theory," in *The Gothic and Theory: An Edinburgh Companion*, eds. Jerrold Hogle and Robert Miles (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 53–70.

[142] As Mississippi's white-supremacist Senator, James Vardaman, argued, Georgia's black population an "incubus upon her material progress." *Congressional Record*, 63rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Jan. 31 1914), 2653. For the deployment of vampire imagery by North Carolina Democrats, see Rachel Marie-Crane Williams, "A War in Black and White: The Cartoons of Norman Ethrie Jennett and the North Carolina Election of 1898," *Southern Cultures* 19 (Summer 2013): 7–31. Andrea Kirschenbaum, "'The Vampire that Hovers Over North Carolina': Gender, White Supremacy, and the Wilmington Race Riot of 1898," *Southern Cultures* 4 (Fall 1998): 6–30.

[143] Atticus Haygood, "The Black Shadow in the South," *Forum* 16 (Oct. 1893): 168.

[144] Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (New York: Basic Civitas, 1998), 212–216.

contagion, especially those familiar with the pages of San Francisco's deeply anti-Chinese *Wasp*.[145] Several Blue Gum narratives occupied the same liminal space. When the writer of the dispatch on Elijah Morton's execution described him as "one of the worst of the species yet discovered in Georgia" – or when the original Blue Gum account declared that "a species of what may be termed a human rattlesnake is creating considerable interest" – readers were left to interpret "species" as a biological order, a sociocultural category, or, more likely, a hazy amalgam of both.[146]

The popular purchase of Blue Gum narratives is suggested by the swift incorporation of Blue Gums within white-supremacist fiction. In 1897, the Texan writer, Mollie Evelyn Moor Davis, led the way with "A Bamboula," in which a character named "Blue-gum Marc" declares, "ef I git mad at anybody, an' bite de pusson, dat bite gwine ter be wusser 'n rattle snake pisen!"[147] Other authors used blue gums to animalize African Americans, without mentioning poison. In 1898, Thomas Nelson Page combined jaws, teeth, and gums in his description of Dr Moses, the villain of *Red Rock*. "His chin stuck so far forward that the lower teeth were much outside of the upper, or, at least, the lower jaw was," wrote Page, "for the teeth looked as though they had been ground down, and his gums, as he grinned, showed as blue on the edges as if he had painted them."[148] Echoing the previous year's description of Elijah Morton's "light-blue gums, thickly studded with short, sharp teeth," Page's description may well have inspired

[145] Kim, *Dangerous Crossings*, 57–60. See also, Nicholas Sean Hall, "The Wasp's 'Troublesome Children': Culture, Satire, and the Anti-Chinese Movement in America," *California History* 90 (January 2013): 42–63.

[146] "A 'Blue Gum' Negro," 3; "Human Rattlesnake," 3. See, also, "Ear Bitten Off During Fight," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, June 7, 1905, 1.

[147] M. E. M. Davis, *An Elephant's Track and Other Stories* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1897), 192.

[148] Thomas Nelson Page, *Red Rock* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), 292.

Thomas Dixon's portrayal, in *The Clansman*, of the Black Republican, Old Aleck.[149] Evoking the association between blue gums and apishness, which had been given credence by scientists like David Starr Jordan, Dixon's prose pointed, unmistakably, towards the conflation of race and species. Old Aleck's jaws, he wrote, "were strong and angular, mouth wide, and lips thick, curling back from rows of solid teeth set obliquely in their blue gums." Indeed, Aleck was "so striking a negro in his personal appearance" that he appeared "almost a distinct type of man."[150]

BLUE GUMS AND THE SUPERSTITION OF RACE

Discourse on Blue Gums appropriated and refashioned Black diasporic culture as racist calumny. It was not alone in this. Contemporaneous white discussions of the loup-garou were doing the same thing. The loup-garou was a creature from Haitian myth, bent upon the kidnap and exsanguination of children, yet nineteenth-century white writers presented it as genuine evidence of endemic cannibalism. In response to the Haitian author Jacques Leger, who dismissed such stories as superstition, the journalist and travel writer, Stephen Bonsal, denied that the loup-garou was "invented by old black mammies on the plantations to scare bad white children."[151] As Vincent Brown has argued, whites had long sought to control people of African descent by appropriating the power of their spiritual beliefs, mutilating the bodies of enslaved

[149] "The Fate of a Colored Criminal," 3.

[150] Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1905), 248.

[151] Stephen Bonsal, "Haytian Fetiches and Cannibalism," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec. 28, 1909, 1, 4. See Jacques Nicole Leger, *Haiti: Her History and Her Detractors* (New York: Neale, 1907), 355.

rebels in order to exploit African conceptions of the afterlife.[152] In white discourse on Blue Gums, however, the power of Black culture was redirected towards the project of racial formation. In order to create race, white writers drew from the well of Black culture. In this way, discourse on Blue Gums epitomized what Stephan Palmié describes as the "densely woven mesh" of the Atlantic world. In this discursive web, dominant and subjugated forms of knowledge existed in symbiosis, rather than binary opposition.[153]

Further complicating the racialized opposition of white, rational, modernity and Black, superstitious, tradition was the fundamentally magical character of racial thought. Glimpsed from afar but dissolving on approach, race was an intellectual mirage. Consequently, in order to defend chimerical notions of racial difference, white supremacists divorced race from phenotype. Like magic, race depended upon "invisible ontologies": the assumption of a hidden reality affecting the visible.[154] As Horace Smith Fulkerson claimed, observable, biological reality was not a reliable guide to racial difference. The "whole thing is only 'skin deep,'" he wrote, defensively, "it is only a surface mark."[155] White supremacists fused the spiritual and secular in a decidedly "amodern" fashion, superimposing upon the visible an invisible,

[152] Vincent Brown, "Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority in Jamaican Slave Society," *Slavery and Abolition* 24:1 (2003): 24–53.

[153] Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists*, 60.

[154] K. Anthony Appiah "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, eds. K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 37.

[155] Fulkerson, *As He Was*, 82. See, also, Bruce, *Plantation Negro*, 139.

essentially mystical, racial order.[156] In this light, Philip Bruce's cavil that Blacks dwelt "as much in the visionary world as in the material world" looks like projection.[157]

Without evidence for the existence of race – the racial "holy grail" – Social Darwinists traded in the metaphor of "blood," both as a synonym for race and as the medium of its transmission.[158] In the late nineteenth-century, hard hereditarian conceptions of germ plasm gave this figurative language new authority, allowing exponents of Jim Crow to invoke the "most impressive doctrines of biological science."[159] Such appeals, however, remained little more than gloss for an essentially magical conception of race. Meanwhile, as Black agency was met with mass terror, this magical system legitimized the spilling of very real blood in southern killing fields and northern streets. It was little wonder that, seeking to cement racial hierarchy, whites circulated tales of poisonous Blue Gums. Converting fears of microbial infection into narratives of racial contamination, Blue Gum narratives coursed with blood, both literal and figurative.[160]

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[156] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 47. For the transition from visible to invisible, see Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early American Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1–39.

[157] Bruce, *Plantation Negro*, 111.

[158] Muhammad, *Criminalizing Blackness*, 23. As Mike Hawkins notes, metaphors were "central to any Social Darwinist enterprise." Hawkins, *Social Darwinism*, 34.

[159] William Benjamin Smith, *The Color Line: A Brief in Behalf of the Unborn* (New York: McClure, Phillips, 1905), 12.

[160] In this respect, as H. L. Malchow has argued, cannibalism and vampirism were twinned fictions, united by a preoccupation with blood and its "metaphoric derivatives." In both myths, as Malchow notes, "sharp teeth and bloody mouths signify an uncontrollable hunger infused with deviant sexual sadism." H. L. Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 125, 124.

As Audrey Smedley notes, with no basis in fact, race was "a product of human invention much like fairies, leprechauns, banshees, ghosts, and werewolves."[161] However, Blue Gums and loup-garous demonstrate that racial types were more than simply comparable to the supernatural creatures of folklore: these supernatural creatures could themselves be converted into racial types. This process of translation from folklore to science was nothing new. From Pliny the Elder to John Mandeville and beyond, Western discourse on people of color traded in monsters. In the tenth edition of his foundational work of categorization, *Systema Naturae*, Carl Linnaeus included *homo ferus* and *homo monstrous* alongside *homo sapiens*.[162] Evincing the continued influence of both the Plinian races and the European "Wild Man" tradition, these mythical additions to the genus *homo* betrayed the confusion of fact and fiction that was inherent to racial taxonomy from its inception.[163] Subsequently, Médéric Moreau de Saint-Méry, the author of one of the earliest typologies of "nuances of skin," borrowed the nomenclature of magic and mythology for his imagined racial categories.[164] And, as late as 1915, no less an authority than David Starr Jordan could be found discussing the voguish notion that European fairy lore was a folk memory of "historic swarthy dwarf races."[165] This idea, of

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[161] Smedley, *Race in North America*, 5.

[162] Caroli Linnaei, *Systema Naturae*. 10th edition (Holmiae: Impensis Direct. Laurentii Salvii, 1758-1759), 20–22.

[163] For the genealogy of these ideas, see John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1981).

[164] Quoted in Doris Garraway, "Race, Reproduction and Family Romance in Moreau de Saint-Méry's *Description de la Partie Française de l'Isle Saint-Domingue*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38 (Winter 2005), 227. As Joan Dayan noted, Moreau's taxonomy was a "kingdom of the grotesques," influencing later gothic fictions, including *Dracula*. Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 232.

[165] Jordan, *Organic Evolution*, 18.

course, was no more fantastical than Jordan's comparison of "Blue-gum negroes, blue-gum apes." Thus, Racial taxonomies are one of the most unmistakable examples of a haunted modernity, dissolving the boundary between premodern and modern. Discourse on Blue Gums was only the most recent manifestation of such hybridization, providing further support for Bruno Latour's contention that there "has never been a modern world."[166]

At the close of the nineteenth century, Blue Gum narratives joined the cultural apparatus of nationwide white supremacy. Whilst complementing the notion that criminality and credulity were Black racial traits, these narratives were more than simply capsules for the Jim Crow zeitgeist. On the contrary, they constituted a contingent instance of racialization, in which new fears of microbial contagion were harnessed to older notions of embodied racial difference. Blue Gum narratives captured white imaginations because they dramatized Social Darwinist and proto-eugenicist fears of the Black body as a source of racial contamination. It was for this reason that white writers were sometimes reluctant to dismiss Blue Gums as superstition, capitalizing, instead, upon the fact that racial discourse so often operated in a borderland between figurative and literal dehumanization. Thus, tales of venomous, Black, assailants resonated with discourses of race poison that swirled at the turn of the century. And, in an intellectual setting in which nature and culture were seen as synonymous, even allusions to the interracial character of Blue Gum lore could evoke biological impurity. The irony is that, in presenting a figure from Black folklore as a racial type, white writers testified to the chimerical nature of racial purity, whilst betraying the superstitious foundations of racial science. In using Blue Gums to construct race, they were chasing their own tails.

[166] Latour, *Never Been Modern*, 47.