SHANE McCRAE’S

BLOOD

A Non-Neutral Teaching Guide of Loaded Questions

Preliminary Vocabulary:

Colonialism, Imperialism, Slave Narrative, Deconstructed Sonnet, Assimilation, Autonomy, Appropriation, Abolition, Dehumanization, Canaan, Meter, Disembodied, Solidarity, Syntax, Systemic Racism, Volition, Reconstruction, Partus Sequitur Ventrem, Tabula Rasa, Elliptical, Caesura, Vernacular

Define each term and discuss. Find examples (or lack thereof) of each in Blood.

Identity, Power, Race, Domination:

Civilization is pronouns and verbs. History is people and what they do. Create columns to track history (pronouns and verbs) throughout Blood.

- Track the “I,” and “We/Our/Us” of the Black body + Verbs
- Track the “He” (Master) and “They/They’re/Them” of the White body + Verbs

Here are some examples from Blood’s section 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[B L A C K]</th>
<th>[B L A C K]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I---------- &gt; was</td>
<td>We-------- &gt; happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I---------- &gt; seen</td>
<td>We-------- &gt; touched</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I---------- &gt; didn’t</td>
<td>We -------- &gt; killed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I---------- &gt; saw</td>
<td>We-------- &gt; wanted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I---------- &gt; know</td>
<td>We-------- &gt; made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I---------- &gt; don’t</td>
<td>We-------- &gt; marched</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I---------- &gt; remember</td>
<td>We -------- &gt; were</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The “I” (slave) is disembodied and exists, at times, in negation. Note and track these instances of negation.

At times, throughout section 1, the “I” possesses no autonomy, no agency, no power. If “I” has no volition, how is “I” constructed/deconstructed/reconstructed into being? By whom? Is there an imbalance of power?

There is a correlation between power and how often a body is embodied?

**Collective Consciousness:**

Notice “I” gradually shifts into “We” and “Us.” When does this shift occur? What catalyzed this collective solidarity? Does this moment mean civilization?

Track the “We” and “Us” verbs. What do we and us do? Why does “I” become “We” in order to be? What does this say of individuality? Of self-autonomy? Identity? Consciousness vs. collective consciousness?

Why is “I”’s existence, identity, and embodiment contingent on “We” and “Us”? Is the Black body invisible until it becomes collective? Does this phenomena occur with the White body? Is an individual body still a body if it only exists in the “We?” Is the construct of a collective consciousness reductive of individualistic existence?

Throughout *Blood*, I becomes we becomes us. He becomes they becomes them. Does one race shape shift more than another? Is this fluidity necessary for survival? What is lost in this fluidity? What is gained?

**Liberation, Freedom, Transcendence:**

Pay attention to development and trajectory of the “I.” There is a violent, radical shift of embodiment (still often negated) as *Blood* progresses. “I” seemingly becomes individual and active in being. Some examples:

I-------- >  
|          | hurt
I-------- >  
|          | cut
I-------->  
|          | learned
At what moments in *Blood* does the “I” possess most agency? Locate textual examples. These instances may include moments of upheaval, uprising and revolt. Does “I”’s body only become a body when “I” is reactive? Is reaction still an act of passivity? “I” exists by reacting to oppression, racism, slavery, sexual abuse, dehumanization, and violence. Define injustice.

Locate textual examples in *Blood* when “I” re-inflicts these same injustices to their own. Sadly, “I” becomes most ‘embodied’ when deconstructing bodies that their own bodies constructed. Define paradox. Such examples:

*Killing them we / made ourselves more / nigger their niggers and they / Killing us after / They made themselves / more innocent* (p. 12)

*The death of us was bigger than the life in us* (p. 15)

*I couldn’t stop / Hurting her because it hurt I had to cut her head / All the way off* (p. 19)

*I loved her / wanted her / Head to come off in my hands* (p.20)

*To punish me he never / Raped me again* (p. 35)

. . . *Master said he wouldn’t / give me any more / Babies to kill* (p.35)

*And killing her was running / Was / shackled when I threw / Priscilla from the boat / And killing her was also / being chained* (p. 35)

*I cut her sister Mary’s throat / And hit her / Cilla with a coal / shovel the flat of the blade / Swung / down / like I was putting out a fire* (p. 36)

*And I was happy to be saved* (p.37).

*And the Yankees / kill us like they wasn’t / Killing to set us free* (p. 45)
. . . like how the first thing I / Done with my freedom was I thought / Who do I got to kill / to get all the way free / And it was more people that it was / alive in the world” (p. 86)

These instances are narrative accounts of mothers (at times raped) throwing their children off slave ships, cutting a child’s throat, or beating a child to death with a shovel. There’s circularity in “I, a violence done doing violence upon the body” in order to spare lineage a life of slavery. Children serve as extensions of self or trajectories of becoming. Are there any other moments in Blood when “I” is granted perhaps the ultimate freedom: the freedom of choice? Is dismemberment (destruction of Black body), death, or passing as a White body the only liberation of the Black body?

**Gender, Body:**

What female body parts are most frequently referred to in Blood? Track them. Answer: The belly for bearing. Legs for fleeing or spreading. The hands for killing and praying.

How do the following lines antagonize gender? Discuss.

*How is she know he ain’t / A white man born wrong inside out / and twice as big and mean / And got a hole go twice as deep to hell / How is that woman sure / of anything at all* (p. 42)

**Time, Body:**

Does time operate differently for the Black body as it does for the White body? Is there a White time? A Black time? Textual examples to discuss:

* . . . that stretch of forever / white folks own / but only negroes get old in* (p. 85)

*Except no nigger ever was a child. . . Except no nigger ever was grown* (p.28)

**Holes, Visible Invisibility:**

There are repeated instances of bodily holes in Blood. The Black body is seemingly more ‘porous,’ susceptible to or inducing destruction, or a deficit that needs to be ‘filled’. Discuss these examples:

* . . . something about a nigger’s skin / puts holes in everything he wears* (p. 11)

*Like every eyes in any / white folks is another / Hole in our bodies* (p. 67)
. . .when it was the Klan or any white men raping her was always in the road / most always in the middle to be seen / Most always in the night / when nobody was looking (p. 57)

**Additional Lines to Discuss:**

*But if my skin / separates me from you / brother it does not keep me* (p. 71)

*Brother we not the fist / we not the water / we the thirst* (p. 68)

These lines propose the ultimate transcendence. The body is no longer a body, but anthropomorphizes past nature into an alternate state of being. Yet, even thirst is a bodily condition. What is freedom?

**Further Discussion Prompts and Creative Activities:**

In *Blood*, Shane McCrae states that he “adapted” slave narratives and to adapt means that “I used the language—or as much of it as possible—as I found it in the original narrative, tweaking it only when necessary in order to make it metrically regular” (Poetry Society of America). Shane McCrae reconstructs history through use of genealogy—the slave narrative—and bases *Blood* on historical events such as the German Coast Uprising of 1811 and the Reconstructionist Period.

Where’s the line between adaptation, assimilation, and appropriation? What does it mean to make a body and a voice “metrically regular?” Does this mean to make it White? Does this statement assume these bodies and voices are an ostracized ‘other’ needing to be ‘tweaked’? Why? Who created the metrics? Why are these metrics ultimate measures of what everything else is measured against? What happens to bodies and voices outside these metrics? Provide contemporary examples of society’s metrics or systems.

In Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, scholar Reva Siegel states that White Privilege is maintained via “preservation through transformation.” Systemic racism thrives because rules and rhetoric surrounding it perpetually change. Provide contemporary examples of modernized lynching.

How does one rebel when a body is not your own?

Track your personal “I” + verbs for 24 hours. What did you do? Track the “They” + verbs of everyone and every inanimate object you encounter. This may be a parent, a lover, a stoplight, a pet, the system, a teacher, a cookie. Is there a balance of power?
How is the pegging of “narrative” in captivity narratives, slave narrative, runaway narratives potentially reductive or dismissive of singular, distinct, unique, individual experiences? Heraclitus once stated you “never cross the same river twice.” Are all narratives the same? If not, what does this say of humanities hyper-fetishization of order, category, taxonomy, and control? Does knowing where to ‘put’ a thing aid in the understanding of it? How may race be operating in similar constructs?

Further extend lives of Margaret Garner, Mary Armstrong, Lucretia Alexander, Mary Anderson, Isaac Adams, Mary Garner, Cathay Williams / William Cathay. Create multimedia projects that present images and visual artifacts of the lives of individual. Utilize the Federal Writers’ Project or similar genealogical archives to further research slave testimonies, narratives and biographies. Creatively reconstruct (being cognizant of appropriation) these identities to permit a voices, freedoms, justices and liberties that were never had.