

Murder and Mattering in Harambe's House

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This article approaches the controversy over the killing of the gorilla Harambe in the Cincinnati Zoo in May 2016 as a unique window onto the making of animalness and blackness in the contemporary U.S. The construction of the “human” in relation to both the “animal” and the “black” is explored.

Keywords:

Harambe; gorilla;
blackness; antiblackness;
human; black; animal

INTRODUCTION

THIS IS THE HOUSE OF TARZAN, THE
KILLER OF BEASTS AND MANY BLACK
MEN.

—Edgar Rice Burroughs

Surely Descartes never saw an ape.

—Carl Linnaeus

In what public discourse does the reference to
black people not exist?

—Toni Morrison

The first epigraph above is taken from the note Tarzan (“White-Skin”) of the Apes tacks to the front door of a decrepit cabin in the jungle, warning the Englishpeople who have just arrived in the area against entering the structure (Burroughs, 1914/1997). He does not yet know that the cabin was built by his long-dead parents, Lord and Lady Greystoke—who were marooned in the jungle just long enough to build the cabin and birth a boy before they were killed by apes—but he has taught himself to read and write by poring over the primers he discovered within. His child-like use of all capital letters, meant to convey emphasis, indexes his awkward, incipient relation to human language. Throughout Burroughs’ novel, Tarzan’s halting journey to acquire language—his inability to read script, his unfamiliarity with speaking, his initial acquisition of French rather than English—tracks his gradual ascent into true (English) civilization. He writes his first words here to announce a proprietary claim, and he grounds the claim on his skill at dealing out death. Language, property

right, and death-craft are organic elements of the transformation from ape to human.

“Killer of beasts and many black men.” Burroughs’ novel was published in 1914, during the heyday of lynching in the U.S. and one year before D.W. Griffith’s film *Birth of a Nation* thrilled white audiences around the nation by glorifying white mobs who kill black “brutes” in the name of protecting white womanhood. Tarzan’s preferred method of killing is, significantly, the noose, the use of which he perfects by moving up the evolutionary scale, targeting first a gorilla, then an anthropoid ape (“a species closely allied to the gorilla, yet more intelligent”; Burroughs, 1914/1997, p. 25), then African villagers. What Tarzan’s phrase indicates, despite the nod to black men as individuals to be enumerated, as opposed to generic “beasts,” is where he makes what Jacques Derrida calls the “cut” between those we may “noncriminal[ly] pu[t] to death” and those against whom this would constitute “murder” (Derrida, 1991, pp. 112–117). Tarzan makes the “cut” on the basis of species *and* race. The killing of African villagers, like that of “beasts,” is not “murder” but, to the contrary, a prerequisite for white home ownership. Burroughs writes: “Tarzan of the Apes was no sentimentalist. He knew nothing of the brotherhood of man” (Burroughs, 1914/1997, p. 65).

Reading Tarzan’s declaration today produces a certain unease, an anxiety, perhaps, about what, if anything, differentiates our epoch from his. A half-century after the civil rights movement, a century after the novel was published, and nearly four centuries after slavery was first codified in the Virginia colony, the question of whether black people can be said to be “murdered” has not yet been settled. The Black Lives Matter movement,²

which emerged in 2013 after self-appointed neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman was acquitted for killing 17 year old Trayvon Martin for walking while black in a residential area in Sanford, Florida, aims precisely to highlight the “noncriminal putting to death” of black people and to name these events as “murder” on the part of the police and their remarkably expansive *posse comitatus*.³ We see from the proliferation of responses to this project—“Latino Lives Matter,” “Muslim Lives Matter,” “Blue Lives Matter,” “All Lives Matter,” and so on—that we are in the midst of a veritable war over (who gets to say) who matters and, correspondingly, who does not. And that we have always been in the midst of this war. Burroughs’ novel springs from an age that is also ours.

Derrida, of course, raises the notion of a “noncriminal putting to death” in relation to the animal. It is the denial of “murder” in abattoirs, laboratories, farms, zoos, fisheries, and such that has made possible the “industrial, mechanical, chemical, hormonal, and genetic violence to which man has been submitting animal life for the past two centuries” (Derrida, 2002, p. 395). While thinking about the nearness of “black men” and “beasts” in Tarzan’s mind, then, we might also think about the coeval rendering of “beasts” as a cipher or zero-figure of mattering, as well as the connection between these two taxonomic moves. Why are “beasts” and “black men” the special targets of Tarzan’s death-craft? Why does killing them provide reliable ground upon which to stake one’s public identity and property right? What relations are being drawn among Tarzan and these other two figures? Burroughs approaches this last question with a mischievous glee, rolling out a pseudo-evolutionary trope and retracting it in the same breath (Lundblad, 2013). African villagers are Tarzan’s own kind (human) but not of his tribe (ape) or race (white). He steals their finery to conceal his nakedness and appear more human—“to mark his evolution from the lower orders in every possible manner” (Burroughs, 1914/1997, p. 85)—but observes that they are more savage and cruel than the apes who raised him. It is not clear whether Tarzan has more in common with the apes or with the African villagers, and this indeed seems to be the point. To achieve English manhood, it is clear that he must kill both “beasts” and “many black men.” But beyond that, nothing is certain.

HARAMBE’S RESPONSE

On May 28, 2016, a three year old black child who was visiting the Cincinnati Zoo with his family told his

mother that he wanted to go see the gorillas close up. His mother said no. When she was not looking, he climbed over the bushes surrounding the gorilla cage and fell ten feet into the shallow water therein.⁴ Harambe, a male western lowland gorilla, approached him and interacted with him for ten minutes before zookeepers called in the Dangerous Animal Response Team (DART) to shoot Harambe dead, “standard protocol” when a zoo animal is deemed a serious threat to a human.⁵ A passionate argument erupted in the public sphere, particularly on social media, as to whether the killing was necessary or justified, with all manner of folks, including zookeepers, leading primatologists, parenting experts, and Hollywood celebrities, weighing in with great feeling. Harambe had meant the boy no harm, many argued. The video showed him holding hands with the boy and standing over him protectively, at one point situating himself between the screaming crowd and the boy. Some pointed to the August 1996 incident at the Brookfield Zoo, where the female gorilla Binti Jua picked up an unconscious three-year old boy who had fallen into her cage and cradled him in her arms before handing him to the zookeeper, or the August 1986 incident at the Jersey Zoo, where the male gorilla Jambo stood guard over an unconscious five year old boy who had fallen into his cage, stroking his back until zookeepers arrived.

The scene in Harambe’s cage was, in one sense, a primal scene of the “human” and the “animal.” The “animal” has been, since before the age of Aristotle, the zero-figure against which “human” mattering has been measured in what Giorgio Agamben calls the “anthropological machine of humanism” (Agamben, 2004, p. 29).⁶ The very word “animal,” Derrida notes, is an incoherent attempt to reduce “an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals” to a unitary category, an ill-disguised ploy to “institute what is proper to man, the relation to itself of a humanity that is above all careful to guard, and jealous of, what is proper to it” (Derrida, 2002, pp. 409, 383). In this light, zookeepers, who procure captives from hunters, who summon the sharpshooters of DART to dispatch any who step out of line, and who daily forfeit the dearest needs of the “animal” for the momentary pleasure of the “human,” are above all keepers of “humanity,” that is, protectors of “what is proper to it.”⁷ Lori Gruen writes that zoos are “places that cause [animal] death” (Gruen, 2016a). They are, as well, and for this very reason, places that sustain (human) life.

Thane Maynard, director of the Cincinnati Zoo, conceded that Harambe had shown no signs of aggres-

sion toward the child, but insisted that he was “agitated” and “disoriented” (Abad-Santos, 2016). When critics argued that Harambe had been trying to protect the boy from the screaming crowd, Maynard parried that they “[d]idn’t understand primate biology.” He then declared: “We’re talking about an animal that with one hand can take a coconut and crush it” (Fieldstadt & Stelloh, 2016). Note the sleight of hand: when confronted with evidence suggesting that Harambe’s state of mind was not aggressive, and in fact altruistic, Maynard answered by pointing to what Lisa Uddin in another context calls the gorilla’s “overwhelming presence of body” or “extracorporeality” (Uddin, 2006, p. 114). Animal = all body, no mind. Following Maynard, we shift from asking about Harambe’s *mentation* or *intentions* to focusing on Harambe’s indisputable *physical capacity* to harm. How then do we get from “capable of harming” to “poses a mortal danger”? The threat of capacity looms large to the precise degree that consciousness, will, agency, choice have been presumptively ruled out. Capacity is especially concerning when there is no one at the helm. Harambe, the fearsome 400-lb behemoth impelled by raw instinct, was showing signs of disturbance, we are told. What other option was there?

Though Maynard did not say that Harambe was vicious or bloodthirsty, we are still in the presence of Du Chaillu’s ghost. Paul Du Chaillu was the nineteenth-century explorer-naturalist whose *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa* (1861) launched the myth of gorilla ferocity that found fateful expression decades later in both Burrough’s *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914) and the film *King Kong* (1933). After the gorilla was identified as a distinct species (a separate genus from the chimpanzee) in 1847, based upon a single gorilla skull found in Gabon (Fossey, 1983; Patterson, 1974), Du Chaillu, who was of French origin, set out to be the first white man to hunt and study the gorilla in the wild. His travels in Gabon in the 1850s produced dead gorilla bodies for scientific consumption and fantastical tales about gorilla behavior for popular consumption. Du Chaillu famously describes his encounter with a male gorilla:

Nearly six feet high...with immense body, huge chest, and great muscular arms, with fiercely glaring large deep gray eyes and a hellish expression of face, which seemed to me like some nightmare vision: thus stood before us this king of the African forests....His eyes began to flash fiercer fire as we stood motionless on the defensive, and the crest of short hair which stands on his forehead began to twitch

rapidly up and down, while his powerful teeth (fangs) were shown as he again sent forth a thunderous roar. And now truly he reminded me of nothing but some hellish dream creature—a being of that hideous order, half man, half beast, which we find pictured by old artists in some representations of the infernal regions. He advanced a few steps—then stopped to utter that hideous roar again—advanced again, and finally stopped when at a distance of about six yards from us. And here, as he began another of his roars and beating his breast in rage, we fired, and killed him. (Quoted in Akeley, 1923/2013, pp. 237–238)

Spectacularly, unforgettably, the gorilla burst into the Western imaginary as a ferocious and murderous beast. That the King Kong slander has since been proven a slander—that all available scientific data collected since then suggests that the gorilla suffers this reputation unjustly—has done little to weaken its hold on the Euro-American imagination. A century and a half of primatological research has been no match for Du Chaillu’s mythopoetic powers. We continue to see gorillas exactly as it pleases us to see them.

The prominent American hunter–taxidermist Carl Akeley was one of those bent on debunking Du Chaillu. As he set out on an expedition to the Lake Kivu area (on the border between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda) in the 1920s to collect gorilla specimens for the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, Akeley already had in mind that gorillas had been badly maligned and that they were in fact “extremely affectionate” and “perfectly amiable and decent” creatures who fought only to defend themselves or their families (Akeley, 1940, pp. 162–163).⁸ Again and again, this sense was reconfirmed on his expeditions: “My experiences proved the correctness of my theory even more thoroughly than I had expected” (Akeley, 1940, p. 182). When he encountered the male gorilla who would become the Giant of Karisimbi, the centerpiece of his gorilla group in the museum’s African Hall, Akeley noted that he, like all of the other gorillas they met, tried to retreat into the foliage and not show himself. Akeley’s companion felled him with a shot to the neck, and Akeley stood over his body, reflecting:

[L]ike all of the others, he displayed no signs of aggressiveness. He had not made a single sound at any time. As he lay at the base of the

tree, it took all one's scientific ardor to keep from feeling like a murderer. (Akeley, 1940, p. 183)

Akeley also feels like a “murderer” when he kills a female gorilla on another occasion: “The day I shot this female I felt almost as if I had killed some decrepit old woman” (Akeley, 1940, p. 195). What haunts Akeley as he tracks, shoots, skins, skeletonizes, stuffs, and mounts these gorillas, is the possibility that what he is engaged in, his passionate vocation, is not a “noncriminal putting to death” at all.

Akeley's impassioned challenge to Du Chaillu reads as an effort to negotiate this contradiction. In a chapter entitled, “Is the Gorilla Almost a Man?” in his book *In Brightest Africa* (1923), Akeley proposes to “explain why the gorilla has his aggressive reputation” (Akeley, 1923/2013, p. 237). He then takes a quote from Du Chaillu (the one I used above) and proposes to edit it, “put[ting] in brackets what Du Chaillu felt, leaving outside the brackets what the gorilla did.” The result is the following:

Nearly six feet high...with immense body, huge chest, and great muscular arms, with [fiercely glaring] large deep gray eyes [and a hellish expression of face, which seemed to me like some nightmare vision]: thus stood before us this king of the African forests...[His eyes began to flash fiercer fire as] we stood motionless on the defensive, and the crest of short hair which stands on his forehead began to twitch rapidly up and down, while his powerful teeth (fangs) were shown as he again sent forth a thunderous roar. [And now truly he reminded me of nothing but some hellish dream creature—a being of that hideous order, half man, half beast, which we find pictured by old artists in some representations of the infernal regions.] He advanced a few steps—then stopped to utter that [hideous] roar again—advanced again, and finally stopped when at a distance of about six yards from us. And here, as he began another of his roars and beating his breast [in rage], we fired, and killed him. (Akeley, 1923/2013, pp. 237–238)⁹

Once we effect a separation of Du Chaillu's projections from empirical description, Akeley shows, the gorilla goes from looking like a “terrible animal” to a creature doing “nothing that a domestic dog might not have done under the same circumstances” (Akeley, 1923/2013, p. 237). Du Chaillu was compelled by his

publishers to revise his manuscript not once but twice, Akeley reminds us, in order to make it more exciting to his readers.

Having collected enough gorilla “specimens” for the museum, Akeley helped to persuade King Albert of Belgium to create a national park to protect the mountain gorilla habitat on the Virungas volcanic mountain range. Akeley died during a return trip to the Virungas, where he had hoped to conduct a field study of the mountain gorillas. Four decades later, in 1967, Dian Fossey set up her first research station not far from where Akeley was buried in the Kabara meadow. Fossey was recruited by paleo-anthropologist Louis Leakey to be one of the “Trimates,” three young white women with limited (or no) formal training and field experience whom he handpicked to do extended field studies of the great apes.¹⁰ As the “Gorilla Girl,” Fossey set up camp in the Virungas and initiated field research that stretched over the better part of two decades. After several years, the gorillas she studied accepted and even embraced her presence: they solicited play with her, groomed her, hugged her, climbed on her, brought her wild celery stalks, and napped beside her on the forest floor. Which is to say, they developed relationships with her. One young male, Digit, formed an especially close bond with her over many years, and Fossey was never the same after she discovered his decapitated body in the forest. Poachers had speared him and then cut off his head and hands for sale.

Fossey's book, *Gorillas in the Mist* (1983), gives us a glimpse into the biological, social, and mental-emotional life of mountain gorillas, whom she called the “most maligned creatures on earth” (Battiata, 1986). We learn that mountain gorillas live in tight-knit family-based groups (typically one dominant silverback, an immature male or blackback, several females, and juveniles and infants) and that they are gentle, curious, intelligent creatures who typically retreat upon encountering humans but will fight to the death to defend their kin.¹¹ We see that the social and emotional relationships within each family group are textured, complex, and fluid, with relationships waxing and waning and individuals gaining and losing status over time, depending in part upon contingent events. We observe as silverbacks protect their families against raids from other groups, usually having to do with contesting territory or obtaining females. We realize that their survival as a species is profoundly in question, with poachers and cattle grazers driving them back into an ever-smaller piece of the forest. Akeley wonders aloud about the “humanness” of gorillas as he

kills and dismembers them, but Fossey presents gorillas on their own terms, like us and unlike us, rich in their own worlds.

In that other key site of Western primatology, the laboratory, Francine Patterson has worked with Koko, a western lowland gorilla (like Harambe), since the 1970s. Koko understands thousands of spoken English words and learned a modified version of American Sign Language, which Patterson calls Gorilla Sign Language. Koko uses this to communicate freely, indeed exuberantly, with the humans around her. She “invent[s] jokes and insults, prompt[s] answers in tests for her younger companion gorilla, reports [on] past events in her life, [and displays] her vulgar sense of humor” (Haraway, 198 p. 143). She photographs herself in the mirror, holds a cup up to her chimpanzee doll’s lips during tea parties, and correctly identifies herself as a “fine animal gorilla” when asked if she is human or animal. At one point, Koko asked to have a pet kitten, whom she named All Ball. She nurtured and played with him until he escaped from the laboratory one day and was killed by a car, an event Koko mourned even several years later. She is “a being who uses sign language to articulate her inner and individuated desires, her tastes, her passions—that is to say, her personhood” (Uddin, 2006, p. 112). To riff on Linnaeus (second epigraph above), surely Descartes never saw an ape like Koko. But whereas Fossey immersed herself in the world(s) of gorillas and tried to speak their language, Patterson instructs Koko on human language in a laboratory where she is held captive. The House of Science is a coercive one, even when there are kittens. Koko’s ability to please—that is, her value—hinges on how closely she can mimic us. Despite the name, Gorilla Sign Language is the language of the captor. When we delight in Koko stories, then, we are delighting in the simulacrum of the “human” in nonhuman form. Language is the medium less for seeing into the mind of the Other than for seeing ourselves reflected there.

Access to human language pushes Koko across the threshold of mattering. Koko was born in the San Francisco Zoo and “lent” to Patterson for her research, and in 1976, the zoo asked for her back. But Koko was no longer zoo-able. The thought of a communicative subject, a bearer of language and will and mind, being turned (back) into a zoo animal was unbearable, and the Mayor of San Francisco intervened (Haraway, 1989). What did the loss of zoo-ability on the part of an English-speaking Koko say about those of her species who remained in zoos? That they belonged there because they

were (human) language-lacking. Yet in fact they had the *same language potentiality as Koko*. She was representative of her kind; she had been born a zoo animal. If Patterson had a larger laboratory, she could turn other zoo gorillas into Kokos. Which is to say, human language, as a “get out of jail free” card, or at least a “get out of the zoo and into the laboratory” card, happens not to have been gifted to other gorillas, and the precarious basis for their zoo-ability, therefore, is not what/who they are but rather *what has been withheld from them*.

The (human) language-lacking gorilla’s mind, such that it is, remains a black box. The chasm seems unbridgeable, understanding impossible. Merriam–Webster offers two definitions of “cipher”: “(1) zero: one that has no weight, worth, or influence: nonentity; (2) a method of transforming a text in order to conceal its meaning...a message in code.” The animal cipher is a nonentity and a secret code at once, a blank slate and a hidden message, the footstool of human mattering and the outer limit of human *logos*. These definitions may not be as contradictory as they seem, since an indecipherable mind scarcely counts as mind at all when it really counts. Jane Goodall, the Trimate whose work with chimpanzees in Tanzania has made her the Most Famous Primatologist in the World, supported the zoo’s decision to kill Harambe: “[I]t would be difficult for even people familiar with Harambe himself, researchers or keepers who may have spent hours with Harambe, to ascertain his intentions from a distance in as short a time as it would take to do irreparable harm” (Downes, 2016). Goodall, a pioneer in illuminating the phenomenological world of apes, acknowledges that Harambe has “intentions” but then transfers our attention, *a la* Maynard, to Harambe’s capacity to harm “irreparabl[y].” In the case of the gorilla, as we have seen, this move ends the conversation.

Perhaps we withhold (human) language because we depend upon the inaccessibility of the animal mind. It is not that we cannot decipher the secret code of the “animal” but rather that we have good reason not to try. Killing Harambe eliminated uncertainty about his harming the boy. Did it eliminate another uncertainty as well? We cage great apes after a certain age because even after they have been gifted with human language, they are not reliably submissive. Even Koko lives in a cage. Gorillas are not domesticatable, they remain always a bit wild, and that wildness, though we try to make it about the body, resides in their minds. It is a quality of independence, a resistance to human sovereignty. At the Cincinnati Zoo, zookeepers noted that unlike his female com-

panions Chewie and Mara, Harambe *did not heed the call to come inside*. This was not a failure of language or communication but a failure of obedience: he knew what they were asking him to do and *he chose not to comply*. Derrida writes: “The said question of the said animal in its entirety comes down to knowing not whether the animal speaks but whether one can know what *respond* means. And how to distinguish a response from a reaction” (Derrida, 2002, p. 377). We are accustomed, following Descartes, to talking about animal “reactions,” but Harambe’s actions declared themselves a “response.” Disregarding the zookeepers’ call, he approached the child, stood over him, held his hand, pulled him through the water. He reversed the “gaze” that the zoo represents, and, in so doing, turned the world upside down. Derrida describes how the gaze of his cat leaves him naked and exposed: “[E]verything can happen to me, I am like a child ready for the apocalypse” (Derrida, 2002, p. 381). Only after that moment passes, he explains, can he once again visit animals at the zoo. It is not just the fact of the animal’s alterity, his or her possession of a gaze, that terrifies, but what is revealed to us upon recognizing that subjectivity—all of the grief and loss of being “animal” in a human world, the incomprehensible, interminable record of “irreparable harms”. It is worth doing almost anything to suppress this terror.

Before Harambe’s body was cold, zookeepers rushed in, made an incision in his scrotum and extracted sperm to place in a “frozen zoo” for safekeeping. Thane Maynard was then able to say to the press: “There’s a future. It’s not the end of his gene pool” (Schwartz, 2016). Note the absence of a subject in Maynard’s first sentence. He could not plausibly say “There’s a future for Harambe.” Who is it or what is it then that has a future, according to Maynard? Harambe’s gene pool. This slippage between species representative and individual, or, more precisely, the substitution of the former for the latter, is how we have come to talk about wild animals in the Age of Conservation, or at least those whose numbers have dwindled enough to earn the designation “endangered.”¹² Harambe, who was born in the Gladys Porter Zoo in Texas, was shipped to the Cincinnati Zoo under the auspices of the Gorilla Species Survival Plan, a breeding program for captive gorillas (Dalbey, 2016). The administrators of this plan assembled the “family” of Harambe, Chewie, and Mara for the purposes of reproduction, and the posthumous sperm procedure kept the dream alive. Gorilla scarcity produces gorilla value. Every time a media story mentioned the gorilla’s “endangered” status, Harambe’s worth rose, as in: “The sto-

ry [of Harambe’s death] is particularly sad because Harambe was a western lowland gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*), a subspecies of western gorilla that is critically endangered” (Hogenboom, 2016).

The language of conservation has a magical quality. It transforms death into everlasting life. It produces a heartwarming drama out of a horror story. To follow the chain of human violence that structured Harambe’s life, we would have to go at least as far back as the capture of his grandparents in Africa. Because gorillas fight to the death to defend the young in their group, capturing a baby gorilla often requires killing all of the adults in a group (Montgomery, 2009; Fossey, 1983). Every baby gorilla capture leaves a bloody stain in the forest. Then there is the captive breeding program, which subjected his grandparents, his parents, and Harambe himself to the creation, breaking up, and reshuffling of gorilla “families” over the years with an eye to maximizing conservation goals and zoo profitability. Gorillas are fungible, commodified bio-units. Shooting Harambe and “retrieving” his sperm were acts that culminated a life conceived in and lived in violence. By the special grace of conservation discourse, however, we see ourselves not as murderers and captors and chess masters but as saviors. Narcissism appears as altruism, greed as self-sacrifice. We imagine that we are touching the Other when in fact the Other has never been more to us than a resource for the Self. Which is to say, we succeed, as ever, in evading Derrida’s apocalypse. *Harambe’s sperm is safe. If we wish, we can make another gorilla and hope he does not meet the same fate. If he does, we can harvest his sperm.* And so on.

HUMAN–BLACK–ANIMAL

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison draws our attention to the “dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” in the U.S. literary tradition (1992, p. 5). Even literary works that appear to have nothing to say about race, Morrison demonstrates, are organized, upon closer inspection, around an unspoken black presence. There is an obvious analogy in the political-legal realm: the word “slaves” is not used in the U.S. constitution, and references to slavery therein are few, but slavery nevertheless undergirded the fledgling nation-state and powered its economic growth. Similarly, U.S. culture depends upon the ubiquitous but unacknowledged black presence for narrative and symbolic coherence. Morrison writes (third epigraph above): “In what public discourse does the reference to black people not exist?” (1992, p. 65)

The story of Harambe, too, is a story about blackness and antiblackness that purports not to be. Perhaps it was inevitable, given the presence of the black child, that this would be read as a crime scene, or a scene of black intrusion and violence. It was the boy's fault—well, because of his tender age, perhaps his parents' fault, yes his parents' fault!—that Harambe was dead. It was an encroachment of the urban jungle into the Edenic jungle. If Harambe was shootable because he was “animal,” he was grievable, to use Judith Butler's term, because there was someone black(er) on the scene. He was another casualty of the epidemic of black violence that threatens to engulf us all. Thus the *Daily Mail* ran a story entitled, “Father of boy who fell into gorilla's zoo enclosure has a lengthy criminal history,” which Fox News host Ainsley Earhardt then seized upon in her coverage of Harambe's killing (Schwartz, 2016; Rodriguez, 2016). It mattered not that the boy's father had not been at the zoo that day; in fact, perversely, the “absent black father” trope only strengthened the interpretation of the child as criminal transgressor.

Then there was the Change.org petition (www.change.org/p/cincinnati-zoo-justice-for-harambe) that garnered more than a half million signatures:

It is upsetting that people vilify the Cincinnati Zoo, an institution that has done so much work in trying to turn the tide against extinction in several critically endangered species... This beautiful gorilla lost his life because the boy's parents did not keep a closer watch on the child... It is believed that the situation was caused by parental negligence and the zoo is not responsible for the child's injuries and possible trauma... We believe that this [parental] negligence may be reflective of the child's home situation. We the undersigned actively encourage an investigation of the child's home environment in the interests of protecting the child and his siblings from further incidents of parental negligence that may result in serious bodily harm or even death. Please sign this petition to encourage the Cincinnati Zoo, Hamilton County Child Protection Services, and Cincinnati Police Department hold the parents responsible.

After nearly two centuries of “writing crime into race,” to use Khalil Muhammad's phrase, we have come to believe not only that all blacks are violent, but that *violence itself is black*, not a state monopoly but a black mo-

nopoly (Muhammad, 2010). In this schema, black presence is by definition a lethal threat to the non-black self. Black presence is fundamentally aggressive and menacing, so much so that when private citizens and state officials execute black men, women, and children for mundane actions such as sitting in a car with friends, playing with a toy gun in the park, knocking on a person's door for help, and walking on the street, this is taken to be “reasonable” rather than “excessive” force.¹³

By rendering violence black, an antiblack social order disguises the palimpsestic brutalities entailed in its own reproduction and prevents them from being recognized as violence in the first place. Thus the Change.org petition, which might have been penned by the zoo's legal counsel, so careful is it to valorize the zoo and absolve it of any liability, denies what Lori Gruen calls the “carceral logics” of the zoo and the broader society while doubling down on the criminalization of black men and women (Gruen, 2016b; see also Gruen, 2016c). The boy's parents are accused of harming everyone—the zoo, Harambe, their son, and even their other children. Were these white parents, we would likely find the insinuation of a risk of “serious bodily harm or even death” to their children hysterical and the call for state intervention fascistic.¹⁴ But the black is, as Fanon clarifies, “phobogenic” (Fanon, 1952/2008, p. 129).¹⁵

Black criminality, moreover, is a family affair, due not only to genetic inheritance but also to aberrant family structure and deviant parental behavior. To expand on Toni Morrison's question, in what public discourse on black people does the reference to lawless violence, father absence, and maternal unfitness not exist? A good deal of social media vitriol was directed at the mother, who was on the scene with her child that day at the zoo. Facebook posts called for her to be sterilized (King, 2016). One meme—a picture of Harambe with the text “Not sure why they killed me, I was doing a better job of watching that lady's kid than she was”—denigrates her twice over, as a bad parent and as less capable than a gorilla to boot. This is not run of the mill maternal negligence, one commentator clarifies: “It's not like [the mother] lost track of her son and he bumped his head on a kitchen table or burned himself on a hot pan. Because of [the mother]'s lack of supervision, an endangered animal was killed and her son's life was put in danger” (Abad-Santos, 2016). We are back in the 1830s, when local physicians forced slave women to submit to gynecological experiments and slaveholders suggested that slave women did not suffer when their children were sold away from them because they had no maternal

feelings to speak of. Or the 1950s, when white physicians sterilized black women in southern hospitals without their consent or knowledge. Or 1965, when the Moynihan Report blamed black female-headed families for creating a “tangle of pathology.” Or the 1980s, when President Ronald Reagan complained about “welfare queens” cashing their AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) checks to buy Cadillacs instead of food for their children. So many social ills, we are told, can be laid at the feet of black women. Hortense Spillers writes: “My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented” (2003, p. 203).

The black presence in the Euro–American gorilla story in fact goes back a long way. In one way or another, the black has been part of every encounter between the white (wo)man and the gorilla. When Du Chaillu traveled to Gabon in 1855, he was intent upon learning about the “fierce, untamable gorilla” and the “superstitions, customs, and modes of life of the black tribes” (Du Chaillu, 1861, pp. 25–26, quoted in Patterson, 1974, p. 650). Both types of savages excited him. In fact, he won fame not only for “discovering” the gorilla but also for his stories of cannibalism among the Fang people, where he showed the same tendency to embellish past the point of distortion. Ferocious apes and cannibalistic savages were the two pillars of Western travel–scientific writing during this era, titillating the Victorian reader and confirming his/her sense of Africa as the land that time forgot (Bivona, 2005). Indeed, African persons were occasionally exhibited as zoo animals alongside apes in Europe and the U.S. in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, part of the treasure hauled from the colonial outpost for display in the metropole. It is not quite that Africans were animalized here, or had a pre-formulated apeness transferred over to them, but rather that apeness and blackness were hammered out in intimate relation in the crucible of the Western imaginary, each taking shape with the other in mind. In this light, King Kong, the 1930s cinematic character whose genealogy we can trace to Du Chaillu, was not an animal coded as black or a black coded as animal—not one figure standing in for the other—but a body in which apeness and blackness, always already in tense proximity, explosively converged.

Akeley, too, viewed Africans as fauna, but a type that held no interest for him. He seldom comments on the “natives” whom he hires as cooks, porters, gun boys, guides—those whose indispensable labor subtends his expeditions. They are a de-individuated mass, part of the material substrate and equipment of the safari, features

of the landscape against which Man achieves communion with Nature through the shedding of animal blood. When Akeley does mention African people, it is with the detachment and contempt of a slaveholder. Hospitalized with fever, Akeley describes his guide Wimbria Gikungu (“Bill”) as stricken with worry, “waiting like a faithful dog...with tears in his eyes staring at his master” (Akeley, 1940, p. 134).¹⁶ Even Bill, whose valuable skills earn him individual mention in Akeley’s memoir, must be punished when he tries to be more than a “native.” On one occasion, Akeley punishes him for refusing to obey the order of another white person. What Bill prefers to imagine as a personal relationship with Akeley is, in reality, Akeley reminds him, a relationship of racial subordination. Under slave law in the U.S., the slave owed obedience not just to his or her master but to *all white persons*. On another occasion, as Donna Haraway recounts, Akeley slaps Bill for shooting a charging elephant. Akeley writes: “[Bill] had broken one of the first rules of the game, which is that a black boy must never shoot without orders, unless his master is down and at the mercy of a beast” (Akeley, 1940, p. 132, cited in Haraway, 1989, p. 53). A black “boy” who shoots a gun without orders imperils the whole colonial project, built as it is upon the fault line between fauna and person, hunted and hunter, instrument and subject. Only afterwards does Akeley realize that Bill shot the elephant because he thought Akeley was in danger.

Dian Fossey, an avid student of gorilla language, never mastered Kinyarwanda, the national language of Rwanda (Montgomery, 2009). She describes in her book how she is struck with terror when her white guide departs down the mountain, leaving her “alone” in camp for the first time with only African companions:

I felt a sense of panic while watching Alan fade into the foliage....He was my last link with civilization as I had always known it, and the only other English-speaking person on the mountain. I clung on to my tent pole simply to avoid running after him. A few moments after Alan’s departure on of the two Africans in camp, trying to be helpful, asked “*Unapenda maji moto?*” Forgetting every word of Swahili memorized over the past year, I burst into tears and zipped myself into the tent to escape imagined “threats.” About an hour later, feeling the fool, I asked the Congolese to repeat his statement slowly. Did I want hot water? Whether for tea or bath he didn’t specify. (Fossey, 1983, p. 7)

Fossey recounts what transpired with chagrin, laughing at her youthful fearfulness, but the incident is more revealing than she realizes, adumbrating the impact that antiblack affect would have on her work for the next eighteen years. After an early encounter with Congolese soldiers over the expired registration on her Land Rover, she falsely reported to her lover, photographer Bob Campbell, that they had raped her (Montgomery, 2009). In an interview years after Fossey's death, Campbell repeats her account and suggests that the rape "set her attitudes toward the local people" (Shoumatoff, 1995). Campbell seems to have the causal direction wrong: it was almost certainly her "attitudes toward local people" that caused her to fabricate the rape charge.

In addition to referring to Rwandans as "wogs" or "woggiepoos," a British racial slur (Varadarajan, 2002; Battiata, 1986), her attitude toward her Rwandan staff was, in the words of former student Kelly Stewart, "perfectly colonial." Two researchers (all of the researchers she hired were white) left the camp because of her treatment of the staff (Shoumatoff, 1995). Fossey's principal targets, though, were poachers, who hunted gorillas and harmed them in antelope snares, and cattle grazers, who encroached upon the gorillas' habitat. On one occasion, she instructed her staff to slip a noose around a poacher's neck and threaten to hang him. She personally kidnapped the small child of a poacher to force him to negotiate with her. Fossey also pistol-whipped and tortured poachers captured by her staff, according to Bill Weber and Amy Vedder, who worked with Fossey for a time (Varadarajan, 2002). Kelly Stewart, too, recalls:

She would whip their balls with stinging nettles, spit on them, kick them, put on masks and curse them, stuff sleeping pills down their throats....She reduced them to quivering, quaking packages of fear, little guys in rags rolling on the ground and foaming at the mouth. (Shoumatoff, 1995)

In Fossey's war to save the gorillas, Africans were the enemy.¹⁷

The primal scene of "human" and "animal," it turns out, *has had a third figure in it all along*.¹⁸ Which is to say, Agamben's "anthropological machine of humanism" is not the only machine involved in the manufacture of the "human." There is also racial slavery, which, Frank Wilderson writes, wrought an ontological rupture between the Human and the Black (Slave), rendering the Black "the very antithesis of a Human subject," the counterpoint against which the Human could gain co-

herence and knowledge of self (Wilderson, 2010, p. 9; see also Sexton, 2015, 2011, 2008). We could say, then, that the "human" is paradigmatically *both not-animal and not-black*, birthed through the simultaneous application of these two caesurae, requiring the presence of both the "animal" and the "black" to locate itself. The "human" ejects itself from the superset category of animal and ejects from within itself the subset category of black, opening a zone of thriving marked by these external and internal limits.¹⁹ Subtending both the human-animal dyad and the human-black dyad, therefore, is the *human-black-animal triad*.

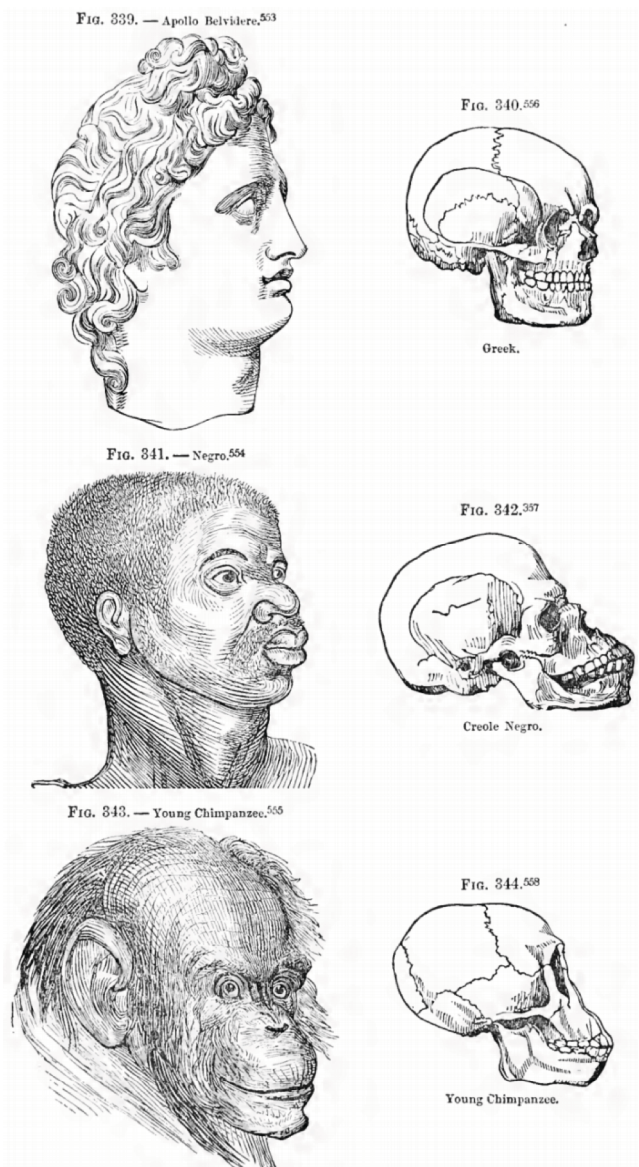


Figure 1. Figures 339–344 in Nott and Gliddon's *Types of Mankind or Ethnological Researches* (1854, p. 458)

Consider Figures 339–344 in Josiah Nott and George Gliddon's *Types of Mankind or Ethnological Researches, Based Upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races* (1854) (Figure 1), which give visual form to the Great Chain of Being, the ur-text that has structured Western ontological imaginings for hundreds of years (Nott & Gliddon, 1854, p. 458). Unlike Ernst Haeckel, who clutters his Great Chain diagram with Fuegians, Chinese, and other extraneous figures, Nott and Gliddon present a truncated Chain, the core segment of the Chain, if you will, in order to focus our attention on three principal characters: Apollo Belvidere (representing the ideal European man), the Negro, and the chimpanzee. Next to each head is a corresponding skull so that we can see with our own eyes the truth of race–species difference written into the body's casing.

The logic of the Chain is one of continuous, graduated difference (Lovejoy, 2009, p. 59). Thus the Negro is formally equidistant in the sketch from Apollo above and the chimpanzee below. Yet the figures are drawn in such a way that the Negro looks uncannily like the chimpanzee, and both of these look remarkably different from the figure at the top, a chasm made more pronounced by the fact that the figure at the top is not a representation of a generic European man (like the generic Negro and the generic chimpanzee) but a representation of a celebrated classical marble sculpture of the God of Music, Reason, and the Sun. On the opposing page (see Figure 2), Figures 345–352 depict different ape species and blacks from varying places and epochs; there is no European man (or divine stand-in) in sight. What is of interest on this page, without pretense, is Negro–ape nearness: yes, the Negro is intermediate between (hu)man and animal, but the Negro is *also quite a bit closer* to the animal than to the (hu)man. *Unspeakably close*. Blackness and animalness, then, form poles in a closed loop of meaning. Blackness is a species construct (meaning “in proximity to the animal”), and animalness is a racial construct (meaning “in proximity to the black”), and the two are dynamically interconstituted *all the way down*. In this sense, the antiblack social order that props up the “human” is also a zoological order, or what we might call a *zoologo-racial order*.

Putting pressure on the space between the “black” and the “animal” allowed pro-slavery ideologues to reconcile the institution's ontological rupture with the Chain's graduated logic. If it was brought up that the Negro was only one small step below the white man on the Chain, one could concede the technical truth of the statement while pointing out the Negro's much greater

nearness to the ape. For all of the sound and fury that attended the debate between U.S. polygenists and monogenists in the 1800s, there was a strong consensus across camps that black inferiority was a natural fact indexed by proximity to the animal. Reading the archive of racial slavery in the U.S., from Senate debates to plantation bills of sale, reminds us of the institution's intimate dependence upon the symbolic (as well as material) figure of the animal. For many slaveholders, the black's humanity was a technicality to be ritually counteracted

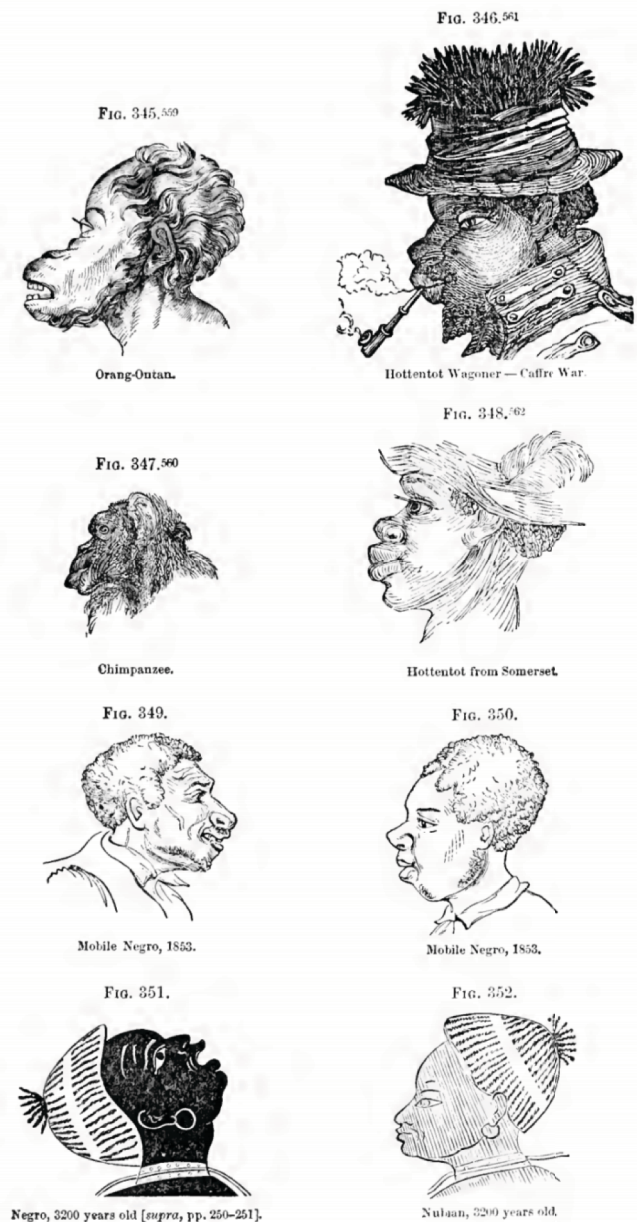


Figure 2. Figures 345–352 in Nott and Gliddon's *Types of Mankind or Ethnological Researches* (1854, p. 459)

through myriad practices of slave–animal conflation, including branding slaves, selling slaves at auction, and feeding slaves at the trough with pigs (Bay, 2000).²⁰ Slaves understood this all too well. Reflecting on the ex-slave narratives collected by the Work Progress Administration, Mia Bay recounts: “[E]x-slaves remembered being fed like pigs, bred like hogs, sold like horses, driven like cattle, worked like dogs, and beaten like mules” (Bay, 2000, p. 119). That is, they understood that the master saw his relationship with them as above all, and in essence, a human–animal relationship. (Bay, 2000, p. 129) The gap between the “black” and the “animal”—that space of ontological doubt—is always on the verge of collapse.

Slavery produces and bequeaths to us an entire zoologo-racial order whose foundation is the “kill[ing] of beasts and many black men.” It is an order in which everything “human” depends upon keeping the relation between the “black” and the “animal” *unspeakably close and perpetually open*. We cannot stop posing the question “*Is the black animal?*” It is not the answer to this question but rather the infinite deferral of the answer that fixes the closed loop of meaning in which both imagined entities—“black” and “animal”—are produced *as indeterminate relative to one another*.²¹ The ontological certainty of the “human” turns out to depend upon the ontological uncertainty of “black” and “animal.” In this light, what made the killing of Harambe a collective trauma (for nonblacks) was that it *forced the giving of a response* to a question (Is the black animal?) that did not seek an answer. It etched a border upon whose indiscernibility the world is built. It insisted on (re)suturing the “black” (boy) into the “human,” on putting back together—via the barrel of a gun and only for a moment—what racial slavery had torn asunder.

“[B]lack lives matter,” Jared Sexton writes, “not in or to the present order of knowledge that determines human being, but only ever against it, outside the limits of the law” (Sexton, 2015, p. 162). That is, black mattering stands in contradiction to the world as we know it, and the full realization of it will require the shattering of this world. Even the single act of killing Harambe to “save” a black child produced an intense cultural distortion, a collective wave of nausea. And so Harambe memes replicated furiously in the aftermath of that day, restitching the negrophobic social fabric by re-opening the question of black–animal nearness. Harambe is the kin of black women and children (a black woman says “they shot my husband”; a black boy is “going to see daddy” in the gorilla cage); he is a black celebrity (Aus-

tralian indigenous footballer Adam Goodes, Michelle Obama); he is Trayvon Martin or another black victim of police violence (#justiceforharambe, #allgorillalivesmatter).²² Rendered “black,” Harambe is elevated and debased at once, vaulted into, and out of, “human” status in the same gesture. In this unfolding semiotic play, the ruptured loop of interconstituted race–species meaning is repaired, fragment by fragment. Once again, we cannot tell where blackness ends and apeness begins.

EPILOGUE

In 1999, the Gladys Porter Zoo held a contest to select a name for their newborn gorilla. The winner was a white man who had been working out at the gym when he heard Rita Marley’s reggae song “Harambe.” *Harambe* means “all pull together” in Swahili and relates to traditional notions of community self-help. (In this case, a U.S. carceral institution gave an African name instead of stripping one way.) In postcolonial Africa, *Harambe* has taken on complex meaning (Chieni, 1998).²³ Jomo Kenyatta announced it as his slogan when he took office as the first president of the Republic of Kenya in 1964, calling for Kenyans to work together to advance national development in the era of independence. Controversially, Kenyatta’s vision of unity was premised on the protection of white property rights that had been established during the colonial period. The term has also been used by Pan-Africanists and Afro-centrists to summon racial and diasporic solidarity in the face of continuing white oppression. One hears both senses of *Harambe* in the lyrics of Rita Marley’s song. There is: “What colour is the rainbow/Check it the next time it shows/That’s the way we should be/All together in harmony/We sailing in the same boat/We rocking up the same stream.” And there is also: “They try to keep us down/Scatter us all around/To diverse parts of the earth/Hoping we’d waste away/But no matter what they do/But no matter what they say/All a Jah Jah children a go Harambe.” So there is a certain tension in the term—Is it soft or hard? Conciliatory or rebellious? A message of white–black conciliation in the postcolonial age or a call for black unity in the never-ending freedom struggle? Zookeepers undoubtedly chose the name for the first set of connotations, as a sort of cognate of the more familiar *Kumbaya*. But the term’s double edge persists, and with it, the hope that Harambe’s tale will trouble the zoologo-racial order in which he lived and died by exposing the circuits of unremitting violence that go into making the black, the animal, and their nearness to one another.

NOTES

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² See Sexton (2015) for discussion of how Black Lives Matter is an essentially feminist and queer, as well as anti-racist, project. Although I begin with Tarzan's patriarchal wording ("many black men"), I use "the black" throughout the article to capture the ungendering, dehumanizing, de-personifying lens through which persons of African descent were viewed. On this point, see Spillers (2003).

³ One of the most controversial clauses of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 allowed law enforcement officials to press any white person, no matter how unwilling, into a posse to recover fugitive slaves.

⁴ I use "cage" deliberately, to suggest that the preferred term "enclosure" is euphemistic. The modern zoo goes to great lengths to appear naturalistic, to give the viewer an aesthetic-ideological experience unmarred by bars (Rothfels, 2002; Uddin, 2015), which makes it all the more important to call a cage a cage.

⁵ There are two recognized gorilla species, the Eastern Gorilla (*Gorilla beringei*) and the Western Gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla*). The first is divided into two subspecies, Eastern Lowland Gorilla (*Gorilla beringei graueri*) and Mountain Gorilla (*Gorilla beringei beringei*). The second is also divided into two subspecies, Western Lowland Gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) and Cross River Gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*) (www.endangeredspeciesinternational.org/gorillas.html). Early experiments with keeping mountain gorillas in zoos failed, so all gorillas in zoos are lowland gorillas, most of them western lowland gorillas like Harambe (igcp.org/gorillas/faq/).

⁶ See Steiner (2005) for discussion of pre-Aristotelian thinking about animals.

⁷ The Dangerous Animal Response Team, certified by the Hamilton County Sheriff's office, consists of expert marksmen/hunters who are interested in shooting "big game." Their expertise is in killing, and their training consists of regular shooting drills. They have no expertise in ascertaining whether an animal poses a serious threat to a human; they are called in after the decision has been made. See Dykes (2016).

⁸ See Giles-Vernick and Rupp (2006) for discussion of African stories about the gorilla.

⁹ I have excerpted from Akeley's longer quote.

¹⁰ The other two Trimates are Jane Goodall, who worked with chimpanzees in Tanzania, and Biruté Galdikas, who worked with orangutans in Borneo.

¹¹ A silverback is so named because of the dorsal pattern of silver hair achieved upon maturity. A younger male, or blackback, has not yet developed this hair pattern.

¹² See Kheel (2008) for a critique of environmental discourse's disavowal of the individual animal. All four gorilla

subspecies are listed as "endangered" or "critically endangered" according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. The western lowland gorilla and mountain gorilla are both listed as "critically endangered," which means "extremely high risk of extinction in the wild." This is the IUCN's last designation before "extinct" (Greshko, 2016). Hunting, the wildlife trade, and habitat destruction are the main threats to both subspecies. There are fewer than 100,000 western lowland gorillas in the wild and only several hundred mountain gorillas in the wild (www.endangeredspeciesinternational.org/gorillas.html).

¹³ This is similar to Thane Maynard's insistence on Harambe's capacity to harm but also different. The zoo justified killing Harambe on the grounds that the gorilla's mind was unknowable (and perhaps so weak as to be irrelevant), but the police and civilians who shoot black people operate rather with a sense of certainty about black murderousness.

¹⁴ See Hayes (2016) on how the white parents in the August 1996 gorilla incident at the Brookfield Zoo were objects of public sympathy and not excoriation.

¹⁵ See Sexton (2008) on the libidinal economy of anti-blackness.

¹⁶ Akeley's words bring to mind Malcolm X's comments distinguishing the house negro and the field negro. Unlike the house negro, who identified with his master, the field negro would tell the doctor to go the other way when his master was ill.

¹⁷ In Rwanda, which is densely populated, rural, and extremely poor, every inch of land is valuable. Paid work is scarce, and Rwandans farm and hunt/poach and graze cattle in order to survive. Mindful of this, current conservation work in Rwanda focuses on making gorillas the centerpiece of a national ecotourism industry that gives the human inhabitants of the Virungas a stake in the gorillas' survival. Before her murder in 1985, Fossey denounced this strategy, preferring open antagonism with local people to a compromise that entailed commodifying the gorillas and exposing them to the harmful intrusion of international tourism.

¹⁸ Buckner Payne, the pro-slavery clergyman-pamphleteer who wrote *Ariel: or the Ethnological Origin of the Negro* (1867), argued that God made blacks at the same time as beasts and before Adam. See Luse (2008). Thus Adam's creation produced a triptych of man, beast, and black in the Garden of Eden.

¹⁹ "[Man is] always the place—and, at the same time, the result—of ceaseless divisions and caesurae" (Agamben, 2004, p. 16).

²⁰ Nott and Gliddon, continuing the Jeffersonian tradition of proving black abjection through unfavorable comparisons with Indians, write: "Furthermore, certain savage types can be neither civilized nor domesticated....Our Indian tribes submit to extermination, rather than wear the yoke under which our Negro slaves fatten and multiply" (1854, p. 461). Even a wild Indian would rather die than be the white man's beast of burden (Bell, 2012).

²¹ Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, and Jackson (2008) indicate that experimental subjects—even those unfamiliar with the history of linking blacks and apes—make this cognitive association below the level of consciousness, and that making this association makes them more supportive of police violence toward black people.

²² For discussion of racism and the Harambe memes, see Pulliam-Moore (2016), Rex (2016), Cooper (2016), Savali (2016), Shah (2016).

²³ My thanks to Michael Dawson for pointing me to the multiple meanings of the term “harambe.”

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