

## **Review of Ward Blanton, *A Materialism for the Masses: Saint Paul and the Philosophy of Undying Life. Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics and Culture*; New York: Columbia University Press, 2014**

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Jumping the gun on Moore and Sherwood's *The Invention of a Biblical Scholar* (and its call to Theory after Theory), Pauline scholar Ward Blanton masterfully engages continental philosophy in *Materialism for the Masses*, taking his place alongside the Paulinists. With its account of the massive engagement with continental philosophy, this volume is not for the faint of heart nor for the average divinity student. It is, rather, a volume for those fascinated with the postsecular re-turn to the religious and the biopolitical engagements of continental philosophy with Paul. Where other Paulinists have highlighted an aspect of Paul for the "Left," having still perpetuated a Platonic (dualist) Paul, Blanton attempts to locate an "underground current of a new materialism" (18) in the philosophical genealogy of Paul, primarily from Nietzsche to Deleuze.

Blanton's foundational question is: what if Paul (Paulinism, really) "were not naturally linked to metaphysical dualisms, to brutally supersessionist anti-Judaisms, or to the economies of salvation with which both of these are tied?" (xii) Blanton is not identifying a singular (historical) Paul, but rather the immanence of a Paulinist line of historical movement. Eventually then, the question becomes: Why the Paulinists, now? For Blanton, Heidegger anticipates this question, this postsecular turn, to a "faith without objects ... contingent on exposure to risk" (xv). In defence of these possibilities, where Nietzsche weaponized the classics, Blanton will weaponize Paul against the Nietzschean "Platonism for the masses." Paul must be emancipated from "pop Platonism" in order to substantiate a "materialism for the masses."

From the Introduction on, a dialectical form emerges whereby Blanton shows how a philosopher has misinterpreted Paul, while that same philosopher is shown to have borne something of a materialist Paulinism through his philosophy. Nietzsche, Freud, and Derrida are the first targets. Blanton demonstrates how Nietzsche presented a Platonist Paul, implicating Paul for the crimes of Christianity. Nietzsche is important because his tradition is inherited by modern philosophers, even by the pro-Pauline Badiou and Žižek. The first ancestor for this genealogy is traced to Freud in *Moses and Monotheism*, where a Platonist Paul is presented as a figure of repression. Blanton then turns to Derrida's originary Paul, archived for a later violence against a (Blanton's) materialist Paul, even as Derrida recognizes the violence of the archive. For Blanton, Derrida (and the others) could have done better.

With Blanton's expertise on Christian origins established, he proceeds to locate an originary problem of Pauline categorization (of an archive) in Acts of the Apostles. In short, the needs inherent in Roman apologetics, coupled with the unique distinction between “Christians” and “Jews,” result in a Platonist, supersessionist (possibly misinterpreted) Paul. Blanton does well not to suggest that Acts is motivated by supersessionism, but, rather, the distinction made in Acts made it possible for later bearers of the tradition (Eusebius) to make supersessionist claims. Still, Blanton critiques Acts for its collusion with Rome against the (or, at least certain) “Jews.” From the Acts of the Apostles, through the founding Fathers of Christianity, to Nietzsche and Freud, the Platonist perpetuation of Paul creates a (Deleuzian) apparatus that Blanton describes as “the emergence of a quasi-transcendental recursivity within a complex multiplicity of historical actuality” (34). From the ghost(s) of those who perpetuated Paul-as-Platonist, he calls forth “Paul the Jewish Partisan” from whom he will draw his materialist Paul.

Chapter one takes up Paul's *klēsis* as *clinamen*, that insertion of a disruptive randomness into and by the everydayness of life. Paul's *klēsis* is viewed from Althusser's undercurrent of an aleatory materialism, whereby Paul forms “a genuinely surprising ‘federation’ or covenantal community [emerging] from the nothings” (44). This undercurrent, as part of the materialist Paul, flows past the life of the singular Paul and into his future traditions, and even further on as a repressed element in those who use Paul as a Platonist straw man. In this chapter, Paul targets Althusser and Derrida, each of whom perpetuates Nietzsche's Platonist Paul despite their larger arguments for an aleatory materialist form of after-life, of an “undying life.” This is also not an attempt to establish a new metaphysics of the continuity of an earthly life-after-death. Blanton aims more at locating an embodied immanence, a nod to Schweitzer's call to *become* Paul. Reading and thinking a materialist Paul in our time is a way of becoming an apostle of the apostle of the event.

Chapter two covers familiar themes to those acquainted with radical theology. Where the apparatus before carried the dominant Western Paulinism, Blanton now aims more ambitiously at “ideology,” a greater subsuming force than the Platonist Pauline apparatus. The great dilemma (even in our day) is how to escape dominant ideology, a theme most famously of Althusser (2008) and Žižek (2009). Blanton makes a parallel argument using Breton's *A Radical Philosophy of St. Paul*. Like Žižek, Breton (2011) affirms that identity is part of the ideological system itself, but Breton goes further arguing:

that the martyrological or persecutorial passion of enthusiasm—the obsession with finally solving or grounding the ensemble in question, with finally conjuring it into full presence—is itself merely a form of the “death instinct,” a longing for the release of cultural life from its limits, in death or in a way that is incompatible with life. (Blanton 82-3).

Whereas, for Žižek (2011) and Thomas Altizer (1966), *kenosis* (or the emptying of the divine from Christ) is a crucial element in understanding Jesus's death, for Breton (1976) it is the “scandal and stupidity” of the cross that resists ideology, the refusal (or naivety)

to think from within the dominant schematics. In a rare excursion into a political example, Blanton invokes the “ideo-logic” of Guantanamo Bay. There, within the dominant (Western) schematics, locking up those bodies provides a sense of security, by getting rid of the “obstruction” to the better society. Yet, a process of imagining or representing those bodies (even in photograph form) becomes a way of exiting (if only for a moment) the ideological superstructure. Such an emptying of ideology elicits questions of what “newness” a community might produce, “a difficult freedom,” as Blanton suggests (95).

Foucault is the target of chapter three. Blanton considers the “turn” to religion as Philosophy “returning again to rewired ancient spiritual exercises” (98). For this reason, Blanton turns to Foucault's juxtaposition of Pauline Christianity and “classical Greek ethics.” Focusing primarily on Foucault's *History of Sexuality v.3* (1990), Blanton draws out Foucault's critique of Paul and Foucault's emphasis on philosophical practices of self/soul caring. Yet, Foucault's Paul is problematic for Blanton by being a “Paulinism being consigned to becoming ... the founder of a form of Christian moral system whose inventive machinations will engender a ‘self’ constituted by being turned against itself, at once constitutively guilty, fallen, and also profoundly normalized by the universalization of its underlying metaphysical nature” (100-1). Unsurprisingly to those who have read Foucault, Paul is essentially the Patriarch of that self-giving form of domination in the West that is coined “pastoral power.”

What must be evident thus far in Blanton's work is that, while he is vying for the Pauline tradition and revising the Western reception of the Paul of the New Testament, he leaves the critiques of Christianity and its despisers unhindered. The critiques of Nietzsche, Freud, Derrida, Foucault, and others against Christianity remain valid, inseparable from their formal critiques of metaphysics. Sexuality, subjectified by the Christian metaphysical tradition, becomes then a measure for Christianity's repressive power. Blanton concludes with Foucault's own words:

We are informed that if repression has indeed been the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality since the classical age, it stands to reason that we will not be able to free ourselves from it except at considerable cost: nothing less than the transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power will be required. (128; quoting Foucault 1978)

Blanton, like the Paulinists before him, aims for the “Pauline proclamations about the ‘liberation’ of spirit beyond the legal limits of law” (128).

In the previous chapter, Blanton critiqued the Pauline Christianity's failure to engage in “philosophical practice”; in chapter four, Blanton considers what form a “spiritual exercise” of Paulinism might take. He begins with a gloss (by comparison) of the Pauls of Negri and Deleuze, but he quickly turns to “resistance” in Foucault and the “emptying of power” in Judith Butler. For Foucault, the appeal to Blanton's Paul is one that recognizes a need for “a symbolic violence more powerful than any political violence” (148). The necessary paradox for the Pauline community is one named in the “*dispossession*” of an executed messiah that becomes “communal property” and “a

new source of political critique” (155). The Pauline imag(in)ing or performing of the crucified messiah is a performance that “tells the secret of power precisely by performing it so profoundly that the specific elements of theatricality and (necessary) performance appear directly” (155).

For Butler, the location of a performative resistance relies on the “self-subversion” or vacuity of power. Blanton finds conflux with the Paulinist “tragic self-subversion or self-emptying” (157). As in his reading of Butler, Blanton also sees in Paul the attempt to form a new Big Other (for power's sake), that is in itself a short-circuit of power relations in an “invaginated space of communal subjectivity” (157). More than giving a concrete “spiritual exercise,” Blanton leaves this chapter with provoking questions. Is it possible to think of an executed messiah? “How are we able to think, to be, transgression, sin, crime, once power becomes identified with normalizing *bios*, with life itself?” (159) And finally, if Romans 7 and Galatians are worth anything to the Paulinists, “how does ‘law’ *produce its own transgression*” (159) and how can a community harness it?

In a typically Pauline fashion, the sublime question driving the beginning of chapter five is: Why not *transgress, transgress, transgress*? It is, in the end, a problem of desire, both desire for power but also among those who realize power does not exist. In this chapter we get the most out of the literary Paul; much discussion hovers over Rom. 7:21-4. Blanton draws out the concealed equality of surplus desire and surplus law. Where many a commentator has asserted Paul's desire to change one sovereign allegiance to another (“a new commandment”), Blanton argues Paul “himself calls sin's manifestation through the commandment to be ‘sin beyond measure’” (173). Indeed, if the (law-abiding?) messiah was crucified according to law (*nomos*), then the law must be subverted, even if that *nomos* be *Torah*. The Roman authorities, our capitalist masters, have too long lived off our excess desires and their excessive laws.

In the Conclusion, we realize again that this is a survey and critique of philosophical Paulinism and an argument for its sustained appearance in our neoliberal collective consciousnesses. For Blanton's part, he leaves with a parting question and riposte:

One of the uncomfortable questions of this book, which I posed to Nietzsche, to Freud, to Althusser, to Derrida, to Foucault, and to Deleuze is just this: why are *we* reading Paul in such a docile, traditional way? What are *we* preserving or protecting in *not* exposing Paul, as it were, to the unjustified, unsaved—or, simply, immanent—forms of always singular life in which we claim to believe? In each instance, I argue, this way of reading a biblical text (perhaps above all a biblical text!) is to set oneself up as *wanting* to escape metaphysics, all the while preserving oneself as the one able to look down on this moribund condition, or over at it, as if it were an object, a given entity, or an alter ego. And so these thinkers have continued to read Paul protectively, continued to cover him up in the glass of a museum casing, and this in order to guarantee an important distinction between their postmetaphysical present and a pop Platonic religiosity they rightly disavow. (186)

In the end, Blanton has lifted the veil on an aleatory undercurrent of a materialist Paulinism. The underground current is noticeable now (why Paul now?) under our current hyper-capitalist regimes, garnered by their excessive laws, desires, and meanings, so much so that the usual metaphysical logic is losing its power. For long periods of Western history, Christianity has carried and perpetuated this metaphysical logic, at the cost of repressing a Paulinist “materialism for the masses.” The trick for Blanton has been to draw out a singular Paul, from whom an immanence may now be accessible by the masses, if only for those who are willing to continue in new forms of a post-secular religion.

My first critique is Blanton’s resistance to the representation of Paul in favour of a form of immanent Paulinism. For me, Paul (and any social human) is always a singular representation of a network of immanences. Does the undercurrent of materialism that Blanton describes belong to Paul? Or to Paul’s scribe? Or to Paul’s lover? Since the first memory of Paul was formed, Paul has always been a representation of a number of non-archivable singular immanences. Put in another way, to favour the immanence of a singular historical figure over its representation is to repress a materialism *of* masses.

The second critique I have is a general critique, or more of a question, for the Paulinists: where are the women? Of course, Blanton engages Nicolet-Andersen and Judith Butler, but there are more sustained feminist critiques and scepticism of the Paulinist movement. Since this work surveys a vast amount of literature, it is worrisome that these critiques were not taken up. If a work that argues for an “underground current” finds an “underground current” that is an unquestioned universal singularity lingering under the surface of the Platonic Real, *that* undercurrent might also be ideology, and in this case, possibly a patriarchal ideology. I would have preferred to see Blanton engage with at least Elizabeth Castelli’s work on Foucault and Paul, and in addition, in her critical work in his own edited volume, *Paul and the Philosophers*. In short, the absence of feminist voices elicits a question for Blanton: do the feminists have a Platonist Paul, or is their own materialist reading different from Blanton’s materialist Paul?

We could also push forward, even just slightly, on the need for transgressing laws. What is needed, according to Blanton, is to transgress both *nomos* and *Torah*. In some cases, the law adapts to its own transgression. Examples of this would be old laws prohibiting homosexual marriages which have now become legalized by the state. Yet, in some cultures (recently in the U.S.), homosexual sex is still against a cultural “law.” Paul’s interaction with *Torah* must be pushed into the realm of transgressing cultural “laws,” which Foucault still has in mind. The minimal lawlessness he proscribes need not be limited to state apparatuses.

In conclusion, Blanton’s *Materialism for the Masses* is a requirement for those who will engage the Paulinists. While the book is not accessible to “the masses,” it surveys a vast amount of Paulinist literature, and creates a materialist space for further readings of Paul and further *becomings* of Pauls. Blanton does not invent this space but instead shows how it was there from the (originary) beginning.

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