What is blood? The many meanings of blood vividly attest to its polyvalent qualities and its unusual capacity for accruing layers of symbolic resonance. Life and death, nurturance and violence, connection and exclusion, kinship and sacrifice – the associations multiply, flowing between domains in a quite uncontainable manner. Whether expressed in the rhetoric of familial, racial, ethnic, or national exclusion, or in calls to violent action, idioms of blood often have exceptional emotional force. Blood has the capacity to flow in many directions: it is literally present in spaces of blood donation, and metaphorically central to sanguinary idioms in depictions of the economy. These essays illuminate through close anthropological and historical scrutiny blood’s special qualities as bodily substance, material, and metaphor. They suggest many reasons for elucidating a theory of blood.

Blood Will Out
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BLOOD WILL OUT

ESSAYS ON LIQUID TRANSFERS AND FLOWS

EDITED BY JANET CARSTEN
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Introduction: blood will out

Janet Carsten  
University of Edinburgh

Newspaper reports from Bangkok in March 2010 described a novel form of political demonstration. Thousands of demonstrators gathered to empty plastic containers of donated blood, collected from volunteers, on the fences and gateways to government headquarters. In a rite that seemed to combine elements of sacrifice and curse, and was also clearly a transformation of forms of civic participation in blood donation campaigns, the pouring away of blood became a vividly expressive act of political opposition to the perceived illegitimacy of the current regime (Associated Press 2010; see also Hugh-Jones 2011; Weston, this volume).

A little more than a year later, in April 2011, from a quite other part of the world, it was reported that, as prelude to Pope John Paul II’s beatification, a phial of his blood would be displayed as an object of veneration by the Vatican: ‘The Vatican said the blood, which had been stored in a Rome hospital, had been kept in a liquid state by an anti-coagulant that was added when it was taken from him’ (Hooper 2011).

The entanglement of the medical and religious encapsulated by the papal phial was further underlined by the description of how this blood had been obtained, and its potential future destinations:

The Vatican said doctors had taken a quantity of blood from the pontiff while he lay dying, which had been sent in four containers to the blood transfusion centre at the Bambino Gesu hospital in Rome. Two ‘remained at the disposal’ of his private secretary, Stanislaw Dziwisz, who was later made a cardinal and the archbishop of Krakow (Hooper 2011).

What is blood? This volume begins from the premise that the meanings attributed to blood are neither self-evident nor stable across (or even within) different cultural and historical locations. The many meanings of blood that are captured in the essays that follow vividly attest to its polyvalent qualities and its unusual capacity for accruing layers of symbolic resonance. Whether literally present in spaces of blood donation, as in the twentieth-century London or US contexts discussed here by Nicholas Whitfield and by Susan Lederer, respectively, or indicated through elaborated metaphor, as in
Kath Weston’s discussion of the deployment of sanguinary metaphors in depictions of the economy, blood has the capacity to flow in many directions. Analysing the meanings of blood in particular contexts illuminates its special qualities as bodily substance, material, and metaphor. But, taken together, these essays also attempt to answer another kind of question: can we have a theory of blood, and what would such a theory look like? If blood, like money, seems to be more or less ubiquitous, it departs from money in lacking a well-worked seam of sociological or anthropological theory with which it is associated. This initial puzzle suggests that, in assembling a volume on blood, we need to attend both to implicit theories of blood and to the several dispersed fields where they might be located.

The significance of blood, as the two opening vignettes make clear, is not limited to any of anthropology’s classic domains: politics, religion, kinship, or even to their more recent offshoots, such as the body or medical anthropology. Rather, the interest in blood lies in its propensity to travel within, between, and beyond all of these. Its scope, in other words, requires a broad view, and returns us to the insights of foundational work on symbolism, such as that of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969a [1962]) or Victor Turner (1967). While the former drew attention to the fact that ‘some objects are good to think’, the latter attended closely to the links between material properties and their emotional resonance in specific contexts. In demonstrating blood’s recurring but divergent significance across cultural and historical contexts, the essays collected here articulate another theme familiar from classic studies of symbolism: a tension between the ‘arbitrary’ nature of the sign (Saussure 1960 [1916]) and the particular power of ‘natural symbols’ (Douglas 2003 [1970]).

But what kind of thing is blood? Is it an unusual bodily material, a sub-category of corporeal substance, or is it part of some larger category whose significance is not constrained by bodily features? Is it part of the person and relationships, or an object that can be commodified (Baud 2011)? Or does its uniqueness stem, as Stephen Hugh-Jones (2011) argues, from the many spheres in which it participates, and the corollary that it is irreducible to the category either of commodity or of personhood? The connections between the essays collected here suggest that the meanings of blood are paradoxically both under- and over-determined. Seemingly open to endless symbolic elaboration, its significance appears from one perspective to be curiously open; but from another point of view, it is this very excess of potentiality that is over-determined. Not only does blood have a remarkable range of meanings and associations in English (Carsten 2011), but many of these readily encompass their antinomies (Bynum 2007: 187). The essays in this volume demonstrate that blood may be associated with fungibility, or transformability, as well as essence; with truth and transcendence and also with lies and corruption; with contagion and violence but also with purity and harmony; and with vitality as well as death.

The contexts presented here are indeed wide-ranging: depictions of blood in German medieval religious and medical texts (Bildhauer); politically inspired portraiture executed literally in blood in contemporary India (Copeman); Mormon conceptions of blood in the United States (Cannell); transformations in ideas about blood donation in twentieth-century Britain and the United States (Whitfield; Lederer); practices concerned with the flow and fungibility of blood, food, and water in the body among peasants in Northeast Brazil (Mayblin); working practices in clinical pathology labs and blood banks in Malaysia (Carsten); the interpenetration of blood and finance in descriptions of trade and capitalism in the global economy (Weston); and up-to-date...
brain imaging for medical purposes in the United States in which blood seems strangely absent (Martin). In keeping with this diversity of contexts, the contributors approach their material in remarkably different ways. While several of the contributions are historically framed, relying on both documentary and visual material, others attend to contemporary narratives about blood, and are based on close observation of particular contexts or the interplay between spoken exegesis and visual images. Some of the discussions rely on a juxtaposition of such different kinds of evidence. We hope that the range of evidence and approaches offered within and between these essays will be an added enticement for readers to engage with our subject matter.

The obvious geographical, cultural, and historical discontinuities between the sites discussed here suggest that commonalities between them might be fortuitous or far-fetched. In fact, the essays demonstrate continuities in blood symbolism where we might not expect them – in the idea that blood reveals the truth, for example, which appears in the context of medieval medical and religious texts discussed by Bettina Bildhauer, in the exegesis on portraits painted in blood of Indian martyrs for Independence analysed by Jacob Copeman, in the history of twentieth-century blood-typing documented by Lederer, and in the Malaysian political rhetoric and practices of clinical pathology labs that I describe. But there are also discontinuities in contexts where we might perhaps expect to see similarities. For example, the two historical considerations of the twentieth-century development of blood donation and transfusion services considered here, that of Britain, discussed by Whitfield, and of the United States, by Lederer, reveal some very different underlying social anxieties – in the one case about class, and in the other about race, among other concerns.2 To take another example, the two contemporary Christian settings – that of Latter-day Saints in the United States considered by Fenella Cannell, and rural Catholics in Northeast Brazil by Maya Mayblin – reveal strikingly divergent ideas about blood. The rather ‘eviscerated’ notions of blood articulated in the Mormon case may be linked to wider Protestant precepts and iconography, while Mayblin’s analysis shows a remarkable ‘fit’ between the ideas about blood, water, and sacrifice that she elucidates and prevailing conditions of water scarcity in the local ecology. The contrast thus appears to speak to a complex interplay between historical forces and the development of Christianity in specific locations. But it also is suggestive of how symbolic registers may be elaborated (or reduced) in an implicitly contrastive logic that underlies and contributes to the historical differentiation of divergent branches of a world religion.

If discontinuities between the cases discussed here emerge as much as continuities, this might perhaps be regarded as an expected outcome of the close attention paid by the authors of these essays to the specific sites, locations, historical eras, and cultures they have studied. In this sense, the essays are separately and collectively intended as a contribution to an ‘anthropology of blood’. In drawing together the themes that unite them in this introduction, however, I have endeavoured to foreground continuities where these emerge – perhaps partly because these seem more arresting in the face of the obvious dissimilarities between contexts. This disposition also reflects the starting-point for this collective endeavour, which was not only to grasp the cultural specificities of ideas about blood, but also to look for commonalities, and to understand their wider significance. Locating this discussion in a wider anthropological literature has also highlighted how, while there is much previous work that is relevant, there has been surprisingly little sustained attention given to placing this topic in a comparative frame.
In tracing the ways in which blood flows within and beyond the locations discussed in this collection, what emerges most clearly is the literal uncontainability of blood – its capacity to move between domains, including the religious, political, familial, financial, artistic, and medical, which in other contexts are often kept separate. Delineating the contours of this uncontainability of blood, and examining how it operates, brings to light further themes that illuminate blood’s particular qualities. Some are closely tied to its material attributes and its bodily manifestations, others involve symbolic or metaphorical elaboration, but often the distinctions between physical stuff and metaphorical allusion seem porous and difficult to disentangle. Some symbolic associations may refer to or resonate with others, and may also allude to physical or material qualities. A distinction between literal or material qualities and metaphorical ones is of course further undermined by the fact that, as the essays collected here show, what are claimed as the literal or material qualities of blood are themselves culturally and historically variable.3 Tim Ingold’s emphasis on the processual and relational properties of materials seems apt here: ‘To describe the properties of materials is to tell the stories of what happens to them as they flow, mix and mutate’ (2011: 30).

In the discussion that follows, the themes of materiality, bodily connection, contagion, violence, transformability, and vitality are associated with apparently literal or physical attributes of blood. But they may also emerge in more symbolic or metaphorical ways. So, as in the example of the Thai political demonstrations or Pope John Paul II’s blood with which I began, these themes segue into others that are less closely tied to blood’s physical manifestations: ancestral connection, truth, morality, corruption, and transcendence. And this suggests that blood might be a productive medium through which to consider symbolic processes, metaphor, and naturalization (see Jackson 1983; Lakoff & Johnson 1980).

The main themes of the essays have already been mentioned: blood’s multiple and sometimes contradictory registers; the relation between metaphor and materiality; blood’s apparent capacity to encapsulate the truth; its association with vitality. All of the essays in different ways bring together practices or discourses that might more conventionally be analysed separately, including those concerning religion, medicine, politics, kinship, and economics, showing how images of blood or ideas and practices relating to blood run through these, sometimes providing continuities, but also often disjunctures, of register.

In keeping with blood’s tendency to flow between and beyond specific sites, the structure of this introduction does not adhere to the bounded domains of classic anthropological texts. Through the medium of blood, we see how – as in real life – politics may merge with religion or medicine, and the lines between morality, kinship, religious ritual, and health practices may be difficult to discern. This necessitates paying close attention through these themes to the ways in which metaphors are deployed, as well as to blood’s physical attributes, before tacking back to our starting-point. To explore what blood is, what a theory of it might look like, or the wider processes such a theory might illuminate, we need first to delineate some of blood’s distinctive features.

The materiality of blood
Anthropological analysis does not always proceed from what is hidden or obscure. Sometimes it is the most obvious features of objects or relations that call for attention. Blood has a unique combination of material properties that make it distinctive within
and outside the body. Colour and liquidity are the most striking of these, but their co-occurrence and association in the body with heat, and the propensity of blood to clot, turning from liquid to solid, may be equally important to its capacity for symbolic elaboration (see Carsten 2011; Fraser & Valentine 2006). Colour was of course central to Victor Turner’s classic symbolic analysis, and his discussion underlines the significance of the connection between the striking visual features of blood and its emotional resonance (1967: 88–9).

Several of the authors in this volume connect blood’s material properties to the way it is symbolically elaborated in particular contexts. Bildhauer’s discussion of medieval texts, building on her earlier study (Bildhauer 2006), shows how both colour and heat together are central to its medical and miraculous properties. Here we are immediately confronted with the impossibility of separating these qualities from religious notions. Medieval concepts of blood, as Caroline Bynum (2007) has shown, are bound up with ideas about the sacred and, in particular, with the miraculous eternal vitality of Christ’s blood, encapsulated in powerful relics. While Christ’s blood in these ideas is seen as exceptional, the blood of humans, as discussed below, holds the body and soul together. Normally hidden in the body, when it becomes visible it gives access to the truth. Because of its living qualities, bleeding is a sign of crisis. Good blood is a sign of health, while either too much or too little blood in the body may cause sickness and require regulation through medical attention. Blood can thus secure life, but also be a source of danger through its lack of boundaries.

In an utterly different context – but one that is linked by the importance of Catholicism – Mayblin considers the significance of blood for peasants in the drought-ridden Northeast of Brazil. She shows how blood partakes in a ‘fluid economy’ where its liquid property is part of a wider system of ideas in which access to water for agriculture is paramount to survival, but which also connects to religious ideas about the significance of Christ’s sacrifice. Here peasants understand themselves to be involved in their own sacrificial labour in the fields in which the water and nourishment they lose through the sweat and energy of hard work must be continually replenished. Crucially, water and food that are consumed are transformed in the body into blood. But when these villagers are unwell, their preferred form of cure is to administer sterile isotonic solution, soro, intravenously as a form of instant infusion that replenishes and strengthens the body. This especially pure form of liquid can be likened to the sacrificial water that gushes from Christ’s side, as depicted in highly valued local religious imagery, and which is associated with the holy spirit and with life. Soro is understood to be particularly effective in replenishing blood that is continually depleted through everyday human sacrificial labour. Here water, food, and blood exist as transformations, or possible substitutions, of each other, and exhibit varying states of purity – a theme that is also present in Bildhauer’s discussion of medieval texts, and to which I return below.

While material properties of blood are clearly central to both Bildhauer and Mayblin’s analyses, they are also just one starting-point for grasping the medical and religious understandings delineated in their essays. In analogous ways, the colour and liquidity of blood might be seen to enable other practices discussed in this volume. The portraits of Indian martyrs for Independence described by Copeman that are literally (as well as metaphorically) painted in blood make use of its redness and liquid form – though interestingly, as neither quality persists outside the body, these have to be artificially enhanced. Here the interpenetration of metaphorical and literal meanings of blood is especially dense, and the emotional resonance of these pictures rests on the
complex entanglement of historical, national, political, medical, and bodily perceptions of sacrifice (see also Copeman 2009a). If Copeman’s essay offers a particularly vivid depiction of how different meanings of blood evoke and amplify each other, it also powerfully demonstrates the centrality of visual and material cues to these wider resonances.

But of course blood’s physical properties cannot simply be thought of as the causal factor in what is obviously a very complex web of signification. Sometimes these properties actually limit the uses to which blood may be put. Thus in the twentieth-century development of blood collection for transfusion and of blood-typing, discussed by Lederer and by Whitfield for the United States and Britain, respectively, physiological barriers to the use of one person’s blood in the body of another had to be overcome. Nevertheless, as both these essays demonstrate, the fact that transfusion might result in adverse bodily reaction was itself amenable to interpretation in social and racial terms. The history of premodern European ideas about the links between blood and heredity shows how elements in such thinking long pre-dated innovations in blood collection (de Miramon 2009; Nirenberg 2009). Such entanglements were both persistent and amenable to historical transformation in new circumstances (see, e.g., Foucault 1990 [1976]: 147).

Accounts of one of the earliest experiments in animal-to-human blood transfusion, conducted in 1667 under the auspices of the Royal Society, in which Arthur Coga was transfused with the blood of a sheep, indicate that the religious and moral connotations of blood were very apparent to participants. Coga’s assertion (made in Latin) that ‘sheep’s blood has some symbolic power, like the blood of Christ, for Christ is the lamb of God’, reportedly ‘became a topic of London wit’ (Schaffer 1998: 101). While the leap from scientific experiments on transfusion to Lamb of God was taken humourously, concerns about the moral and spiritual qualities of blood permeate contemporary discussions about such experiments (see Schaffer 1998). It appears likely that, as Mayblin suggests, the liquidity of blood encourages a heightened possibility of multiple associations envisioned in terms of flow within and between bodies. But the entanglements of scientific rationalism and religious imagery also underline that the material qualities of blood are only one plausible starting-point for understanding its symbolic salience.

**Fungibility and substance**

We are already confronted by the difficulty of containing an anthropological discussion of blood within any of its particular dimensions. Attention to its material qualities has merged with consideration of religious, political, racial, and other matters. But there is an interesting symmetry here in terms of understandings of blood within the body. The essays of Bildhauer and Mayblin underline how blood may be conceived as the transformation in the body of food that has been consumed. These are just two instances of a culturally more widespread phenomenon, partly associated with the spread of humoral medicine, and which can also encompass other bodily fluids, such as semen and breast milk, that are understood as transformations of blood (see, e.g., Carsten 1997; Good & delVechio Good 1992). Thus blood itself is not a stable entity, and its composition and quantity may be altered through adjustments to diet, blood-letting, or other means that are undertaken to achieve improvements to health and/or the proper balance of different humours.
Changes in the composition or quantity of blood in the body may be purposefully achieved but they may also be inadvertent, resulting from illness, accident, or misadventure or – as in the case of peasants in Northeast Brazil – from the sheer wear and tear of hard work. But one might say that processes of life itself and social exchange bring about such alterations. The consumption of food, breastfeeding, and sex are widely understood to have serious implications for health and well-being. Elaborate rules governing these practices in order to maintain purity or reduce the possibility of contagion, such as those of the caste system in India, are one expression of such ideas (see, e.g., Daniel 1984; Lambert 2000; Marriott 1976; Marriott & Inden 1977). The physical importance of blood within the body, and its role in supporting life, make it an apparently obvious focus for regimes of bodily vigilance through blood-letting or other means. One might see the widespread occurrence of menstrual taboos or the negative associations of menstruation as more or less over-determined both by the significance of blood and by the connection of menstruation with processes of fertility, sex, and gender (Knight 1991; Martin 1992 [1987]; this volume).

As well as being subject to transformation within the body, blood can of course also be thought to be a vector of connection between bodies or persons. This may be articulated as occurring through the transfer of semen or breast milk (both, as noted, perceived as transformed blood), through maternal feeding in the womb, or through habitual acts of commensality, which are perceived to produce blood of the same kind in the different bodies of those who share food. Here liquidity seems to be a key quality, and the symbolic resonance of bodily fluids may be enhanced by the fact that sexual intercourse, breastfeeding, and family meals are often occasions of heightened emotionality (Taylor 1992; Turner 1967). As historians and anthropologists have observed, the physical transformation understood in Christian ideas to be set in train by marital relations – in which husband and wife become ‘one body’ or ‘one flesh’ – had profound implications for ideas about marriage and marriageability in Europe (Johnson, Jussen, Sabean & Teuscher 2013; Kuper 2009). A parallel can be drawn here with a concern in Islamic contexts about the potential incestuous implications of breastfeeding in case of future marriage between those who have consumed milk from the same woman (Carsten 1995; Parkes 2004; 2005).

In many cultures, being ‘of one blood’ or the phrase ‘blood relation’ connotes kinship. While this connection might seem almost too obvious to be worth stating, and is certainly central to Euro-American ideas about relatedness (Schneider 1980 [1968]), anthropological renditions of exactly how the connection between blood and kinship is understood further afield have often been surprisingly imprecise or under-specified (Carsten 2011; Ingold 2007: 110-11).4 And this seems to be partly a result of the implicit conflation of Euro-American indigenous ideas with anthropological analysis of the sort that David Schneider (1984) warned against. Somewhat bizarrely, however, considering the attention Schneider paid to sexual procreation in this regard, his own usage (and that of his informants) of blood and the ‘blood relation’ in American kinship was highly unspecified (Carsten 2004: 112), and this is the starting-point for Cannell’s essay in this volume. As she elegantly documents, blood in US culture – or in the subculture that Mormonism represents – can have many meanings, and these cannot be assumed to be historically or culturally stable.

If materiality constitutes the first set of under-theorized aspects of blood to be considered here, then kinship can be seen as a second field in which blood is often invoked but more rarely analysed with much theoretical precision. Because of the
continuities between kinship and wider ideas of social connection, this is a significant lapse that inhibits understanding of the ways in which rather abstract political ideologies that draw on kinship, such as nationalism, are rendered emotionally salient (Anderson 1991 [1983]; Carsten 2004: chap 6; Foucault 1990 [1976]; Robertson 2002; 2012). Before returning to the power of blood as political and religious symbol, I take up another apparently more physically circumscribed theme from the contributions in this volume – the importance of blood in medical contexts.

Donation

We have seen how the imagery of blood in kinship connection may blend ideas that have a literal referent, in terms of bodily fluids, with more symbolic or metaphorical usages. But metaphorical allusions to connections ‘in the blood’ apparently also occur in the absence of any obvious literal source. The donation and collection of blood for transfusion might then be expected to provide a rich and rather open set of opportunities for possible symbolic elaboration. Not surprisingly, anthropologists have recently turned to blood donation to explore its meanings and cultural significance (see Copeman 2009b). An emerging body of scholarship on blood donation in New Guinea (Street 2009), India (Copeman 2004; 2005; 2008; 2009a; 2009c), Brazil (Sanabria 2009), Sri Lanka (Simpson 2009), the United Kingdom (H. Busby 2006), and the Indian community in Houston, USA (Reddy 2007), amongst other locations, demonstrates the complex ways in which blood donation both draws on and expands local practices and idioms of gift-giving, the body, political, religious, or personal sacrifice, kinship connection, and ethics. One obvious point underlined by this work is the importance of considering blood donation not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a ‘total social fact’ – to co-opt an apt Maussian phrase.

Efforts to encourage blood donation in contexts of scarcity, as well as the declared motivations of donors, draw on ethical discourses from a combination of religion, politics, or kinship – as conventionally delineated by anthropologists. This suggests that an analysis of the symbolic mechanisms through which blood operates needs to place the medical contexts in which blood donation occurs within this much wider frame, and, conversely, that medical practices have the effect of multiplying the emotional and symbolic potential of blood (Copeman 2009a; 2009b; Hugh-Jones 2011). There is a parallel to be drawn here with organ donation, in which a shortage of available organs has been seen to jeopardize potentially the ethical management of transplantation. While attention has been focused on ‘tissue economies’ (Waldby & Mitchell 2006), issues of ‘bioavailability’ (Cohen 2005), or the trafficking of human organs (Schepa-Hughes 2000; 2004), it is also clear that such pressures are often ambivalently experienced, for example, through the medium of family ties (Das 2010; Fox & Swazey 1992; 2002 [1974]; Lock 2000; 2002; Sharp 1995; Simmons, Simmons & Marine 1987). Perhaps not surprisingly, the connections to donors and their families envisaged by organ recipients also have the potential to be elaborated in terms of kinship, and to be understood as transforming aspects of the person. This is particularly evident in cases of heart transplants, and is apparently associated with the heart’s centrality to notions of the person and understandings of it as the seat of the emotions (Bound Alberti 2010; Lock 2002; Sharp 2006).

Blood donation seems generally to be apprehended in terms of more diffuse relations than those set in train by heart transplantation. Nevertheless, Copeman notes the strong link between the idea that donated blood has come ‘from the heart’ and the