NOAH’S NAKEDNESS:
ISLAM, RACE, AND THE FANTASY OF THE CHRISTIAN WEST

Roland Boer and Ibrahim Abraham

Hay Moros en la Costa (Beware! There are Muslims on the Coast!)

Jews and Muslims have more in common than any religion, ever… Both Jews and Muslims don’t eat pork. We don’t celebrate Christmas. We both use ‘ccchhh’ in our pronunciation. And we’re both hairy creatures of God.¹

This essay is quite simply an exercise in puncturing the fantasy of the Christian West. We begin by considering a foundational text in that fantasy, Genesis 9:18–29, the story of Noah’s drunkenness and subsequent curse of Canaan, usually misnamed the curse of Ham. From there we move on to three moments of that fantasy in order to show that the very possibility of a Christian West relies as much on Islam as it does on Judaism. But let us lay out our basic argument before exploring its various dimensions: in the same way that the story of Noah’s nakedness over-reaches itself to distinguish Israel from Canaan, thereby showing the very Canaanite-ness of Israel, so also the frantic effort of the Christian West to distinguish itself from the ‘East,’ in this case the Muslim East, shows through the effort itself that the Christian West relies for its very possibility on Islam. However, it is the subcultures of the West, often hidden from view, that show up the truth of the Christian West.

Noah and That Sweet Red Wine

But let us tarry for a moment with our text, Genesis 9:18–29. Here we find Noah planting a vineyard, his first act after the flood, and

drinking himself legless. Ham, his son, sees his father naked in the tent, sleeping off the drink, and tells his two brothers, Shem and Japheth. These two promptly grab a cloak, holding it over their shoulders and walking backwards so they wouldn’t view the old man’s nakedness (i.e. the family jewels) while they cover him with it. In response Noah blesses them when sober again and curses Canaan to be the slave of the other two:

Cursed be Canaan! A slave of slaves will he be for his brothers.

Praise Yahweh the God of Shem! Canaan will be his slave.

May God increase Japheth, and may he dwell in the tents of Shem.

Canaan will be his slave (Gen 9:25–27).2

Out of many features, two things interest us with this text. The first is the curious pace of narrative time: the initial impression is deceptive, for it all seems to happen in a rather concise time-frame from Noah’s drunken sleep to the curse—perhaps no more than one afternoon to the following morning. But just when we feel comfortable with this little domestic scene, we find that our eye has passed all too quickly over the initial verses, especially: “Noah, a man of the ground (Adamah),3 was the first to plant a vineyard. And he drank from the wine and became drunk” (Gen 9:20–21a). The sparest of words for a much greater time span than the rest of the story—for it takes some years to prepare the soil, plant and nurture grape vines, harvest the grapes, tread them down and let them ferment before one take that first welcome sip. Noah must have been just a little thirsty after the wait. The story suddenly blows out and the little vignette concerning the cloak, nakedness and curse that seemed to be its main concern turns out to be but a moment in a much longer stretch of time. But once we have been alerted to the tension between these two elements of narrative time—the longer time has the briefest of descriptions whereas the short time of the incident takes up much more textual space in slow-moving detail—we begin to find other dimensions of narrative time. Does the text not also refer to the three sons of Noah as the seminal source of ‘all the earth’ (Gen 9:19)? And does it not close, or at least pause, with the brief mention of Noah’s 350 years after the flood and 950 years of his life as a whole? We are quite clearly reading a text with epic pretensions, and it is in

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2 Unless otherwise specified, the biblical translations are by Roland Boer.
3 Noah is of course another Adam, another character made from Adamah, ‘ground’ or ‘earth’.