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# **THE LIVES OF OBJECTS**

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Material Culture, Experience,  
and the Real in the History  
of Early Christianity

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**MAIA KOTROSITS**

The University of Chicago Press  
*Chicago and London*

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637

The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

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Published 2020

Printed in the United States of America

29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20      1 2 3 4 5

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-70744-0 (cloth)

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-70758-7 (paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-70761-7 (e-book)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226707617.001.0001>

{~?~CIP data to come}

⊗ This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992  
(Permanence of Paper).

# CONTENTS

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*Introduction* 000

- 1** Objects Made Real: The Art of Description 000
- 2** Citizens of Fallen Cities: Ruins, Diaspora, and the Material Unconscious 000
- 3** Histories Unwritten in Stone: The Frustrations of Memorialization 000
- 4** Tertullian of Carthage and the Materiality of Power (with Carly Daniel-Hughes) 000
- 5** The Perils of Translation: Martyrs' Last Words and the Cultural Materiality of Speech 000
- 6** Penetration and Its Discontents: Agency, Touch, and Objects of Desire 000
- 7** Darkening the Discipline: Fantasies of Efficacy and the Art of Redescription 000

*Acknowledgments* 000   *Notes* 000   *Bibliography* 000



**Might it not be that the main point  
of the performance is a denial of deadness . . . ?**

D. W. WINNICOTT, "THE MANIC DEFENCE"





# INTRODUCTION

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## The Lives of Objects

You move from your home, are perhaps forced to move, and are packing up. You are feeling numb. You pack objects, now both alien and familiar, heavy and strange in your hands: objects that made more sense in the landscape of a life, however provisional. Now their thingness, their density feels more distinct, their value questionable or intensified. You pack them, you give or throw them away. They go on to live a different life, take on different uses, accrue more or less value, or become trash.

Despite their unreliable value and mobility of meaning, given the swiftness of time and the unpredictability of change, objects can take on a curious solidity, a steadiness. As remnants, they contain pasts by externalizing memories, for one, but their obvious form of presence might also offer a more subliminal reassurance that *some* things, some *things*, remain (whether we'd like them to or not). In and among all the confused narratives of what happened, the postmortems for a moment not ever fully concluded, the subtexts and whys, the repeated reconfigurations of proximity to and distance from people and places, there is the blunt and unequivocal object.

How might we interrupt this apparent solidity of things?

This is a book about the lives of objects considered through a history of the ancient Mediterranean. It is about the nonobvious histories of obvious physical artifacts, and about the ways in which, across time and geography, colonial relations and collectives crystallize in the tangible, material world. It is about the ways in which aliveness and deadness, agency and objectification—fully political categories—were points of ongoing reflection in ancient worlds, no less than contemporary ones. I render the ancient Mediterranean in terms of its subterranean social content, and read themes

of life and death, vitality and breakdown, in both ancient and contemporary literature as they touch questions of political self-determination (sovereignty) and cultural solvency. In this way, the ancient world, and particularly what we call early Christian literature, is not the exclusive focus of this book as much as it is the needle's eye for considering a more expansive set of historical, sociopolitical, and theoretical questions. The ancient world and its remains offer condensed illustrations for the ways people grapple with the materiality of life.

But this is also, and perhaps more, a book about objects of *attachment*—those relationships, figures, and elements that live on in the psyche—and the dynamic place of those objects, as considered through the history of what has been designated as early Christianity. It is about the subtle intonations and furtive psychic content of those things that consistently draw ancient attention and/or scholarly energies: ruins, statues of the gods and emperors, the “bad” student. And it is about the elaborate worlds we devise, especially the ways the worlds we devise make some things (people, experiences) matter more than others—make them more material. My interests are both historical and historiographical, focused not only on making sense of ancient lives and experiences, but also on how we imaginatively reconstruct those lives or experiences.

In other words, this book approaches materiality (and what is implied by it) both critically and expansively. It destabilizes material objects as such, their “realness,” mostly by noticing that their stability is a product of *psychological work*. It points to other, seemingly less solid things as no less actual or significant. Inflected by theories of the psyche, it is a series of meditations on the tensions between fantasy and reality, readability and the illegible, physical elements and their subtexts. It mixes and moves between ancient history and contemporary cultural studies to ask: What appears real to us? What appears to us *at all*, and why?

## **MATERIALISMS AND OBJECTS OF INTEREST**

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This project began with a curiosity about the renewed attraction (an attraction I share) to material culture in the ancient world—those more distinctly physical elements of the ancient cultural landscape. Numerous fields across the humanities have witnessed a swell of revived interest in the tangible artifacts and processes that form the often underacknowledged basis for

scholarly work. To name a few in studies of the ancient Mediterranean: manuscript variations, book production, and the dating of long-dried ink on papyrus; inscriptions in situ; architectural remains and the reliefs that decorate them; burial practices; the spatial organization of houses and marketplaces; the sizes of dining rooms where various groups met for banquets; the assortment of objects—crowns, clay pots, and weapons, described in scrupulous specificity—held by ancient hands.<sup>1</sup>

In a mostly parallel development, over the past fifteen years or so, concentrated in cultural studies, literary studies, queer studies, and philosophy, the collective attention has settled on the sensible world and our mechanisms for sensing it. Social theories of emotion and affect—a basic capacity to feel, be moved, or respond—emerged out of a kind of frustration or weariness with the linguistic turn, of which these same fields were prime propagators.<sup>2</sup> The linguistic turn, the shift toward analyzing the ways in which language or discourse both constructs what is perceived as real and funds power relations in the social world, was characterized, at least in part, by a fist shaken at the Cartesian formulation “I think therefore I am” (*cogito ergo sum*) and the sovereign, knowing subject it emblemized. These new materialist theories that turned to the sensible world and its affective impressions on us heightened the gesture. In social theories of emotion, bodies course with social forces, and dominant narrative histories are countered with attention to the more seemingly ephemeral effects of these forces.<sup>3</sup> Feeling—that which seems most personal, internal to us—is an experience of social incursion, one that forms us and those collectives to which we belong. In new materialism, the already shaky subject-object opposition and human-animal divide began to disintegrate, producing a world ever more vivid and dynamic, one crackling with liveliness, uncertain fluidity, and strange affinities.<sup>4</sup>

In studies of ancient societies, the world of words, at once ethereal and noisy, has given way to the somewhat stark and quiet, but comfortingly palpable, world of things. But these quiet things, these objects of our affection, cull no small amount of words around them. Likewise, even the list of curiosities attending the materialist turn in studies of the ancient Mediterranean, especially, so many of which are about writing in some form, suggests we haven't turned (or can't or won't turn) away from utterances. Indeed there seems to be a kind of tension issuing from the collective turn away from linguistic analyses and toward various kinds of materialist ones. The tension, I want to suggest, is an epistemological one: a tension about “thereness,” or what those of us who do history might traditionally call data or

evidence.<sup>5</sup> Objects and spaces, codices and temples, can be seen or touched, if not by us, than by someone. They offer a distinct sense of not just groundedness, but legitimacy in an enterprise like ancient history that can seem, not without reason, marginal and capricious if not downright whimsical. Likewise the linguistic turn and its associated relativities around what constitutes the real might feel a little too friendly, to put it gently, to a political climate now operating (at least in the United States) more explicitly in the realm of “alternative facts.”

I’ve been riveted by the materialist turn in studies of the ancient world(s). This is less because of the verifiability or legitimacy it promises than because the linguistic turn in the field abetted an already problematic overattention to the statistically minor practice of literary production for understanding the ancient Mediterranean. With the linguistic turn came not just questions about the construction of reality through discourse, but a fantasy that writing could tell us everything. Material objects represent and often preserve a certain element of intractability in the writing of history. Less pliable than language, material objects can’t or don’t always do what you want them to.<sup>6</sup>

The materialist attachments in contemporary theory circles have likewise circulated around, and wobbled on, the question of thereness and the real. Feelings are ephemeral, after all, and the attraction to ghosts and haunting as thought-figures in some of this work, especially in queer theory, illustrated the way affective historiography endeavored to unseat those traditional forms of history and renditions of reality that maligned subjective experiences (especially minoritized ones) and their expression as insubstantial, negligible, or indulgent.<sup>7</sup> And yet some of this work was founded on a desire to engage with work in the so-called hard sciences, to be grounded in some biological particulars of human experience, even at the risk of the essentialism so disavowed by poststructuralist theory.<sup>8</sup> When affect indicates not feelings but rather an elemental, if unevenly distributed, capacity of all existent things, the force of the work is in its *reanimation* of a world rendered dull and still by a disillusioned modernism.<sup>9</sup> But the central place of the sciences in so much new materialist theory suggests not simply some further, if still tentative, erosion of familiar disciplinary divides. Humanities scholars’ blending of work in the sciences (associated with the concrete) with work in the humanities (associated with the interpretive) more distinctly suggests a desire on the part of the humanities to touch something more *solid*, to make contact with certain externalities that have been foreclosed in the self-referential focus of poststructuralist theory.<sup>10</sup>

This book is not just born of these tensions across fields, but seeks to intensify and stage them. I am dissatisfied with the ontological bombast and universalizing around language so characteristic of the body of literature housed under the linguistic turn (Derrida, Foucault, Lacan). But I can't turn away, and so I play out renegotiations of some of those figures and their claims on other terms. Besides, the linguistic turn as indebted to psychoanalytic theory brought with it something I do not wish to leave behind: it sheltered in it a certain relativization of the visible and the obvious. As suggested by the now clichéd iceberg analogy for the unconscious, in which most of the substance of the psyche exists below the observable surface, psychoanalytic epistemologies taught that what we see is only a fraction of what we get, and that even then we don't always know what we're getting. That is, the unconscious presents us with striking intimacy the limits of our knowing. The observable is but a tantalizing hint of the total picture. Thus "symptomatic" readings emerged with the linguistic turn. In symptomatic readings, the words on the page were manifestations of the much larger, infinitely more complicated and consequential world of the unsaid. The coherence and unity of meaning, like the coherence and unity of the person, are undone by the implicit associations of the said, which offer a glimpse into the forces and conflicts at work behind the scenes.<sup>11</sup>

Not incidentally, the ancient world was an important analogue for the psyche for Freud. Actually, it was the ruins of the ancient world that he evoked: "Now let us, but a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past—an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one."<sup>12</sup> Commenting on this passage, Shane Butler notices the counterintuitive use of Rome as a place where *nothing* is lost, "[W]here [Freud] gives us a scenario of potentially total recall (the return of the forgotten or repressed), the Romantic imagination had instead surveyed, with melancholic desire, a scene of irremediable destruction."<sup>13</sup> For Freud, the remains of Rome/the psyche call forth and necessitate attending to a much broader, deeper scene. Thus this book offers some provocations in chapter 2, "Citizens of Fallen Cities," on the place of ruins in postcolonial (and psychosocial) landscapes of the ancient and modern worlds. Of course ruins, as objects that gesture toward absence and erasure, occupy an uncertain place in relationship to materiality from the get-go.

But psychoanalysis is nothing if not a history. What's more, it is a history in which, as Adam Phillips puts it, what we might normally think of

as facts are neither obvious nor necessarily the most relevant dimensions of that history.<sup>14</sup> Psychoanalysis is also a history of objects. It is most definitively so in the object-relations school of psychoanalysis tracing back to Melanie Klein. In object-relations, relationships are rendered into discrete, even concretized forms that we consume or internalize. The relationship between mother and child becomes concretized in the breast, for example. Psychoanalysis likewise demonstrates how thoroughly the past, as that which we think is dead or over, is animating the present as we relive our traumas, repeat our primary relationships, and build our worlds and ourselves out of bits and pieces of bygone people and events. In the Freudian scheme, the human psyche contains impersonal, inhuman parts (the id or the “it” being the prime example), and the psyche is the place in which subjects and objects are made. It is the place where subjects and objects are distinguished and no longer easily distinguishable. That is to say, part of the materialism of psychoanalysis is that it treats objects and matter or what matters as elastic.<sup>15</sup>

Can our renewed interest in what physically remains of the past hold this more ample notion of thereness? Can it hold this destabilization of relevant facts, and especially this subtle inquiry into the mind-work around objectification and the animate that psychoanalysis (for one) provokes? Can it afford not to? How will we be responsible to the ephemeral dimensions of life that typically seem immaterial in considerations of history but are the very substance of our own experience?

Before I address these questions more directly, I want to claim some of the subtexts and historical assumptions that underpin the readings here. I want to also map some of the theories that inflect my narratives or get elaborated in a more methodical way.

### **STAGING THE REAL: ON FANTASY AS A HISTORICAL CATEGORY**

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In a piece on the history of dream interpretation (“The Future of Dreams: From Freud to Artemidorus”) thirty years ago, S. R. F. Price observed the heavy hand of psychoanalytic (specifically Freudian) approaches to human experience and the structure of the self on understandings of ancient dreams. In so doing, he argued vehemently against modern psychoanalytic readings of ancient literature and figures. His reasons are both historical and ethi-

cal or ideological: Freud's internalized, introspective model of the human psyche constitutes a "radical break" from ancient notions of the self.<sup>16</sup> The "asocial, apolitical nature" of Freudian theory, with its focus on individuals, is "unlikely to be informative historically," Price writes. "It might be illuminating for the biographies of individuals, but it cannot make sense of the cultural configurations specific to that society."<sup>17</sup> Critiquing not just the universalism but the "ethnocentric and Whiggish tendencies" of psychological readings of historical figures,<sup>18</sup> Price (rightly, I think) suggests we put both Freud's introspective approach to dreams and Artemidorus's predictive approach to dreams into cultural perspective.

For all of Price's steep rhetoric, he illustrates a circulating sentiment regarding the application of psychoanalytic theory to ancient history and literature.<sup>19</sup> Obviously Price's conviction that the individual or personal/subjective offers us little if any read on culture is unfounded. That presumption has been undone by feminist epistemologies and recent theories of affect after and indebted to them. Individuals and their experiences are knit into social fabrics at the most intimate of levels, and so there is genuine historical traction and heat generated in thinking through those more apparently individual experiences, in the same way that, post-Foucault, texts have been understood as being less about individual authors and more about cultural discourses. Likewise I would quarrel with a hardened distinction between modern and ancient people, with its ironically essentialist tendencies. Such a perspective insists that ancient people are *absolutely* different from modern ones, and that therefore their experiences, no matter how apparently compatible, should not be submitted to modern rubrics.

While certain specified assumptions from psychoanalytic thinkers might sustain hits in these pages (most notably perhaps in chapter 6, "Penetration and Its Discontents"), those hits are not taken in the name of history. Do we really think that ancient people had no ulterior motives? Do we believe they were transparent to themselves, or that because they didn't think in predominantly individualist terms, there was no depth at an individual level? One can note the ways terms and concepts in both the contemporary and the ancient world might point (sometimes awkwardly or partially) to compatible experiences, and do so without imputing a specific historical understanding of the structure of the person.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed fantasy (*phantasia* in ancient Greek) is one such concept that points toward compatible, transhistorical experiences of creativity, invention, and imagination. Ancient minds were active as, for instance, Jaś Elsner has demonstrated in *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text*.

Ancient visual culture stirred and provoked the imaginations of its on-lookers. In fact Elsner's very thesis that ancient people *formed their subjectivity* through viewing and being viewed would seem to require not just narrative creativity on the part of ancient people, but some level of internalized self-reflection. And ancient people had dreams, as Patricia Cox Miller has richly catalogued. Dreams were not only sleep experiences, and while they were often thought to arise from an external source (a place, in Homer and Ovid at least, near the land of the dead), Miller notes the clearly psychological implications and corollaries of the place from which dreams emerge.<sup>21</sup> In Ovid in particular this place is "chthonic": dark, shadowy, and where personified emotions live, what we might think of as the externalized kin of the unconscious.<sup>22</sup>

Miller describes what she calls the "oneiric imagination" in the ancient world, which "confounds the conventional distinction between (real) thing and (false) copy."<sup>23</sup> Even with a certain suspicion circling around images in antiquity—a suspicion that itself testifies to the fluidity of real thing and false copy—encountering a figure in a dream often meant encountering the figure itself.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, statuary had an eerie doubleness about it. As depicting gods in statue form became more dominant as a cultural practice, these representations shaped senses of who the gods were. By the second and third centuries, dreamers encounter the gods in dreams *as their statues*, Miller notes, and indeed statues regularly moved, interacted with, and appeared alive to observers.<sup>25</sup> The visual representation of the gods, and the effect of that liveliness on notions—or fantasies—of Roman power in the provinces, provide an important pretext for rereading Tertullian's relationship to Roman power in chapter 4 ("Tertullian of Carthage and the Materiality of Power"). But on a basic level, it is clear that the liveliness of statues and the discourses negotiating the truthfulness of images suggest not just active inner lives, but *a fluidity and constant negotiation of what is real*.

These ancient negotiations invite comparisons with later and more contemporary experiences of reckonings with the hazy boundaries of subjects and objects, animate and inanimate—including in our historical and anthropological descriptions (as I discuss in chapter 1, "Objects Made Real"). The place of fantasy, not as a counterpoint to reality, but as *constituting it*, is a thread I pull throughout the book in various ways. In psychoanalytic theory, fantasy is the psyche representing the world and the self to itself, a continual and endlessly adaptive attempt to make sense of relationships, feelings, and contradictions in an incoherent self and world. Much psychoanalytic work on fantasy proceeds from the work of Melanie Klein, who theorized phan-



tasy (with a *PH*) as distinct from the normal kinds of daydreaming and daily flights of fancy of fantasy with an *F*. Phantasy is especially characteristic of the earliest phases of child development and happens mostly in relationship to the mother or the breast. But it persists over time as a psychic process. As Klein writes in *Envy and Gratitude*, “Phantasies—becoming more elaborate and referring to a wider range of objects and situations—continue throughout development and accompany all activities; they never stop playing a great part in all mental life.”<sup>26</sup>

Consequently, fantasy and imagination signify more than fiction or myth. They rather evoke a set of psychosocial processes that assemble disparate elements of a noncoherent world into a working if also frequently contradictory set of devised scenarios. In *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, for instance, feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott leverages fantasy to describe the ways in which feminist historians place themselves into a historical and monolithic continuum of women, thereby stabilizing the category of “woman.” What makes such affiliations across time, geography, and other material differences possible, if not “woman” as a fixed identifier? Scott uses the work of Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Lacan, describing fantasy as a “setting for desire” and as a “tightly condensed” narrative that gets staged to arrange and work out wishes and fears.<sup>27</sup> Fantasy is both a social and an individual process. However, its psychoanalytic underpinning means that no one controls the process. Fantasy has a life of its own.

One of Scott’s most striking observations is the persistence of the figure of female orator in feminist histories, which “projects women into masculine public space, where they experience the pleasures and dangers of transgressing social and sexual boundaries”—a fantasy that feminist historians themselves do or hope to embody.<sup>28</sup> The figure of the female orator, emblemized by the woman at the podium speaking publicly that Scott tracks through feminist histories, inspires my own interest in another fantasy figure, one that gnaws at and inspires so much of contemporary academic life: that of the Public Intellectual. In my last chapter, “Darkening the Discipline,” Scott’s use of fantasy is amplified by Robyn Wiegman’s spellbinding account in her book *Object Lessons* of the affective force and fantasies of political agency undergirding certain identity-based disciplines.

Scott’s critique of feminist history however is not that it engages in fantasy. Nor is Wiegman imagining we should divest ourselves of certain political aspirations. Rather Scott critiques what gets *naturalized* in the process of writing these histories. Fantasy is an inevitable dimension of psychic life, and so likewise of historical work. Obviously I don’t dispute the inevi-

tability of fantasy as a strong dimension of any sense-making we might do of the world (past or present). But I still want to approach the real, which is foreclosed as an available, assimilable possibility, particularly in theories indebted to Jacques Lacan, which place the real (or rather, the Real) in near-absolute opposition to any form of representation. So on the one hand, I want us to reckon with the way fantasy constructs what we construe as reality and the ways reality is not available to us as we hope. On the other, I resonate with the desire for the real that has been articulated both self-consciously and unselfconsciously in contemporary and ancient studies. I persist in the belief that we must reckon with what is *outside* our devised worlds, as well. I want to have my cake and eat it too, I suppose, even while I know I'll still leave the table a little bit hungry.

My (our) ongoing and unresolved push-and-pull between fantasy, reality-as-fantasy, and the real in any attempts to describe a world is managed in this book through recourse to something like reality-testing in psychoanalysis. Reality testing doesn't mean "facing" reality; it means the relational process by which fantasies are suddenly seen as nontotalizing, *as fantastical*, and the process through which one must revise one's narrative. The question I pose in the first chapter, "Objects Made Real," is: what happens if we construe history (and pedagogy, in chapter 7) as an ongoing process of reality-testing and fantasy-revision? What if we understand it as a process that might provide fleeting or even chance run-ins with the real, on terms other than our own—largely by grappling with the pieces that our fantasies do not, cannot hold? We cannot fully manage the real, but perhaps we can set the stage for it. There may even be ways to think about (gasp) representing it—a tabooed notion since the linguistic turn. These questions and propositions appear most prominently in that chapter, but as an extended meditation on the theoretical questions that gave rise to the rest of the project's pieces, they underwrite so much of this book.

Fundamental to fantasy/phantasy in psychoanalytic theory is the life of objects in the psyche. In object-relations theory, the lineage of which Klein is a significant member, the self is formed (in infancy and childhood, particularly) through the internalization of others as images or "objects," or even part-objects. Fantasy/phantasy is the imaginative work of relating to these images or objects. In Klein, objects are projected or introjected, and thus are the arbiters of the boundary between inside and outside:

From the beginning the ego introjects objects 'good' and 'bad', for both of which the mother's breast is the prototype—for good objects when the

child obtains it, for bad ones when it fails him. But it is because the baby projects its own aggression on to these objects that it feels them to be ‘bad’ and not only in that they frustrate its desires: the child conceives of them as actually dangerous—persecutors who it fears will devour it, scoop out the inside of its body, cut it to pieces, poison it—in short, compassing its destruction by all the means which sadism can devise. These imagos, which are a phantasmically distorted picture of the real objects upon which they are based, become installed not only in the outside world but, by the process of incorporation, also within the ego.<sup>29</sup>

In Klein, objects “disintegrate” as they are hastily parceled off into “good” and “bad” pieces. This can become a state of anxious desperation, in which the ego seeks ever more urgently to deny the incorporation of the whole, mixed, complicated object. There is loss, since the object has been rent into bits and pieces, its wholeness destroyed. The guilt of destruction fuels an attempt to reassemble the object into a whole, restore it, bring it back to life, which Klein only belatedly and almost scandalously describes as “love.”<sup>30</sup> “Love” then appears as an attempt not just to restore the object, but to let it be real, which in this case is a complicated mix of good and bad.

The term “object” derives from Freud—the object is the telos of drives. It is the flat recipient of desire; that which gets invested with desire. The implicit gendering of the object is clear even in Klein’s account above, in which the infant is a default “he” whose central object is the breast—that biological reduction and synecdoche of womanhood. In the past few decades, psychoanalytic theory-in-practice has struggled with the notion of the object, as it imagines the child as a single subject in a field of psychic instruments. Jessica Benjamin, most prominent among proponents of what is called the relational perspective, describes her discontentment with the one-person model as a function of her needing to reconcile psychoanalysis with its feminist critiques. Of course the primacy of the breast as the object after which all objects are modeled points to the prickly difficulties of maintaining the term “object” at all. The relationalist perspective theorizes not one subject and its objects, but the dynamism between two (or multiple) centers of subjectivity. In her work, Benjamin theorizes “intersubjectivity,” which posits that individual subjectivity is born, somewhat paradoxically, out of dependence on one’s others for recognition.<sup>31</sup> Importantly, as I discuss in chapter 1, she does not negate the intrapsychic process of fantasy and the objects that come with it: she rather suggests that intersubjective and intrapsychic processes be held in tension with one another.

Like the artist Pygmalion, a character in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, whose woman-statue animates before his very eyes (and whom I discuss in chapter 1), one might say theory has sought in various ways and places to bring its own woman-object to life, to make her real. But one might note that psychoanalytic theories of fantasy/phantasy, particularly those in Klein and Benjamin, have also offered us a way of thinking about how it is that a human being could become an object in the first place. They describe the conflicted and imaginative processes that both open and foreclose realms of possibility. That is to say that psychoanalysis not only depicts a subject that struggles with ideal images and reality. More generally, it witnesses to psychic states that, in their navigation of the ongoing life of objects, resonate with the ancient oneiric imagination too.

### **BODY OBJECTS AND THE SOCIAL BODY**

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The fluidity between subject and object has appeared with particularly poignant critical traction in postcolonial and critical race theories. Who is seen as a locus of experience, as being substantial in and of themselves rather than instrumental or subsidiary to the worlds of others? Who manages to reach the echelons of the human? These questions are politically differentiated and racially arbitrated. Scholars from Frantz Fanon and Hortense Spillers to Anne Cheng and Antonio Viegó have also played out in psychoanalytic terms the logics, injunctions, and curses of racialized identities. Anne Cheng, for example, describes racial identification of any kind as a melancholic process, one that “affects both dominant white culture and racial others; indeed racial melancholia describes the dynamics that constitute their mutual definition through exclusion.”<sup>32</sup> In racial melancholia, the loss of being what one cannot be is both admitted and denied, as one incorporates the object/other that one cannot be. But this process, according to Cheng, creates a kind of “Moebius strip,” a slide between objects and subjects.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, some psychic objects become cultural objects much more easily and readily than others. “The melancholic eats the lost object—feeds on it, as it were,” Cheng writes, suggesting connections to the work of Kyla Wazana Tompkins, for instance. Tompkins draws attention to the ways cultural eating practices and discourses produced racialized national citizens in the nineteenth-century United States, a “consolidation of racist ideologies

in the intimate workings of the body politic.”<sup>34</sup> The edible Black body that Tompkins tracks, epitomized in chocolate fetishization, might be understood as one way these racial psychosocial processes materialize. Similarly, to be a racialized subject is not just to be an object in a particular way. It is also to occupy a space between life and death, to be a dead subject, or a ghostly citizen, haunting the citizen body since, as Michel Foucault and biopolitical theories after him have demonstrated, life, sustenance, dis-ease or debility, and death themselves are political distributions.<sup>35</sup> I discuss ecologies of social life, and the ways eating and digestion process belonging and its contingencies, in chapters 3 and 5 (“Histories Unwritten in Stone,” “The Perils of Translation”).

This collection of race-critical work suggests moving toward what, according to Lana Lin, psychoanalysis has often been hesitant to do, and that is think about material objects and psychic objects together. Her book *Freud’s Jaw* performs an “expanded notion of object relations,” which “contends with objects that are not ‘properly’ psychoanalytic, namely the psychic life of things as opposed to persons.”<sup>36</sup> Reading Freud, Eve Sedgwick, and Audre Lorde’s negotiation of their long-term illness with cancer, Lin recounts their relationships with physical objects, particularly body-objects—including the cancerous breast in the case of Sedgwick and Lorde. “In showing how morbidity is negotiated through nonhuman objects,” Lin writes, “I intend to give psychoanalytically informed criticism a more nuanced discussion around material culture.”<sup>37</sup>

In the present book, I move between and merge psychic and more literal objects (or: instantiations of materiality). Here too ancient material elements express negotiations of morbidity, as well as many other things, including—most especially—ethnic or national dissolution and diaspora re-formation.<sup>38</sup> There was an almost ubiquitous cultural preoccupation with bodily integrity and bodily breakdown subtending the Greco-Roman world. This preoccupation showed up in a variety of forms. Novels of the first and second centuries repeat motifs of dismemberment, near death, or false death; medical literature intensifies and proliferates; healing gods and more general interests in healing practices mushroom. The arena’s battle dramas, enactments of torture, and other forms of disciplinary violence, whether real or imagined, provided prolonged, lurid encounters with the crumbling, or even implosion, of ambitions of bodily integrity. Queries about what dimensions of the person might be immortal, divine, or otherwise indestructible were especially hotly debated when they focused in on that most heavy of cosmic substances, the flesh. Body *parts*, specifically, loomed

in the ancient imagination—a constancy of limbs and organs—ones either disjoined physically or through discourse that, like that of the Greek orator Aelius Aristides, isolates and catalogues somatic particulars.

What does it mean for the body to become an object (an object for use, an object of thought) or a collection of them? We know on some level what makes it possible: the animate—what counts as a life—is a socially derived distinction, as many have observed. And the objectification of human beings is a corollary to the ways certain lives are seen to matter more than others, or not at all.<sup>39</sup> In other words, that people can become objects has everything to do with what in the larger social body counts as a life in the first place.<sup>40</sup> So the question is not only, How does objectification happen? It is also, What is happening when animate and inanimate are no longer salient distinctions—when, for instance, the French Martinique poet Aimé Césaire merges with the ruins of his landscape? What is happening when one carves up or cordons off dimensions of that forest of elements composing selfhood into distinguishable parts—a mouth from its voice, the voice from its speaker, the flesh from that which keeps it warm? How does experience get parsed in such moments of suspended animation? It is often literally parsed: truncated, boxed, parceled into manageable pieces. Conversely, what happens when objects take on a life of their own? What are the experiential subtexts for those moments when the social body expands to accommodate a host of things?

Not insignificantly, the object in psychoanalytic theory also regularly interrupts the subject's imagined reality. In Lacan's mirror stage, the stage in which the child begins to associate themselves with the image they see reflected back to them in the mirror, the ego is constructed out of a sense of the body as a comprehensible whole. It is a mistaking of the mirror image for reality, and a retrojection of that image. The self was, in that well-known formulation, "always already" cogent. But the conceit of that mirror image, the fantasy of it, follows the subject. So the fragmented body—*le corps morcelé*, the "body in bits and pieces," and what Lacan associates with "the real"—haunts the subject by arising in the spectral form of dreams and nightmares.<sup>41</sup> *Le corps morcelé* is an uncanny twin to the terracotta votives—myriad and fragmentary—that lived in the literal underground of Corinth and (as I argue in chapter 2) seemed to haunt the imagination of the apostle Paul as he stretches his rhetoric like a skin over the miscellany of his interlocutors. This is one instance in which we see the real and the material collide—which is to say that they are not always and already the same. In other words, "the material" and material objects are not real by virtue of

their materiality. They can, however, create encounters with the real in the moments in which they interject in or fail to conform to dominant (fantastical) realities. These body-objects make their return by disturbing the slumber of the social body that has assumed that its own intact image was real.

### **LOST OBJECTS: LOSING THE “NATION” IN THE HISTORIES OF CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM**

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Studies centered on nations, nationalism, and sovereignty have swept through the humanities. This is mostly due to the growing resurgence of nationalism across the globe, as well as the increasing prominence of Indigenous studies, especially in Canada. The study of the ancient Mediterranean—and particularly of Christianity and Judaism—has, with few exceptions, sidestepped this movement.<sup>42</sup> A significant part of the reason for the inattention to nations and nationalism is that there is simply nothing like the contemporary idea of the nation (the nation-state as a geopolitical entity) in the ancient world. What is translated as “nation,” the ancient Greek term *ethnos*, rather meant something like ethnic peoplehood, though still one with (as I’ll elaborate more) emphatically geographical referents. It is the loss of that form of belonging—the loss of it in colonial antiquity, and the loss of it in histories of Judaism and Christianity—that I would like to examine and, in the case of the latter, for which I’d like to adjust.

Another reason for the absence of the nation with reference to Christianity and Judaism might be that evoking the term thrusts one into a modern political minefield. As I write this, white nationalist Christians march in Charlottesville, and Zionist aspirations and Israeli military operations continue to shrink and impair Palestine. Both of these movements take place in the name of a national, religious, and racial sovereignty ostensibly or almost lost and in need of reclamation. The response to these nationalisms, too, has often been in the key of a nation now lost. It is modern nationalism, with its naturalized racial and geographical reverberations, that tends to make some uneasy with bringing sovereignty and ethnicity to ancient literature.<sup>43</sup> To talk of sovereignty in Christian and Jewish literature, even with a healthy dose of historical differentiation, is to potentially find oneself aligned with these causes, if subtly.

Thus for some it might seem counterintuitive if not completely disorienting to use ethnicity and sovereignty as primary frames for under-

standing the texts I collect here. (This is less true for diaspora, which appears prominently in this book, and only as tied to ancient forms of ethnic peoplehood.) Ethnic peoplehood has only rarely seemed like a significant historical preoccupation or even a preoccupation at all for Roman period Jewish or Christian literature.<sup>44</sup> This is most obviously because of the notion of Judaism and Christianity as religions: separate, if entangled, ones. “Religion” and all that it draws up with it have taken some hits in recent years.<sup>45</sup> Although many modern historians of the ancient world who want to retain the category do so with some pretty steep qualifications, the baggage that surrounds that term—an abstract, transcultural, and nongeographical entity, revolving around a particular set of beliefs—is still heavy. But what we might call religion—a set of practices and assumptions in relationship to the gods—was tied to basically every facet of ancient life, making it hard to particularize and extricate. Even if it works tentatively to describe a set of practices, religion fails as a way to think about social collectives and belonging in antiquity, especially given the general nonexclusivity of devotion to gods in the ancient world.

Ethnic peoplehood, on the other hand, was arguably one of the most salient categories, if not *the* most salient category, for self-understanding in antiquity. Shy as we might be about the racial and geographical implications of the term nation, peoplehood in the ancient Mediterranean was imagined in unequivocally physical and geographical terms, if less distinctly naturalized ones. I would even go so far as to argue that peoplehood was simply not legible without some sort of geographic reference, even while that geography was not clear, continuous, or uncontested. What constituted Judea even just in the Roman period—previously Judaea, and before that Judah and Israel—for instance, was a moving target over time. Of course the Romans remapped many portions of the Mediterranean after conquering them. Nonetheless, “religion” and even “culture,” terms that become more portable (if not quite extractable) over the course of time, are largely dependent on histories of territorialization. There was the culture of *X place*, and the reason this is important is precisely that place was so thorny and so completely imbricated in Roman imperial and other past frames of conquest. (This is why I will from here on use “Judean” rather than “Jewish” as a qualifier for this period.)

In fact, the reason ethnic peoplehood and sovereignty are not obvious to us as thematics in ancient literature, especially in the first through third centuries, is because of the colonial/imperial erasure of those forms of belonging. Claiming to belong to a people in the ancient Mediterranean was



to make immediate reference to such specific and constructed geographies. However, there was one variation: when one claimed “Romanness.” In contrast to classical Greek notions of citizenship, which were grounded in the city (*polis*) and civic responsibility, Roman citizenship was expressed translocally as both familial and a particular kind of submission to Roman law, a submission that was imagined to enable freedom.<sup>46</sup> *Romanitas* was to accept Roman values as superior, but it additionally implied a surrender of previous local attachments.<sup>47</sup> The Roman ethnographic enterprise of describing and stereotyping the peoples Rome conquered was not in contradiction with the goal to incorporate “other” peoples.<sup>48</sup> In this way, the Antonine Edict of 212 CE, which granted citizenship “universally” across the empire,<sup>49</sup> was not a signal moment of transformation as much as the formal articulation of a long-held set of goals and values — so much so that this edict was in later history attributed to various other emperors, including Hadrian, who ruled almost a century earlier.<sup>50</sup>

Universalism and particularity are not opposites; they rather operate in a dependent tension with one another.<sup>51</sup> The imperial tendency to press disparate peoples and their traditions or cultures into similar molds — producing them as different kinds of philosophy, for instance<sup>52</sup> — is both particularizing *and* universalizing. Imperial authorities sought to locate and target populations by various means, and to do so for physical eradication and/or cultural assimilation.<sup>53</sup> Judea’s tentative and limited autonomy into the middle of the first century CE, and then its stagger and collapse, are simply part of the more extensive and simultaneous movements of boundary expansion and refigured relation to imperial authorities.<sup>54</sup>

We might say then that the early empire’s intensive focus on ethnic particularity through ethnography and affiliated mapping practices worked to parlay these particularities into a heightened investment in universal Roman belonging (cosmic rule over the inhabited world or *oikoumene*). In some instances, this perhaps gave more localized forms of belonging, however imperially structured, additional traction for Rome’s conquered peoples.<sup>55</sup> Therefore it also gave the loss of that object, that imperially constructed particularity, more poignancy. But the slow erasure of localized attachments and movement toward more status-conscious subjection to Roman law and *paterfamilias* (legal male head of the family)<sup>56</sup> are contemporaneous with and strikingly similar to the delocalization of rhetoric in so much “Jewish” and “early Christian” (read: Judean) literature. In this literature we see an increasing emphasis on family (and status within it, as in the household codes) instead of nation as the primary structure of self-

understanding, and then later a growing attachment to the universalizing terms “Judaism” and “Christianity.”<sup>57</sup> Orthodoxy and heresy debates of the second through fourth centuries and their rhetoric of authenticity mimic ethnographic discourse *because they grow out of ethnographic discourse*.<sup>58</sup> More specifically, they grow out of the diaspora rhetoric of authenticity, and take flight within this delocalized landscape.

But we must read ancient literature through and against this deletion. My own attempt at doing so materializes in chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5, as I seek to recover a history of the almost negligible (at its moment) production of “Christians,” as well as that lost object of the nation (*ethnos*) and the ways in which that loss was felt and/or refused by those who suffered it.

Regarding the production of Christians, one historical proposal and presumption here deserves some elaboration: that Christianity, as an analytical object, and attachments to it need to be more thoroughly scrutinized and denaturalized. In my previous book, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*, I logged restlessness with the reliance of the field on the notion of “Christian literature,” which leads to somewhat circular readings: what do these Christian texts tell us about being Christian? But I took seriously, and still do, the lateness of the appearance of the term Christian (after most of the New Testament was ostensibly written), in combination with the fact that even long after the term was coined, there was nothing at all socially unique about the people called Christians. This means that understanding nearly any first-through third-century text housed under that term with recourse to some discrete, if diverse, phenomena is wildly anachronistic and profoundly problematic for trying to get a sense of what kinds of social lives and collectivities these texts archived.

My point of departure in both this book and my previous one is thus not anything like Christians or Christianity in the ancient world. It is ethnic peoplehood and diasporic culture, including (but not exclusively) Judean culture in the ancient Mediterranean. It is the standard MO to understand ancient Mediterranean culture in general, and Judean traditions and belonging specifically, as offering “context” within which to articulate the dimensions of ancient Christian discourses/beliefs/practices—ones that are, somehow, unique or creative adaptations. This still feels a little like the background model that contextual historical studies were meant to replace. Reversing the ordinary flow of analysis, I suggest instead that what we think of as early Christian literature, as it is embroiled in ethnic questions of collective self-understanding, offers a fresh angle for getting at ancient culture in the first and second centuries. What’s more, I argue that it can contrib-

ute generally to understandings of peoplehood, diaspora, and colonization across time. In other words, when we're not attempting to locate, define, or differentiate Christians in antiquity—the marker of belonging to a *contemporary field*, rather than indicating a social movement in antiquity—the literature in which scholars of early Christianity have been trained might actually help us focalize underexplored facets of history more generally.

Interestingly, most of the casual pushback I received for *Rethinking Early Christian Identity* was for nearly dispensing with Christians and Christianity for first- and second-century literature that has borne those names. The more sympathetic objections showed up as questions such as “But what do we call this literature then?” or “But what are we studying then?” My proposals that those themes seen to be most fundamentally and uniquely Christian were simply mundane responses to diasporic and colonial conditions also were sometimes greeted with a kind of apologetic shrug: “I just don't see it.” My stubbornness drives me to double-down on my original propositions and inquire about how disciplines overdetermine and legitimize certain objects of study over others. Questioning “Christians” produces disciplinary crises. This pushback also drives me to inquire about the ways certain beloved objects (such as martyrdom, as I discuss in chapters 4 and 5) dominate our historical frames to the degree that they take on the status of reality, even if the form our love takes is some moderate deconstruction.

### **FINAL WORDS: ON DISCIPLINARITY AND BELONGING**

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Psychoanalysis began as a form of interpretation that tried to lay claim to itself as a science. Its inability to pass as a science, however, is not incidental to its increasing marginalization outside of theory circles. But that means that part of what then drives (pun intended) psychoanalysis at its inception is a longing for modernist legitimacy, to be seen as real, even as it has created a legacy of unsettling any modernist sense of the real. The founding tension (preserving a place and desire for the real, while reconstructing the psychic processes that produce it) is a creative one, I think, and one I try to replicate across this book.

At the same time, legibility and disciplinary mechanisms are a substantial preoccupation here, and became more so with each chapter I wrote. I

am interested in scenes of law and justice in antiquity, as well as those disciplinary scenes of contemporary academe, and the fantasy lives they respectively engender. What are the laws, both written and unwritten, that determine what materializes, what appears as real in those scenes? How might we surface experiences that don't register on dominant grids of legibility (whether past or present) or that fall by the wayside of disciplinary operations? The first chapter theorizes on the ways historical description might interrupt or work around dominant grids of legibility for what counts as real. But these questions appear again in chapter 4 with the third-century North African writer Tertullian of Carthage and his own captivation with legibility and recognition in Roman scenes of law and justice (and the invention of a Christian population in those scenes). Chapter 5 considers legibility and translation in other, roughly contemporaneous, juridical scenes, as well as the violence associated with translation in colonial lives. In chapter 6 I relativize the penetration grid, as it is often called, as the overriding framework for understanding erotic relations in antiquity, suggesting that the very function of such grids is to render certain experiences illegible. Penetration has also been an overdetermining model for relationality in contemporary theory, though, so I borrow from the Acts of Paul and Thecla to articulate an erotic relationality off the grid and work around the surface/depth binaries and traumatic injury that penetration implies. And the final chapter asks about some particular disciplinary fantasies about teacherly agency and scholarly political intervention, observing the ways those fantasies actually might constrain and limit the political potentialities of our scholarship and classrooms. In all of these cases, I pose questions about how we imagine various systems of power to operate and why we imagine them as such, recognizing all along that one of the ways these systems of power operate is by shaping vivid imaginations.

Indeed the academic disciplines to which I speak in this book are also at issue. While I am a historian of early Christianity, I have been writing to and in conversation with the adjacent and overlapping fields of classics, Jewish studies, literary studies, diaspora studies, anthropology, gender and sexuality studies, and others. Still, the impulse for this intervention feels as if it falls to the side of any of these frames of reference. Cultural studies—which theorizes diaspora, gender, sexuality, and more—has not taken a particular interest in the ancient world, and certainly not anything associated with ancient Christianity. Classical studies, by virtue of its canon, centers on Greek and Latin people and literature, which almost necessarily relegates other people or literatures to secondary or derivative status. Jewish studies

has only rarely integrated New Testament literature as part of its overall capture of ancient Judean literature and culture. And given that so much of my work keeps pressing against specifically Christian belonging in antiquity as the overriding object of study or object of attachment, early Christian studies feels like a poor fit, too. And yet, here we are.

As may be clear by now, while I do want to propose some fairly comprehensive orientation changes for the way “Christianity” is configured within the literature and social world of the ancient Mediterranean, this is not a standard or conventional historical project. First of all, the title of the book is somewhat ironic, since I am not directly describing individual archaeological objects—the dimensions of a wall, the specific cartouche in a codex—but rather expanding, almost to the point of breakage, our ideas of what we might take material culture to mean in the first place. Again, taking inspiration from psychoanalytic theory, I want to know not only how more overtly material things live on in the imagination, but how materiality as such is an imaginative negotiation.

Second, the overriding goal of this book is not comprehensiveness. This book is rather a series of historically specific illustrations and provocations for ways to approach not just the social world of antiquity, but the materiality of history, differently. As such, the collection of materials that I address cuts across time, geography, and affiliation—though not unconditionally. There are certain texts (the Gospel of Mark and the letters of Ignatius, for example) that are more dense with the themes I want to accentuate, so I confer disproportionate degrees of attention on them. I often do so recursively, returning again and again to particular materials that won’t quite let me go. On the axis of ancient literature, I touch on writers from the classical Greek writer Herodotus to Tertullian of (Roman) Carthage—roughly the fifth century BCE to the third century CE. I address the Israelite/Judean books of Daniel and 4 Maccabees, as well as the texts of the New Testament and so-called Christian texts associated with the New Testament but outside of the biblical canon (such as the Gospel of Peter and the Acts of Paul and Thecla), and in a more familiar move place them alongside Greek writers like Pausanias and Aelius Aristides.

Trained in ancient literature, but always with my head someplace else, I can’t (won’t) read ancient literature as if it’s a time capsule or as if there’s some absolute difference that must be respected between then and now, especially since “then” and “now” are also heterogeneous fields. So along with ancient material, I gather thematically resonant, more contemporary literary works on the social, political, and personal reverberations of matters

of life and death (torture, decay, illness, healing, revival), ones that speak to or from other fields. Sometimes these contemporary reflections help foreground certain elements of ancient materials, sometimes ancient materials bring submerged facets of contemporary experience to the surface. In some chapters, ancient history and texts predominate; in others contemporary material and directly theoretical concerns take over. While I'm not on the hunt for universal human experiences, I do get satisfaction out of unexpected points of contact along all kinds of lines. I feel that these points of contact, when not seen as threatening the compartmentalization that modern academia so encourages, can fill out our sense of history in both the long and the short view. Perhaps more than that, I hope they can deepen our understanding of the forces that make and break our material lives, the forces that shape the ways we live and die.