Review Essay[*]

Abject Objects: The Lives and Times of Early Christian Material Culture

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Introduction

The Lives of Objects is an object about objects. This is admittedly an odd way to describe a book, for we often focus on the cerebral content contained *within* the physicality of the book. But such a description fits with the project at hand, which, in author Maia Kotrosits's words, is "a book about the lives of objects considered through a history of the ancient Mediterranean" (1). Yet, *Lives* is about more than static objects that live at a remove from people. It is also about our relationships with and attachments to said objects, how they embed themselves in our psyche and continue to exert an influence on us over time. By focusing on unconventional objects—as we will see, some might even debate whether some are objects at all—Kotrosits wants her project to bring "nonobvious histories" into relief (1). Each chapter is thus a kind of case study in thinking through an ancient object (again, broadly conceived) and its relationship with early Christ followers. Taken as a whole, *Lives* demonstrates a creative rethinking of the histories we tell about the origins of Christianity. In the review that follows, I quote liberally from Kotrosits's

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[*] Maia Kotrosits, *The Lives of Objects: Material Culture, Experience, and the Real in the History of Early Christianity* (New Studies in Religion; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020) 232, pp. $30.00 pb., $90.00 hb., ISBN 9780226707440. Page references appear in parentheses within the text. I would like the thank Meredith J. C. Warren, Herbert Berg, John S. Kloppenborg, Robyn Faith Walsh, Jennifer Eyl, and Erin Roberts, for being invaluable conversation partners (even when it was unbeknownst to them!) as I worked through the stimulating ideas presented in this book.

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engaging prose, for her phrasing is often carefully constructed, affectively oriented, and deliberately emotive—indeed, inimitable.

Method

> "Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one."[1]

The Lives of Objects self-consciously leverages psychoanalytic theory to think differently about various sites of early Christian cultural expression. The book's methodological self-awareness is refreshing; I continue to cringe at how many theoretically uninformed analyses of early Christianity appear every year, often justified by authors who somehow think they are "not using a particular theory." They are, of course. They just have not articulated it or reflected upon it in any meaningful sense. *Lives* is a wide-ranging instance of using a theoretical framework to imagine new ways of thinking about objects of study. Using theory in this way does not necessitate answering the question of whether this theory is "right," but rather, asking how we can wield it for new insights.

Kotrosits wants to chart a middle ground between taking seriously the linguistic turn and acknowledging the concrete world we navigate. The former and its "relativities" about The Real, she worries, "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' " (4). Objects stand to resist our efforts to make them endlessly pliable, and so they offer some grounding characteristics. Further, she aims to move beyond the binary of self and object to the relationships that sustain the binary itself. It turns out that these relationships, carefully considered, often blur the boundaries between subject and object. She is thus interested in "expanding, almost to the point of breakage, our ideas of what we might take material culture to mean in the first place . . . material things live on in the imagination. . . . materiality as such is an imaginative negotiation" (21).

Psychoanalysis allows her to both take seriously one's subjective experience with objects and the solidness of the objects themselves. For Kotrosits, this discipline "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" (6). Fantasy, in particular, allows us to play out and imagine our selves in relation to the objects in our world and their potentialities. Thus, the goal is to think about material objects as well as psychic objects. Though some critics would (and have) argued that modern psychoanalytic theory is incompatible with the way ancient people's selves were constituted, Kotrosits (and I, for what it is worth) resists the assumption that modern humans are essentially different from ancients. To hold such a view, to my mind, would undermine the promise of cross-cultural sociological and anthropological studies that have been so helpful for my own research.

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[1] This quotation is widely attributed to Albert Einstein (as in *Science Daily*, 14 Sept 2008, https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/09/080911154216.htm), though tracking down the original source proved impossible.

Finally, there is also an evident dose of affect theory in this book, not always as explicitly acknowledged as psychoanalytic theory, but it is certainly there if you know what you are looking for. In particular, there is a grammar of affect, a style of writing, and a body of recognizable vocabulary that signals the widespread presence of affect theory.

To put all this in laypeople's terms, this is a book that considers both the objects that we perceive to exist outside of ourselves, as well as the processes by which we perceive them and relate to them. In imagining our relationships to those objects, we internalize them into our constructions of our selves, and in a real way, make them sites for working out identities, diasporic conditions, cultural anxieties, and much more.

Recognizing the Matrix

> "If 'real' is what you can feel, smell, taste and see, then 'real' is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain."[2]

The first substantive chapter of *Lives* wrestles with conceptions of The Real and the relationship between reality and representation. Scholarship on early Christianity has long been obsessed with accurate historical description (the so-called historical-critical method), on the assumption that its conclusions can bear close, if not perfect, resemblances to reality. While Kotrosits is interested in what is real, she also wants to foreground how our cognition entangles with that reality. This entanglement produces the real terrain that we navigate, as well as the mental terrain that we live in. Thus, the quest is not just for the objects as they exist independent of us, but also for the *moments* that objects become real to us and the *processes* by which we produce reality through those encounters.

She chooses the *Gospel of Peter* as a site to think briefly about how scholars of early Christianity have tried to adjudicate The Real. The *Gospel of Peter*, with its memorable image of a walking, talking cross emerging from Jesus's tomb in the middle of the night, creates a fantasy that animates objects that are arguably inanimate. Scholarly assumptions about what is real and what is fantasy have guided how this account has been treated. The fixation on describing what is "really real" has allowed the fantastical elements of this story to be dismissed as just that: creative imaginaries that have no relationship to reality. Kotrosits pushes back against that so-called logic. "Why," she rightly wonders, "is the animacy of a dead body more 'realistic' or less fantastical than the animacy of the wood on which it dies?" (28). By disrupting the real/fantasy binary, the chapter aims to show that reality and fantasy can be mutually constituting.

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[2] These words were spoken by the character Morpheus in the 1997 film *The Matrix*.

Lamenting the Ruins

> "Whenever and wherever societies have flourished and prospered rather than stagnated and decayed, creative and workable cities have been at the core of the phenomenon. Decaying cities, declining economies, and mounting social troubles travel together. The combination is not coincidental."[3]

Kotrosits spends the haunting next chapter on the ruins of cities as sites of both destruction, as well as constitution. The material "objects" under consideration here are the ruins themselves. Situating physical ruins in psychoanalytic theory, Kotrosits notes that they are, despite our first impulse, "not passive or dead" (42) but rather continually influential matters (literally) that exert pressure on those who live in, through, and in relationship to them. In particular, civic ruins have stamped a significant form on ancient people who have used their spaces for identity formation. In Kotrosits's words, "sovereignty and civic or social belonging—particularly diasporic belonging—materialized in and through ruins in antiquity" (46). Often ignored as merely background scenery, spaces of ruin operate as "a distinct and constant experience of sociopolitical life" (44). Civic ruins are more than spaces of interaction, however. They have a deep life below their rubble, signaling more than just a lived in, or lived through, space. Ruins are *externalizations* of other processes and anxieties marking the social lives lived in them. Even more, Kotrosits regards ruins as "a kind of material social agent . . . vital and active participants in social life" (44).

She attunes her gaze upon Troy first to explore these thoughts on ruin. Troy is a city long associated with ruination and destruction. Yet, its legacy of ruin also becomes *constituting*, as it famously becomes a cache of materials for Romans to cobble together a myth of their own origins. With this example, we can easily see how the ruins of a single city provided at once: 1) space for the physical thriving of the Trojan people, 2) a mythic trauma that influenced numerous people (notably both Greeks and Trojans), and 3) the fodder to craft a brand-new identity (the Romans as exiled descendants of Trojans). All of these identities are conceived of in relationship to the idea of Troy, illustrating the ambiguity that we can find within notions of ruin.

The more robust example that occupies the discussion is the specter of Rome-as-Babylon that inspires Revelation's vivid imagery. Revelation is a revenge fantasy that depicts the destruction of Babylon, clearly a cipher for Rome. The text imagines a constituency left to survive in the wake of this destruction that is in a position to reflect on the city's downfall (Rev 18). The revenge imagined in Revelation presupposes another historical ruin, that of Jerusalem and its temple, which Rome destroyed in the Jewish War. But Revelation, as Kotrosits observes, is not a *description* of Christ-followers suffering in the Roman Empire, but rather, a fantastical representation, even "magnification," of that experience (48). In keeping with the ambiguity of ruin, she also highlights the doubleness of the ruined Babylon: it is broken and destroyed, yet it is also God's weapon. In addition, it stands for a has-been people, but from its ruins emerge new fodder for constituting the Christian identity. Its destruction also makes way for Revelation's fantasy of the New (restored) Jerusalem; in that sense, the ruins are necessary for rebirth.

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[3] Jane Jacobs, *Vital Little Plans: The Short Works of Jane Jacobs* (New York: Random House, 2016) 243.

Lurking in the Christian cultural memories, of course, is the ruined body of Jesus, which also becomes a kind of "material" for building and rebuilding the Christian identity. Such is the preoccupation of, for instance, 1 Corinthians, as it works out and defends the boundaries of its groupness through the metaphor of a collective body *in* Christ's body (esp. 1 Cor 6). Thus, this chapter paints ruined objects not just as indicative of destruction, but rather as the raw materials through which people can begin to build their futures.

Anxieties of Extinguishment

> "Our name will be forgotten in time, and no one will remember our works;
> our life will pass away like the traces of a cloud, and be scattered like mist
> that is chased by the rays of the sun and overcome by its heat."[4]

The next "objects" considered are memorials, that is, efforts to fix moments and meanings in time. Objects of memorialization are closely related to objects of ruination, because the former are often expressed in the conditions of the latter. Thus, Kotrosits contends that memorialization involves "speaking for and about something or someone that has passed, an attempt to generation meaning" (68). Yet, our efforts at memorialization are always partial and fragmentary, for they always only capture part of what they intend to remember. In that sense, memorials also *participate* in the process of ruin, never fully reproducing what they intend to remember. There is always forgetting. So, like ruin, memorialization has an edge of ambiguity.

The most obvious form of ancient memorialization is the inscription, which was ubiquitous in the Mediterranean world. It was "a landscape peppered with these inscriptions" (71). Inscriptions sought to fix a memory, a reputation, or an idea in both time and space. Like all other objects considered in this study, they are deeply ambiguous, trading in the "language of accomplishment and disease, glory and fate . . . allusions to divestment or a sense of displacement, but [also] a subtle mourning for, perhaps even an indictment of, the aspirations of sovereign power" (73).

There is a way, Kotrosits then argues, in which texts themselves are acts of memorialization. She considers the Gospel of Mark as one of these acts, that is, as a memorialization brought into the material world via text. She reads it alongside the Priene Calendar inscription, which lauds the arrival of Augustus and the peace and salvation that he will inaugurate in the empire. Mark's Gospel similarly looks forward to those elements as part of the reign of God. Yet the text is full of unrealized promises, as it balances the "soon" with the "not yet." One might even say that Mark preemptively memorializes the yet-to-come reign of God.

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[4] Wisdom of Solomon 2:4 (NRSV). This sentiment, of course, is spoken by the "ungodly" in Wisdom of Solomon and is thus supposed to be rejected, but I have always found it very beautiful and compelling.

This chapter also considers Ignatius's letters as another scene of memorialization. Deploying an "ecology of violence" (82), Ignatius reflects on the idea of sacrifice as a memorial of Christ, as well as a testament to his own beliefs. The violence of sacrifice extends a "politics of ruin" (83), taking that which has been broken and destroyed and reconstituting it into something new. Therefore, this chapter on memorialization shares many points of contact with the previous chapter on ruin.

Materializing Power in the Legal System

> "Justice is the first virtue of those who command, and stops the complaints of those who obey."[5]

Roman power—and its necessarily related concept of justice—is no doubt an abstract phenomenon, not a tangible object; yet we can certainly say that power and justice were lived *through* the material bodies of the empire's inhabitants, which justifies their treatment as material "objects" in the next chapter. There is no better site to see the imaginations of Roman power and justice than in martyr stories. Kotrosits takes for granted that martyr stories do identity work for early Christians, but at this point in scholarship, they have been "overly determined by questions of identity construction" (122). Characteristically, she wants to go further and ask "what *else* we see" (85, italics in original) when we look past the obvious to the more nebulous fantasies about Roman power that are sustained among ancient writers.

In considering the ways in which the Roman Empire is manifested through the material world and into the lives of its subjects, this portion of the discussion brings much needed nuance to our many conversations about "empire" and early Christian writings. Most subjects of the empire, for instance, never saw the emperor—but they did see expressions of the vast bureaucracy that sustained Rome's power, as well as its architectural feats that represented its power to its subjects (and to itself). Most people's primary encounter with empire would be local government and/or the legal sphere; hence, the focus on legal power and judicial situations in this chapter.

Tertullian of Carthage is Kotrosits's dialogue partner here. Figures like Tertullian, with his extensive treatment of martyrdom, have often encouraged us to envision "resistance" to Rome's power.[6] Kotrosits, however, asks us to think differently about Tertullian: “a lonely figure in a library, occupying a world of literary and antiquarian fascination, who had little real interaction (or even acquaintance) with Roman authorities . . . [who instead has] florid fantasies about Roman power and its possibilities” (91). Like many Christian writers in this time, he investigates the legal system, where the discipline of the Roman Empire plays out regularly. And like most elites, Tertullian retains an obvious confidence in the functioning of the legal sphere.[7] But more than that, she notes, he has a “beguiled fascination with discipline and judgment” (99). In particular, he believes the judicial sphere to be a venue where innate truths are revealed—thus it is no surprise that sincere Christian beliefs are often on display there. In this way, the trial operates as a productive motif for him: “juridical settings provided a stage in which one got to imagine and even act out fantasies about power” (96).

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[5] Denis Diderot, as quoted in Rev. James Woods, *Dictionary of Quotations from Ancient and Modern, English and Foreign Sources* (London: Good Press, 2019 [1893]) 216.

[6] Like identity formation with respect to martyr stories, resistance in such accounts has been extremely overdetermined in modern scholarship as well (Michael F. Brown, "On Resisting Resistance," *American Anthropologist* 98.4 [1996] 729–35).

Perhaps, Kotrosits supposes, one reason why Tertullian is so drawn to juridical discourse is that it matches his theology. For him, God is a figure who calculates judgment based on evidence—and his omniscience assures that he will have unencumbered access to all the information that he needs to make his judgments. In this way, Tertullian has internalized the discipline of the Roman legal system and reproduced it in his own writings and in the cosmos that he imagines. Such awareness challenges the binaries that we usually employ to think about empire (ruler/subject; oppression/resistance; conquest/defeat)—we need something far more complex to account for Tertullian’s relationship to empire.

These aspects of the judicial sphere play out in the lives of Tertullian’s fellow Christians as well. Kotrosits suspects that those Christians living “in the middle of colonial disarray” (106) would have some ambivalence with the discourse of the Roman legal system. On the one hand, a trial was a scene of terror and anxiety, but on the other hand, if offered “a transparent moral world,” which could provide some comfort that one “could truly be known” (106). However, being truly known, to return to the first hand, might have serious consequences.

Objectifying Speech and Translation

> “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”[8]

Kotrosits next extends the discussion to the materiality of remembered speech. Guided consciously by Derrida, she hopes to break down the assumed binary between words and things and treat “acts of translation” (109) as a kind of material culture. Keeping the focus on the moments of memorialization and legal discipline, she wants to probe how they magnify language and thus expose its functions to “reflect on the fraught place of language within colonial experience” (109). This will no doubt be one of the places where some readers will think the concept of "object" is stretched too thin.

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[7] Peter Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

[8] Genesis 1:3.

The moments of translation under the microscope here are expressions of grief in the Gospel of Mark. Kotrosits identifies "high stakes around speaking" (111) in Mark, as speech is closely tied to identity, especially the need to manage communication and knowledge about identity (famously, the so-called messianic secret motif). Speech is also the way God's kingdom is brought to people and thus brought into being materially (this, of course, has curious resonances with God's method of creation in Genesis 1). She focuses closely on Jesus's desperate cry in his final moments, which Mark records in Aramaic. This moment is an eruption of Judean identity, ironically produced *by* the colonial apparatus, similar to how Tertullian describes the breaking through of the true Christian identity within a courtroom scene. As Kotrosits explains, Mark's rendering of this moment is "a poetic capture of colonial and/or diasporic subjectivity at large, in which cultural authenticity, itself a form of sovereignty, and its terms of articulation are not in tension with colonial experience, but rather *produced by it*" (113, italics added).

She then investigates 4 Maccabees (in particular, the martyrdom of the seven sons) to think further about the materialization of language and translation. This is yet another scene of legal discipline where subjects are being asked to submit to a cultural framework not of their own making. She notices ambivalence here too: such a situation of discipline produces "*both* crisis about belonging *and* cultural recognition and distinctiveness" (121, italics in original). Like many of the case studies in *Lives*, we see how insufficient our typical binaries are for a nuanced analysis.

Reclaiming Erotic Sensation

> "Touch is not optional for human development."[9]

What would a study guided by psychoanalysis be without a discussion of penetration? Yet Kotrosits believes that a fixation on penetration has overdetermined the study of ancient sexuality, and so she turns to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* to experiment with alternative erotics. The problem with the "penetration paradigm," she argues, is that it singularly associates sexual encounters with trauma, and as such, forecloses other, less traumatic, forms of sexuality (126). Her goal is to "widen our aperture for ancient sexuality" (125) in order to find experiences "off or under the grid" of legibility (126). "What might we see," she asks, "when not caught in the obsessive if also sometimes pleasurable return to traumatized/traumatizing penetration?" (132).

Martyr acts (of which the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is not technically one, though it is rather similar) tend to depict characters' sexuality either as existing within the confines of a sanctioned marriage or being happily extinguished upon the martyr's death. In the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Kotrosits sees some space to challenge the contours of this binary. Notably, Thecla does not die, nor is she forced into any conventional sexual relationship. Moreover, while she is not depicted as an explicitly sexualized figure, she does experience intimate encounters and deep connections with other characters. Thecla enjoys moments of intimacy, for instance, with the kindly elite woman who embraces her as family, and during the intellectual infatuation that she experiences with Paul directly. In these scenes, moments of anticipatory desire, tactile contact, and gentle encounters come into view, even though the typical active/passive sexual grid and the ubiquitous paradigm of penetration are not present.

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[9] David J. Linden, *Touch: The Science of the Hand, Heart, and Mind* (New York: Penguin, 2016) 4.

The argument for reining in the penetration framework unfortunately dominates this discussion, at the expense, in my view, of dealing with the ancient dialogue partner. The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is only covered in about three pages, and of that, much is a summarization of what happens in the story. I would have enjoyed more attention to the otherwise persuasive argument for different ways of thinking of eroticism in the story. Despite this, the wider discussion does a compelling job of questioning the "straightforward hierarchical active/passive binary that penetration stages" (143) when we let it dominate discussions of sexuality.

Checking Public Intellectuals

> "Not all representation is good representation."[10]

Kotrosits knew that her final chapter would be provocative. The chapter thinks about the role of scholars in educating the public, especially when writing about politically inflammatory topics such as race and gender. Her touchstone for the discussion is Sarah E. Bond's recent public-facing essay on racial imaginaries in the Roman world ("Why We Need to Start Seeing the Classical World in Color," published in 2017).[11] In this essay, Bond discusses the vivid color in which ancient statues used to be painted. Their current whiteness, she contends, contributes to a false imaginary that ancient Mediterranean history is somehow white European history. Bond then links this conversation to one about the modern racial makeup (i.e., predominantly white) of the discipline of Classics. Anyone following the reception of Bond's essay knows the awful responses that she received from white supremacists, among other critics, in the wake of its publication.

Bond's essay highlights an important issue in Classics. Yet for Kotrosits, Bond's project, much like the other objects of analysis in *Lives*, is marked by ambivalence. Bond's essay, she notes, is essentially discourse generated *from* a predominantly white discipline, aimed *at* a predominantly white readership. As such, it is still participating in objectifying Black and Brown people, which is ironically the accusation often leveled (albeit incorrectly) at much ancient literature that dominates the discipline of Classics. Kotrosits does not advocate for ceasing to produce public scholarship, however; instead she focuses on encouraging us to interrogate our unspoken assumptions when carrying it out. She recommends questions such as: what are we assuming about our own positions of power? How do we imagine our audience receiving it? Indeed, who precisely is our audience? What solution do we imagine our public scholarship offering? In the case of Bond's piece, for instance, she wonders who exactly benefits from this project of "darkening" antiquity (145).[12] Is modern inclusivity really affected by scholarly efforts to color the Roman world?

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[10] Patti Harrison, as quoted in Mark Olsen, "In a Breakout Role, Stand-up Comedian Patti Harrison Subverts Rom-com Rules in 'Together Together,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 2 Feb 2021, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2021-02-02/patti-harrison-together-together-sundance.

[11] Sarah E. Bond, "Why We Need to Start Seeing the Classical World in Color," *Hyperallergic*, 7 June 2017, https://hyperallergic.com/383776/why-we-need-to-start-seeing-the-classical-world-in-color/.

This is a curious chapter to close the book. On one hand, concerned as it is with contemporary public scholarship, it strays far from ancient objects, no matter how broadly conceived they might be. On the other hand, it attends to what I might call our "processing" of the world we encounter, which is what previous chapters had also considered. In short, Kotrosits ends with prodding us to think about how we know what we know and how we come to know it. Such is a fitting note on which to land after the extensive intellectual examinations throughout *Lives*.

Discussion

The word engrossing is perhaps the best term to describe *Lives*. Each chapter absorbs the reader as it presents an innovative way of rethinking its object(s). Some of the chapters hang together more coherently than others, which makes sense, as several were published as standalone essays elsewhere. As noted earlier, for instance, the chapter on ruins and the one on memorialization and epigraphy work very well together, because anxieties about memorialization, like ruins, emerge in the wake of destruction. Likewise, the discussions of juridical scenes in Tertullian and those about the cultural materiality of speech and translation have many points of connection. If one is looking for a monograph that systematically builds up to a singular, ground-breaking conclusion, though, this is not it. Instead, we have a series of vignettes that invite fresh considerations of individual case studies.

Some readers will no doubt take issue with the looseness with which Kotrosits uses the concept of "object." Consider the example of translation. Translation is certainly not a physical object in the same way that bodies, civic ruins, and inscriptions are. I, too, struggled with how to align these disparate things. It eventually becomes clear that translation is a cultural process that is carried out *through* the material body, and therefore it is an embodied phenomenon. But there is admittedly something different between that understanding of an "object" and, say, a marble statue on a pedestal. We can and should blur the boundaries of the world we inhabit, especially to push our scholarship in new directions, but for many, the contours of "object" here will seem too ill-defined.

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[12] The language of "darkening" is used in the title of this last chapter of *The Lives of Objects*: "Darkening the Discipline: Fantasies of Efficacy and the Art of Redescription." It is a not a word that Bond herself employs.

In addition, the idea that objects can be agents of influence will not be wholly embraced by all readers. No doubt this way of talking about objects is *en vogue* in psychoanalysis and affect theory, but social constructionists will resist the idea that external objects do things to us outside of our instigation. Let us think through an example: in an earlier chapter ruins were considered "active material participants" in social life (53). Such a statement is worth parsing in order to get at its implications. What Kotrosits does not mean by this—I assume—is that ruins are conscious, living agents like me, the reader, my dog, or my students. Instead, I take her claim to be a comment on the solidness of material objects and the way that they demand to be interacted with, simply on the grounds that they take up space in our world. They cannot, moreover, be molded into whatever meaning a social actor wants, as one might (theoretically) be able to do with language. Material objects *push back*, so to speak, and constrain the meaning that one might try to squeeze from them. This is an absolutely crucial insight. Since the linguistic turn, we have routinely lacked ways to talk responsibly about the checks and pressures on the world-building that we can engage in through language use. Crafting meaning (and thus our world) through language is not a free-for-all—though one would be forgiven for thinking that given how some social constructionists talk about how humans make concepts into whatever we want them to be.

At the same time, I worry about the analytical strategy of treating objects as having a life and agency of their own. I agree that material objects push back on us when we interact with them; they are not entirely pliable. But animating inanimate objects, I fear, stands to disguise *our* own agency and power, which strikes me as somewhat dangerous. If we can surrender our creative agency and power to external objects (that is, if we understand ourselves as merely *responding* to the world we encounter), to what extent does it release us from responsibility for our actions?

Finally, I would like to pick up the line of inquiry concerning public intellectuals. Scholars of Religious Studies, Biblical Studies, Classics, and related disciplines are all over the map regarding how much we should be engaged with the public and whether or not we should ever operate as activists. Kotrosits suggests that in our anxiety about relevance, scholars of antiquity have sought to make their work useful to contemporary debates about race, ethnicity, and identity. But I think it is important to keep two things separate here: 1) the anxiety about relevance that many academics understandably have, and 2) their sincere efforts at social justice work, however limited its impact may sometimes be. Sometimes these intentions overlap, but they are not necessarily identical.

For Kotrosits, many of these scholars who specialize in antiquity and write about contemporary race for the public are keeping alive a fantasy about the role that (predominantly white) scholars can play in the public sphere. In our hopes to be public intellectuals, she supposes, we project numerous unrealistic ideas on the public, which we treat as a "blank slate upon which we write our aspirations for import, our longings to be architects of change, our fears about whether or not, and how, we are relevant" (158). We imagine ourselves writing for people who can be persuaded about our "correct" views of history. "How often," she wonders though, "is 'the public' listening to public scholarship beyond outrage or piqued interest?" (157). She eventually lands on the conclusion that the reader might be anticipating (I know I was): in such public work, "there persists the disquieting fantasy of the white savior" (156).

She is no doubt correct that scholars-*cum*-public intellectuals often overestimate their influence and ability to sway the public. That seems to be par for the course for academics; we are trained to amplify the scope and influence of our work (after all, how else are we supposed to compete for prestigious grants and coveted professorships?). *Lives* does raise the significant question about how disciplines should go about critiquing themselves and who should be doing the work of changing them. Many disciplines *do* lack representation, and we need to think hard about how to rectify that. We need people on the inside to hold up mirrors (to use Kotrosits's language) and to expose power structures for what they are. Yet, this cannot be the burden that falls on BIPOC and other traditionally marginalized groups. Specifically, critiquing whiteness must also—indeed, primarily—be a job for white people.[13] Allyship from figures in positions of power is necessary and should be welcome.

The decision to treat Sarah Bond's work as exclusively paradigmatic of the problem with public, activism-oriented scholarship seems a bit odd, to be honest. Bond's attention to race/ethnicity and the Roman world has been widely influential, and in my view, she should be credited with nudging an entire discipline to think differently, indeed more critically, about its representations of ancient identity and about the explicitly racist intellectual legacy that we have inherited. Such praise only comes through dimly here though. Instead, Bond is critiqued for the optimism with which she appears to believe her public scholarship might make a positive difference. Bond, Kotrosits argues, embodies the fantasy of "the presumed white subject and architect of the discipline (part of the 'we') [who] has the power to disable racist narratives, and perhaps more eerily, the power to provide those darker others with the mirror" (149). With such phrasing, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the "white savior" label is affixed plainly to Bond. I, on the other hand, would prefer to align Bond's work with the necessary allyship that was mentioned earlier. To be sure, Bond has fundamentally changed how I and others think about race and ethnicity in antiquity.

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[13] Melanie S. Morrison, "Becoming Trustworthy White Allies," *Reflections* (Spring, 2013), https://reflections.yale.edu/article/future-race/becoming-trustworthy-white-allies; Say Burgin, "Black Lives Matter, Black Power, and the Role of White Allies," *Black Perspectives*, 12 Dec 2018, https://www.aaihs.org/black-lives-matter-black-power-and-the-role-of-white-allies/.

The final chapter uses the word "gatekeeping" at one point, and indeed, that is how I would characterize some of the implications here: in a wide-ranging and creative study that works so hard to break down boundaries and binaries, the views about what a public intellectual should or should not be doing unfortunately generate new constraints and boundaries within which we are being told to operate. But is there a constructive proposal here? That is, is there any way that a scholar with activist interests can be effective in undoing some of the racialized rot in academia? Kotrosits's only soft suggestion is that the classroom is a more politically efficacious place than public-facing writing. "It would be wise," she contends, "to stop trying to make the discipline relevant, and to lead instead with the contemporary moment, to lead with our relationships with our students and with each other" (162). Given the diversity of institutional settings that exist at least in North America, this is surely easier in some classrooms than others. Furthermore, considering the terrain of the job market and its over-saturation with qualified scholars, many academics can only dream of ending up with a job that lets them be in the classroom anyway.

A final thought: the register of this book intends deliberately to elicit affective responses, which can be polarizing for different kinds of readers. Not everyone is affected similarly by such efforts and may find them distracting. As we, as a discipline, reflect on an increasingly multi- and interdisciplinary field, it is important to consider our forms of expression. We are now, for instance, at a place where the precision, certainty, and fixity that the historical-critical method calls for is acknowledged to alienate some scholars.[14] Likewise, we should not shy away from thinking about the work done by analyses inspired by affect theory. Of course, we will never find a theoretical framework or register of writing that resonates with everyone. Theoretical frameworks rise and fall according to various trends in scholarship, and they will always appeal to some over others. What we can hope for, as I have aimed for here, is thoughtful discussion of their benefits and drawbacks, lest any particular approach assume hegemonic status.

I am certain that there will be a number of biblical scholars who do not "get" this book. They will not appreciate the constant complication, the efforts to elicit affect at the same time as intellect, and continual presentation of intentionally challenging questions that are only sometimes answered. Some of them will also balk at the fact that we continue to use Freud as a touchstone, enmeshed as he is in bigotry, racism, and misogyny. So, in writing this review, my goal is to think about what we can take away from this, even if all readers have not been—indeed, will not be—persuaded wholesale.

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[14] Sara Parks, "Historical-Critical Ministry? The Biblical Studies Classroom as Restorative Secular Space," *New Blackfriars* 100 (2019): 229–44; R. R. Warne, "(En)Gendering Religious Studies," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 27.4 (1998): 427–36; Francis Borchardt, "CSTT and Gender #2: A Gender Theory Critique of the Historical-Critical Method," CSTT (blog), 6 July 2017, https://blogs.helsinki.fi/sacredtexts/2017/07/06/cstt-and-gender-a-gender-theory-critique-of-the-historical-critical-method/.

Concluding Remarks

Perhaps what *Lives* excels at most is asking questions. Not all questions that Kotrosits asks are definitively answered, or even thoroughly explored, but that is not really the point. The point is to destabilize the "knowledge" about objects that we have hitherto taken for granted. Throughout *Lives*, Kotrosits shows how new questions can reveal new ways of looking at seemingly ordinary things—in the interest of space, I cannot spend sufficient time on all those vantage points, and so I encourage readers to explore *Lives* themselves. It is a provocative work that will certainly challenge them.