

Anachronistic, Queer Pauline Bodies amidst the Appeal of Appalment

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Abstract

Bodies and embodiment hardly make a dent in Pauline reception history, as corporeality either fails to register as significant among interpreters or is simply absent from the Pauline letters. Pauline bodies, in so far as they are deemed to exist at all, have been posited as inconsequential at best and worrisome and best eschewed, at worst. Deliberately forcing unlikely, anachronistic and queer juxtapositions, allows the emergence of bodies other than Paul's, and in particular the grotesque and indecent bodies of persona non grata of ancient times and the modern world. The purpose and result both are the thoroughgoing queering of bodies, of monstrosities, of temporalities and of Pauline texts and interpretation

Keywords: Corporeality, Pauline interpretation, queering

Introduction

Bodies of the human, fleshy kind are not commonly claimed as a particularly Pauline emphasis. To the contrary, while interpretive history has and often continues to profile Paul in roles that range from founder of Christianity, to stalwart in the Protestant Reformation, to yardstick for modern Christendom, when it comes to his letters, the emphasis has been on the spiritual to the detriment of bodily matters. There has been little room for corporeality in Pauline interpretive frameworks that formed over time, except perhaps for terms like σῶμα (body) reserved as positive metaphor for faith communities, or σὰρξ (flesh) framed as negative image for sin and depravity – both understood as-and-in their binary simplicities. With few exceptions,¹ neither bodies as real-life, living persons nor corporeality as theme and descriptive of human existence have received significant attention in Pauline interpretive tradition, as if corporeality was of little if any concern to, or of value for and in, his letters.² Feeding both off and into his ostensibly

¹ See e.g. the references to the work of other scholars in my earlier contributions on Paul's body theology (Punt 2005; 2012). The scholarly neglect of other voices, such as African and African-American readings has also had adverse implications for the construction of a Pauline body theology hermeneutic (see recently e.g. Bowens 2020, Togarasei 2016).

² The exception to this may be the strong focus on sin, and in particular, the concern with sexual (im)morality. A few exceptions to the anti-corporeal reading of Paul can be found, mostly in more recent feminist scholarship.

corporeal-docetic letters, Paul's dissociation with the body became proxy for disinterest with the material world, and later a trend entrenched in the history of interpretation of his letters.³ In time, and with few exceptions, Paul's writings have come to be seen as, at best, non-corporeal in orientation, and at worst, anti-corporeal in theology (some would argue, ideology; and others fail to see the difference).

This is not to say, however, that bodies are absent from the Pauline literature, whether implicit, assumed, referential or otherwise. As a matter of fact, bodies in various shapes and sizes populate Paul's letters, and sometimes are the centre of attention in his writings. Serving as more than surfaces of engagement, bodies were often implicated in and even became the sources and instigators of transgression and punishment. In fact, throughout his letters, Paul's own body remains a prominent location or marker of suffering as much as negative experiences and evaluations are both rhetorically inscribed and reclaimed for the better (e.g. Gal 1-2; Rom 7; Phil 1; 2 Cor 10-13). To some extent, Paul's awareness of his own and others' bodies drives and determines his letters, until the corporeal gets all but drowned out by interpretive tradition opting to celebrate an other-worldly, disembodied or at best body-sceptical, thrust.⁴ This contribution considers Marchal's treatment of some of these bodies in the Pauline corpus, and in particular, androgyne-, eunuch-, slave- and foreigner bodies, that were ambivalent at best but more generally framed as abhorrent, to be avoided and pushed away by the communities addressed by the letters, and often presented or understood to be characterised by their relationship to "normality".⁵ Retrieving and making sense (rather than sin) (out) of Pauline bodies requires attention not only for embodied texts in their corporeal contexts, but also demands critical attention to a protracted history of anti-body interpretation,⁶ for which Marchal employs a queer past-Paul reading. Since retrieval processes are neither simple, nor the resisting of longstanding traditions held in place by normalised conventionality, a queer approach to Pauline bodies holds much promise.

³ Though not limited to an other-worldly, eschatological focus and theological paradigms such as the well-known "already-not yet" framework (e.g. Beker 1982; 1991; Ridderbos 1975; Verhey 1984; and others), these notions are key in an interpretive history that is slanted towards positing Paul as an apostle whose concern for the life hereafter and with his eyes focused on what it to come. Such an interpretive history drowns out any comprehensive concern in his letters for the here-and-now as much as for the mundane, everyday-existence of Jesus-followers in his letters.

⁴ Indeed, Paul's insistence on the bodily, humiliated and crucified Christ (1 Cor 2:2; Phil 2), notwithstanding his affirmation of the importance of Christ's resurrection (1 Cor 15), is telling in terms of the corporeal emphasis even in a Christological sense; and offers interesting prospects considering his attention to his own body, anguish and brokenness as in 2 Cor 10-13 (see e.g. Punt 2021).

⁵ See also (Thiem 2005) on how "normality" is created, also by being defined and structured through notions of "the body".

⁶ An important – and perhaps not unexpected – caveat: it is impossible to respond in one article to all the many, different angles, forming a rich theoretical pastiche and intricate and complex tapestry of social, cultural, political, religious and other threads, that Marchal weaves together in this valuable and significant contribution.

Appeal of Appalling Bodies

In *Appalling Bodies*, Joseph Marchal strives to achieve numerous goals – methodologically, theoretically, literary, exegetically and otherwise – and they all revolve around the central aim hinted at in his monograph’s title: to investigate the Pauline letters from the perspective of those embodied persons generally not in focus for either Paul, nor the ancient communities receiving his letters, nor even for most contemporary interpreters. Not only does he read against the non- or anti-corporeal thrust of Pauline tradition, Marchal selected the side-lined, disqualified human non-entities of Paul’s letters and matched them up with those of our times. As part of his counter-kyriarchal project,⁷ he juxtaposes androgynes, eunuchs, slaves and foreigners of ancient times with, respectively, today’s trans-, intersex-, BDSM- and terrorist-identities or assemblages – in deliberately and functionally anachronistic ways. His hope is “that such admittedly anachronistic questions highlight the persistence of such figurations of gender, sexual, racial, and religious perversity across the centuries” (Marchal 2020, 194). Both by considering bodies that are deemed loathsome, as well as insisting on temporalities considered improper for comparison, these bodies receive renewed attention by framing them outside socio-normative bodies and conventional timeframes.

From the outset, then, Marchal’s approach differs from attempts to trace within the Pauline letters as well as other testimonies to incipient Christianity, tensions that developed into long-standing and irreconcilable, stark contrasts: between notions such as mind and body, soul and body, or spirit and flesh, especially in contexts of contemporary reflection on human immortality and bodily resurrection.⁸ Such discussions extended in late antiquity to the resurrected human body and the relevant philosophical, medical and theological notions that formed the background for the topic.⁹ Going a different route, the analogical thread that binds together Marchal’s exercise in anachronistic comparison, is the marginalisation of real-life individuals and groups in specific times and places on grounds of gender and

⁷ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza coined the term “kyriarchy” in the nineties to refer to “the rule of the emperor, lord, slave master, husband, or the elite freeborn, propertied, educated gentleman to whom disenfranchised men and all wo/men were subordinated” (Schüssler Fiorenza 2009, 9), within complex, institutionalised systems of dominance and exclusion built on male property rights, and where race, gender, ethnicity, class and other social lines intersect.

⁸ Interpreters negotiating contemporary Pauline discourse can hardly avoid such conjectures, connections, and contrasts altogether, given how these have informed and formed Pauline interpretive history over a long time. Some of these contrasts live on in popular conceptions of religion: “The distinction between mind and body is often interpreted as also a distinction between beliefs and practices. In this view, religious practices are seen as consequences of particular beliefs, rather than as an integral part of religious identity and experience in themselves. As a consequence, religious practices that are contested in society today—often practices associated with the body—need to be justified by arguments based on beliefs, in order to be seen as legitimate” (Neutel 2019).

⁹ After the issue of the divine-human body had been problematised by Christianity, it began to drift away from vast metaphysical deliberations into a sphere of more specialized bodily concepts, developed in ancient medicine and other natural sciences (see e.g. Usacheva, Ulrich, and Bhayro 2021).

sexuality, inflected by various other social practices such as what today will be referred to and (therefore) categorised as economics and politics and religion. And, as much as historical veracity and interpretation of biblical texts in appropriate socio-historical contexts are in many ways key to the biblical studies-enterprise, history can become a controlling and suppressive fence and at the same time, also a comfortable hiding place.¹⁰

Resisting both the interpretive tide and its attempts to absolve Paul, an anachronistic reading shows that Paul, too, is incriminated through his letters. Aligned to the Roman imperial tendency to array figures such as androgynes, eunuchs, slaves and foreigners generally, in awkward, demeaning and perverse ways, Paul used these oddly embodied figures to get at other members of the Jesus-follower communities he addressed in his letters.¹¹ This reading results from an alternative approach wanting to resist a kyriarchal ethos, as found in queer strategies (Marchal 2020, 133). Marchal uses his constructed framework of understanding to theorise four sets of ancient and contemporary identities by engaging specific biblical texts, themes and character portrayals and interpreting what he identifies as analogous *comparanda*, exploring them from a theoretical and largely queer theoretical perspective.

Queering Pauline Bodies

The juxtaposing of first century androgynes, eunuchs, slaves and foreigners with twenty-first century trans-, intersex-, BDSM- and terrorist-identities or assemblages, is (part of) a distinctly queer theoretical move. Marchal does not only want to expose and recover, but also to reread and provide alternatives. He concludes that his “anachronistic aspiration” was for his work to have “pulled together a counterassembly: one in which twenty-first-century bodies reach back in order to critically reflect on which monsters, which perversities, which pariahs, which Others do we continue to create” (Marchal 2020, 198). His purpose is plural, related both to making sense of the Pauline letters, but also to exploring their use in the past and present, contemplating their ongoing effect and impact, and – importantly – considering an alternative, counter-conventional understanding of these letters and their embodied figures.

The queer purpose, on the one hand, serves to challenge regimes of normality and the desire to resist and contest conventionalities and their worldviews. *Appalling Bodies* is an excellent specimen of queer scholarship that “in its contemporary form

¹⁰ On historical inquiry as open-ended, methodologically rigorous investigation of human existence in the past, as opposed to tradition(s) that claim(s) historical accuracy but boils down to crafting historical frameworks according to preconceived images, see e.g. recently Mason (2021).

¹¹ The enduring profiling of Paul as an exemplary, almost hero-like figure, is well-established in interpretive history. Feminist scholars have argued that “male-stream” interpretation has played a major role in construing his complimentary stature, in which even the shortcomings to which Paul admits are regarded positively (see e.g. Johnson-DeBaufre and Nasrallah 2011).

is anti-normative and seeks to subvert, challenge and critique a host of taken for granted ‘stabilities’ in our social lives” (Browne and Nash 2010, 7). The focus is on sexualities and in particular on those considered unconventional and therefore unacceptable: “Queer theory challenges the normative social ordering of identities and subjectivities along the heterosexual/homosexual binary as well as the privileging of heterosexuality as ‘natural’ and homosexuality as its deviant and abhorrent ‘other’” (Browne and Nash 2010, 5). Marchal sets himself the task of queering across the board, not only biblical texts but also modern gender and sexual personae, interpretive traditions, and the biblical studies guild, to name a few.¹² “Queer as a mode (and occasionally an identity, or anti-identity, of sorts) casts itself, then, as inhabiting an ethos and praxis especially useful for interrogating regimes of the normal and the natural. Described thusly, queer is an oppositional, resistant, transgressive movement, contrary and troubling to what surrounds and precedes in normalization” (Marchal 2020, 197).¹³

Queer, on the other hand, is restorative and coalitional, and, in this study of Pauline bodies, takes place through anachronism in the form of assembly. Anachronism remains risky and is often considered unappealing but it is neither ahistorical (as in the absence of temporality) nor antihistorical (as in the negation of a specific temporality). In fact, it is rather “a distinctive kind of historical co-presence, a pull of the past still in the present, persisting, partially lost, but haunting” and therefore it is a “kind of assembly” (Marchal 2020, 206), which makes anachronism a somewhat queer temporality.¹⁴ At the same time, he is not blind to the theoretical and epistemological challenges inherent to queer theoretical claims, which in turn may harbour its own exceptionalism, encouraged by a politics of respectability or coaxed by homonormative measures for belonging in conventional practices.

Perhaps the queerest aspect of *Appalling Bodies* is when appalling becomes appealing – or is it the other way round?¹⁵ The rhetoric of ancient bodies generally was about the ideal more than the normal, about perfection rather than bodies without blemish. Paul’s inclusion of androgynes, eunuchs, slaves and foreigners of

¹² Marchal more readily acknowledges his queer angle on “temporality, historicity, anachronism and spectrality” (Marchal 2020, 199) than any of the other queer movements in his book.

¹³ Some scholars explain the “beyond” of queer interpretation as related to four turns or swerves within queer theory: an antinormative turn, an antisocial turn, a temporal turn, and an affective turn; it is the temporal turn that receives form in anachronistic juxtapositions, of course (Moore, Brintnall, and Marchal 2018, 5–25).

¹⁴ Ironically, an anachronistic approach announced as such may attract attention for its explicit claims and its irreverent confrontation of established conventions. However, its prior acknowledgement of its intentions and its willingness to consider disparities along with analogies, to deal with divergences side by side with resonances, puts out a challenge to the guild where anachronistic concepts (like sexuality) and methods are often bandied without consideration and often even without acknowledgement.

¹⁵ In the end, Marchal also makes explicit the connections between appalling and appealing and their potential reciprocity, first in terms of anachronism but also in terms of affective responses (Marchal 2020, 206–7).

ancient times and Marchal's analogies with today's trans-, intersex-, BDSM- and terrorist-identities or assemblages, queerly destabilise both the ancient idealised body as well as today's respectable, decent and conventionalised body.¹⁶ It is not possible to mimic Marchal's vociferous, boundless and energetic style and one has to strain not to overuse appalling in ways that will distract from the rich ways in which he uses it, throws it around, and makes it to resonate. Appalment is of course constructed, nurtured and promoted, it is conveyed and formatted into place, and then protected and guarded.¹⁷ Such construction of appalment, equally evidently, is hegemonic. However, when appalling turns into appealing, does the latter become a form of resisting, or a matter of attraction and allure? Or, what happens when appealing is reinscribed and challenged as appalling, when the normal becomes the aberrant, when the socially desired becomes the rejected? Can and does this switch also happen, at large scale, and is it sustainable? And who benefits or derives power when creating a new-normal in the process, and conversely, who loses out? Such questions cannot be avoided in a queer reading.

Reading Past Paul

Marchal is careful to be fair towards Paul, that is, the Paul of the letters if not of the interpretive history – an important distinction in the book, as it should be in scholarship in any case. He aligns himself with Benny Liew in describing Paul as caught up in a “colonised mindset” (Liew 2008, 95) which explains Paul's use or redeployment of stereotypical, barbarian Other scare-figures of gender, sexual, ethnoracial, regional and religious difference. Such explaining, Marchal consistently points out, is not to exempt Paul from blame or to excuse him, but to situate the letters in their larger Roman imperial setting. Marchal takes Rubin's reference to Paul and his letters as the origin of today's “sex negativity” and its consequences, as his point of departure, but is not interested in cleaning up such perceptions. Instead, Marchal insists upon a re-evaluation of embodiment in the Pauline letters. “I will be reaching past Paul toward other, far more fascinating figures, before and after these letters: androgynes, eunuchs, slaves, and barbarians—each depicted as perversely gendered and strangely embodied figures in their own distinctive, though interrelated ways, before and after the letters” (Marchal 2020, 2).¹⁸

¹⁶ In the words of Althaus-Reid, “Indecent Sexual Theologies do not need to have a teleology, or a system, yet they may be effective as long as they represent the resurrection of the excessive in our contexts, and a passion for organising the lusty transgressions of theological and political thought” (Althaus-Reid 2000, 200).

¹⁷ Marchal is not oblivious to his own interpretive constructions and practices, and especially engages his anachronistic juxtapositions, even if unapologetically and decidedly queerly.

¹⁸ Although the focus is more on monstrosities related to race, Livingstone's consideration of non-adamic origins highlights the interconnections between religion and the construction of monstrous others, which in history were considered degraded humans or even non-humans (Livingstone 2008, espec 11-16).

However, is it in fact possible to read past Paul, or is a side-lining of Paul perhaps the best that can be achieved, especially as Paul retain the authorial imbalance of power, propped up by a centuries-old interpretive history? Can readers today duck under the Pauline reach, or step outside interpretive history's fences in sustained ways? In this regard, Marchal aims beyond the historical-typical, since his goal "is as much about generating what 'we' who are not an audience (of a sort) to this rhetorical act in history can do, possibly with connection of a queer kind of coalition: not in corresponding with this correspondence (Paul's letters), but in any noncorrespondence to the letters that nonidentically touch on other noncorrespondences" (Marchal 2020, 26–27). Still, to what extent are all attempts to read past Paul, not in the end constricted through the Paul letters and sentiment as well as interpretive history? Is the sheer dominance of the Pauline tradition, theologically and culturally, not so determinative that even a contra-Paul reading eventually ends up again depending on Paul?¹⁹

Marchal pushes back against the over-deployment of Paul's letters in modern discussions of or disputes on gender and sexuality, either through enlisting the letters' support for contemporary arguments or in defence of Pauline positions. Marchal's aspiration to reconstruct subjugated persons and formations "do not compel unthinking acceptance or repetitions of mimetic exactitude but rather have their appeal in contributing queerly nonidentical identifications, unanticipatable similarities, and unconventional temporal copresences" (Marchal 2020, 25). He advocates a different approach, starting with viewing the letters as "rhetorically sophisticated objects," and exploring "new ways to reach out and know more about the historical figures targeted by the letters to these assembly communities" (Marchal 2020, 2–3), situating them within their historical, Roman imperial context, while trying to understand how ancient audiences might have heard Paul's words.²⁰

Anachronistic Juxtapositions

Marchal describes and assembles contexts of credulity for themes and identities of antiquity, before he embarks on socially locating the NT texts in these contexts for heuristic purposes.²¹ He stresses that his focus is on rhetorical bodies, or "figures" within the first-century imperial context, who preceded those who may eventually

¹⁹ See also the valuable contribution of (Moore and Sherwood 2011) regarding the tradition of insisting on discontinuity between past and present as way of propping up modernist thinking and models.

²⁰ Sharing what lies behind the sentiment, "greater familiarity with these figures and forms of argumentation provides key contexts for approaching and reimagining those 'others' still so marginalized within both these epistles and their interpretations" (Marchal 2020, 3), does this not amount to an over-asking the texts? Also, as much as "subversively anachronistic juxtapositions" are largely reliant upon the one-sided epistolary materials, is the lack of information the reason for their marginalised existence in interpretive history?

²¹ E.g. the unproblematic and conventional nature of slaves' sexual availability in ancient contexts informs a reading of Onesimus' "usefulness" not simply in a general, labour-related sense, but as "good for intercourse" (Marchal 2020, 124).

have received the letters in one way or another in historical northern and eastern Mediterranean settings or assemblies, and who prevailed after the arriving letters, notwithstanding the letters' impression of the reverse sequence (Marchal 2020, 2). However, more than only texts, *Appalling Bodies* is concerned with people, real-life embodied and liminal people and their identities, then and now: "The vulnerability of all of these figures to invasion, possession, and penetration was imagined as demonstrating a temporality that prevails because it persists—the past, present, and future of Roman imperial power" (Marchal 2020, 203). A wide range of culturally relevant concepts or social categories such as gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, political affiliation, language, religion, class, profession or occupation, and sexual orientation, play into perceptions of identity. It may be useful to understand identity as "a socially constructed, dynamic discourse-world whose terms and frames of reference are constantly in motion, and whose elements may appear distinctly different depending on one's position in the social, economic and political structures and interests that define the life of a given community or state" (Filonik and Kucharski 2021, 3). It means not only that identity is never stable, but also that it is actually, constantly renegotiated through social interactions. However, as much as people claim identities, identity is not a reference to some essential characteristic but rather social acknowledgement of self-ascribed or societal denotations and therefore inevitably performative. Choosing four at-risk identities of the past, in Paul's letters, Marchal contrasts their construction and purpose with four equally if differently at-risk identities of the present.

In a *first* juxtaposition ("Corinthian close shave"), between the ancient figure of the androgyne and the modern transgender person, Marchal points to the range of masculinities, and in particular, female masculinity. He proceeds to explore analogies between today's female masculinities, including transgender, butch and drag-king identities, and ancient androgynes such as possibly referenced in 1 Cor 11. His purpose is not comparison, and least of all, equation: "The stories about contemporary forms of female masculinity and ancient forms of androgyny have the potential to reflect not a continuum, but a constellation arrayed in relation to each other, but not in terms of progression or a hierarchy of value" (Marchal 2020, 61). The hermeneutical energy and epistemological value of such juxtapositions are situated in the opening up of categories of understanding and interpretive space: "The touches, even the traffic between the figures and forms of ancient androgyny and female masculinity suggest a more capacious space, cross-temporal habitation in which one might find nonidentical correspondences, complicating varieties of gender, prophetic people, then and now" (Marchal 2020, 67).

A *second* juxtaposition ("Uncut Galatians") is between eunuchs as antiquity's "ultimate scare-figures of elite imperial masculinity" or "non-masculine nightmares" or "monstrosities" (Marchal 2020, 78–89), and intersex people of today. This exploration serves various purposes, of which an important component

is the critique of androcentrism.²² Marchal goes beyond socio-cultural *Umwelt* explanations such as that Paul wanted to dissuade his letter recipients from circumcision by, among others, relating the practice to the *galli* or Cybele-followers' practice of castration (see e.g. Elliott 2003). Ironically, for all Paul's agitation in Galatians against a focus on fleshiness, his argument is driven exactly by an emphasis on fleshly practice, which can enable but also denounce especially where genitals are concerned: "flesh is tainted by its association with desire, weakness, enslavement, inferiority, or, in short, the feminine, all qualities that the eunuch figure potently signifies for elite Roman imperial males. The vilification is ironic, considering Paul's particular focus on the phallic flesh of the foreskinned males in the community" (Marchal 2020, 102).²³

Paul's rhetorical gaffe about castration (ἀποκόπτω, Gal 5:12; see κατατομή, Phil 3:2) suggests an even more ominous scenario with anachronistic consequences, for intersexed people in particular.²⁴ The rhetoric supports and perpetuates "naturalizing and normalizing dynamics about such bodily differences found in recent modes of medicalized management."²⁵ Other ancient authors such as Philo (*Migr. Abr.* 92-93) and Josephus (*Ant.* 20.41-43) emphasise the meaning of and adherence to circumcision above actual physical marking. "The stress on circumcision as the definitive marker of Jewish identity in antiquity is much more the result of distinctly Christian interpretations than the lively and long-lasting discussions about the meanings and practices of Judaism(s) among Jews" (Marchal

²² "Anachronistically juxtaposing ancient eunuchs and contemporary people with intersex conditions makes it easier to trace how female forms of embodiment only come into view as figures of receptivity in all three settings" (Marchal 2020, 97).

²³ In subsequent religious traditions, castration generally received negative evaluation: "While castration is forbidden in prophetic traditions and only vaguely alluded to in the Quran (see Q24.31 for a possible reference to eunuchs), it was practised by some men who served as attendants in the sultan's harem, especially in Ottoman times. It is an unscriptural innovation. Nor is it certified by the Prophet's normative practice. The Quran does not regard ascetic self-restraint as a reprehensible practice. It criticises celibate monasticism, however, as an ultimately misguided though well-intentioned Christian innovation (Q57.27)" (Akhtar 2018, 166).

²⁴ So too in antiquity, where both the reversal of circumcision and even the possible restoration of a "mistakenly" enslaved person were possibilities, but castration was final and irreversible, and would have had disastrous consequences in an environment driven by imperially-induced masculinity and the danger of crossing a porous gender boundary. The eunuch was a stock figure in ancient literature for sterile yet sexually uncontrolled, and also infracted masculine identity (Moxnes 2003, 72-90). "As testaments to the separability of man and masculinity, eunuchs represented divergent, but all-too possible pasts and futures for these elite men and their heirs" (Marchal 2020, 85). Marchal also posits the anachronistic but important analogy of intersex people blurring gendered distinctions and challenging heteronormative identities, especially for today's medical elites, and ancient eunuchs' destabilising threat to the boundaries of masculinity and the assumed correlating right of free, elite males' prerogative regarding penetration (Marchal 2020, 106).

²⁵ Marchal points to four aspects in particular: "an exclusive insistence on one model of embodiment, a fixation on and overestimation of the centrality of the penis, the debasement of fleshly and femininely receptive bodies, and a disturbing lack of concern about pain or pleasure" (Marchal 2020, 110). See also Neutel (2020) for how circumcision feeds into both gender (male) and religious (Christian) exnomination.

2020, 95; for the Jewish context see also Cohen 2005; for the Jewish-follower context, see also Smit 2017).

In a *third* juxtaposition, Marchal aligns bottom or BDSM communal practices with slavery in a chapter on “Use.” His purpose is to show that established, conventionalised reading patterns allow both for ignoring or simply not registering the extent to which slaves in antiquity were deemed to exist for their owners’ pleasure, as well as sidestepping the implications of slaves availability to be used, also sexually, by their owners (Marchal 2020, 154). “Anachronistically juxtaposing the sexual use of Onesimus, an oppressed figure from a biblically referred but obscured history, against these different uses of the materials and other markers of slavery in BDSM scenes does not cover over or evade the horrors and atrocities of embodied violence against enslaved people, as most biblical scholarship is still so prone to do” (Marchal 2020, 152). His reading strives to provide “a queer alternative to the letter’s oppressive continuities with slave regimes ancient and modern,” to get to grips with the horrors of slavery in the past, as well as ongoing practices of subjectification, of which Bible readers and users are not innocent (Marchal 2020, 139).²⁶

Marchal’s resistance and, at times, ire is directed primarily at what he describes as Paul’s appalling argument and style of arguing in the Philemon letter.²⁷ He is not unaware of the difficulty of totally separating negative slavery and positive BDSM,²⁸ or the more recent context’s equally troubling impositions.²⁹ On one level BDSM encounters seem to feed into established, stereotyped sociosexual roles, like masculine activity and feminizing passivity or receptivity (Marchal 2020, 135). However, it can nevertheless, “make visible the traffic within and between various monstrous intimacies” (Marchal 2020, 148), and even conjure a parody of authority (Marchal 2020, 141), and so provides an important lens both for re-evaluating slavery as well as Paul’s related rhetoric in the letter to Philemon. He defends his “genuinely blasphemous use” of the Philemon letter, since “the disconcerting juxtaposition of ancient slave and BDSM ‘slave’ indexes the instability of both

²⁶ “The anachronistic juxtaposition of Pauline arguments about slave utility and owner- users’ consent alongside BDSM help to highlight the connections, resonances, and inheritances from slave systems into the contemporary context” (Marchal 2020, 142). See also Roth’s argument on Paul’s involvement in slavery, regardless of modern questions regarding complicity and condonement (Roth 2014).

²⁷ Frilingos (2014) also refers to the use of εὔχρηστος by Lucian of Samosata (2nd CE) to express sexual servitude in a context of slavery (*Erôtes* 25, 27); the possibility of Paul and Philemon quarrelling over claims to the sexual use of Onesimus; and the implications in this regard given Paul’s frequent use of familial rhetoric such as τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου (Phlm 10; cf. Gal 4:19, 1 Thess 2:7, 11-12). See also Marchal’s earlier arguments about the sexual availability of slaves in antiquity (Marchal 2011).

²⁸ “The simulative dynamic of BDSM tempers some of the utopic enthusiasm about BDSM inventing something new in relation to power” (Marchal 2020, 142).

²⁹ “Slavery’s modes of embodied dispersal, sensate and social, could resonate with claims that BDSM can reterritorialize bodily pleasures, while also figuring slaves as troubling heteronormative kinship” (Marchal 2020, 145).

biblical and historical claims to power” (Marchal 2020, 136). And, both enslaved resistance that devalue their embodied utility as useless as well as exploitative economies’ rubbishing of BDSM’s techniques of restraint, “signal alternate imaginaries for different kinds of communities than those that coincide with and contribute to exploitative economies” (Marchal 2020, 137).

Marchal’s *fourth* and final pair (“Assembled Gentiles”), terrorist and barbarian, is not so much a new category added to the previous, but rather forms an overarching category for the foregoing, especially in terms of “barbarian”. As he contends, “These features of barbarians, then, can be fleshed out by their depictions with or as gender-variant females, effeminized males, eunuchs, and/or enslaved—precisely the figures Paul’s letters have redeployed” (Marchal 2020, 173, see also 181). The difficulty of dealing with exceptionalism, though, is related to its ambiguity, which simultaneously establish distinctiveness through insisting on unlikeness, the one in opposition to all others, while yet comparing in elevating one above others, in order to show superiority. Reflection on the national, racial and imperial uses of gender and sexuality is compounded by their intersectionalities and their “stickiness” (Puar 2007, 185), in the sense of signifiers continuously reappearing and reattaching to certain bodies in different contexts. The creation of the heteromasculine patriot versus the demasculinised dark enemy, thus “are twin processes that are themselves racialized and sexualized” (Alexander 2005, 259).³⁰ Not unlike earlier dissonance between gay liberation hermeneutics and queer interpretation of the Bible, “[t]he problem, then, may just be that some LGBTIQ folks have claimed a uniquely transgressive site from which to argue, which is not actually that transgressive, given the way it obscures some forms of normalization and naturalization, including specifically racialization and nationalization” (Marchal 2020, 197). Paul’s argument switching between minoritizing (focussing on the stereotyped Other) and universalising (broadening the argument out to the recipients and people generally), fits well with his combination of the warding off of the externalised threat and securing internalising control in Romans letter, and temporally plays out on, respectively, contemporary and eschatological levels (Marchal 2020, 162–63, 263 n35).

Conclusion: Rhetorical Bodies, Real Bodies, Queer Bodies

To conclude, three summarising remarks and questions. One, it is a queer-theoretical perspective that gives shape to the design and argument of the book. In many ways, all human bodies are queer bodies in the sense that the constructed normativities of the day are exactly that, normatively constructed rather than pragmatically existential. If nothing else, *Appalling Bodies* shows how rhetorically constructed bodies are not in any way unreal or fictional bodies, but that language

³⁰ “Romans 1:18–32 and 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 ... are about much more than sexuality, constructing a racialized difference that is established by and interwoven within intersecting gender, sexual, and religious perversities”(Marchal 2020, 162–63).

and rhetoric play vital roles in making bodies, in the linguistic construction of corporeality, and through the relationship between language and ideology. However, an all too inclusive queer-umbrella may leave queers in the lurch and (re)instigate a(nother) normativity, again. Queer reading entails the exploration of various fault lines, fissures, innuendo's, conjectures, possibilities, counter- and protesting readings and the like. It also entails an indecent reading (in similar vein if on another topic, see Althaus-Reid 2000), where holy cows have no pastures but both the assertive and outspoken "in your face" – and candid and forthright "call a spade a spade" – approaches coexist productively as well as cheerfully. Fragility will struggle to find a foothold in queer readings such as found here.

Two, much of the argument centres on Paul's redeployment of the sexualised scare figure or monstrosity of the barbarian foreign Other, in his construction of particular ethnic groups over against opposing ethnoracial groups, with boundaries that remain flexible and porous notwithstanding claims to their definite and fixed nature (Marchal 2020, e.g. 190). However, it is within the porosity and fissures of these constructions and their construed boundaries, that Marchal unearths further haunting presences. Amidst the interesting anachronistic juxtapositions and the many different real and constructed divides they cross, or better, which Marchal makes them to cross, are also the lingering sub-themes he allows to emerge, such as the enduring androcentrism prevalent in and driving discussions about trans- and androgyne identities, or, the dominant, modern bio-surgical (re)construction discourse that impacts intersex- or eunuch bodies. Such androcentric, surgical constructions not only reflect but continue to dominate modern lives, in discourse and in practice. In past and present contexts where, still, "'male' or phallic tissue is overly invested with importance" (Marchal 2020, 92), both masculinity and men are simultaneously indicated as the reason and both are invested through it with significance – very bodily and very corporeally.³¹ "By accepting and only arguing themselves from this perspective, Pauline interpreters reinforce Paul's reduction of Jews and the other nations to what the males do (or do not) have done to their genitalia. The history of interpretation paradoxically perpetuates yet deflects this Pauline focus on the penis" (Marchal 2020, 93). And as another fissure, exnomination raises its ugly head too, when attempts to displace and dethrone the masculine by desisting from male profiling, ironically may serve to entrench a masculine-focussed if not derived perspective.

Three, Marchal conjures up various scenarios by framing the Pauline letters in their rhetorical contexts, in their socio-cultural settings, from an author's or intentional perspective, from the recipients' or audiences' perspective, from a disaffected such as an anti-Paul Onesimus perspective (Marchal 2020, 138), to name a few. That is, he queers reading perspectives and accompanying time frames and historical periods. However, one can ask a question or two here. One, given the

³¹ For interesting perspective on scripting the male bodies, maleness (hormonal and chromosomal) and manliness/masculinity (social formed identity over time), see Flannigan-Saint-Aubin (1998).

persistent warning against the conventional, glib alignment of biblical interpreters with Paul as person and with his positions, in content as well as in direction or attitude, does the forthright acceptance of the baptismal formula of Gal 3:28 as constituting a positive framework for including different people, for erasing differences between them, and, as an ideology indicative of Paul's own practice (e.g. Marchal 2020, 196), not deserve more scrutiny?³² Two, some important interpretive frameworks such as the priapic protocol that reflects and maintains a kyriarchal socio-political order; the interwovenness of gender and sexuality with race, ethnicity, geographical location or regionality, economics and politics, and religion; and, the neglect of sexuality even more than gender in the interpretive history of the Bible, all inform Marchal's work. Moreover, given that sexual, gender, ethnic, racial or ethnoracial, national and religious difference together and intersectionally comprise Paul's Others, those who are considered outsiders and foreigners and barbarians (Marchal 2020, e.g. 171), one is left wondering why Marchal did not explore the possibilities offered by "intersectionality" more explicitly or more intentionally?³³

Finally, Marchal writes with academic erudition, even if all will not be in agreement with the project's goals, approach or conclusions, and with exuberant flair and persistent yet subtle and even unexpected sexual double entendre. In his decidedly non-aligned (to Paul) and non-partisan (to the interpretive tradition) engagement with Pauline texts, Marchal successfully brings four queer social identities and locations into an equally queer, unsettling and disruptive conversation(s). *Appalling Bodies* poses an overt challenge to the long interpretive history of an invincible and theologically Protestant Paul, and through anachronistic queering, depicts a vulnerable, exposed and at times vengeful figure.³⁴

³² Would a queer approach, especially in tandem with a postcolonial reading, not first wrestle Gal 3:28 from its sentimentalist paradigm, showing upon tensions and strains, before it starts to explore the potential of Gal 3:28 anew, rethinking ancient setting but also thinking about its potential for new, modern contexts? (see e.g. Punt 2010).

³³ In all fairness, Marchal does refer to Matthews's use of intersectionality (Marchal 2020, 267, n117). Other contributions can enrich the argument further, see also e.g. Kartzow (2010), Nash (2008, 1–15). Hill Collins and Bilge describe it well: "Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves" (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016, 22 epub).

³⁴ "Paul's rhetorical efforts seem to be less defenses of the gospel or the community, endangered from the outside than a response, angry and volatile, to a (perceived) encroachment on his gospel and his (perceived) community, from another potential option about the embodiment of communal life, likely even from within these assembly communities" (Marchal 2020, 109).

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