

Review of Maia Kotrosits, *The Lives of Objects: Material Culture, Experience, and the Real in the History of Early Christianity*

Class 200: New Studies in Religion. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020.

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I recall hearing Maia Kotrosits read, at a Society of Biblical Literature meeting a few years back, an abbreviated version of the second chapter of her remarkable new book. That presentation foregrounded “the votive dedications...found in archaeological excavations near Asklepios sanctuaries: the terracotta casts of hands, feet, arms, breasts, heads, fingers that were hung or placed in the sanctuary, out of either hope or gratitude for healing” (64). What might it mean to read 1 Corinthians’s appeals to a corporeal figure of unity in light of this material evidence of fragmentation, ruin, and disjointed bodies? It was a terrific presentation. But it was not quite the preview of *The Lives of Objects* I’d imagined it might be—this despite the book’s cover art, which features Leonid Tsvetkov’s striking ex-voto casts of organs and limbs (alongside various modern consumer objects). I opened the book anticipating an undoubtedly fascinating new materialist engagement with ancient artefacts, particularly of the body. What I discovered instead (or really, in addition) was a strikingly personal, poignant series of meditations on attachment and commitment, fantasy, and desire, in relation to constructions of objects of all kinds, including that object we call early Christianity. This is certainly a book about “body-objects” (12-15), including: Pygmalion’s sculpted woman; the Gospel of Peter’s talking cross; the tortured if almost entirely rhetorical bodies of martyrdom narratives; the cultural politics of penetration as a framework for theorizing ancient sex; and the skin tones of ancient statuary, among many other examples. The body returns again and again as Kotrosits’s most significant site of critical, political, and ethical reflection. And yet, in Kotrosits’s beautiful, meditative, critical score, the body-object is less a predominant tonality than a motif played in subtle variations that recur rather unexpectedly throughout the book, at times startling the reader with visceral force.

One of the primary functions of the body, or more generally the material object, in the book is as a counterpoint to theoretical modes Kotrosits rightly feels have lost critical value. Primary among them is the linguistic turn, with its “ontological bombast and universalizing around language” (5). As with much work in a new materialist vein, there is no naïveté here about materiality as a ground for truer analytical reflection. But a stubborn focus on materiality can produce interesting “encounters with the real” within the “dominant (fantastical) realities” of discourse (15). In one of her most significant chapters, Kotrosits reminds us that even critical paradigms ostensibly focused on the body can likewise lose touch with the real through overgeneralization and a failure of the imagination to exceed dominant discursive limits. “Penetration and its Discontents: Agency, Touch, and Objects of Desire” (Chapter Six) expresses dissatisfaction with penetration as a critical key to understanding ancient power relations. Drawing insights from a variety of realms –

personal, literary, theoretical, and scholarly—Kotrosits urges us to abandon trauma as the template for thinking sex in our scholarship in order to embrace “warmer concepts that accommodate the pushes and pulls, the more minor and intriguing, and sometimes uncomfortable, impressions and touches that shape erotic life and relationships at large” (127). “Friction” is far better than penetration at bringing fundamental but overlooked conceptual insights to bear upon our texts, including especially the insight “that pleasure can happen without disfigurement, and that resilience is as real as injury” (144).

While I feel that one ought to outline the chapters of a book under review, doing so in this case could be misleading. Yes, Chapter Two discusses biblical apocalypticism. Chapter Three homes in on epitaphs while continuing to think about Mark 13 and discussing Ignatius. Chapters Four and Five take up Tertullian, martyrs’ narratives, Daniel, and juridical scenes in ancient romances. Chapter Seven brings the book to a close with an analysis of public debates around the color of statuary and possibilities and limits of education. Throughout, Kotrosits also engages sensitively with psychoanalysis, affect theory, queer theory, translation studies, post-colonialism, critical race theory and more while reflecting on various scholarly constructions of early Christianity, most of which, she argues throughout, misunderstand as distinctly Christian what is instead a much more broadly recognizable response to the damage wrought by imperial power and the politics of sovereignty. But a reading organized by chapter might fail to celebrate how *The Lives of Objects* shifts forward and backward in time, and ranges across texts and perspectives. This is a book about ancient Christianity and/as the present, about the relevance of scholarly constructions of the early church for our desperately urgent but seemingly impossible need to understand ourselves and one another in simple, ordinary, shared realities of ruin and pleasure. There are a number of astonishingly poignant moments in the book, perhaps none quite as powerful as Kotrosits’ narrative of her own erotic/romantic trauma and healing in chapter six. “When I read Thecla’s story,” she writes, “I cannot help but install myself at nearly nineteen, still a girl, having had a fragmenting episode of sexual violence that occurred a couple of weeks after my mother inexplicably left my father...” (141). This is less a return to autobiographical criticism than an acknowledgment of how and why scholarship matters and doesn’t matter. When the last chapter of the book concludes by foregrounding our failures in “the unguarded attentiveness” (162) of the classroom experience; when the acknowledgments section notes that “our writing is skin shed at a particular moment in time” (166), one wants to return to the first page and read *The Lives of Objects* all over again in light of the humanity so generously, playfully, sometimes painfully exposed.

I began writing this review before the unexpected death of my father. When I returned to the task and picked up the book again, I found that sentences like the following could bring me up short: “ruination is both what funds and what threatens a sense of belonging” (62). Maia Kotrosits’ *The Lives of Objects* is a work of resonant prose that has both touched me personally and enriched my understanding of what a work of scholarship can do.



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