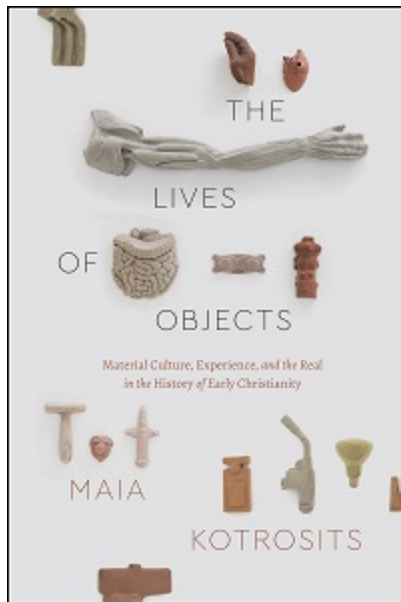


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**Maia Kotrosits**

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

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Jimmy Hoke

United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities

What is a monograph *really* about? The task of a reviewer, as laid about by RBL guidelines, is, “at minimum,” to *describe* the contents with an “informative summary.” The reviewer’s primary goal should be to distill pages of (hopefully) thoughtful analysis into a legible description for both the author and reviewer’s peers. But, as Maia Kotrosits poignantly dissects, descriptions always create fantastical representations of the objects they purport to “really” describe. *The Lives of Objects* taught me, as I struggled to represent Kotrosits’s poignant, personal analyses, that this review could only hope to be my own fantastical reconstruction of its rich content.

But still, what fantastic content might reside in the pages of Kotrosits’s book? As indicated in her title, a major focus is *objects*, that is, materials and how they matter. Objects have lives, not only as they exist in the world but also as they exist through historical representation. In fact, anything and everything—from statues and healing gems to texts and ideas—become objects that could be studied. Kotrosits queries historical claims of “realness” in discussions and depictions of these varied objects. Kotrosits draws from work in psychoanalytic, critical-race, and postcolonial theories and emphasizes the production of fantasy in historical claims to represent objective reality. How much of our historical scholarship about the ancient Roman world is actually fantasy? Moreover, if it turns out that all this representation is fantasy, then what work are our fantasies *doing*?

In the introduction, Kotrosits explains the overarching questions and theories that underpin the chapters that follow. Drawing from materialism and its intersections with affect theories, Kotrosits sets out to reanimate history in ways that pay attention to the impressions objects leave behind, making them “less pliable than language” (4). Objects tend to exceed the fantasies that historians construct from words. Psychoanalytic theories, which study processes of fantasy and its relation to objects, bolster Kotrosits’s discussions of objects and history, fantasy and realness. Kotrosits emphasizes ethnicity and sovereignty because Roman imperial ethnography pervades “Jewish” and “early Christian” literature (classifications that Kotrosits contests for this period). It is more generative to consider this literature as part of the wider production of ethnographic discourse of the Roman world.

Chapter 1, “Objects Made Real, offers a theoretical meditation on realness and fantasy as, intertwined, they impact the task of historical description. Kotrosits begins with the story of Pygmalion, whose creation of a woman-object blurs the lines between reality and fantasy. Kotrosits proceeds to ask and analyze what an object *is* (or, perhaps, is not) and what it means to be real. Kotrosits weaves through work on thin and thick descriptions in literary and cultural studies, psychoanalytic discussions of the disjoints between subjects and their objects, and the coloniality of language embedded in rendering objects legible through description. This first chapter unsettles the notion that historical description captures what really happened, a notion held by most historians of early Christianity and made visible in scholarship around the Gospel of Peter and the Secret Gospel of Mark.

Kotrosits turns to ruins and anxieties of ruination in her second chapter, “Citizens of Fallen Cities.” She opens with the cycles of ruin that haunt ancient and contemporary descriptions of ruins: empires create ruins that they will also become. Kotrosits considers how invocations of Babylon, in Revelation as well as Josephus, produce Judean identity using the language of sovereignty and the rise and fall of empire. These authors, as well as Pausanias and the author of Mark, reckon with wrecked feelings. They write from diaspora in the aftermath of Roman devastation, thus reinventing a people’s shared past and constructing visions of a sovereign future using restless ruins. Kotrosits concludes, considering Paul’s production of wholeness in 1 and 2 Corinthians, with the possibility of *collectives*, which can emerge from ruined materials as social bodies.

In chapter 3, “Histories Unwritten in Stone,” Kotrosits explores memorialization and its connections to the ruination around empire. She begins with Roman-era epigraphy, especially funerary inscriptions. Through their regular invocations of homeland, these memorials reckon with the inevitability of death and ruin in both personal and political dimensions. Mark, “a gospel ‘in ruins’” (73), crafts queer questions of time in the miniapocalypse of chapter 13 and memorializes forgetting (e.g., 14:3–9). The gospel struggles with the problems of history: to write history is to impose a temporal ending on an always-unfinished past. Working with Christina

Sharpe's *In the Wake*, Kotrosits observes a "visceral archive" in Ignatius and the healing gems of Aelius Aristides that always exceeds memorialization's attempts to recover "of and from sovereign power" (84).

Kotrosits scrutinizes the fantasies embedded in our scholarly and cultural attachments to the terms *Christian* and *martyr* in chapter 4, "Tertullian of Carthage and the Materiality of Power," coauthored with Carly Daniel Hughes. Hughes and Kotrosits point out that Tertullian produces a fantasy of Roman presence in colonized Carthage, as Roman imperialism and justice were largely experienced and disseminated through representations of empire—that is, "paper and stone" (106)—as opposed to direct interactions. Tertullian writes his tales of martyrdom into this gap at a period when there is little evidence of Christ-assemblies in Carthage and the term Christian was not widely used as a self-designation. Therefore, the "courtroom dramas" produced in martyrdom accounts such as Tertullian's fictionalize ideals of Roman justice and, ultimately, portray God as fulfilling the sovereign ideals to which the empire itself did not live up.

Chapter 5, "The Perils of Translation," moves beyond the reading of martyrdom accounts in terms of identity production and, instead, reads them through the lens of translation and speech. Kotrosits centers questions of cultural authenticity in constructions of an "original language." Questions around translation, in this sense, betray its colonial violence and reckon with loss of both language and homeland. Returning to Mark, Jesus's final utterance in Aramaic (15:34) reveals these perils: speaking Aramaic makes him illegible to those who hear his statement even as it seemingly confirms fantasies of the "authentic" Judean identity of an otherwise Greek-speaking Jesus. Similarly, 4 Maccabees' report that the martyred mother delivered her speech in (translated) Hebrew produces a sense of Judean authenticity through the emphasis on speaking in one's "original language" at a significant textual moment. These moments of translation occur at points of narrative pain. The violence of colonial translation are represented through the agony of martyrdom, losses that representations can never render real.

In chapter 6, "Penetration and Its Discontents," Kotrosits reads the Acts of Paul and Thecla and challenges the predominant penetration model of Roman sexuality. Drawing from Ann Cvetkovich's *Archive of Feelings* as well as her own experience, Kotrosits suggests alternative models of eroticism that exceed penetration and its associations with trauma: "sex positivity and sex negativity need not exclude one another" (135). The eroticism readers encounter in Thecla's (chaste) story bypasses traditional constructions of both sexuality and gender. This eroticism is ultimately illegible because the story ends with neither Thecla's marriage nor her death. Kotrosits encourages approaches to pleasure and excitement that sense beyond and beneath scholarly grids of legibility.

The concluding chapter (ch. 7), "Darkening the Discipline," scrutinizes the fantasies produced in discussions of public scholarship and disciplinary relevance. Taking as a starting point Sarah

Bond's viral Hyperallergic piece "Why We Need to Start Seeing the Classical World in Color," Kotrosits queries who constitutes the public that sustains the fantasy that biblical scholarship is relevant as a discipline. Digging into critical studies of whiteness, she points out how these fantasies are deeply embedded in the white, cisnet, and malestream ideology that pervades our discipline. The field, and its impulses toward public scholarship, wants to add diversity to the discipline (keeping it "relevant") without challenging or changing the racist, colonial structures that built it. Kotrosits questions our love for the discipline that enables our fantasies of authority. In conclusion, she suggests decentering the discipline and admitting its failures instead of perpetuating the fantasy that our scholarship or pedagogy can ever render it relevant.

*The Lives of Objects* provokes. Kotrosits's provocations propel Roman-era historians and biblical scholars to recognize the fantasies that underlie and constitute the stories we tell about the past—and the various objects we study from it. As with her first book (*Rethinking Early Christian Identity*), she unsettles the firm foundations of anything we want to label early Christianity. She challenges readers to engage the past differently and ask it—and, therefore, ourselves and our fantastic motivations—new and different questions. Reading *The Lives of Objects* can change the way we look at things.

I appreciated Kotrosits's sustained attention to colonialism, race/ethnicity, and racialization throughout her book. She insists that, to understand Roman imperialism, we must take seriously the ways that the social, sexualized, gendered, and religious dimensions of its politics were all rooted in how Romans portrayed ethnicity, especially in terms of the different nations Rome colonized. These politics pervade the ancient texts and objects we commonly label Jewish or early Christian. In dialogue with ancient historians who have long been engaging these questions, Kotrosits shows how the insights of contemporary critical-race and postcolonial studies give historians a better sense of how ethnicity impacted ancient people and their worlds. Through her attention to psychoanalysis and affect, Kotrosits deftly unearths more hidden historical fantasies that sustain white supremacy in our field (and beyond).

As indicated in my opening, I found most provocative how Kotrosits lays bare the fantasies that structure our discipline: What fictions have we created using historical objects, and what unjust structures do our fantasies uphold? Her points so sharply disciplined traditional ways of approaching the past that even folks like me, who have long labeled our work nontraditional, will be forced to reckon with how our stories of the past still uphold traditional fantasies. As I was challenged, I also craved more. Kotrosits robustly engages feminist work, including Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her*. I am curious how Kotrosits's considerations of less-conscious historical fantasies might interact with feminist, womanist, and queer scholars who overtly claim our historical descriptions to be imaginative fantasies.

Most readers of *The Lives of Objects* will be folks already embedded in the discipline of biblical or early Christian studies. I suspect her most receptive readers will be scholars who already feel marginal in the field—due to a combination of nonnormative identity politics or being contingently employed (two factors that are not unrelated). Every scholar in our discipline *should* read this book: Kotrosits breaks new ground with her insights about ancient objects. But for the rapidly growing number of us trying to work at disciplinary margins, Kotrosits invites a reckoning with the ways our scholarship may still center a discipline we still hold to as “ours.” How do we fantasize that we might be accepted into this discipline by making it “more relevant”?

If we let go, what else can we imagine in the past or future? Kotrosits’s rereading and rewriting of ancient history impels change. This begins with serious questions of the ways we fantasize about the impact our scholarship has beyond the compacting walls of our guild. “How, and to what extent, can history do justice?” (77). The same might be asked of a book review, our teaching, and everything we consider to be *real* scholarship.