
The Force of History

Force is infraempirical. No scientist has ever observed a force . . . Newton did not see gravity. He felt its effect: a pain in the head. The newly visioned blind do not see things. They feel a pain in their eyes . . . With more experience, the feeling of the effect comes to be identified. Reactions in different sense modes are cross-referenced. . . . The experience has been determined, objectified, empiricized . . . With that passage, and that determination, the pain is (provisionally) assuaged. Assuaged: the empirical is palliative.

Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*

I am convinced that memory has a gravitational force.

Patricio Guzman, *Nostalgia for the Light*

Under the thermal blaze of the sun, a woman carefully examines five tiny white shards in the palm of her hand. She explains that some of these pieces must be from the bones of an arm or a thighbone, because they are flat; the others must be the inside of a bone, because they are porous. “Their whiteness is due to their calcination by the

sun,” she remarks. In a change of scene, and in a different register, this same woman recalls having found remains of her brother, years before, in a mass grave: some pieces of his skull, a few teeth, a foot. She recounts, “I remembered his tender expression, and this was all that remained. . . . Our final moment together was when his foot was at my house. That night I got up and went to stroke his foot. There was the smell of decay. It was still in a sock. A burgundy sock. Dark red. I took it out of the bag and looked at it.”

In the same expanse of earth where this woman sifts for bones in the ground, hulking telescopes housed in white geometric buildings direct the gazes of some other people upward, rather than downward. This expanse, the Atacama desert in Chile, has zero humidity, and so provides both phenomenally clear skies and an exceptionally slow rate of decomposition, drawing anthropologists, archaeologists and astronomers—as well as survivors of Chile’s Pinochet regime, which dumped the bodies of thousands of its political prisoners in this desert. Patricio Guzman chronicles this convergence in his film *Nostalgia for the Light*, framing the Atacama as a “vast open book of memory,” both historical and cosmic.¹

Guzman’s film makes connections and distinctions between the various pursuits taking place in the Atacama. For example, stars provided a sense of an outside for prison camp detainees, and astronomy similarly provides a way of working out the question of loss, the past, and memory. According to one astronomer, the questions of his discipline are more abstract and less immediate than the women who search for their loved ones. Guzman interviews him, asking him to describe his work and compare it with the work of those who search the desert for Pinochet’s victims:

1. Patricio Guzmán, *Nostalgia de la luz (Nostalgia for the Light)*. Directed by Guzman. 2011.

To compare two completely different things, their process is similar to ours, with one big difference. We can sleep peacefully, after each night observing the past. Our search doesn't disturb our sleep . . . The next day we plunge back, untroubled into the past. But these women must find it hard to sleep after searching through human remains, looking for a past they are unable to find. They'll not sleep until they do so. That is the major difference . . . I don't know what I would do if a sister, a brother, or one of my parents were lost somewhere in the desert, in this vast expanse. Personally, as an astronomer, I would imagine my mother or father in space, lost in the galaxy somewhere. I would look for them through the telescopes. I would be very anxious as it would be difficult to find them in the vastness.

But by the admission of another astronomer, astronomy helps her address the loss of her parents to Pinochet when she was a year old, and does so by offering a grand-scale perspective. Without resorting to bland reductions like “we all seek answers to our past,” Guzman delicately recounts how observing the stars links people in different ways to the trauma of Pinochet's murders.

The irony this film observes is that the apparently less urgent and less proximal work of the astronomers is given more social credibility, technical support, and cash than the women who search for their loved ones. One of the women who has not yet found her brother's body tells Guzman how she does not want to die without having found him: “As I told you the other day, I wish the telescopes didn't just look into the sky but could also see through the earth so that we could find them . . . We would sweep the desert with a telescope. Downwards. And give thanks to the stars for helping us find them. . . . I'm just dreaming.”

This film moves me for many reasons; among them, Guzman's generous attentiveness to each person who speaks in the film, and the way he manages to connect bones and stars not only visually and thematically, but even elementally (they are both made of calcium). However I am also struck by the way he treats each endeavor in the

Atacama as reckoning with history's felt forces—even those endeavors which seem least directly involved in the specific and traumatic histories of that geography. The difference is that the more heightened, abstract, and technical language of astronomy as a scientific discipline not only makes it seem loftier, but it also enables distance. One “sleeps better” when removed from the immediacy of such histories.

In a rather different illustration, Brian Massumi also lays out the affective stakes of distanced and grand-scale vision. In his book *Parables for the Virtual*, in a chapter entitled, “Chaos in the ‘Total Field’ of Vision,” Massumi philosophizes on the failures and incidental findings of scientific attempts in the first half of the twentieth century to re-create and isolate visual perception apart from other senses.² Not unlike Guzman's understanding of the astronomers in the Atacama, Massumi's chapter tells a story of pain and totalizing, objectifying vision. When scientists tried to reproduce the conditions of pure visual perception, however, subjects in these studies, paradoxically, could not see. They reported experiencing things like “levels of nothingness,” and could not tell if their eyes were open or closed.³ They also experienced strange sensations, including dizziness and out of body experiences. They experienced chaos, not distinct objects. In fact, Massumi tells us, vision is never “pure”—it is always “contaminated by a multisense pastness.”⁴ It turns out that vision is impossible to isolate and distill, because seeing requires constant cross-referencing between different sensory modes. Seeing is synesthetic, and requires other organs of perception.⁵

2. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

3. *Ibid.*, 146.

4. *Ibid.*, 155.

5. *Ibid.*

Subtly disabling the priority and presumptions of objectivity that vision has acquired, Massumi describes visual perception and organization as not only compensatory, but also nearly artistic in its attempt to render experiences comprehensible. Vision is not only an experience: it requires some *abstraction* from experience, and the objects of vision arise out of the chaos of non-separation between the sensing and the sensed. In a rather poetic turn, he summarizes, “The newly visioned blind do not see things. They feel a pain in their eyes . . . With more experience, the feeling of the effect comes to be identified. Reactions in different sense modes are cross-referenced . . . The experience has been determined, objectified, empiricized . . . and . . . the pain is (provisionally) assuaged. Assuaged: the empirical is palliative. The anesthetic is the *perceived*, as distinguished from the perceiving . . . What could this be other than the aesthetic: the pain is the beauty of the world emergent.”⁶

Guzman and Massumi together encapsulate the broadest theoretical argument of this project: the discipline of (capital-H) History, with all its abstract, heightened and technical language, arrives to intervene in the felt forces of (small-h) history. It performs the quelling, redirection, or displacement of affect through organized observation. What might proceed from imagining history to be, like gravity, an infraempirical force? What if instead of prioritizing a carefully classified, comprehensive vision, or alongside of the usual inquiries about what happened and how it happened, we attended to history’s affective potencies and vicissitudes: its felt effects?

This project nonetheless does not renounce, nor is it especially embarrassed by, a tenacious attraction to the discipline and practices of History in all their limitation. This project is not an apologetic for those various practices themselves. It is, however, a sympathetic

6. Ibid., 160–61.

response to them, and even a playful participation in them. It is a project fostered by the mostly speculative assumption that these practices arrive out of, and attempt to cordon off, the vast and overwhelming swampland of affective experience. History is felt as much as it is made.⁷

The notion of history as a felt force is not exactly new. Already insinuated in Jacques Derrida's description of spectrality in *Specters of Marx* is the idea of history as an ongoing force rather than a set of clear events.⁸ Both Wendy Brown and Carla Freccero have found Derrida's work on haunting to be productive for rethinking history as emphatically present, if elusively so.⁹ Others have tried to account for the ghostly and diffuse energy of primarily traumatic pasts, and have done so in a way that moves to the side of the very fraught and inevitably unanswerable questions of "what really happened."¹⁰ Mourning, melancholy, grief, and trauma appear in this work as affective language for ways that pasts haunt.

The last twenty-five years or so of scholarship in the field of New Testament and early Christianity has nominally accepted the

7. The notion that history is felt as well as made is a New Historicist formulation, if perhaps one that is not necessarily obvious or deliberate in New Historicist scholarship. While the idea that history is made, rather than simply occurring, is a basic tenet of New Historicism, *feeling* has typically been thought of in terms too referential or too individual(istic) to be compatible with New Historicist interests. At the same time, early New Historicist writings are full of curiosities around and about affect, though, perhaps due to its poststructuralist inheritances, hesitant to theorize more than melancholy, grief and anxiety. See the affectivity of the New Historicist fascination with the anecdote, for example, illustrated in Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 49-74.

8. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

9. Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*, Series Q (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

10. Grace Cho, "Voices from the *Teum*: Synesthetic Trauma and the Ghosts of the Korean Diaspora," 151-169; Jonathan R. Wynn, "Haunting Orpheus: Problems of Space and Time in the Desert," 209-230; and Greg Goldberg and Craig Willse, "Losses and Returns: The Soldier in Trauma," 264-286, all in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

felt quality of history, but has laid considerably more emphasis on its made quality.¹¹ In other words, while New Testament and early Christianity scholarship is by now much more at ease with the conclusion that histories are produced, as well as with critiques of objectivist modes of analysis that claim fastidious detachment from their narratives, it has not itself necessarily waded into the affective murk. The claim that we are living in the stream of the history we are writing rings with a certain dissonance against, say, the meticulous particularizing of cultural localities and the rigorous rhetorical diagnostics of discursive criticism.¹² Even as those of us in the fields of New Testament and early Christianity soften to our own pain and are able to admit more of the ways we have been touched by and conscripted into violence, this waxing on pain and violence often takes place in puzzlingly remote registers. As Guzman's *Nostalgia for the Light* illustrates, the distancing mode of scientism and technical examination (even without objectivist or positivist pretensions) is an understandable, sometimes important move. But it is not an uncomplicated one.

This chapter addresses "Christian identity" as one particular instance of the field's simultaneous acknowledgement and allaying

11. As Moore and Sherwood suggest, "Theory" has been a scapegoat or magnet for this realization, even while philosophy arrived in biblical studies long before deconstruction or New Historicism: "Adapting strategically to the demands of this very particular (and rather peculiar) disciplinary context, Theory in biblical studies found itself repeatedly unveiling, with fitting rhetorical flourishes, the discoveries that objectivity is a myth; that interpretation is necessarily an infinite enterprise; that exegesis cannot be cleanly separated from eisegesis, nor theology from ideology; and that even our most cautious historical reconstructions are first and foremost imaginative creations. The Theory-redolent name of Hayden White was regularly intoned over the last of these discoveries in particular, but the basic position enunciated in the discovery was a commonplace in history departments even in the pre-Theory era, being a fundamental facet of the understanding of historiography expounded by less glamorous names, such as R. G. Collingwood and E. H. Carr" (*The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011], 100).
12. For a critique of such meticulous particularizing of cultural localities from an epistemological perspective, see Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory and Comparative Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

of the affective potencies of different pasts, teasing out some of the contradictory historical implications of “Christian identity” as an analytical lens. Now a rather fashionable term, “Christian identity” represents something like the cutting edge of New Testament and early Christianity historiography.¹³ Judith Lieu, often credited with putting the term into circulation, evokes it in her 2004 book (*Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*) to give full due to the variety of practices, positions, and locations represented by the New Testament and related texts.¹⁴ Since then, the term generally signifies a collective weight-shift from essence to practice, universal to local, unity to diffusion, and referential to discursive. In other words, “Christian identity” has become a kind of metonym for a loosely poststructuralist historiography.

Christian identity’s first and most influential proponents used it in the service of larger projects deconstructing the categories of orthodoxy, heresy, Gnosticism, and the model of a “parting of the ways” between Christianity and Judaism. More candidly, it was used to go for the jugular of modern, dominant Christianity via its undergirding master narrative.¹⁵ Thus while Christian identity

13. For a very brief sampling of the huge volume and variety of recent titles in the fields of New Testament and early Christianity which take up “Christian identity” as an analytic (other than Lieu, King and Boyarin), see V. Henry T. Nguyen, *Christian Identity in Corinth: A Comparative Study of 2 Corinthians, Epictetus and Valerius* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); Mikael Tellbe, *Christ Believers in Ephesus: A Textual Analysis of Early Christian Identity Formation in a Local Perspective* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); William S. Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity* (London: T & T Clark, 2008); Bengt Holmberg, ed., *Exploring Christian Identity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race?: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); and Torrey Seland, *Strangers in the Light: Philonic Perspectives on Christian Identity in 1 Peter* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). Related to associations and meals, and under more specific discussion below, see Philip Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians* (New York: Continuum, 2009); and Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).
14. King, “Which Early Christianity?” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David Hunter, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 66-84. Taussig (*In the Beginning Was the Meal*), and Harland (*Dynamics of Identity*) all credit Lieu with this observation.

addresses the mishmash of values, kinds of belonging, and cultural forces at work in the ancient world, it also addresses the social fractures of the present, providing a way to come to grips with histories of Christian violence (colonial, imperial, and anti-Jewish, among others). Karen King, one of the earliest and leading proponents of Christian identity as an optic, explicitly describes her work as “hearing alternative voices,” and, perhaps most significantly, as putting another nail in the coffin of “impersonal objectivity,” allowing space for “grief, uncertainty and injustice” against the vehement and melancholic suppressions of the modern historian.¹⁶ In fact, most of the leading scholars whose work falls under the aegis of Christian identity are not shy about their political commitments or their grief, though sometimes such politics and affectivity are played out with aching specificity, and other times they are simply implied through vague references to fundamentalism or Christian dominance.¹⁷ In any case, the facing of pain, mess, and violence has

15. King describes the master narrative of Christian origins as asserting “an unbroken chain, stretching from Jesus to the apostles and on to their successors in the church—elders, ministers, priests, and bishops—guaranteed the unity and uniformity of Christian belief and practice. This chain links modern Christianity securely with its historical origins in the life and deeds of its founder, Jesus Christ. The correct form of this belief is ‘orthodoxy.’ It is inscribed in the New Testament canon and the Nicene creed and enacted in ritual performances such as baptism, the Lord’s supper or Eucharist meal, and ordination.” King, “Christianity Without Canon,” Paper presented at the Fall meeting of the Jesus Seminar. New Orleans, 1996, 3.
16. Karen King, “Factions, Variety, Diversity, Multiplicity: Representing Early Christian Differences for the 21st Century,” *MTSR* 23 (2011): 216–37 (230).
17. Lieu ends her book by linking her historical work with the current moment, “where we are being urged to discover and to honour the value of difference and diversity, to give ear to the voices from the margins, to acknowledge the integrity of the ‘other,’ and our need for them, and, only so, to affirm our own as well as their integrity . . . [T]he exposure of rupture and the undermining of stability, which perhaps lies at the heart of any searched-for ‘essence,’ forbids any form of fundamentalism, whether textual or institutional” (*Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 316). King’s turn to thinking about the construction of Christian identity appears as another dimension of her focus on taking responsibility for what meanings are generated through historical claims and reconstructions, and on surfacing the lost possibilities and quiet victims of dominant narratives through the integration of non-canonical ancient texts into historical reconstructions. King also writes that “It may be that a complex and partial history of Christian beginnings could lead to critical and constructive reflection on our own theologies and practices in their specifically

been the veritable engine of work on Christian identity, and dealing with grief one of its main ethical motivations.¹⁸

Rightly so: grief does, or at least can, have ethical reverberations.¹⁹ But it is worth inquiring about what we imagine the relationship between grief and ethics to be. Is the ethics to be found in the simple recognition of grief in the wake of violence or injustice—having witnessed it, having felt its affects, having been part of it?²⁰ Is the posture of grief an inherently more vulnerable, less defensive one (thus interrupting cycles of violence)?²¹ If the project of history, or of writing at all, is always already bound up in loss and death, as Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau have suggested,²² how does an admission of grief change the writing of history? And what other,

contemporary contexts, of wealth and poverty, of privilege and deprivation, of natural beauty and environmental disaster, of truth and justice. It could open up new possibilities for appreciating the diversity of forms that modern Christianity has taken globally, and for how Christianity has been enriched through contact with a wide variety of cultures in its 2000 year history” (“Christianity Without Canon” Paper presented at the Fall meeting of the Jesus Seminar. New Orleans, 1996, 21). King’s and Lieu’s ethical longings are resonant with feminist historiographical ones—particularly in the appeal to silenced voices—a connection that Shelly Matthews is more specific about in her work on Acts and Christian identity. Cf. Matthews, *Perfect Martyr: The Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Christian Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3–26. I will discuss this book in more detail in the next chapter.

18. Regarding the master narrative of Christian origins, Hal Taussig writes: “Obviously, even though it covers a relatively short period of time, this master narrative took a long time to come into being. It depends not only on unquestioned and covert mythological thinking but also on cunning calculations that simultaneously preserve, hide, and rationalize the prerogatives of Christian dominance in our day. It is told today—at least in part—to compensate mythically for the messy situation in which Christianity find itself as a worldwide dominant culture.” Taussig also describes the “failures of Christianity to provide sufficient authority for negotiating (post)modern life” (*In the Beginning Was the Meal*, 11–13). Daniel Boyarin prefaces his book *Border Lines* with an even more ardent sense of disappointment and heartbreak, expressing how tormented he is by modern Christian and Jewish violence.
19. As David Eng and David Kazanjian write, “Avowals of and attachments to loss can produce a world of remains as a world of new representations and alternative meanings.” They suggest an “apprehension of loss as creative,” and that keeps loss “steadfastly alive for the political work of the present” (*Loss: The Politics of Mourning* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003], 5). For Eng and Kazanjian it seems then that the ethics of grief is tied into the ongoing life of a particular loss or trauma.
20. For an extended discussion of (in)justice and “feeling bad,” see Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 191–203.
21. As Judith Butler has theorized in much of her work. See, for instance, “Beside Oneself,” in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 17–39.

unacknowledged affects might be tagging along behind (or even giving fire to) the apparently more ethically respectable grief?

Grief, after all, hardly appears alone, and the naming of any affect is a dicey matter. Do we always know exactly what we are feeling? What happens when we name an experience as love, sadness, or embarrassment, for example?²³ I find King's choice of words appealing for the complexity they render as a trio: the cluster "grief, uncertainty, and injustice" suggests perhaps not three separate items, but three hazy and overlapping experiences. For instance, grief sometimes accompanies—or is accompanied by—a sense of having been wronged. So what happens when grief bleeds into the more ethically fraught righteous anger? How might we negotiate the grief that is paired with guilt? The pair "grief and uncertainty" is especially shrewd since, as Judith Butler has remarked, "Freud reminded us that when we lose someone we do not always know what it is *in* that person that has been lost."²⁴

Butler's repeated writing on grief and mourning has contended that grief reveals an intrinsic susceptibility, that we are "given over from the start" and "undone by each other;" therefore, claiming our grief means accepting that susceptibility.²⁵ But to claim one's grief, is, as Butler recalls from Freud, not the same as knowing all the facets of one's grief. Admitting to grief is simply admitting to unfinished

22. As for instance Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault have suggested. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); and Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977). In a consonant way, Stephen Greenblatt begins his book *Shakespearean Negotiations* with this line: "I began with the desire to speak with the dead" (*Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* [Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1989], 1).

23. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 1-22.

24. Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso Press, 2004), 21. She also deconstructs the difference between mourning and melancholia, but I am not as much talking about mourning vs. melancholia as about "grief" as the affect that might be said to connect the two and that crosses the shaky line between conscious and unconscious processes.

25. Butler, "Beside Oneself" in *Undoing Gender*, 17-39.

business, an entry into a cloudy process. We are stripped of knowing how to proceed, in addition to not always being clear on what we are grieving. So any ethics of grief is complicated by both grief's proximity to other affects and the problem that we do not always know what we are grieving. It seems, then, that if grief is part of an ethics of history, one is obliged to the indefinite, amorphous, and elusive dimensions of pastness—not only the spectrality of pasts, but their often ambiguous affects.²⁶ This is the obligation that I hope to meet, opening the question of how certain pasts might be haunting us, and doing so by risking naming some of the barely-claimed affective stakes of histories of early Christianity.

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Christian identity has come to replace Christianity as the object of analysis for many scholars in the field—Christianity now signaling an almost wistful imagination of theological and social coherence. Curiously, though, Lieu begins her book by mulling over the *limits* of the term “Christian identity,” and they are not all that different from problems with the term “Christianity.” For one, the word “Christian” hardly appears in any New Testament literature, making it an obvious anachronism there. But she also concedes that “[t]here is an

26. Carla Freccero, reading Butler's work on grief alongside Derrida's hauntology, offers a queer ethics of history that tries to account for the ongoing affective force of the past. As Freccero notes, “The past is in the present in the form of haunting. This is what, among other things, doing a queer kind of history means, since it involves an openness to the possibility of being haunted, even inhabited, by ghosts” (*Queer/Early/Modern*, 80). This “penetrative reciprocity” of haunting embraces an erotic *jouissance* of history, and resists the melancholic entombment and memorializing of history (typically conceived), which treats the past as resolved and over. De Certeau, in *The Writing of History*, describes Western practices of historiography in precisely the language of entombment and memorialization as Freccero (cf. Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*, 70-72). Wendy Brown has also written on “Resisting Left Melancholia” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2003). Freccero does not address specifically the problem of grief's unknowability, or present much of an affective range beyond grief and *jouissance*.

admitted but unavoidable contradiction in accepting even a broad classification of ‘Christian’ while also seeking to subvert its unity and differentness.”²⁷

Lieu adopts “Christian identity” to address local difference and, she admits, suggest translocal connections. But Lieu also observes a similar set of problems with the term “identity” as with the term “Christian(ity)”. Not only does “identity” tend to suggest sameness and stability, but it too has its anachronisms, implying as it does a post-Cartesian individualistic self-consciousness.²⁸ With both “Christian” and “identity” qualified, she nonetheless goes on to chronicle “Christian identity,” the goal of which she describes as this: “to explore, through the texts generated within the movement initiated in different ways by the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, how they construct a distinctive identity. It is an identity that in the end we agree to label ‘Christian,’ so long as we forswear further categories such as ‘orthodox’ or ‘heretical.’”²⁹ Despite her own reservations about unity and essences, Lieu refers here to a *singular phenomenon*, a “movement,” even if it is initiated “in different ways,” with a primary catalyst—the life and death of Jesus. Amidst a wariness of singularity, a surprising point of reference materializes, one that is not unique to Lieu. The uncertainties and deadlock of terms (in other words, the attachments) in Lieu’s introduction dramatize a more general set of conflicts. “What do we call it?” is not a question of precision, but of preservation: that is, how to keep the “it” alive.³⁰

27. Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 24.

28. *Ibid.*, 12. She clarifies that this anachronism in the term “identity” is less at issue in her study, however, because she has her eye on belonging and group consciousness—the construction of belonging through tropes and discourses, and the management of boundaries and difference.

29. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 12.

30. Karen King notes this dynamic in which even “critics of normative identity projects” resist giving up the problematic terminology of “Gnosticism,” and perhaps even more to the point, have trouble coming up with alternatives (“Factions, Variety, Diversity, Multiplicity,” 220).

Like Lieu, so many of the scholars who use something like the construction of Christian identity as an optic use it against the force of their own analyses. Work done by Hal Taussig, Philip Harland, and Richard Ascough on Greco-Roman associations and association meals has collectively illustrated that what we call “Christian gatherings” were formed on the association model. But that model actually disallows for any single or exclusive identifications, and this work additionally suggests that translocal links between associations that bore similar identifications were often spotty, weak, or even non-existent.

So although it is easy to imagine, for instance, a gathering of ethnic Jews³¹ oriented toward Israel as homeland, and with Yahweh as exclusive patron deity, or perhaps a mix of Jews and non-Jews joined on the basis of a kind of exuberant loyalty to Christ, Ascough’s work shows that such imagination is complicated by a number of factors. First, there is evidence of Jewish involvement in associations with non-Jewish deities as patrons.³² Second, diaspora Israel links to Jerusalem, for example, were often reticent at best, especially during periods of social distress, such as the rebellions of the mid-first century, and in general associations with homeland or geographical links were often multiethnic or multinational in composition.³³ Within New Testament literature specifically, it is clear that at least some of those who gathered around Christ (e.g., the Corinthians) were hesitant to see themselves as translocally affiliated.³⁴ Ascough

31. On the complications of even this imagining of something like an ethnic Jew, see Cynthia M. Baker’s essay, “From Every Nation Under Heaven?: Jewish Ethnicities in the Greco-Roman World,” in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 79–100, in which she notices that the Pentecost narrative of Acts is not a specifically Christian universalist construction, but rather a deeply Israelite (and diasporic) imagination in which affiliation, and even homeland in some sense, is shared but not necessarily on the basis of ethnicity/nationality.

32. Richard S. Ascough, “Translocal Relationships among Voluntary Associations and Early Christianity” *J ECS* 5, no. 2 (1997): 236.

33. *Ibid.*, 231, 236.

also raises the strong possibility that Paul's Thessalonians, for instance, were an existing group of craftsmen who met together as a group before encountering Paul, and for whom Christ was secondary (perhaps incidental?) to their gathering.³⁵

This relativization of Christ as a singular or fundamental basis for affiliation is confirmed by Harland, who has shown that "Christ associations," like others, drew their members from five overlapping networks: professional organizations, households, neighborhoods, sanctuaries or temples, and shared homeland or ethnic identity.³⁶ Judean associations were not only formed around the more predictable ethnic and cultic networks, but they also found definition through shared neighborhood, occupation, and geographic origin (which was not necessarily Israel), and so were regularly composed of people that fit neither cultic nor "ethnic" parameters for "Judean." Such circumstantial kinds of belonging meant tension, but it also meant a merging of practices and affiliations that might normally (or categorically) seem to be at odds with one another.³⁷ Hal Taussig's study of "early Christian" associational meals suggests, in fact, that negotiations of class, gender, and imperial loyalty, among others, were primary to these gatherings; and Christ, or being "in Christ," at least for Pauline groups, worked to smooth or amplify other tensions of belonging.³⁸ In other words, for the first hundred years of what we

34. As Ascough notes, "Meeks points to Paul's collection as indicating translocal obligations to other Christians. However, Paul's troubles with raising the money promised, and his rhetorical strategies in his letters to the Corinthians (II Cor 8.1-15; 9.1- 5), suggest that they, at least, remained unconvinced that they had a social and religious obligation to an otherwise unknown group. What confuses the Corinthians is not necessarily the fact that they have to donate, but that the monies are going to Jerusalem rather than the common fund of the local congregation. Also, the financial support for the Jerusalem church came from the newer, Pauline churches (not the reverse), which would have gone against expectations. In a translocal organization the established center usually supports the struggling, newer organizations" ("Translocal Relationships," 237).

35. Richard Ascough, "The Thessalonian Christian Community as Professional Voluntary Association," *JBL* 119, no. 2 (2000): 311-28.

36. Harland, *Ibid.*, 1; and Taussig, *Ibid.*, 35.

37. Taussig, *Ibid.*, 35.

call “early Christianity,” “Christian” was not *itself* a kind of belonging to be worked out.³⁹

Yet despite the contingencies and textual problems, Taussig, Harland, and Ascough all use the term “Christian” to describe the social gatherings represented by New Testament literature. The only real sense of social coherence apparent in their analyses, though, is effected through the very use of the word “Christian.” Even for scholars such as Karen King and Daniel Boyarin, whose work has repeatedly unhinged notions of continuous social or theological content for the groups we call ancient Christians and deconstructed clear distinctions between ancient Jewish and Christian identities, the term “Christian” has a curious stability about it. For King, the category “Christian” still figures as that which contains all the social and theological diversity. For Boyarin, although “Christian” is not a category mutually exclusive to “Jew,” it is still nonetheless a pertinent category as early as the Gospel of John.⁴⁰ Not only is the “Christ” in Christian not a universal appellation for Jesus, posing the question whether so-called Christ people and non-Christ Jesus people would even recognize themselves as belonging together,⁴¹ it is also far from obvious that the sudden “all of you out there” appeals and grand

38. *Ibid.*, 183–84.

39. *Ibid.* For Taussig, it appears that “Christian” is the category that facilitates the working out of other differences. In other words, it seems to create the space for negotiation. Cf. 145–172.

40. Cf. Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 89–111, in which he discusses “The Intertextual Birth of the Logos.”

41. The concentration of New Testament literature arriving from Asia Minor and the eventual dominance of the very term “Christian” may have created a false sense that “Christ” language itself is universal among people interested in Jesus. It is an open question how “Jesus people” who were not using the rhetoric of Christ at all—as indicated by Q, the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Thomas, for instance—may have related to the term “Christian” as invoked by authorities or others. My questions on this are provoked by a set of reflections in *Redescribing Christian Origins*, ed. Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004). I am particularly interested in the insight, first made by Burton Mack but later elaborated by Merrill Miller, that “Christ” language was not universal to people interested in Jesus, and the implications that might have for assumptions that Jesus was “originally” understood as a messianic figure. Neither Miller nor Mack think much about what this might mean in terms of the ceding of these non-Christ traditions to “Christ” traditions, either in the canon or in history. See Merrill Miller, “The Problem of the Origins of a Messianic Conception of Jesus,”

perspective of early second-century literature are more than hyperbolic imagination—or that they imagine the same “you.”⁴² There are ways to understand the appearance of the term “Christian” in the late first and early second centuries, as well as ways to understand relationships between texts, without presuming a unitary, translocal phenomenon that finally comes to be named. In fact, many of these scholars have already proposed ways to do this (see chapter two), which makes the problem of their reifications of the figure of “the early Christian” through the optic of Christian identity all the more engrossing. However wary of referentiality so many contemporary historians of early Christianity seem to be, “the Christian,” as a subject, remains recalcitrantly referential.

“Christian identity” is a strategic term, if epistemologically contradictory, indexing universality and continuity as well as the impossibility of the same. As such, it seems to house the contradictory longings and dissatisfactions of a (post)modern diaspora: senses of belonging and estrangement, guilt and latent triumphalism, which may, by the way, do as much to instantiate each other as to cancel each other out.⁴³ For instance, as an instrument of politicized historiography, the Christian identity optic has been party to an increasingly obsessive cataloging of ideology in ancient texts, a

in *Redescribing Christian Origins*, 301–36; and Burton Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

42. I will say more on this in the next chapter regarding Ignatius. This language/construction of a multitudinous readership appears in, 1 Pet. 1:1, James 1:1, Eph. 1:1, and Rev. 1:4, for instance. In Revelation, for example, the addressees are 7 “churches,” but 7 is perhaps too symbolic of a number to be an actual referent to a number of gatherings..
43. Perhaps obviously, estrangement no less implies belonging, since that which you are estranged from still has a claim on you. It is tied painfully to you, or you to it, through the very feeling of estrangement. Colonial belonging lives eerily on in this manner, imposing its belonging most forcefully through a sense of estrangement, even in what is experienced as self-estrangement. Frantz Fanon chronicles something like this in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008.) On latent imperial desires, see Erin Runions, “Empire’s Allure: Babylon and the Exception to Law in Two Conservative Discourses,” *JAAR* 77, no. 3 (2009): 680–711.

suspicious ferreting out of any possible violence (anti-Jewish rhetoric, valorization of masculinity, imperial mimesis, etc.) covertly nestled in the text. However crucial such work is for certain ends, this vigorous attachment to a hermeneutics of suspicion—this “paranoid imperative”—given so much prestige in contemporary criticism has affective as well as ethical reverberations. As Eve Sedgwick points out, not only does the hermeneutics of suspicion typically refuse its own affectivity, but it additionally contains a kind of obsessive impulse to forestall surprise: “The first imperative of paranoia is *There must be no bad surprises.*”⁴⁴

According to Sedgwick, it is not incidental that the injunction of paranoid practices to anticipate violence and pain runs so strongly in queer theory, given the depths of pain animating and contiguous to queer theory (the AIDS crisis, homophobic violence and exclusion, for example). However, for contemporary Christians with visceral memories (that is, sensory, but not necessarily conscious ones) of colonial missions, holocausts, and various crusades into the Middle East,⁴⁵ such paranoia may have other valences along with grief, the specificities of which depend on one’s proximity or generational relationship to such violences. Such paranoia may also contain guilt, anger, loss, shame, and embarrassment, for example. It is possible that some of this guilt, shame, loss, etc., are more quiescent factors in the American right-wing Christian defensiveness that, against all odds, continuously insists on purity and its own moral justifiability. But for so much liberal and progressive scholarship, it is hard to ignore the moral satisfaction of implicitly scolding the aggressive threads, ancient or otherwise, of the very tradition that one has inherited, however one has inherited it (and boy, is this satisfying, trust me).

44. Sedgwick, *Ibid.*, 130.

45. By memory, I do not mean to consign these events to the past as if they are “over and done with,” but rather to evoke the haunted traces and ongoing persistence of certain traumas, as the literature on loss, haunting, and spectrality cited above suggests.

Do such demonstrations of righteousness and outrage interrupt or consolidate a sense of Christian exceptionalism and ethical achievement? Though different in tactic, compulsive scrubbing and exposing dirt have a common source of anxiety.

Christian belonging, however unsettled or fractious, has been generated and regenerated through violence. But the relationship between any belonging and violence may be less straightforward than identity models might have us believe. In Althusser's famous model of interpellation, the "subject" is produced through the formative, symbolic, and inherently violent act of being hailed by the Law (represented by any number of figures), and turning in acknowledgment. This notion of "subjectivity" as being formed in power has been a dominant understanding for identity for the last forty years, as seen in the work of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Spivak, among many others. Althusser's interpellation and its theoretical elaborations suggest the content of subjectivity/identity is not natural or stable, but rather "socially constructed," contingent, and even fragile. I am in full accord with the constructedness of the subject—that is, its constitutive sociality—but I am additionally wondering if the interpellational model and language of subjectivity does not undercut the very contingency that notions of the constructedness of identity wish to highlight. What's more, violence has other, less predictable effects, and ones that don't always relate to the maps and grids of identity. For example, the visceral haunting of violence can seal even warring factions together,⁴⁶ creating entanglements that not only set limits on but scramble identity categories or models of interpellation.⁴⁷

46. For instance, Jacqueline Rose writes about the way Palestinians and Israeli Jews are joined through the haunting of violence in a "monstrous family of reluctant belonging." See *States of Fantasy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 30–31. More will be said about this concept in chapter three.

What is more, as much as Christian identity arises out of postmodern suspicion of the category of religion for the ancient world,⁴⁸ the term “Christian” still signifies, like religion, a category that supersedes geographic, cultural, and ethnic differences in order to generate another kind of particularity. It may be that Christian identity does not work as well as one might like for either ancient or contemporary people, and what we call Christian identity blinds one to all kinds of intricate relationships around the perimeters of the category “Christian,” or investments in Christian texts and history that both weaken and intensify the category’s affective pull.

Aside from imputing a basic stability, “identity” emphasizes the work of the ego ideal—in Freudian terms, the coherent vision of oneself to which one aspires—giving it a distinctly unattainable quality.⁴⁹ This is especially true of interpellational models following from Althusser, since Althusser is an explicit interpreter of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. It might be worth recalling that even Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva, who use interpellational and Lacanian models respectively, give an account of how identity is affectively imbued.⁵⁰ Identity is not only ideal (or, to emphasize its

47. See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

48. For instance, both Boyarin and King expressly question traditional understandings of the category of religion, in *Border Lines* and “Factions, Variety, Diversity, Multiplicity,” respectively.

49. For Lacan, it would seem subjectivity is bound up with the symbolic, or the Law, and thus the ego ideal. In his discussion of the mirror stage, on the other hand, what apparently emerges as identity is bound more to the ideal ego and the Imaginary. The relationship between subjectivity and identity is not typically strongly differentiated in contemporary theories, and even regularly interchangeable. I myself am not all that interested in differentiating the two. Althusser, for instance, makes no distinction between subjectivity and identity, relating both to ideology (which for him is of the Imaginary order). His now well-known scene of the police officer hailing the subject, a scene cast as exemplary of the dynamics of interpellation, is based on Lacan’s mirror stage. Although the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, for instance, both depend on Althusser, the notion of “discursive construction” of the subject seems to be an assumption leaning more heavily on the symbolic. See Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007), 75–81.