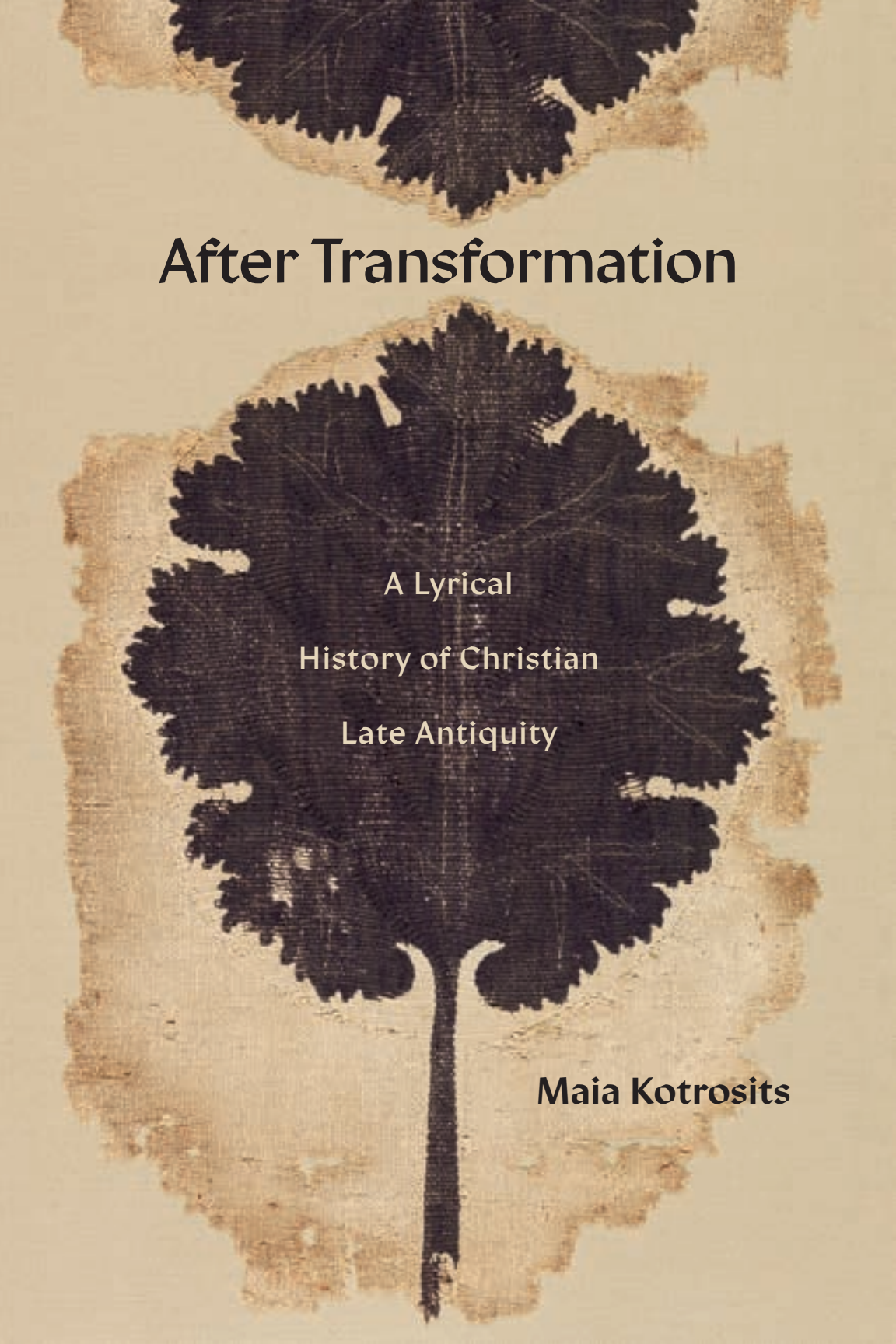

After Transformation

A Lyrical History of Christian Late Antiquity

Maia Kotrosits

After

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A Lyrical History of Christian Late Antiquity

MAIA KOTROSITS

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We Did Not Go to the Ruins at Ostia

We went instead to the beach with the black sand. It was the hottest day of summer and the sand was so scorching we had to leave our shoes at the edge of the water, everyone on the beach did, hundreds of flip flops nearly swept out by the waves. We laughed when we finally got in, we had made it past the gauntlet of umbrellas and chairs, weaving and bounding with the least steps we could manage. The sea was so salty it burned our eyes, we squinted at each other, still laughing, gasping for breath. We were swimming with grouper that could swallow my leg, and later we got pizza by the pound, and ate it while we stood on the pavement. We rode the train back to the city with hair and clothes wet, watching the car fill up and the sun get orange and low. We were quiet, glutted, only at the beginning. Two historians, in Rome for work, and we didn't see the ancient theater, the statues of the entwined wrestlers, the overgrown gardens. We didn't see the bath of Mithras or the church that was built on top. We did not want the past, its plight and its rot. We held another time, larger, more ludicrous, in our arms.

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Introduction

THINGS ARE BREAKING

Who will speak these days,
if not I,
if not you?
—MURIEL RUKEYSER,
"The Speed of Darkness"

This book is a lyrical history of Christian late antiquity. It began when I reread Peter Brown's *The Making of Late Antiquity* for the first time in a decade, alongside a lot of poetry, during the first several months of the pandemic. Passing through different forms of consciousness about the newly visible extremity of the world I occupied, buried in my own extremity of sickness and isolation,[1] trapped in the interminable and achingly terminal era that I had no idea was coming, I found myself desperate for some form of expression that met the moment. Poetry makes immediate sense for experiences so monumental and disorienting. Brown's book, which attempts to capture the large-scale changes of the second through fourth centuries, an era in which Christian language, practices, and conceptualities became central to Roman elite culture and imperial rule, consequently ushering in its own idiosyncratic colonialism, seems perhaps a less likely go-to. But it

was the way that Brown began that carried me through the entirety of the book: "I wish that I had been one of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus," he writes, in a conceit that would, from then on, provide the subtext for nearly all proceeding understandings of this period.[2] These seven Christian brothers fell asleep in a cave during the middle of the third century, so one version of the story goes, hiding from violence against Christians under Decius. They stretched and awoke a century or so later only to find themselves in a world they could hardly recognize: a Christian one. "Imagine their surprise," Brown muses, as they stepped into a terrain so palpably changed. He casts his book as "an attempt to enter into their surprise" at the remarkable shifts of (especially) the third century, to look with fresh eyes at what has, since Brown's book, become the most definitive way of understanding late antiquity as such: its transformations.

Amazed that I hadn't remembered how charming Brown's prose is, or what a complete world he unfolds for his reader, I immediately identified with Brown, and with the seven sleepers, but with a wildly different valence: head fogged, body crushed with exhaustion and ripped with anxiety, I wanted nothing more than to go to bed and stay there indefinitely. Then to wake up, someday, in a new world.

Fresh off my last book, which felt at the time like a massive expenditure I could never repeat, and (frankly) mad at the conventions of academic prose for being so spiritless and stolid when life was reminding us repeatedly, gravely, of the stakes of how we conduct ourselves, I could not bring myself to write much in any form other than poems. Or, at first, pieces of poems—little poetic phrases or images that didn't belong to any larger thought I could yet articulate. I returned once again to texts and figures of late antiquity, but this time with a sense that there was some profound consonance between the present and the past: the disorientation and lostness, the attempts to come to grips with grief, mass death, and magnified physical vulnerability, the struggle to understand time and change. Both times defined by Christian imperialism.[3] The writing that resulted was the only writing that could hold these consonances and raw experiences reasonably well.

This book, then, critically redescribes central phenomena and figures of Christian late antiquity—saints and ascetics, Origen and Augustine, Christian pilgrimage, for example—but does so by taking cues from this elongated condition of blurriness and heightened attunement, by staying with it even as the specificity of the urgencies revised themselves.[4] It does this retelling via a collection of lyrical forms ranging from micro-essay to lyrical vignette to poem to fragment. It represents a set of conjunctions and interrelations,

often nonliteral or oblique ones, between distant past and extended present so as to reexperience both.

One of the book's primary aims is to depict historical relationships between Christians and imperialism with new intricacy and dimension, and create a small dossier tracing some of the vast violence and profound effects of Christian colonialism in and across time and place. Historian Jeremy Schott has already shown how late ancient Christian apologetic discourses, which were ethnographic and racializing discourses, were fundamental epistemological frameworks for early European conquest and colonization, ones which continued to underwrite nineteenth- and twentieth-century comparative and world religions projects.[5] While this book seeks more furtive, and more immanent, connections than these, it assumes the force of these pasts.

Of course this book does intervene, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, in scholarly narratives of Christian late antiquity—not least the predominant notion of this period as a period of "transformation." (The "after" in the title *After Transformation* registers this critique.) However this book also takes Christian late antiquity and its resonance in and with the present as an occasion to consider more: the ambiguities of change, desires for sovereign agency and for magnificent self-transformation, and the collapse of those desires. It articulates through historical particulars a phenomenology of the tensions of time, and it asks after the various forms that grief takes in the face of mass death and mundane structural violence. Perhaps most, it is about the ironies of the ways history is written in the face of the ways history is lived.

I write equally for those very familiar with the figures and texts of Christian late antiquity, those with some curiosity about that history who might appreciate an unconventional primer or reading companion, and those who simply long for unorthodox models of writing history. I hint to readers across the humanities that Christian late antiquity can be theoretically interesting and relevant far beyond Foucault's narrow reading and imagination for it,[6] and make some beginning suggestions about how. This book represents my effort to claim resonance, urgency, expressiveness, and even vulnerability for historical work on antiquity. It additionally considers the many small deaths of academic professionalization, and ways to reenvision the potentials of expertise. Beneath it all are questions of time and change: the unfoldings and interruptions of time, the narration and disappointments of change, the relationship of time and change to living and understanding imperialism and colonialism.

Poetry and late antiquity are in some ways long companions. Patricia Cox Miller has highlighted a "poetic imagination" in late ancient literature—a penchant for image, for metaphor, for philosophizing about language among its writers.[7] Maybe this is what begets the dreamy lyricism in not only Brown's work, but Patricia Cox Miller's own writing, as well as the poetic prose of a small handful of other scholars of late antiquity.[8] It is what I have elsewhere described as "lyrical historiography," seen also in the work of Virginia Burrus, Catherine Michael Chin, and Michael Motia.[9] It could very well be that the poetic imagination of late antiquity is what drew these expressive writers to the study. In any case, it is in part the quiet tradition and sly invitations of these writers across time that I take up.[10]

But there is more to this project than: "Can you mix lyricism with late antiquity?" And lyricism is not just about elegant writing. It is about knowledge-production. Academic prose knows some things well, and some things badly.[11] Though you wouldn't believe the latter from academic prose's vast overreach, its attempt to render every corner of the world, era of history, human experience, and act of speculation, into its form. There is nothing that academic prose claims it can't handle. But along with different forms of writing come different kinds of understanding. This project is one experiment in what comes of lyrical knowing.

Lyricism and Disciplinary Life

> In a tantalizing way many individuals have experienced just enough creative living to recognize that for most of their time they are living uncreatively, as if caught up in the creativity of someone else, or of a machine. —D. W. WINNICOTT, *Playing and Reality*

Poetry was an old practice that started when I was a kid, and took a long pause, about fifteen years long, for the part of my adulthood in which I became an academic. Returning to it the last few years highlighted for me how circumscribed the life of lyrical language is in ancient studies, religious studies, and biblical studies (the primary fields from which I speak). "Art" or literariness might be something to study or analyze, and elegant writing might be valued so long as it is guided by refinement of style over affective charge. But lyrical writing can fast become suspicious: "indulgent," "excessive," "opaque." Poetry itself also might serve as a kind of accoutrement: poetry as epigraph, as preface, as evidence of literariness and well-bred education. It becomes a stylized gesture of selection. But this is even while poetry lives a less sterile life on unofficial registers. It is what I've texted friends (or, if you

like, the more respectable "colleagues") early in the morning, what we read softly to ourselves when we can't stand any more philological analyses or flat renditions of information. It is what many of us return to at heightened or elemental moments—love, wonder, sickness, death.

So what to make of this contrast? What induces such a self-conscious—wrong word—*controlled* deployment of lyricism on official registers? Here's one thought: lyrical language is the claimed expressiveness these fields want but have mostly given up in their (also highly stylized) emergence as modern fields of study. It is, in other words, what you sell to afford your expertise. Lyricism becomes threat, its pleasures and thickness of meaning shaved down to a canon of acceptable uses, parlayed into the exoticism and mystical air of "other languages," and sometimes even becoming, in this whittled form, its own delicate dispatch.[12]

I tripped into academic life. I entered a biblical studies classroom at the age of twenty-six—an actor, sort of, and a well-intentioned but disillusioned Brooklyn public school teacher. I was still an adolescent, so numbed and melancholy from a long series of acute disasters, personal and collective, that I could barely even register that they were there. I was just simply *curious*, not seeking a career, not even wanting a degree. I felt intuitively obligated to old Christian things, without knowing why, in which ways, or to what ends.

I was also a self-fashioned poet: a creative writing major in college, who had been enabled, fortunately, by a professor who saw writing—and specifically my writing—less as an exercise in perfection of technique than as a venue for an almost perverse attachment to life, even and especially at life's strangest, most inscrutable turns. She'd register me in her graduate poetry workshops, and scribble encouragements that now seem outlandish, like "Send this to Alice Quinn at the *New Yorker*," in the white space next to my Anne Sexton knock-offs, poems caked in my rage and depression. At the same time, she regularly dropped some of the most efficiently terrifying writing advice I've received to date. Once: "Write from what you love, not from what you hate." In this, she taught me the art of grieving.

So it was a sharp turn into the literary world after graduation as I sent my poems out for review, with the attendant waiting and rejections. I got a job with a nonprofit poetry organization in Manhattan, working alongside students in Columbia University's MFA program, and met Alice Quinn who, I learned, did not want my poems for the *New Yorker*. I mispronounced names, earnestly quoted lines back to their writers, and asked, with real confusion, "What do you mean by 'language poets,' aren't all poets language

poets?" to George Plimpton himself, longtime editor of the vaunted *Paris Review*, at a cocktail party in his apartment. (Hint: no, they are not.)

I was "unsophisticated." I had not been initiated into the elite forms of knowledge and careful postures that the literary world assumed.[13] Writing, for me, had always been what you might call spiritual. It would be easy to say that I was not "prepared" by my professors to survive the literary world. It's true. They were, to their credit, more discerning than that. And I did not survive the literary world—or rather, I knew something in me *would* not survive there, and so I made a fast exit. Ironically, it was not long after that I found myself plunged into another world with an even steeper price of entry, and an almost endless list of words and names I would flub and forget, usually in public. But what field of study could better accommodate a perverse attachment to life than religion? What is history if not an attempt to fish out or pronounce life's strangest, most inscrutable turns? It was at a conference six months after my defense when I heard for the first time: *What you write is beautiful, but it is not history*. Many versions followed.

While lyricism may be a more obvious interruption of the carefully honed empiricism and self-seriousness of historical fields, the fields of biblical studies and religious studies have their own long contexts for wariness. Biblical studies, for instance, has had a strained and strange relationship to theology: it has consistently wobbled between, on the one hand, its exegetical investments in a slim canon of texts read too often in isolation and, on the other, its desire to cull the legitimacy of proper history via historical critical methods and regular, if arm's length, courting of classics. The becoming of religion as a modern field of study demanded distance between those analyzing and those doing, a distinction between observer and participant.[14] But in all cases lyricism threatens to overtake this carefully assembled creature, the Scholar, with captivation and un-self-consciousness. Lyricism is, in Mark Doty's words, a "slipping . . . into the interior landscape of reverie."[15] It might be literary elegance ("musicality"), but it is more definitely getting carried away, the lostness of a child daydreaming.[16] By necessity, then, it is a refusal to wear the proper bearing of detachment. In other words, lyricism looks too much like devotion.[17]

What's more, lyricism can resist, or at least slow down, the commodification of ideas. It obstructs information-making, knowledge in quantified form. It is not strictly productive, at least not in the neoliberal sense. Lyricism is also antiprocedural. It is not a method, and religious studies and biblical studies, in particular, define themselves through method.[18] Indeed, even where poetry and these fields might seem to express compatible interests,

these fields distinguish themselves by devising clunky and elaborate systems. Take, for instance, "description," or better yet, *comparison*: where lyricism invites imagination, the open-ended likening of disparate things through metaphor, religious studies invents a machinery, dedicating no small amount of meticulous work and exorbitant worry over its ideal execution.[19]

I point this out not in the name of multi- or interdisciplinarity, since belonging to multiple disciplines often just means multiple forms of deviance—or multiple forms of disenfranchisement. In fact, I begin with this story of my life in the literary world because I want to disentangle lyricism from its formalization and professionalization in the discipline of literary studies. In other words, rather than simply valorizing movements across disciplines (work which I do), I'm more interested in how lyricism is creative play, is therefore the conceptual opposite of "discipline," and how it undermines disciplinarity of all kinds. In other words, I'm interested in how it interrupts our professionalization.

The structured scarcity of contemporary academic life has raised the premium on our professionalization. Many of us have come to imagine professionalization—the constant enactment of a specialized skill set, a certain air of hypercompetence, an enthusiastic alignment with institutional goals and disciplinary creeds—as a route to our security. It might be, sometimes, for some of us. But this woefully overestimates the possibility of guaranteeing our own security. In fact, the very promise of security through tireless and unremitting demonstrations of professionalization is exactly the ruse that prevents intellectual life from doing strange and extraordinary things, from outgrowing its container.

What's more, consider what's at stake: "It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living," psychologist D. W. Winnicott writes in *Playing and Reality*. "Contrasted with this is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance, the world and its details being recognized but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation." Compliance gives way to a sense of "futility," of deadness, according to Winnicott, but more than that, against creativity's health, "compliance is a sick basis for life."[20]

"The Hegemony of Reason"

Dry, informational narration. Distant, even transcendent in tone, inflected by specialized vocabulary (*comparanda*, for instance) and careful equivocation. The verbal tics, rhetorical gestures, and structural habits of academic

writing are conventions: we've learned to do them because they signal our participation in a community of professionals and are designed to impart a sense of erudition. But they also produce an epistemological position: a subject of a certain economic class, at least aspirationally so. And these conventions contribute to the impression of a subject apparently outside of the stream of history—outside of its urgencies and its hopes. A subject with minimal attachments, reservedly parsing the options, the data, the arguments. A subject that organizes time without being disoriented by it.

Rationalist discursive styles are not just occasionally stultifying or unsatisfying. This set of tightly orchestrated genres, with little room for variance, associated with most academic work carries a racialized disciplinary force that determines what work, and who, gets read, cited, understood. It determines who enters intellectual history, and for what. Barbara Christian's "The Race for Theory" observed this thirty-five years ago, during the swell of poststructuralism, regarding the canon of largely white writers that had become synonymous with theory, and regarding what work counts as theory at all. As a literary critic, she had been asked continually about a black feminist "method" for reading. She argues against such monolithic systematization and prescription in favor of being changed by each work we read and cultivating a "tuned sensitivity to that which is alive."[21] Christian ends her piece quoting Audre Lorde's "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," which finds in lyrical language a capacity for making the radically new or the frightening *bearable*—an incipient possibility allowed through the dreamlike logics of lyricism, and felt into reality. By now, black feminist theory is fully and distinctly a project characterized by beauty and expressiveness, as well as by writing that averts compartmentalization into theory/practice, academic/popular, as Jennifer C. Nash has shown.[22] Yet even with the institutionalization of black feminist critiques of the norms of academic writing, a formalized rationalism—particularly in historical fields—is the universal parlance, if not the only truly acceptable epistemology.

The dominance of rationalist discursive styles is tied to the "hegemony of Reason" as La Marr Jurelle Bruce names it, modernity's colonialist, ableist, antiblack episteme, which claims "to uphold objective 'truth' while mapping and mastering the world."[23] Bruce's description of Enlightenment's noxious romance with Reason provides the context for his exploration of "black madness," forms of creativity and expression that register to an antiblack world as pathological, angry, or simply "crazy."[24] Bruce writes (gorgeously, sympathetically) about a range of mad black figures, both real and fictional people, Sun Ra and Lauryn Hill, Nina Simone and Eva Canada from the novel

Eva's Man by Gayl Jones, Dave Chappelle and Bigger Thomas from Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*. His book lives out a "mad methodology that neither vilifies the madperson as evil incarnate, nor romanticizes the madperson as resistance personified, nor patronizes the madperson as helpless ward awaiting aid. Rather, mad methodology engages the complexity and variability of mad subjects."[25]

Bruce's beginning conceit is an image of Michel Foucault's "ship of fools" crossing paths with the slave ship in the oceanic: "where imprisoned madness meets captive blackness in a stifling tightness through a groundless vastness."[26] And his hope is to connect kinds of madness with the black radical tradition, to connect black madness with forms of art, survival, thriving, and the political field. Black madness appears as "content, form, symbol, idiom, aesthetic, existential posture, philosophy, strategy and energy."[27]

One way to understand Bruce's work is that he reveals how black expression, by virtue of being black, is so often pathologized for its apparent unreadability *as* expression. So, too, the legibility of certain forms of expression within academic life are often tied to the legibility of the people who are doing the expressing.[28] The burden of the reproduction of disciplines often falls most heavily on nonnormative and racialized subjects.[29] Consequently, nonnormative and racialized subjects are the first to experience cost and violence when not reproducing disciplinary boundaries, methods, and epistemologies, even while, or maybe because, their very being is seen as a threat to the perfect reproduction of the discipline. Nonnormative and racialized people are, in this familiar institutional logic, best contained within the bounds of diversification, which is, without fail, the pluralization and proliferation of normativity.

Thus, I want this project to push my fields to think harder about the implications of the dominance of rationalist discourses and their associated styles and conventions in academic knowledge production. I do this not so that we can eject rationalism (as if we could), or abandon all traditional academic forms—this book stretches, disturbs academic forms, but does not *disown* them.[30] I do this so that we can come to see that the hyperperformance and defense of rationalism is colonial, racialized, and gendered, too. Indeed, as Donovan Schaefer has shown, "rationalism" itself is deeply imbued with feeling, even as the felt dimensions of rational knowing are so regularly denied.[31] Part of rationalism's arrogance, though, Schaefer points out, is its claim to secularist neutrality, the illusion of overcoming the ways knowing is experienced precisely as being *felt*.[32]

Traditional academic writing style can be, among other things, the physical architecture of that illusion. So I want this book, via a kind of "postsec-

ular style" (as Kate Stanley puts it), to invite us into closer contact with the unequivocally felt bases of our historical knowing.[33] I want it to loosen our grip. Why do we even care to hold on so tightly to such doggedly rationalist styles and conventions, to shore them up, in the face of the varied urgencies enfolding us? This is not a rhetorical question.

Story and the Tyranny of Realism

> Everything is up in the air, all narratives for the moment have been blown open—the statues are falling—all the metrics are off, if only briefly. —DIONNE BRAND, "On Narrative, Reckoning and the Calculus of Living and Dying"

Natalie Loveless asks a version of this question—Why do we hold onto these styles and conventions when things are in collapse?—in her book *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation*. Loveless narrates the relationship between her artistic practices and research-based practices (in her case, theory, art history), both of which she finds life-giving, but the latter of which gets infinitely more credibility and funding, even *within* the arts wing of the academy. Writing in the ambiance of the Anthropocene and other narratives of world-ending, Loveless holds that "the arts have an important and overlooked part to play in this context. They offer modes of sensuous, aesthetic attunement, and work as a conduit to focus attention, elicit public discourse, and shape cultural imaginaries. 'How might the world be organized differently?' is a question that matters urgently, and it is a question that art—particularly art attuned to human and more-than-human social justice—asks in generative and complex ways."[34] Her hope for research-creation is "curiosity-driven," and "imagines new literacies," "pushing us to tell new stories in the academy, stories that denaturalize singular disciplinary locations while nomadically claiming space within all of them. . . ."[35]

Loveless's manifesto envisions forms of making that alight across and challenge disciplines, and, importantly, "challenge the current hegemony of the book-length monograph," despite her love of the academic monograph.[36] I share both her desire to move between and upset disciplines, and her simultaneous love of and exhaustion with the academic monograph. But I also find her emphasis on *story* enticing. She begins one chapter with a quote from Donna Haraway: "Stories are much bigger than ideologies. In that is our hope."[37]

To claim storytelling as the work of history perhaps sounds simultaneously quaint, obvious, and suspect. Since Hayden White's work, especially *Metahis-*

tory, most historians know on some level at least that history is always story and that the realism of history is only an effect of its genre.[38] But there is still an overall reluctance, even refusal, to claim one's own narrativization in historical fields like late antiquity studies.[39] This is even while the study of late antiquity's most famous character, Peter Brown, is a consummate storyteller. Likewise the dominance of ideological critique in biblical studies and, to a lesser extent, religious studies makes anything like an embrace of "storytelling" sound retro or uncritical. So too the use of "storytelling" as a euphemism for brand management and marketing lends it a capitalist pallor. For Loveless, however, who draws from Audre Lorde and Thomas King as well as from Haraway, storytelling is not simply or exactly "narrative." It is about taking the risk of naming a moment with images.[40] It is a mode of carving out more complex realities—an affectively charged and artful mode. It is about redirecting attention, about care for the emergent, as well as ways of refiguring a world already hypersaturated with, founded on, bad stories.

Loveless provokes me to reconsider historical and critical work on antiquity not just as deliberate narrativization, but also potentially as this artful, affectively charged storytelling. We are in a long moment, as Dionne Brand so deftly expressed it, of narrative breakdown. For Brand, the broken story is the credulousness of pre-pandemic "normalcy," speaking itself back into existence with every exhausted sigh of pandemic life.[41] I would add now that the broken story continues to speak with every desire to return to a "before," or to chug along without real recognition of the many kinds of deaths surrounding us. With every concurrent disaster—pandemic, global displacements, systemic collapse, genocide—the brokenness of the story further reveals itself.

This kind of embrace of narrative as imagistic world-making could do more than just move historians and critics into different discursive modes. It could mitigate the tyranny of a certain kind of realism that is the unwritten rule and litmus test of our work: namely, that our renditions must be chastened reproductions, the first effect of which is verisimilitude. Realism is simply a convention of historical work, and not a necessary one.[42] And it is a convention that is, as psychoanalytic theories have amply demonstrated, an elaborate form of fantasy life.[43] More to the point, realism is always a delimiting of the possible; not a description but rather an imposition of a certain kind of "reality."[44] As Sasha-Mae Eccleston observes of the "The Brainsex Paintings" by classicist and poet Anne Carson, in which Carson explores the work of the Greek poet Mimnermos, playing with genre (for instance) can destabilize the realist designs of traditional scholarship. Eccleston writes:

> Carson could have relied on the values of realism, scientism, and classical philology, especially because of her scholarly training and the special relationship between Greek literary history and realism. Instead, she draws attention to the variety of methods available for understanding Mimnermos as both poet and person. Carson's approach suggests that this situation is not unique: If we want to grapple with human reality, the elements of fantasy—uncertainty, potentiality, and the sensitivity to the dynamics of perception—that constitute our existence and representations of it should not be excluded. For the stuff of real life is complicated, like working with the fragments of a long-lost poet.[45]

We might think of our work, then, as a way of playing with, framing, renegotiating the real. Images and spun narrative can jar and attune. The embrace of such world-making could also force more of the field to acknowledge the efficacy of things like aesthetics and resonance, the more-than-rational, for making sense of and inhabiting worlds differently. Not only the efficacy of aesthetics and resonance, but the vital, existential importance of them.

So that is why I find myself, in this project even more willfully than other books I've written, engaged in immersive narrativization about the proximity, even occasional indistinguishability, of the long past and the present. Sometimes I produce something that looks like an argument, but more often, I conjure scenes.[46] Historical points emerge, but often through echoes, repetitions, dissonances, and juxtapositions between pieces. I bend translations and make up inscriptions. I speculate. I engage in playful anachronism. There is nothing (of which I'm aware) regulating the points of contact between Christian late antiquity and what is, roughly, "now"—between ancient writers and contemporary figures from my own life, for example. Any intuitive connection was, and is, fair game so long as it felt compelling, alive, or unexpected.

Despite its delinquency with respect to the rules of professionalized historical engagement, I will not relinquish the description of this book as historical. If so much historical work is about defamiliarization, this project, too, defamiliarizes late antiquity, though ironically by rendering it in the hyperfamiliar language of the contemporary world. It defamiliarizes by selecting out details for their beauty or poignancy rather than for their utility in relationship to the usual historicizing categories and schemas: it dilates those details and recalibrates their meanings. The goal is to stretch the boundaries of historical work, and to experiment with historical work as a form of research-creation: to honor artistic forms *as legitimate ways of knowing*, ones

which do not need exorbitant attachments to rationalism or realism to hold the specificity of the past as closely as possible, and ones which do not shy from the long past's immanence.

Historical work is frequently about naming continuity and discontinuity with attention and care. We do not need to do that work so rigidly. And while the writing in this book arrives from an excessive and quirky set of reading and observational habits that amount to what we call expertise—expertise that I find generative—expertise is not the *only* place I put my stock.[47] This project places weight on the hope that lyrical knowing can bring relief, expansiveness, and latitude where so many of us have been made clinical, constrained, and numb. And it places the weight on the necessity of metabolizing many times in tandem. As Rukeyser writes, "Who will speak these days, / if not I, / if not you?" This brings me to the question of time and change.

"It was a period of transformation. . . .": Exceptionalism and Change

For the last fifty years or so, the predominant story of the late ancient Mediterranean has been a story of "transformation." To be sure, there was a lot going on. Roman bureaucracy and elite classes grew, the definition of Roman citizenship broadened, civic administration moved away from the local and became centralized in provincial and imperial structures. Roman rule was increasingly authoritarian, grammar and legal education came to dominate over (and in some cases replace) philosophical education. Associated with Christianity, there was also, of course, the rise in popularity of ascetic behaviors and virtues, of book culture. Monasteries began cropping up from east to west, and shrines for saints peppered cities. In the wake of Christian emperors, over time, traditional Greek, Roman, and indigenous gods and cultic practices (termed "pagan") became controversial, thinned out, got absorbed, or persisted between the lines. People began thinking more in totalizing terms: compendiums, law codes, universal histories.

Peter Brown, whose work essentially reperiodized "late antiquity" and narrated (in particular) Christianity's robust and creative social changes, was central to the popularity of this characterization.[48] To speak of transformation was and continues to be seen as an antidote to the narrative of decline and collapse from Greek and Roman classical culture into the "dark ages," propagated and emblematized in Edward Gibbon's eighteenth-century *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—although the decline and collapse narrative has hardly disappeared.[49] Importantly, Gibbon's work, steeped in modernist derision for religion, quite notoriously lays the blame

for the fall of Rome on Christianity's excesses (as well as on "barbarism").[50] So what has emerged over time in response to the narrative of decline is, as one might guess, a different story not only of the Roman empire, but a different story of Christianity. Christianity was now seen as full of inventive and fascinating (if also sometimes unattractive) characters, new social practices, and expressions of bodily life that were, certainly at first, countercultural within the history of the Mediterranean. Individual subjects, too, were transformed, it seemed, even transforming themselves with this potent new language of Christianity.

But Thomas Hunt's work on "the making of late antiquity" as a field of study has demonstrated just how fully steeped the epistemologies of the field are in the time and space of colonial modernity through its intellectual legacies—its formative figures and scholarship, including Brown.[51] Hunt notes a reliance on not only the French archaeology of colonized Algeria, but approaches to North Africa (and space generally), notions of the human, culture, and civilization very much indebted to the conditions and conversations of French empire and colonization.[52] Thus transformation as creativity/innovation, as a descriptor for late antiquity, carries in it imperialist (and) Christian exceptionalism, I'd argue, even when some of the less savory figures and dimensions of the period or its colonial conditions are being held in view.[53]

It is not only the element of extraordinariness that makes the equation of late antiquity with transformation (unqualified) epistemologically suspect; it is also its implied theory of change. Historical work in general tries to mark and describe change; to name its catalysts and effects. Historians are famous for arguing a case for their geographic and temporal area of expertise as especially fascinating, dynamic, or pivotal. Nonetheless, even leaving aside the problems with periodization, what does it mean to imagine a *particular* period one of "transformation"?[54] How do we gauge the momentousness of change: the number of changes, or the kind (economic, political, social)?

Time and change are fundamentally experiential. They are inescapably tied up in subjectivity and perspective. Some changes are more momentous and resounding in retrospect, some so ephemeral it seems that they hardly happened at all. Some changes are most perceptible to those experiencing them, while in other cases, they are more perceptible to those *not* experiencing them directly. It is difficult to pinpoint change, it requires work and speculation, and in the middle of it we are often hard-pressed to say with any confidence, or at least predict accurately what, exactly, is changing. Change is regularly an experience of uncertainty and disjoint: uncertain in its meaning and scale, disjoint between what is sensed and what is observed.

Time is no less ambiguous. For all of modernism's love of sequential time, for all its confidence in a past entombed and a future that is always not yet, we are constantly navigating asynchronies. So much theorizing of the last few decades has indeed shown how thoroughly multiple temporalities/timelines define power and the management of populations.[55] "The present" is myriad and cacophonous.

Beyond the differential asynchronies that compose the present, though, we live in what Carolyn Dinshaw describes as a present crowded with times and figures that would seem to belong to the long past. In *How Soon Is Now*, Dinshaw describes asynchrony on several levels. She recounts medieval tales of lapsed or jumped time, of belatedness and Rip Van Winkle–style stories, for example, that pepper medieval literature. But she also describes how, contra the linear and developmental temporal conceits of professionalized, modernist historians, amateur readers of medieval literature practice a different relationship to medieval figures and texts, one with its own distinct relationship to temporality. Quite apart from professionalized history, with its regimented schedules and replicable methodologies (not to mention its sometimes chilly disposition), amateur readers tend to work on their own time, or work with the little snatches of time they have found around the edges.[56] Amateur readers additionally lead more overtly with enjoyment: desire and attachment define the work of these readers, as does resourcefulness.[57] In both their offline relationship to the modernist practices of professional history and their grounding in pleasure, Dinshaw argues such amateur readings have a queer force to them. But in this deeply felt relationship to the medieval past, Dinshaw argues that her dilettantes also tend to live closer to the queer asynchronies of the texts they so enjoy.

Readers will see an obvious debt to and kinship with Dinshaw in this book.[58] I share her desire to thoughtfully divest from the relentless performance of strategies and presentations of academic professionalization. I share her recognition that professionalized history has a relationship to modernist (and thus, I would add, colonial/imperialist) time. And I share her sense that the long past was no less full of asynchronies. We know this about late antiquity, specifically, because these asynchronies were often corralled awkwardly and with great labor into grand, monolithic arcs—Julius Africanus's *Chronography* or Eusebius's *Church History*, for example. Likewise we know this because these asynchronies were amplified to fashion and preserve a cultural identity, as in rabbinic literature.[59] We know, too, that fourth-century Christian writers and tourists approached Jerusalem and living Jews as signs and ghosts in their presence of a long-gone past.[60]

With equal debt to Dinshaw and Peter Brown, then, I begin, in the prologue, with that emblematic tale of asynchrony, the Seven Sleepers story. Dinshaw reads this story at length, a story that circulated widely and has had a rich, ongoing life. So the story is a kind of touchpoint between her and Brown—that is, between her queer temporalities and Brown's wistful identification. But while obviously taking cues from both writers, I begin with this story to emphasize a difference in tone and cast. Rather than a tale of miraculous escape and wonder, or of extraordinary large-scale historical transformation, here it is retold as a mundane tale of ambivalent survival, of a desire for a dampened, even deadened consciousness.

This difference in tone and cast enfolds the book, in which the queerness of time is not necessarily or mostly a site or consequence of pleasure, and the historical and personal changes experienced are chilling and deeply uncertain. The figures depicted here are twisted, captivated, frustrated, and undone by time and change. Sometimes their read on *right now* is sweeping and consequential, sometimes they long to lose themselves in a past they never lived, sometimes the future can't come fast enough. They sense change, witness to its losses and possibilities. They crave being architects of their own change and fail to accomplish it. In the middle of it they dream of changeless gods. Change worries and eludes them. They try to finesse the terms of time and change. They do it poorly.

And by *they* I mean *we*, at least many of us, in a tentative and uneasy consortium. One other dimension of the ambiguity of time in this book is not just the proximity, but the blend and bleed between more overtly late ancient figures and contemporary ones, such that those distinctions start to make little sense.

How We Live in Time

while she waited for something else to happen, she considered that maybe something was happening. —ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS, *M Archive: After the End of the World*

I have spent a lot of time waiting: waiting to feel better, waiting for things to get better, waiting to see people I love, waiting to find out *what's next*. Feeling trapped in time, drawn thin by it. I have pleaded for change on some days, while on others dreading what particular changes might bring. I'm sure I'm not alone.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs's *M Archive* is a work of speculative documentary that imagines life after the apocalypse into which the present world is living

and dying. A collection of lyrical prose pieces that bear out a black feminist metaphysics, Gumbs writes "from and with the perspective of a researcher, a post-scientist sorting artifacts after the end of the world."[61] It honors M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing*, and is written "in collaboration with the survivors, far-into-the-future witnesses to the realities we are making possible or impossible with our present apocalypse."[62] What unfolds across the book is a poetic reinhabiting of a catastrophic world through the language of time and grounded in black life. The present is spoken through the past tense, with the apparently distant future already come, to reveal "a species at the edge of its integrity, on the verge or in the practice of transforming into something beyond the luxuries and limitations of what some call 'the human.'"[63]

So much of *M Archive* is an account of change in all of its gritty particulars, one which knits survival and possibility to conditions of annihilation and neglect. Those who live on develop physical adaptations to their extreme conditions, conditions forged by enslavement and racial capitalism, and these adaptations include sublime new potential and heartbreaking debilitation. Various figures in the book move between being the sinister catalysts of change to physically and psychically overwhelmed subjects whose bodily and environmental changes are beyond their imagination and choice. The changes are somehow both unthinkable to those who undergo them and incredibly quotidian. In this scenario, change is a many-sided thing. Rooted in black ongoingness, "transformation" loses its exceptionalist valences.

I read *M Archive* alongside various pieces of the vast collection of texts of Christian late antiquity—somewhat accidently. I read knowing that Gumbs's imagined but immanent future, a future shaped and propelled by European Christian imperialism and its corollaries, was tied uncannily and irrevocably to the heavy past of Christian late antiquity. It soon began to feel to me as if ancient people also knew somewhere (intuitively, unconsciously) what their strategies and improvisations would become, and were plagued by that intuition.[64] In some cases, I felt that these ancient people were experiencing their losses as beyond them, almost as if they were registering the juggernaut and explosion of colonialist futures of which they were—are—unwittingly a part. I was also sensing uncanny contiguity between some rather unhistorical seeming dimensions of my life and the hyperspecific circumstances of the past. Elements of my world became stories of the long past as it expresses itself in less than predictable ways.[65]

Gumbs's book offers an example of what historian of late antiquity David Maldonado Rivera has argued is the necessity of disobeying the rules of par-

titioned, linear, colonial time in order to more fully discern the conditions of the world. Maldonado Rivera makes this argument through an account of the way the Catholic church legally retained expropriated property in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Puerto Rico. He describes how juridical reasoning placed the Catholic church in a continuous line with Constantine, thereby producing "the church" as a transhistorical imperial entity. This legal logic, he writes, "turned Puerto Rico into one of the outermost and unlikeliest of territories of a Transatlantic Roman Empire, an eruption of late antiquity into the so-called American Century."[66]

Through this example, Maldonado Rivera points to how critical the organization of time as "linear, unavoidable sentence" is to the ongoing force of colonialism.[67] To counter this colonial temporality, he suggests that historians "cultivate a 'diasporic consciousness' by thinking a historical commons as a tentative connection to the fragments of history rather than the irrefutable certainties of cosmopolitan linear universality."[68] Which is to say normative and colonial histories will not ever be fully undone using normative temporal frameworks. As long as we continue to tell time in the usual ways and with the usual disposition, we will almost inevitably produce the same results, ones that benefit and extend histories of colonialism.

This present book's form, as associatively linked fragments that regularly scramble linear temporality, something like *anachronology*, is in part an attempt to take up Maldonado Rivera's invitation.[69] It is an attempt to create a troubled reckoning with the eerie, diffuse, and unpredictable presence of the past—especially colonial histories which go on in seemingly endless reiteration and territorialize beyond their given historical periods. Gumbs and Maldonado Rivera together compel us to ask generally about ways we might write the "distant past" while experiencing ourselves more fully *in time*. They press us to entertain ourselves as living out—intimately living out—this apparently distant past, and to entertain the distant past as alive in its futures, the futures we now live, futures constantly unfolding. The past is not "finished," in other words, not simply waiting to be uncovered or finally understood.

But if it is true that the past lives expressed in its futures, futures that are constantly in flux, that means that the past is not just pressing on us, not just proximal to us. That means *the past itself is changing*, remaking itself, and only available to us through the crowded now, the edges of which evade us. What would it be to entertain the past not just as fragmentarily alive in its futures, but reorganizing *with* its futures, becoming together with them? Past not as entity, not as what has already passed, but as continuous motion, as passing: passing alongside, in, and through.[70]

What this book is, then, is a post-rationalist, post-realist experiment in living with and writing ancient history differently. The imposition of realism, rationalism, and sequential, developmental time continually racialize academic work and foreclose fuller histories of colonialism, and in doing so they also constrain otherwise historical possibilities. They deny the sensations of time, the disorientations of history. Especially in the face of the international rise of fascism, and the various forms of deadness and numbness that issue from late-capitalist life, it is a matter of spiritual and psychological vitality (or maybe even just *survival*) to be able to think the world and what we call reality outside of its given terms and forms. Fascism and late capitalist commodity culture are nothing if not regimes that reduce (with the hope of elimination) everything outside of the dominant reality *to* the dominant reality.

While I want to make a strong, steady case for the importance of lyricism as an epistemology, my point is not to persuade everyone to write poetry. I am not suggesting myself as a model, at least not in any straightforward way. Rather the point is that this is a parable for writing history differently when it comes to us, as it so often does, in ways we would not choose, and in languages and gestures and styles that are often eccentric to us. The point is to ask what might happen if we took the circumstances of our lives and relationships seriously as conduits for intimate historical knowing even of "distant" pasts. Black feminist theory and writing, as well as affect theory and compatible work in cultural studies, has already framed the realm of subjective experience, intimate relations, mundanity, and the personally felt as a source of historical knowledge about modernity, the present, and the social forces at work in it.[71] But what if ancient forces also appear through a kind of emotional-historical sedimentation? What if, for instance, ancient people's desires are more apprehensible through ours—and ours more elusive because they were never quite ours to begin with?

The point is additionally to encourage ancient historians, in particular, to bring the form of our academic work into more integrity with the shape and texture of our many experiences, proclivities, pains, and creativities.[72] What I'm encouraging is a more conscious proliferation of forms to replace the hollow dogma of canonical discursive academic forms, and a more playful, flexible relationship with those canonical discursive forms without seeing History, itself, as under threat.

But within and through that experiment, this book fashions an ominous and critical re-description—though fragments, figures, and vignettes—of

Christian late antiquity. It does so especially in light of its colonial futures (namely, European modernity and the neocolonial United States), and in the face of many decades of scholarship that has come to think much more generously, to the point of romance, of Christian late antiquity.[73] Both broad and dense, evocative rather than comprehensive, it is something like a postcolonial restyle of Brown's tiny, programmatic, and vivid *The Making of Late Antiquity*.

On a standard timeline, the ancient texts, figures, and scenes appearing in this book would fit between the late second and early third century CE to the sixth century CE, though obviously part of the work of the book is to render that timeline itself a little strange. The book's content is structured by four major and recognizable themes of this period: church fathers, the interior self, the lives of saints, and the so-called decline of paganism.[74] But of course, here too, the collection of material in each of these sections twists and turns and recalibrates the theme.

The first section, "Fathers," launches from late ancient theologians of the early church whose power and influence were growing and changing with the rising status of Christians within the empire. It is a consideration of book culture, intellectual culture, as well as their heavy legacies and menacing political entanglements across time: in other words, intellectuals, power, empire, and writing/paper. These are figures working hard to manage the terms of time and change, and who are, at least sometimes, haunted by that work.

In considering the capacities, real and imagined, endowed in and through writing, I was also preoccupied with the long history of studies of Christian late antiquity and "patristics," the obsessions and disavowed eroticisms (racial/colonial ones, gendered ones) circulating especially around certain scalar and jurisdictional approaches to time and language: the gravitas and spiritualized attachments to the microscopic phenomena of philology, the impulse to periodize and reperiodize, the urge to produce encyclopedic volumes, meticulous commentaries, and exhaustive chronicles. By no coincidence, the approaches to time and language mimic those of the very ecclesial figures I silhouette here.[75]

Threaded through this section, as others, are reflections on my family—in this case especially my father—and their relationship to paper.

The second section ("Notes from the Interior") explores the increasing interest in late antiquity in subjective interiority, and works out the violent and sustaining dimensions of confession and the inner space of the self. I crave a richer, more complicated discussion of interiority than the Foucauldian framework, which locates in late antiquity precedents for later forms of

interiorized self-regulation, permits. I aim for this in part by more fully inhabiting the meanings and possibilities of interiority, and by linking psychological/subjective interiority to the increasing obsession in that period with physical virginity—sometimes imagined as an untouched inner space—and to colonial, sexualized violence. Freud's "dark continent" of female sexuality and the racial violence of modern gynecology appear, in this section, as logics both inherited from late ancient writers and living contiguously with them. And especially since biographical fragments of my own appear across the book, it felt necessary to complicate self-narration in this section by placing it in this tweaked history of interiority. What is self-narration after all if not an attempt to control the story of what changed you and how? Augustine, famed writer of the long biographical monologue, the *Confessions*, looms large.

The third section, "Saints' Lives," begins from an understanding of late ancient hagiography as a literature of grief and its abeyance. It describes experiences of durational crisis and unsatisfied desires for transformation and agency under such conditions. Indeed the ascetic practices of spiritualized deprivation modeled by the saints have in so much scholarship been understood as "transformative," and creating a new kind of subjectivity—reproducing some of the language of the ancient literature itself.[76] So it is in this section that I try to mitigate the romance of that narrative, which works as a synecdoche for the "transformation" of Christian late antiquity at large. Saints' lives and the ascetic practices they commend are stories of aggrandizement. What happens when that work of aggrandizement becomes more transparent? This aggrandizing work, and its foundering at covering over the mundane conditions of grief, feels associatively close to Lauren Berlant's work on "slow death" in *Cruel Optimism*. In this section I play out the possibility of ascetic practice as part of the undercurrent and social-emotional landscape of some structures of contemporary life, particularly higher education.[77] As one iteration of a more generalized surfacing of hagiography's unsatisfied desires for agency and transformation, I also play with portraits of women saints in ways that complicate feminist critical recuperations of agency, recuperations which still hold critical sway in the field.

The fourth and final section, "The Passing World," homes in most specifically on loss and history's ephemerality, memory and memorialization. It does so through explorations of some of the corollaries of the eventual Christian dominance of the late ancient landscape and imperial managements of the past. So for example, the changing place of the traditional Greek and Roman gods with the eventual dominance of Christianity across the Roman

empire offers a needle's eye into complex, often eroticized attachments to authority, attachments that only become *more* complex when that power and authority wanes. In a series of fabricated inscriptions, for example, I write through the metaphor of one's god losing influence, or being in some sense gone, as a way of getting at structural change, and the strange, slippery work of trying to document the erosion of formative relationships—or loss at all. This section also contemplates the nostalgia and attachments of an invented classicism of this period, as well as Christian colonization of Jewish history. Overall, this section most pointedly houses meditations on the vague and distorting nature of change, as well as meditations on power: delicate and multifaceted bonds with it, and then the hollow anticlimax of tentatively securing it.

In each part and across sections, other networked themes emerge. Some of those themes: Gardens. Mirrors. Goldenness. The ocean. Exhaustion. On a grand scale, the crushing experiences and constant perils of living in late capitalist imperialism—which is shaped by Christian strategies and conceptualities in ways both more subtle and more forceful than one might think. Throughout, I pose the question: what if ancient Christians' strategies and hopes and rejoinders did not succeed for them in the way they, and we, imagined? Or rather, *what if they are succeeding, in an extant way, and to disastrous ends?*

Read this book laterally, not literally. Read it for proximal and residual effects. Read it for passing impressions, for the grain and quality of relations. Read it as a passage out of which both past and present emerge ever more distinctly, emerge remade.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. I had COVID for nine weeks. Soon after, I developed a chronic migraine condition that soaked up many of my days over the course of the writing of this book. The book's form is not incidental to those conditions, either—a kind of "disability as method." Compatibly (in a general sense), see Mills and Sanchez, *Crip Authorship*; and specifically, for a critique of the kinds of cognition privileged by academia, see. Chen, "Brain Fog." So too Jonathan Sterne's *Diminished Faculties*, especially his description of exhaustion, has lived closely with me.

2. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*.

3. The most frequent parallel between the contemporary United States and the Roman empire these days is made via the story of Rome's "fall," a moralizing discourse that not only presumes a clear narrative arc for both the contemporary United States and the Roman empire, but often laments the loss of imperial robustness. As will become apparent, I am trying to resist (and describe) the desire to diagnose grand arcs and delineate periods.

4. Again, on the possibilities of blurry thinking, see Chen, "Brain Fog."

5. Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion*, epilogue.

6. See especially the posthumously published *Confessions of the Flesh: The History of Sexuality, Volume IV*. But for a schematic and thorough treatment of Foucault's interest in Christian texts and practice, see Clements, "Foucault's Christianities." Foucault influenced Peter Brown's work on late antiquity, as Brown has described in various times and places. See, for instance, Brown, *The Body and Society*, introduction.

7. Cox Miller, *The Poetry of Thought in Late Antiquity*. See also Roberts, *The Jeweled Style*. Both Roberts and Cox Miller have suggested an "aesthetics of discontinuity" in late ancient writing.

8. This project owes something in particular to Virginia Burrus's *Ancient Christian Ecopoetics*, which mixes a handful of her own poems into a collection of thematically linked, lyrical, and sometimes fragmentary essays. Burrus, too, encourages nonlinearity, and draws together the long past, the present, and her own experiences (6–7). Although not in late antiquity studies, and not interested in making historical claims, Anne Carson's genre-busting work is an obvious precedent here.

9. Kotrosits, *Theory, History, and the Study of Religion*. Such work is no less important for the way it erodes the history/reception divide. For my own deconstruction of this divide, see Kotrosits, "Response."

10. So many poetic renditions of ancient themes, myths, or figures, whether in early Christian studies or classics, are undertaken in aggrandizing and romanticizing registers, which serve to reaffirm their status as universal in relationship to something like "the human," or at least naturalize their canonical place. I am aware of this dynamic. I am frustrated by it. I hope to cut through some of it.

11. The characteristic style and obtuseness of academic prose does, after all, have a history, as Edith Hall has shown in "Aristotle's Lost Works."

12. See, for instance, the introduction of the Latin—*inter alia*—in a reviewer's remark on what I'd forgotten in a piece under review: the elegance of the letters, the soft strangeness of the sounds against the specter of my shoddy bibliography. The missing names spill from her mouth like integers. A recitation, a repetition, a bar, among other things.

13. I suppose I was like Carolyn Dinshaw's amateur, or living out Jack Halberstam's "queer art of failure," but it was less exciting than all of that, and much more about class. I got my first job after my PhD as visiting faculty at Amherst College, famous for its poets (Emily Dickinson, for one) if not also its crackling fireplaces, and a school I could not have gotten into let alone afforded as an undergraduate. I arrived on campus to teach, only to realize just how far out of the echelons of literary culture I had truly been.

14. This distinction between observer and participant in the study of religion is part of the genealogy, fantasy, and ongoing presumption of secularism, as so many have pointed out. However, I do not mean to align science or empiricism with modernity over and against art here, since the scientist and the artist are really twin figures of modernity, both of whom loom large in the religious studies imagination.

15. Doty, *Art of Description*, 22–23. See also Audre Lorde's "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." For Lorde, poetry is "the revelation or distillation of experience," and not "sterile word play," 37.

16. I am not a singer, but when I started approaching poetry more fully again, I had dreams about singing. In one, I found myself in a concert hall, a half a step from the stage, dressed for the occasion. The songs I was supposed to sing I hadn't heard in ages. To my surprise they were all in my range, and I only remembered the words once I was singing.

17. Indeed, that patron saint of the study of religion, Émile Durkheim, associated art of all kinds with the forms of religiosity for which he was generating scientific explanations. "It is a well-known fact," he declares, "that games and the major art forms have emerged from religion, and that they long preserved a religious character." *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 283.

18. Kotrosits and Given, "*Ars Botanica*."

19. Most recently: Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges*; Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*; and Hughes, *Comparison*.

20. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 87–88.

21. Christian, "The Race for Theory," 78.

22. Nash, *How We Write Now*.

23. Bruce, *How to Go Mad*, 4.

24. Bruce, *How to Go Mad*, 5–9.

25. Bruce, *How to Go Mad*, 9.

26. Bruce, *How to Go Mad*, 1–2.

27. Bruce, *How to Go Mad*, 5.

28. I have written on this before; see "Darkening the Discipline," chap. 7.

29. I think of Catherine Michael Chin's review of a book in the esteemed *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, in which Chin met the book's interest in tiny and fragmentary objects in antiquity with his own tiny and fragmentary lyrical reflections on objects. The review received nothing less than a wave of outrage on social media, some of which came out of structural concerns for what reviews mean for authors' professional advancement. But some came in the form of an outrage that was expressed as a critique of a "lazy" or inscrutable review, and carried other heavy valences, given Chin is Asian and trans. Chin's double interest in late antiquity and puppetry/object theater has helped embolden me to write this book, even as I'm painfully aware how our colleagues' responses to Chin's various kinds of mixing of late antiquity with creative play have ranged from fervent admiration to puzzled shrugs to sour derision. See Chin, "The Tiny."

30. I don't disown them, in part, because there are many dimensions of academic prose that I take pleasure in, both as a reader and as a writer. Besides, not all academic prose invests in rationalist conventions to the same extent. I fell in love with a body of literature that we call *theory*, beginning, counterintuitively, with the prose of Judith Butler, less because I understood the arguments (I didn't yet) than because its density of meaning and cadence reminded me of poetry. Many of the academic books that have stayed with me the longest have done so because of these qualities.

31. Schaefer, *Wild Experiment*.

32. Schaefer, *Wild Experiment*, especially 226–27.

33. Kate Stanley describes postsecular style as an emergent response in some scholarship in religious studies to critiques of secularism in the United States as colonial and regulatory force, one that takes a critical position of situatedness and "feeling with." Stanley, "Postsecular Style." Though admittedly the present book's blurs and intimacy with its subjects are much more extreme than in the works Stanley is reviewing. On postsecularism, see Coviello and Hickman, "Introduction."

34. Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 16. From the conclusion: "If the project isn't (only) to ensure our own survival at the level of the individual or the species, if we give up on the pathological narcissism of me-at-all-costs, then how might we, workers in the university, orient ourselves in our current projects of everyday academic life under the sign of the Anthropocene . . .?" (99–100).

35. Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 37. While I follow Loveless on several fronts, I do sometimes find her romantic in her discussion of multidisciplinarity and its possibilities (or, as she coins the term, "polydisciplinamory").

36. Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 17.

37. Loveless, *How to Make Art*, 19. The quote is from Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*.

38. Consequently, we can easily try out other genres, with other effects, and be no less "true."

39. Thanks to Andrew Jacobs for this articulation of the problem. While narrative history is a recognized and legitimate academic writing form, it is generally still quite traditional in execution: fact-based, restrained, literal, and with little literary flourish.

40. Brekelmans, "The Fall," 152.

41. "Who would one have to be to sit in that normal restfully, to mourn it, or to desire its continuance? We are, in fact, still in that awful normal that is narrativized as minor injustices, or social ills that would get better if some of us waited, if we had the patience to bear it, if we had noticed and were grateful for the miniscule 'progress,' etc. . . . Well, yes, this is normal, this usual, this ease was predicated on dis-ease. The dis-ease was always presented as something to solve in the future, but for certain exigencies of budget, but for planning, but for the faults of 'those' people, their lack of responsibility, but for all that, there were plans to remedy it, in some future time. We were to hold onto that hope and the suspension of disbelief it required to maintain 'normal.'" Brand, "On Narrative, Reckoning, and the Calculus of Living and Dying."

42. Though perhaps we can see why the attachment: As Keith Moxey has observed of art, some of the captivating effect of verisimilitude is its ability to make a representation seem to stand outside of time, and even transcend the perspectival limits of its maker. Moxey, *Visual Time*, chap. 3.

43. In psychoanalytic theory, reality and fantasy are not opposites. Rather fantasy is the work of reality construction. Melanie Klein, especially, has observed the way fantasies do not dissipate as we age. Klein writes, "Phantasies—becoming more elaborate and referring to a wider range of objects and situations—continue throughout development and accompany all activities; they never stop playing a great part in all mental life." Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*. See Kotrosits, *The Lives of Objects*, introduction. *The Lives of Objects* contains my own contestation of the way the notion of the "real" and realism operates in the study of antiquity, especially via recourse to material culture, as well as my own articulation of the possibilities of "the real" in historical work.

44. We might also think here of the work of Suzanne Césaire on surrealism, colonialism, and the psyche.

45. Eccleston, "Fantasies of Mimnermos," 287.

46. There are so many ways to write. "Argument" is not only an overused but an impoverished one, certainly in academia.

47. Here, too, I would want us to separate *expertise* from *credentialing*. In fact, it seems worth distinguishing expertise from professionalization, so that we might think of expertise not as disciplinary askesis proven through rigid and informational writing styles, but rather expertise as devoted interest, as years of idiosyncratic study, as intimacy with sources and the dead, as community-involved knowledge-sharing.

48. There is no real agreement on what period (or geography) "late antiquity" designates. While Brown's markers for the era have changed over time, his late antiquity is generally housed in the second through eighth centuries. Central to this narrative of transformation is the notion that with Christian culture come *new* developments that bloom in the thousand or so years that follow. Polymnia Athanassiadi's work, on the other hand, understands the developments of this period as fully connected to the globalized Hellenistic culture following the conquests of Alexander. She thus challenges the segmentation and newness implied by this consensus picture of late antiquity. Athanassiadi, *Mutations of Hellenism*. For larger discussion of periodization and change regarding late antiquity, see Testa, *Late Antiquity in Contemporary Debate*.

49. See Ramsay MacMullen's highly regarded *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, or more recently, accounts of the fall of Rome due to climate change and environmental factors, thoughtfully summarized in Kristina Sessa's "The New Environmental."

50. Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

51. See Hunt, "The Influence of French Colonial Humanism" and "Imperial Collapse."

52. "To put it briefly, late antiquity is modern because it was constituted in relationship with the colonial other, particularly Algeria. It remains modern to the extent that the constituting role of the colony is unacknowledged in the historiography of the field." Hunt, "The Influence of French Colonial Humanism," 274.

53. For more on the exceptionalisms of the field post-"transformation," especially as they appear in the work of Brown and Foucault, and as they are mitigated by some scholars in late antiquity studies, see Kotrosits, *Theory, History, and the Study of Religion*.

54. As Kristina Sessa writes, critiquing the dichotomy of continuity and change, "Indeed one could argue that everything in history is always changing *and* staying the same. . . . " Sessa, "The New Environmental."

55. There is a long and extensive genealogy for the critique of colonialist, imperialist, and capitalist time. A few examples that have influenced my own thinking and have been diffused into this book, beyond Carolyn Dinshaw's work (on which, see below): Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Freeman, *Time Binds*; Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*; Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*; Puar, *The Right to Maim*; and Azoulay, *Potential History*.

56. Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?*, 22.

57. Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?*, 23.

58. Likewise, I have taken cues from Dinshaw's theorizing of queer touch across time in *Getting Medieval*.

59. See especially Gribetz, *Time and Difference*. For another history of imperial time and forms of temporal resistance to it, one from an earlier period, see Kosmin, *Time and Its Adversaries*.

60. Jacobs, *The Remains of the Jews*.

61. Gumbs, *M Archive*, xi.

62. Gumbs, *M Archive*, xi.

63. Gumbs, *M Archive*, xi.

64. I borrow the notion of ancient writers' strategies as improvisations from Jacobs, *Epiphanius of Cyprus*.

65. While *M Archive* is obviously a very different kind of reckoning with time, change, and colonialism, Gumbs has helped me feel out and conceptualize this book.

66. Maldonado Rivera, "Method, Ethics, and Historiography."

67. "Chronology emphasizes a succession, the chaining of things one after another. It fosters a language of accumulation and replacement," writes Stefan Tanaka in *History without Chronology*. He writes, "My hope is that in this renewed interrogation of time, scholars, especially historians, first recognize the historicity of chronology as a construct that claims externality and has gained material expression through the clocks, calendars, conceptual forms, and social structures built on them. . . .," 6. Tanaka argues for, among other things, preserving the heterogeneity of time, which includes less mapping (grid and emplotment), and more multiperspectival readings (chap. 3).

68. Maldonado Rivera, "Method, Ethics, and Historiography."

69. Other scholars of antiquity have tentatively suggested anachronism or anachronology as method. On anachronology, see Greenwood, "Thucydideses." Greenwood, interestingly, draws from the work of Anne Carson (*Men in the Off Hours*) in the conclusion of this essay that illustrates authorship's vulnerabilities in time. In James Uden's *Spectres of Antiquity*, he offers the gothic metaphor of "haunting" for the ongoing presence of antiquity, and because this haunting involves aberrations and interruptions of time, "anachrony" is a central dimension (232). On anachronism, see Chalmers, "'Anti-Semitism' before 'Semites'"; and Marchal, *Appalling Bodies*, both of whom still abide by a strong distinction between past and present. A more programmatic treatment is offered by Brooke Holmes in "At the End of the Line." As Holmes writes, "I argue that the challenge posed by anachronism to these value systems lies not only in positing alternative figurations of time but also in drawing attention to the work of valuation itself that is carried out in the description and use of historical time" (62). Holmes, like Maldonado Rivera, uses the language of diaspora, explicitly but also implicitly ("multiple, mutating stories of transhistorical affinity"), and builds on queer historiography (including Dinshaw), as well.

70. It turns out, in fact, that artistic processes have a distinct capacity to accommodate and appreciate this passing, and where the past-as-passing and art meet is in the infrathin. See for instance the descriptions of this concept, coined by Marcel Duchamp, in the work of Manning, *For a Pragmatics of the Useless*, 15–23; and Perloff, *Infrathin*.

71. See Wiegman, "Introduction"; and Nash, *How We Write Now*.

72. I say "ancient historians, in particular" because we are (dare I say) the field least inclined to do so.

73. For an intellectual history of postcolonial critique, which is still marginal, in the study of religion in late antiquity, see Kotrosits, *Theory, History, and the Study of Religion*.

74. These themes (fathers, interiority, saints, the deterioration of traditional cults) are routine ways the field has carved up phenomena of Christian late antiquity. In organizing the book along these lines, my hope is to play with these categories a bit, to rethink them, which is also to explore their power as frames. (As is probably already very clear, I've always been more drawn to playing with frames of legibility than the invention of new taxonomies.)

75. One of the press's reviewers pointed out the deep contrasts between this book, with its interest in condensation and piecemeal accretion, and such tomes, noting too that the pocket-size of Brown's *Making of Late Antiquity* is an exception in Brown's work.

76. The transformation of late ancient Christian ascetic practice has been the predominant assumption of scholarship for decades, most famously Clark, *Reading Renunciation*; and Burrus, *Sex Lives of Saints*. See full bibliography and discussion in Clements, *Sites of the Ascetic Self*, 15.

77. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Across the present book, Berlant figures large, not just for "slow death" but for their larger critique of sovereign agency as fantasy that prevents us from finer description of social and subjective life. For more on Berlant and slow death, see the appendix section on *Saints' Lives*. Elizabeth Povinelli's foundational and field-shaping work on exhaustion is part of the subtext of this book, as well. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*.

PROLOGUE

1. Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence*.
2. Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence*, 3.
3. Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence*, 97.
4. Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence*, 97.
5. See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.
6. Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence*, 98.
7. Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence*, 99.
8. Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence*, 117.
9. Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence*, 117.
10. Grysa, "The Legend."

PART I. FATHERS

1. Jacobs, *Remains of the Jews*, 23.
2. Sarantis, "Arnold Hughes Martin Jones," in Gwynn, *A. H. M. Jones and the Later Roman Empire*, 8. Emphasis mine.