

# The Wound: Bible and the Pedagogical Violence of Methodological Objectivity

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## 1. Dissection

Sometimes I wonder what it's like to dissect a cadaver in your first year of medical school.<sup>1</sup> You carefully slice open the spleen, expose the spongy recesses of the lungs, learn the geometry of the foot, and then what? When you have known and understood the structure of the heart and catalogued all its powers and pathologies, where does your mind go? Once the body

knowledge and understanding? Do you become preoccupied with everything that can go wrong in a body, counting the ways a mutation or a blockage or an unnoticed infection can bring it all to ruin? Do you look to the face of your child and find yourself unable to see? Do you embrace your mother only as pretext to diagnose the density of her bones? Does knowledge of the body bring anything more than an understanding of contingency and peril? Will dissection cure you of your reliance on humanity, or will it remind you of your investments in living flesh?

I cannot imagine that dissection kills desire, affection, or care. I think dissection must teach you wonder, tie purpose to your hands, and inventory all that is riding on the body. I think it must teach you something, to cut so far, because then you know how deep the body goes.

## 2. Methodological Objectivity

In the first year of a theological degree, students usually find themselves in a bible class. It might be Hebrew Bible in the fall or New Testament in the spring, and most often it's both. It's a common and even essential moment of orientation

is splayed out there in front of you, pried open with each part labeled, what do you do next? Do you go home to your lover and find yourself incapable of love? Do you begin to trace the contour of his shoulder but lose the arc somewhere among your

within a theological curriculum, and it's a moment that hides a profound disorientation. In those classes, bible becomes one of the first objects of dissection—one of the earliest cadavers to be splayed open, sliced, and labeled. The cooling table is surround-



Figure 1: The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp, Rembrandt

ed by all the tools supplied by the field: introductory textbooks and framing essays, exegetical methods and grammatical observations, charts of possible solutions to the Synoptic Problem or the composition of the Torah arrayed like pedigrees or genealogical proofs.<sup>2</sup> The story about these classes—the jokes that float around and the knowing smiles thrown by second-years in the direction of first-years—is that they divest you from your

stance of value-free objectivism and scientific methodism.<sup>3</sup> Surveying various arguments made in favor of methodological objectivity for biblical studies, Schüssler Fiorenza characterized those arguments as valuing “radical detachment, emotional, intellectual, and political distanciation...a-political detachment, objective literalism, and scientific value-neutrality,” and she sought to decenter “this rhetoric of disinterested news and presupposition-free exegesis” in order to “recover the political context of biblical scholarship and its public responsibility.”<sup>4</sup> Reading her address nearly four decades later, I am struck both by the success of her call for scholars to locate themselves as embodied and political beings, and also by the persistence of the guild’s pretensions to objectivity. In one sense, we have moved well beyond the airs to detachment in biblical interpretation that Schüssler Fiorenza was noticing then, multiplying interpretive methods that are grounded in lived experiences and diverse kinds of knowledge. Womanist, postcolonial, Minjung, islander, queer, Latina/o/e, ecological, and feminist methodologies (to name but a few) all constitute robust and enduring communities of interpretation and meaning-making, each fostering conversations that flourish within networks of scholars and mutually inform one another.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, though, a substantial bloc within biblical studies retains the “rhetorical stance of value-free objectivism and scientific methodism” that Schüssler Fiorenza described. For some members of the guild, this stance presents itself as open scorn for people who bring theological (or even ethical) categories and convictions to the work of biblical studies, and for other members it shows up as a persistent belittling of emergent or identity-centered methodologies as trendy, fashionable, or unserious. But the posture described in Schüssler Fiorenza’s 1987 address also persists as trends and patterns in the way scholarship is organized, with some work going methodologically unmarked while other work is labeled as perspectival or situated. Denise Kimber Buell makes this argument about New Testament and early Christian

studies, noting both the methodological whiteness (and maleness) that dominates the intellectual norms of those fields, and the ways the guild itself is structured so that some program units of the SBL “have a ‘visible’ interpretive approach (ideological criticism, LGBTQ hermeneutics, Paul and Politics, ecological hermeneutics, feminist hermeneutics of the Bible) where others do not (Pauline Epistles, Book of Acts, Gospel of Luke, etc.).”<sup>6</sup> It is still possible, and indeed easy, to earn a PhD in biblical studies, have a career in the field, travel within the Society of Biblical Literature, and never engage with the “political context of biblical scholarship and its public responsibility” called for by Schüssler Fiorenza.<sup>7</sup> And it is still common within the guild to encounter scholars who openly disdain any acknowledgement or presence of an interpreter’s perspective, whether it be an ethical or theological perspective or one characterized by social location and lived experience, or both. It often seems as if the field’s idealized interpreter is one who can hardly be bothered to care very much about the things they are interpreting.

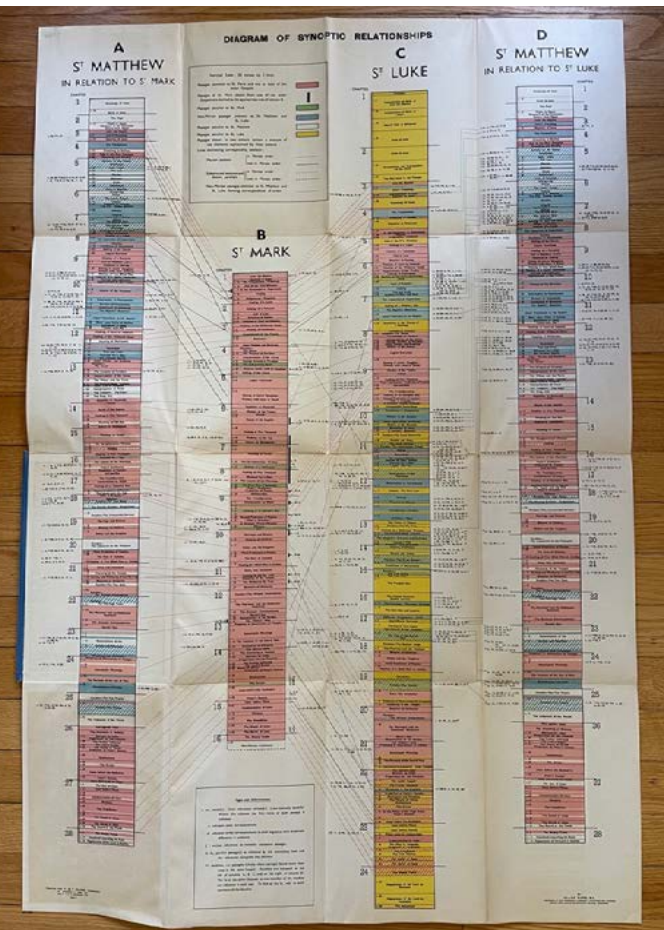


Figure 2: A Diagram of Synoptic Relationships, Allan Barr. T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1938. 27x40 inches.

interests, your commitments, your naïve certainties, and your unexamined easy truths. The story goes that in bible classes, you trade whatever desires brought you to theological education for a disinterested kind of detachment. You learn to read like a scholar reads; you learn to wield the scalpel skillfully. You cut away your attachments and learn to diagnose. Your prize—both the goal and the most essential tool—is objectivity.

The discipline of biblical studies likes to insist on disciplinary objectivity as its starting point. Perhaps because of its historical and present entanglements with confessional institutions and unseemly associations with apologetics and evangelism, biblical studies often prefers to cosplay as a science. In many of its forms and expressions, the discipline imagines itself as unmoored from the vagaries of faith, and unconcerned with the unreliable whims of experience and personal piety.

In her 1987 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza called this a “rhetorical

### 3. Christ's Wounds

Alone among the four canonical gospels, the Gospel of John insists that we pay attention to Jesus' wounds.<sup>8</sup> Beginning with the crucifixion and an explanation of why Jesus' side was pierced but his legs were not broken, and continuing through his resurrection encounters with followers, the gospel keeps Jesus'



Figure 3: The Man of Sorrows, Michele Giambono, ca. 1430. Tempera and gold on wood. The Rogers Fund, 1906.

wounds in the front of the reader's mind.<sup>9</sup> Other gospels seem to ignore the wounds, preferring to pretend that the raised Jesus is whole, but John keeps our eyes on Jesus' body. John's gospel draws our attention again and again to the scars.

In John's story of Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus' wounds are his objective correlative.<sup>10</sup> They are the "set of objects" and "chain of events" that travel with him on an extraordinary journey, as T.S. Eliot put it. Jesus received his wounds at the end of his life, by being fastened to and hung by a cross, and by being pierced as he was suspended there in death. His legs were not broken, but he got the tip of a Roman spear between his ribs. Both blood and water came from the wound—John wants us to notice that. In the text, this detail is presented as evidence that Jesus was dead, but also as evidence that Jesus was special, marked for mourning. John paraphrases the prophet Zechariah to drive home the point: "When they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born."<sup>11</sup> We are supposed to understand that Jesus was well and

truly dead, and we are supposed to understand that the wound is the witness both to the death and to the depth of grief that follows after.

The Gospel of John does not tell us where Jesus traveled during his death or what happened to him there, but when we first meet him again after his resurrection, Jesus is cagey about his body. When he finds Mary Magdalene by the tomb, early in the morning, he asks her why she is weeping. There is a pedagogical edge to the question. Does Jesus ask Mary why she is weeping because he doesn't understand her sorrow, or does he ask because he wants her to interrogate her own tears? Either way it's an obvious question to ask, why are you weeping, and also a little bit rude. Jesus speaks her name, and then the next thing he says is, "Do not hold on to me."<sup>12</sup> Why does he say that? There is an understandable guardedness, even if his inaccessibility might have hurt Mary. Perhaps he was sore, or reeling, or feeling some change that only the resurrected can know. The text won't tell us; it only tells us that for Mary, Jesus was unapproachable. *Do not hold on to me.*

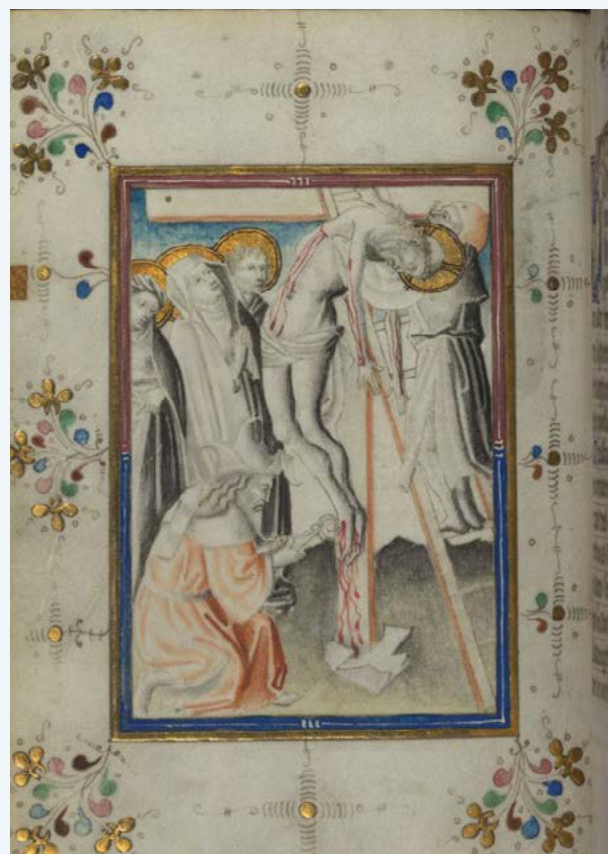


Figure 5: The Deposition of Christ, Loftie Hours, Walters Ms. W.165, Loftie Hours fol. 26v

In his second appearance after his death, Jesus showed the disciples his wounds.<sup>13</sup> He showed up unannounced, popping up all spooky-like inside a house that had been locked in fear. "Peace be with you" is all John tells us that Jesus said—though all the "peace" in the world was probably not enough to soft-



Figure 5: The Incredulity of Saint Thomas, Caravaggio, 1602.

en the vision of the bloodied and resurrected form of a friend. But that's why Jesus was there—to produce his wounded body as a kind of evidence. John is sure to note that Jesus showed the disciples both his hands and his side. Jesus showed his wounds like stamps on a passport or a new tattoo, as evidence of travels undertaken. When he had shown them, he breathed on his friends—perhaps a way of testing the limits of his no-longer-dead body.<sup>14</sup> But Thomas wasn't there to see the wounds or to feel the breath.

A week later, the disciples had gathered again, and this time Thomas was there. Just like the first time, Jesus showed off his wounds, and he invited Thomas especially to touch them: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."<sup>15</sup> This story is usually read that way—as a tale of doubt and belief, a kind of epistemological trial, in which the disbelief of Thomas was countered by evidence that could not be denied. But it can also be read as a story about the persistence of woundedness—how injury can follow us from one time to another, through one state to the next, its mark tenacious and obvious, holding on despite our insistence that it not. In both ways of reading it, this is a story about what a wound can teach. Even a resurrected body carries scars, the text is telling us. Embodiment and all its brokenness persist from life to death to resurrection. There is no magical repair in the offing, and even a power as fearsome as the power over life and death, the power to rise from the dead, remains subordinate to the power the body possesses to remember what it has endured.

Across the twentieth chapter of John, while the gospel writer insists that we pay attention, Jesus' body transforms from a site of violence to a site of knowledge. What at the beginning was a sign of death and mourning has by the end become an epistemology. By the time Jesus catches up with Thomas, the same Jesus who had told Mary *do not hold on to me* was asking Thomas to touch him. Maybe the swelling had gone down, or he had made peace with his altered body, but Jesus was finally in a tactile mood. "Reach out your hand and put it in my side," Jesus said, and see what you can learn from it.

### 4. But

When introducing themselves, my students often stress discontinuity. "I grew up evangelical, *but*," they will begin. "I was raised Catholic, *but*." "My undergrad degree is from a conservative school, *but*," and they often go on to explain that their beginnings don't necessarily have much to do with who they are in the present. There's an element of *do not hold on to me* to it. This might be a performance commanded by the experience of showing up to a graduate theological school with what feels like the wrong kind of theological baggage; negating the past might feel like the most direct path to being understood as the person you feel like you are in the present.

The *but* in those introductions is doing a lot of heavy lifting. The *but* elides years of struggle, alienation, and guilt. *But* hides the trauma of being disowned, reconverted, ignored, and sent away. It fast forwards through the scary parts. But I have noticed that *but* doesn't reliably deliver students to the places they hope it will. *But* explains both the past and the future in a certain way, and then we end up spending a lot of time in the middle, in various forms of the present. Many students devote their years in theological education to rummaging around in the now, inside the thing the *but* leaves out, working to understand how they came to be here now, how it happens that they live in their particular body, how the kid who grew up evangelical or was raised Catholic or went to a conservative undergraduate school came to find themselves *here*—or, perhaps more to the point, how they came to find themselves *now*.

Like Jesus, most of my students have a wound. Some have many more than one, but most of them have at least one. They carry the marks in their flesh from life to death to resurrection, their own objective correlatives, each with a version of Eliot's "chain of events" that is unique to them. Sometimes these are psychic wounds and sometimes they are physical injuries. They can be the bruises of theological combat, the cuts and scrapes of narrow escapes, or the spiritual trauma of a long captivity. Sometimes they are top surgery scars, like the split in a cocoon. (More on this later). At first these wounds are mostly hidden, under clothing or some other form of concealment, carefully secreted away at a distance, like Jesus and his *do not hold on to me* to Mary Magdalene by the tomb. Early on, it feels shrewd to hide the wounds or deny them, or at the very least explain them away. But almost universally there comes a moment when a student decides that it might be safe, and they begin to test what it might be like to talk about their wounds, to show them off, or even to ask someone to touch them. By the end, after some years, some students have come to think of their wounds like Jesus thought of his: as evidence, as an epistemological opening, or as a relational key for making themselves known.

## 5. More Wounds

Here is what one wound looks like. River grew up a Black Pentecostal.<sup>16</sup> That's the thing that hurt them, and also the thing that helps them know. They were in my seminar on the Acts of the



Figure 6: Pentecostals Praising, April 1 1941, Library of Congress.

Apostles, and on the day we read the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, River showed up ready to talk. In a previous life, going by a different name and passing under the guise of a different gender, they spent years at a flagship seminary of the evangelical movement, learning Greek and Hebrew and the finer points of exegesis. So they knew what they were doing. They stayed at that seminary until they got kicked out. (Perhaps you can guess which policies they were supposed to have violated). River could talk about anything from scripture, and do it well; they could probably recite most of the New Testament from memory. But that day River showed up wanting to talk about the Spirit.

The Spirit of the Lord is a bully in Acts.<sup>17</sup> It imposes itself on everyone, blocking here and sending there. It forbids and it instructs, it appoints and captures, it directs and sends. In Acts 8:39, the Spirit *snatches* the apostle Philip. That's the word, in Greek—*harpazō*. The Spirit of the Lord abducts Philip, *kidnaps* him, and takes him somewhere he was not planning to be. River had things to say about this Spirit—the same Spirit their Church of God in Christ congregation had danced to and praised, the Spirit that could be a bully when it wanted to. All that dancing, all that charisma, all the tongues and movement, helped River know something about the text of Acts and the Spirit found there that the evangelical seminary courses hadn't helped them know, and River felt betrayed by the bully Spirit they encountered in Acts 8. The Spirit that could pull bodies through such exquisite movement and show them something ethereal was also willing to impose itself, seize control, force its will, seize a body. How dare the Spirit grasp a person and move them like that without warning or consent?

Here is what another wound looks like. Brady sat up in his chair near the front of the class, slid forward almost to the edge of his seat, and smiled. "The way Paul talks about Onesimus," Brady said, "I know that way of talking." I asked him what he meant. Some of the other students nodded, and some of them shifted uncomfortably in their seats. "Paul is saying something between the lines that he's not saying all the way out loud. Paul and Onesimus, there's more there. 'I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.'<sup>18</sup> Paul has other reasons for wanting Onesimus to stay." Brady told me during a break that his bishop told him that he couldn't be living with someone unmarried while serving a pastorate. Brady was from Nebraska, where the politics, especially the church politics, run conservative. "I told the bishop," Brady said, "that I would gladly marry Luis, if he would officiate the ceremony. The bishop walked away."

Here is what another wound looks like. Jennifer was a preacher's kid. Her father had been a minister and she was too—one of the first women ordained in her mainline Protestant denomination. Everywhere she went, she was the first woman minister that anyone had ever met. Jennifer worked hard to win them over, church by church, holdout by holdout, showing them by sheer force of competency and perfection and measured smiles and just the right height of heel that she had been called by God. A thousand times she parried 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy; a thousand times she endured *let a woman learn in silence with full submission*. She never slipped up and she never mailed it in; she was superb. And a lot of them never trusted her.

## 6. White Male Biblical Scholarship

Especially in his recent work, Willie James Jennings has been interrogating the figure of the white male biblical scholar, the "white self-sufficient man," the "rich ruler" of the humanities, a ruler who "lack(s) nothing."<sup>19</sup> He tells the story of "the white male candidate" who "showed more" in a job interview than other, less-white, less-male candidates, glittering like a jewel set in a crown of white completeness, dazzling the eyes of his future white colleagues.<sup>20</sup> Jennings lifts up the white male biblical scholar as a paradigmatic example of how whiteness functions in the academy, as a paragon of self-sufficiency, unbrokenly embodied as an exemplar of competency, confidence, and unimpeachable expertise. The white male biblical scholar has no wounds, no traumas, no fears, and indeed no past at all. He is an "epistemic emperor."<sup>21</sup> He is untouchable, not for the reasons Jesus is untouchable by the tomb, but because no one is permitted to approach him.

I am a white male biblical scholar—I should make that clear. I am a white male biblical scholar, but—there's my *but*—I don't feel the way I think it ought to feel to be one of the people Jennings de-

scribes. I don't feel like I "lack nothing," like I "have everything the modern academy requires," or like I "reign in the world of religious studies as our epistemic emperors" as I should be expected to do.<sup>22</sup> I can see some of my colleagues in the person Jennings describes, but it's harder to see myself. At Society of Biblical Literature meetings, I move in fear of being discovered a fraud. When I publish a book, I wince every time a new batch of books is reviewed, worried that mine will be among them and that someone will reveal my ignorance. (It has happened before). I am still surprised any time someone cites me. I know that only people presumed to be complete can go around "renouncing completeness," as the title of Jennings' short *Journal of Biblical Literature* article puts it, and that status and perceived expertise are only easy to give away when you already have them.

I know that Jennings is right about white male biblical scholars, not because of how it feels to be among other biblical scholars, but because of how it feels to teach biblical studies. The only time I feel like I am performing the script that Jennings describes is when I am teaching my students, and I sense the wholly unearned deference and awe with which they regard me and the material. The whole cadre of what Schüssler Fiorenza calls "the scientist ethos of value-free detached inquiry" seems to come alongside me in the classroom, invited or not.<sup>23</sup> Even the students who don't care anything about the New Testament and who have never read it seem to show up to my classes with a sense that they are entering some kind of special domain, some sacred precinct where you have to remove your shoes or walk in backwards. In there, it can be easy to feel like the high priest, anointed for this purpose. In that reaction, it's hard for me to separate the subject matter from my own embodiment—it's hard to know whether they're reacting to the New Testament, or to their white male professor—but that is precisely Jennings' point. Students show up to my New Testament classes eager to be taught orthodoxies, offered revelations, and disabused of misconceptions, in a way that they don't seem to show up for my history classes, first year seminars, or thesis proposal courses. New Testament seems to cast a spell, capture and stifle people's rebelliousness, and quell dissent. It's unsettling but more than a little bit intoxicating.

Because the New Testament classroom is where I can sometimes feel like Jennings' self-sufficient white male biblical scholar, it's also where I can sense that way of thinking move, and feel the power it has. Its power is something pharmacological, able to alter pathways and rewire thoughts. It blocks the nerves, it numbs the woundedness. The scars no longer ache. Everything has been settled already, in the New Testament classroom, and all there is to do is to be taught about it. It's easy to parry any question a student might have, because the deep well of self-sufficient white male biblical scholarship has already thought of everything. Why does Acts tell the story of the Ethiopian eunuch? Because of Luke's geographical agenda. Why does Paul write to Philemon about Onesimus? Because of *amicus domini*. Why does the Johannine Jesus share his wounds? So that Thomas could believe, because of high Christology. Everything has been decided; every wound has already been numbed, and there is nothing left to feel.

The internalized competency and self-sufficiency of biblical studies arrives in the New Testament classroom as pedagogical violence. It does not surface or engender knowledge or understanding; it forecloses the possibility of knowledge. It is an epistemological painkiller. Your wounds can tell you nothing, because the matter is already settled. What the preacher said can't hurt you, because he was ignorant and unlearned, so stop feeling the pain. He should have read his Dibelius and his Wellhausen.

The students often welcome the anesthetic. It's an appreciated relief, to take cover under the shelter of other people's impervious certainties. It's comforting to hear that the spear between your ribs should not have hurt you, because you were dead by then anyway. The performed self-sufficiency and "dispassionate industry" of biblical studies arrives in the New Testament classroom as a norming force, as a normative regimen of knowledge that erases experience, effaces the wounded body, and overwrites internal forms of knowledge.<sup>24</sup> It renders unnecessary the carefully-crafted counter-narratives that students have nurtured for themselves. Biblical studies shows up as knowledge, but behind that it stops the many ways of knowing, arrests their creation, and constrains all the important ways of learning. It tells River that they need not worry about the Spirit, because it's likely that trying to squeeze justice from the text will do more harm than good anyway, so it's best not to reckon with the Spirit, wrestle with how their Blackness is bound up with their religious trauma, or put your finger into too many wounds. Be suspicious of putting too much of yourself into it. It will compromise your objectivity. Sacred texts have no place in politics anyway, and politics no place in the reading of the texts, the self-sufficient ones insist. Renounce your body to free your mind.

## 7. Parallel Openness

If the Gospel of John insists that the reader pay attention to Jesus' wounds, then few have heeded the call more faithfully than late medieval artists and the people for whom they produced devotional art and objects.<sup>25</sup> The wounds of Christ proliferated in medieval art, appearing in both public settings like altarpieces and private settings like prayer books. Sometimes these images of wounds seem to have functioned like technologies for reckoning with one's own ailing and failing body on divine terms, understanding trials of the flesh through Jesus' own mortification and suffering.<sup>26</sup> Other times, abstracted from the body, the wounds became like "wells, plentifully flowing with blood as a source of the spiritual benefits of mercy, grace, life, pity, and comfort."<sup>27</sup> In the late medieval period, the abstracted wounds of Christ began to take on a decidedly genital form, resembling depictions of vulvas from elsewhere in visual culture.<sup>28</sup> For all readers but especially women, the "vulva-wound implored a variety of tactile responses from devotees," who (judging by wear patterns on the manuscripts) seem to have interacted with the images.<sup>29</sup> Sophie Sexon sees evidence in the manuscripts and their patterns of use that these devotional materials "demonstrate an ex-

pressly haptic response to the image of Christ's body, showing where patrons have kissed or rubbed away the image of Christ's wounds" through repeated tactile engagement with the images.<sup>30</sup> All of this together points to an important and seemingly widespread medieval practice of using Christ's wounds as an aperture through which to see one's own embodied vulnerability and particularity. Devotees insisted on seeing themselves in Christ's body, across barriers of gender, sexuality, and even anatomy.



Figure 7: Christ's Side Wound, Psalter and Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg, The Cloisters MS. 69.86, fol. 331r

In a lengthy response to Leo Steinberg's book *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*,<sup>31</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum takes issue with Steinberg's reading of the Renaissance iconography of Jesus' penis as evidence of painters' particular theological perspectives, but she also follows his invitation to think more broadly about how gender and sexuality work—sometimes counterintuitively—in visual depictions of holy bodies. In Renaissance portrayals, Bynum sees a fluidity of gender and sexuality that might feel foreign to our modern contexts, in which “not only the penis but also the eyes and breasts, even the toes, of Christ engendered extravagant emotional response.”<sup>32</sup> Bynum especially notes the way the iconography of Christ's wounded side parallels and eventually assimilates that of Mary's lactating breast, diversifying the kinds of haptic connections that were already present in late medieval depictions of wounds as vulvas.<sup>33</sup> (A particularly forthright depiction of this parallel can be seen in Figure 8, in which Christ points to his wound and Mary holds her breast as if to breastfeed, both with eyes fixed on God [“the Father”] in supplication, to emphasize the unique and special warrant for making intercessions that



Figure 8: In Bynum, Man of Sorrows and Mary Intercede with God the Father, style of Konrad Witz, about 1450, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel

each of them possesses). The parallel productivity (or leakiness) of Jesus' and Mary's bodies would seem to be connected to the “wells” described by Pollick; the wound and the breast (and the vulva) collaborate to signify the multiply-gendered body of Christ as a source of both nourishment and self-understanding. Throughout the medieval and Renaissance periods, we see an ongoing and developing practice of using Christ's wounds to understand Jesus himself, but also as a way for the viewer to understand their own embodied existence and place in the world. The wound becomes a potent way to see through biblical narratives (and theological motifs), and to place oneself and one's body within the fecund porosity of holiness and holy bodies.

## 8. Embodied Epistemologies

I have noticed something similar in my own classrooms—a twenty-first century version of this same embodied epistemology that flourished among medieval and Renaissance people.<sup>34</sup> I have noticed that if I teach the self-sufficient white male biblical scholar version of New Testament, the one in which every question has a tidy answer and all the wounds have been anaesthetized, then students tend to give themselves over to that perspective and put on the methodological objectivity (and whiteness, and maleness) that is the field's default setting. They hold the text at a distance, treat it like an object, parrot back the things I teach them about being a self-sufficient white male biblical scholar, and stand in awe of the whole enterprise. They speak and write

in the methodologically unmarked ways identified by Schüssler Fiorenza and Buell, unconsciously mimicking the pretensions of positionless objectivity that dominate New Testament and early Christian studies. When students do this, they shut away the things that brought them to theological education in the first place. They hide their wounds under loose clothing, mentioning them to no one. They become more likely to conclude that the most important figures in their formation—parents, friends, pastors, mentors—were either superstitious rubes or willfully hurtful; my students take the medicine that makes things stop hurting. They leave caring less about the body that bears the scars, and learning to work harder to hide their wounds.

But when their bodies are invited into the classroom, wounds and all, my students *notice that their bodies are there*. It sounds obvious, but it's true. When the wounded bodies of their friends and loved ones are visible through the windows in the classroom walls and in the texts on the tables and screens, my students pay attention to them. When the fullness of bodies in the fullness of woundedness are invited in—raced, gendered, located, traumatized, loved, sexualized, queered, transformed, multiply abled, visible and invisible, wounded bodies—my students treat the dissection table differently. There is a care and a respect in the room. Even where there is anger, hurt, disappointment, and fear, students sense that there is something at stake, something worth knowing and learning, and the classroom transforms into a space where we can do that work. The wounds—students' own wounds, and the wounds of others—become a way of knowing and an opening. When objectivity isn't crowding them out, the wounds are an epistemology.

## 9. Scars

Zeke had more wounds than he could count. We had grown up a few hours' travel from each other, in the same part of the South (though twenty years apart), so I knew something of what he had been through—but not all of it. We met during first-year orientation. I saw his hometown on the list, and sought him out to talk, to make connections. He was called by a different name then, and was known by another gender—an assigned name and gender that Zeke worked hard to peel away from himself during his time in school. By the time of his final quarter, we had spent a fair amount of time together, in a handful of classes across several years. Now he was enrolled in my favorite class to teach, one where we learn to read the New Testament alongside Queer Theory. One of the things I love about that class is that in it, we abandon all pretense to self-sufficient white male biblical scholarship, ignoring the posturing of most mainstream commentary. When we read the story of Lazarus, we are not interested in the Signs Source or the redactional layers of the Johannine text; we are interested in Jesus' tears and the queer family that Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Jesus seem to have chosen.<sup>35</sup> When we see the woman of Revelation 17, we are not asking about the bad Greek of John of Patmos or anything much to do with Nero; we are asking about whose gaze has made this woman what she is in the text.<sup>36</sup> When, in that class, we read about Paul's eschatology, we find ourselves asking whether Paul might have preferred the work of Edelman or Muñoz.<sup>37</sup> (It's a

tossup).

For his final paper in that class, Zeke wrote about wounds. He wrote about Jesus' wounds, pausing to consider the vaginal way that medieval artists painted them and then the Renaissance style that was parallel to Mary's lactating breast. But then Zeke wrote about Jesus' wounds in his own way: as the scars from top surgery. Zeke saw in the twentieth chapter of John a familiar story, one about transformation, transfiguration, and trans-ness at large, in its multiple and diverse forms. He read the gathering in the locked room in John 20 as a “gender reveal party,” Jesus' unveiling of a changed body, on the other side of trauma, scarring, and a new kind of knowledge.

It's not an interpretation of that text that would be easy to find in most of those methodologically unmarked SBL program units. It's not a reading that could be arrived at easily by using the “rhetorical stance of value-free objectivism and scientific methodism” described by Schüssler Fiorenza four decades ago.<sup>38</sup> It's not even a way that I could have thought to understand the text,

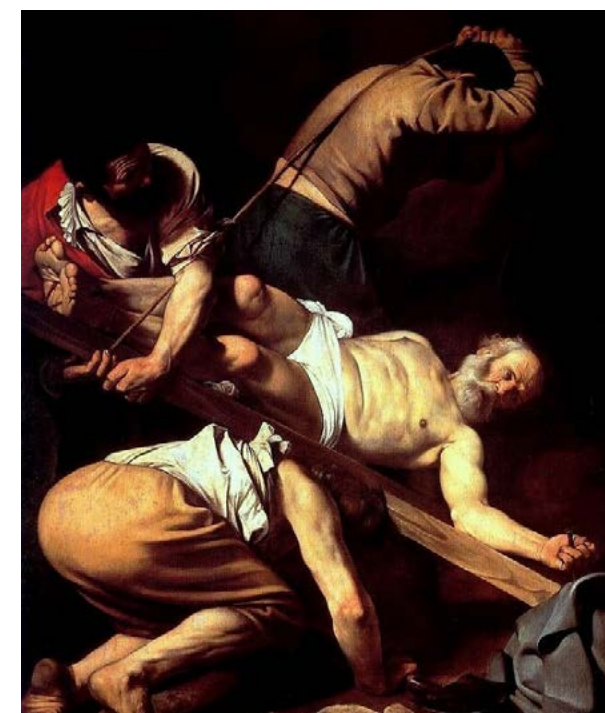


Figure 9: The Crucifixion of Saint Peter, Caravaggio, 1601.

limited to my own embodied knowledge, through the apertures of my own wounds. But it was a truth that Zeke found by reading the Gospel of John alongside his own wounded and transformed body. It was found by hands in wounds. It's a testament to how deep the body goes, and to the pedagogies of bodies and wounds—the bodies and wounds that students bring with them, that they learn to learn with, if they are allowed. “*Reach out your hand and put it in your own side,*” Jesus might have said, and see what you can learn from it.

## 10. Vulnerability

The last we see of Jesus in John's gospel, just a few paragraphs after he met Mary in the garden and showed Thomas his wounds, he's grilling fish on a beach and backing Peter into a corner. They are on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, about a half dozen of them, and Jesus is talking about love. As they talk, Peter can't quite say the word love the way Jesus wants him to, and Jesus is getting frustrated. There is a *do not hold on to me* under the surface of things, attached somehow to the thread of bodily ambivalence that ran through Jesus' conversation with Mary, but now it's Peter who isn't sure. They go around and around. Perhaps Peter has already traded his wounds for certainty; perhaps Peter has already settled on masculine self-sufficiency as the safest path. Maybe he has opted for completeness, or for "radical detachment, emotional, intellectual, and political distancing."<sup>39</sup> Peter might have seen the way the wounds were sunk into Jesus' body, the way they were laced across him, and he might have begun to choke on the word "love."

"When you grow old," Jesus told him, "someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."<sup>40</sup> It will happen to you too, Jesus tells him; don't sit there pretending that you can't be hurt. An editorial remark follows in 21:19, put in parentheses in some modern translations: "He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God." Even as Peter sat there in his self-sufficiency, talking with Jesus, the text wants the reader to trace the shape of Peter's wound, to put a hand into it, to remember it before it has happened. This comment is one of the final words from the author of the gospel of John, a benedictory remark on the high stakes of embodiment. And these words to Peter are some of the last ones from John's wounded Jesus—words reminding him of vulnerability, and its inevitability, and the wounded body's way of helping you know.



### About the Author

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## Notes & Bibliography

1 I am grateful to Jesse Mann, Maia Kotrosits, Amy Erickson, Beth Ritter-Conn, and the leaders of and participants in the 2023 Wabash Center Journal on Teaching Writing Colloquy for reading drafts of this piece and providing critical feedback.

2 Yii-Jan Lin, *The Erotic Life of Manuscripts: New Testament Textual Criticism and the Biological Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Ekaputra Tupamahu, "The Stubborn Invisibility of Whiteness in Biblical Scholarship," *Political Theology*, November 12 (2020), [https://politicaltheology.com/the-stubborn-invisibility-of-whiteness-in-biblical-scholarship/?fbclid=IwAR3tmNuR37\\_8zNG07-QHIP0r-xc4tLLxj8xG3\\_b6vmmTmgXqOaWmydrSEI](https://politicaltheology.com/the-stubborn-invisibility-of-whiteness-in-biblical-scholarship/?fbclid=IwAR3tmNuR37_8zNG07-QHIP0r-xc4tLLxj8xG3_b6vmmTmgXqOaWmydrSEI).

3 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 1 (1988): 4.

4 Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 10–11.

5 Steven L. McKenzie, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Many of these methods and others are catalogued in the Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation, though any such a collection is bound to be out of date by the time it is published.

6 Denise Kimber Buell, "Anachronistic Whiteness and the Ethics of Interpretation," in *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts, and in Modern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Katherine M. Hockey and David G. Horrell (London: T & T Clark, 2018), 153–55.

7 Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 11.

8 Luke 24:40 reads, "And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet," but there is nothing explicit about Jesus' wounds, and many ancient manuscripts lack the verse, suggesting that it is a gloss of John's account, added later by a scribe.

9 John 19:31–37. This and all other citations are from the NRSV.

10 T.S. Eliot went looking for a name for the thing that haunts stories—for the presence that hounds our heels and the vessel that carries the way it feels to move through the world. He went seeking a term of art and came back with an unpoetic term of science, an "objective correlative," an ungainly phrase that simply means the thing that will not let us go.

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art," Eliot wrote, "is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of

events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. The objective correlative is an entry wound, a bit of shrapnel picked out of the flesh, and the scar tissue covering over the place where we have felt the most injury. The objective correlative is a reminder against the forgetfulness brought on by either neglect or trauma, "the formula of that particular emotion" that's entangled with our skin. T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays* (New York: Dover, 1998), 58.

11 Zechariah 12:10.

12 John 20:17.

13 John 20:20–21.

14 John 20:22.

15 John 20:27.

16 In this and all other mentions of students in this essay, names and other identifying information have been changed, and stories have been used with permission.

17 I argue this point in a forthcoming book, and also in a paper delivered at the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting in 2021. Eric C. Smith, "Characterizing Spirit: The Necropolitics of Divine Sovereignty in Acts" (Society of Biblical Literature, Book of Acts program unit, San Antonio, TX, 2021).

18 Philemon 12.

19 Willie James Jennings, "Renouncing Completeness: The Rich Ruler and the Possibilities of Biblical Scholarship without White Masculine Self-Sufficiency," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140, no. 4 (2021): 842, 837.

20 Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 26.

21 Jennings, "Renouncing Completeness," 837.

22 Jennings, "Renouncing Completeness," 837.

23 Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 10.

24 Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 10.

25 This section is broadly informed by a collaborative essay by Pollick, Poore, Sexon, and Stradal. Johanna Pollick et al., "Your Body Is Full of Wounds: References, Social Contexts, and Uses of the Wounds of Christ in Late Medieval Europe," *Science Museum Group Journal* 10, no. 15 (April 2021).

26 See especially the essay by Emily Poore in the citation above. One prominent example of this kind of identification with Christ's wounds can be found in Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, made for a hospital staffed by the Antonine monastic tradition. The altarpiece makes numerous connections and cross-references between Jesus' suffering and the suffering of the hospital's patients, who were frequently there because of the effects of St. Anthony's Fire (a skin condition caused by a fungus) and pox. Sally Hickson, "Grünewald, Isenheim Altarpiece," in *Smarthistory* (April 27, 2023), <https://smarthistory.org/grunewald-isenheim-altarpiece/>.

27 This citation is from Pollick's essay, which especially considers the well-like attributes of Christ's abstracted wounds. Pollick et al., "Your Body Is Full of Wounds," 8.

28 Sexon's essay demonstrates this thoroughly. Pollick et al., "Your Body Is Full of Wounds," 33.

29 Pollick et al., "Your Body Is Full of Wounds," 33.

30 Pollick et al., "Your Body Is Full of Wounds," 33.

31 Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).

32 Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," *Renaissance Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (Autumn 1986): 438.

33 Bynum, "The Body of Christ," 424.

34 When I speak about classrooms, I mean not only physical or residential classrooms, but also—mostly—hybrid and online classrooms. For most of my career, most of my teaching has been technologically mediated at a distance, asynchronously, and so that is what I am describing here, even as I use "classroom" as an encompassing metaphor for learning environments.

35 Jione Havea, "Lazarus Troubles," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011); Benjamin Perkins, "Coming Out, Lazarus's and Ours: Queer Reflections of a Psychospiritual, Political Journey," in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

36 Lynn R. Huber, "Gazing at the Whore: Reading Revelation Queerly," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011). Huber now prefers to refer to the woman in Revelation 17 differently than her chapter title, which is why I have simply called her "woman" in the text above.

37 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). Students often see Paul in Edelman's eschewing of the structures and products of heteronormative reproductivity, and in Muñoz's insistence in locating flourishing both in an already and in a not-yet.

38 Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 10.

39 Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 10–11.

40 John 21:18.