

Simon the Tanner, Empires, and Assemblages

A New Materialist Asian American Reading of Acts 9:43

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Abstract

This article participates in dismantling systemic racial discourse in racialized and/or minoritized biblical interpretation by challenging the anthropocentric tendencies found in such interpretation. It does so by re-reading Acts 9:43 and 10:5-6, 32—Simon Peter’s stay at Simon the tanner’s place—as more than just a preamble or backdrop to the Cornelius narrative (Acts 10:1-48). Rather, the encounter between the two Simons, if read closely, invites an imaginative, imperial, and (fashionably) philosophical reading, wherein Simon Peter’s stay evokes the Roman Empire’s usurpation of an industry. This usurpation, though, is not simply a colonial endeavour. The proximity of nonhuman skins (from the tanning industry) to the colonized skins of Peter’s community invites a new materialist interpretation, in which the “touching” of these two skins provokes a “perverse ontology,” or an assemblage, of emerging human and nonhuman bodies. This assemblage blurs the boundaries of human-nonhuman binarization, an emergence that transgresses the affect of animalization which is experienced by both nonhumans and minoritized bodies.

Key Words

Asian American Biblical Interpretation, assemblage, Daniëlle Bruggeman, new materialism; nonhuman studies.

If we want to do more than just end mass incarceration—if we want to put an end to the history of racial caste in America—we must lay down our racial bribes, join hands with people of all colors who are not content to wait for change to trickle down (Alexander 2012, 258).

Michelle Alexander’s admonishment above prefigures the need to check the hegemonic tendency that limits racial discourse to black-white issues, one of the many by-products of systemic racism. To clarify, prefiguring is not about prescribing what ought to be obeyed. Rather, following Tat-siong Benny Liew’s definition of “prefigure” in his exposition of the nature of Asian American biblical hermeneutics, it means “opening up other options and opportunities for the purpose of helping to level the playing field” (Liew 2008, 2). Alexander challenges her audience to engage their racial and ethnic concerns by opening themselves up for other options and opportunities in dismantling (systemic) racism. She proposes, among many other things, two ways to combat such hegemony: the first is to recognize that there is this

(unspoken) racial caste system in the United States which oppresses Asians, Latinx, Native Americans, and other minoritized groups; the second is to build coalition among minoritized groups in order to combat systemic racism in its many forms (Alexander 2012, 258).

Liew (2008) also cautions against dedicating one's entire concern to one's ethnic group (in Liew's case, Asian American), particularly in biblical interpretation. Re-focusing on marginality and alterity opens other options and possibilities for deconstructing stagnant ways of being, becoming, and belonging. Such re-focusing exposes hegemonies that are un(fo)reseen, not just those that construct the Other but also those that impact one's group identity, politics, and ethics. Here, Liew proposes an "opening up" of Asian American ontology. He suggests that Asian American identity has to be fluid, because "it is not only unstable and subject to history but also more like a phantom that always eludes one's grasp" (Liew 2008, 6). Liew speaks of "forces and practices both of and beyond human plans and wills" that shape and re-shape identities of Asian Americans (2008, 6). Although Liew does not explicitly engage "beyond human" perspectives, the spirit of his work opens options and possibilities for a nonhuman intervention in understanding Asian American identity and biblical interpretation.¹ Recently, Wongi Park also hinted at de/(re)constructing racialized identity and biblical interpretation by lifting up "the process of race/ethnicity (i.e., race-as-ideology), to expose it as a meaning-making device that codes and decodes what it means to be human" (2017, 204). Park participates in supporting racial/ethnic coalition building that focuses on racialized/minoritized experiences as a way to interrogate the "what and who" of being human (2017, 204). Although Park's argument is not explicitly focused on the ontological, his work (and Liew's) opens up possibilities for a biblical interpretation that is attuned not only to the racial/ethnic processes that confer or deny human identity, but also to the nonhuman entities who are the ultimate constitutive Other and, as such, are also (unwillingly) embedded in the discourses of race and racism.

This article participates, then, in dismantling systemic racial discourse in racialized and/or minoritized biblical interpretation by challenging the anthropocentric tendencies found in such interpretation. Liew challenges minoritized biblical interpreters (Asian Americans in particular) not to be trapped by the "tyranny of authenticity, or to be trapped by the tenet or dictate to 'tell the truth'" (2008, 16). If becoming and being Asian American, in Liew's words, is "performative" (2008, 16), then Asian American biblical interpretation should not be confined by the tyranny of performing anthropocentricity. To read as Asian American, among many other ways, is to challenge anthropocentricity. The so-called "Asian gaze"

¹ "Nonhuman" is an umbrella term for all entities that are beyond human: animals, plants, and inanimate entities. It is an imperfect term that I have to use for now until something better comes along. For further elaboration, see Grusin (2015, ix).

should perceive its liminality,² identity, and biblical interpretation with the affective persuasions of the nonhumans. Inspired by Sze-kar Wan, Asian/Asian American hermeneutics are not just “double” (Wan 2006, 148), but are multiply emerging, depending upon our assemblage with the Other (including nonhumans). Such an understanding of identity formation simultaneously challenges anthropocentric tendencies and systems of racism, even in the field of (Asian American) biblical studies.

Applying this intersectional perspective, this essay re-reads Acts 9:43 and 10:5-6, 32 (Simon Peter’s stay at Simon the tanner’s place), not just as a preamble or backdrop to the Cornelius narrative (Acts 10:1-48). Rather, in its own right, the encounter between the two Simons, read closely, invites an imaginative, decolonial, and philosophical reading in which Simon Peter’s stay with Simon the tanner evokes usurpation of an industry. This usurpation, though, is not just simply a colonial endeavour. The proximity of nonhuman skins to the colonized skins of Peter’s community invites an imaginative reading based on a new materialist approach, in which the “touching” of these two skins provoke a “perverse ontology” or an assemblage of emerging human and nonhuman bodies. This assemblage blurs the boundaries of human-nonhuman binarization, an emergence that shares the stories of animalization and colonization experienced by both.

Intersecting Race and Ethnicity with New Materialism

Mel Chen has already started a conversation about the need for race, among other constructs, to be re-theorized beyond anthropocentric binarization, including “dynamism/life, life/death, subject/object, speech/nonspeech, human/animal, natural body/cyborg” (2012, 3). Chen challenges scholars and activists who are concerned with race and ethnicity issues to re-write their own “biopolitical spheres, or, at least, how we might theorize them” (2012, 3), by recognizing that nonhumans shape, animate, and affect one’s identity and belonging. While acknowledging that minoritized communities have always been “dehumanized” with animalizing rhetoric, Chen focuses on the concept of animacy as a way to re-evaluate relationality, because living/dead and organic/inorganic binaries do not fully capture how those who are considered “inanimate” actually affect those who are considered “living.” Chen goes even further, arguing that human bodies do not have physical integrity—they are in “constant interabsorption” (2012, 11), where various entities enter and exit human bodies. In other words, when discussing how

² I acknowledge Sang Hyun Lee’s and Julia Ching’s admonitions that liminality, aside from its positive and empowering effects, could also be “coerced liminality” (Lee 2003, 19) or “an experience of being dominated and dehumanized by ... the racist hegemony of a society’s controlling center” (Ching 1999, 41-61) which encourages/forces minoritized groups to find their identities only in the margins and tainted spaces, thus perpetuating the centre-margin and pure-impure hegemonies. Such liminal identity, as Ching argues, produces “double rejection.” I am indebted to Sze-kar Wan (2006, 148) for directing me to their work in his essay.

toxins transgress corporeal boundaries, Chen reconfigures human bodies as constantly absorbing and being absorbed by various entities, both human and nonhuman (as will be discussed further below). This fluid transgression, not just of ontology but of the physical/material, calls the “human” construct, and particularly the “racial” construct, into question. If humans are affected by nonhumans, then to be Asian American is also to be affected by nonhumans.

Taking a step back and further grounding the theoretical roots of this article, the challenge to deconstruct race and ethnicity’s anthropocentricity, by recognizing their porosity to affective encounters with nonhumans, stems from nonhuman studies’ insistence on ontological fluidity between humans and nonhumans.³ Donna Haraway’s famous and frequently quoted description of the “human body” sets the tone for a fluid ontological and material relationality with nonhumans:

I am a creature of the mud, not the sky ... I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us no harm.... To be one is always to *become with* many (2008, 3-4).

Due to her insistence on a muddy corporeality with nonhuman companions, Haraway coined a new term for bodies/humans/creatures/entities: *holoents/holobionts*. In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Haraway finds *holoents/holobionts* apropos, because it expresses her understanding that creatures are “symbiotic assemblages” (2016, 60) of diverse inter- and intra-acting relationalities without pre-existing bounded measurements (genes, cells, atoms, and others). *Holoents/holobionts* infiltrate, affect, and consume each other in their ever mixing and, as Haraway describes it, composting: “We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities” (2016, 97). Haraway proposes that we need to think and live beyond the Anthropocene, for we are and should be in the *Chthulucene*—“a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth” (2016, 97).

Inasmuch as Haraway’s work is revolutionary, the irony is that just as race and ethnicity studies (and even postcolonial studies) struggle to grapple with the claims of nonhuman studies, nonhuman studies and/or new materialism also sparsely engage matters of race and ethnicity. In “New Materialisms/New Colonialisms,” Peta Hinton, Tara Mehrabi, and Josef

³ Aside from Haraway, philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Cary Wolfe, and Jane Bennett (to name but a few) have also challenged human exceptionalism and superiority. Summaries of their work have already been regurgitated in various monographs and essay collections. See Calarco (2008); DeMello (2012); Koosed (2013); Moore (2014); Stone (2017); Strømme (2018); Wolfe (2010).

Barla engage with the sensitive, and much needed, intersectional work on postcolonialism, race and ethnicity, and new materialism (2018). They are responding to critiques that label new materialism a middle-class, western “white episteme,” which erases or “transposes” (Braidotti 2006; Ahmed 2012) questions of race, power, gender, sexuality, and other key issues. Similarly, Ruth Panelli (2010) invites readers to consider how western theories and/or philosophies (such as posthumanism and new materialism) need to provide better channels for discussing socio-ethical issues, including the disenfranchisement of marginalized (human and more-than-human) groups. This is also a critique levelled against Haraway’s claim that “we have never been human” (2006, 135-58), because for many minoritized and racialized bodies, to be included in the realm of “human” is a struggle and life-long desire. Nikki Sullivan cautions against such “white optics” (2012, 303), as they constitute an episteme that overrides and thus neglects questions of race and ethnicity. This episteme re-installs racism’s “whiteness-as-humanness” logic by equating nonhuman entities as a “place-holder” for non-Whites while humans represent Whites (Sullivan 2012, 310). For Sullivan, the matter-culture binary is once again upheld by new materialism, as this binary diminishes the importance of identity politics and ethics. Peta Hinton and Xin Liu also reflect upon this conundrum:

To put this query another way, in all of its efforts to deliver a post-anthropocentric cultural analysis, one that is sensitive to questions of difference, ethical futurity and social justice, has new materialism overlooked its own, universalizing, homogenizing and neutralizing capacities? (2015, 129)

Does engaging new materialism and/or nonhuman studies gesture to an abandonment of the particularities of race and ethnicity issues? Responding to this intersectional conundrum, Hinton and Liu offer a “complicated yes.” First, they redefine “abandon” as “to surrender ... both as an act of renunciation (as in to ‘abandon it’) and as radical immersion (as in to ‘abandon to’)” (Hinton and Liu 2015, 129). Then, they tap into Homi Bhabha’s abandonment neurosis in order to explain further this ambivalence. They engage Bhabha’s identity as double but less than one: “to exist is to be called into being in relation to an Otherness” (Bhabha 1990, 186). This is an identity that is muddled and porously ambivalent by being contaminated by the affective presence of the Other. Hinton and Liu suggest it is im/possible to abandon the particularities of race and ethnicity in new materialism’s grand ontological reach; they call such intersectional ontology a “perverse ontology: an ontology that both affirms and negates the identities it involves” (2015, 141). It abandons fixed categorizations of identities, while recognizing that “identity is never self-present or finally achievable, but its gravity compulsively substantiated by continuous demand and desire, the subject and object of abandonment are simultaneously rendered im/possible—both available and yet unavailable in self-present terms” (Hinton and Liu 2015, 139). Simply put, new materialism performs a perverse and paradoxical engagement that both abandons the

anthropocentric tendency of race and ethnicity studies and yet surrenders to the impossibility of abandoning its very human optic. In this perversity, Pheng Cheah urges that discussions about race/ethnicity and new materialism are not really about the “relevance of these new materialisms to political thought and their implications for concrete politics ... [Rather, it is about putting] into question the fundamental categories of political theory including the political itself” (2010, 89). This is done by re-evaluating anthropocentric “ontological bases of current languages and vocabularies of politics and political thought” (Chea 2010, 89). With regard to Asian American biblical interpretation, Hinton and Liu’s (2015) proposal acknowledges that new materialist Asian American biblical interpretation should attempt to respond to the agentive and affective capacity of nonhumans, while also ceding that one’s (human-optic) interpretation is limited to one’s own anthropocentricity. This article therefore responds to Cheah’s question: “What is the matter of the political and what is the matter of politics?” (Cheah 2010, 90)

Carol Wayne White’s work offers an African American response to Cheah’s question, as she interrogates the matter in terms of African American religious experience and identity. Utilizing the tenets of African American religious naturalism, White accentuates the Black liberationist project: to affirm the sacredness and irrefutable value of African American humanity, not by maintaining its anthropocentric exclusivism but by revisiting what it means “to become” human. White argues that “we become enriched by diverse allegiances, identifications, and loyalties” when we start understanding that our ontology is “rigorously communal” with the nonhuman (2017, 267). This entanglement does not negate the animalizing experience that African Americans have endured throughout history, particularly the current (re)emergence of systemic racism, which killed/murdered George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Atatiana Jefferson, to name but a few.⁴ Rather, White argues that this preoccupation with distancing oneself from nonhumans, in order to have full humanity, is the product of a racist technique fabricated by oppressors (2017, 267). This technique forces a certain understanding of ontology, in which to be fully human is to follow an exclusivist ontology that places the white male human as the epitome of full humanity. We can combat such reductionistic ontology when we acknowledge that “our humanity is inescapably entangled in other natural processes of becoming” (White 2017, 267). Thus, living as “relational natural organisms” (White 2017, 268) has the potential to liberate us from the snares of both systemic racism and anthropocentrism.

⁴ There are more names that the world should say/name: Aura Rosser, Stephon Clark, Botham Jean, Philando Castille, Alton Sterling, Michelle Cusseaux, Freddie Gray, Janisha Fonville, Eric Garner, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Tanisha Anderson, and many more. I am hoping and praying that this list (which is incomplete) does not get any longer as I write this article.

Usurping the Tanning/Leather Goods Industry

In this article, I apply the intersection between (Asian American) race/ethnicity and new materialism as a biblical hermeneutic to re-read Simon Peter's encounter with Simon the tanner (Acts 9:43; 10:5-6, 32).⁵ Going beyond the typical dismissal of these short passages as a premise, or backdrop, for the Cornelius narrative (Acts 10:1-48), I find the aforementioned passages ripe with (de)colonial and nonhuman affective footprints. The decolonial footprints come from analysing the colonial experiences of Acts' colonized community (the audience and the two Simons). Meanwhile, the leather goods manufactured in Simon the tanner's business serve to territorialize possibilities for new materialist engagement. Although the passages do not explicitly mention "leather goods" (*dermatina eidē*), citing the tanning industry (a certain Simon, tanner—*tini Simōni bursei*) implicitly acknowledges the presence of this by-product. As a matter of fact, Carol van Driel-Murray defines leather as, "simply the resilient portion (collagen) of animal tissue preserved by means of drying (resulting in rawhide), or by curing with smoke, fat (chamoising), or soaking in a mineral bath (tawing), or by tanning with vegetable extracts" (2008, 483).⁶ Thus, where there is tanning, there is leather. I argue that reading these biblical passages from within the intersection of colonialism and leather goods pries open an unforeseen colonial mimicry by Acts' colonized community.

Acts mimics the imperial techniques of colonial expansion espoused by famous conquerors, such as Alexander and Augustus. Such mimicry has been a prime location for postcolonial interpretation, because Acts, including the gospel of Luke, radically subverts the Roman Empire while accommodating its colonial techniques. Virginia Burrus marshals key narratives in which Luke-Acts mimics the Roman imperial strategies (2009, 133-155). Just as any empire needs headquarters, Burrus points out where Acts claims Jerusalem (not Rome) as the centre of its operation, and proclaims its projected expansion: from Judea to Samaria and on towards the ends of the earth. This is done not by any human army, but by the power of the Holy Ghost (Acts 1:6-8).⁷ This claim is manifested through the heroic adventures of Acts' Peter and Paul. Their adventures and conquests in the name of the Way try to redraw the line of the empire of God wider and wider, despite various hindrances to their mission (Acts 4:1-22; 5:17-42; 6:8-8:3;

⁵ "Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner" (Acts 9:43); "Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside" (10:5-6); "Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea" (10:32). All of the passages quoted in this essay comes from the NRSV.

⁶ Wolfgang Habermann (2005, 337) describes the tanning process as such: "The separation of the epidermis (with urine, mulberry leaves, red bryony) and the subcutaneous connective tissues (with mechanical aids) from the rawhide was followed by the chemical conversion of the corium into temperature and water-resistance, smooth leather via the tanning process."

⁷ For a post-poststructuralist reading of the Holy Ghost in Acts (and the deliberate choice to use "ghost" instead of "spirit"), see Moore 2017, 85-106.

13:44-52; 19:1-41; 21:27–22:22).⁸ Along the way, the heroes of this new empire co-opt ancillary machinations that previously belonged to the Roman Empire.⁹ Acts 10:1-48 is a prime example, where we read of a Roman centurion changing allegiance to the new empire of God. I argue that there is one more annexation happening in this narrative: Simon the tanner's leather goods industry.

Why bother at all with the tanning/leather goods industry that is represented by Simon the tanner? According to van Driel-Murray, leather is “antiquity’s plastic” (2008, 483), durable and versatile enough to be an essential ingredient for the production of domestic and military footwear, clothing, saddles, and tents. Among the various ways leather could be preserved, van Driel-Murray argues that the dissemination of tanning (preserving leather with vegetable extracts, mineral oil, or aldehyde) to northern Europe, Egypt, and other regions was, in certain ways, due to the Roman Empire’s colonialism (2008, 483). Acts 9:43 attests to the presence of the tanning industry in Joppa, reflecting the occurrence of leatherwork even at the eastern side of the empire.¹⁰ This contradicts the argument that there was cultural antipathy to the use of leather and fur, particularly by Mediterranean elites during the Roman Empire. As van Driel-Murray points out, some scholars resort to Artemidorus’ *Oneirocritica* as evidence of ancient communities’ belief that leather and fur signified moral decay due to their stereotypical association with the “barbarians” of northern Europe (2008, 484; see also Forbes 1966, 45).¹¹ Contrary to this argument, archaeological evidence shows the presence of significant amounts of leather goods throughout the Roman Empire. In particular, the Roman military demanded substantial quantities of leatherwear. Aside from tents and boots, leather was used to make bags, belts, baldrics, horse harness, shield covers (protective gear against elements) and coverings (attached to the face of the shield), straps, satchels, sword and dagger sheaths, ties for helmets (including *lorica segmentata*, the helmet’s internal straps), and other

⁸ Acts also uses the expression “empire/kingdom” or “empire/kingdom of God” (1:6-7; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). I am following Moore’s preference to use “Empire” instead of “Kingdom or Kin-dom.” Moore is influenced by such scholars as Wes Howard-Brook, and argues: “I believe that *basileia* in Mark, as in other early Christian texts, is best rendered in English by the term ‘empire’ rather than by the more innocuous ‘kingdom,’ a term whose political edge has been all but rubbed smooth by centuries of theological usage” (Moore 2006, 37, n.29).

⁹ These heroes co-opted or turned many local elites away from the Roman Empire. See Acts 1:1; 5:1-12; 9:36-42; 12:12; 13:12; 16:14-15, 40; 17:4, 12; 19:31.

¹⁰ According to van Driel-Murray, archaeological evidence for the presence of leather is rare in the Mediterranean area, unlike the regions to the north. The attestation in Acts 9:43 that there was a tanning industry in Joppa is therefore significant. Nevertheless, van Driel-Murray strongly argues that the Roman Empire’s demand for leather goods became one of the primary reasons why tanning technology spread throughout the known world (2002, 261-262).

¹¹ Artemidorus states that, “to tan hides is ill-omened for all. For the tanner handles dead bodies and lives outside the city. It indicates, moreover, that secrets will be revealed, because of the smell” (translation by White 1975, 59 [1.51]).

equipment (Bishop and Coulston 2006, 247). Van Driel-Murray suggests that “a legion required a minimum of 68,000 goatskins to make tents, and more than 3,000 cattle hides annually for boots alone” (2008, 490). Although the Roman soldiers tended to repair and recycle their leather goods (van Driel-Murray 1983, 19), M. C. Bishop and J. C. N. Coulston echo van Driel-Murray’s assessment of the scale of demand needed to supply leather goods to Roman soldiers: “Each tent required some 70 hides, so to put a *cohors quingenaria* ‘*sub pellibus*’ (auxiliary regiment ‘under leather tent’—approximately 500 soldiers) would require the lives of more than 4,200 goats, and a legion (approximately 5,000 soldiers) something in excess of 46,000” (2006, 247). In an ecological sense, the amount of animal deaths required to satisfy human (colonial) demand anticipated modern-day factory farming.

Moreover, such high demand for leather needed an equally draining and exacting supply-chain system.¹² The Roman Empire co-opted and stationed permanent manufacturers of leather-based war equipment in many of the colonies: hides from Illyria, Gaul, Britain, Spain, and the Alpine provinces; and luxury leathers and pelts from Syria, Babylonia, Asia Minor, Egypt, and the North, to list but a few (Forbes 1966, 52-53). Cicero and Tacitus even narrated anecdotes in which tanning and the leather goods industry became tools for corruption. First, Cicero chastises Lucius Calpurnius Piso for extorting all the cattle of Macedonia on the pretence of producing military leather goods for the Roman army, when in fact Lucius did so for personal gain (1931, 243-245, 36.87). Second, Tacitus narrates how Drusus demanded from the Frisians (a trans-rhinane tribe living above the Rhine) a moderate amount of tribute in the form of ox hides from this colonized community. The demand was bearable until Olennius, a centurion appointed to rule Frisii, ordered high quality aurochs’ hides—a difficult order for the Frisians to fill due to their environment and circumstances. When the Frisians could not deliver, Olennius took away their herds, lands, and family members as slaves. Consequently, the Frisians lost patience and expressed their anger through war (Tacitus 2004, 158, 4.72).

To imagine Simon Peter usurping Simon the tanner’s residence and business is not a critique of the Jewish ritual purity system (Acts 9:43; 10:5-6, 32). Contrary to the assumption that tanning conveys ritual impurity (cf. Strack and Billerbeck 1922–1961, 2.695; Neil 1973, 136; Trever 1979–1988, 4.726; Bruce 1990, 250; Litwak 2006–2009, 5.470), Isaac Oliver argues that Acts 9:43 has been interpreted using rabbinic sources that have disdain for the tanning industry, not because it is against the Jewish purity system but due to the stench and filth it produces (forcing tanners to be on the outskirts

¹² Van Driel-Murray (1985) argues that the perishability of leather goods created a difficult situation for archaeologists to find excavation sites of those items. Nevertheless, they worked with the refuse of leather and tanning industries to pinpoint their possible sites. Van Driel-Murray argues that “the environmental evidence from Vindolanda confirms that tanning was being carried out at this particular auxiliary fort.... the [Roman] army probably obtained its leather via imports from outside the Empire or from small private manufacturers” Van Driel-Murray (1985, 64-65).

of their region, preferably near a body of water, as with Joppa). This disdain is also based on the stereotype that tanners lacked morality and were low in social standing (Oliver 2013, 55). Contradicting C. H. Talbert's interpretation of Acts 9:43, which uses rabbinic sources to argue that tanning was ritually impure,¹³ Oliver re-reads those rabbinic sources¹⁴ and suggests that they are actually dealing with matters that have nothing to do with Jewish ritual purity. Oliver further argues that the tanning and leather goods industries were much needed in Jewish culture. For example, the straps of tefillin were made out of leather, and the parchments in which Jewish scribes copied the Torah were made from animal skins (Oliver 2013, 58).¹⁵ R. J. Forbes also lists the pervasiveness of leather goods in almost every facet of Jewish community:

Leather was an excellent material for quivers, caps or helmets, shields (which were “anointed”), coverings (Isa. 21:5), tents (Ex 26:14—“tent covering made from tanned rams’ skins and an outer covering of fine leather”), and Elias the Tishbite “was girt with a girdle of leather about his loins (2 Kgs 1:8).” The Jewish law adds tables, seats of chairs and the leather aprons worn by donkey drivers, flax workers and bearers. The skin was widely used as a container (1 Sam 1:24; 10:3; 16:20; 2 Sam 16:1; Job 32:19; Jer 13:12; Hab 2:15; Mt 9:14-17/Mk 2:18-22/Lk 5:33-39). The waterskin already figures in the story of Hagar (Gen 21:14) and it was quite common in later Jewish homes, the Jewish law mentions that it could easily be turned into a cushion by filling it with flour (1966, 38).

¹³ Oliver (2013, 52) quotes Talbert:

“On the other hand, that Peter resides ‘a long time in Joppa with Simon, a tanner’ (v.43) is very significant. Because Lev 11:39-40 pronounces unclean anyone who touches the carcasses of even a clean animal, a tanner (even a Jewish one) would be perpetually unclean. Being a tanner, therefore, was one of the trades a father should not teach his son (*m. Ketubim* 7:10; *b. Kiddushin* 82a Bar.). The rabbis said that tanneries could not be within fifty cubits of a town (*m. Baba Bathra* 2:9); that even if a tanner’s wife agreed before marriage to live with him, he must put her away if she could not stand her circumstances after marriage (*m. Ketuboth* 7:10); that a synagogue building could not be sold for use as a tannery (*m. Megillah* 3:2). If Peter lives with a Jewish tanner over a period of time, it means that he has already come to the position that the cleanliness laws do not apply to Jews and to those who associate with them” (Talbert 1997, 104).

¹⁴ For example, *Sifra* Shemini Parashah 10.3-6; *Sifra* Shemini Perek 4.8-9; *m. Ketubim* 7.10; *b. Haggadah*. 7b; *b. Kiddushin*. 82a; and other rabbinic texts too many to list here. See also Lamed 2007, 574-577.

¹⁵ According to Yehudah B. Cohn (2008, 56), most of the tefillin housings were “formed of a single piece of leather .” With regard to dating the existence of tefillin during the writing of Acts, Cohn argues that tefillin, and/or its variation, existed before and since the late Second Temple era and onwards. See also Cohn (2008, 55-102).

Acts 18:1-3 even narrates that Jewish persons during the time of Paul participated in working with leather goods, such as tentmaking.¹⁶ In Corinth, Paul met and worked with tentmakers: Aquila (a Jewish native of Pontus) and his wife Priscilla (a native of Rome). Acts 18:4 juxtaposes this description of Paul's work with his other work of going to the synagogue every Sabbath in order to convince his audience that Jesus is the Messiah. By doing so, Acts implicitly acknowledges that working with leather goods does not fall under the category of unclean acts.

Going beyond acknowledging the ubiquity of leather goods in Jewish life, Ken Stone exposes the unscrupulous demand for animal skins by none other than the Jewish and Christian scribes: "How many goats, how many ibexes, how many sheep, cattle, and other animals whose skins were used for parchment provided the material conditions for the survival of Judaism and Christianity as text-based religious traditions?" (2017, 22) If Oliver interprets Peter's visit to Simon the tanner as an act of solidarity with those of low social standing (2013, 60), my interpretation finds the passages suspect of colonial and military undertones, less than an imperial *parousia* but definitely more than a benign, friendly visit.

These passages reflect the Acts community's mimicry of the Roman Empire, which commandeered local businesses to provide for their imperial and military machinations. Peter's "stay" in Simon the tanner's place seems to mirror this imperial practice. While Acts 9:43 uses the verb *meinai* ("to stay"), Acts 10:6, 18, 23, and 32 employ the verb *xenizō* instead, which has two definitions. The first one simply expresses the act of being received as a guest to stay in a place. The second, as attested in Acts 17:20, defines the verbal action as something that "cause[s] a strong psychological reaction through introduction of something new or strange, astonishing, surprise" (Danker 2000, 684). Acts 17:20 describes Paul preaching to various contingents in Athens (at the Areopagus to be precise). Those listening to Paul's message are bewildered by his words, and ask him: "It sounds rather strange (*xenizonta*) to us, so we would like to know what it means." In other words, Simon Peter's "stay" in Simon the tanner's place both encapsulates his benign stay/residency, while simultaneously depicting a snapshot of Simon Peter's astonishing colonial act of co-opting a local industry.

Such astonishment happens in three ways in Acts 10:1-48. First, Simon Peter is *startled* because a voice tells him that he should be/is allowed to eat four-legged animals, reptiles, and birds, because God has made clean these animals that were previously unclean (10:9-16; 11:5-10). This is astonishing because the voice is endorsing/forcing a new way of engagement with the Other that is abrupt and unexpected. The passage breaks with kashrut (Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14), solely to accommodate the co-optation of Cornelius and his men (Acts 10:1-11:18), thereby accomplishing

¹⁶ Peter Lampe (1987, 211-21) argues that Paul literally worked as a tentmaker. On the other hand, Zahn (1909) and Hock (1980) side with the patristic fathers and prefer to translate verse 3 as Paul "worked with leather."

the imperial goal of expanding the Empire of God. Second, as mentioned above, Cornelius, a centurion of the Cohort called the *Italica* (an enemy of the colonized who were transferred to Syria to rule over the Levant), changes allegiance by accepting Jesus as the “lord of all” (10:36), receiving the Holy Ghost, and being baptized into the community of the Way. Cornelius is received into the community by none other than Peter, a colonized subject and Cornelius’ new superior (10:44-49; 11:16-18). In the middle of this narrative, v.23 uses *xenizō* to narrate the way Simon Peter showed “hospitality” to Cornelius. I argue that this so-called hospitality expresses both generosity and astonishment. Cornelius and his men are not invited to reside in or enjoy Simon the tanner’s place. Rather, they are provided “hospitality”—a shock treatment through words, baptism, and the Holy Ghost—to expedite and fulfil their goal of incorporating these former enemies into the Way. The third way that this pericope depicts astonishment is when it repeats the narrative describing Simon Peter’s stay with Simon the tanner (10:6, 18, 23, 32). This is a literary technique that provides emphasis and a narrative hint/wink to the readers/listeners of Acts. Here, I argue that the pericope is repeated because it is highlighting an under-the-radar activity that needs to be brought to light: just as Cornelius is co-opted for the Empire of God, Simon the tanner is now likewise working for the Empire of God.

Acts 9:43 does not explicitly mention military equipment; and yet, Peter’s proximity to leather goods, and his symbolic usurpation of the leather and tanning industry in the interests of his mission, echo Roman soldiers’ tendency to use “equipment, attire, and jargon to form their own society, separated from the wider civilian context” (Bishop and Coulston 2006, 255). Acts’ colonized community mimics Roman soldiers’ tendency to form an exclusive society by creating their own version of (militaristic) community identification and status. Instead of shunning the Roman Empire’s colonial techniques, the community in Acts seems to claim superiority over, or at least claim to be on par with, the Roman Empire’s imperial expansion. Even if it seems implausible, they depict themselves as usurping this imperial industry and forcing Cornelius to change allegiance. Following James C. Scott’s interpretation, I suggest that the colonized community in Acts may be said to partake in the hegemony of a “public transcript”—the transcript of colonization and imperial expansion—by taking the Roman Empire to task: “taking the values of ruling elites seriously, while claiming that they (the elites) do not” (1990, 106).¹⁷ Acts’ colonized community challenges the hegemony created by the Roman Empire, but not by eradicating it; rather, it claims to perform this hegemony *better* than the Roman Empire.

¹⁷ See Kahl’s (2008) take on this concept, and also Barreto’s (2016) rendering of imperial transcript through hybridity.

The Assemblage of Colonized Bodies/Skins

Acts 9:43 and 10:5-6, 32 are not just narratives that echo usurpation. They are also stories of ambivalently transformative encounters between colonized human bodies and inanimate entities—encounters that are highly relevant to Asian American bodies. I find theoretical resonances of these transformative encounters in the work of fashion critics and scholars who have already started discussing the intersection of (human) bodies and inanimate entities. Daniëlle Bruggeman’s exposition of Viktor&Rolf’s material/immaterial fashion artistry takes a compelling look at the transformative relationality and assemblage(s) of bodies and inanimate entities, including leather goods (2017, 234-249). Although I am not stating that Acts 9:43 and 10:5-6, 32 are about modern fashion (obviously), Bruggeman’s intersectional work between fashion, new materialism, and bodies yields philosophical points of discussion, in which the assemblage of human bodies and leather goods in these biblical passages could be analysed. Bruggeman finds various (re/de-)territorializations (using Deleuze and Guattari’s concept) in many of Viktor&Rolf’s subversive fashion statements.¹⁸ Clothing and/or fashion are usually understood as systems of signification which represent certain social and ethico-political issues of their time. By doing so, the actual materiality of the clothing (textiles, fabrics, patterns, shapes, colours, and other features) disappears within the immaterial and the conceptual realms of signs and meanings. Contrary to this trend, Bruggeman finds that many fashion designers seek to bring back the very materiality of the clothing and the bodies that wear them.¹⁹

Bruggeman finds Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of assemblage helpful in her analysis of this new (materialist) trend. Following Manuel DeLanda’s definition, assemblage or *agencement* refers “to the action of matching or fitting together a set of components (*agencer*), as well as to the result of such an action: an ensemble of parts that mesh together well” (2016, 1). To elaborate, DeLanda finds Deleuze’s definition of assemblage in *Dialogue II* most helpful:

It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across sexes and reigns—different natures. Thus, the assemblage’s only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a “sympathy.” It is never filiations which are

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 475-477) often engage art and fashion/clothing materials as a way to express their theories. For example, they compared striated space (vertical and horizontal elements, intertwining and intersecting) with the warp and weft of woven fibre, as well as comparing smooth space (entanglements) with the fulling of fibres in felt. They also view quilting as an assemblage of both of these spaces.

¹⁹ There are other subversive fashion designers who do the same, including Mariano Fortuny, Madeleine Vionnet, Madame Grès, Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto. See Smelik (2014, 39); Bruggeman (2017, 237-237).

important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind (2016, 1).²⁰

Claire Colebrook's understanding of assemblage emphasizes the alliances of humans and nonhumans: "All life is a process of connection and interaction. Any body or thing is the outcome of a process of connections. A human body is an assemblage of genetic materials, ideas, powers of acting and a relation to other bodies" (Colebrook 2002, xx). If (human) bodies and clothing/leather goods are assemblages in their own fold,²¹ then the assemblage of colonized bodies and leather goods emerge as a new territorialization.

Acts 9:43 and 10:5-6, 32 reek of colonial assemblage between the bodies of the colonized and the bodies (more precisely, skins and furs) of the colonized animals. Donning this imperial outfit/assemblage, in a sense, makes it "impossible to tell where the body ends and where the clothes begin" (Bruggeman 2017, 240). When a member of the colonized community of Acts decided to wear the skinned, mutilated, and hanged bodies/skins of nonhumans, I wonder if there was a moment in which that person had an affective encounter with the skins of the nonhumans. That is, could the person have empathized with the plight of the nonhumans, as it reminded them of their own plight? As their messiah was also hung on a tree like a hide being dried by the sun (Acts 10:39), did the deaths of the nonhumans remind the colonized human of their shared expendability?

Following Bruggeman's argument, the donning of leather could also reflect the colonized community's desire to "escape its fixed orders and its focus on representations and significations" (2017, 241). This donning of leather redefines "escape" as a series of potentialities, whereby the clothed bodies and the leather goods themselves produce variables that liberate "the materiality of the body [and clothing] into something continuously changing, mobile, and fluid" (Smelik 2014, 53). Applying this perspective to Acts 9:43, the donning of (imperial) leather goods by none other than colonized bodies produces a bewildering assemblage, a perverse ontology, in which those who should be shunned by the colonized are ironically attaching themselves to form new emergences and new understanding of themselves (and their new empire). Following Simon O'Sullivan's application of Deleuzian new materialism and fashion, this new assemblage frees bodies and clothing from

²⁰ See also Deleuze and Parnet (2002, 69); Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 34, 38, 67, 73, 88, 90, 97-8, 323-4, 330, 356-7, 368, 503; 1994, 36); Guattari (2011, 47, 55, 147, 188; 1996, 154-155).

²¹ "The fold" is a Deleuzian term which reconfigures anthropocentric subjectivity: "the fold is a dynamic and creative force that opens the subject up to a process of infinite becoming. Deleuze uses the concept of the fold to undermine the idea that subjectivity consists of an opposition between interiority and exteriority" (Smelik 2014, 38-9). I did not delve into this concept further in this article because comparing Smelik's engagement of the fold in the pleats, creases, draperies, furrows, bows, and ribbons of modern fashion with ancient Roman military garments is too difficult, due to the lack of textual and material evidence of the latter. See also Deleuze's own work on the fold (1993).

being “objects of recognition,”²² or a mere confirmation of what has been: “our habitual way of being and acting in the world is reaffirmed and reinforced, and as a consequence no thought takes place.... Representation stymies thought” (O’Sullivan 2006, 1). Rather, this new assemblage becomes an “[object] of encounter or a cut/crack that ruptures our habitual modes of being and thus in our habitual subjectivities ... Affirming a new way of seeing and thinking this world differently” (O’Sullivan 2006, 1). Thus, the usurpation and donning of military leather goods by Acts’ colonized community, even if it is just fleeting and imaginary, unsettles the expectations and possibilities for what the colonized bodies could be. The usurpation of imperial leather goods invites an imaginative approach “to reconsider the possibilities of the clothes being worn differently, upside down, or maybe even inside out” (Bruggeman 2017, 241). As Bruggeman reports, if, for Viktor&Rolf, this upside down and inside out is a literal reconfiguration of expectations (such as skirts being worn on the upper part of the body), Acts’ colonized community is also turning the expectations—the perceptions of colonized bodies (and even the colonizers themselves)—upside down by claiming that the imperial, military look “works” for them.

How, then, did this usurpation affect the audience of Acts? Did it form new identities, emboldening its listeners/readers to defy the colonially enforced limitation on how bodies could be in alliance with these (military) leather goods? Here, Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming assists in challenging fixity of identity and relationality. Becoming is a process of transformation and metamorphosis, in which an assemblage is always in the process of (re/de-)territorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 315). This territory, according to Adrian Parr, has a “mobile and shifting centre” (2005, 275). But this centre constantly de-territorializes by a “line of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 88-9), through the insertion, alliance, or emergence of new entities. With this de-territorialization comes the re-territorialization of a new assemblage. This philosophical outlook on the territorialization between (colonized) bodies and leather goods understands the self, not as fixed and confined (anthropocentrically). Rather, as Anneke Smelik states, “The self is a node in a network of multiple relations, and to set its desires flowing, one has to create connections with others—animals, plants, machines, molecules” (2016, 69).

Another Deleuzoguattarian concept that expresses the concept of becoming is the “body-without-organs (BwO)” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 161), not a literal removal of body organs but a philosophical reconfiguration of the self—a “process of undoing the ‘organized, signified, subjected’ body” (Smelik 2016, 172):

As fashion often probes the limits of what a body can do or what it can become, the notion of the body-without-organs helps to see how such designs set the body in motion, potentially freeing

²² O’Sullivan (2006, 1) quotes Gilles Deleuze (1994, 139): “Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*.”

it from a territorialized understanding of its matter. (Smelik 2016, 172)

Reading Acts 9:43, the assemblage of colonized bodies—and Asian American bodies—with nonhuman bodies (which/who are literally without organs) becomes a subversive act, precisely because it pushes the boundaries of what colonized bodies could become. This act of pushing boundaries echoes Jin Young Choi’s hermeneutic of *phronesis*. As defined by Choi, this hermeneutic interprets the Bible, finds meaning, and reads texts with both the mind *and* the body, demonstrating an improvised and embodied engagement with wisdom: “[as] the body is represented and constructed, it has its own agency, as it always keeps searching for meaning. This is also true when I read the Bible. My body is involved in the reading: my brain, guts, and nerves react ... What is produced through interpretation is not merely an interpretive work on paper but a dialogical event between the text and my whole person—the body—in relation to community and tradition” (Choi 2015, 37). In other words, the sovereign human subject is no longer; the “I is a material-semiotic actor ... [assembled by] humans and nonhumans, the social and physical, the material and immaterial” (Bolt 2013, 3). As Susan Hekman proposes, the “I is a mangled composition of multiple elements” (2010, 100). Thus, although Choi does not explicitly engage with new materialism, her hermeneutic provides dialogic spaces that combat mind-body dualism in which the body/material is treated as inferior or acted upon. Choi finds in bodies/materiality the agency to disrupt the Other.

Pushing this envelope further, my article identifies another embodiment with (colonized) materials (clothing/leather). Two (colonized) human and nonhuman bodies become one fluid assemblage, as their materiality flows with intensity, fluidly affecting each other, their skins touching, perhaps chaffing, revealing their entangled colonial material reality. Such an embodiment transgresses the particularity of fixed (ethnic) bodies and (racial) discourses since it suggests that all bodies are affected by the nonhuman other. To be more specific, leather goods might be considered inanimate, or “dead,” within an anthropocentric purview. But new materialism finds these leather goods and other “inanimate” entities that are used in their production not only to be “alive” but also to be producing life/death with/for the colonized bodies. To be producing is to create, sustain, destroy, and transform; thus, they are “more of a process than a thing” (Keller and Rubenstein 2017, 1). The leather good’s tanning ingredients, such as extracts of “acacia, mimosa, pine, and oak bark (gall)” (van Driel-Murray 2000, 299-319),²³ seep into the skins, mouths, open wounds, and

²³ See also Bickley (1991, 16-23). Forbes (1966, 6) also provides a detailed list of tanning ingredients:

“The vegetable tanning materials can be divided roughly into two groups, each of which has somewhat different characteristics. The pyrogallol group (Sumach, chestnut, myrobalanus, divi-divi, oak-wood, oak-galls, Valonia (acorn cups), and oak bark) give a leather of a pale colour varying from creamy or yellowish to light brown. The second, the catechol group (gambier, hemlock, quebracho, mimosa, mangrove,

other orifices/contact zones of those who don these complex polyphenols. These leather goods' emergences in their new material-semiotic assemblages are mobile and fluid, or, more precisely, demand mobility and enact transgressions, as they penetrate permeable human skins and enter their new empire. One follicle of fur at a time, they are blurring the perverse "ontological" boundaries between the animalized human skin/leather and the colonized nonhuman skins. Such transgressions echo Gale A. Yee's discussions of determining what is "Asian American." If Yee finds hybridity, heterogeneity, and multiplicity to be sites where "Asian American" identities can be found, then to dismantle systemic racism and hegemonic identity formation is to "underscore the continuous interplay of history, culture, and power in the mutable act of defining" identities (Yee 2006, 158). Intersecting my perspective with Yee's, I argue that another way one could dismantle hegemonies is to engage this mutability of identities by including the affective history, culture, and power of the nonhuman. Here, I harken back to Alexander's admonishment, where her solution for tackling anti-Black sentiments is, among many other things, to care for and be in solidarity with other minoritized bodies. I argue that fully fighting for one's life involves fighting for and with the Other. To fight systemic racism as Asian Americans is to follow Alexander's admonishment in which we redefine our ontology as a way to challenge the racist and speciesist ideology that divides humans versus nonhumans, Whites versus non-Whites. Anthropocentric understanding of Asian American identity is a by-product of racism's animalizing discourse. Thus, I propose we extend ourselves to our fellow creatures, to be in solidarity the Other, as a way to fight racism. Reading Acts 9:43 as a colonial assemblage that transgress various ontological boundaries is my way of extending myself and my hermeneutics to those who are chaffing and touching the superficial borders of my human body.

Haunting Asian American (Published) Ontologies

We, Asian Americans, should open options and possibilities to understand our hermeneutics by challenging the very anthropocentric foundations upon which we stand. We need to listen and recognize the nonhuman presence (hissing, lurking, biting, and even digesting), who not only reconfigures our being but also demands responsivity about how we view the Other. By caring for those who are considered dispensable, we could influence racial discourses that tend to be myopic, as well as systems of racism that make us fight for crumbs by animalizing each other.

Eschewing anthropocentricity in biblical interpretation opens interpretive possibilities that have previously been hidden or shunned as nonsensical. As demonstrated above, by intersecting Asian American

pine, or oak-bark) tend to produce a more solid leather of pink to reddish colour. The vegetable material obtained by leaching do not only contain tannin but also large amounts of other materials such as sugars, starch, salts, acids, etc. which are of some influence as they influence the progress of tannin."

readings with a new materialist reading of Acts 9:43 and 10:5-6, 32, I offer an interpretive practice, an unearthing of meanings, that holds together the confluences of various streams of interpretive persuasions, resulting in a brackish interpretive assemblage.

This optic demands a significant paradigm shift in understanding what it means to be/become Asian American and racially and ethnically minoritized. The struggles against racism and animalization—the rally to become and be considered equally “human”—cannot be discounted. And yet, this interpretive “leap of faith” proclaims that to be with nonhumans provides a vista through which new liberating horizons can be reached. What would it look like if we Asian Americans have our ways of “being and reading” affected by nonhumans? Would our Asian American biblical hermeneutics still remain anthropocentric? Would we have the nonhumans with us in one place, or still serve them up on the table? Would we consider their “voices” to also be part of the “margin?” Would we (postcolonially) embody their presence or just consume their bodies?²⁴

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