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Carnal Excess: Flesh at the Limits of Imagination

VIRGINIA BURRUS

This essay explores representations of fleshly excess in Christian and Jewish texts of the late fourth and fifth centuries, from the cosmically-scaled figures of Adam and the resurrected Christ in *Genesis Rabbah* and Augustine's *City of God*, on the one hand, to the hagiographical portraits of fat rabbis and monks in the tractate *Baba Metsia* of the Babylonian Talmud and the *Lausiac History* of Palladius, on the other. The Platonic figure of the *khora* is initially invoked to frame two main arguments: first, that these late ancient texts discover transcendence within, rather than outside of, the boundlessness of materiality; and, second, that this incarnational tendency has intriguing implications for practices and theories of representation and imagination.

“The ‘boundless’ cannot be captured . . . but it can be imagined.”

—Patricia Cox Miller, “‘Plenty Sleeps There’:
The Myth of Eros and Psyche”

How might one imagine boundless bodies? And why would one want to make such an attempt? Representations of carnal excess recur throughout late ancient religious texts, and I have found myself wondering what they might collectively signify. Flesh, it seems, is always more than needed or anticipated—always already *too much*—in the terms of the late ancient imagination. To say that flesh is too much is not, however, to imply that it should be *less*, or to wish it were *not at all*, but rather to point toward its fascinating elusiveness, its paradoxical relation to in/finitude. To say that flesh is too much is to invite the possibility, at once thrilling and horrifying, that there might be *even more*. It is to link flesh, perhaps surprisingly, with transcendence.

This essay is dedicated to Patricia Cox Miller, whose work ever expands the boundaries of scholarly imagination.

There is, of course, a prior history to this conceptualizing of carnality as transcendent excess. Plato's *Timaeus* already associates materiality with the boundlessness of *khora*—itself a conceptual surplus of the Platonic text, strategically presented as an afterthought to an initial account of a world divinely created in accordance with the pattern of heavenly forms.¹ Introduced as a “third *genos*” supplementing and also disrupting the more familiar categories of being and becoming, noetic original and sensible copy, *khora* is perceivable, we learn, neither by intellect nor by the senses but only indirectly and by a more mysterious faculty, designated a “bastard *logos*” and likened to the perception of one who dreams. Indeed, dreams seem to reveal a deeper truth, even as they lie: images are unmoored from the reality they might be thought to represent, each one emerging as “a phantom of something other . . . generated in something other, clinging to being, at least in a certain way, on pain of being nothing at all” (48e–52d).² This something other that “makes possible the doubling of being in an image, the duplicity of being,” is none other than the elusive *khora*, suggests John Sallis.³ “Chorology” (as Sallis names it) thus spans the gap between oneirology and cosmology—or, perhaps better, opens up *in* that gap, where the creativity of the imagination and the generativity of the cosmos very nearly coincide, though neither is exactly an image of the other. Evoking both the receptivity that occurs in withdrawal—a “making way” for what has not been before—and the flux that underlies the cosmos as well as the imagination, *khora* can also be conceived, Sallis notes, “as errancy: as hindering, diverting, leading astray the work of *nous*, as installing indeterminacy in what *nous* would otherwise render determinate.”⁴

This unsettling figure is subsequently mis/translated (with a little help

1. As John Sallis puts it, with the discourse of the *khora*, *Timaeus* “makes a new, second start, producing a second discourse that is not continuous with the discourse interrupted” (*Chorology: On Beginning in Plato's Timaeus* [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999], 3).

2. Translation my own, from the Greek text printed in Plato, *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*, ed. R. G. Bury, LCL 234 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929), 122, 124.

3. Sallis, *Chorology*, 122.

4. Sallis, *Chorology*, 132. The aspect of giving way or making way etymologically conveyed by *khora* is intriguingly resonant with the thirteenth-century Kabbalistic concept of *simsum*, “the primordial act of contraction and withdrawal of light that allows for the emanation of different worlds” (Elliot R. Wolfson, “Divine Suffering and the Hermeneutics of Reading: Philosophical Reflections on Lurianic Mythology,” in *Suffering Religion*, ed. Robert Gibbs and Elliot R. Wolfson [London: Routledge, 2002], 101–62, citation at 117).

from Aristotle) into the more mundane concept of pre-existent matter (*hyle*), only to be refused altogether by the *ex nihilo* cosmologies of later antiquity. Yet something quite like the platonic *khora* lingers on, I want to suggest. The annihilating power of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is less total than it is often perceived to be. Indeed, precisely when frontally opposed by the *nihil*, *khora* seems to re-enter by the back door, so to speak.⁵ When creation is positively asserted to come *from nothing*, that is, from what is *neither* pre-existent matter *nor* divine essence, *khora* regains its properly improper character: it reemerges as that dreamlike haunting of “things” that are (very nearly) “no-things at all,” as the realm of creation is cut loose from the over-determining being from which it has its generation, existing only in the groundless space of new possibility. Casting the shadow of a theological (as well as a cosmological) apophasis, *khora* may even begin to release God from the very being to which God is riveted by the *ex nihilo* itself: the negation of negation gives rise to its own negation, in other words, thereby revealing anew the face of divine depths—or, in more precisely scriptural terms, “the face of the deep (*tehom*)” (Gen 1.2).⁶ A “third *genos*” now supplementing not platonic forms and their best-possible imitations but a creative deity and its cosmic generations, the late ancient *khora* is timelessly enfolded in divinity even as it also unfurls in an ever-shifting world. *Khora* may, in fact, harbor the secret at the heart of much late ancient theology: if God is ever exceeding Godself by becoming other (even other-than-being), then the infinite fullness or *pleroma* of divinity is, paradoxically, ever suffering its own becoming-finite.

Or rather: pleromatic infinity and finite materiality turn out to be two aspects of the same *khoric* “flow at the heart of things,” as Patricia Cox Miller so aptly dubs it.⁷ Divine creativity, we apprehend, entails temporal and spatial articulation. Yet time is always folding back onto the

5. Perhaps *khora* is always entering by the back door. As Sallis points out, the integrity of the noetic (also assumed by the *Timaeus*) depends on a negation of the interruptive *khoric*, yet this very negation appears to be doomed to failure. “Is it possible for negation to be absolute in every respect . . . ? Or is the negation of a certain spacing not itself another spacing?” (*Chorology*, 146).

6. The possibility that a *khora*-like *tehom* might be liberated from the repressive clutches of the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* lures constructive theologian Catherine Keller in her *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003).

7. Patricia Cox Miller, “‘Plenty Sleeps There’: The Myth of Eros and Psyche,” in *The Poetry of Thought in Late Antiquity: Essays in Imagination and Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 107–21, at 115. I previously pursued these insights from Miller’s work in “*Creatio ex libidine*: Reading ancient logos differently,” in Sherwood and Hart, eds., *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (London: Routledge, 2005), 141–56.

boundlessness of eternity, and flesh, emerging as the excess of divine becoming, is always exceeding its own bounds. Such boundlessness cannot be grasped, but it *can* be imagined—or dreamed. This essay will, then, explore the dreamlike images of carnal excess harbored in certain late ancient Christian and Jewish texts. As we shall see, exegetical musings on the elusive extremities of time, past or future, draw fantasies of a cosmic humanity swollen to near-divine proportions, while narratives of fat sages and saints seem to explode the ambivalence of presence. The topic of boundless materiality is itself in some important sense boundless, my own argument at once encompassing and encompassed by the texts invoked and engaged. On the one hand, I am gesturing toward a history of culturally-diffused ideas about embodiment that is “out there” (or “back then”); on the other, I am deliberately insinuating myself into that history by bringing together texts and figures that are, historically speaking, only loosely or indirectly related, but that nonetheless seem to me to call out to each other—and also, perhaps, to us.

“NOW WHAT AM I TO SAY ABOUT THE HAIR
AND THE NAILS?” RESURRECTED BODIES
IN AUGUSTINE’S *CITY OF GOD*

In his *Confessions*, Christian theologian Augustine gives considerable attention to the role of the imagination in relation to memory, which he describes as “a great field or a spacious palace, a storehouse for countless images of all kinds.” Even the unfathomable archives of memory’s “vast, immeasurable sanctuary” (10.8) prove inadequate when he attempts to imagine the unchangeable God, however.⁸ Augustine dramatizes the frustrating experience, retrojected onto a disavowed Manichaean past: “My heart was full of bitter protests against the creations of my imagination, and this single truth [immutability] was the only weapon with which I could try to drive from my mind’s eye all the unclean images which swarmed before it,” he avows.

But hardly had I brushed them aside than, in the flicker of an eyelid, they crowded upon me again, forcing themselves upon my sight and clouding my vision, so that although I did not imagine you in the shape of a human body, I could not free myself from the thought that you were some kind of

8. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 214, 216. Here and elsewhere the Latin text consulted is *Augustine: Confessions*, text and commentary by James O’Donnell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992; online reprint at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/conf/>).

bodily substance extended in space, either permeating the world or diffused in infinity beyond it. (7.1)⁹

As a catholic Christian, he will later turn to the figure of Christ in an attempt to understand how divinity can be at once incorporeal and incarnate, infinite and implicated in finitude. Intriguingly, he locates that figure in “a secret place,” a “virginal womb,”—a “third *genos*,” one might say—that is neither divinity nor flesh but rather that which demarcates the possibility of their mutual traversibility. Taking his cue from Psalm 18.6–7, Augustine is still thinking big, however: “Then, ‘as a bridegroom coming from his bed, he exulted like some giant (*gigans*) who sees the track before him.’” Descending, ascending, withdrawing, remaining, this gigantic, racing Christ is everywhere because also nowhere, in constant motion because also still: “He departed but he is here with us. . . . He went back to the place which he never left . . .” (4.12).¹⁰

If divine immutability continues to challenge Augustine’s imaginative powers, so too does the “not altogether nothing (*non omnino nihil*)” of “formless materiality (*informis materia*)” (12.3)—the “nothing-something (*nihil aliquid*)” (12.6)—from which he understands the immutable God to have created the cosmos, as recorded in Genesis 1.2. Now making a mental effort to erase form so as to imagine not sheer divinity but bare matter, he merely manages to multiply form, picturing “numerous and varied” shapes that are “hideous and horrible,” distortions so “bizarre and incongruous” that if they had actually manifested before his eyes he would have been psychologically undone. Exhausted by the visual shuffle of hybrid and unstable figures generated by his own imagination, he subsequently surmises that changeability itself must be the shifting substrate, the pretemporal (or, more properly, nontemporal) *nihil aliquid* around which he has been trying vainly to wrap his mind. If only he could capture the moment of transition between forms—if only he could perceive that which “comprehends all the forms”! Then he would be able to see through time to eternity and know mutability in and as the fertile betweenness that is the womb of flesh’s excess (12.6).¹¹ The moment is always vanishing, however, and the mind cannot contain a truth that overflows time.¹²

To restate the point: if God, as Augustine imagines it (however imperfectly), takes up all the space and then some, thereby evading temporality,

9. Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. Pine-Coffin), 133.

10. Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. Pine-Coffin), 82, translation slightly modified.

11. Translations my own.

12. On Augustine’s curious discussion of the *nihil aliquid* in his exegesis of Gen 1.2, see Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 74–75.

creation takes up all the time and then some, thereby exploding spatiality: there is no place—except the “no place” of *khora*, or a virgin’s womb?—that can hold all of its changing forms at once. No time outside eternity, no place but the infinitely extended divine. In the meantime (*in time*), Augustine plays God, hovering over the depths of his own memory palace. What he creates is, of course, but a temporal image of creation’s boundless bounty—indeed, a nightmarishly monstrous conglomeration of unclean images, signaling at once a deficiency and an excess of bodily form that breaks the closure of teleology by overloading its possibilities.

Yet in the *City of God* (a later text) Augustine cannot resist trying to imagine the unimaginable once again.¹³ Here, as in his *Confessions*, if on a grander scale, temporality is strained, even stretched to the limit. Past fictions, future hopes, present possibilities—all point to the event of incarnation, the event that takes place in a fathomless moment of no duration. In that event, time is intensely eternalized—“so fully in the moment that it can have no past or future and, consequently, no re/representable present”—and eternity is richly temporalized.¹⁴ But how can one *imagine* such an exceeding fecundity of eternity harbored within time’s measured steps? In this work, Augustine ultimately directs his gaze not to the “nothing-something” of unformed matter that surfaces from the depths of the initial verses of Genesis but rather to the resurrected bodies unveiled in the culminating spectacles of the Apocalypse.

En route to flesh’s unimaginable future, anticipated in the resurrection and ascension of Christ, Augustine detours through an unbelievable past, taking his cue from the observed oddities of the present—which just might take both belief and imagination over their limits. In book fourteen, for example, he evokes instances of human abilities “remarkable by their very rarity” to hint at the extremes of submission and control that would have characterized sex in paradise—had there only been time for it! There are some people, he reports, who “can do things with their body which

13. The following discussion of resurrected bodies in Augustine’s *City of God* grows out of an essay co-authored with Karmen MacKendrick, entitled “Bodies without Wholes: Apophatic Excess and Fragmentation in Augustine’s *City of God*,” to appear in *Apophatic Bodies*, edited by Christopher Boesel and Catherine Keller, forthcoming with Fordham University Press. I thank Dr. MacKendrick both for this collaboration and for allowing me to continue to share her insights.

14. Elliot R. Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, Death* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 92. Wolfson offers a nuanced and innovative theory of time based on (but not confined to) kabbalistic texts that seems to capture very well the often underestimated complexities of Augustine’s thought. See also his particular discussion of Augustine at 3–11, 16, 75.

are for others utterly impossible and well nigh incredible when they are reported.” Like what? Well, wiggle their ears or move their scalps; swallow improbable items and regurgitate them on command; make uncannily inhuman sounds such as bird calls; create music by passing odorless gas through their anuses; sweat or cry at will; or even detach themselves from all sensation (14.24).¹⁵ In book fifteen, he similarly introduces contemporary examples of the bizarre in order to corroborate biblical reports of the past, in this case the existence of giants: “Was there not in Rome a few years ago . . . a woman . . . who towered far above all other inhabitants with a stature which could be called gigantic? An amazing crowd rushed to see her, wherever she went. And what excited special wonder was the fact that both her parents were not even as tall as the tallest people that we see in our everyday experience” (15.23).¹⁶

By the time Augustine reaches the final book twenty-two, much of which is devoted to the discussion of resurrected bodies, the world has become strange indeed. Miracles multiply at such a rate that any sense of the limits of the natural or normal is not merely exceeded but very nearly undone. If the particular miracles recorded in scripture necessarily loom large in popular awareness, Augustine wants also to call our attention to the ongoing, paradoxically quotidian, irruption of marvelous events that typically remain overlooked even by the people in the very communities where they occur. Relatively well known, he avers, is the case of the blind man of Milan whose sight was restored when the bodies of the martyrs Protasius and Gervasius were discovered by Bishop Ambrose. Less well known, however, is the astonishing cure of a deeply buried rectal fistula that Augustine himself has witnessed—and now narrates at what might be deemed excessive length. This strange story swiftly gives rise to other tales of healing: breast cancer, gout, hernias, demonic infestations, paralysis, coma, and a dislodged eyeball are all among the ills miraculously cured yet too little talked about, Augustine feels. An underdressed man is unexpectedly granted money for a coat. Children’s corpses are revived, and this happens more than once. In the face of such excess, Augustine is beside himself: “Now what am I to do? . . . I cannot relate all the stories of miracles that I know.” Yet he also cannot resist sharing a few more. Indeed, he seems quite overwhelmed by the impossibility of his self-appointed task of making *all* miracles known to *all*: God knows he has tried, but it is simply not feasible for any bishop, however diligent, to impress these tales on the

15. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972), 588.

16. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God* (trans. Bettenson), 639.

memories of the entirety of God's people. Even those who have heard the stories "do not keep in their minds what they have heard" (22.8).¹⁷

If the miracles of this world exceed the capacity of the mind, so too do the miracles of the world to come. Or rather, the miraculous is what *spans* the two worlds or "cities." But how is one to imagine bodies in the other world—resurrected bodies? Can Augustine's excitedly cited instances of miracles already witnessed provide enough of a clue as to what lies ahead? Aided now not so much by the credulity of the faithful as by the incredulity of questioning skeptics, he reaches for the limit cases that will expand his imagination. Does resurrected life begin before birth, and if so when? Will a miscarried infant be resurrected (22.13)?¹⁸ These are fruitful queries in their very strangeness. Consideration of tiny humans, whether pre- or post-natal, gives rise to the further question of the size of resurrected bodies—no small matter, as it happens. What *does* flesh unfolded in time look like, from the perspective of eternity? What if there was no time for its unfolding, in the case of babies—much as there turned out to be no time for sex in Paradise? Augustine answers confidently with regard to those who die as infants: "By a marvelous and instantaneous act of God they will gain that maturity they would have attained by the slow lapse of time." There will be no loss of flesh—no loss even of flesh's potential—in the resurrection, he assures his readers. If anything, there will be gain in excess of expectation. At this point, Augustine toys with the idea of a sort of heavenly egalitarianism that would eliminate all differences of stature, in which case—he is sure—God would add extra matter "so that all would attain the stature of giants" rather than unfairly diminish the gigantic proportions achieved by some (22.14).¹⁹ He rejects this possibility, however, in favor of the notion that each individual will embody the height that he or she had, or would have had, at the age Christ achieved—roughly thirty years (22.15).²⁰ Just as differences in height will be preserved so too will sexual difference, he further elaborates (22.17).²¹

Nonetheless, the possibility of gigantic stature reemerges, and it does so precisely in the context of Augustine's affirmation of the preservation of the particularities of difference, when he turns to address another of the questions raised by skeptics, regarding lost body parts. "Now what reply am I to make about the hair and the nails?" he asks. It would seem that the

17. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God* (trans. Bettenson), 1033–47.

18. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God* (trans. Bettenson), 1054.

19. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God* (trans. Bettenson), 1054–55.

20. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God* (trans. Bettenson), 1055–56.

21. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God* (trans. Bettenson), 1057–58.

bits cut off from each body must be restored in the body's eternity (he has already promised that nothing will be lost!), yet the insult to beauty that would be presented by the resulting excesses of hair or toenails presents a problem for Augustine (if not for the long-tressed Mary of Egypt).²² Thus he suggests the analogy of a potter reshaping a pot: "All that is required is that the whole pot should be remade out of the whole lump, that is, that all the clay should go back into the whole pot, with nothing left over." This has implications for more than the reincorporation of cut-off (or otherwise lost, discarded, or even excreted) parts, as it also allows for a reshaping of form more generally, arranging differently what is too fat or too thin, for example, while each body still retains its distinctiveness somehow, as tellingly preserved in the transcendent beauty of scars (22.19).²³ Surely, however, such a conservationist stance implies that resurrected bodies will be either significantly bigger or much, much denser, if all that ever belonged to them, across time, is reintegrated. (Would they not extend almost infinitely?) Augustine admits as much, after taking what is a rather bizarre (even for him) detour through the perplexing digestive issues raised by cannibalism (what flesh belongs to whom?). He does so despite his continued attraction to the notion that resurrected bodies will preserve their original (or potential) mature height: "there may be some addition to the stature as a result of this," he confesses (22.20).²⁴ Even when a limit has been set at a Christlike thirtysomething, the body still exceeds.

Caroline Walker Bynum asserts that for Augustine "resurrection is restoration both of bodily material and of bodily wholeness or integrity, with incorruption (which includes—for the blessed—beauty, weightlessness, and impassibility) added on." She charges him with "a profound fear of development and process" that results in a view of "salvation as the crystalline hardness not only of stasis but of the impossibility of non-stasis."

22. Interestingly, hair and nails seem to present a problem of excess for Plato as well, though not an identical problem. While he can just barely imagine the possible usefulness of hair as a relatively non-burdensome shelter for the head, the function of fingernails escapes him (*Tim.* 76d). He solves the problem of such apparent superfluity by suggesting that fingernails were incorporated into the human prototype out of concern for other kinds of creatures—including women!—that would be derived from it: "For those who were constructing us knew that out of men women should one day spring and all other animals; and they understood, moreover, that many of these creatures would need for many purposes the help of nails; wherefore they impressed upon men at their very birth the rudimentary structure of finger-nails" (76e; Plato, *Timaeus, etc.*, trans. Bury, 203). Perhaps Plato's gods foresaw the current popularity of manicures.

23. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God* (trans. Bettenson), 1060–62.

24. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God* (trans. Bettenson), 1063.

While admitting that “Augustine’s insistence on keeping minute details of the heavenly body close to the earthly one” is quite striking, she notes again that he does so “while adding (a crucial addition of course!) stasis.”²⁵ I am here questioning, however, whether “add stasis, and stir” to turn human bodies that are both scarred and mutable—both fragmenting and excessive—into flawless marble statues is a formula that adequately captures Augustine’s approach, as if he were thereby seeking a recipe for balance between Neoplatonic transcendentalism and Christian incarnationalism. Augustine’s thought seems much stranger, his additive fantasies much more transgressive than that.

More appealing is David Dawson’s suggestion that Augustine should be seen as departing rather decisively from Neoplatonic idealism²⁶ by positing incarnation as the site of transcendence: divinity exceeds itself in a process of “becoming embodied,” and humanity appropriates this movement, thus also exceeding itself by becoming “more embodied.”²⁷ For Dawson, however, Augustine finally chooses incarnationalism *instead of* the apophaticism that carries him past the boundaries of imagination.²⁸ It seems to me, however, that the incarnational and the apophatic—similarly, imagination and the unimaginable—converge at their extremes in Augustine’s thought. This is nowhere more evident than in his (dramatically and productively failed) attempts to *imagine* resurrected bodies. Resurrected bodies are transcendent not because they are static or weightless, as Bynum suggests, but because they are the *most embodied*. Emerging at the disappearing border of time and eternity, they are *so much body* that they utterly exceed wholeness, no matter how hard one tries to stuff all the leftover fragments back into the bag of integrity—and try, Augustine does. They are *so much body* that they utterly exceed representation, no matter how inventively one rearranges the available images—and inventive, Augustine is. In relation to the *forms* of representation, resurrected bodies are *nihil aliquid*, nothing-something—so many miracles and monsters. Resurrected bodies manifest where metamorphosis displaces mimesis, in and as the exceeding beauty of becoming and the fragmenting desire for disintegration.

25. Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 95, 97, 99.

26. Neoplatonism’s idealism may be overrated. But this doesn’t really change the point.

27. David Dawson, “Transcendence as Embodiment: Augustine’s Domestication of Gnosis,” *Modern Theology* 10 (1994): 1–26, citation at 3–4.

28. Dawson, “Transcendence as Embodiment,” 7–8.

“HE WAS SPREAD FROM ONE END OF THE WORLD TO THE OTHER”: THE COSMIC ADAM IN GENESIS RABBAH

According to a roughly contemporaneous rabbinic exegetical tradition that seems to strain at the same imaginal limits as Augustine does, the first human was both formally indistinct (or alternately formally multiple) and incredibly huge: “R. Tanhuma in the name of R. Benaiah, R. Berekhiah in the name of R. Eleazar, ‘He created him as an unformed mass (*golem*), and he was spread from one end of the world to the other’” (*Genesis Rabbah* 8.1).²⁹ This assertion arises in the context of an interpretation of Genesis 1.26–28. It comes, more precisely, on the heels of an interpretation of verse 27 (“So God created humankind [*ha adam*] in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”)³⁰ that has been fluidly displaced onto Genesis 5.2 (“Male and female he created them and he blessed them and named them humankind [*adam*]”), from which R. Jeremiah b. Eleazar infers: “When the Holy One, blessed be he, came to create the first human, he made it androgynous.” R. Samuel bar Nahman adds that “the Holy One” created the first human with two faces and subsequently sawed it in two.³¹ Perhaps it is the multiplicity of genders in the original, unhewn “Adam” that suggests both a lack of stable form and a surplus of mass—a wondrous monstrosity, in short.

The assertion that the first human lacks stable form is, however, also anchored in the particular language of Psalm 139.16: “Your eyes beheld my *golem*.” Whether the term *golem* (which appears nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible) should here be rendered “unformed mass” is in fact disputed:³² elsewhere in *Genesis Rabbah* (24.2),³³ the verse is interpreted to indicate that the creature is both massive in size and that it contains the generations to descend from it, but not necessarily that it is formless or embryonic, as is sometimes suggested.³⁴ Nonetheless, the unformed materiality that Augustine also discovered in Genesis 1.2 lies close at hand,

29. *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. and commentary by Jacob Neusner (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985), 73.

30. All free-standing biblical citations are from the NRSV translation.

31. *Genesis Rabbah* (trans. Neusner), 73.

32. David H. Aaron notes that Moshe Idel “finds no evidence in the early history of the term for this connotation” but sees the *golem* as a formed, yet huge, entity (Idel, *Golem* [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990], 298, cited by Aaron, “Imagery of the Divine and the Human: On the Mythology of Genesis Rabba 8 § 1,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 5 [1995]: 1–62, at 57).

33. *Genesis Rabbah* (trans. Neusner), 264.

34. Aaron, “Imagery of the Divine and Human,” 55–59.

textually speaking, and *Genesis Rabbah* 8.1 will soon circle around to just that verse, linking it with Isaiah 11.2—"the spirit of the Lord shall rest on him"—in order to read Genesis 1.2 as a reference to the creation of the first human, thereby aligning the *golem* with the "face of the deep" over which the spirit hovered.³⁵ Here the newly formed Adam does seem almost to fold back, embryonically, toward the formless void, even as it also begins to unfurl its generative potencies—the multiforms of its potential generations.³⁶ In so far as *golem* displaces *tehom*, it becomes (almost) possible to imagine the unimaginable, that which Augustine dubs the "nothing-something" and which the rabbis pronounce "hidden" (*Genesis Rabbah* 8.2; see also 1.5).³⁷

All of these interpretive moves are themselves folded into discussion of the expository verse that introduces the exegesis of Genesis 1.26–28 in *Genesis Rabbah* 8.1, a verse drawn from the same Psalm that harbors the *golem*—"You beset me behind and before and lay your hand upon

35. *Genesis Rabbah* (trans. Neusner), 74.

36. With respect to the term *golem*, Susan Niditch points out that "its etymology is taken from *glm*, 'to wrap up,' 'fold together.' . . . The embryo in fetal position is literally wrapped or folded in upon itself." Like Aaron, however, she is *not* inclined to read references to *golem* in connection with the first human as indicating its unfinished or embryonic status. "Where mentioned explicitly, the *golem* motif appears to emphasize 1) the early time in the process of creation to which the midrashic discourse refers; 2) the malleable, amoeba-like quality of the first man who is able to fill all the crevices of the universe; and 3) his foreknowledge of and connections to future generations" ("The Cosmic Adam: Man as Mediator in Rabbinic Literature," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 34 [1983]: 137–46, at 143). I myself see more affinity than contrast between the concept of the folded or embryonic on the one hand and the elements of emergence, plasticity, and potentiality that Niditch associates with the *golem* of the midrashim on the cosmic Adam.

37. *Genesis Rabbah* (trans. Neusner), 76; 3. Not unlike *Confessions* 12, the rabbinic commentary seems to occupy an ambiguous space between the doctrines of creation from pre-existent matter and creation from nothing. Maren Niehoff detects Christian influence in the most stridently *ex nihilo* passages of *Genesis Rabbah*; e.g., 1.9, where Gamaliel curses a philosopher who suggests that the Jewish God creates from pre-existent materials ("Creatio Ex Nihilo Theology in *Genesis Rabbah* in Light of Christian Exegesis," *Harvard Theological Review* 99 [2005]: 37–64). I myself am struck by the paradox of hiddenness and disclosure that is sustained with regard to divine creativity, as un/veiled in—and as!—Torah. Torah contains the unutterable secrets of creation, perceivable only through the bastard logic of a dreamer, it would seem: "R. Huna in the name of Bar Qappara: 'Were the matter not explicitly written in Scripture, it would not be possible to state it at all: "God created heaven and earth" (Gen 1.1)—from what? From the following: "And the earth was chaos" (Gen 1.2)'" (*Genesis Rabbah* 1.5). Chaos (*tohu va-bohu*): another name for the unnameable "nothing-something" that falls outside the binary oppositions of the philosopher and his interlocutor, for whom there is *either* something *or* nothing.

me” (Ps 139.5). Perhaps precisely because it seems at first to have so little relevance for the account of humanity’s creation, the verse explodes with interpretive possibilities as it intersects with the lemma, or text at hand. Initially it is read with reference to humanity’s doubled inheritance—“this world and the world to come”—as well as God’s ultimate judgment: the human “must come and give a full accounting of himself.”³⁸ Subsequently it is retranslated, under the authority of R. Eleazar, “West and east you have formed me,” thereby indicating, in harmony with Deut 4.32 (“From one end of the heaven to the other end of the heaven”), the vast expanse of the first human. Alternately, it may suggest that the human is vertically as well as horizontally extended, since it is apparently tall enough to reach God’s heavenly hand (a possibility seemingly confirmed by Job 13.21: “Withdraw your hand from me”). Or it may refer to the span of time in which the human is emerging, from the initial hovering of the spirit of God over the face of the deep to the sixth day of creation when God declares, “Let us make a human.”³⁹ This last interpretive possibility brings us back finally both to Genesis 1.26–28 and to verse 2, hovering nearby in the same chapter and hinting, moreover, at a near conflation of the newly or not quite formed Adam with the formless depths of divine creativity, as we have already seen.

Intertextual larding has by now fattened the Genesis verses to the point that they burst all imaginable textual boundaries. It has also yielded a boundless Adam who spans all worlds, genders, spatial dimensions, and temporalities. “He is the first and last, spirit and body, otherworldly and this worldly, a future being and a present being,” as Susan Niditch notes.⁴⁰ If this *golem* seems almost to dissolve into the faceless deep of creation’s infinite potentiality, it also closely resembles Augustine’s frustrated attempt to imagine God: “some kind of bodily substance extended in space, either permeating the world or diffused in infinity beyond it.”⁴¹ Moreover, like the resurrected bodies regathered at the end of time, the gigantic Adam

38. *Genesis Rabbah* (trans. Neusner), 73.

39. *Genesis Rabbah* (trans. Neusner), 74.

40. Niditch, “Cosmic Adam,” 144.

41. Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. Pine-Coffin), 133. For rabbinic (and later Jewish) sources, perhaps even more than for Christian (where anthropomorphism is more typically christologically diverted), the im/possibility of visualizing God is bound up with the question of the image of the first human: “The morphological resemblance between the divine and human image, rooted in biblical thinking, played a central role in the subsequent development of Jewish mysticism in all of its stages” (Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994], 23).

emerging at the dawn of time straddles temporality and eternity. Spread thin across the six days of cosmic differentiation, or else finding its Sabbath “so fully in the moment that it can have no past or future and, consequently, no re/presentable present,”⁴² creation is ever exceeding all bounds.

“THEIRS ARE BIGGER THAN OURS”:
FAT RABBIS AND MONKS IN *TRACTATE BABA METSIA*
AND PALLADIUS’S *LAUSIAC HISTORY*

With that sense of slight trepidation that attends the mixing of unlike things, I want now to shift from the ambiguously mythical to the more concretely carnal, perhaps also from the sublime to the comical. Borrowing a page from Augustine’s *City of God*, as well, I want to think about what representations of actual overlarge bodies (like that of his extremely tall Roman lady) might have to say about materiality as cosmic excess—or the cosmos itself as divine excess. Of particular interest are fat bodies that serve as icons of holiness, specifically those on display in the collective hagiographies of both patristic and rabbinic traditions.⁴³ Contrary to what one might expect, neither saints nor sages are particularly idealized in such works, in either their moral or their physical depictions. In fact, the literary images of rabbis and monks seem to subvert classical aesthetic ideals. Or rather: they seem to overflow the boundaries of the classic body.

I begin with a story from Tractate Baba Metsia of the Babylonian Talmud, which constitutes, among other things, a virtual *Lives of Fat Rabbis*.

When Rabbi Ishma’el the son of Yose and Rabbi El’azar the son of Rabbi Shim’on used to meet each other, an ox could walk between them [under the arch formed by their bellies] and not touch them.

A certain matron said to them, “Your children are not yours.”

They said, “Theirs [i.e., our wives’] are bigger than ours.”

42. Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 92.

43. For a nuanced account of the genre of collective hagiography, see Patricia Cox Miller, “‘Differential Networks’: Relics and Other Fragments in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 135–36. See also her “Strategies of Representation in Collective Biography: Constructing the Subject as Holy,” in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, ed. Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 209–54. I discuss the parallels between Christian collective hagiographies and Talmudic narratives in an essay entitled “A Saint of One’s Own: Emmanuel Levinas, Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, and Eulalia of Mérida,” forthcoming 2010 in a special issue of *L’Esprit Créateur* dedicated to sanctity and edited by Cary Howie.

“If that is the case, even more so!”

There are those who say that thus they said to her: “As the man, so is his virility.” And there are those who say that thus did they say to her: “Love compresses the flesh.” (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metsia 84a)⁴⁴

Here two obese rabbis deflect mockery through clever quips about their wives’ size when an unfriendly interlocutor insinuates that they are too fat to have fathered their children—in itself, no laughing matter for either the rabbis or their wives. The mocking *matrona* (a stock figure) is unmistakably Roman.⁴⁵ The redactors of the Talmud muse aloud: “But why did they respond to her?” We might also ask why they responded as they did. Perhaps the rabbis are offering a deliberately “Gentile” reply to their Roman interlocutor, if an intertext like that of the Hellenistic writer Philostratus’s early third-century tale of the fat sophist Leon of Byzantium is operating knowingly.⁴⁶ When mocked by the fractious Athenians for his large belly, Leon is said to respond: “I have a wife at home who is much stouter than I, and when we agree the bed is large enough for us both, but when we quarrel not even the house is large enough” (Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 1.485). Yet the would-be table-turning rejoinder—“our wives’ are bigger than ours!”—seems an inept echo of Leon’s witty repartee—as if the rabbis, both notorious imperial collaborators,⁴⁷ nonetheless fail to master the master’s idiom even well enough to counter the challenges of the master’s wife. Why, after all, should the greater size of their own wives’ bellies prove any defense against charges that their children are illegitimate? Then again, perhaps it’s not bellies they’re talking about but genitalia—or, as the medieval commentator Rashi puts it tactfully, the size of their sexual desire.⁴⁸ The *matrona*, at any rate, is not impressed by the

44. Translated by Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 220.

45. Note that Tal Ilan has argued with regard to early Palestinian rabbinic traditions that *Matrona* was originally the proper name of a Jewish woman (“*Matrona* and Rabbi Jose: An Alternative Interpretation,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 25 [1994] 18–51). Be that as it may, the *matrona* figure in the Babylonian Talmud is pretty clearly presented as “a stereotypical figure of Roman culture” (Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997], 96).

46. Daniel Boyarin has recently pointed out the parallels with Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 1.485, in an essay entitled “The Talmud as a Fat Rabbi: A Novel Approach,” forthcoming in *Text and Talk*.

47. See the discussion of Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, 86–94.

48. See *The Talmud: The Steinsaltz Edition*, vol. 5, *Tractate Baba Metsia*, part 5, trans. Rabbi Israel V. Berman (New York: Random House, 1992), 119. Boyarin’s suggestion (*Carnal Israel*, 204, and *Unheroic Conduct*, 96–97) is that the rabbis

rabbis' response and continues to cast aspersions on their paternity. The tradition is split regarding their final triumphant rejoinder. According to one account, the rabbis hint that the size of their penises is proportionate to the size of their bellies. According to another account, the rabbis' explanation is similar to that of Philostratus's Leon, albeit more graphically presented, namely, that where there is harmonious love, the size of the body (or of certain parts of the body) simply doesn't matter: flesh makes way for desire.

The carnivalesque exuberance of the rabbinic tale⁴⁹—in particular its bawdy shamelessness with regard to the sexual—makes it difficult to imagine a Christian version of this tale, perhaps. Yet there are other parts of Rabbi El'azar's story that cut even closer to the flesh and thereby also bring us much closer to narratives of Christian holy men, some of whom are notable for their swollen bodies, but none of whom are credited with wives, whether fat or thin.

El'azar is known, as it happens, not only for his great size and unfortunate collaboration with Rome but also for his delicate conscience. Once, in a fit of pique at a man who has mocked him for not being as great a rabbi as his father Shimon, El'azar turns the man's name in for execution. He quickly repents of such hasty action, but it is too late: the man has already been hanged. Learning from others that the hanged man was indeed a serious sinner, El'azar is still not fully comforted. His disciples set out to reassure him by a most curious test, inspired by a tradition that the bodies of righteous men do not decay: they give him a sedative and cut open his belly, removing several basketsful of fat and placing it in the hot sun to see if it will rot. It does not rot, thus proving that El'azar is indeed a righteous man. Still, El'azar continues to suffer doubts about his own judgment, "and he accepted painful disease on himself" for this reason.⁵⁰ "In the evening they used to fold under him sixty felt mats, and

initially meant genitalia, the *matrona* understood bellies. The ambiguity continues in a subsequent passage regarding the size of rabbinic "limbs," as the cryptic brevity of the language multiplies interpretive possibilities. There is even the possibility of a homoerotic implication to the *matrona's* charge since, after all, it is the visual image of the two male bodies that initially seems to invoke anxiety about how they are to couple; moreover, the discussion of the size of "limbs" in this passage directly links El'azar and Ishmael to Yohanan, a figure famed for his womanlike beauty, which once attracted the amorous attentions of Resh Lakish. El'azar is also a significant figure in the medieval *Zohar*, where he is associated with the "homoeroticism of the mystical fraternity," as discussed by Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 370–71.

49. See Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 197–225, for an explicitly Bakhtinian reading of the Talmudic tale.

50. See Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, 99–107, on El'azar's masochistic regime.

in the morning they would find under him sixty vessels full of blood and pus.” He refers to his afflictions as his “brothers and companions” but he sends them away in the day so that they will not interfere with his study of Torah. His wife initially tends him diligently and also “would not let him go to the study-house, in order that the Rabbis would not reject him” but eventually she loses patience with his cult of suffering and leaves him. Others—men (sixty sailors in fact!)—care for him thereafter and under their ministrations he allows himself to be cured and returns to the study house, where he delivers controversially liberal opinions on the purity of the bloodstained garments of sixty women (Baba Metsia 83b–84b).⁵¹ Thus by the end of his life El‘azar looks much like a monk, having courted physical suffering and taken on a non-marital life within a community of men. His rewards are great: later Zoharic tradition identifies him, along with his father Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Abba, as one of the three to have looked on the face of the divine Presence.⁵²

A nightly shedding of sixty bowlfuls of blood might seem excessive even as penance for having sent a man to what might have been (though in the end was not) an unjust death. But excess is precisely the point, a point also echoed by many of the tales recorded in Palladius’s roughly contemporaneous *Lausiac History*. Indeed sin may even be embraced in so far as it leads to an excess of penitential suffering. Take for example Macarius the Younger, a happy shepherd youth who at age eighteen accidentally kills someone, an incident that leads him to live alone in the desert for three years without shelter and for another twenty-five years in a self-built cell. He confides to Palladius that he rejoices in his “sin of homicide,” “since it was actually the starting point of his salvation” (15).⁵³ Another Macarius, this one of Alexandria, reflexively kills not a man but a gnat that has stung him on the foot. Palladius reports:

He accused himself of acting out of revenge and he condemned himself to sit naked in the marsh of Scete out in the great desert for a period of six months. Here the mosquitoes lacerate even the hides of the wild swine just as wasps do. Soon he was bitten all over his body, and he became so swollen that some thought he had elephantiasis. When he returned to his cell after six months he was recognized as Macarius only by his voice. (18.4)⁵⁴

51. Translated by Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 219–25.

52. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 369.

53. Palladius: *The Lausiac History*, trans. Robert T. Meyer (New York: Newman Press, 1964), 51.

54. Palladius, *Lausiac History* (trans. Meyer), 59.

Other holy men included in Palladius's history suffer merely circumstantially and through no fault of their own, yet their suffering is thereby no less productive. Consider the following account:

In this mountain at Nitria there was a man named Benjamin who had lived eighty years and attained the height of ascetic perfection. He was deemed worthy of the gift of healing. . . . Now this man . . . contracted dropsy about eight months before he died. His body swelled up to such a size that he seemed to be another Job. . . . So we went and saw his body so greatly swollen that another person's fingers could not reach around one of his. . . . For eight months, then, a very wide seat was set out for him on which he sat all the time. He was no longer able to lie down, because of other needs. Even in this great sickness he cured others. . . . When he died, the door and jamb were pulled down so that his body could be carried out of the house, so great was his swelling. (12)⁵⁵

Resonant especially with the Talmudic tale is the graphic description of fleshly excess. In this text, the fat monk carries his excessive flesh *explicitly* as an affliction. For Benjamin, however, the obscurely humiliating burden of carnality does not ultimately prove compressible any more than it is rendered funny but instead seems to increase and multiply beyond the limits of imagination, not unlike El'azar's basketfuls of fat or bowlfuls of blood: his corpse cannot even be squeezed through the door of his house. (Interestingly, El'azar's corpse does not leave the house for many years either but resides in his estranged wife's attic. Surely a case of excess flesh!) The words placed in the mouth of Bishop Dioscorus regarding the fat monk Benjamin are instructive: "Come here, see a new Job who possesses boundless gratitude while in a state of great bodily swelling and incurable sickness."⁵⁶ The boundlessness of Benjamin's gratitude, marked by his continued gift for curing others while remaining himself without cure, is matched by the apparent boundlessness of his pathologically swollen flesh. The culmination of a life of ascetic perfection is an excess of spiritual grace coinciding with an excess of shameful flesh.

Put otherwise: the depths of humiliated flesh and the heights of divine holiness converge at their extreme limits in the tale of the fat monk. That there is a link between the fleshly and the divine is also hinted in the more overtly comical—as well as frankly sexual—tales of fat rabbis. The incarnational perspective—the turn to the flesh—can and does take many forms in late antiquity but it cannot evade the plunge into abjection precisely because late ancient incarnationalism is transcendental in its aspirations—

55. Palladius, *Lausiaca History* (trans. Meyer), 47–48.

56. Palladius, *Lausiaca History* (trans. Meyer), 48.

as the excessive bodies of the first human and the final resurrection also attest. What is reached for is something that exceeds the classically beautiful body, the contained body, the controlled body of a prior cultural imagination—in part by driving that classic body to, and beyond, its limits.⁵⁷ In an effort to demonstrate his incorruptibility, El‘azar spills his guts. (It is our exceeding brokenness, not our wholeness, that defends us from impurity—to paraphrase a rabbinic dictum.) Having achieved the heights of holiness marked by the gift of healing, Benjamin becomes incurably fat. (His boundless flesh matches his boundless grace—as bishop Dioscorus notes.) There is an excess of carnality where the divine spirit falls.

IN CONCLUSION: DREAMING BIG

In late antiquity, “dreams formed a distinctive pattern of imagination which brought visual presence and tangibility to such abstract concepts as time, cosmic history, the soul, and the identity of one’s self,” writes Miller. “Dreams were tropes that allowed the world . . . to be represented.”⁵⁸ In the *Timaeus*, the “distinctive pattern of imagination” associated with the tropic fecundity of dreams is attributed to their groundless ground, which Plato names *khora*. Such abyssal imagistic abundance is also manifest, I am suggesting, in certain patristic and rabbinic texts that seem to exceed both the abstract and the literal, generating worlds of story and image that lend “visual presence and tangibility” to what could not otherwise be perceived by either the senses or the intellect—“the flow at the heart of things.” Call it *khora*, *tehom*, or even a “bastard” *logos*, if you like. “Call it a God if you wish.”⁵⁹ Call it carnal excess. As Patricia Cox Miller, as much as anyone, has taught us, the late ancient imagination was tuned to the intensely incarnational, in which the presence of spirit was also discerned. The transcendence of flesh, the flesh of transcendence: the boundless is too big to grasp. But we can dream, we can try to imagine . . .

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57. Note my slight but perhaps significant difference at this point with Boyarin’s *Carnal Israel*, 215: I see no classic body in the Talmudic text, as even Rabbi Yohanan is placed in the line-up of gargantuan rabbis.

58. Patricia Cox Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity: Studies in the Imagination of a Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

59. I here quote Julia Kristeva, only slightly out of context, I think. “Stabat Mater,” trans. León S. Roudiez, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 184–85.