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Early Christian Mystagogy and the Body

Edited by

Nienke Vos and Paul van Geest

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Let's Get Physical

Ignatius of Antioch and Judith Butler

Peter-Ben Smit

I. Introduction

Olivia Newton-John's "Physical" (1981) tickles the imagination with lyrics such as "Let's get physical, physical / I want to get physical / Let's get into physical / Let me hear your body talk, your body talk." Yet early Christian bodies are often remarkably silent, even if bodies obviously played a key role in early Christian initiation: no rituals without bodies; no ascetism without bodies, for instance. In fact, even when they are present, bodies have a tendency to disappear in early Christian studies, and even more so in the adjacent field of New Testament studies.

The body of Jesus, for instance, disappears into the grave and rises only to be submerged again in a discussion about its own risen reality; the bodies of Jesus' followers disappear behind texts, the body at the Eucharistic banquet is frequently invisible.¹ Also, the conceptualization of the body, questions as to what one is and is not allowed to do with it, and the assemblies of early Christian bodies vanish into debates about the social and ethical ideals of representatives of the early Jewish sect of Christ devotees. Discussions of physicality and its fundamental role for early Christian communities are few and far between, excepting research into ascetism, gender and the body, which is probably more developed in patristics than in New Testament studies. I would like to see some change in this respect. The reason for entertaining this wish is simple: early Christianity is all about bodies: the body of Christ, the

¹ See for a study of Paul as a theologian of the body in 1 Corinthians 11: Peter-Ben Smit, "Het lichaam van Christus aan tafel: Paulus van Tarsus en Judith Butler in Korinthe," in *Rond de tafel: Maaltijd vieren in liturgische context*, ed. Mirella Klomp, Peter-Ben Smit, and Iris Speckmann, Meander 17 (Heeswijk-Dinter: Abdij van Berne, 2018), 47-59; revised and translated as "The Resurrection of the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 11: Paul as a Theologian of the Body in Conversation with Judith Butler," *Lectio Difficilior* 2019:1, http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/19_1/pdf/smit_peter_ben_the_resurrection_of_the_body_of_christ%20.pdf (accessed 27 May 2020).

bodies of people who interact with Christ and with each other, and beyond that: communication is about bodies and bodily actions. In order to help effect this change, I will draw on a theoretician who has recently discussed the expressive dimension of physical bodies at somewhat greater and thought-provoking length: Judith Butler in her recent *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.² In this book, Butler argues for the added value of the physical dimension of assemblies. The word assembly evokes a key notion in Ignatius of Antioch's work, that of the Eucharistic body, participation in which has a clear mystagogical function. Simultaneously, Ignatius' own body is the site of an intense and initiatory encounter with Christ through the prolonged process of martyrdom that he is engaged in, all the way to Rome. This also has initiatory value.³

This contribution will argue that Butler's theory of the physical is an aid for understanding the way in which the *communio* between Ignatius and the churches that he writes to (an exchange that is intended to further their mutual relationship and their relationship to Christ) is constituted both by the physicality of the persons involved and by the physicality of the Eucharist they all (physically) partake of. This approach is encouraged by observations such as Schoedel's that "the various channels of physical and spiritual nourishment are not sharply distinguished by Ignatius or by those to whom he writes."⁴ Thus new light will be shed on the physical aspect of the mystagogical dimensions of Ignatius' letters to

² Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Smit, "Lichaam" / "Resurrection" contains presentations of Butler's views similar to the presentation in this essay. The association of Butler's work with early Christianity is indebted to a discussion with Marco de Waard of Amsterdam University College.

³ Cf. the exploration of this in Peter-Ben Smit, "Mystagogy and Martyrdom in Ignatius of Antioch," in *Seeing through the Eyes of Faith: New Approaches to the Mystagogy of the Church Fathers*, ed. Paul van Geest, LAHR 11; *The Mystagogy of the Church Fathers 2* (Louvain: Peeters, 2016), 593-607.

⁴ Cf. William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1985), 141; the full comment there is on the work of the deacons: "He reminds the deacons that their work has other dimensions: they are deacons of the 'mysteries' of Jesus Christ and 'servants of the Church'. Mysteries may refer to the word of God (cf. 1 Cor 4:1, compare Phil 1:1), but Ignatius may also have had the eucharist in mind since deacons are soon found distributing the bread and wine (Justin, *Apol.* 1.65.7; 1.67.5, cf. <http://earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-firstapology.html>). Such a development was natural in a setting where a variety of links obtained between the eucharist, common meals and charity. In any event, the various channels of physical and spiritual nourishment are not sharply distinguished by Ignatius or by those to whom he writes. The solidarity of the community itself was experienced as the fundamental spiritual reality."

the communities that he writes to. In addition, the heuristic value of Butler's proposal, developed with twenty-first century political movements in mind, will be tested on a historical case.

After outlining key aspects of Butler's thought, I will explore its potential for highlighting overlooked aspects of one of Ignatius' letters, that to the Trallians (for which I accept the commonly assumed early date).⁵ A broader exploration of the Ignatian epistles would be inviting, but it appears that the analysis of one letter already suffices to demonstrate the fruitfulness of the approach pursued here; moreover, a discussion of the full corpus of letters would go widely beyond the available space.

II. Judith Butler: Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly

The starting point of Butler's *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* is the role of physical assemblies during the past few years, especially in the context of the Arab spring. Her central thesis concerning the physical body and the assembly is that "Assemblies of physical bodies have an expressive dimension that cannot be reduced to speech, for the very fact of people gathering 'says' something without always relying on speech."⁶ In this way, public space is always shaped in an embodied way and bodies are always communicative bodies. To some extent, this is obvious: when I think of the day I attended the funeral of the scholar of early Christianity Professor Tjitze Baarda (1932-2017) prior to delivering this paper at the

⁵ Cf., for example, the judgement of Eginhard Meijering, *Geschiedenis van het vroege christendom: Van de jood Jezus van Nazareth tot de Romeinse keizer Constantijn* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2004), 162; *The Apostolic Fathers. Volume I: I Clement. II Clement. Ignatius. Polycarp. Didache*, ed. and trans. Bart D. Ehrman, LCL 24 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 212-213, whose edition and translation of the letters is also followed here. See also the excellent and nuanced discussion of the dating and other introductory matters by Jonathon Lookadoo, *The High Priest and the Temple: Metaphorical Depictions of Jesus in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament II*/473 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 15-24, see also the extensive review, especially of the various recensions (short, middle and longer) of the Ignatian letters, of Markus Vinzent, "Ignatius of Antioch: A Mysterious Martyr," in idem, *Writing the History of Early Christianity: From Reception to Retrospection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 266-464. See for a different view e.g. Walter Schmithals, "Zu Ignatius von Antiochien," *ZAC* 13 (2009): 181-203. N.B. the work of Lookadoo and Vinzent appeared too late to be considered fully in this study.

⁶ Butler, *Notes*, thesis on the book jacket.

CPO conference: being there physically communicated something else than just sending my condolences would have.⁷

In Butler's essay, the body is continuously linked to the notion of precariousness, specifically as the locus of its experience, in the sense of

that politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence, to street or domestic violence, or other forms not enacted by states but for which the judicial instruments of states fail to provide sufficient protection or redress.⁸

The public assembly of bodies – in the social and political sense of the word, to be sure – is the main topic of her work. The repertoire of performativity, including notions of performative space and the performing body, that Butler developed in her earlier work is key to her analysis of the assembly. She argues that “performativity characterizes first and foremost that characteristic of linguistic utterances that in the moment of making the utterance makes something happen or brings some phenomenon into being.”⁹ The performing body and the performance of the body are central to the performance of relationships, in particular of relationships of power at large. As such, the body and its performance are also the locus of precariousness. On the occasion of a public assembly, such precarious bodies, connecting with each other, can become “an embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political.”¹⁰ In fact, such an assembly makes visible the claim to, and in doing so actually claims and exercises, all sorts of rights that may have been denied to these precarious bodies. This includes the right to mobility and association (or, if no assembly can take place: the lack of such freedoms).

⁷ This resonates not just with Butler's thought, but also with that of Rowan Williams, who has similarly dwelled recently on the physicality of communication, though he approaches it from the other side: the use of language and speech. According to him, the body implicates a person in a more inextricable way in communication than “mere” speech or thought could – as if this could exist apart from the body! In particular, he refers to the “acknowledgment of our bodiliness, the fact that we do not speak from a safe distance above and beyond the flesh but in the whole of our physical presence, whether we are ‘literally’ speaking or not.” See: Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 155.

⁸ Alexis Bushnell, “Book Review: *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* by Judith Butler,” <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/book-review-notes-toward-a-performative-theory-of-assembly-by-judith-butler/> (accessed 1 October 2017).

⁹ Butler, *Notes*, 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

Freedom of assembly only really exists when a physical assembly as such happens; this widely surpasses the theoretical right of assembly. This is also of key importance for the embodiment of gender, given that precisely those who, usually involuntarily, embody non-hegemonic genders, be they non-hegemonic masculinities, femininity, or any (other) kind of queer identity, are usually the bodies that make up such public assemblies. Gender, therefore, is a key element in the dynamics of the public assembly of bodies, but is not its only characteristic; in fact, gender politics is broader than just gender. As a reviewer of Butler's book commented, "questions surrounding which humans count as human and are eligible to appear, what justice is, what we call those who do not and cannot appear as 'subjects' within hegemonic discourse, how the excluded appear and the living and social conditions of agency"¹¹ are among the issues raised by an assembly and the collective and connected presence of bodies in the public sphere. A similar issue that is raised in this physical manner is that of being seen and of seeing others. From the perspective of the powers that be, precarious bodies ought not to be seen in public, given their non-hegemonic and therefore private character, and even if they are seen, they are subjected to and determined by the dominant point of view, the gaze of those in power. However, bodies that appear in public can also publicly observe others, return the gaze, as it were, and this quite publicly and visibly. Butler uses the example of filming police actions in this context. In this manner, people in the street can influence visualization themselves, thus gaining agency. In her dialogue with the work of Hannah Arendt in significant sections of her own book, Butler criticizes Arendt, especially for not sufficiently considering the role of power in relationships, but she also takes an important cue from her:

Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us, or indeed, among us. So this is not a matter of finding the human dignity within each person, but rather of understanding the human as a relational and social being, one whose action depends upon equality and articulates the principle of equality ... The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together, or rather, when through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being.¹²

¹¹ Bushnell, "Book Review: *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* by Judith Butler."

¹² Butler, *Notes*, 89.

Freedom, of any kind, therefore virtually always has a physical dimension and exists in relation to (physical) others.¹³ On this note, I will cut short my discussion of Butler and turn to Ignatius, in particular to his *Letter to the Trallians*. I will look for aspects of bodiliness that stand out more clearly against the background of Butler's considerations, looking in particular for gender in relation to the bodily assembly.

III. Bodies in Ignatius' *Letter to the Trallians*

When reading Ignatius' *Letter to the Trallians* while looking out for bodies and bodiliness, a number of aspects stand out. These have to do with: (1) the relationship and communication between Ignatius and the Trallians; (2) the relationship and communication of the Trallians with each other; (3) the relationship and communication between Ignatius and Christ.

I. *Ignatius and Polybius – Ignatius and the Trallians*

A first text in which physicality and communication play an important role concerns *episkopos* Polybius' visit to Ignatius while the latter is *en route* for Rome and is staying in Smyrna. Tralles itself is not on Ignatius' route to Rome, and the Trallian bishop has therefore taken a lot of trouble to reach Ignatius and visit him in person. Ignatius comments on this in terms that underline bodiliness.¹⁴

First, he notices that Polybius "showed me" (ἐδήλωσέν μοι, *Trall.* 1.1) the blameless way of thinking and the unwavering endurance of the Trallians (Ἀμωμον διάνοιαν καὶ ἀδιάκριτον ἐν ὑπομονῇ ἔργων ὑμᾶς ἔχοντας, *Trall.* 1.1). In fact, he communicates that he "saw your entire congregation in him" (τὸ πᾶν πληθὸς ὑμῶν ἐν αὐτῷ θεωρεῖσθαι, *Trall.* 1.1).¹⁵ This

¹³ See also Williams' emphasis on responsiveness in *The Edge of Words*, passim; that language is a reaction to something is a key part of communication.

¹⁴ For this and the following, see also Allan Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch and the Second Sophistic: A Study of an Early Christian Transformation of Pagan Culture*, Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity 36 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 179 (and his entire argument on "typology" and embodiment; a term not used by him – in fact, the body as such is remarkably absent in his study): "The churches welcomed his procession and sent representative figures to join it. Those representative figures bore *in their flesh* [emphasis added] the τύποι of the Christian cult effecting their unity with the divine and creating a common identity thus expressed ..."

¹⁵ As also stressed by Allan Brent, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order: Concepts and Images of Authority in Paganism and Early Christianity before the Age of Cyprian*, VCS 45 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 219.

stressing of the visual aspect strongly suggests that the physical presence of Polybius demonstrates both the quality of the Trallian *ekklesia* and the representation of the Trallians through the company of his body. Without a body it is hard to “see” someone. One can also wonder whether the joint rejoicing that Ignatius reports (*Trall* 1.1: *μοι συνεχάρη δεδεμένω ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ*) is related to the arrival of Polybius only. In fact, the rejoicing together seems to be the way in which Ignatius recognizes the entire congregation (*πᾶν πλῆθος*) of the Trallians in their *episkopos* (cf. *ὥστε* in 1.1).

Second, somewhat later on in the letter, Ignatius returns to the subject of Polybius’ presence and again comments on some of its physical aspects. In *Trall*. 3.2, Ignatius refers to him as the *ἐξεμπλᾶριον τῆς ἀγάπης ὑμῶν*, which can be rendered (as Ehrman does) as “the embodiment of your love.” Even when a translation is used that places less stress on bodiliness, the fact that the *κατάστημα* (*Trall*. 3.2), that is the behaviour or “deportment,” of Polybius is singled out as a “great lesson” to Ignatius shows that physical presence is what is meant here.¹⁶

All this emphasis on bodies that meet each other also achieves something else: it transforms space. When reading the letter, it is easy to forget at times that Ignatius writes from a situation of imprisonment. Yet this is very much the case – he also states it in his opening lines (cf. the self-description in *Trall*. 1.1: *δεδεμένω ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ*). The space of the prison – whatever its physical form may have been in Smyrna – is transformed and reinterpreted by the bodily meeting of Ignatius and Polybius. Precarious as Ignatius’ body in particular may be, together they reclaim the space of the prison (both as a physical and as a social space) and their performance of the right to assemble creates a communion not just between them, but between Ignatius and all the Trallians, which is a source of encouragement for Ignatius.

In this sense, the letter to the Trallians and Polybius, who likely also served as the bearer of the letter, have a sacramental function. Conybeare has described this function of letters well with reference to the correspondence between Paulinus of Nola and Augustine of Hippo, when she referred to “the primary purpose of the letter” as “to serve as a tangible sign of an invisible communion between writer and recipient,” also explicitly mentioning the sacramentality of the letter in this context.¹⁷

¹⁶ See for a different view: Mikael Isacson, *To Each Their Own Letter: Structure, Themes, and Rhetorical Strategies in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, Coniectanea Biblica. New Testament Series 42 (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 2004), 108–109.

¹⁷ Catherine Conybeare, *Paulinus Noster: Self and Symbols in the Letters of Paulinus of Nola* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 55.

2. *Ignatius and the Trallian Bodies in Tralles*

A second way in which bodies play a role in Ignatius' letter to the Trallians has to do with his comments on the internal affairs of the Trallian community. It is in this regard that Ignatius makes some of his best-known remarks on the social coherence of the community and the activities that its members undertake. For instance, in 2.2 he states that one should do nothing without the bishop (ἄνευ τοῦ ἐπισκόπου μηδὲν πράσσειν). Whereas this can be understood in a very generic sense, it appears from other texts, such as *Magn.* 6–7 and *Smyrn.* 8 (*passim* and esp. ἐκείνη βεβαία εὐχαριστία ἡγείσθω ἢ ὑπὸ ἐπίσκοπον οὔσα ἢ ᾧ ἂν αὐτὸς ἐπιτρέψῃ),¹⁸ that cultic activities, that is, the (Eucharistic) liturgy, are intended here. The remarks in *Trall.* 7.2: “the one who is inside the sanctuary is pure but the one outside the sanctuary is not pure” (ὁ ἐντὸς θυσιαστηρίου ὢν καθαρὸς ἐστὶν ὁ δὲ ἐκτὸς θυσιαστηρίου ὢν οὐ καθαρὸς ἐστὶν – see also the continuation: τοῦτ' ἐστὶν ὁ χωρὶς ἐπισκόπου καὶ πρεσβυτερίου καὶ διακόνων πράσων τι οὗτος οὐ καθαρὸς ἐστὶν τῇ συνειδήσει – “This means that the one who does anything apart from the bishop, the presbytery, and the deacons is not pure in conscience”) also suggest this. Ignatius is likely using a metaphor here, or, even more likely, extending what is valid for the liturgy – for him arguably the core activity of the Church both empirically and theologically – to other aspects of the life of the Church. All ritual involves bodies and the shaping of space through them, and this also applies to these remarks. Only bodies operating in communication and conjunction with – and in submission to – each other can validly constitute the Church.

The point of this is that through this physically gathered and ordered community of human beings, salvific communion with God becomes possible. Ignatius indicates this in different ways, for instance by means of visual imagery in *Trall.* 3, where the bishop is called the τύπος of the Father, while the comparisons relating to the *diakonoι* and the *presbyteroi* of the Trallian community in this section also invite visualization. Again, for someone to function as an image, physical presence is required, otherwise this kind of signification will not work, or it will work only partially. The reverse also occurs in *Trallians*: the readers are to keep their physical distance from “heretics” (cf. 6–7), be deaf (9, Κωφώθητε) when someone confesses “heresies,” and flee such people (cf. 11, Φεύγετε).

¹⁸ Cf. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 140.

These and other texts could be discussed in more detail, but the main question is: how does this contribute to understanding Ignatius' way of thinking? I would like to offer the following observations. First, as gatherings of bodies, certainly in a liturgical setting, imply the occupation of space, either wholly publicly (Butler's focus) or semi-publicly (as meals in Antiquity can best be described), authentic faith for Ignatius exists only when it is embodied in physical communion with others. This may also be one reason why he values the presence of Polybius so much. As is clear from Ignatius' remarks on the subject, this social space is also subject to interpretation, in this case in terms of embodied soteriology (that is, ecclesiology). As Schoedel rightly points out, the basis for this can be found in the passion: "A community based on the passion is a community that stands united (with the bishop and with one another ...) in the face of a hostile world."¹⁹

This leads me to the following observation: physical communion such as this – and this is an aspect that Butler emphasizes to a lesser extent – also implies (social and physical) discipline and, although assembled bodies always claim freedom and rights, they also create mutual interdependence and, therefore, restrict freedom, or so it would seem. This has both physical and noetic aspects: the bodies create a space which is demarcated both physically and mentally, as meaning is attributed to it. This thought can, in fact, also be reversed: if assembling as a community means acquiring freedom and rights communally, then to separate oneself from this community (and its inherent structures) is also to lose such freedoms and rights as may have been acquired. Does Ignatius' emphasis on submission to the bishop, unpleasant as it sounds, in actual fact not enhance freedom-in-communion because it furthers the freedom achieved through physical assembly?

In addition, it is necessary to examine Brent's thesis on Ignatius' journey towards Rome in terms of the procession of a martyr, possibly (or according to Brent: probably) mimicking ritual as it was practiced in the context of Greco-Roman (imperial and/or mystery) cults.²⁰ A full discussion of Brent's proposal cannot be offered here, but attention should be

¹⁹ Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 140-141.

²⁰ Cf. Brent, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order*, 210-250; for a more reluctant view that constructively receives some of Brent's key insights, see: Katharina Waldner, "Letters and Messengers: The Construction of Christian Space in the Roman Empire in the Epistles of Ignatius of Antioch," in *The Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity, and Other Greco-Roman Religions in Antiquity*, ed. Ian H. Henderson and Gerbern S. Oegema, Studien zu den Jüdischen Schriften aus Hellenistisch-Römischer Zeit (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 72-86.

given in particular to its relevance for *Trall.* 12.1: Ἀσπάζομαι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ Σμύρνης ἅμα ταῖς συμπαρούσαις μοι ἐκκλησίαις τοῦ θεοῦ, οἱ κατὰ πάντα με ἀνέπαυσαν σαρκί τε καὶ πνεύματι (“I greet you from Smyrna, along with the churches of God that are present with me and that have refreshed me in every way, in both flesh and spirit”), which can be understood as meaning that Ignatius is accompanied on his “procession” into the arena by the “churches of God” that are with him by means of the physical presence of persons from these churches. Their physical presence connects Ignatius with these churches and they now also greet the Trallians through these representatives.²¹ Just as these churches are represented physically to Ignatius, Ignatius himself represents Christ to them, precisely in his physicality, in his bodily suffering in imitation of Christ. This is probably most apparent in Ignatius’ use of himself as an example and his reflection on himself in *Trall.* 3.3–5.2:

<p>3.2. ἀγαπῶν ὑμᾶς φείδομαι, συντονώτερον δυνάμενος γράφειν ὑπὲρ τούτου. οὐκ εἰς τοῦτο ᾤήθη, ἵνα ὦν κατάκριτος ὡς ἀπόστολος ὑμῖν διατάσσωμαι.</p>	<p>3.2. I am sparing you out of love, though I could write more sharply about this matter. But I have not thought that I, a condemned man, should give you orders like an apostle.</p>
<p>4.1. Πολλὰ φρονῶ ἐν θεῷ, ἀλλ’ ἐμαυτὸν μετρῶ, ἵνα μὴ ἐν καυχῇσει ἀπόλωμαι. νῦν γὰρ με δεῖ πλέον φοβεῖσθαι καὶ μὴ προσέχειν τοῖς φυσιοῦσιν με. οἱ γὰρ λέγοντές μοι μαστιγοῦσίν με.</p>	<p>4.1. I am thinking many things in God, but I take measure of myself so as not to be destroyed by my boasting. For now I must fear all the more and pay no attention to those who make me self-important. For those who speak to me flog me.</p>
<p>4.2. ἀγαπῶ μὲν γὰρ τὸ παθεῖν, ἀλλ’ οὐκ οἶδα, εἰ ἄξιός εἰμι. τὸ γὰρ ζῆλος πολλοῖς μὲν οὐ φαίνεται, ἐμὲ δὲ πλέον πολεμεῖ. χρῆζω οὖν πραότητος, ἐν ᾗ καταλύεται ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου.</p>	<p>4.2. For indeed I love to suffer; but I do not know if I am worthy. For envy is not obvious to many, but it is escalating its war against me. And so I need humility, by which the ruler of this age is destroyed.</p>
<p>5.1. Μὴ οὐ δύναμαι ὑμῖν τὰ ἐπουράνια γράψαι; ἀλλὰ φοβοῦμαι, μὴ νηπίοις οὔσιν ὑμῖν βλάβην παραθῶ· καὶ συγγνωμονεῖτέ μοι, μήποτε οὐ δυνηθέντες χωρῆσαι στραγγαλωθῆτε.</p>	<p>5.1 Am I not able to write to you about heavenly things? But I am afraid that I may harm you who are still infants. Grant me this concession – otherwise you may choke, not being able to swallow enough.</p>

²¹ Cf. Brent, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order*, 228, see also idem, *Ignatius of Antioch and the Second Sophistic*, 41–230, cf. Waldner, “Letters and Messengers,” 80.

<p>5.2. καὶ γὰρ ἐγώ, οὐ καθότι δέδεμαι καὶ δύναμαι νοεῖν τὰ ἐπουράνια καὶ τὰς τοποθεσίας τὰς ἀγγελικὰς καὶ τὰς συστάσεις τὰς ἀρχοντικάς, ὁρατὰ τε καὶ ἀόρατα, παρὰ τοῦτο ἤδη καὶ μαθητῆς εἰμι. πολλὰ γὰρ ἡμῖν λείπει, ἵνα θεοῦ μὴ λειπώμεθα.</p>	<p>5.2. For not even I am a disciple already, simply because I am in bondage and am able to understand the heavenly realms and the angelic regions and hierarchies of the cosmic rulers, both visible and invisible. For many things are still lacking to us, that we may not be lacking God.</p>
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The same is true for Ignatius' concluding salutation in 12.1-3, with its references to the "flesh and the spirit" (12.1); the "chains" (12.2) and the indication of Ignatius' upcoming martyrdom (12.3); this can be unpacked further, as well as Ignatius' opening salutation. In the latter, he speaks of being refreshed (*ἀνέπαυσαν*) in body and spirit (*σαρκί τε καὶ πνεύματι*, *Trall.* 1.1; assuming that this text is part of *Trall.*). This is an interesting remark, I believe, because apparently the communion between him and the Trallians through Polybius and the letter has had an effect not only on Ignatius' spirit (as one might expect), but also on his body. The fellowship among them is, therefore, also physical in nature. Moreover, Ignatius mentions his body even prior to mentioning his spirit when he speaks about being refreshed. As Nicklas has suggested in relation to *Eph.* 2.2 (*κατὰ πάντα με ἀνέπαυσεν* – relating to Crocus' ministry to Ignatius), this refreshment may well have included the provision of food.²²

Furthermore, Ignatius uses a common term for greeting that, in fact, refers to a physical act, *ἀσπάζομαι*, embracing. He does this in *Eph.* 1.1 (*ἀσπάζομαι ἐν τῷ πληρώματι*) and subsequently towards the end of the letter: *Ἀσπάζομαι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ Σμύρνης* (*Eph.* 12.1) and *Ἀσπάζεται ὑμᾶς ἡ ἀγάπη Συμυρναίων καὶ Ἐφεσίων* (*Eph.* 13.1). Even if *ἀσπάζομαι* here has a more generic meaning in terms of "greeting," it is nonetheless noteworthy that Ignatius employs this term and thus at least provides some scope for imagining an embrace, a physical greeting across the distance covered by the letter and its bearer.

3. *Bodies, Suffering and Communion with Christ*

A final instance of assembled bodies that I regard as relevant concerns Ignatius' body in relation to that of his guards and – by extension – the relationship between the bodies of the Trallians in relation to whoever

²² Cf. Tobias Nicklas, "Ancient Christians' Care for Prisoners," in *Perspectives on the Socially Disadvantaged in Early Christianity*, ed. François Tolmie, Acta Theologica Supplementum 23 (Bloemfontein: Faculty of Theology, 2016), 49-65, esp. 58.

is making them suffer (Ignatius seems to think or know that they are suffering). A key text in this regard is *Trall.* 4, in Ehrman's translation:

(1) I am thinking many things in God, but I take measure of myself so as not to be destroyed by my boasting. For now I must fear all the more and pay no attention to those who make me self-important. For those who speak to me flog me. (2) For indeed I love to suffer; but I do know if I am worthy. For envy is not obvious to many, but it is escalating its war against me. And so I need humility, by which the ruler of this age is destroyed.

Here we enter one of the more controversial parts of Ignatius' witness: his somewhat paradoxical emphasis on suffering. Paradoxical, because on the one hand he desires it, as it will bring him closer to Christ, but on the other he is wary of it, given that he constantly doubts whether he is worthy of it, something he will only know when he breathes his last in the arena – or not.

What interests me is how Ignatius perceives the relationship between his body and the bodies of his guards – of those who are inflicting suffering upon him, here in the shape of flogging. Flogging obviously implies physical proximity, so we may interpret Ignatius' journey in chains together with his guards as yet another instance of assembled bodies. As in the case of the community in Tralles, this fellowship established through assembled bodies and the manner in which these relate to each other is also subject to interpretation. The perspective of Ignatius' guards is not made explicit in the text, but it is not difficult to make an educated guess: they will have seen their own bodies as dominant, as exercising control over Ignatius's in the name of the emperor, and the flogging is an expression of this dominance. Ignatius, however, subversively reverses the interpretative gaze, creating a hidden discourse in the relative privacy of his letters, and thus "off stage," invisible to the public sphere; a discourse that reveals the true meaning of his predicament, that is, true from Ignatius' perspective, in which he makes his readers (or the "audience" of his letters, as they were likely read aloud in assembly) complicit. The guards' treatment of him brings him closer to Christ, in fact, it may be that "those who make me self-important" are the very guards that are flogging him. If I understand him correctly, Ignatius needs to learn humility vis-à-vis his flogging, not by means of his flogging! In fact, he needs to learn humility in order to be or remain worthy of the flogging (*Trall.* 4.2, cf. 12.3).²³ Like other kinds

²³ Cf. in general also the argument of Gregory Vall, *Learning Christ: Ignatius of Antioch and the Mystery of Redemption* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 155, who notes that it is all about the sanctification of the flesh, i.e. of the concrete, enfleshed existence that needs to be oriented in a particular way in order to

of suffering, for Ignatius, the flogging is an expression of adherence to Christ, of experiencing fellowship with Christ by means of sharing in a suffering that is similar to Christ's and on behalf of Christ.²⁴

The backdrop to all of this is his belief that Jesus Christ "was truly crucified and died" (*Trall.* 9.1) and it explains why he has such an abhorrence of "Docetism."²⁵ He substantiates this rejection as follows in *Trall.* 10:

But if, as some who are atheists – that is, unbelievers – say, that he only appeared to suffer (it is they who are the appearance), why am I in bondage, and why also do I pray to fight the wild beasts? I am then dying in vain and am, even more, lying about the Lord.

He also applies this view of suffering, in which to suffer is to be incorporated into Christ, to the Trallians: "through the cross, by his suffering he calls you who are the parts of his body" ("Thus, the head cannot be born without the other parts, because God promises unity") (*Trall.* 11). Understood and interpreted in this way, suffering is quasi-sacramental: Christ's own suffering is his means of calling the faithful to become his members (ἐν τῷ πάθει αὐτοῦ προσκαλεῖται ὑμᾶς ὄντας μέλη αὐτοῦ, *Trall.* 11.2), and experiencing suffering in a faithful and humble manner is a means of experiencing communion with Christ.²⁶

All of this rests on a bold reinterpretation of the otherwise unpleasant physical proximity of Ignatius' and the Trallians' tormentors (however distinct these may be). Yet bodiliness is a precondition for this reinterpretation. By stating that he both loves to suffer and needs to do so humbly,

remain on the road towards salvation. Carl B. Smith, "Ministry, Martyrdom, and Other Mysteries: Pauline Influence on Ignatius of Antioch," in *Paul and the Second Century*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Joseph R. Dodson, Library of New Testament Studies 412 (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), 37-56, does discuss martyrdom, but hardly bodiliness. This is very different in Finbarr G. Clancy, "Imitating the Mysteries That You Celebrate: Martyrdom and Eucharist in the Early Patristic Period," in *The Great Persecution: Proceedings of the Fifth Patristic Conference, Maynooth, 2003*, ed. Vincent Twomey and Mark Humphries (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 106-140, who shows the broad relationship between incarnation, sacramental physicality and the physicality of the martyrs' witness.

²⁴ Cf. also the general outline in Smit, "Mystagogy and Martyrdom in Ignatius of Antioch," and cf. especially Gillian Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, Key Themes in Ancient History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 38-59.

²⁵ For a brief treatment of this, in the context of Ignatius' emphasis on following the way of the cross, see: Tobias Nicklas, "Leid, Kreuz und Kreuzesnachfolge bei Ignatius von Antiochien," in *Gelitten – Gestorben – Auferstanden: Passions- und Ostertraditionen im antiken Christentum*, ed. Tobias Nicklas, Andreas Merkt, and Joseph Verheyden, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament II/273 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 267-298, esp. 280-283.

²⁶ Cf. with this emphasis also Romulus D. Stefanut, "Eucharistic Theology in the Martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch," *Studia Patristica* 73 (2013): 39-47.

Ignatius turns the tables of what ought to be an unpleasant physical experience on his torturers. In doing so, he reclaims agency and, thereby, reorders the social space that comes into being through the fact of being assembled with his guards.²⁷ In doing so, Ignatius does more than pursuing “the most excessive form of imitation of the gods,”²⁸ rather, he turns the tables on those who seem to control him by envisioning his ordeal as martyrdom rather than punishment.²⁹

IV. Ignatius’ Love of Suffering as a Way of Reclaiming Masculinity?

In this context, the question of gender also needs to be raised. As Butler has pointed out, (physical) presence and the possibility of appearing in the public space is always gendered. This was no different in the ancient world, where the “outside” tended to be gendered masculine and the “inside” feminine (see for instance the positioning of Thecla on a windowsill, between the inside and the outside as she hears Paul preach in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, cf. *Act. Paul.* 2). Without wishing to rehearse the entire discourse on hegemonic masculinities here, it is worth noting that key elements are autonomy, self-control and, ideally, control of others. As Maier has observed in relation to the “silent bishop” in Ignatius’ letters: “The bishop of Philadelphia is the perfect gentleman who manifests all the self-control of speech and character of the carefully self-regulated ancient male urged upon his pagan contemporaries.”³⁰ It is obvious that Ignatius’ situation as a prisoner who is apparently also being flogged (cf. *Trall.* 4.1-2), a shameful and humiliating treatment, clearly involved the surrender of his own body to the control of others.³¹

²⁷ As Henk A. Bakker, *Exemplar Domini: Ignatius of Antioch and His Martyriological Self-Concept* (diss. Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2003), 172-173, puts it well: “[N]either the executioner nor the beasts have the initiative, but Ignatius himself. He gives the impression that he alone is orchestrating [the] bizarre spectacle.” See similarly: Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, 38-59.

²⁸ As Anders Klostergaard Petersen, “Attaining Divine Perfection through Different Forms of Imitation,” *Numen* 60 (2013): 7-38, esp. 35, has it.

²⁹ Cf. also the emphasis placed by Timothy McDonnell on the urgency of the question as to how he would die for Ignatius, “Ignatius of Antioch: Death Wish or Last Request of a Condemned Man?,” *Studia Patristica* 45 (2010): 385-389.

³⁰ Harry O. Maier, “The Politics of the Silent Bishop: Silence and Persuasion in Ignatius of Antioch,” *JTS* 55 (2004): 503-519.

³¹ Cf. representatively: Jennifer A. Glancy, “Boasting of Beatings (2 Corinthians 11:23-25),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123 (2004): 99-135, esp. 108-113.

Ignatius' rhetoric concerning the body, in particular his own suffering and subjected body, can be further understood against the background of this ancient discourse on masculinity. Especially its deeply subversive character is highlighted in this way, and its gendered nature becomes more apparent. What Ignatius achieves is, quite simply, a total reversal of perspective and hence a total reinterpretation of his role. Rather than agreeing with the role imposed on him, i.e., that of a prisoner who is to be thrown to the wild beasts in the Roman arena, he presents himself as a faithful follower of Christ, a bishop who speaks (and writes) with authority. He appears as a highly masculine figure, therefore, because such a role would be gendered masculine in Antiquity. In this way, he casts those who accompany him and those he visits as participants in his triumphal journey to what others will see as his ultimate undoing, but which he views, if all goes well, as the crowning achievement of his life. The manner in which Ignatius achieves this is by interpreting everything he undergoes in terms of, on the one hand, identification with the suffering Christ, and on the other, of a struggle (ἀγών) that will test his faithfulness and by his endurance of which he will demonstrate this faithfulness, thus both setting an inspiring and exhortatory example and successfully achieving his own salvation. In terms of gender, Ignatius moves from a "feminized" or "unmasculine" position back to one that conforms to hegemonic ideals concerning masculinity in the ancient world. However, this kind of gendered beauty exists quite clearly only in the eye of the beholder: for others who do not share Ignatius' Christocentric perspective, there is little here to convince them. Yet in operating as he does, Ignatius carves out a space for an alternative view of masculinity in Christ, in which social marginalization and physical humiliation can be integrated. This may have been just as attractive and empowering to him as it may have been to other Christ devotees who were marginalized due to their faith.

V. Bodies and Mystagogy?

Is there anything mystagogical about Ignatius' comments on bodies and physical experiences in his *Letter to the Trallians*? I would propose that there is. Three aspects stand out in particular. They have to do with the second and third points of discussion above, regarding Ignatius and the Trallian bodies in Tralles, and with the theme of bodies, suffering and communion with Christ. So far, I cannot see many mystagogical elements in the "physical" encounter between Polybius and Ignatius.

Concerning the bodies of the Trallian faithful: physically belonging together and acting in physical harmony, an idea that is probably liturgical in nature but is extended, as it were, to other parts of the life of the Trallian community, is key to existence in general, and to growth in existence in Christ in particular. Bodies are needed to enter into communion with Christ through communion with others, around the bishop. Accordingly, the creation of a new social space “in Christ,” and entering this space, means on the one hand claiming freedom and rights, such as the right to assemble, and on the other it also means (physical) submission to each other, and thus a (voluntary and intentional) limitation of such freedom. In other words: true freedom implies a certain kind of asceticism, if it is to be a freedom-in-communion.³²

With regard to suffering bodies, both Ignatius’ and others’, the suffering itself is a means of growth in Christ, and is in that sense mystagogical. At the same time, Christ’s own physical suffering calls people to become members of his body. Suffering is so important that Ignatius, who was getting a fair share of it, was even worried that he would lose his humility due to this. A substantial reinterpretation of the “assembly” of bodies that leads to inflicting pain and suffering is required, and a shift of (mental) agency from those who are doing the flogging to the one who is undergoing it – the gaze is reverted, in Butler’s terminology – to achieve this effect. Yet, properly suffered suffering is certainly mystagogical in nature. In this case, it is the mind that needs to be disciplined vis-à-vis the physical experience, both by reinterpreting it and by not becoming proud because of it.

Finally, Ignatius also physically represents Christ (and Christ’s suffering) to the Trallian community, and in doing so he acts as a *τύπος* of the divine, which is necessarily embodied. Controversial as this body may be, it nonetheless has an initiatory function, as Brent has noted, given that it represents Christ to the community and thus enables the community to enter into (Ignatius’ understanding of) its identity in Christ.³³

³² Cf. Peter-Ben Smit, “Prayer and Participation in the Eucharist in the Work of Ignatius of Antioch,” in *Prayer and the Transformation of the Self in Early Christian Mystagogy*, ed. Hans van Loon, Giselle de Nie, Michiel Op de Coul, and Peter van Egmond, LAHR 18; *The Mystagogy of the Church Fathers 5* (Louvain: Peeters, 2018), 81-92.

³³ Cf. Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch and the Second Sophistic*, 206: “There are in the Christian mysteries no painted, carven, or molten images ... Yet ... the basic form of his understanding of the Eucharist was that of a mystery drama with Christian clerics assigned a function and role. ... The individual drama of replay, re-enacted on the Day of the Sun’s

VI. Conclusions

This brings me to the end of my exploration of Ignatius' *Letter to the Trallians*, read with Judith Butler's considerations on the body in mind. All that is left is to draw a few conclusions based on this experiment.

A first conclusion is that reading Ignatius' letter in the light of Butler's considerations – and I am sure this applies to other letters by him and can easily be extended to other early Christian writers as well – simply makes one more aware of where bodies are in play. This move towards the physical is, I think, both interesting and promising. So far, scholarship has focused either on the noetic, that is, ideas, concepts, etcetera, or on the social, considering how people relate to each other or should do so, but the physical, whether in terms of human bodies or of other aspects of the physical world, has received less attention. This may, again, be more true for New Testament studies than certain areas of patristics, but it does seem to be true for Ignatius, in whose case physical suffering has received the most attention, but usually only with regard to its theological role (and sometimes as a reason to doubt his sanity).

A second and more specific conclusion is that in the communication between Ignatius and Polybius (especially concerning the visual aspect), in the life of the Trallian community, and in Ignatius' communion with Christ, bodies are of paramount importance. In the first two cases, I do not think this has been stressed sufficiently so far, and in the third case, the interpretative tour de force that Ignatius performs regarding his own physical "assembly" with his guards may also still be able to yield new insights. What is clear in any case is that assembled bodies have added value. Without a physical encounter with Polybius, communication between Ignatius and the Trallians would have been vastly different, life in communion without disciplined physical assembly is an impossibility, and Ignatius' soteriology hinges on his communion with Christ, communicated or mediated through his own physical suffering. Thus, the emphasis on disciplining the body as a prerequisite for living in communion may shed light on an aspect of assembled bodies that Butler has stressed to a lesser extent.

Third, in at least two of the kinds of physical assemblies considered here, those of the Trallians and of Ignatius and his guards, this encounter can be called *mystagogical*, in the sense that it furthers a person's initiation

rising. ... could now be carried over into his martyr cult, with him enacting as *μαθητής* the role of the suffering God, with images of the Roman arena and the Sunday Eucharist fusing into one in the enthusiastic frenzy of his prophetic imagination."

into the mystery of, in this case, Christ. In the former instance, the creation of a shared “social space” is better understood when one realizes that assembling always implies a claim to the (physical) right to do so and, consequently, a certain kind of freedom. The latter situation draws attention to the importance of interpretation and agency when it comes to bodies, their positioning, and their claiming of space. Ignatius makes up his own mind about the kind of assembly and encounter he has with his guards, and in doing so reclaims his body, even if it is being flogged.