Poetics of the Flesh
By M. Rivera (2015)
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Reviewed by Paul J. Griffiths

Mayra Rivera is professor of Religion and Latino/a Studies at Harvard University. This is her second monograph; the first was *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Westminster John Knox, 2007). The work under review here is a study of and a contribution to what its author calls a 'poetics of the flesh'. By this she means 'a view of corporeality woven by its [corporeality's] carnal relations to the world – spiritual, organic, social – describing the folds of body and flesh, flesh and world, body and word' (p. 10). The book, it seems, intends both to depict and to perform this view of corporeality.

The book has three major parts. In the first, Rivera treats Christian theological texts in which flesh (and body) are significant presences. Her principal interlocutors here are the Johannine and Pauline literatures, and Tertullian, principally in his treatises on the flesh of Christ and the resurrection. In the second, she engages philosophical texts, with Maurice Merleau-Ponty as the central presence, but with significant attention also to responses to his work by Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, and Jean-Luc Nancy. In the third, she treats depictions of the symbiosis between social structures and the flesh, with special reference to the work of Frantz Fanon on fleshly/social relations under colonialism, and to the poetry of Aimé Césaire, one of Fanon's objects of critique. Linda Alcoff's work on the social constitution of corporeality is also an important presence in the third part, as is Judith Butler's, on performativity.

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Rivera's prose is allusive, compressed, sometimes beautiful, and consistently resistant to paraphrase. Consider this, in partial summary of the book's first part:

Christian flesh is notoriously susceptible to metamorphosis. Its transformations link humanity to the earth, even if flesh also travels all the way from earth to heaven and back. Definitions of flesh are no more stable than the things they try to define ... the images and terms witness (opaquely and ambivalently) to its Christian origins in earth, word, or womb. (p. 54)

This kind of thing – and there is a lot of it in the book – plays with (but is it playful?) the range of possible meanings of 'Christian flesh' – as synecdoche for 'the locutions that Christians use to talk about flesh', and as referring to the flesh of the baptised, the flesh that belongs to Christians. Mostly, Rivera means the former, or something like it, I think; but sometimes she approaches the latter, and she is studiously careful not to let the reader find in her work the comforts of precision and definition.

Or, consider this, on Césaire's poetry:

The poet [Césaire] takes into himself these powerful (and dangerous) words in order to offer a vision of flesh. He does not present that vision as an absolute, clean, or safe break from racializing ideologies. It is a transformation of ambivalent words. (p. 128)

Rivera, so far as I can tell, approves of this poetic ambition. The form of her own prose, and the allusive, recursive, and repetitive patterns of her thought prevent readers from finding anything 'absolute, clean', and move them, if they stay with her, towards the occupation of a world in which flesh – the material, the particular, the given – is not abandoned or subsumed into body – the abstract, the universal, the intelligible. In the fleshly world Rivera depicts, and in which she encourages her readers to dwell, there are few abstractions and generalities, and those there are find their places as combatants with other, equally imaginary, abstractions. The battle, when its outcome is what Rivera would like it to be, results in the mutual destruction of the combatants and the recovery thereby of the fluid particularities of flesh-in-the-world.

This is a good place to be; it's the place we all find ourselves in; but Rivera's implicit understanding of the place of thought's abstract precisions in that world – the less of it the better – is assumed axiomatically. That axiom impoverishes human existence as much as would its complement – the more of it the better – which would be anathema to Rivera. We are carnal thinkers, the colonised and oppressed as much as all others; poetry and poetics are not the only liberative desires for such as we, and the assump-

tion that they are debilitates the book. It is a mistake to oppose abstraction with particularity, to set 'the God of heaven, as a reservoir of truth, knowledge, and stability' (p. 154) against the God who embraces flesh. They are one and the same.

There is in this book a suspicion of the intellect's capacities, coupled with an awareness of the intellect's potential for theorising the flesh of others into abjection before that of those doing the theorising. This suspicion is justified, and Rivera shows, in her readings, how it works: the flesh of Jews, women, and blacks gets typed as earthy, sinful, less-than-human when juxtaposed to those bodies (not flesh) imagined to be less fleshly, more closely approximate to discarnate existence – the bodies, archetypally, of white men. This is an old story, and perhaps it still needs to be told. Rivera certainly tells it elegantly. What she wants is replacement of the intellect's ambitions for discarnate cognition by attention and consent to the webs of fleshly (not somatic) relations that constitute the fabric of human relations. Those webs, when made into words, require silence and allusion as much as precision and argument. So she thinks. But why make the fleshly and the somatic-intellectual at odds in these ways? Why insist on subordinating one to the other? Why not say, and think, that poesy is one thing and abstraction another, and that each has its peculiar gifts and its peculiar deformities?

Rivera's poetics of the flesh affirms the importance of attention to carnal particularity. This is something that any such poetics should do. Most of what she attends to in this book is the verbal/carnal (*verbum caro factum est*) particularity of texts. And in this there lies a puzzle. Texts like John's Gospel, Tertullian's *De carne Christi*, and Merleau-Ponty's *Le visible et l'invisible* are composed in particular languages (Greek, Latin, French, in these cases), and attention to their carnality, to their poetical acts of making, ought (surely?) to involve attention to their sheer verbal particularity. This would mean close reading of John's lucent and sometimes ponderous Greek, Tertullian's spiky, compressed, and excitable Latin, and Merleau-Ponty's elegant mandarin French. But there is little attention of this kind evident in Rivera's treatment of these texts. Tertullian, for example, is present in Rivera's book mostly in Ernest Evans' English rendering from the 1950s; and Merleau-Ponty mostly in Alphonso Lingis' English version of the 1980s. Does that matter? It wouldn't (much) if Rivera were interested principally in the thought – the conceptual content, the somatic abstractions – of these works. But since she claims concern with their poesy, their fleshly particularity, it matters enormously. It might, for that concern, be the only thing that matters.

Rivera's is in many ways a delightful book, and that's high praise. How many books published by university presses give aesthetic pleasure in the reading? This one does. It's also a suggestive book, moving thought and talk about flesh where it needs to go and where, too often, it refuses to go: towards attention to the social and interpersonal constitution of flesh exactly as such. But it is hampered by its unargued dichotomous dogmatisms, and by its refusal to attend to the poesy of its interlocutors. It cannot, therefore, be taken as a reliable guide to the textual poesy it claims to engage. Rather, it stands or falls upon its own poetical merits, and it is good that these are considerable.