

When the KKK Exegetes: Circulating Hate with 2 Peter

Dong Hyeon Jeong

At the height of the white supremacist “Unite the Right” rally at Charlottesville, Virginia (August 11-12, 2017), Univision’s Ilia Calderón, a Black Afro-Latina immigrant to the United States, interviewed two KKK white knights.ⁱ Among the many racist expressions spewed, they supported their hateful remarks by arguing that 2 Peter commands them not to break bread with the Other.

Although they did not explicitly mention the exact passage, the two KKK white knights seem to be alluding to 2 Peter 2:13c’s warning against the false prophets (the opponents) who target meal gatherings in order to maximize their influence. Aside from this passage, 2 Peter teems with animalizing hateful rhetoric. For example, 2:12 describes the false prophets or “these people” as “irrational animals, mere creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed.” Chapter 2, verse 22 equates the false prophets with “dogs returning to their own vomit, and pigs returning to the mud right after being washed.” 2 Peter writes as such because he feels like the false prophets are threatening his community’s identity and faith tradition.

It seems, then, that the KKK members have found discourses in 2 Peter that are affectively useful in expressing their frustrations. Although 2 Peter does not promote white supremacy and antisemitism, the KKK members have tapped into the letter’s protectionist strategy and applied it to their own. Whether they have heard 2 Peter through sermons, Bible study, or (social) media, what is a relatively obscure text in the New Testament has not only survived, but has circulated its affective capacities throughout the centuries, even in a small rural town in North Carolina, USA.

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How then did this relatively obscure New Testament text capture the hearts and minds of the KKK? How did 2 Peter (unwillingly) become part of the “clobber text”? It was definitely not rigorous biblical exegesis/interpretation in which the historical contexts are cross-examined, let alone a manifestation of close reading of the literary contours of the texts. As felt in the interview with Calderón, the KKK white knights expressed their knowledge of 2 Peter with such bravado not because they are confident in their exegetical skills. Rather, they know that their bravado has emotional effects on the bodies/objects of their hate. Working with Sara Ahmed’s take on affect theory,ⁱⁱ I would argue that the KKK white knights participated consciously or unconsciously in the affective system that circulates and sticks hate onto bodies with biblical passages such as 2 Peter.

As Ahmed writes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, hate does not originate in certain bodies; rather, hate originates from its very circulation among bodies. The more it circulates, the more it becomes affective or “stick to bodies.” This circulation, repetition, or overdetermination of hate then produces a rhetoric of differentiation between “us” versus “them.” Such circulation accumulates by their very repetition, which in turn becomes solidified onto bodies. That is why Ahmed perceives emotion as producing “the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects.”ⁱⁱⁱ



Moreover, Ahmed argues that one hates because one loves: “Hate is generated as a defense against injury.” One hates because one loves oneself, one’s group, one’s ideology, and even one’s faith. 2 Peter begins his letter by demonstrating his love for his faith. 2 Peter 1:1 describes those who share his faith as “precious” or honorable/dignified. Moreover, 3:14 even describes the recipients of his letter as “the beloved.” The KKK white knights hate because they love themselves, the Aryan race, the white supremacist ideology, and their version of Christianity. This “I hate because I love” is also based on the fantasy that one is victimized by the Other. The reemergence of white supremacy’s hate-filled rallies in which they voice their anger for being “oppressed” is a form of their defense against injury, their need to vocalize/circulate hate in order to love and protect their community.

Emotion is so powerful that it not only determines the kind of interpretation one does with a sacred text, it even moves bodies to march again for white supremacy. It also, however, moved a body to death. During the “Unite the Right” rally, a Nazi sympathizer murdered Heather Heyer, a civil rights activist. He also seriously injured nineteen other bodies.

So, what do we do? First, we trace the circulation of hate, figure out how racist and antisemitic statements have stuck onto bodies (as I try to do in this article). Then, we

circulate new emotions, hopefully those that are life-giving, reconciling, and caring, so that all bodies (even the KKK members’ bodies) could have new ways of being and belonging in this world.

DONG HYEON JEONG is assistant professor of New Testament at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. His forthcoming book is *With the Wild Beasts, Learning from the Trees: Animality, Vegetality, and (Colonized) Ethnicity in the Gospel of Mark* (Society of Biblical Literature Press).

i Occupy Democrats, “A Black Journalist Confronts an Imperial Wizard of the KKK,” Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/OccupyDemocrats/videos/1656436401116074/>.

ii Among many definitions proffered, I find Donovan O. Schaefer’s simple but never simplistic definition helpful: “Affect theory is an approach to history, politics, culture, and all other aspects of embodied life that emphasizes the role of nonlinguistic and non- or para-cognitive forces. As a method, affect theory asks *what bodies do*—what they want, where they go, what they think, how they decide—and especially how bodies are impelled by forces other than language and reason. It is, therefore, also a theory of power. For affect theory, feelings, emotions, affects, moods, and sensations are not cosmetic but rather the substance of subjectivity.” *The Evolution of Affect Theory: The Humanities, the Sciences, and the Study of Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1.

iii Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2nd ed; New York; London: Routledge, 2015), 45–48.



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