

BOOK ROUNDTABLE

Roundtable on Carlos Eire, *They Flew: A History of the Impossible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023)

Introductory Remarks

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Twenty-five years ago, this journal inaugurated the Book Review Forum as a way “to add dialogue (and disagreement) to the pages of our journal.” No book is better suited to promote such discourse than Carlos Eire’s fascinating, whimsical, and deliberately nonconforming study of impossible phenomena in early modern Europe, *They Flew: A History of the Impossible*. At the last gathering of the American Society of Church History, a panel on *They Flew* attracted an enthusiastic audience equipped with plaudits and protests. The four panelists – whose written reviews are found here – extolled and interrogated *They Flew*, while noting that Eire’s book has received both glowing and grumbling reviews in popular newspapers and magazines.

Eire treats an inherently controversial subject in *They Flew*: supernatural events in history. He does so at two levels. First, he examines sixteenth-century miracles like levitation and bilocation, which were attested to by thousands of witnesses. Then, he considers the critical reception of these miracles, both in their own day by devil-fearing detractors and today by contemptuous historians who dismiss miracles as childish fantasies that should be excluded from history. Eire rebukes such contempt and centers his history of early modern Europe on miracles and belief in miracles. In so doing, he challenges us to question the bounds of historical knowledge and the relationship between belief and reality.

Our four reviewers endorse Eire’s effort to reengage with the miraculous in history. They also detect in *They Flew* a fresh approach to history that can bear fruit in many subfields. Esther Chung-Kim suggests that historians of medicine follow Eire’s lead, consider the role of belief in the development of medical science, and thereby demolish the anachronistic notion that religion and medicine stood in opposition to each other. Jonathan Reimer notes how studying miracles can illuminate the shortcomings of methodological naturalism. Mark A. Noll and Ronald K. Rittgers – while they largely praise Eire’s book – criticize his depiction of Protestants. Noll rejects the idea that Protestants set out to divorce the sacred from the mundane. This divorce was rather a “by-product” of Protestantism. Rittgers does not concede even this, insisting that Protestants continued to

live in an enchanted world, though the supernatural now revolved around the Word of God. Ultimately, the four reviewers here agree that Eire succeeded in challenging prevailing assumptions about the role of the supernatural in history.

Believe It or Not

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Carlos Eire uses his signature style to explain mystical experiences that elicit responses from awe to disbelief. Despite the challenges of tackling such a topic, it is quite refreshing to read a historical work that stretches our imagination and provides a palpable sense of early modern religious sensibilities. Since there are other contributors to this book forum, my comments will focus on three key themes arising from the case studies examined in this history of the impossible.

First, in the process of determining the heroes of the faith, something had to make them stand out or stand above the rest. To tame the desires of the flesh, extreme asceticism played a major role in the pursuit of holiness. Severe austerity revolved around the mortification of the flesh, resisting satiation, pleasure, or indulgence. Many of these practices were reminiscent of the penitent associated with the sacrament of penance. In the ancient church, penance was a second baptism, a last chance for cleansing or purification, until it became repeatable. Penitential practices became a regular part of religious life for those seeking to purify themselves. Despite the attacks against superstition and growing skepticism in the early modern era, a notable pattern of mystical movement emerged as another indicator in the saint-making process. In the case studies of this book, we see a pattern where (1) the mystic takes a vow and makes a commitment to live a virtuous life devoted to prayer; (2) the soul is cleansed through severe austerities or works of satisfaction (fasting, scourging, sleep deprivation, hair shirts, and chains, etc.); and then (3) for exemplary mystics, these austerities are accompanied by raptures or notable spiritual experiences (203). (4) These manifestations, figuratively and literally, signal an elevated status in the religious community, whereby their holiness is revealed in various mystical ways. Mystical movements included multiple incidences of levitation and bilocation, often accompanied by other miraculous works. Eyewitnesses to these mystical experiences often recognized them as signs of special blessing. One ongoing conundrum, which the book clearly illustrates, is that holy mystics were not supposed to call attention to themselves since that would be hubris, not humility, and yet their miraculous feats needed to be witnessed in order for them to display the power of holiness and God's supernatural work in the world, for the process of canonization. They could not seek recognition, but they had to be recognized. If a person were physically gifted, perhaps we would see them lifting unusually heavy things or running faster than others, but if someone were spiritually gifted, we would expect extreme asceticism and miracles.

The noteworthy example of resolving this dilemma was Teresa of Avila because she publicly resisted her levitations and repeatedly asked God to take away the physical manifestations of rapture, to stop the levitations (75). Teresa's example reflected a common theme throughout the book, which was the belief that human beings could have intimate encounters with the divine and that those experiences involved the whole

person, body, mind, and soul, revealing a bridge between the heavenly and the earthly, or at least a fluid boundary between the natural and supernatural (80).

The second theme revolved around the spectacle of miracles. Since popular piety strongly desired and flocked to see miracles, even needed to see them to strengthen their faith, the hordes of curious visitors resulted in carnivalesque displays for those who came to witness the spectacle of levitation. In the cases of Joseph of Cupertino, the Flying Friar, and Maria de Agreda, the Ecstatic Levitator, another boundary would be crossed that would alarm some pious people and bring about the intervention of inquisitors and higher officials in the Catholic Church. While such miracles confirmed spiritual realities and supported the stances of the Catholic Church, people could not help themselves when faced with the impossible. During Joseph's levitating ecstasies, they prodded, poked, pinched, and even hugged him. Reverent observing alone was just not satisfying enough. During Maria's cataleptic levitations, she too endured the maltreatment of constant poking and prodding, since her body seemed deprived of any sensation (204). While Joseph was moved to more and more isolated monasteries, Maria's superiors wished to keep her on display (207). The spectacle of miracles corroborated the Catholic view of divine revelation beyond the Bible or the early church. Yet manhandling the floating saints seemed irreverent at best, and abusive at worst.

Why was the spectacle of miracles important for Catholic popular piety, especially in Iberia? In the deliberations over how to respond, whose piety was the priority? Common people or saints?

Third, the case studies of failure to be considered saints revealed the boundaries of belief (256) and different kinds of disgrace. Some miracles would be rejected by scathing judgments, such as collusion with the devil, fraud, or humiliation in life (only cleared posthumously). The issue of motivation and causality was a key point. Of divine or demonic origin? Mentally ill or not? Investigations into spiritual fraud were communal events that involved entire convents and monasteries, especially in Italy and Iberia, the land of enchanted beings (258). The proliferation of mystics, miracle workers, and miracle seekers created a context where the line between natural and supernatural and the possible and the impossible constantly crossed (259). Yet in this environment, the Spanish Inquisition saw feigned sanctity as a dangerous category of religious deviancy (261). This category would place the outward expressions of extreme holiness under suspicion. Due to possible delusions and deceptions, miracles and mystical experiences had to meet certain standards or qualifications.

To create even further suspicion and scrutiny, interest in demonology and witchcraft increased dramatically in the early modern period. As shown by both the medieval pronouncements on demons and witches, and the proliferation of such works in the 16th and 17th centuries, there was a range of interpretations regarding the power of the devil in the demonic collaboration with humans, and the physical manifestations of Satan's presence, expressed in the debates over whether witches could actually fly or just be duped into imagining that they were flying (348). This was not a division between Catholics and Protestants, although these groups clearly had their leanings. Rather, Catholics themselves were divided over how to understand how witches could fly, while Protestants were divided over the continued validity of holy miracles in the post-apostolic age. Just as not every Protestant agreed with Luther, not every Catholic would agree with Francesco Guazzo, a Catholic arguing against skeptics on the flight of witches, as his criticism was aimed at some fellow Catholics, as much as at Protestants.

In the milieu of increasing rationalism and skepticism, how did the failed cases potentially impact the reception of the "successful" saints? Did they help or hinder

broad acceptance and trust in the Catholic system? Why did some people continue to believe in failed saints?

Finally, let me offer one last observation and a suggestion for future directions in research. I appreciated the inclusion of humor in this book, whether from intended puns, like why some of these stories of levitation never got off the ground, or from the fun fact that the flying Friar became the patron saint of pilots. Or the irony that the Roman emperor, Julian the Apostate, defined Christians as those who hiss at demons and make the sign of the cross on their forehead. Christians from ancient times were quick to identify their enemy and to exercise a ritual.

For future directions, I was particularly intrigued by the third approach to the impossible miracles of the early modern age, taken by the Catholic Church after the Council of Trent, which involved employing medical and scientific knowledge in the investigation of miracle claims. Further research would illuminate developments in the history of medicine as it was related to the religious and social understanding of disease and healing. Many historians of medicine do not address religion because it has been viewed as something antithetical to science. Yet as this book shows, such an anachronistic view has limited our understanding and dampened our imagination. In my current research of early modern medical sources, many physicians included their religious views and beliefs in their medical manuals. It is time for these religious views to be examined rather than dismissed. If medicine required an understanding of humans, then religion played a role.

Rethinking Methodological Naturalism

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It is profoundly fitting to link Carlos Eire's *They Flew: A History of the Impossible* with the word "legend." Not only is this 2023 publication already establishing its own legendary status by winning, for example, the American Academy of Religion's Award for Excellence in Historical Studies, but it also embodies the highly contested character of this term. *Legenda* traditionally meant something to be read or, more specifically, read aloud. For examples of this older meaning, consider St Bonaventure's *Legenda major*, which conveyed an account of St Francis of Assisi's levitation (47), or Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea*, which popularized stories of Mary Magdalene "being borne aloft by angels every day during the seven canonical hours" (34). This term, however, was reformed in the fires of the Renaissance and the Reformation(s), developing from a reference to profitable reading – particularly from the life of a saint, as the previous two examples attest – to its negative, modern connotation of a traditional tale, perhaps popularly regarded as historical, yet wholly unauthenticated and evidently shaped by fiction and fancy. This etymological transformation – in part, a result of sustained attacks on the credibility of the *Legenda aurea* by both Protestant and Catholic reformers – took place during the early seventeenth century: the chronological epicenter of *They Flew*.

In this powerful and provocative work, Eire seeks to convince his readers that early modern accounts of impossible miracles, such as levitation and bilocation, produced

concurrently with the rise of “aggressive skepticism and empirical science” (1, 19), should not be conveniently consigned to the remade category of “legend”: safely assumed to be false and considered by historians only in so far as they illuminate the foreign mentality of a bygone era. Instead, he maintains that these “wild facts”—to borrow the fecund phrase from William James that he uses (4, 20)—deserve a methodology which is “evenhandedly skeptical” (xiii) and which “transcends reductive functionalism, dogmatic materialism, or any other one-dimensional approaches that fail to take belief in a supernatural dimension into account as a very *real* thing for those long-gone folk one is analyzing” (4). To this end, we are presented with a series of extraordinary case studies: from the levitations of St Teresa of Avila (72–97) and St Joseph of Cupertino (98–167) to the bilocations of María de Ágreda (199–251). These accounts are contextualized through triangulating discussions of a threesome that it is hard not to hear with a *Wizard of Oz*-esque cadence: fraudsters (255–288), Protestants (289–316), and witches (317–353), oh my!

As can easily be imagined, this sort of nonconformist historical project has provoked a variety of responses. Many are extremely positive: for example, Peter B. Kaufman ends his review in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* with the effusive declaration: “Of course, any reader coming to the end of this masterpiece of historical scholarship could quibble and want more. But as for me? I flew.” Others have been highly critical. These latter reviews are especially intriguing, in part because such responses are anticipated in the preface to *They Flew* (ix–x) and also because their confusion and frustration with its methodology showcase the need for and significance of this book. For example, Erin Maglaque – distrustful of the playful, questioning character of this work’s approach (xiii, which Kaufman compares to the rich prose of Carlo Ginsburg and Natalie Zemon Davis)–accuses Eire of “evasion, even a kind of professional dishonesty” which affirms the miraculous while maintaining plausible deniability, and, thus, presumably scholarly respectability. Jan Machielsen – who is somewhat more positive about what he labels Eire’s “evocative, beguiling narrative manner” – echoes Maglaque’s conjecture that satire and irony allow for plausible deniability and openly asserts:

Eire wants more from us than an open mind; he wants our souls. His argument has deep roots in Christian apologetics. For all the barbs aimed at materialist, secularist and functionalist straw figures, Eire knows full well that his fellow Teresa scholars do not dismiss her visions as frauds or epileptic fits. The reality of her experiences is simply irrelevant to the questions they ask. But agnosticism is not enough ... It is this fence-sitting that really is in Eire’s crosshairs. He is forcing us to choose between impossible feats and an impossible number of liars, much as C. S. Lewis once challenged.

Neither interpretation of this text – either as an evasive, dishonest scholarly attempt to have one’s cake and eat it too or as a cloaked Christian apologetic – adequately captures its historiographical subtlety, in part because both reviews refuse to take the author’s statements at face value (19–20, 214). Moreover, they also struggle to situate *They Flew* within the broader context of scholarship seeking to relate faith to the discipline of history. Instead, their interpretations appear to adulterate the arguments of Ronald K. Rittgers in a 2012 festschrift for Eire. Maglaque’s review references this piece, while Machielsen’s contains a series of parallels – including the claim that Eire is Erasmian, the description of his childhood in Cuba as enchanted, a discussion of him taking exception to being labeled a lapsed Catholic in *First Things*, and the notion that he plays the part of a Christian apologist – that point to Rittgers as the source of some of his ideas. This indicates that at

least some reviewers – those for the *New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement* no less – are perplexed enough by the arguments of this work that they are bastardizing underacknowledged content from another author. Their predicament, in turn, implies that what is needed to evaluate the importance of this book fruitfully is more historiographical context.

During the nineteenth century, the discipline of history – formerly practiced under the aegis of ecclesiastical, monarchical, and civic patrons – was more fully transplanted into the university, where it was institutionalized, nationalized, professionalized, and secularized. As the modern academy was shaped by a deep reverence for the scientific method, history sought new levels of objectivity and framed its task solely as empirical analysis of natural causation. Even though Leopold von Ranke – the father of critical, source-based history, who came from a family of Lutheran pastors – employed overtly religious language in conceptualizing the “remembered past” – for example, describing every epoch as *unmittelbar zu Gott* – the discipline that followed in his wake embraced a self-understanding based on assumptions of methodological naturalism. Modern history, therefore, came to be shaped by what Jon H. Roberts describes as “the detachment of explanation and description of empirically accessible phenomena from religious affirmations and a concomitant insistence on using *natural* causal agencies in describing the behavior of those phenomena.” This secular context has left historians of faith with the challenge of balancing this shibboleth of their professor with their own, now privatized religious convictions as well as the interrelated, though often unsettlingly different, beliefs of their historical subjects.

During the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Christian historians within the academy have approached the disciplinary presupposition of methodological naturalism in three major ways: as affirmers, engagers, and resisters. The first group – the affirmers – which includes scholars like Roberts, Leslie Woodcock Tentler, and (now) D. G. Hart, wholeheartedly accepts methodological naturalism, arguing that it either has little bearing on their work as historians or else aids their inquiry. They draw a sharp contrast between private belief and public scholarship and view history as a secular vocation. They insist that this approach offers common standards of evidence and explanation, that it allows for more even-handedness in engaging historical subjects, and that it focuses attention on the beliefs and values of subjects rather than on the identity of the historians describing them.

The second group – the engagers – while not necessarily challenging methodological naturalism outright, seeks to articulate the positive role(s) that the Christian faith might play in historical scholarship. This alternative view – most clearly articulated in the scholarship of evangelical historians such as Mark Noll, George Marsden, and Nathan Hatch, but also evident in the scholarship of Catholic historians, such as Eamon Duffy – is ambassadorial. It offers unique Christian perspectives in service of a broader disciplinary whole: while historians of faith must continue to play by the “rules of the academic game” – to use Marsden’s terminology – their sensibilities, knowledge, interests, and experiences, make them valuable contributors alongside other scholarly sub-communities defined by race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ideology. They owe “limited allegiance” to the shared standards of the academy, at least insofar as they do not directly conflict with overriding Christian commitments. The exact nature and scope of what such conflicts might be is left largely unstated.

The third group – the resisters – takes a much more radical view of methodological naturalism. Brad S. Gregory, for example, repudiates this disciplinary assumption on the philosophical grounds that it is a reductionist “imposition of *undemonstratable*

metaphysical beliefs” and, therefore, simply a form a secular confessional history. He advocates a methodologically neutral perspective, which “neither privileges a particular tradition or specific religious claims” nor implies that “scholars of religion must conduct research as if no religious claims *could* be true.” However, this approach hitherto has focused on the beliefs of historical subjects, rather than on the possibly supernatural historical realities to which they *may* (and this qualification is important) attest.

While it shares concerns with the first two of these groups – a desire to even-handedly uncover the testimony of premodern men and women, deeply strange though it may be, with the affirmers and an acknowledgment that writing history is an “intensely personal question” (x) with the engagers, *They Flew* makes a notable contribution to the third approach, even breaking new ground. Its “post-secular” (371–373) evocation of “impossible” accounts of early modern levitation and bilocation is marked by what Rittgers aptly calls an “epistemic openness to the transcendent in history.” While it is deliberately transgressive, rather than triumphalist, this work self-consciously allows for the possibility that these fantastical events really did happen, even if “it is ultimately impossible to prove that what is claimed in these testimonies happened as recorded” (377) and robust historical practice demands at least some bracketing of this question (20, 214). Whether Eire is attempting to “re-enchant the scholarship,” as Rittgers claims, or simply to dissipate the secular enchantment of methodological naturalism and other reductive interpretations, this is a major accomplishment. One hopes that it is but the first fruits of a greater historical harvest that will, among other things, retell the biography of the seventeenth-century German Duke, Johann Frederick of Saxe-Lüneberg, who converted from engrained Protestantism to Catholicism in light of experiencing the public levitations of St Joseph of Cupertino (22, 121–123), and uncover the extraordinary and enigmatic life of the twentieth-century bilocating French Augustinian nun, Yvonne Beauvais (197, 363).

The Best Kind of Interpretive Challenges

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One of the great delights in reading *They Flew* is to see matters fully fleshed out that had been sketched in Carlos Eire’s general study from 2016, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450–1650* (Yale University Press, 2016), which I am pleased to say I was able to assign as the main text on the last occasion I was privileged to coteach a survey of the Reformation. Micro delights included meeting again the unfortunate Saxon counselor, Nikolaus Krell, who was (in that gruesome German expression) *enthauptet* for promoting Calvinist opinions after Saxony turned unreservedly to orthodox Lutheranism (*Reformations*, 586–87; *They Flew*, 321–22).

Macro delight came from admiring how Eire deployed thorough research in the accounts of levitation that proliferated from the mid-sixteenth century to expand consequential arguments intimated in the earlier book. First was his bracing challenge to the anti-supernaturalist assumptions that have long marked professional historical study,

and about which I have little to add. Among many other expressions of this challenge, *They Flew* spotlights the “thorny problem” that remains invisible when modern historians take for granted “that the devil is *not* and *never* has been a ‘real’ being” with the same absence of self-reflection as the assumption of early-modern inquisitors “that all magic involved *Implicit* dealings with the devil” (*They Flew*, 339; see *Reformations*, 658–59). Even Erin Maglaque, who in a long review described *They Flew* as a “deeply unserious book” guilty of “a kind of professional dishonesty,” nonetheless acknowledged how expertly Eire skewered “histories of religion” that do no more than treat “early modern beliefs and practices as [only] a set of discourses, ideologies, and representations” (*New York Review of Books*, 14 April 2024). In contrast to Maglaque, I found Eire’s description of four early-modern or modern approaches, along with four postsecular approaches, a serious map that was honestly self-consciousness about how “each [approach]... provides its own valuable perspective” (*They Flew*, 370, with the four approaches, 370–78). A question for Eire now might be whether he has figured out how to employ what is valuable in these eight approaches while negotiating their incompatibilities.

A second macro delight came from the stimulus provided by Eire’s account of how Protestantism both desacralized and demonized medieval Catholicism – and then how especially the desacralization, or disenchantment, led on to the triumphant rationalism, scientism, unbounded capitalism, hyper-individualism, and functional atheism of the modern West. The rest of my comment is a response to that stimulus.

As with Brad Gregory’s impressive *Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Harvard University Press, 2012), I believe Eire is basically correct when he describes a continuous progression from Protestant seeds to the secular thickets of modernity. Yet, as in my response to Gregory (*Church History* 81 [Dec. 2012], 928–33), I would like to question how Eire describes that early Protestant challenge. While conceding that this challenge precipitated the changes he outlines, I view those changes as more or less inadvertent by-products of Protestant pastoral efforts to remediate corruptions threatening basic Christian existence. In my understanding, the ontological changes did not derive “from certain *concepts* innately central to Protestant thinking” (*They Flew*, 58, my emphasis), even if they did derive from the practical *reforms* that focused Protestant energies. In other words, efforts to right the old ship preceded efforts to build a new vessel.

Eire specifies three momentous changes resulting from the kind of Protestant attacks on levitation that *They Flew* documents in such rich detail. First, the relationship of matter and spirit. As explained in *They Flew*, “Bridging these two essential realms of existence was the role of religion, or more specifically of the Church and its clergy, and the bridging was effected in myriad ways through rituals and symbols” (59). Protestants, however, did not originally protest against the interplay of matter and spirit. Instead, they objected to the way the pope and the clergy were using new-fangled rituals like the indulgence traffic to describe the Christian gospel as a path of self-exertion and worldly exchange rather than a pathway of grace.

Martin Luther in number 33 of the Ninety-Five Theses warned, “Men must especially be on their guard against those who say that the pope’s pardons are that inestimable gift of God by which man is reconciled to him.” Ulrich Zwingli asserted more broadly that “the more you focus on material things, you take away from the spiritual” (quoted, *They Flew*, 49). From such expressions may have come the Reformed principle, “Finitum non est capax infinitum,” but only because early Protestants believed the church’s way of

concentrating on the material was destroying the imperative supernatural truth that humans were made righteous before God by grace through faith.

Second, the relationship of the natural to the supernatural. *They Flew* shows how Protestants argued that putting any reliance on miracles in the post-apostolic age undermined confidence in the Scriptures as the primary, essential source of divine revelation. That conviction then led to Protestant demonization of “the commonplace irruptions of the sacred that were central to medieval religion” (60). Yes, but I am suggesting that the consequence was only an aftereffect.

The section in Book One of Calvin’s *Institutes* that Eire cites as Calvin’s rejection of post-apostolic miracles (I.viii.5–6) may have led in that direction, but its primary purpose was to show that the miracles associated with the life of Moses validated the revelation Moses recorded. In general, the primary Protestant complaint against the church and its clergy did not concern the question of post-apostolic miracles, but how the life-giving Scriptures had been sidelined in favor of human traditions and human experiences of many kinds. Brad Gregory has expertly demonstrated how the Protestant standard of *sola scriptura* led to ever-increasing dilemmas of interpretation. Similarly, Eire shows that defending Scripture as the one indispensable source of divine revelation took a “meta-physical turn,” supporting the claim “that the ultimate purpose of all biblical miracles was *not* to alter the fabric of the material natural order but simply to authenticate revelation” (61, emphasis in *They Flew*). The intent of the Protestant exaltation of Scripture, however, was first to redirect attention away from human achievements of whatever sort so that the scriptural message could accomplish its redeeming purpose.

Third, the redefinition of the human and the divine. Protestants did attack the medieval ideal of a mystical path to union with God, but why? Why did they find “the very idea of becoming ever purer and more godlike [through purgation, illumination, and union]... repulsively false”? Why did they go on to attack “the assumption that anyone could ever have supernatural encounters with God..., especially of the sort that caused human bodies to float in the air” (62–63). *They Flew* provides the answer: “the Protestant rejection of monasticism.” That rejection did reflect “a very different understanding of the way in which humans are redeemed by Christ” (63). That different understanding, however, came from the positive assertion that *all* humans, and not just the spiritual adepts, could become saints in every true sense of the word.

So Martin Luther asked, “What would the nuns and monks do if they heard that in the sight of God they are not a bit better than married people and mud-stained farmers?” (quoted, *They Flew*, 63) When in the *Institutes*, Calvin addresses monastic vows, he commends the spiritual discipline of monks in the early Christian centuries, but then goes on to describe the spiritual, economic, and moral corruption that had overtaken the monasteries. He concludes by denying “that a more perfect rule of life can be devised than the common one committed by God to the whole church” (IV.xiii.12). Had the monastic way not become, in the eyes of Protestants, irredeemably corrupt, the Protestant rejection of the monastic way may very well have been not so severe.

The Protestant attack on monasticism also illustrates the complex importance of developments that were only indirectly religious, what *They Flew* mentions as “external factors – political, social, economic, or cultural” (58). The huge impact when the monasteries in Protestant lands were dissolved (*They Flew*, 63; *Reformations*, 326–27, 416–17) is a prime example. Whatever theology was involved, the dissolutions were also hastened by the rise of powerful nation-states, the growth of learning beyond monastic supervision, the new possibilities for women with convents closed, and more. A

concentration on Protestant ontological challenges risks oversimplifying a causal nexus of extraordinary complexity.

Yet Christendom did fracture, and for many of the specifically religious reasons that Carlos Eire's work has persuasively illuminated. If Protestant-leaning history may be too ready to celebrate the results and Catholic-leaning history perhaps too ready to regret what was lost, Eire is convincing that the "fragmentation of Christendom" really was "the most immediate and long-lasting effect of the Reformations" (*Reformations*, 756).

In my understanding, Christendom fractured because, while late-medieval Christian Europe retained much that was pure, honorable, altruistic, charitable, life-giving, and respectful of every human as made in the image of God, it was also shot through with corruption, dishonor, antinomianism, egoism, greed, and disrespect for many different humans in many different conditions.

The early Protestants hoped to set a grievously ill patient on the road to recovery. Their medicine was justification by grace through faith, the supremacy of Scripture, and the priesthood of all believers. If that medicine led to an over-enthusiastic, excessive unmixing "of heaven and earth," it matched the slipshod, excessive mixing of "the sacred and the mundane" that they saw in late-medieval Catholicism.

Eire's books make it easier to see that when reformers set out to correct perceived errors, they often pushed the pendulum as far from an ideal center in the opposite direction as it had swung in what the reformer considered the wrong direction.

Picking a Bone with Carlos Eire

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I want to begin by congratulating Carlos Eire on his remarkable achievement in *They Flew*. I have had the privilege of watching this book gestate over the past few decades, first learning of its subject matter when Carlos gave a presentation on levitating monks at the Harvard Renaissance-Reformation Colloquium in the 90s. About a decade ago, I contributed a piece to a festschrift for Carlos (*A Linking of Heaven and Earth*) that situated his evolving research on the impossible within the larger corpus of his scholarly and popular work. In that piece, I drew attention to the important and, in my view, much-needed methodological intervention Carlos was making in the field of Reformation and Early Modern Studies. I showed how, with increasing intentionality, he was challenging the very metaphysical assumptions of the modern historian's guild, especially its thoroughgoing anti-supernaturalism and materialism. Two years ago, I helped to welcome Carlos to Duke Divinity School to deliver the annual Steinmetz lecture. He provided the audience with a tantalizing precis of *They Flew*, which was soon to be published; students responded enthusiastically. After the event, one of them produced buttons that echoed and amplified something Carlos said in the question-and-answer period: "Rage Against Dogmatic Materialism." The rage buttons quickly appeared on the bookbags of many in the halls of the Divinity School.

Because I have already commented on this rage in the festschrift for Carlos, here I want to take a different approach to *They Flew*. Although I believe there is a great deal to praise

and admire in the book, I have a bone to pick with my former colleague and good friend, which has to do with his treatment of Protestantism in its pages. Now, given that the book focuses almost exclusively on early modern Catholicism, it may seem unfair to take Carlos to task for the little he has to say about Protestantism. But because his comments on Protestantism play such an important role in his larger argument, I believe my bone-picking is still warranted. I think *They Flew* lacks a sympathetic and fully informed historical imagination where Protestants are concerned; I do not think the book gets Protestants quite right.

In *They Flew*, Carlos juxtaposes the early modern Catholic enchanted and sacralized worldview with the worldview of early modern Protestantism. While he allows that Protestants continued to inhabit a kind of enchanted universe that included belief in the devil and in signs, wonders, and prodigies in the natural world (262), Carlos finally wants to separate Protestants from Catholics in the early modern period. He insists that Protestants desacralized Christianity, that is, they removed the sacred from the mundane, especially from the physical matter of the mundane (58, 62). He asserts that the Protestant Reformation effected “an earth-shaking paradigm shift” (17) in how early modern Christians conceived of the relationship between matter and spirit, the natural and the supernatural, the human and the divine, and the living and the dead. In Catholicism, there were many points of contact between the transcendent and the immanent, while in Protestantism, these points were reduced to but a few, with deep suspicion about the rest. This was especially true of miracles, which Protestants thought had ceased with the apostolic age – Catholic miracles could only be the deceitful trickery of the devil. Carlos connects the Protestant assault on Catholic “superstition” with the emergence of early modern skepticism and the eventual rise of modernity, including its atheistic modes and models of scholarly inquiry. Here, there are important parallels to Bob Orsi’s *History and Presence*, which traces the assumed absence of the divine in modern Religious Studies to the eucharistic debates of the Reformation and the way absence allegedly won out over presence among Protestants.

Revealingly, much of what I have just summarized of Carlos’s view of Protestantism appears in a section of the Introduction entitled, “The Trouble with Protestantism.” This section concludes with a discussion of David Hume, and is followed by a section entitled “The Trouble with Modernity.”

To be fair, Carlos does not posit a direct line between Protestantism and modernity. He knows the relationship between the two is complicated and anything but linear; he knows that one does not lead inevitably to the other. In fact, because early modern Protestants continued to believe in the impossible, Carlos says that they, along with early modern Catholics, bequeathed a complex legacy to subsequent generations that included Protestant seeds of secularity but also Catholic and Protestant seeds of intensified supernaturalism (290–1). These latter Protestant seeds were of a diabolical sort according to Carlos, which leads him to quip, “the devil played one hell of a role in the birth of modernity ...” (351). *They Flew* posits no steady rise of Weberian rationalism from the early modern to the modern period.

Still, there is not a lot of sympathy for early modern Protestants in the book: the evangelical world is a grim one that is largely cut off from God, who is totally other. Protestants are basically alone as they face ongoing assaults from their oversized devil. They exist without the possibility of miraculous intervention or of union with God and growth in Christian virtue, along with the possibility of the favors and powers that this union and growth might elicit from God (17, 58, 244, 325). Regardless of their differing eucharistic theologies, for Carlos, all Protestants are metaphysical iconoclasts (59) – the

finite is never able to bear the infinite for them; the divine cannot be found in the mundane. Protestant religion is internal, cerebral, and disembodied; it is focused on the invisible spiritual realm (60) and on the ethical, with the Bible as its rulebook and code of conduct (64). When Carlos discusses the conversion of a Lutheran prince to Catholicism after witnessing St. Joseph of Cupertino in ecstatic flight (121–3), the conversion seems inevitable, even a relief: why would anyone remain in the austere religion of Luther when he could join the uplifting religion of St. Joseph (pun intended)?

Of course, there is some truth in Carlos's depiction of early modern Protestantism. After all, to my knowledge, there were no Protestant levitators, bilocators, or stigmatics in the Reformation period. Protestants did not fly, at least not the godly ones. And this fact is tied to important metaphysical and epistemological differences that emerged between Protestants and Catholics; Protestants did introduce certain impulses into early modern Europe that had the potential to contribute to disenchantment and desacralization. Carlos is finally more interested in the latter than the former, that is, it is the separating of heaven and earth that he says was paradigm-shifting in Protestantism, not the narrower Evangelical effort to de-magic Christianity. In my view, the most important potential source of disenchantment and desacralization in early modern Protestantism was its restriction of the sacred to basically one channel, Scripture (see discussion below). What happens if, in time, this channel dries up too, at least for some or even for many?

Nevertheless, there is a good deal of recent scholarship, especially among cultural historians, that would say to Carlos, "Not so fast with the modified Weberian view of Protestantism." I am currently seeking to contribute to this scholarship as a church historian. Following the lead of Bob Scribner, whom Carlos cites twice, scholars such as Ulinka Rublack, Alex Walsham, Matthew Milner, Jacob Baum, and Ute Lotz-Heumann have argued compellingly that early modern Protestantism was a fully enchanted religion with its own version of sacrality; it is just that the supernatural mingled with the natural in different ways and places than in Catholicism. (Carlos cites Walsham once, the others not at all.) These scholars have shown that while Protestantism abolished many traditional portals to the divine, they also opened others more widely, and these doors were not divorced from the material world.

Many were associated with the Word, the focus of my current research, which builds on the scholarship mentioned above and its nascent analysis of the place of Scripture in Protestant religious culture. Whether preached, heard, read, sung, or inscribed, the Word took on mystical and sacramental qualities in Protestantism, both the physical artifact of the Bible, which became a kind of Protestant relic, and the words and message of Scripture, which functioned almost as sacred runes, conveying divine power to those who wielded or encountered them. In Scripture, heaven and earth still met for Protestants, the sacred and the mundane were comingled. Scripture was not part of some Weberian rationalistic biblicism in the Reformation, providing nothing more than clear and certain knowledge of divine doctrine and morals. The Word was more profoundly a place of encounter – even mystical encounter – with the divine. It was enchanted and it was sacral. I have discovered Protestants using eucharistic language for Scripture, and in such cases, they are always operating with a doctrine of real presence – Christ enfleshed in ink and paper, and conveyed through human voices, is truly present to Christians in and via the Word, bringing consolation, healing, and protection to both their souls *and* bodies. The enchanted and sacral Word was also ubiquitous in the Reformation, owing to the explosion of printing, preaching, and singing in the period. Thus, the most relevant recent scholarship on Protestantism, such as Alex Walsham's, draws on John Bossy's famous phrase and argues for "migrations of the holy" in the Reformation: migrations,

not eliminations; of the holy, not only of the diabolical; and of the incarnated holy, not of a spiritualized holy. To put all of this differently, there is an emerging consensus among scholars that early modern Protestantism, like early modern Catholicism, was a religion of presence, not absence. Or, to put it differently again, there is a history of the impossible among early Protestants to be written, and scholars are already writing it.

I think this means two things for the argument that Carlos has advanced in *They Flew* about the relationship between early modern Protestantism and early modern Catholicism, on the one hand, and the relationship between Early Modern Christianity and the emergence of modernity, on the other. First, even with the concessions and qualifications he makes, I think Carlos still posits too wide a gulf between Protestants and Catholics with respect to enchantment and desacralization. Protestantism had its own versions of enchantment and sacralization, and the Word was at the very heart of both. Second, this fact means that the relationship between the Reformation and modernity is even more complicated than Carlos appreciates. I think one must pay close attention to what happens to the enchanted and sacral Word in post-Reformation Western history if one is to understand rightly the complex and contingent relationship between early modern Protestantism and the shape of the modern world. This crucial ingredient is missing from Carlos's otherwise masterful analysis.

So, while early modern Protestants did not fly, they did "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the Word, much as medieval monks once did. They also inscribed verses of Scripture on the walls of their homes, businesses, and churches for protection and blessing; showed great reverence toward Bibles and Scripture-laden works of devotion; carried on their persons scraps of paper containing biblical sayings; sang hymns and songs saturated with Scripture in their daily lives and in worship; and listened frequently and intently to Bible-based sermons. In such practices, they thought they were encountering the divine in the mundane, a belief devout Protestants have held down through the centuries to the present day.

Levigators, Protestants, and Dogmatic Materialists, Oh My!

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I am immensely grateful to my colleagues Esther Chung-King, Jonathan Reimer, Mark Noll, and Ron Rittgers for their comments on *They Flew*, all of which I find extremely perceptive and gratifying.

Their incisive responses call attention to issues that could have been addressed more clearly, as well as to some that were overlooked, overemphasized, or underemphasized, or could have been examined with greater precision.

Fortunately, the exchanges made possible by our conference panel some months ago, and now by this special volume of *Church History*, give me the chance to reflect on these issues and to expand upon them.

I. The Elephant in the Room

First, I would like to address the issue of the book's challenge to existing cultural and scholarly assumptions about anomalous phenomena. Given how much our dominant culture is guided by dogmatic materialism, and given the pervasive dominance of strictly functionalist interpretations of the miraculous in religious history, it is indescribably gratifying to hear and read the words of praise for my efforts voiced by my four interlocutors.

Not everyone is pleased by this latest book of mine. This was inevitable. As Jonathan Reimer points out, one hostile reviewer has dismissed *They Flew* as a "deeply unserious book." Another reviewer has observed that one of the book's few merits is its effectiveness at annoying its readers. And God alone knows what other harrumphing dismissals inevitably await the book in the near future.

So, in a very real way – given the latent hostility that exists in scholarship as well as our dominant culture towards trans-materialist interpretations of the miraculous – it takes some courage for any scholar to offer praise for *They Flew*. I am not only grateful for the solidarity expressed in these four responses, but heartened by it, as well as by the fact that my "epistemic openness to the transcendent in history" is appreciated by these four eminent colleagues.

And I am especially gladdened by Jonathan Reimer's dexterous critique of the book's critics and of the polemics that give shape to their glib dismissals of the evidence presented in it. He lays out in very precise terms what is at stake in the book's reception, and does so eloquently with a seemingly light touch that gets to the heart of the matter with a weighty punch.

"Fraudsters and Protestants and witches, oh my!" Such a perfect expression. So perfect, it deserves mimetic recognition in this essay's title. Mimesis, mimesis, mimesis, oh my! Common wisdom is so correct: Imitation is the sincerest form of admiration.

Moving on to specific issues addressed in these four responses, let us now turn to the weightiest of all, one by one.

II. The Trouble with Protestants in *They Flew*

Assessing religious continuities and discontinuities in history and measuring their significance can be risky, especially when it comes to massive inflection points such as the era of the Reformations, when the relationship between the natural and supernatural realms was reconfigured in Western Christendom.

While there is no denying the fact that all sorts of changes took place in religion during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, making generalizations about these changes has always been difficult, due to the plurality of "Reformations" that took place and due also to the plurality of hermeneutical perspectives employed in the assessment of these changes, some of which are still linked to confessional issues.

Moreover, all of these competing appraisals invoke and employ concepts laden with highly unstable and flexible meanings, such as *transcendence*, *sacrality*, *spirituality*, *migrations of the holy*, and *enchantment*.

For instance, how is one of the most unstable, flexible, and troublesome of all of these concepts, "enchantment," to be understood? Or its opposite, "disenchantment"? These concepts were bequeathed to us in 1919 by Max Weber in his essay "Wissenschaft als Beruf" ("Science as a Vocation"), in which he described the epistemic and metaphysical revolution caused by the emergence of modern science as "*die Entzauberung der Welt*," an

expression he chose to translate loosely into English as the “disenchantment of the world” rather than literally as “the removal (*ent*) of magic (*zauber*) from the world.”

Several decades later, historians of early modern religion began to rely heavily on this concept in their assessment of religious changes, and the word *disenchantment*, much like the proverbial toothpaste out of its tube, has ever since asserted its unavoidable presence in all discourse. But what does it mean to say, as Ronald Rittgers does, that the work of some of these historians, including Robert Scribner, Alexandra Walsham, Ulinka Rublack, and others, proves that “early modern Protestantism was a *fully enchanted* religion?”

What is “full enchantment”? Such an assertion needs unpacking, for the meaning of “enchantment” is way too unstable, as is that of the adjective “full.” Ron is fully aware of this, which is why he adds that early Protestantism was “a fully enchanted religion *with its own version of sacrality*.” But how is “sacrality” to be understood? That concept needs more definition, too, and Ron supplies it by saying, “it’s just” mingling “the supernatural with the natural in different ways and places than in Catholicism.”

I agree wholeheartedly with this last assertion, but I also think that there is an element of imprecision in it that calls for further definition, precisely because Protestant attitudes toward the supernatural were not all the same. Those attitudes were on a spectrum, ranging from those that remained closer to Catholicism, as in Lutheranism, to those that moved further away from it, as in the Reformed and Radical traditions.

There is the rub. There are many discontinuities within the continuities. And there is one salient discontinuity between early modern Catholics and Protestants that cannot be ignored or downplayed.

They Flew focuses on the discontinuities rather than continuities and metaphysics rather than practical issues of reform. Necessarily, it glosses over fine distinctions and questions of causality. It does so because despite all of the disagreements among Protestants that led to the creation of many separate churches – including varying attitudes toward the supernatural or the relationship between the spiritual and material realms – they all agreed that the medieval Catholic Church erased the line between the natural and the supernatural way too much, as well as the line between matter and spirit.

This is the singular discontinuity that defies denial or reduction in significance, and this change in attitude is what I call “an earthshaking paradigm shift” in *They Flew* and a “radical desacralization” in my *Reformations* (754), where I also observe that one of the most significant unifying traits of early modern Protestantism was its rejection of “the commonplace irruptions of the sacred favored in medieval religion” (750).

Early modern Protestants might have had different interpretations of how much was “too much,” but there is no denying the fact that all of their leading lights rejected Catholic metaphysics to some degree. And this involved a collective change in attitudes toward symbols, rituals, miracles, mysticism, and especially toward levitation and bilocation, those “impossible” phenomena that are the main focus of *They Flew*.

To say this is not to imply – much less to say – that Protestantism was “grim” or that it was a “disembodied” religion, “largely cut off from God.” Not at all. Basically, what I have done in *They Flew* is to emphasize as much as possible that undeniable differences of a substantial sort emerged between Catholics and Protestants.

To be clear, I agree wholeheartedly with the gist of everything Ron Rittgers says in the following statement, which is free of unstable concepts: “Protestantism abolished many traditional portals to the divine, they also opened others more widely, and these doors were not divorced from the material world.” Absolutely. Yes.

And I also agree with Mark Noll's observation that the original thrust of the Protestant Reformation was an attack on the abuses and corruption of the late medieval Catholic Church, and that its rejection of the "commonplace irruptions of the sacred" so favored by it was an "after effect" rather than a motivating principle.

Yes, the initial aim of Protestantism was to reform Christendom according to biblical principles and to rid it of beliefs and practices that did not square with their interpretation of Holy Scripture. As Jean Delumeau argued over 50 years ago in *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire* (1971), Protestants aimed to finally Christianize Europe for good, that is, to vanquish all those vestiges of pagan beliefs, rites, and superstitions that stubbornly endured for centuries under a thin Christian veneer.

But there is no getting around the fact that the "after effects" of Protestant *Christianizing* included iconoclasm, both literal and metaphysical, and that this iconoclasm did away with many of those "irruptions of the sacred" found in Catholicism, as well as with monasticism, which had long served as an incubator of ecstatic mysticism and miracle-working saints.

In other words, the "after effects" themselves prove that despite all of their intramural disagreements, Protestants of all stripes shared a common religion that rejected the Catholic "interplay of matter and spirit" to varying degrees.

III. Impossible Methods, Impossible Evidence, and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Writing a history of the impossible in our day and age requires methodological dexterity as well as a nonconformist willingness to approach evidence from forbidden perspectives. Above all, it requires ignoring all warning signs, such as those that were once posted at the gateways of the most highly charged and deadly section of the wall that reified the Iron Curtain: "*Achtung! Sie verlassen jetzt West-Berlin.*"

Watch out! You are now leaving West Berlin.

As a former subject of the Soviet Empire, I tend to view such walls and the signs hung upon them as idols that cry out for annihilation rather than as indelible demarcation lines or commands to be obeyed.

Naturally, the gatekeepers of dogmatic materialism are interpreting *They Flew* with an intense hermeneutic of suspicion, that method of interpretation in which texts are analyzed skeptically to uncover hidden or repressed meanings – a hermeneutic driven by the conviction that what appears on the surface may be deceptive and that deeper meanings or motives may be at play.

One of the hostile reviews of *They Flew* quoted – and deftly deconstructed by Jonathan Reimer – has this to say about my ultimate intentions:

Eire wants more from us than an open mind; he wants our souls. His argument has deep roots in Christian apologetics... He is forcing us to choose between impossible feats and an impossible number of liars, much as C. S. Lewis once challenged.

My response to this unscholarly invective is the same today, as I am writing this, as it was at the conference in Chicago: "I don't want anyone's soul. I have enough trouble managing my own; I wouldn't know what to do with others."

As for the charge that all testimonies about levitations and bilocations are lies – which was leveled by both hostile reviewers quoted by Jonathan Reimer and will doubtlessly be found in reviews that have yet to see print – my response is equally logical, and linked to a

question raised by Mark Noll, who asks in his response if I have figured out how to employ what is valuable in the eight approaches to the history of the impossible that I examine in *They Flew* (370–78).

My answer to this question is this: Yes, I think I have found a very sound approach, which is to focus on the context of the testimonies and the provenance of the evidence and to separate the wheat from the chaff. Who are the witnesses, and what are the circumstances under which the testimony is given? What makes some testimonies more credible than others, and harder to dismiss as lies or fabrications?

When it comes to the evidence cited in *They Flew*, all of it comes from canonization inquests conducted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the process of gathering evidence about the lives and feats of holy men and women was standardized and subjected to empirical methods of research.

These inquests relied on the testimonies of eyewitnesses who had known the candidate for canonization, and all these eyewitnesses were presented with identical questionnaires and asked to swear that they were telling the truth, much as eyewitnesses in present-day secular courts of law are asked to swear that they are not lying.

However, unlike secular courts, where the penalty for perjury is a stiff fine or a stint behind bars, the canonization inquests asked witnesses to place their eternal souls on the line. The penalty for lying was not a fine or a prison sentence, but eternal, inescapable damnation in Hell.

My question for anyone who argues that all testimonies about levitations and bilocations are lies is this: how likely is it that deeply religious witnesses who believe in Hell will lie for a canonization inquest?

In the canonization inquests cited as evidence in *They Flew*, most of the eyewitnesses fell into this category. Is there any other similar circumstance in which historians will dismiss all testimonies as lies? Or as psychotic delusions or cases of mass hysteria?

Not likely, I am willing to wager.

Any historian worth his or her salt knows how to parse the hierarchy of trustworthiness in eyewitness accounts and how to weigh testimonies according to context. Which circumstances make testimony credible, and which do not? Needless to say, the penalty of Hell for perjury makes all testimonies cited in *They Flew* more credible than testimony given by most witnesses in present-day secular courtrooms.

IV. Piety and Issues of Veracity

Esther Chung-King raises pertinent questions concerning the issue of veracity, especially in regard to the location of the impossible phenomena examined in *They Flew*. She asks: Why was the spectacle of miracles important for Catholic popular piety, especially in Iberia?

My response here is the same as at the conference. Miraculous spectacles were a mainstay of medieval piety throughout Christendom. The Protestant challenge made such spectacles disappear in those areas under its sway or diminish in highly contested lands, such as France, but it heightened their significance and their occurrence in Catholic areas, especially those in which few Protestants could be found, such as Italy and Iberia.

Esther also asks: In the Church's deliberations, whose piety was the priority? Was it the common people or the saints?

The answer to this question is that the Church gave equal attention to both realms of piety because the common people and the saints were in symbiosis. This is the main

reason that the Church put safeguards in place for sifting out clerical as well as lay fraudulence. And in Spain and parts of Italy, it was the Inquisition that played a key role in discerning which spectacles were genuine and which were frauds.

Two other questions have to do with “failed” and “successful” saints and the impact they might have had on believers as rationalism and skepticism increased. She asks: Did they help or hinder broader acceptance and trust in the Catholic system? Why did some people continue to believe in failed saints?

Simply put, frauds and failed saints were a double-edged sword, so to speak. On the one hand, the constant ferreting out of failed saints could assure the faithful that the Church was vigilant and a zealous custodian of truth. On the other hand, however, failed saints who had gained popularity before being unmasked as frauds posed a potential threat to people’s faith, and their condemnation could anger and drive away devotees.

V. The Road Ahead

As I see it, Jonathan’s classification of *They Flew* as a text that offers resistance to “methodological materialism” is correct. And I share in his hope that it is “but the first fruits of a greater historical harvest.” I also share Esther’s hope that further research in the history of science and medicine will focus more intensely on the religious dimension of social and cultural understandings of disease and healing.

Such developments are certainly possible, and many recent texts published by prestigious academic presses, such as Peter Harrison’s *Some New World*, Rod Dreher’s *Living in Wonder*, Jeffrey Kripal’s *How to Think Impossibly*, David Bentley Hart’s *All Things Are Full of Gods*, Ross Douthat’s *Believe*, and Dale Allison’s *Encountering Mystery* – to name but a few – seem to indicate that trans-materialist approaches are not only gaining credibility on various fronts, but perhaps also redefining our dominant culture’s take on all things previously deemed impossible.

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