

MULTIMODAL ANTHROPOLOGIES

Curatorial Authority in Digital Scholarship: A Review of Materializing the Bible

Urmila Mohan

New York University

Courtney O'Dell-Chaib

Syracuse University

This essay reviews the website Materializing the Bible (MTB), a digital scholarship project curating Bible-based attractions throughout the world (www.materializingthebible.com). Anthropologist James Bielo, the website's founder and chief curator, notes, "This project begins with the premise that 'the Bible' as a cultural category is not reducible to a printed text that people read, interpret, memorize, and discursively circulate. 'The Bible' has historically been performed through a wide range of experiential registers: from stained glass and other artistic media to film, video games, and toy objects" (Bielo 2018b, 298). As part of the study of "material religion" (Meyer et al. 2010) and the multimodal turn in anthropology (Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017), we welcome this opportunity to write this review and dialogue with the curators of MTB (James Bielo, Amanda White, Claire Vaughn, and Kaila Sansom).

This is an exciting time for anthropologists of religion because digital projects are being created on various aspects of the discipline (Bielo 2018a). Our review explores Bielo's (2018b, 2018c) idea of "immersion" and its limits in MTB by questioning the categories of the "material" and "bodily" from the perspective of praxis and affect (Mohan and Warnier 2017; O'Dell-Chaib 2017). (The latter concerns also motivate the Material Religions blog, materialreligions.blogspot.com, and a corresponding Facebook group that we currently coedit.) While technological solutions are needed to draw viewers/readers into digital scholarship, technology cannot replace the role of curatorial authority and theoretical commitment. For our initial assessment of MTB, we consulted graphic designer Kate DeWitt to understand how the flat world of the screen could be animated through various digital tools. These include using large images and incorporating video at the top of the screen, using the act of scrolling to animate an image that draws the viewer into the topography they are describing, and employing designs that combine more conventional scrolling text with augmented-reality sections. However, such tools must also serve conceptual imperatives. Immersion, in our understanding of James Bielo's work, is the paradigm by which American Christian groups use sensory and material means

in specific modalities, such as entertainment, to achieve their goals. We explore the limits of the immersive paradigm in MTB by noting the design of the site but also paying close attention to the "bodily" and issues of praxis, affect, and power.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF "TOURS" ON THE WEBSITE

Three short lines on MTB's homepage succinctly summarize the website: "People do more than read Bibles. They use the written words to create material environments. *What happens when the Bible is materialized?*" (emphasis in original). The main tabs in the upper navigation bar of the website are "About," "Curators," "Map," "Attractions," "Tours," and "Scholarship" (Figure 1). "A 'Tours' portal explores individual attractions, combining fieldwork photography and/or video; publicity materials; archival scans; hyperlinks to relevant data and scholarship; and, narrative description" (Bielo 2018b, 293). We have chosen to focus on tours because we consider them most relevant to the issue of immersive experience and hereafter refer to the virtual space of the tour as the "website" and the physical space as the "site." The website listed seven tours at the time of writing—"Biblical History Center," "Fields of the Wood," "Desert Christ Park," "Biblical Gardens," "Nazareth Village," "Garden of Hope," and "Cabazon Dinosaurs"—and our comments below involve four of these.

MTB tours are formatted according to a template (Weebly) where a written narrative with illustrative audiovisual material guides the visitor as he or she scrolls down the page. The tour of the Biblical History Center in La Grange, Georgia, is written by Claire Vaughn and James Bielo, and focuses on an archaeological garden and the ways in which the language and paraphernalia of archaeology illustrate and reaffirm a Biblical life-world. Visitors to MTB can further explore photos, videos, and transcripts to learn about the use of religious entertainment within an archaeological paradigm. What engaged us in this tour was the inclusion of videos (also explored later in this review) and text that pointed out the material omissions in sites with close affinities to Christian Zionism. For instance, the curators note that in an "erasure of Arab culture and statehood," many of the items sold in the gift store are imported from Israel and Palestine, but there is no inclusion of Arab products, such as *keffiyeh* (a traditionally Middle Eastern headdress) or mention of the West Bank. Such elisions indicate the kinds of tensions

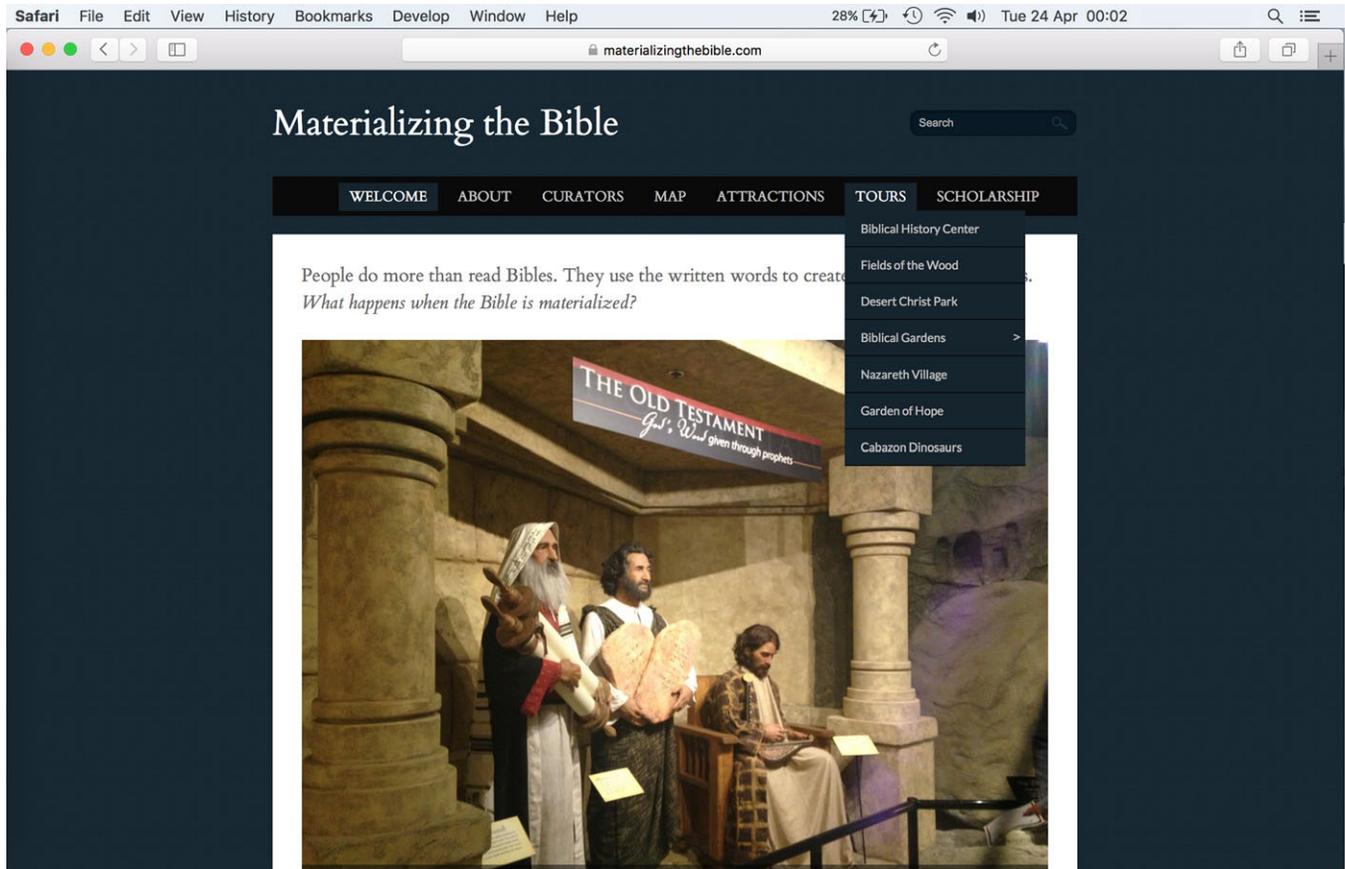


FIGURE 1. A screenshot of the homepage for *Materializing the Bible*, showing how one might access virtual tours. (Courtesy of James Bielo) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

that are overlooked or smoothed over in Biblical historical recreations.

The tour of Nazareth Village, Nazareth, Israel, has a connection with the Biblical History Center through their common desire to connect visitors with Israel and their display of historicized activities, such as weaving (Figure 2). Another similarity between these sites is the presence of a gift store. Author Lena Rose points out the ubiquitous nature of souvenirs sold in the Nazareth gift store and how visitors may choose to shop here rather than in the market outside. Strategies such as “fixed-price” items help protect tourists from the realities of bargaining outside the controlled space of the site. Such observations and analyses are worth exploring further because they raise interesting questions about the roles of bodies in encounters, such as shopping, and in the negotiation of politics in Christian tourism.

Our review next turns to Cabazon Dinosaurs, near Palm Springs, California, a former roadside attraction intended to draw patrons to a restaurant that was subsequently turned into a Creationist museum (Figure 3). Authored by C. Travis Webb, this tour is a good example of innovation as appropriation—in this case, the incorporation of two dinosaur figures into a religious narrative. As the commentary indicates, interactive and entertaining displays such as “Dino Dig” on the Cabazon site allow the realms of religion and

science to overlap at least temporarily in a nonthreatening manner. We note that “Discussion Questions” provided under the “Scholarship” tab raise critical points to guide further exploration of content on the tours. But similar to our observation about gift stores in the Biblical History Center and Nazareth Village, we suggest the content on Cabazon could include more pointed discussion on the types of omissions, contradictions, and negotiations involved and consequently the limits of such immersive play and entertainment paradigms.

To come back to the Biblical History Center, and in a useful illustration of methodology, visitors can view two videos made by a Christian ministry embedded in the MTB website. In the videos, we see tour guides who verbally and physically mediate the dialogue between objects and scripture. An insightful transcript by Bielo codes the guides’ speech and gestures as linguistic conventions and makes us think further about how the study of actions might take on a central role in MTB. In this physical tour (as well as others) labels and didactics may be provided, but it is guides who do the performative work of enlivening the objects and connecting with visitors. The same can be said of Bielo’s description of Garden of Hope in Covington, Kentucky, and the glimpse it offers of the importance of tour guides. This tour hints at how guides develop their personas through techniques

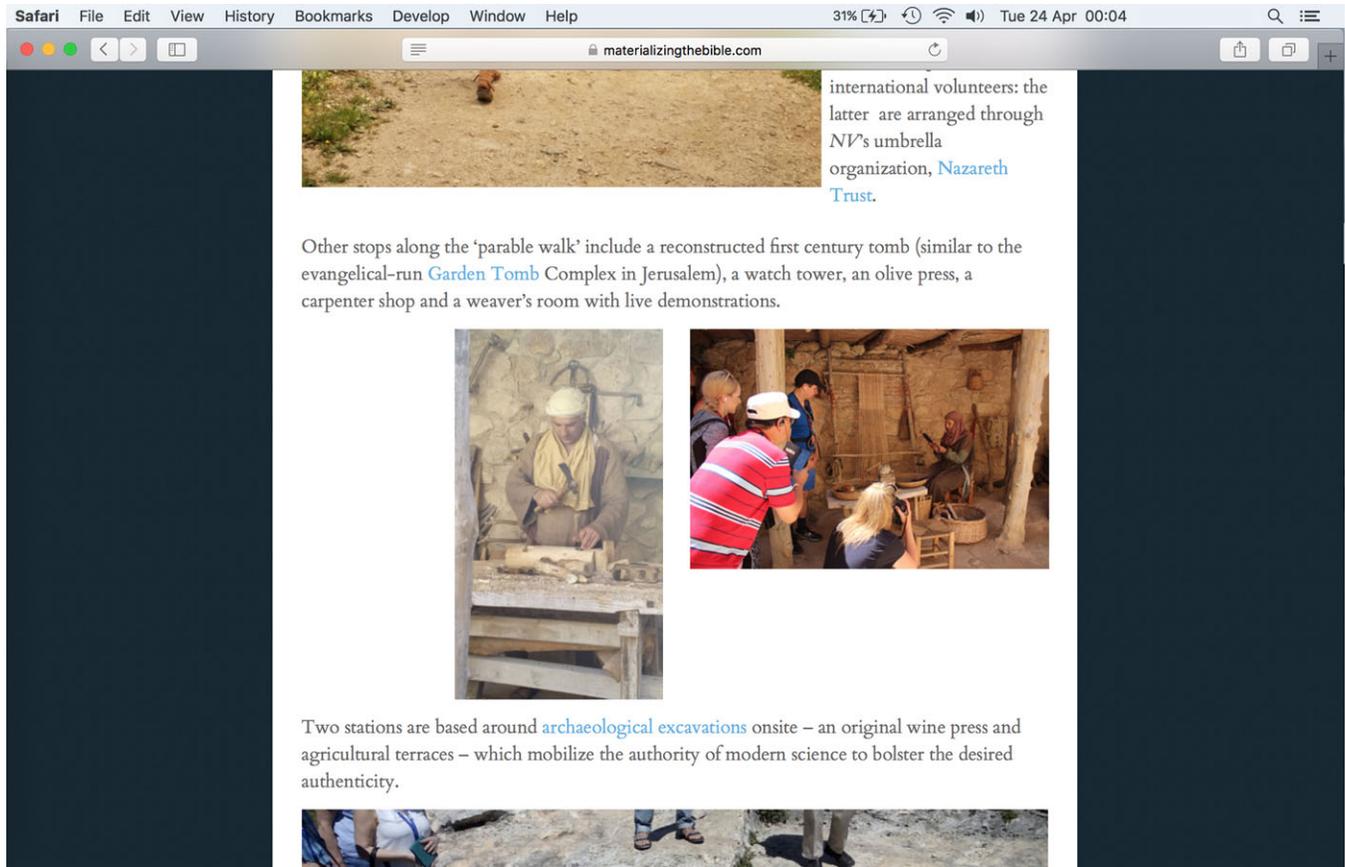


FIGURE 2. A screenshot of the virtual tour of Nazareth Village with stops along the “parable walk.” The photos document reenactments of Biblical-era activities such as weaving and carpentry. (Courtesy of James Bielo) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

of narrating Biblical stories and by using the material environment as sensory-motor props. This phenomenon could be further studied through a praxeological lens to enhance our understanding of why believers do what they do and how they are “made” as believers through their movement through space. In addition, what is the knowledge (verbalized and procedural) that creates these spaces and produces people at these sites as guides, pilgrims, (non)believers, fundamentalists, creationists, evangelists, and so on?

While navigating the tours, our desire to find an identifiable or empathetic figure to guide us motivated us to think of the potential value of diverse perspectives on the website. If the bodies of tour guides and visitors are integral to the physical experiences of the Bible, then whose body is being presented as the normative one in the virtual tours? Further, what is the role of (the bodies of) curators who take these tours in the real world and subsequently interpret them virtually for others? The anthropologist-curator is for the most part an omniscient figure in the tours—the photos and videos taken by authors and curators frame them as observers who are behind the camera and at some distance from the activities being described. (Also, in many of the tour photos we cannot see people actually engaged in the activities being described, and this limits our ability to mimetically “feel” them.) The tours provide us interesting

narratives but few ethnographic details on how the bodies of scholars—or other visitors, for that matter—(don’t) fit affectively and praxeologically into the space.

THE ROLE OF AFFECTIVE BODIES IN CONCEPTUALIZING “IMMERSION”

In his article “Immersion as Shared Imperative: Entertainment of/in Digital Scholarship,” Bielo (2018b, 298) writes that MTB uses “immersive techniques so that visitors can be virtually caught up in the phenomenon of religious tourist attractions that transform the written words of scripture into physical, experiential and choreographed environments” in the hopes that they can experience a similar affective encounter to those visiting the attractions. He states that both in the website and at sites the invocation of affect is “pivotal” to their capacity “to be efficacious” and to develop “intense bodily and emotional bonds with scripture” (298). Such affective relations are developed through environments that “construct, perform, and elaborate an affective intimacy with scripture” (298).

Building from Jenna Supp-Montgomerie’s (2015, 336) introduction of affect theory in the study of religion, which positions affect as “the social energy through which subjects, meanings, and cultures are produced, organized, and undone,” Bielo (2018c, 299) resonates with our embodied

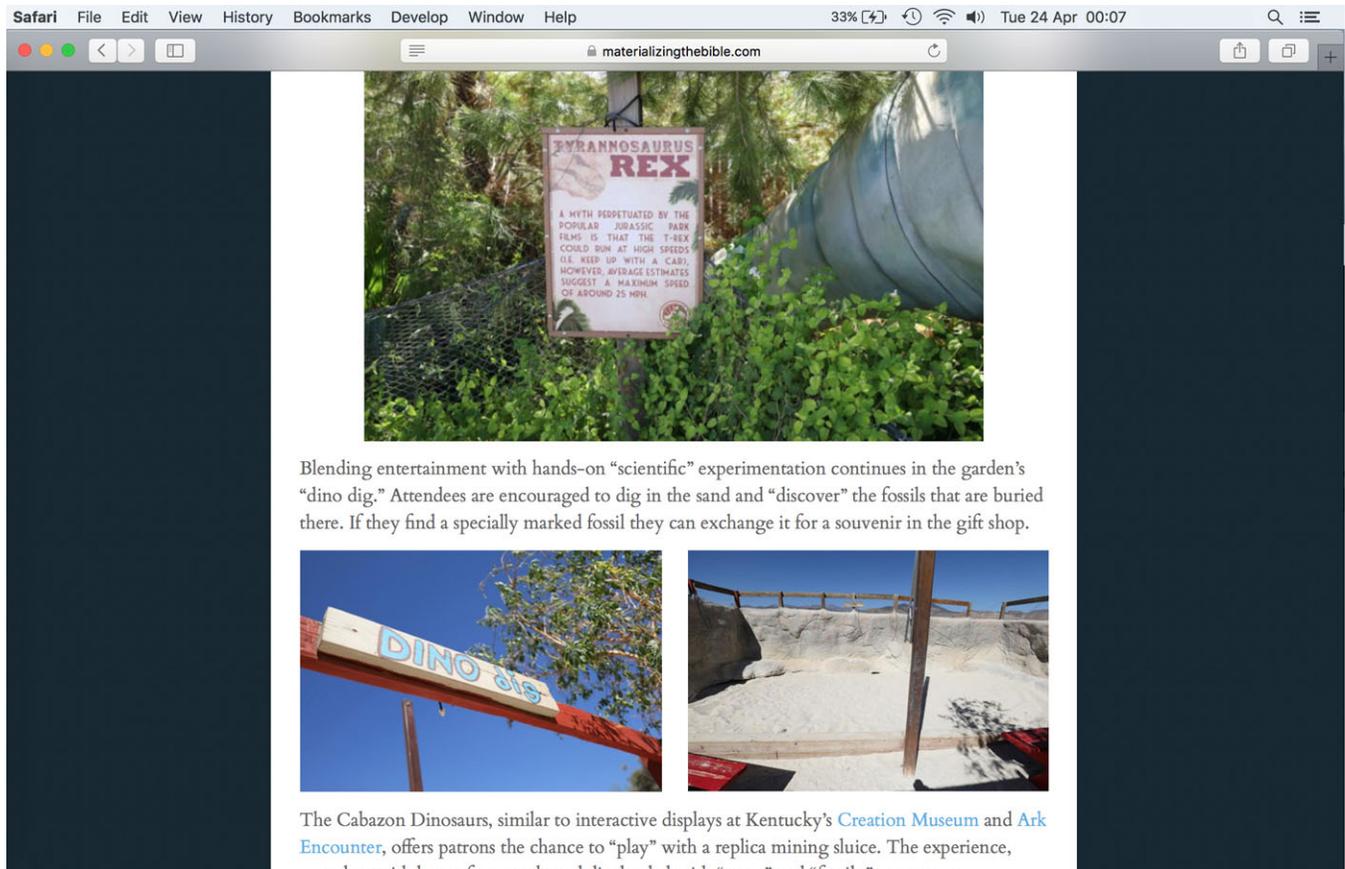


FIGURE 3. A screenshot of the tour for Cabazon Dinosaurs. The photos illustrate how paleontological facts about dinosaurs are combined with activities where visitors search for “fossils” buried in the ground. (Courtesy of James Bielo) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

capacity to be “caught up” by affective encounter, provoked by the “multi-sensory presentation” of this history. However, we suggest that, to the detriment of the project, MTB attends less to the cultural, social, and historical specificity of bodies, affect, and praxis. Carefully choreographed bodily encounters at these attractions register “effects on and through the sensations of visitors,” provoking responses that “may or may not have the consent of language or cognition,” but nevertheless intend to immerse the visitor in “something timeless and unmediated” (299). But will all visitors to these attractions and this website have similar encounters?

Within what Sara Ahmed (2010, 22) calls “the messiness of the experiential,” affect is “not an object that resides inside particular bodies” but, “rather, is a *movement* of culturally valued feelings that circulates outside of bodies and subjects and determines which bodies and subjects are able to emerge in a given social context” (Supp-Montgomerie 2015, 339). Attending to the sociality of affect “pushes us to consider the interactive process through which certain embodied feelings and particular religious subjects were validated, discounted, or disciplined” (339). To expand their response to the question, “What happens when the Bible is materialized?” contributors and curators could focus on the possible pluralities of encounters at these sites. They could emphasize the realities that bodies at Christian attractions experience, which

may be diverse combinations of intimacies beyond—and at times, in spite of—the intentions of their orchestrators. When encountering objects, are the experiences of women, people of color, and non-Christians the same? What are the range of emotions, sensations, and actions—including feelings of ambivalence, irreverence, and irrelevance—with which visitors actually respond to such sites?

In his book *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park*, Bielo (2018c) follows the design and building of Ark Encounter, a large-scale Noah’s Ark replica with exhibits built in Williamstown, Kentucky, according to the description in the Bible (www.arkencounter.com). Bielo acknowledges that evangelical, fundamentalist, and charismatic Christians often use sensory means for immersion, for instance, in alternative Halloween entertainments or “Hell Houses” to incite an “emotional and visceral condition of fear among visitors, to literally scare them into religious change” (91–92). Scenes include “a young woman confronted with the choice of abortion, a gay male dying of HIV-AIDS, a teenager on a shooting rampage, drug abuse, marital infidelity, suicide, and date rape” (91). But beyond such dramatic vignettes, what other far subtler props may be used? For example, what might a queer body *feel* when seeing the Ark Encounter theme park illuminated by rainbow light after its president, CEO, and founder Ken Ham tweeted his intention to take

back the rainbow from LGBTQ communities to “remind the world that God owns the rainbow” (Eads 2017)?

If Biblical scripture (broadly conceived) is being used “by communities of practice to reflect and re-create identity, values, and claims to public legitimacy” (Bielo 2018c, 293), it can simultaneously function to delegitimize other kinds of identities and values. These attractions are designed not only for “religious devotion, pedagogy, fun, and/or evangelism” (295) but also for political aims, validating particular visions of what it means to be a good human. To work toward inclusivity of sensory encounters at these attractions would require including a plurality of voices engaging with these attractions. While the goal of successful immersion might be for visitors to be caught up in the moment, examples of not being “caught up” (and the ways in which visitors’ bodies interact with materials and other bodies to create feelings/actions of exclusion) can give religion scholars pivotal information about the diversity of intimacies at these sites.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN ENHANCED CONCEPT OF IMMERSION

The strength of MTB is both its unique content and its analytical approach. As scholars, curators, and visitors of curated spaces (whether physical or virtual), we are both acting and acted upon, subject to the power of affective narratives and practices. Indeed, the representation of physical spaces as “tours” helps MTB visitors to identify as virtual “participants,” an idea that may have well emerged from Bielo’s own training as an ethnographer. But it would be a lost opportunity if the project did not generate criticality about the concept of “immersion” itself. While MTB’s intent has been to present content as part of an objectively curated and cataloged archive, we suggest that enhancing and extending curatorial authority into the design/content of the site will lead to differently immersive digital experiences. Virtual tours can certainly be made more engaging by

incorporating greater affective content and various kinds of digital tools. But the latter do not replace the centrality of curatorial vision and recognition of curatorial authority as it is put into practice. In its current version, MTB is successful in making the case to scholars in the English-speaking world that a material-culture approach to the Bible through the study of scripture-inspired spaces has much to offer. Going forward, the issue may be to identify innovative ways that expand upon this goal and further immerse visitors.

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