Editorial

Introduction

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This set of articles has been on a longer journey than usual, with many of them written prior to or during the COVID-19 pandemic. As is a common story for younger journals, they were caught up in delays due to difficulty in securing peer reviewers, the necessary time and attention for author revisions in the midst of other institutional demands and caregiving priorities, and an overburdened academic system experiencing labor shortages, among other factors. And yet, we made our way, step by step, with patience, to bring this issue of *Body and Religion* to the scholarly conversations on this intersection of embodiment and religion. How we understand this intersection is rooted in real bodies that are made and remade ritually, affectively, and relationally in ways that connect to the sacred, even when the spaces and activities are not designated as such explicitly.

Through a variety of methods, including ethnographic, document, film, and art analyses, this issue offers case studies on punk grinder cultures, the movements of gaga and ashtanga yoga, actions of agency by evangelical Christian women, borderlands art for public mourning, and cinematic affects in an LGBTQ+ film. There are unexpected reversals and unseen contours that run across all of the articles, such as when punk grinder cultures reclaim what makes humans mortal and seen for all of their diverse, inclusive ways of being in the world as central to processes and practices that seek to transcend human bodies. Or when the technical layering of affect is made visible in a film about the 1990s ACT UP movement, which aimed to intervene on behalf of marginalized bodies during the AIDS pandemic. Authors construct theory in the offering of ‘experience filters’ to

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bring to light the traces of embodied practices across multiple contexts, and in the reframing of gendered religious performativity by religious practitioners who are often left out of examples of formations of agency. And migrant bodies, who hope to be hidden in the lands they pass through, but in death become caught up in political and ethically problematic spectacles, may best be seen through collective sculptures that blend land and articles left behind into bodied mother figurines who mourn their absent children. Each author’s work, expanded on below, brings important case studies forward for consideration.

Jacob A. Boss, in his article ‘Punks and profiteers in the war on death,’ provides a primer on some of the key concepts and practices of transhumanism in relation to various approaches that engage in religious ideologies and soteriologies, even when explicitly removed from religious contexts, as part of a war on death. Boss offers us the lenses of ‘punk,’ the DIY-er who scrappily biohacks, and ‘profiteer,’ the biohacker who builds on commercialized motives, as ways to shift toward examining relational approaches that illuminate aesthetics, ethics, and values within these technological–human pursuits aimed at human perfectibility. Highlighting punk grinder subcultures, whose adherents experiment by creating and implanting DIY devices in their own bodies, Boss observes participants as part of radically inclusive communities that re-center human mortality and an intersectional range of identities over attempts to transcend human bodies as a form of salvation. These strategies resist biohacker trajectories often entrenched in oppressive dominant nationalist and religious discourses.

While Boss’ article helps to illuminate the fluidity of religious frameworks within transhumanism contexts, Lina Aschenbrenner and Laura von Ostrowski, in ‘Embodied neo-spirituality as an experience filter,’ move to theorize on the lasting impact of embodied practices that embrace ambiguously religious resonances as part of the movements of the Israeli forms of gaga and ashtanga yoga. They offer the concept of an ‘experience filter’ as a way to acknowledge the larger aesthetic, cultural, and social effects beyond any one particular embodied event. Conducting ethnographic research on two neo-spiritual practices, Aschenbrenner and von Ostrowski create a comparative dialog that examines how bodied techniques of awareness/mindfulness, balance, and emotion, among other filters, are developed and transferred to other parts of practitioners’ lives. Their work also investigates how ‘secular’ and ‘spiritual’ serve as embodied filters, furthering the dissolution of boundaries that attempt to theorize bodies as separate from what is created. The authors advocate for centering a dynamic body knowledge that is continuously in motion within cultural analyses, in order to privilege processes and interactions, rather than isolated or rigid reifications.
Marie Olson Purcell reframes Judith Butler’s groundbreaking feminist theorization of gendered performativity, as informed by her work with evangelical Christian women who often self-identify as non-feminist and understand agency as that which maintains God as the highest power. In her article, ‘Bodies that Matter to God,’ Purcell outlines power shifts within models that affirm complementarian gender roles, while also engaging in ‘actions of agency’ as a type of religious performativity. In an analysis of two letters, one penned collectively by evangelical Christian women, and the other by the high-profile and now former Southern Baptist Convention Bible-study leader Beth Moore, the author reveals the ways actions can navigate and create meaningful bodied pathways of religiously informed resistance as part of the distinct contours of the #SilenceIsNotSpiritual movement, in contrast to the more avowedly feminist and secular #MeToo movement. In centering God’s agency, the female subjects of Purcell’s analysis call out the manipulation of Butlerian citational practices, especially of scripture, which are misused to disrespect women’s bodies, while at the same time aligning their own citational practices of calling out as not being solely their own, but as indirect citations from God.

In a different context of calling out, Bryan Ellrod, in his article ‘The remembrance of dismembered bodies,’ brings attention to the tensions around the public mourning of migrant bodies in the Sonoran Desert. Dead migrant bodies, often unidentifiable and criminalized, continue to be a political flashpoint, and their display in photographs and other media are critiqued for creating spectacles that undermine human dignity. Ellrod examines previous and ongoing attempts at aesthetic public mourning, notably the use of crosses and their material and ritual adaptations, before amplifying the work of artist Valarie James. She creates a type of art for public mourning that Ellrod sees as blending a theologically attuned bodied presence and absence, which creates a necessary somatic haunting while avoiding the ethics of spectacle. James’ work centers mothers’ bodies formed from found materials and desert plants combined into a pulp and covered with resin that melts in the hot sun of the landscape. In his analysis, Ellrod argues that James’ sculptures create a ‘re-membering’ of both body and environment that affectively engages in the moral imperative of witness and action, in order to address this form of human fratricide.

And in our final article, ‘Making bodies and worlds,’ Stefanie Knauss utilizes affect theory to trace the impact of the multidimensional ‘circulations of emotions’ both within and in the act of viewing the 2017 film 120 BPM (Beats Per Minute/Battements par minute) by filmmaker Robin Campillo. Knauss engages with the aesthetics of a film about the AIDS activist group ACT UP Paris, in order to make visible how the affective experiences that
she notes in the film embody religious qualities shared with Christian affectivities. These affects include dimensions of love, fear, and shame, as well as more kinesthetic experiences of connection with the sacred and disconnection between body and soul. Narrative structure, camera position, editing, sound, use of time, and treatment of bodies are all deftly employed focus points highlighted by the author to delineate how each contributes to the overall embodied aesthetic that creates and ‘impresses’ bodies and communities through the cinematic experience.

All of these articles take as their primary study some aspect often found on the peripheries. Some are not typically identified as religious. By focusing on embodiment, each author brings to the surface underexamined religious dimensions or allied connections to religious sensibilities. Power is, not surprisingly, a central theme, whether in relation to the death of migrants, to those who are HIV+, or in the war against it, but also in the complex life-affirming actions of respecting all women’s bodies and in the creation of neo-spiritual bodies whose movements are traceable beyond their initial practices. Furthermore, each article demonstrates how focusing on bodies continues to help problematize secular and religious binaries, or bring further complexity to their use. Each author has an important contribution, and together they show the ongoing diversity of this field of study.