***Reconfiguring the Body:
Embodiment in South Asian Religions***
By B. Holdrege and K. Pechilis (2016)
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Refiguring the Body provides an apt corrective to two contradictory yet pervasive stereotypes about South Asian religions. Co-editor Karen Pechilis explicitly notes in the Afterword that the volume targets ‘any lingering popular idea that South Asian religions can be generally characterized as body-renouncing, transcendent, and world-ignoring traditions’ (p. 321). In addition to resoundingly discrediting this popular conception through explorations of diverse forms of human, divine and devotional embodiments, this volume also combats the caricature, stemming from colonialist historiography, of South Asian traditions as hypersexualised and obsessed with bodily pleasure. Steering clear of either of these extremes, the essays in this volume provide nuanced readings of the diversities of the full spectrum of embodiment in these traditions – from everyday concerns with health, wellbeing and conduct to bodies in performance to bodies that fuse, stretch and break the divide between human and divine. The sheer weight of textually and ethnographically well grounded evidence speaking to distinctive South Asian paradigms of embodiment is this volume’s greatest contribution, and one that should inspire continued in-depth scholarship into both the traditions themselves and potential cross-cultural applications of their insights.

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The volume is divided into three parts, along with an Introduction and an Afterword. Part 1, 'Material Bodies, Embodied Selves, and Perfected Embodiments', provides case studies of the interrelationships between forms of selfhood and forms of embodiment in four different traditions. In 'Perfected Embodiment: A Buddhist-Inspired Challenge to Contemporary Theories of the Body', Michael Radich undertakes an ambitious project of claiming that 'Buddhist-inspired' perspectives on embodiment can overcome the impasse created by the near-universal division of contemporary academic discourses on the body into 'materialist' and 'descriptivist' camps, both of which fail to comprehend 'the full range of human embodiment and how it can be understood' (p. 17). Anthony Cerulli's 'Body, Self, and Embodiment in the Sanskrit Classics of Āyurveda' explores how the multivalent use of the term *ātman* (self, body) in Āyurveda leads to distinctive perspectives on health, healing and how to live a truly fulfilling life. In 'Bodily Gestures and Embodied Awareness: *Mudrā* as the Bodily Seal of Being in the Trika Śaivism of Kashmir', Kerry Martin Skora explores the role of *mudrā* as a 'bodily gesture that embodies awareness' that forms a mimetic bridge between internal liberated awareness and spontaneous bodily manifestation. In one of the stand-out contributions to the volume, Harshita Mruthinti Kamath's 'Bodied, Embodied, and Reflective Selves: Theorizing Performative Selfhood in South Indian Performance' uses both textual and ethnographic analysis to propose a multilayered theory of selfhood emerging from considerations of the performer's individual subjectivity, the effects of possession and the role of technical training in cultivating the 'lingering reflective self of the performer' (p. 126).

Part 2, 'Divine Bodies and Devotional Bodies', examines the multiple forms and transformations of human and divine embodiments in epic, theological and devotional literature. Kendall Busse's close analysis of the semantic range of the terms *mūrti* and *vigraha* in her 'Observations on the Bodies of the Gods in the Mahābhārata' foregrounds a dynamic moment in how divine bodies were understood to manifest in the world: while these terms do not yet connote a sculpted image, as they later come to do, in the Mahābhārata they primarily refer to the gods' use of *yoga* to produce both interactive human-like bodies (*mūrti*) and multiple bodies (*vigraha*) within the world. In '*Bhakti* and Embodiment: Bodies of Devotion and Bodies of Bliss in Kṛṣṇa *Bhakti*', Holdrege provides a sustained demonstration of the central role of embodied transformation in devotional practices, with particular attention to the interplay between different levels and modalities of divine and human embodiment in the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition. Karen Pechilis' presentation in 'To Body or Not to Body: Repulsion, Wonder, and the Tamil Saint Kāraikkāl Ammaiār' of the contrast between a female

devotional poet's own representation of the/her body and her later male biographer's portrayal not only highlights Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's remarkable use of an 'aesthetics of repulsion' to revalue the fearsome body of Śiva as Lord of the creation ground – thereby subverting divisions between pure/impure, beauty/repulsion and even life/death – but also examines how Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's male biographer refigures this rejection of (her) physical beauty as the height of her all-consuming devotion. In 'Bodies of Desire, Bodies of Lament: Making Emotion in a South Indian Vaiṣṇava Messenger Poem', Stephen P. Hopkins explores the transformation of emotional landscapes through human, divine and animal embodiments in Veikaṭanātha's *Haṃsasandeśa* (Goose-Messenger), indicating in rich detail how the longing for the beloved-in-separation creates a full experience of time regained.

Part 3, 'Gendered and Engendering Bodies', turns its attention to the dynamics surrounding gender, sex and embodiment in South Asian religious practice and literature. Carol Anderson's 'Defining Women's Bodies in Indian Buddhist Monastic Literature' provides a fascinating analysis of how male commentators on monastic rules understood non-normative women's bodies – and how this understanding emerged in and through the process of defining who was not eligible to join the Buddhist renunciatory community. In 'Murderer, Saint, and Midwife: The Gendered Logic of Engendering in Buddhist Narratives of Aṅgulimāla's Conversion', Liz Wilson argues that accounts of Aṅgulimāla's transformation from a mass murderer to a healer and midwife evince different but complementary understandings of male and female generativity in Buddhist narratives and commentary. Through an examination of narrative sources and ethnographic field work, Tracy Pintchman's 'Fruitful Austerity: Paradigms of Embodiment in Hindu Women's *Vrat* Performances' looks at the ways in which embodied participation in the Chaṭh *vrata*, a contemporary votive ritual performed primarily by married women, engages different understandings of the body to produce the 'auspicious female body' that aligns with 'the dominant paradigm of the religiously regulated body' (p. 8).

These chapters all provide powerful and engaging contributions to their respective subfields, as well as to the field of South Asian studies as a whole. On this level, the volume is an unqualified success. The volume's relationship to its additional goal of providing cross-culturally salient paradigms of embodiment is more complicated. As indicated by co-editor Holdrege's explicit adoption in the Introduction of Radich's distinction between ordinary and extraordinary modes of embodiment as a heuristic key to South Asian embodiment (p. 9), Radich's essay looms large in the cross-cultural and cross-traditional aims of the volume as a whole. Following Radich,

Holdrege points out that theories of embodiment in South Asian traditions tend not to consider the 'biophysical human body' in and of itself, but rather see even ordinary embodiment in dynamic relation to extraordinary forms (p. 9). This basic insight lends structure to the overarching theme of bodily and embodied fluidity present throughout the book and constitutes a highly promising conceptual framework.

However, while the Buddhist traditions that Radich explores are promising candidates for developing cross-culturally salient paradigms of embodiment, Radich's startling claim that all contemporary academic discourse on embodiment is plagued by a refusal to abandon the biophysical human body is neither accurate nor conducive to cross-cultural dialogue. The fields of disability studies, critical race theory, women's, gender and sexuality studies, political theory, trans- and post-humanism, artificial intelligence and animal studies – among others – have all radically questioned the use of ordinary human bodies as normative templates for sentient embodiment. Radich's claim to know of no contemporary traditions that 'dispens[e] entirely with the biophysical, given human organism as the definitive point of reference' simply does not bear empirical scrutiny (p. 39). His rationales for dismissing the feminist and post-Foucauldian theories with which he does engage seem stretched (pp. 20–1) – perhaps not surprising given his self-professed 'limited knowledge of Foucault's project' (p. 42, fn. 14). His dismissal of the entire field of religious studies is similarly hasty (pp. 21–3). Further, even if Radich's universal critique of contemporary discourse were accurate, beginning a cross-cultural dialogue by claiming that one's interlocutors are trapped by pernicious assumptions that have rendered them unable to provide real insight into the topic at hand is rarely productive. Radich's essay therefore presents not just a missed, but rather a mishandled opportunity: it probably makes his explicit aim of 'find[ing] ways in which radically different models of embodiment, like those found in pre-modern religious traditions, can be brought into dialogue with modern body theories' less likely, not more so (p. 37). This is particularly unfortunate because the traditions from which Radich draws inspiration do indeed have valuable insights to contribute, and Radich's broad and deep knowledge of the relevant texts indicates that his work should be well positioned to enrich contemporary discourses on the body. It is also unfortunate because his essay's position as the first chapter, Holdrege's highlight of the importance of its frame, and the simple fact that it is the only contribution that explicitly mentions contemporary theories in its title would probably lead a cross-culturally inclined reader to begin (and quite possibly end) their engagement with

the volume here – at the potential loss of not only Radich’s insights, but of other perspectives as well.

Although the cross-cultural potential of Radich’s contribution is the most explicitly forefronted, a number of other chapters provide valuable potential contributions by emphasising the ways in which bodies intimately shape and are shaped by their full surrounding environments. Cerulli and Anderson’s respective contributions are particularly noteworthy in this regard. Cerulli’s contribution brings into sharp relief both the promises and pitfalls of turning to a model of bodily health that puts strong emphasis on an individual’s capacity to direct his or her health through embodied action. On one hand, as Cerulli indicates, the Āyurvedic focus on the role of self-cultivation seems to open space for holistic therapies that comprehend the power of the embodied mind and surrounding environment in furthering healing (pp. 73–7). On the other hand, however, this same focus on the positive and negative effects of following one’s ‘body *dharma*’ could contribute to the highly destructive claim that just as good actions lead to health (p. 82), having an illness is a reflection of the moral fault of the individual. This is particularly problematic in relation to the Āyurvedic perspective on mental illness that Cerulli outlines (pp. 62–5), and also seems conducive to generating stigma and a lack of compassion towards those whose bodies are deemed ‘diseased’. Indeed, Anderson’s contribution indicates some of the nuanced ways in which the connection between body and dharmic behaviour provided institutional justification for excluding those with – especially female – non-normative bodies from participating in monastic life. As she describes, the eleven types of non-normative gender and sexual expressions for which women could be barred entry into the *saṃgha* ‘are all medically documented conditions, but this fact appears to be of little interest to the commentators [on the Vinaya-Piṭaka]’ (p. 267). Simply put, ‘women who have any of these varieties of physical bodies cannot become nuns’ (p. 259). Such a negative assessment of ‘disordered’ bodies should indicate that an attempt to theorise health and body *dharma*, while potentially quite insightful, should proceed with caution.

This need for caution, however, is itself a valuable contribution to contemporary theories of embodiment that increasingly consider the body as open, malleable and intimately shaped by both individual agency and larger societal forces. When bodily health and disease are not simply matters of biophysical manipulation, how do we understand the multiple forces at play such that we can recognise the full spectrum of embodiment and open paths to equally diverse forms of bodily fulfilment? The nuanced presentations of under-appreciated resources stemming from multiple South Asian

religious traditions represented in this volume intersect with, challenge and refine contemporary academic discourses on embodiment in complex and stimulating ways. It is exciting to envision how further scholarship on these traditions will continue to enrich the growing contemporary field of body studies and related areas.