

# Introduction

## Body Matters in South Asia

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In the past decades, theories of the body have proliferated in the social sciences and humanities, representing a range of disciplinary perspectives and generating a host of contending categories of the body, such as the lived body, the mindful body, the social body, the body politic, the medical body, the alimentary body, the sexual body, and the gendered body. Among the plethora of theories, as I have discussed at length elsewhere, three areas of scholarship in particular have had a significant influence on studies of the body in religion: the body in philosophy, the body in social theory, and the body in feminist and gender studies.<sup>1</sup>

For the purpose of the present analysis I would like to briefly highlight the contributions of several theorists whose work is particularly germane to the essays in this volume. (1) *The body in philosophy*: With respect to the contributions of philosophy, one of the most important trends of analysis stems from the philosophical phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who proposes a theory of embodiment founded on the notion of the “lived body,” which posits a continuum of consciousness-body-world that seeks to overcome the dualities of subject/object and mind/body.<sup>2</sup> (2) *The body in social theory*: Among the various theories of the body developed by anthropologists, sociologists, and historians, the seminal contributions of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault are of particular significance. Bourdieu posits the notion of the “socially informed body” that is inscribed with sociocultural taxonomies through the logic of practice and that functions as the principle that generates

and unites all practices. Foucault emphasizes the “biopolitics of power” in which the body is regulated and disciplined as a site of sociopolitical control on which are inscribed relations of power.<sup>3</sup> (3) *The body in feminist and gender studies*: Among the wide-ranging theories of the body in feminist and gender studies, one of the most important trends of analysis is inspired by the French scholars Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous, who maintain that the body is a text inscribed by the structures of language and signification, and hence there is no experience of the body apart from discourse. Irigaray and Cixous, as exponents of *écriture féminine* (feminine writing), propose “writing the body” and generating new inscriptions of the female body that are liberated from “phallogocentric” discursive practices and that celebrate the alterity of woman’s sexual difference.<sup>4</sup> The notion of sexual difference has been developed in a variety of distinctive ways by Anglo-American feminists such as Judith Butler. Butler is a critical interlocutor in ongoing debates about the relationship of the sexed body to the gendered body, with the validity of the distinction between sex (male or female) and gender (masculine or feminine) itself a topic of contention.<sup>5</sup>

This collection of essays advances the field of body studies in significant ways by bringing together in a single volume eleven scholars to engage in a sustained interrogation of categories and models of the body that are grounded in the distinctive idioms of South Asian religious traditions, with particular focus on Hindu and Buddhist traditions. The contributors engage in various ways the prevailing theories of the body in the Western academy—in particular, the theories of Merleau-Ponty (Skora), Bourdieu (Holdrege), Foucault (Radich, Pintchman), the exponents of *écriture féminine* (Radich), and Butler (Anderson, Pintchman). At the same time, however, as part of the postcolonial turn, we recognize the limitations of applying Western theoretical models as the default epistemological framework for understanding notions of embodiment that derive from the “Rest of the World,” and more specifically from premodern non-Western cultures. One of the principal purposes of this collection of essays is to establish “theory parity”<sup>6</sup> in our investigations and to re-figure body theories by taking seriously the contributions of South Asian discourses to theorizing the body. While a number of the essays bring these indigenous South Asian discourses of embodiment into conversation with Western theoretical models, not all of the essays explicitly address contemporary Western body theories.

The contributors employ a range of methodologies to explore discursive representations and practices pertaining to the body in diverse South Asian religious communities across various registers, including

different historical periods, geographic regions, languages, and social locations. The contributors' explorations of formulations of embodiment in distinct religiocultural, historical, geographic, and linguistic environments not only contribute toward re-figuring theories of the body but also serve to illuminate the intimate connections between categories of embodiment, notions of the person and the self, and representations of religious experience.

## The Essays

The eleven essays are organized thematically in three parts that explore the interrelations between embodiment and selfhood (part 1), divine bodies and devotional bodies (part 2), and gendered and engendering bodies (part 3).

### *Part 1: Material Bodies, Embodied Selves, and Perfected Embodiments*

The four essays in part 1 interrogate the interrelations between embodiment and selfhood in a variety of South Asian traditions, ranging from notions of the material body and the embodied self in the classical medical texts of Āyurveda to theories of perfected embodiment in Mahāyāna Buddhist and Kashmir Śaiva traditions to constructions of performative selfhood in contemporary South Indian performance contexts.

In "Perfected Embodiment: A Buddhist-Inspired Challenge to Contemporary Theories of the Body," Michael Radich argues that contemporary theories of the body in the social sciences and humanities are bound by "materialist" and "descriptivist" assumptions in which the material human body—and more specifically the biophysical body composed of flesh and blood with an anthropomorphic shape—is the default template for what constitutes the body. He suggests that these contemporary academic theories can be fruitfully re-visioned by bringing them into genuine conversation with the radically different models of embodiment found in many premodern religious traditions. While most religious traditions may take as their starting point ordinary modes of human embodiment, at the same time they posit a range of extraordinary modes of embodiment, which are primarily ascribed to two classes of beings: divine beings or other beings who are invested with the status of ultimate reality; and human beings who have undergone some form of bodily transformation, which may entail realization of an ideal or perfected form of embodiment. Radich grounds his general reflec-

tions in a close analysis of Mahāyāna Buddhist constructions of two pivotal categories of embodiment: *sat-kāya-dṛṣṭi*, mistaken identification with the ordinary mode of human embodiment comprising the material psychophysical complex; and *dharma-kāya*, realization of an alternative perfected embodiment in gnostic identity with the ultimate truth of all things. He concludes with a consideration of the challenges posed by Buddhist theories of embodiment to contemporary scholarly theories that are predicated on the ordinary flesh-and-blood body.

Anthony Cerulli, in “Body, Self, and Embodiment in the Sanskrit Classics of Āyurveda,” provides an analysis of the terminology and taxonomies used in the Sanskrit medical literature of classical Āyurveda to articulate the nature of human embodiment, focusing on two distinct Āyurvedic typologies: those that emphasize the material body, and those that emphasize the embodied self, which includes the material body together with the *ātman*. His analysis includes an examination of the multivalent significations ascribed to the term *ātman* and the matrix of socioreligious practices with which the term is associated in the *Caraka Saṃhitā* (ca. second century BCE to first century CE) and other classical medical texts and commentaries. While the term *ātman* is at times used to designate the physical body or the empirical self, it is most frequently used to designate the transcendent Self, which in its essential nature is nonmaterial and is represented in relation to the material psychophysical organism as the “knower of the field” in relation to the “field.” In contrast to Western allopathic medicine, which is almost exclusively concerned with healing the diseased material body, Cerulli emphasizes that Āyurveda is concerned with establishing and maintaining the health, longevity, well-being, and happiness of the embodied self by providing a comprehensive system of “body *dharma*” and “self-cultivation” that is designed to enliven the connections between the microcosmos and the macrocosmos, align the individual physiology with the cosmic physiology, and ensure that all aspects of an individual’s life—physical body, mind, social relations, environment, and the transcendent Self—are properly coordinated and function together in balance and harmony.

In “Bodily Gestures and Embodied Awareness: *Mudrā* as the Bodily Seal of Being in the Trika Śaivism of Kashmir,” Kerry Skora explores tantric formulations of embodiment as expounded by Abhinavagupta (ca. 975–1025 CE), the eminent exponent of the nondual Trika Śaivism of Kashmir, and his disciple Kṣemarāja (ca. 1000–1050 CE). He focuses in particular on the role of *mudrās*, or bodily gestures, in the tantric system of ritual and meditative practices (*sādhana*), which serve as the means through which the finite body of the practitioner is “sealed” with the

absolute consciousness of Śiva, the ultimate reality. Skora concludes with a description of the perfected body of the realized tantric practitioner (*sādhaka*) as exemplified by Abhinavagupta, who in the poetic evocation of his disciple Madhurāja (ca. 1000–1050 CE) is celebrated as Śiva himself embodied in human form, his every posture and gesture a spontaneous manifestation of absolute consciousness.

Harshita Mruthinti Kamath, in “Bodied, Embodied, and Reflective Selves: Theorizing Performative Selfhood in South Indian Performance,” interrogates the interrelations between embodiment and selfhood in contemporary South Asian performance through proposing a theory of “performative selfhood” that distinguishes between three categories: the bodied self, or physical body of the performer; the embodied self, which comprises the psychoemotional faculties within the performer’s corporeal form; and the reflective self, or self-conscious faculty beyond the body through which the performer reflects upon and controls both the bodied self and the embodied self. She distinguishes her theory of performative selfhood from classical Indian aesthetic theories of *rasa* and utilizes her threefold theoretical framework to examine two case studies of South Indian performance: ritual possession and the classical dance forms of Kathakali and Kuchipudi.

### *Part 2: Divine Bodies and Devotional Bodies*

The four essays in part 2 explore the ways in which various types of divine and human bodies are represented, cultivated, and transformed in the epic narratives, devotional poetry, theological discourses, and embodied practices of a range of Hindu traditions in the period between the second century BCE and the sixteenth century CE, including the epic formulations of the Mahābhārata, the Tamil Śaiva and Tamil Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* (devotional) traditions of South India, and the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* tradition of North India.

Kendall Busse, in “Observations on the Bodies of the Gods in the Mahābhārata,” provides a close analysis of the semantics of divine embodiment in the Mahābhārata (ca. second century BCE to second century CE), including a consideration not only of representations of the bodies of *devatās*, gods, but also of the bodies of subtle beings such as *yakṣas* (chthonic spirits) and *rākṣasas* (demons). She focuses in particular on the terms *vigraha* and *mūrti* and the broader semantic fields in which they are embedded in the epic. Her analysis suggests that the term *vigraha* refers to the human-like bodies that the gods assume on the gross material plane in order to interact with human beings, while the term

*mūrti* refers to the multiple bodies that the gods manifest, particularly through the agency of *yoga*. She also provides a brief consideration of the relationship of epic terminology for divine bodies to earlier Vedic constructions of divine embodiment and to post-epic formulations concerning sculpted images.

In “*Bhakti and Embodiment: Bodies of Devotion and Bodies of Bliss in Kṛṣṇa Bhakti*,” I interrogate the role of embodiment in *bhakti* traditions. I argue that an exploration of the connections between *bhakti* and embodiment is not only critical to understanding the transformations that characterize the historical shift from Vedic traditions to post-Vedic *bhakti* traditions in the period between 200 BCE and the early centuries of the Common Era, but, more importantly, it is critical to understanding the myriad forms that *bhakti* has historically assumed up to the present time. I focus in particular on the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition, an important *bhakti* tradition that originated in the sixteenth century in the northeastern region of India now known as Bengal, which provides a robust example of the multileveled models of embodiment and systems of embodied practices that are integral to many *bhakti* traditions. My analysis centers on Gauḍīya constructions of three categories of embodiment: *ananta-rūpa*, the limitless divine bodies of Kṛṣṇa, the supreme Godhead, that interweave the various planes of existence; *sādhaka-rūpa*, the sexually marked material body of the practitioner that is transformed through devotional practices; and *siddha-rūpa*, the perfected devotional body of the practitioner that is an eternally gendered nonmaterial body of bliss.

Karen Pechilis, in “To Body or Not to Body: Repulsion, Wonder, and the Tamil Saint Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār,” analyzes the poetic vision of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, a renowned sixth-century Tamil Śaiva *bhakti* saint, who is the only woman among the sixty-three Tamil Śaiva Nāyaṃṅars to leave a legacy of devotional poetry. She contrasts Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār’s poetic vision, as expressed in her own voice through her poetry, with the portrayals of the poet-saint by Cēkkiṃṅār, her twelfth-century male biographer, in his narrative the *Periya Purāṃṅam*. Pechilis argues that in her poetry Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār constructs a devotional subjectivity in which she deploys an “aesthetics of repulsion” in celebration of the fearsome appearance of the divine body of Śiva, Lord of the cremation ground, thereby subverting the distinctions between beauty and repulsion, purity and pollution, life and death. Cēkkiṃṅār, in contrast, in his biographic portrayal deploys an “aesthetics of wonder” in celebration of the bodily transformation of the female poet in which, as a visible sign of her all-consuming devotion to her majestic Lord Śiva, she sheds her

female beauty and assumes the form of an emaciated ghoul among the host of the Lord's attendants.

In "Bodies of Desire, Bodies of Lament: Marking Emotion in a South Indian Vaiṣṇava Messenger Poem," Steven Hopkins explores the charged emotional landscapes of divine, human, and animal bodies in the *Haṃsasandeśa* (The Goose Messenger), a fourteenth-century Sanskrit messenger poem (*sandeśa-kāvya*) by Veṅkaṭeśa (ca. 1268–1369 CE), the acclaimed South Indian *bhakti* poet-saint and theologian of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community in Tamil Nadu. He examines the ways in which Veṅkaṭeśa refashions the story of Lord Rāma and his consort Sītā and marks emotional landscapes—the agonies of love-in-separation, the torment of loss, and the madness of longing—onto the divine bodies of the lover and his beloved and also onto the animal body of the messenger, a royal goose.

### *Part 3: Gendered and Engendering Bodies*

The three essays in part 3 examine the gendered logics through which female and male bodies are represented, defined, and regulated in the monastic rules and narratives of the Pāli Buddhist canon and in the literature and practices associated with contemporary Hindu women's votive rituals (*vrats*).

In "Defining Women's Bodies in Indian Buddhist Monastic Literature," Carol Anderson provides an analysis of the ways in which female bodies are classified and regulated in Indian Buddhist traditions. She is concerned in particular with the taxonomic schemas deployed in Indian Buddhist monastic literature to classify anomalous women's bodies that deviate from the normative heterosexual two-sex system. She focuses more specifically on a list of eleven anomalous physical conditions that afflict biologically sexed women, which is found in the Vinaya-Piṭaka, the section of the Pāli Buddhist canon of the Theravāda school that delineates monastic regulations for monks and nuns. Women who are afflicted by these conditions, which include various types of abnormal genitalia and menstrual disorders, are disqualified from becoming nuns, just as men with nonnormative bodies are disqualified from becoming monks. Anderson concludes with a series of reflections on the implications of such body taxonomies for illuminating Indian Buddhist understandings of the relationship between sex and gender.

Liz Wilson, in "Murderer, Saint, and Midwife: The Gendered Logic of Engendering in Buddhist Narratives of Aṅgulimāla's Conversion," explores the gendered logic through which male and female bodies are



invested with different forms of generativity in the literary imagination of redactors and commentators of the Pāli Buddhist canon. She focuses in particular on narratives of the Buddha's conversion of the serial murderer Aṅgulimāla (Garland of Fingers), who wears the severed fingers of his victims as a garland around his neck. In the first phase of her analysis, she argues that the Buddha's intervention, which stops Aṅgulimāla from killing his own mother by converting him, may be viewed as a male form of generativity in which the Buddha gives birth to a new being, a transformed Aṅgulimāla, who through his ordination as a monk is born anew in the noble lineage of the Buddhas. Thus engendered by the Buddha, Aṅgulimāla himself assumes the role of a male midwife, in which he helps a woman deliver a healthy child after an extended period of difficult labor and continues to be invoked to the present day as the patron saint of childbirth by expectant mothers in Theravāda Buddhist communities. In the second phase of her analysis, Wilson argues that the commentarial sources ultimately emphasize the interdependence of female and male forms of generativity by showcasing the critical role of women—in particular, Aṅgulimāla's mother and the woman whose childbirth he facilitated—in fostering Aṅgulimāla's transformation from a heartless killer into an *arhat*, awakened being, whose male fecundity is expressed as a fertile "field of merit" for his lay supporters.

In "Fruitful Austerity: Paradigms of Embodiment in Hindu Women's *Vrat* Performances," Tracy Pynchman examines the role of Hindu women's *vrats*, or votive rituals, in the religious management and regulation of householder women's bodies, focusing on one particular votive ritual, the Chaṭh *vrat*. Her analysis draws on Hindi narratives associated with the Chaṭh *vrat* and her own field research on contemporary Hindu women's observance of this votive ritual in the city of Vārāṇasī in North India. She argues that the Chaṭh *vrat*, as represented in the narratives and actualized in contemporary practices, functions as a performative field in which three models of embodiment—the ascetic body, the purity body, and the devotional body—are interwoven in support of the dominant paradigm of the religiously regulated body at work in this votive ritual: the auspicious female body.

### Contributions to Re-figuring Body Theories

As a heuristic device to highlight the contributions of the essays in this volume to re-figuring theories of the body in the human sciences, I will



employ Radich's distinction between ordinary modes of human embodiment, which are predicated on the material psychophysical complex, and extraordinary modes of embodiment, which include divine bodies, absolute bodies, and transformed human bodies. I would argue that, in contrast to the prevailing academic theories for which the biophysical human body is the default template, all of the South Asian traditions addressed in this volume frame their notions of ordinary human embodiment in relation to some form of extraordinary embodiment.

### *Beyond Human Embodiment*

A number of essays highlight the pivotal role that South Asian traditions ascribe to various types of extraordinary bodies beyond the human realm.

These extraordinary modes of embodiment include the bodies of gods, *devatās*, who are represented in the epic formulations of the Mahābhārata as having the capacity to maintain their subtle material forms in their luminous celestial abodes while at the same time manifesting a variety of gross material forms on the earthly plane. The epic also posits various classes of subtle beings, such as *yakṣas* and *rākṣasas*, who inhabit subtle worlds between the divine and human realms and who each have their own distinctive forms of embodiment (Busse).

In *bhakti* traditions the devotional gaze centers on the divine body of the supreme Godhead, who is celebrated as the ultimate reality and the object of devotion. In the devotional poetry of the Tamil Śaiva *bhakti* poet-saint Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār, the female poet constructs her devotional subjectivity in dynamic engagement with her beloved Lord Śiva, celebrating the fearsome appearance of his divine body (Pechilis). In his messenger poem the *Haṃsasandēśa*, the Śrīvaiṣṇava *bhakti* poet-saint and theologian Venkaṭeśa deploys his literary imagination to mark emotional landscapes, ranging from the agonies of love-in-separation to the hoped-for consummation of erotic union, onto the divine bodies of Lord Rāma and his consort Sītā (Hopkins). With the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition we shift from South India to North India and from devotional poetry to *bhakti-śāstra*, a formal discourse of *bhakti*, that constructs a multileveled theology centering on the absolute body of Kṛṣṇa, which consists of *sat-cit-ānanda*—being, consciousness, and bliss—and which manifests on the transcendent, macrocosmic, microcosmic, and mesocosmic planes in innumerable divine forms that are its partial manifestations (Holdrege).

### *Transforming Human Bodily Identities*

In addition to positing a variety of models of divine embodiment, the South Asian traditions addressed in this volume present a range of models of human embodiment that involve some form of bodily transformation. In order to illuminate the interrelations among these various models, I will distinguish three phases in the transformation of bodily identities: from (1) the *ascribed identity* associated with the karmically constructed material body to (2) the *inscribed identity* in which the material body is reconstituted through a designated regimen of practices to (3) the *realized identity* in which a perfected form of embodiment is attained.

(1) *Ascribed identity*. Most of the traditions addressed in the essays take as their starting point the notion of an *ascribed identity* that is determined at birth and circumscribed by the karmically constructed material body, which is sexually marked as either male or female and, in the case of certain Hindu traditions, may be further classified as part of a social class (*varṇa*) and caste (*jāti*). Mistaken identification with the material body, which is represented as a psychophysical continuum that includes the physical body, senses, and mental faculties, is considered the root cause of bondage and suffering. In certain Buddhist formulations this mistaken identification with the material psychophysical complex is termed *sat-kāya-dr̥ṣṭi* and needs to be rooted out in order for liberation to be attained (Radich). In Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava formulations the material psychophysical complex is termed the *sādhaka-rūpa*, which is glossed as the “body as it is” (*yaṭhāvastitha-deha*) and is deemed the body of bondage prior to its transformation through the Gauḍīya regimen of *sādhana-bhakti* (Holdrege).

(2) *Inscribed identity*. Although not every tradition addressed in the essays is explicitly concerned with the mechanisms of bondage and liberation, they share a common concern: to transform the material body that is delimited by the markers of *ascribed identity* through a designated regimen of practices that—invoking Bourdieu’s notion of the logic of practice—serves as a means of *inscribing* the body with the socioreligious taxonomies of the particular religious community. In my own work on Hindu discourses of the body, I have distinguished a number of modalities of the human body, which I term “processual bodies,” that mediate transactions with other bodies in distinctive ways and that are each constituted by a specific regimen of practices: the ritual body, the ascetic body, the purity body, the tantric body, and the devotional body.<sup>8</sup> Several traditions addressed in this volume adopt a system of practices that is designed to constitute a particular modality of human embodiment: for

example, the tantric body constructed by the Kashmir Śaiva system of tantric *sādhana* (Skora) or the devotional body fashioned by the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava regimen of *sādhana-bhakti* (Holdrege). Other modalities of the human body brought to light by the essays include the medical body cultivated by the medical regimes of Āyurveda (Cerulli) and the performative body constructed by possession rituals or the disciplines of classical Indian dance (Kamath). Several of the essays suggest that the means for transforming the material body and constituting alternative modes of embodiment assume distinctive forms depending on whether the biological body is sexually marked as male or female. For example, in the case of the Chaṭṭ *vrāt* performed by Hindu women in Vārāṇasī, the ascetic body, the purity body, and the devotional body are refashioned as integral components of a single performative field aimed at constituting an auspicious female body (Pintchman). Indian Buddhist monastic literature constructs elaborate taxonomies that distinguish men and women whose bodies conform to the normative two-sex system—male or female—from those with anomalous bodies that diverge from the norm and hence are barred from undertaking the monastic disciplines necessary for constructing a monastic body (Anderson).

(3) *Realized identity*. In several traditions addressed in this volume the process of transformation culminates in a state of liberation or realization in which the empirical self casts off its mistaken identification with the material psychophysical complex and realizes a perfected form of embodiment. In Theravāda Buddhist traditions the process of transformation finds fruition in attainment of the status of an *arhat*, an awakened being who is liberated from the fetters of material embodiment (Wilson). In certain Mahāyāna Buddhist formulations awakening is envisioned as realization of the *dharma-kāya*, perfected embodiment in gnostic identity with the ultimate truth of all things (Radich). In Kashmir Śaiva formulations the process of transformation culminates in realization of a perfected tantric body that is the manifest expression of the absolute consciousness of Śiva (Skora). In the case of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition, the ultimate goal is realization of a *siddha-rūpa*, a perfected devotional body that is ontologically distinct from the transformed *sādhaka-rūpa* and is eternal, nonmaterial, and, like the absolute body of Kṛṣṇa himself, constituted of *cit* and *ānanda*, consciousness and bliss.

## Notes

1. For a discussion of recent trends of scholarship on the body in philosophy, social theory, and feminist and gender studies and more specifically

in religious studies, along with relevant references, see Holdrege 2015: 7–11; Holdrege forthcoming.

2. See Merleau-Ponty 1962.

3. See Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1990; Foucault 1973, 1979, 1980, 1988–1990.

4. See Kristeva 1980, 1982, 1986; Irigaray 1985a, 1985b, 1993; Cixous 1976, 1994; Cixous and Clément 1986.

5. See Butler 1993, 1999, 2004.

6. This expression derives from Cabezón 2006: 31.

7. The term “processual body” reflects the Hindu notion that the human body is not “individual” but is rather “dividual”—to use McKim Marriott’s (1976) term—that is, a constellation of substances and processes that is connected to other bodies through a complex network of transactions.

8. For an extended study of the discursive representations and practices associated with these five processual bodies in distinct Hindu discourses of the body, see Holdrege forthcoming. For brief analyses of a range of Hindu discourses of the body, see Holdrege 1998, 2008.

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