



James W. Watts and Yohan Yoo (eds.). *Books as Bodies and as Sacred Beings*.

**James W. Watts and Yohan Yoo (eds.). *Books as Bodies and as Sacred Beings*. Equinox Publishing: Sheffield (UK) and Bristol (CT), 2021. 168 pages. US \$39 (paper) ISBN 978-1-7817-9884-3.**

The book as a cultural object is a common focus in book history. Accounts of fetishist usage of holy scripture abound, such as the woman in Hampshire who in the early 1900s was said to eat daily a page of the New Testament in a butter sandwich to cure her [fits](#).<sup>1</sup> The book is not confined solely to religious veneration. Secular forms of veneration are palpable in popular reactions to libraries as they [weed books](#) or when groups [destroy works](#). As book historians know, the book is not *merely* a cultural object.

The volume, edited by James W. Watts and Yohan Hoo, is a thought-provoking addition to our discipline as it expands the study on sacred texts by looking at them attaining the status of bodies, as well as body practices that merge with the materiality and immateriality of texts. Watts is a professor of religion who has focused on the rituals that surround scriptures. Many of the chapters are grounded on the three dimensions of sacred texts proposed by Watts himself: semantic, expressive or performative, and iconic. The first one refers to textual interpretation; the second to how a text gets materialized through the body by being read, memorized, sung or acted; while the last one refers to the material form and visual appearance of a text.

The volume puts together papers presented at the conference “Books as sacred beings” (October 2017, Seoul National University). The guiding theme is that in all human religions there is a tendency to treat religious texts as sacred beings, be it by rituals that turn the sacred text into a body or through rituals in which bodies become sacred texts. According to Watts these rituals are present in all human cultures as shown by the different papers in the volume. In the introductory chapter he links the premise of sacred texts as beings to the studies by other religious and anthropology scholars.

*Books as Bodies and as Sacred Beings* consists of ten chapters covering eight cases on the embodiment of texts as sacred beings, as well as their performativity, materiality, and iconicity. The traditions and religions covered are Korean Shamanism, Hindu Tantric, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Daoism. Practices from Africa and the Americas are not covered; this may owe to the more performative and oral foundations of these traditions. Rituals from Judaism are not specifically covered, though its rapport to digital texts is mentioned in one chapter. The closing chapter by Watts focuses on

the larger theme of texts becoming bodies and bodies becoming texts by looking into the agency of books, whether secular or religious, and how this focus can further religious studies.

The first two chapters focus on bodily techniques through which scripture is materialized as a sacred presence. Yohaun Yoo writes on *Seolwi-seolgeong*, shamanistic rituals in Korea which embody scripture through recitation techniques and materialize it by means of cutting paper figures and banners with words and phrases from the scripture itself. Katharina Wilkens writes on Qur'an embodiment practices which are grounded in somatic-iconic approaches, arguing against the conceptual separation of ways of knowing as decoupled from the sensual body. Following this, she highlights the process of learning the Qur'an through memorization, absorbing it in the body via the sound of chanted words, and how this embodiment has given way to practices where the verses are breathed in or drunk.

Two chapters center around the perceived sacredness of the texts themselves and how this enables their embodiment. Bradford A. Anderson focuses on the dichotomy of the printed versus the digital form of scriptures by exploring how believers codify the iconicity of sacred texts in their different forms. While Dorina Miller Parmenter's chapter deals with how the ritualized practice of *Bring Your Bible to School Day* employs this iconic book as a "cognitive placeholder" where the carrier is signaled as a sacred body, and a connector to other members of the Evangelical community.

The following two chapters are concerned with bodily performativity motivated by texts. Rachel Fell McDermott's paper focuses on how bodies are transformed into sacred books in the Hindu Tantric tradition through the textualization of Bengali poetry centered around the goddess Kālī. Virginia Burrus draws a parallel between the lives of Saints and contemporary performance artists. She illustrates the different dimensions of performativity both through the tension between the ephemerality of the text/body and in its visual and 'thingly' mediations.<sup>2</sup>

The final two chapters deal with the creation of specific traditions centered on scriptures. Jason Neelis explores the sacredness of material and visual early Buddhist texts, their veneration as embodiments of the Buddha, and how these narratives were appropriated and adapted to local contexts in Gandhāra. Jihyun Kim paper introduces us to the origins of the Daoist scriptures, the relevance of scripture veneration in rituals, and how the recitation of scripture forms a core practice for the body to attain transcendental.

Given the various religious traditions covered in the volume, the non-expert could fear the chapters may be too demanding. The authors, however, give ample background information on the tradition itself, quoting scholars from the field, so that those not familiar with it can place the case study in the bigger theme of books and bodies. Most chapters are grounded on the three dimensions that Watts proposes, which can feel repetitive when reading the book from start to finish, but are helpful when read apart. Not all chapters present direct strong links of literal texts being embodied. Fell McDermott's chapter on worship practices of Kālī and Burrus' chapter on performativity of Saint's lives and contemporary artists, might feel distant from those interested in more grounded material textual practices. Nevertheless, these two chapters tie into the expanded definition of text and reading.

Books, religious or secular, are ascribed agency just like people. The dimensions which Watts proposes to approach rituals and embodiment of scripture, and the cases presented by the various authors, will be useful not only to scholars working on religious texts but can also be an inspiration for historians working on canons and the book as a cultural object. Both the introduction and closing

chapter provide a good working ground for expanding on the materiality and immateriality of books. The approaches presented in the volume can enrich book history methods by complementing the religious and spiritual dimensions of texts with concepts such as “sacred secular” as proposed by Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Meyer.<sup>3</sup> Book history as a discipline has always benefited from contributions from different backgrounds and this is a noteworthy addition to our bibliography.

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## Notes

1. *Notes and Queries*. Vol. 8. Ninth. London, Oxford University Press, 1901, 103.
2. ‘Thingly’ derives from Heidegger’s musings on the nature of objects or things and has been further developed in phenomenology and aesthetics, for further reading see Brown, Bill. “Thing Theory.” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1–22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344258>.
3. Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff. *Secular Ritual*. Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977, Introduction.

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