

[Greenlee on Van Deusen, 'Embodying the Sacred: Women Mystics in Seventeenth-Century Lima](#)

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The following book review from H-LatAm may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

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Nancy E. Van Deusen. *Embodying the Sacred: Women Mystics in Seventeenth-Century Lima*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 280 pp. \$94.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-6989-9; \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-6995-0.

Reviewed by Gabrielle Greenlee (University of California, Santa Cruz) **Published on** H-LatAm (October, 2018) **Commissioned by** Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

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During the seventeenth century, colonial Lima was characterized as the pulsing “mystical body” of the viceroyalty of Peru, an identity cultivated by particular events and spiritual figures. In six chapters divided into two parts, Nancy E. van Deusen’s book, *Embodying the Sacred: Women Mystics in Seventeenth-Century Lima*, presents the reader with several women mystics whose spiritual practices and involvement in *el siglo*, defined as the world outside their religious confines, punctuated a critical period of Christian religiosity in Lima. Each chapter peels back the documentary history (as transmitted through, for example, beatification testimonies, depositions, and religious memoirs or biographies called *vidas*) in order to dissect how women expressed belief in more intimate, often bodily, ways; importantly, the author also situates them in the context of a colony’s maneuvering and flexing under inquisitorial scrutiny and peninsular politics.

Hinging on the question of how spiritual belief met with material realities, van Deusen argues that the women in this study exhibited a “theological literacy” that enabled them to transform everything from sacred objects to speech acts to bodily gestures into a *narrative* practice of sorts through which others could variously follow, learn from, and even interpret them. That is, the analysis extends to how some of these women used their bodies as texts to be “read” by other believers for the materialization of religious understanding. In framing colonial religious practices in terms of narrativity and then formulating the body as script, the author throughout draws on Michel de Certeau’s theorizations of how bodies, buildings, and objects variously write and read as texts within the social space. Van Deusen, a professor of history at Queen’s University in Ontario, has previously written about religious experience in the viceroyalty of Peru and about marginal identities making claims for themselves, often with recourse to writing, textualization, or knowledge inscribed

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in one way or another. The author here follows suit, probing documentary sources to explain a particular colonial history through women's voices and actions.

Van Deusen's book is important reading for those interested in women's expressions of devotion in colonial Lima and modes of theorizing spiritual practices more generally. The book describes how women used spiritual practices to push against social constraints—not always succeeding, or succeeding only after much struggle, but nonetheless finding positionality for themselves. The chapters plot themes that resurface throughout the study of Christianity in colonial South America, drawing on questions of material and immaterial devotional expression, surveillance of spiritual practices, gendered expectations of piety, and tensions between secular and ecclesiastical jurisdictions. The book complements other scholarship of the colonial Andes that investigates how women demonstrated spirituality within certain economic, cultural, and political confines or, in equal measure, how colonial Christians comprehended and manipulated physical materialities (of the bodily self but also of sacred objects) within their spiritual explorations.[1] The three chapters of part 1, "Material and Immaterial Embodiment," dwell on how women narrated religious experiences through physical interactions with material objects or through the body's own sensations. In turn, the chapters of part 2, "The Relational Self," highlight how women acted through their social-relational networks in colonial Lima and "wrote" themselves into these, often pushing against restrictive social structures.

Chapter 2 grounds the book's key points, contextualizing Lima's spiritual luminaries within a history of Christian mystical, embodied religious practices. It references the genealogy of a mystical tradition that formulated divinity through expressions on the mystic's physical body, by which the devout could "read" and interpret divinity. It discusses the legacy of such mystics as the sixteenth-century Teresa de Avila, the seventeenth-century Isabel Porrás Marmolejo, and the thirteenth-century Catherine of Siena, who "'textualiz[ed]' their corporeal experiences of mystical union by rendering ... the ineffable into an orthodox and comprehensible narrative structure" (p. 64). These saintly women linked reading of holy texts to sensory experiences and frequently submitted themselves to bodily punishment in order to, through their pain, further access the Word of God. Through them, we see how text is conceptualized amply enough to become a process of actualization, finding equivalence with other formats of sensorial engagement: visual representation, oral recollection, and mystical vision.

In part 1's other chapters, van Deusen points to the stories of two devout women: Santa Rosa de Lima and Angela de Dios. These women practiced their religiosity according to the idea that spiritual knowledge of the Word of God could be obtained through the senses or more intuitive mystical channels. The *beata* (lay pious) Rosa de Lima circumvented constraints imposed on women's theological learning and became a conduit for women's access to such learning through expressions of devotion as imprinted, or "written," on her body. According to van Deusen, 20 percent of Lima's women lived in some type of enclosed space to different degrees defined by religious devotion; women frequently pursued or were entrusted to (or exerted to follow) the religious life. Thus, the imprint of female spaces like convents, *recogimientos* (enclosed educational institutions), or *beaterios* (for the lay devotee, affiliated with a religious order) was very much felt across Lima's social strata. The story of Angela de Dios is the book's most colorful one and demonstrates how volatile and potentially transgressive the question of material and immaterial experiences of spirituality could be. Angela's followers expressed their "somatic literacy" by acquiring her teeth,

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clothing, nails, blood, and more intimate bodily excretions in a form of spiritual, sensorial appropriation. She is described as a living reliquary, an objectified spiritual being whose “voice” encompassed her bodily substances as much as it included her oral and written narratives of mystical journeys to heaven. But though she rose in influence as a holy woman, she later tumbled into ignominy when *limeños* seem too strained politically, economically, and emotionally by external events to endure her excesses as a spiritual practitioner. The chapter’s allusion to the political tensions that perhaps contributed to Angela’s conviction for heresy give the reader some guidance for the book’s transition into its second part, which focuses more on how devotional practices met against quite rigid social systems and expectations. The author’s application of textualization as a connective framework perhaps strains a little, however, when the book’s content shifts from the mystic’s body as expression of spirituality to how mystics circulated within a larger body politic. At times it is difficult to align the different nods to de Certeau clearly enough. When part 1’s theoretical framing of legibility (applied to women’s bodies vividly and materially “writing” spiritual meaning) gives way to part 2’s chapters about more abstract networks of bodily relations, we could use more guidance on how to register de Certeau’s work even though he seems to be an underlying reference across all six chapters.

Part 2 extends the discussion of the body and spiritual practice but turns away from how the body materializes the sacred and instead considers how bodies act within relational configurations to promote spiritual causes but also to create social positionality. The chapters in this section refer to narrativity but they more clearly implicate ideas of performance and relationality. We meet characters who emerge from the social periphery to affect their local environments: Ursula de Jesús (b. 1604), a black mystic whose selfless piety exceeds her lowly status, and Nicolás de Ayllón (b. 1632), an Indigenous man whose wife, María Jacina Montoya, campaigned (unsuccessfully ultimately) to have him beatified. We also meet a wealthier, more privileged young woman named Josefa Portocarrero Laso de la Vega who negotiated impediments to her religious practice and asserted herself through actions and text by appealing to different public figures. While to some extent these chapters revisit the idea of the body as text to be interpreted, the characters more clearly illuminate how women used spiritual practice to act outside the limitations of a stratified social space.

The book is particularly valuable for giving voice (and body) to female figures and their devotional models. Furthermore, while van Deusen helpfully foregrounds the limitations of the archives with respect to the perception, narration, sensorial engagement, and gendered mediation of sacred experiences, she nonetheless conveys how the sacred was actualized in colonial Lima, retrieving from the historical accounts a sense of the lived, spontaneous expressions of colonial religiosity.

Notes

[1]. Kathryn Burns, *Colonial Habits: Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), for example, is a corresponding text that looks at the ways in which spiritual and material realities converged for cloistered women in colonial Cuzco. Also see Rafael Sanchez-Concha Barrios, *Santos y Santidad en el Perú Virreinal* (Lima: Vida y Espiritualidad, 2004) for a similar investigation of a larger group of religious figures in the sociopolitical context of the viceroyalty, but bridging a longer time span; more singularly focused on one individual who van Deusen also highlights, see Ramón Mujica Pinilla, *Rosa limensis: Mística, política e iconografía en*

torno a la patrona de América (Lima: Instituto Francés de Estudios Andinos, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Banco Central de Reserva del Perú, 2001). Also relevant is Maya Stanfield-Mazzi, *Object and Apparition: Envisioning the Christian Divine in the Colonial Andes* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013) for its study of how Christianity was envisioned and visually narrated in the colonial Andes. Van Deusen's text is also in conversation with a body of scholarship that deals in the ontology of objects outside of a European scope. It is especially interesting to read her explorations of relationality and sensorial experiences within the urban and heavily Europeanized space of colonial Christian Lima alongside works on the presence and "personhood" of objects as fathomed outside of European representational and exchange systems; research into religion in the colonial Andes can be enriched by considering European and non-European practices and conceptualizations of embodied devotion. For example, see Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1998); Alf Hornborg, "The Political Economy of Technofetishism: Agency, Amazonian Ontologies, and Global Magic," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no. 1 (2015): 35-57; Sarah Hunt, "Ontologies of Indigeneity: the Politics of Embodying a Concept," *Cultural Geographies* 21, no. 1 (2014): 27-32; and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Perspectivism," in *Cannibal Metaphysics*, ed. and trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2014), 49-64. For work by scholars circulating closer to Christianity's ontological negotiations, see, for example, Aparecida Vilaça and Robin M. Wright, eds., *Native Christians: Modes and Effects of Christianity among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); David Morgan, *The Forge of Vision: A Visual History of Modern Christianity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); and Amy Whitehead, *Religious Statues and Personhood: Testing the Role of Materiality* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), which van Deusen explicitly cites within her text.

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