

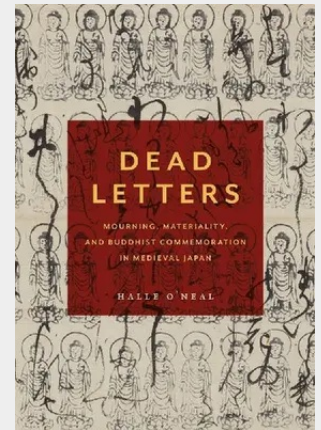
Dead Letters

Mourning, Materiality, and Buddhist Commemoration in Medieval Japan

In *Dead Letters*, Halle O'Neal explores how inventive makers in medieval Japan, haunted by love and loss, turned to things left behind in the wake of a loved one's death—specifically, the letters they once exchanged. Since the ninth century, mourners reused and recycled the epistles of the dead for copying sacred Buddhist scripture to create what are known as "letter sutras." Although these sutras have punctuated the personal histories and material culture of famous figures throughout Japan's history, as objects they remained largely hidden in plain sight. By foregrounding their production, materiality, and haptic qualities, O'Neal recaptures the vivid tales woven by the interaction of the maker as mourner and the beloved as original letter writer. Her analysis pays careful attention to gender, embodiment, emotions, and invisibility to analyze the multidimensional layers of these palimpsests that offered both an outlet for grief and a prayer for salvation. Through their manifestation, letter sutras bring together multiple layers of religious and cultural significance for mourner and mourned. This beautifully illustrated volume centers the emotional intimacy of used objects and the charged nature of embodiment that lies at the root of private devotional practice to this day.

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