

The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature

Ed. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff

Albany: SUNY P, 2009

\$80 hardcover

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“My first thinking about Buddhism was reading the Beats,” Maxine Hong Kingston explains in her interview in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, adding, “it seemed as if the dharma was imported by these Americans” (178). The Beats, of course, are often central to critical commentary on Buddhism in U.S. literature, and this volume indeed presumes that the initial exposure to Buddhism for many twentieth-century writers was “the countercultural intelligentsia who found the pleasure palace of America wanting” (2). However, the deft incorporation of both Buddhism and literary criticism by the contributors to this collection ensures that the range of what is characterized as “Buddhist” and “American” extends beyond Beat writing. The contributors are as adept with Buddhist ways of knowing as they are with contemporary literary studies, which makes this collection a necessary corrective in a critical community that too often in the past has taken the extreme positions of either summarily celebrating North American Buddhist writers as heroic iconoclasts or summarily attacking them as colonizing orientalist.

Jonathan Stalling’s opening essay recasts Ernest Fenollosa’s “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” as a literary antecedent in Buddhist American poetry. Fenollosa, one of the earliest Westerners ordained as Buddhist, is an important transitional figure in Buddhist American literature, a bridge between its roots in American Transcendentalism and its role in shaping the twentieth-century avant-garde. Ezra Pound edited and published a version of “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,” but deleted much of Fenollosa’s Buddhist rhetoric in his version of the essay; still, as Stalling demonstrates, Buddhist epistemological ideas about language remain as a trace in the experimental lineage inspired by Pound’s work on Fenollosa. Stalling establishes a substantive background for reading the first two sections of the volume, “Literature as Vehicle: Transmission and Transformation” and “Zen, Vajrayana, and the Avant-Garde: A Pluralistic Poetics,” which feature essays on the work of Gary Snyder, Michael Heller, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Philip Whalen, Anne Waldman, and John Giorno. The last of these, Giorno, seems particularly undervalued in contemporary scholarship—a mistake, given his prescient incorporation of polyvocality, multitracking, and sound collage within the otherwise static arena of the page. Marcus Boon’s essay argues that Giorno’s work can teach us much about the role of sound as a primary category of understanding in twentieth-century avant-garde U.S. poetry. Boon maintains, too, that from Giorno’s poems we might construct a more accurate model of the meditating mind as a space full of productive noise, rather than portray it in the hushed minimalism of popular stereotype.

Of the generalizations that inhibit a deeper understanding of Buddhist influence in U.S. literature, perhaps the most prevalent is the notion that such writing is only an over-determined product of white privilege. To be sure, for many post-World War II avant-garde writers—and especially the Beats—Asian tradition was one more element of influence to appropriate in order

to revivify what was, for them, the potentially vital margins of an otherwise moribund literary establishment. This revitalization of the margins through the incorporation of Asian philosophy might not have occurred, of course, were it not for the submersion of writers of color, for whom marginalization was not a matter of aesthetic or cultural choice. This volume's final section, "Widening the Circle: Buddhism and Writers of Color," offers the crucial reminder that our literary histories of Buddhism in North America are incomplete if they do not confront questions of race and power at the same time that they focus on aesthetics or epistemology. One can say correctly, for instance, that Buddhism's history is predicated on the religion's ability to adapt to each new culture to which it migrates. However, the material in this final section—Whalen-Bridge's interview with Maxine Hong Kingston, Hanh Nguyen and R.C. Lutz's discussion of Lan Cao, Storhoff's reading of Charles Johnson, and Johnson's Afterword—asks how this adaptation to the post-World War II United States affected not just the counterculture but those who were outsiders in the U.S. by dint of their refugee or immigrant status, or as a result of racism.

Buddhist ontology is skeptical of essential categories such as race, yet it also recognizes race as a significant constitutive element of historical identity. In this way, Storhoff argues that Johnson "has often dismissed race as an absolute category; nevertheless, race is also a generating principle in almost all of his work" (211). Johnson's autobiographical Afterword enacts this collision between Buddhist ontology and the materiality of his historical moment, emphasizing the imperative in most Buddhisms to focus the practitioner inward while simultaneously projecting the practitioner outward into the particulars of his/her historical moment. Johnson argues that "Buddhism has interested writers in part because it dramatizes and universalizes the individual's journey toward completion, but one of the most striking modern trends within Buddhism has included a movement outward, toward social responsibility" (234). Taken together, Storhoff's and Johnson's essays help establish the contours of a field that could be called "Buddhist American literature." Given that the philosophical framework of Buddhist intersubjectivity places equal emphasis on the practitioner's inner life and his/her everyday lived experience, this book suggests that scholars of Buddhist American literature should be mindful that the relentless inner focus of Buddhism in U.S. literature cannot be extricated from its historical contexts. The essays in *The Emergence of Buddhist Literature* confront rather than eschew a paradox that is of utmost concern for those who would work in both Buddhism and literary studies: how does the Buddhist writer acknowledge both the provisionality of language and Buddhism's ontological indeterminacy without lapsing into relativism? In so doing, this collection explores the productive struggles that ensue for American Buddhist writers when their religious practice in turn deepens the influence of Buddhism on their work. *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* signals a significant turn in critical understanding of Buddhism in U.S. literature—one whose methodology emphasizes the groundlessness shared by Buddhism and contemporary literature studies while also grounding itself, necessarily so, in the ways in which Buddhism is shaped by the particularities of history.