

Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature into the Twenty-first Century.
Ed. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff.
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Reviewed by Tom Pynn, Kennesaw State University

Writing as Enlightenment is the third volume in the State University of New York Press series Buddhism and American Culture. All the volumes as well as the series are edited by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff. The first volume, *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* (2009), offers a collection of essays that “focus on the ways in which Asian cultural traditions were inflected and conditioned as they made their way into American culture” (4). The second book, *American Buddhism as a Way of Life* (2010), examines, according to the editors in their introduction to the volume, “in wide-ranging essays how Buddhism has been transmitted to America spiritually and materially in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (2). The current volume “is meant to re-engage literary scholars” (3). The editors both note that “[t]he literary richness characteristic of early Buddhist texts has now become an important part of American literary history” such that literary scholars ignore Buddhist influences at their peril. What ties all three volumes together and links these books to the series in its entirety are the interwoven patterns of accommodation to American culture and advocacy for Buddhisms across American culture.

Clearly this is an ambitious task. We are still very much in the midst of the emergence and development of American Buddhism which, if the history of Buddhism continues to play out as it has since its inception in the *darsanas* (“teachings from a point of view”) of Shakyamuni, will unfold as so many Buddhisms, each with its own unique context, nuances, and emphases. Despite the difficulties mentioned above, as well as those limitations inherent to academic and historical taxonomy, to date there are at least twenty-five works that explore the coming of Buddhism to America. Included in this list is the most ambitious title of all, Don Morreale’s *Complete Guide to Buddhist America* (my emphasis).

The importance of the series and this particular volume to Beat studies is significant. Despite the fact that *Writing as Enlightenment* does not focus exclusively on artists typically associated with the Beats, what is here adds to the already existing scholarship on the relation of Buddhisms to American culture generally and to Beat culture specifically. In Jan Willis’ brief “Foreword” to the collection, she observes that “Americans have been receptive to a sort of literary, although not necessarily or primarily religious, transmission of Buddhism” (xii). I would add philosophical and religious transmission as well. Willis’s observation is an important starting point for those of us interested in the reception of Buddhisms by Beat artists and, through their respective works, American culture. Willis’ statement applies less to specific Beat artists than it

does to American culture broadly construed. For many Beat artists, contact comes in a mix of sources, both canonical and non-canonical. For some members of American youth culture after 1956, for instance, contact with Buddhism is primarily mediated by literary texts such as Allen Ginsberg's *HOWL and Other Poems* and Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*. The distinction between canonical and non-canonical Buddhist texts, as well as how these texts will be (re)interpreted, must be made in the larger conversation about what American Buddhism will look like.

Part I of *Writing as Enlightenment* contains two chapters that are more historical in scope than literary, but contain two important contexts for Beat scholars: the dual discourse of Zen's arrival in America at the end of the 19th century and the significance of Buddhism to African-American culture. Jane Falk's contribution may be read as a first response to Willis' observation that American interest in Buddhism was primarily driven by literary appreciation. Falk's chapter elucidates what she calls the "dual discourse" of aesthetics and spirituality. While the connection of Zen to aesthetics is an important dimension of the transmission of Zen to America, Falk, because she specifically focuses on how the dual discourse is *established* by the activities of both Soen and Okakura, neglects the pivotal role played by D.T. Suzuki in the *conveyance* of Zen's dual discourse to a wider American audience. It is D.T. Suzuki who published *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1927) and later in life lectured to standing-room only crowds at Columbia University in 1952, and whose publication of *Zen and Japanese Culture* (1959) probably has had a greater influence in the long run on the *reception* of the dual discourse that Falk adroitly analyzes.

Linda Furgerson Selzer's historical overview of "Black American Buddhism" focuses on "Black Dharma," which will be of particular interest to those Beat scholars concerned with the influence of Buddhism on African-American Beat poets such as Bob Kaufman and LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka. Her focus on "Black Dharma" raises important questions pertaining to orientalism and essentialism, Buddhist resources for the transformation of pain and suffering, and the conflict between traditionalist interpretations of Buddhist teachings and what has become known as socially-politically engaged Buddhism. This last topic immediately led me to recall Gary Snyder's essay "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution," in which he anticipates "engaged Buddhism" (even though the Vietnamese Buddhist order in the Linji lineage of Ch'an, of which Thich Nhat Hanh is a member, had been practicing and emphasizing this form of Buddhism since the late 1940s) by showing how Western theories of outer revolution are an important companion to Buddhist practices and theories of inner revolution. As Snyder presciently observed, "[t]he mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both" (92).

Part II explores the role of Buddhism in the works of contemporary writers Gary Snyder, Jackson Mac Low, and Don DeLillo. Allan Johnston's contribution is a solid reading of Snyder's *Rip Rap and Myths and Texts*; Johnston identifies an inextricable link between the political-social-spiritual that the Part I essays don't get at directly. An interesting element of his interpretation is

his emphasis on what he terms Snyder's "ethical holism," a concept that connects Snyder's interest in deep ecology and Native American studies with Zen Buddhism. However, it is Jonathan Stalling'sⁱ essay that, to me, is the stand out in the entire volume because the author excavates the deeper Buddhist strata that inform the Buddhist poetics of Mac Low. While Stalling stops short of identifying Jackson Mac Low as a Beat, he does position the poet as a precursor to LANGUAGE poetry's emphasis on de-centering the "I" in order to get beyond Romanticism. To an extent that no other contributor does in the volume, Stalling identifies and critiques the components of Mac Low's "poetics of no-mind," thereby showing directly how Buddhist aesthetics and spirituality inform his work (90). This is an exceptional essay on an important and overlooked poet.

In Part III, the editors present interviews conducted with an interesting array of contemporary American writers whose works have been informed by Buddhist traditions. Julia Martin's interview with Snyder is a reminder of how important he is to the on-going discourse about American Buddhism, especially his continuing reminders, in both prose and poetry, of the interplay between the human and non-human in our developing theories and practices of Buddhisms in America.

Whalen-Bridge's discussion with Charles Johnson and Maxine Hong Kingston ranges along a wide swath of Buddhist themes that pop up in both Johnson's and Kingston's respective writings, including the role of the artist in discussions about American Buddhism, writing and its relation to Buddhist discourses about self and other, and the important relationship between writing and enlightenment. The question about the relation, if in fact there is one to speak of, between writing and enlightenment is crucial to the study of Buddhisms and American literature not only because it is a debate on-going in Buddhist circles at least since the Tang Dynasty but also because it cuts to the heart of both the efficacy of communication and mind to mind transmission, both of which are also crucial themes of interest in the *mahaprajnaparamita* literature. While I applaud Whalen-Bridge for asking the question about how being a writer refers us to the enlightenment experience, not developing a sustained focus on the relationship between writing and enlightenment is a short-coming of the present volume. If it is indeed the case that American Buddhisms has been largely mediated by literature, then it is imperative to ask the hermeneutic question of how we are reading these texts and in what kinds of meaning-constructing acts are we engaging. Furthermore, what do these hermeneutic tactics tell us about our understanding of Buddhist textual traditions, and what kind of American Buddhisms will these tactics give rise to?

Whalen-Bridge's re-hashing of the infamous incident at Naropa between Trungpa Rinpoche and W.S. Merwin is a disappointment. Do we really need to go over this again? Given that he is speaking with Joanne Kyger, I would have liked to hear more about her Buddhist informed poetics. Only in the conversation with Reed Bye, however, do we begin to get at what is perhaps the difficulty at the heart of "the great Naropa poetry wars": what Bye refers to as "the basic division" between "the guru's world and the individualist U.S. poet's world" (167). If the

conversation had developed further on this point we may have dug deeper into one of the major differences between Asian cultures and American culture that is a significant site of contestation between traditional forms of Buddhism (whether from Korea, Japan, Taiwan or China) and American Buddhism. For some Beat writers, this “basic division” may also add a new layer to understanding the early appropriations of Buddhism by some Beats, particularly those working in and around the Bay area. Specifically, it might shed light on the debate among some Beat scholars today about how we are to understand Kerouac’s “Buddhism.”

Even though, as the editors tell us, this volume is aimed at literary scholars, their focus on a specific audience shouldn’t preclude attentiveness to the contested issues at the heart of Buddhist traditions (or any of the Asian traditions that have made their way to American shores). This collection of essays has too narrow a focus on social and political ethics and not enough on the deeper philosophical and religious concerns at stake in the transmission of Buddhism to America through literature. It seems to me that the first book in the series does a better job of addressing the kinds of questions Willis and the editors raise than does *Writing as Enlightenment*. Furthermore, in a book devoted to exploring the influences of Buddhism on some American authors, it is striking that, while important teachers are mentioned (Buddha, Dogen, Soen, Suzuki, Trungpa), and certain core concepts (*dukkha*, dharma, emptiness, *upaya*, and *partiyasamutpada*), almost no one references a single canonical source text. Dogen’s “Mountains and Waters Sutra” is the only Buddhist text mentioned (unless you count Snyder’s citing of *Mahaprajnaparamita*, which can refer to a set of canonical texts that include the Heart Sutra, as well as being a phrase denoting a quality of understanding). While I am not a traditionalist, every movement of Buddhism across borders has involved serious debates about the canon, hermeneutical debates regarding specific texts within the canon, and the relationship of text to practice. In the lack of direct references to canonical texts are the authors telling us something about American Buddhism? Will American Buddhism be the first cultural form of Buddhism that will ignore these debates? If so, what are the implications of this for American Buddhism?

Despite its limitations—don’t all edited volumes fall short of the ideal?—I suggest reading all the contributions or else one will find oneself, as I sometimes did, quibbling with conceptions of *upaya*, emptiness, suffering, and the role of writing in Buddhist practice. Reading the entire volume, one will glimpse the larger discourse about what American-Buddhism will/can be.

Works Cited

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ⁱ An excellent work of what Stalling calls the “transpacific imaginary” is his recent *Poetics of Emptiness: Transformations of Asian Thought in American Poetry* (2010). I consider this work essential reading for Beat scholars interested in Buddhism and Asian thought in American literature.