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Book review: Writing as enlightenment: Buddhist American literature in the 21st century

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Book review: Writing as enlightenment: Buddhist American literature in the 21st century

Abstract

Extract: If uneven in nature and scope, this compendium of essays, interviews, and literary speculations provides a still cogent look at how effectively Buddhism has been transmitted in the U.S. through literature. Whalen-Bridge and Storhof (eds. *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, SUNY, 2009), contend here that Buddhism has become “an important cultural dimension of America” (2). With various contributors, including several from their previous volume, they advance this view convincingly in talking up the indigenization of Buddhism in the U.S.

Keywords

book review, writing, enlightenment, Buddhist, American, literature, 21st century

Book Review:

Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature in the 21st Century.

Eds. John Whalen-Bridge & Gary Storhoff. NY: SUNY, 2011. 193 p. \$29.95¹

If uneven in nature and scope, this compendium of essays, interviews, and literary speculations provides a still cogent look at how effectively Buddhism has been transmitted in the U.S. through literature. Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff (eds. *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, SUNY, 2009), contend here that Buddhism has become “an important cultural dimension of America” (2). With various contributors, including several from their previous volume, they advance this view convincingly in talking up the indigenization of Buddhism in the U.S. In an essay on Japanese Buddhists at the historic 1898 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, Jane Falk (Univ. Akron) examines early discussions of Zen in the U.S., revealing how aesthetic discourse linking Buddhism with “nonreligious aspects of Western philosophy and culture” (21) trumped the spiritual in suggesting to Americans “the advantages of Eastern thought and life practices in contrast to Western materialism and anxiety-ridden modernity” (5). The sub-text was almost effortless, Falk concludes, making Buddhism out as “a practical self-help kind of religion which can better cope with modernity than can Christianity” (26). The echo here of Buddhism in an increasingly secular America sounding more like a form of psychology than a religious path is hard to overlook. As *restauranteurs* are wont to phrase, ‘if you can’t sell the steak, sell the sizzle.’

Writing insightfully on black American Buddhism that in a larger way really addresses the concept of contemporary ‘socially engaged’ Buddhism promulgated by Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa, the late-Robert Aitken and others, Linda Selzer (Pennsylvania State University) cites Carol Copper from a bell hooks² interview saying black Americans “tend to transform the things we embrace” (47). Strikingly, the vast majority of black American Buddhists may also, as African-American Shu Shin cleric Joseph Jarmen contends, be prison inmates (51). Perhaps, as Selzer ponders, by engaging their faith as a form of global conversation, modern engaged Buddhists may be creating ‘an innovative hybrid form of Western Buddhism’ (citing Christopher Queen, 56).

Allan Johnston’s reading of the recurrent ‘real work’ theme in Gary Snyder’s oeuvre is excellent. Analyzing *Riprap*, in which he states Snyder “discovers his voice as a poet,” Johnston (U.C. Davis) explains how working for “nature’s salvation” in a way that embraces practical, “physical

¹ The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions, position or policies of the *Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies* (Bond University). Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors endeavour to publish a range of diverse, critical and dissenting views.

² *Editorial Footnote*: This is the pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins (born 1952), the feminist author, cultural critic and social activist.

immediacy” and contemplative and visionary experience—all ways of clearing the mind and “experiencing the earth”—becomes Snyder’s recommended path toward spiritual liberation (74-75).

Jonathan Stalling’s searching essay on Jackson Mac Low’s Anarcho-Daoist-Buddhist poetics of chance is a welcome jewel and the surprise of the whole book. “ ‘Listen and Relate’: Buddhism, Daoism, and Chance in the Poetry and Poetics of Jackson Mac Low” tracks the poet’s interest in Daoism, the *I Ching*, and thence on to a non-denominational focus on Buddhism in considering Mac Low’s diverse aesthetic strategies and their place in determining what it might actually mean to be a poet. It appears that sociologist Paul Goodman, author of the influential *Growing Up Absurd*, introduced Mac Low to Daoism in the mid-1940s. Symbolized by its concept of *wu-wei*, or ‘doing without doing’, its non-theist, laissez-faire nature proved a good fit for the anarcho-socialist poet. Stallings (University of Oklahoma) quotes Mac Low on Zen, Daoism and the subtle aeronautics of true non-self Buddha-nature, and one admires the American’s willingness to engage with such ideas that were then still remote from Western life. These days, contemporary Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh explains it all so much more simply for us. But in exploring “anarcho-Taoist” elements of chance with avant garde, Buddhist-inspired egoless poetics, Stallings forges some fascinating ‘pre’-postmodernist links among Mac Low, composer John Cage and the assemblage art of Marcel Duchamps. Lao-Tzu and the surrealists? The Abstract Expressionists? Who’d have thought!

Whalen-Bridge (National University, Singapore) includes some short interview conversations with teachers from Naropa University in Boulder, the small Buddhist school that gave us the concept of Contemplative Education which John Kabat-Zinn and other U.S. paradigm-changers are broadcasting widely as we speak. It’s a section with some fun reading. Joanne Kyger gives a characteristically broadminded response to an inquiry regarding the celebrated incident involving Naropa founding monk Chogyam Trungpa and poet W.S. Merwin. Reed Bye, someone I’ve heard of but not seen in print before, emerges sounding as a thoroughly grounded poet, and brings deep background knowledge of his Trungpa/Tibetan-inspired Shambhala training. Andrew Schelling, as always, has good stories to share.

In trying to sum up a range of views aspects regarding American dharma lit, there’s no way to please everybody. However, in echoing how significantly post WW-II American culture has been impacted by the arrival of East Asian thought, this look at ‘literary’ Buddhism comes as a welcome antidote to the growing culture of celebrity Buddhism in the U.S. where thanks to D.T. Suzuki, Jack Kerouac and the Beats, our friendly neighbour nation to the south’s old *Leave It To Beaver* lifestyle was filed deep, deep away in the millennial storage bin.

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