

## Book review

***Journal of Global Buddhism 12 (2011): 37-39***



### *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature.*

Edited by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff. Albany: SUNY Press, 2009, xii + 255 pages, ISBN 978-1-4384-2653-2 (hardcover), \$80.00; ISBN 978-1-4384-2654-9 (paperback), \$24.95; ISBN 978-1-4384-2659-4 (electronic), \$24.95.

Reviewed by Kimberly Beek

Ph.D. Candidate  
McMaster University  
[kimberly.beek@gmail.com](mailto:kimberly.beek@gmail.com)



**Copyright Notice:** This work is licensed under Creative Commons. Copies of this work may be made and distributed non-commercially provided attribution is given to the original source and no alteration is made to the content.

**For the full terms of the license:**  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0>

**All enquiries to:** <http://www.globalbuddhism.org>

B O O K R E V I E W

***The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature.*** Edited by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff. Albany: SUNY Press, 2009, xii + 255 pages, ISBN 978-1-4384-2653-2 (hardcover), \$80.00; ISBN 978-1-4384-2654-9 (paperback), \$24.95; ISBN 978-1-4384-2659-4 (electronic), \$24.95.

*Reviewed by Kimberly Beek*

**T**he *Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, edited by English Literature professors John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff, is a landmark volume of critical essays on contemporary American literature and Buddhism. This collection of works enlightens readers as to the import and impact of poetry, fiction, and even literary criticism for the spread of Buddhism in America. Previous to this publication, scholars interested in the cross sections of Buddhism and American literature referred either to works regarding individual authors associated with Buddhism, or to poetry anthologies such as *Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry* edited by Kent Johnson (Shambhala, 1991) and *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Buddhist Poetry* edited by Andrew Schelling (Wisdom Publications, 2005). By creating a bricolage of essays on this topic, Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff have laid the foundation for a much overlooked yet rich interdisciplinary area of study that the editing duo have dubbed “Buddhist American Literature.”

The volume’s introduction provides a strong contextual framework for reading the essays in the collection. As the editors explain, literature has been an avant-garde of the movement of Buddhism into America by means of literary amplification. Literature supplements social change by providing representations of the “private and the personal” (p. 3) that make people care about other people and causes, thereby motivating change. Such a sharing of objects helps to develop a sense of Buddhist imagined community à la Benedict Anderson (p. 4). The editors duly recognize the paradox of identifying Buddhist Literature as a category unto itself, since this “particular corporate identity forms itself around the idea that identity itself is a delusion” (p. 4). Thusly noted, this paradox of Buddhist American identity applied to both literature and writers is a theme carried throughout the entire collection.

The volume is divided into three sections and begins with “Literature as Vehicle: Transmission and Transformation.” The papers in this section relate how the socialization of words into a post-war, mid-century world of literary cultural actors (authors, editors, readers, and teachers) assists in the transmission of Buddhist ideas into American culture. In the first paper, Jonathan Stalling explores Ernest Fenollosa’s essay “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” which has “become ground zero for most East/West studies of American poetry” (p. 23). Stalling valiantly argues for a rereading of Fenollosa that would emphasize the Buddhist elements of his work edited out by Ezra Pound.

Stalling's paper clearly highlights the major sub-theme for this section of the volume: the fact that English Literature scholars have not heretofore enthusiastically traced Buddhism in American literature. Writing about Fenollosa, Stalling relates that scholars "never addressed Fenollosa's Asian religious/philosophical study and practice in their interpretation of his work" (p. 25). Yuemin He's paper "Gary Snyder's Selective Way to Cold Mountain: Domesticating Han Shan" suggests Buddhism has been neglected in American Literature circles because of the stigma of Orientalism and questions whether we should see Snyder's domestication of Han Shan's poetry as Orientalism or as "the most efficient connections and extensions of Han Shan's words into the English language" (p. 55). In the essay "John Giorno: Buddhism, Poetry, and Transgression" Marcus Boon notes that previous articles on Giorno and Buddhism focused on his association with Tibetan teachers or on issues of Giorno's being gay and Buddhist, but said articles did not look at Buddhist elements in Giorno's poetry. Boon's essay proves that teasing out the Buddhist elements in Giorno's work helps to better appreciate and understand his poetry, even if Giorno himself insists that "I'm not a Buddhist poet. I'm not a non-Buddhist poet. I'm just a poet" (p. 63). The section finishes with Michael Heller's personal account of the interrelationship of Buddhist practice and poetry in "Buddhadharma and Poetry without Credentials," connecting the paradox of Buddhist American literary identity with the recognition of Buddhism in American literature.

"Zen, Vajrayana and the Avant-Garde: A Pluralistic Poetics" is the title given to the second section of the volume. Here the essays highlight the bohemian post-Beat poetics of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Anne Waldman, and Phillip Whalen, and the flow of movement from literary text to embodied practice. In the paper "Finger Pointing at the Moon: Zen and the Poetry of Philip Whalen," Jane Falk argues that Whalen's poetry evolved with Zen Buddhist practice as Whalen became a poet-priest. Erik Mortenson's paper "Keeping Vision Alive: The Buddhist Stillpoint in the Work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg" examines how Kerouac and Ginsberg deployed the experience of the Buddhist stillpoint of a visionary moment in their work. The paper "Illumination Through the Cracks: The Melting Down of Conventional Socio-Religious Thought and Practice in the Work of Gary Snyder" by Tom Lavazzi traces Snyder's writing as it transformed into engaged Buddhist practice deployed within Judeo-Christian socio-cultural contexts. And finally, Jane Augustine's essay "The American Poetic Diamond Vehicle: Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman Re-work Vajrayana Buddhism" examines the crazy wisdom behind the poetry of Ginsberg and Waldman that serves as a counterpoint to affect a sanity that is the "ultimate diamond vehicle" (p. 172). Without mentioning the term, each of the essays in this section questions the stigma of Orientalism attached to the Beats by advancing poetry as practice whereby Beat writers not only embodied Buddhist teachings but instantiated these teachings and practices into their socio-cultural contexts.

The third and final section of the collection, titled "Widening the Circle: Buddhism and American Writers of Color," accommodates essays and interviews that consider the work of Maxine Hong Kingston, Lan Cao and Charles Johnson. Maxine Hong Kingston and Lan Cao are Asian Americans and Charles Johnson is an African American Buddhist convert. These authors are all Americans of color whose writing has flourished in the later twentieth century and "whose literary influence... must not be underestimated" (p. 13). Certainly the work of Maxine Hong Kingston must not be overlooked, for she is an iconic author much studied in the

English Literature sub-field of Asian American Literature. Editor John Whalen-Bridge interviewed Kingston in May, 2004 to produce “Buddhism, the Chinese Religion, and the Ceremony of Writing: An Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston.” Echoing the sub-theme of the first part of *Emergence*, Whalen-Bridge notes that no one had asked Hong Kingston about Buddhism in her work before. Ironically, later in the interview, she makes it clear that she does not consider her most famous work, *The Woman Warrior* (Vintage Books, 1975), a Buddhist book (p. 182). Hanh Ngyen and R.C. Lutz provide readers with a bridge between Buddhist literature and Asian American literature in their essay “A Bridge Between Two Worlds: Crossing to America in *Monkey Bridge*.” This is, perhaps, the best essay of the collection because it poignantly makes sense of Cao’s chronology of karma as it is drawn from her Asian Buddhist heritage and applied to life in the U.S.A. Finally, “‘Opening the Hand of Thought’: The Meditative Mind in Charles Johnson’s *Dr. King’s Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories*,” by Gary Storhoff, introduces an African American Buddhist convert into the trio. Regarding Johnson’s work, Storhoff explains that “meditative practice as a narratological principle is unusual in American contemporary fiction” (p. 208). In fact, Johnson’s work deals brilliantly with race and is such high literature that it could be difficult to identify as Buddhist if the author himself did not. And this difficulty sums up the section, which leaves the reader confused about what the “Buddhist” in Buddhist American Literature signifies. Kingston is Buddhist but some of her work is not. Cao’s work is both Asian American Literature and Buddhist American Literature. And Johnson’s work is labeled Buddhist because he identifies as Buddhist. The paradox of Buddhist identity offered in the introduction is not a satisfying substitute for a clear delineation of what amounts to a new genre of literature and a new sub-field of study. Nevertheless, this criticism is small in light of the vast literary terrain covered in the volume, which is finished off with a joyful, reflective afterword by Charles Johnson that aptly leaves the reader content yet contemplative.

Buddhist Studies scholars should take this collection of essays as a signal. English Literature studies of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have broadened to encompass critical theory and cultural studies, to take on such issues as racism, bigotry, and Orientalism. Now the scope of English Literature is broadening further to include Buddhism. Buddhist Studies scholars interested in current trends may miss the proverbial Buddhist raft if they overlook contemporary Buddhist literature in any language. With the publication of *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, the first in a SUNY series on Buddhism in America edited by this duo, John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff have brought to our attention the importance of literature for the spread of Buddhism in America. They have done nothing less than usher in a new area of study—an act of *dāna* for scholars interested in contemporary Buddhism. We can only hope that their future ventures into the realm of Buddhist Studies are as fruitful.