Journal of Global Buddhism 2025, Vol.26 (1): 83–97
DOI: 10.26034/lu.jgb.2025.4050
www.globalbuddhism.org
ISSN: 1527-6457 (online)

Book Review Essay

New Genre Developments in Autobiographical Buddhist Literature

Kimberly A. D. Beek
Ronin Institute for Independent Scholarship

This book review essay explores two works that examine new hybrid genres of Western Buddhist autobiographical writing: John D. Barbour's *Journeys of Transformation* (2022) and Ben Van Overmeire's *American Koan* (2024). In Barbour's exploration of Western Buddhist travel narratives and Van Overmeire's examination of American Zen autobiographies based on koan, the scholars face an inherent paradox: Buddhist doctrine teaches no-self, yet autobiographical narratives are fundamentally self-centered. Both scholars demonstrate that Western Buddhist autobiographical narratives succeed precisely by refusing to resolve this tension. This essay examines how both scholars define these emerging genres, explains how they navigate narrating self-dissolution, and assesses how they survey the ways in which marginalized authors strategically foreground oppressed identities as a necessary foundation for spiritual transformation. Barbour and Van Overmeire illuminate how genre innovation serves both literary and soteriological purposes, while broadening the study of Buddhism, as well as religion and literature.

Keywords: Buddhist literature; Buddhism and Western literature; religion and literature; Western Buddhist autobiography; Buddhist travel writing; Western Buddhist travel narratives; Zen koan; Zen koan in Western literature; autobiography; Buddhism; Buddhism in the West

American Koan: Imagining Zen and Self in Autobiographical Literature. Ben Van Overmeire. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2024, 252 pages, ISBN 9780813952086 (hardcover), $9.00; ISBN 9780813952086 (paperback), $32.50; ISBN 9780813952109 (ebook), $32.50.

Journeys of Transformation: Searching for No-Self in Western Buddhist Travel Narratives. John D. Barbour. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 334 pages, ISBN 9781009098830 (hardcover), $48.00; ISBN 9781009106337 (ebook), $48.00.

Buddhist literature includes a long tradition of Buddhist autobiographical writing. From the personal narrative poetry of the *bhikkus* and *bhikkunīs* in the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*, respectively, to the Chinese pilgrimage accounts of Faxian and Xuanzang, including the Tibetan autobiographical tradition starting with Milarepa, and the Chinese *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* (*Gāosēng Zhuàn*), the roots of Buddhist life writing run deep. The branches of this Buddhist literary genre reach into the modern era through writers like D.T. Suzuki, *The Training of a Zen Buddhist Monk* (1965), the Dalai Lama, *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama* (1990), and Thich Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World* (2016). More recently, two new genres of Buddhist autobiographical writing have been identified and individually explored by John D. Barbour and Ben Van Overmeire.

Barbour's book *Journeys of Transformation: Searching for No-Self in Western Buddhist Travel Narratives* (2022) examines the stories of Westerners transformed by Buddhist pilgrimages and life-changing travel. Van Overmeire's book *American Koan: Imagining Zen and Self in Autobiographical Literature* (2024) explores how koan have been used in Western Buddhist autobiographies to negotiate American Zen identities. (Note: here we follow Overmeire's and

Japanese typography of not pluralizing the word koan, even when the reference is plural.) These new generic forms present fresh pathways to understanding Buddhist concepts of self/no-self as experienced by Western Buddhists.

With the publication of *Journeys of Transformation*, Barbour is the first scholar to examine Western Buddhist travel writing as an independent literary genre. In *Journeys*, he surveys life writing works by over 30 authors writing in English, whose books were published between the mid-20th century and the first quarter of the 21st century, representing works across the three major Buddhist traditions of Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana. These narratives tell of journeys to sacred Buddhist locations in Asia, from mountains to pilgrimage sites and temples. Embracing the paradox of using autobiographical writing—genres that are fundamentally self-centered—to describe the Buddhist realization of no-self, Barbour introduces the term "unselfing" to describe moments of transformation in travel narratives "when a person's sense of self is radically altered" (Barbour: 2). He approaches each author's unselfing narratives using a reparative reading style that allows for careful sympathy of their complex affective experiences while being conscientious regarding postcolonial concerns.

Ben Van Overmeire's *American Koan* examines how the koan functions as both literary device and spiritual paradigm in American Zen autobiographies. Beginning with an explanation of how D.T. Suzuki's formative influence on the development of Zen in America was established through koan (in "Introduction"), the book progresses through five chapters examining how various authors grapple with their Zen experiences (in "Enlightenment: D.T. Suzuki and Philip Kapleau"), confront failure (in "Janwillem van de Wetering, David Chadwick, Natalie Goldberg, Shozan Jack Haubner"), navigate gender dynamics (in "The Two Truths: Myoan Grace Schireson, Claire Gesshin Greenwood, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel"), cultivate detachment (in "Detachment in van de Wetering's *Afterzen*"), and embody interdependence in their practice (in "Interdependence in the Work of Ruth Ozeki"). In the conclusion, Van Overmeire argues that readers of these autobiographical narratives, and of his book, participate in the koan-like process of American Zen's development, which ultimately transforms readers into Zen practitioners.

Barbour and Van Overmeire are both religion and literature scholars well suited to exploring new genres of Buddhist writing. Van Overmeire is an early career academic and Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Duke Kunshan University in China. His research is comparative around the study of classic Zen Buddhist texts and their representation in contemporary forms of popular literature. At the opposite end of an accomplished academic career, Barbour is now Professor of Religion Emeritus at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. Most of his scholarly work focuses on Christian ethical and theological issues in autobiography and fiction. *Journeys* is his first book to explore Buddhist literature specifically.

I argue that Barbour's *Journeys* and Van Overmeire's *American Koan* reveal that the dozens of life writing works they analyze succeed as new hybrid genres of Buddhist literature precisely because the authors of these works refuse to resolve the tension between self-narration and no-self realization. My essay proceeds in three movements. First, it examines how Barbour and Van Overmeire outline the components of the genres they explore and interrogate what makes these genres "new" in the context of Buddhist Literature. Second, it explores how both scholars grapple with the seemingly impossible paradox of self-narrating potential self-dissolution. Finally, the essay considers how both Barbour and Van Overmeire recognize that identity work is spiritual work, especially as deployed by marginalized Western practitioners who ground in conventional identity to pursue ultimate selflessness. Altogether, these books illuminate how genre innovation serves both literary and soteriological purposes.

What's in a Name? New Genres in Buddhist Literature

Journeys and *American Koan* explore new genres in Buddhist literature that fall into the Western genre category of autobiographical narratives. The novelty of the new genres lies in mixing Western autobiographical narratives with more traditional Buddhist genres to craft new, yet recognizable, categories of Buddhist literature. Examining the generic components uncovers elements of contemporary Buddhist conceptions of self/no-self. Barbour's work on Western Buddhist travel narratives reveals a genre realized through a combination of two seemingly disparate goals. And Van Overmeire's work on American koan provides a glimpse into the complex symbiotic workings of ostensibly erratic writing traditions. Disaggregating the elements of both new genres shows each succeeds by holding typically opposite generic characteristics in tension.

Regarding genre, Barbour declares that

> Every theory of a literary genre is a debatable attempt to define categories of texts that could be organized differently....The point is not to classify books but to better understand them. Taken as a heuristic device, conceptions of genre can help us to discern meaning and creativity and to make illuminating comparisons and contrasts. (Barbour 4)

Drawing on the work of John Frow in *Genre*, Van Overmeire states: "genre is a force that shapes its own interpretations" (Van Overmeire: 171). These perspectives highlight genre as an active, semiotic process that shapes textual creation, reader interpretation, and meaning construction.

Barbour's Western Buddhist Travel Narratives

In *Journeys*, Barbour examines how the Buddhist concept of no-self is portrayed in autobiographical travel accounts written by contemporary Buddhist practitioners**.** Two different genre categories interact in the works Barbour explores: Buddhist autobiographical narratives and Western travel writing. Barbour differentiates how Western travel writing is often about losing oneself, while the goal of Buddhist autobiographical writing is an examination of the self to help recognize no-self. Accepting this incongruity, Barbour argues that these genres combine in Western Buddhist travel narratives to tell stories of unselfing.

First and foremost, Barbour identifies the authors of Western Buddhist travel narratives as Buddhist practitioners when he states "The writers of these works are not simply curious about or sympathetic to Buddhism but seriously considering or committed to it as a worldview" (Barbour: 4). The works are "Western" because they have all been published in English by authors with American or European backgrounds who write "books that claim to represent in prose the author's own experience" (Barbour: 9). These experiences are captured as memoirs of travel to Asia on sacred Buddhist pilgrimage routes, to temples for training, or to other locations that they felt were special to their Buddhist experience.

As its name conveys, travel writing is a type of autobiographical narrative that is based on a journey that "presents opportunities to break out of unchosen fixed patterns and to experience other ways of being in the world" (Barbour: 19). Barbour illustrates that "For all of these writers, a basic theme and recurring metaphor in their memoir is the analogy between an outer journey and an inner or spiritual one" (Barbour: 5). Western Buddhist travel narratives tell stories of journeys to Asia as catalysts for understanding Buddhist concepts of selflessness and transformation: "unselfing." Barbour argues that works of travel writing are valuable "because they give us a first-person subjective account of events, show the larger temporal context of pivotal events, and disclose not only an ideal of enlightenment but also the messy, inconclusive, and confusing aspects of transformative religious experience" (Barbour: 7). In other words, travel breaks fixed patterns and provides a wider ontological context that allows for moments of transformation.

Journeys' first chapter, "The Origins of the Genre: John Blofeld and Lama Govinda," highlights the ways in which Western Buddhist travel writers focus on religious experience. It argues that Blofeld and Govinda, the first authors to write Western Buddhist travel narratives, adapt the genre of Christian religious autobiography to encompass Buddhist enlightenment experiences. For example, Blofeld interprets "unselfing" experiences while at the Tashiding monastery in Sikkim as evidence for the truth of Buddhist rebirth. He understands his conversion to Buddhism as a "reconversion" because he believes his initial stream entry took place in a previous lifetime (Barbour: 27). Blofeld's use of conversion language is drawn from Christian religious autobiography such as Augustine's *Confessions* (Barbour: 397–400) and introduces one of the challenges inherent in writing Western Buddhist travel narratives: the convergence of Asian and Western cultural contexts.

Barbour's argument about genre emerges from his reading of Western Buddhist travel narratives, which is more reparative than suspicious. He reads these works as legitimate religious and spiritual journeys rather than as culturally appropriated tall tales. Barbour also contextualizes travel narrative unselfing experiences in Buddhist literature by examining Tibetan autobiographical traditions. Using Janet Gyatso's study of 18th-century Tibetan autobiography by Lama Jigme Lingpa which provides a framework for understanding "secret autobiography" (Tib. *rangnam*) and self-representation, Barbour explains that Tibetan autobiographers use literary devices that set up a "full self" versus an "unfull self" paradox. The full self is accomplished, assertive, and confident, while the unfull self lacks a stable identity and requires constant validation (Barbour: 287–292). Tibetan autobiographers employ literary strategies like self-talk, using self-deprecating epithets and expressions of doubt in their own authenticity as spiritual teachers. Barbour shows how "this pattern in Tibetan spiritual autobiographies has analogies in Western Buddhist travel narratives" in parallel depictions of a full and unfull self. He uses the phrase "rhythm of selfing and unselfing" to describe the ways in which Western Buddhist travel narratives reveal impermanent subjectivity and the fragile, conditioned aspects of the human experience (Barbour: 289). Throughout his book, Barbour provides compelling examples of Western travel narratives combined with components of Buddhist autobiographical writing to resolve the paradox of a self-examination that allows for an experience of loss of self-identity.

Van Overmeire's Koan-infused American Zen Autobiographies

Van Overmeire's explorations in *American Koan* also attempt to understand the "dynamic of making sense of one's present experiences through recourse to the canonical literature of the past" (Van Overmeire: 3). The canonical literature he refers to is koan, and the 'making sense of experience' plays out in autobiographical literature written by "American convert Zen practitioners who have studied with masters situated within Japanese lineages" (Van Overmeire: 18). Within this group, Van Overmeire examines those who use koan in their life writing. He is "fascinated by what happens when convert Zen Buddhists commit their lives to paper" (Van Overmeire: 19) and he argues that koan "are used by American Zen practitioners as placeholders for awakening experiences" (Van Overmeire: 15). His work distinguishes a symbiotic relationship between autobiographical writing and koan that hinges on the characteristic of koan as mediator.

Van Overmeire plays loosely with genre categories. He relates that his idea of autobiography relies on scholarly notions of "self-referential practices" that circumscribe a range of "autobiographical" texts "from personal correspondence to memoirs, to postmodern novels that use the author's name in the narrative" (Van Overmeire: 20). This allows Van Overmeire to examine how Western autobiographers fill in their own personal details of experiencing koan, an approach that has roots in how koan first entered Western literary discourse.

D. T. Suzuki's English work *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1934) framed koan as the apex of spiritual experience. Even though he taught that religious experience was beyond the power of language to express, Suzuki exploited the ambiguity of koan to establish his own interpretive authority. In doing so, Suzuki legitimized his

representation of an ancient tradition by citing and interpreting koan "liberally in support of his Buddhist modernist theory of religious experience" (Van Overmeire: 30). The interpretive freedom of koan enabled Suzuki to position himself as a Zen master and his followers and *readers* as students by using a writing pattern that equated to: "you do not know what this means, so I will tell you" (Van Overmeire: 31). The authors that Van Overmeire examines become Zen masters in their own right when they write about their Zen experiences through referencing koan.

Van Overmeire's idea of koan as a genre is initially flexible. He demonstrates how authors of Zen autobiographies "use the term 'koan' for any type of enigmatic interaction between Zen masters and students" (Van Overmeire: 20). But this flexible genre definition in Van Overmeire's introduction belies an intensive examination of how koan function. Van Overmeire explains that koan are a medium for transformation: "Koan become mediators between self and Zen, between past and present, tradition and modernity, Asia and America" (Van Overmeire: 3). He examines the two aspects of koan as mediator: koan as text and koan as practice, to reveal that these two aspects are inexorably intertwined because form fits function.

Textually, koan possess dialogical structure and paradoxical content: "enigmatic exchanges aimed at producing enlightenment" from the context of the Zen monastic training curriculum (Van Overmeire: 3). The etymology of *gongan* (cases on the table of a legal magistrate) embeds a legal metaphor establishing koan as trials by masters examining students' insight (Van Overmeire: 169). Practically, koan are riddles. More specifically, Van Overmeire argues that koan function as neck riddles which combine a framing narrative with an unsolvable riddle. Their narrative content presents high stakes scenarios with life-or-death consequences, grave transgressions, or social taboos, where each outcome hinges on a riddle that only the speaker can answer, because the solution depends on hidden or personal knowledge. Thus neck riddles create temporal disjunctions of timeless riddles within temporal frames that render categories of time and space liminal, collapsing boundaries between inner and outer worlds (Van Overmeire: 169).

Unlike the neck riddle, however, koan solutions require looking inward rather than outward. Their questions resist linear reasoning because their structure demands wholistic engagement, "a process to inhabit, not a puzzle to solve," with a high stake that "promises to set us free" (Van Overmeire: 169). In this way, koan mediate between master and student, ordinary and ineffable, self and other (Van Overmeire: 170). By analyzing and identifying koan as neck riddles, Van Overmeire establishes koan as literature crafted within the framework of Zen Buddhism to mediate between language and experience.

Crucially for autobiographical narratives, koan frame stories that lack embedded solutions. This leaves openings for American Zen autobiographers to humanize traditional koan characters across space and time while actively participating in koan themselves (Van Overmeire: 169-170). Van Overmeire uses a two step reflexive reading approach to interpret participation in koan as a religious experience. First, he takes constructivist interpretations of religious experience seriously by acknowledging that they are culturally conditioned experiences. Second, he asks deeper questions about the meaning of the expression of religious experiences that blur the boundaries of literature given the capacity of koan to facilitate healing and transformation (Van Overmeire: 10). Van Overmeire argues that koan both catalyze and express religious experience (Van Overmeire: 10). This power of mediation enables "koan and autobiography to mutually transform each other, with koan becoming a modern American genre, and American autobiographers becoming like the patriarchs of koan" (Van Overmeire: 172).

Section Summary

Barbour and Van Overmeire outline new hybrid genres of autobiographical literature for readers who, as Barbour points out, would not recognize themselves in classical Buddhist literature but could imagine themselves in the

life writing of contemporary Western Buddhists (Barbour: 7). Exploring genre as productive paradox founds both authors' approaches. Though Barbour focuses on travel narratives and Van Overmeire focuses on koan, each scholar demonstrates how a new Buddhist autobiographical genre depends on holding seemingly contradictory elements (self-examination/loss of self; past/present; text/practice) in tension. Barbour's articulation of the rhythm of selfing/unselfing in Western Buddhist travel narratives, and Van Overmeire's formulation of koan as mediator in American Zen autobiographies, reveal literary powers of transformation that support religious experience and help in reshaping traditional literary forms for contemporary Western contexts.

Who is the Narrator? The Paradox of Narrating No-Self

Hybrid genres incorporating Buddhist autobiographical literature present an inherent tension in that Buddhist no-self conflicts with the self-centered nature of life writing. Both scholars lean into the pedagogical function of the genres they explore to approach this tension. Barbour develops a concept he calls "unselfing" to navigate the tension, while Van Overmeire uses failed koan experiences to reframe no-self as interdependence.

Barbour's "Unselfing" Narrators

Barbour uses the term "unselfing" when discussing and examining "incidents that dislodge a person's ordinary and conventional sense of self and elicit some other form of consciousness" in Western Buddhist travel narratives (Barbour: 14). As a gerund (that is, a verbal noun), unselfing names the ongoing process of travelers losing their sense of self. However, the "-ing" also allows unselfing to function like a participle. In the case of Western Buddhist travel narratives, unselfing is applied to descriptions of travel experiences. Barbour employs unselfing as a noun that identifies an ongoing transformative process *and* as a descriptive modifier that characterizes the dynamic, unfolding nature of travelers' Buddhist experiences.

Unselfing is, effectively, an internal, ongoing process, mirrored by travel through landscapes and places that require alertness to ever-changing external realities (Barbour: 19). The travel narratives that Barbour examines take readers on trips through time and space, from John Blofeld's *The Wheel of Life: The Autobiography of a Western Buddhist* (1959), about his travels to Sikkim and Tibet, to Gesshin Claire Greenwood's *Bow First, Ask Questions Later: Ordination, Love, and Monastic Zen in Japan* (2018). Most of the Western Buddhist travel narratives Barbour explores are likely unfamiliar to both readers and scholars of twentieth century autobiographical literature, making Barbour's book itself a reading journey .

As Barbour demonstrates, travel to Buddhist places in Asia presents a perfect opportunity for Western Buddhist experiences of unselfing, though these experiences are neither lasting nor perfect. Using Peter Matthiessen's well-known book *The Snow Leopard* (1978), Barbour provides examples of the paradoxical "full-unfull" self-talk reminiscent of the Tibetan autobiographical tradition. In contemporary Western Buddhist travel writing, such self-talk outlines "the terminology of self in tension with no-self" (Barbour: 61) and is often expressed as a success-failure tension.

Barbour cites a passage from *The Snow Leopard* that tells the story of Matthiessen as a young man experiencing a life-threatening storm while onboard a ship: "Overwhelmed, exhausted, all thought and emotion beaten out of me, I lost my sense of self, the heartbeat I heard was the heart of the world, I breathed with the mighty risings and declines of earth, and this evanescence seemed less frightening than exalting. Afterward, there was pain of loss—loss of *what*, I wondered, understanding nothing" (Matthiessen 1978: 42–43) The confusion and grief that follows this experience of unselfing would become a pattern in Matthiessen's spiritual journey, a pattern that, Barbour points out, he would project onto his relationship with his teachers.

At the end of *The Snow Leopard*, Matthiessen writes about the Himalayan porter, Tukten, who embodies selflessness: "there are no boundaries to this man, he loves us all" (Matthiessen 1978: 270). Matthiessen

writes: "In his life in the moment, in his freedom from attachments, in the simplicity of his everyday example, Tukten has taught me over and over, he is the teacher that I hoped to find" (Matthiessen 1978: 316). Barbour explains the irony that Tukten, the "leopard-eyed" porter, is linked to the snow leopard that Matthiessen never saw on a trek meant for that very sighting and describes how Matthiessen searched for Tukten after his trek had finished, but could not find him. In Barbour's reading, Matthiessen's failure to recognize his true teacher on a trek through the Himalayas leaves him with a memory of his true teacher and experiences of unselfing that resound with potential and possibility (Barbour: 54).

Continuing his exploration into Matthiessen's spiritual journey, Barbour examines Matthiessen's book *Nine-Headed Dragon River: Zen Journals, 1969-1982* (1985) which chronicles his return to his home in the US to take up Zen practice. The book concludes with Matthiessen's journey to Japan with his Zen teacher, Tetsugen Glassman Roshi. Barbour argues that, by this time in his spiritual journey, Matthiessen understands unselfing as becoming one with one's teacher, writing:

> The dynamics of the Zen student-teacher relationship offer the possibility of unselfing, given the ideal of becoming one with the teacher and his spiritual lineage. To transmit the dharma, a master must recognize and approve of the disciple's understanding and practice of the teachings and assess his experiences of the Buddhist kensho and satori. In the ideal master-student relationship, two individual personalities dissolve in a common understanding and experience of the Buddhist dharma. In actuality, however, prickly defensiveness, pride, and other human foibles continue to remind teacher and student of their individual differences and character (Barbour: 59).

This complex relationship includes the possibility of the Zen tradition's own "metaphorical self" extending across cultures, a concept that Matthiessen discusses with Tetsugen as he struggles to achieve oneness with his teacher despite differences in age and personality (Barbour: 59). This oneness is, as Tetsugen describes it, an "endless, intertwining dualism in which one element seeks to maintain its structure and the other tries to keep it from petrifying; if either fails, the whole will die" (Matthiessen 1985: 200). The dualism mirrors the broader Zen principle of self in tension with no-self; it is the tension between form and emptiness, or identity and transformation, that shapes both religious tradition and individual spiritual growth. In *Nine-Headed Dragon River*, Matthiessen never achieves the oneness with his teacher that he saw exemplified in other Zen master-student relationships, but he learns to accept this with equanimity—an acceptance Barbour reads as Matthiessen's unselfing manifesting in the Zen saying: "only be ready, and the teacher will appear" (Barbour: 62).

By deftly demonstrating how Matthiessen's spiritual practice embodies tensions inherent in Zen Buddhism's evolution and adaptation, Barbour positions his reader to recognize how Matthiessen's concept of unselfing shifts. In *Nine-Headed Dragon River,* the goal of unselfing expands with Matthiessen's deeper understanding of Zen as a tradition and his role within it. Barbour's examination reveals how Matthiessen's practice offers a new framework that honors traditional Zen teachings while adapting to contemporary realities.

Van Overmeire's Failed Narrators

In *American Koan*, Van Overmeire explores how deconstruction or questioning of the self "through koan is given literary form by extracting koan from classical texts and inserting them into that most modern of genres, the life narrative, whether it takes the form of a Zen manual, novel, or memoir" (Van Overmeire: 175). He proposes that American Zen autobiographers use koan to *work through* rather than *resolve* the self/no-self tension on display in their life writing narratives. Moreover, their works tell stories of attempting koan without success. As Barbour, Van Overmeire examines autobiographical examples of experiencing failure to solve koan that invert conventional notions of success.

In the chapter titled "Failure," Van Overmeire explains that many American Zen converts questioned whether they were practising correctly, and sometimes if their own teacher was "doing this right" (Van Overmeire: 76). These questions were not always answered, even with trips to and time spent at Zen temples in Japan. And while American Zen practitioners sometimes "found answers to these questions in koan," Van Overmeire relates that they often described koan as misleading instead of helpful, or even misrepresenting the reality of Zen practice (Van Overmeire: 76).

The four authors in Van Overmeire's chapter on "Failure" reject koan as accurate depictions of Zen and instead critically question what constitutes success in Zen, often without reaching definitive conclusions. Reflecting the chapter's theme of failure, none of the authors in this chapter claim to be Zen masters. Their autobiographical works are written from the perspectives of questioning, of wanting to understand. Despite their rejection of koan as descriptors of "what Zen life is like, what enlightenment looks like, or how a teacher is supposed to behave," these same authors continue to use koan in their autobiographical storytelling (Van Overmeire: 76). Van Overmeire positions this chapter to demonstrate the enduring power and influence of koan in Zen discourse as a vehicle of self-deconstruction and understanding no-self, even when the authors themselves describe their Zen experiences as failures to achieve *kensho* or *satori*. (Van Overmeire: 77).

One of the books Van Overmeire examines in this chapter is *The Great Failure: A Bartender, A Monk, and My Unlikely Path to Truth* (2004) Natalie Goldberg. Best known for her seminal book on writing as a practice like zazen, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (1986), Goldberg's autobiography employs her own teaching to create what Van Overmeire calls a "misery memoir" in that it discloses "a history of recovery from trauma, the trauma being the discovery that a trusted teacher did things that are wrong" (Van Overmeire: 77). Goldberg's memoir criticizes the romanticization of Zen practice in a utopian temple setting as she tries to understand the figure of her flawed Zen teacher. Van Overmeire shows how she does this "by reframing herself, her teacher, and her father as figures in a series of koan. For her, writing is a way of experiencing failure, and thus growth" (Van Overmeire: 77).

As Van Overmeire explains, *The Great Failure* is Goldberg's second autobiographical work. The first, *Long Quiet Highway* (1993), characterized her Zen teacher Dainin Katagiri Roshi as a sort of Zen patriarch-meets-ordinary human being who was constantly encouraging and wholly present to her aspirations and spiritual needs. In *Highway*, Goldberg's relationship with Katagiri was typical of that between Zen Buddhist students and teachers. By the time Goldberg published *Failure*, numerous sex scandals surrounding popular Buddhist teachers in America had come to light, and Katagiri was a principal actor amidst that drama. Van Overmeire argues that in Goldberg's misery memoir, the central failure is Katagiri's sexual involvement with multiple students, which makes her second autobiographical book a "rare example of a Zen memoire narrating a sex scandal" (Van Overmeire: 60). Further, Van Overmeire identifies *Failure* as both biographical and autobiographical in that Goldberg examines herself and failures in relationships with two father figures who sexually harassed her: Zen teacher Katagiri and her biological father "Bud."

Reading the combined autobiographical and biographical approaches of *Failure* as purposeful identity deconstruction, Van Overmeire, by examining how Goldberg opens her book, analyzes the koan-inspired character recasting that she deploys. Goldberg begins her misery memoir with a scene that recounts her failed attempt to narrate a koan about the scholarly monk Deshan who meets a tea lady. The audience is disengaged and Goldberg's narration of the koan falls flat, leaving her speechless and establishing failure as both method and theme of her second autobiography. Van Overmeire illustrates that by starting her book in this manner, Goldberg positions her reader to explore the concept of failure as an opening to enlightenment, and to read her memoir as a recasting of the characters in Deshan's koan using herself and her father figures as the principal actors.

Van Overmeire quotes extensively from Goldberg's failed narration of the Deshan koan because it anchors his recasting argument. The framing story of the koan tells how the renowned Chinese Buddhist scholar Deshan Xuanjian traveled south with the *Diamond Sutra* to challenge Zen practitioners who dismissed textual study. During his journey, an old woman, a tea lady selling tea cakes, posed a question that applied the Diamond Sutra's teaching on the illusory nature of mind: "If the mind does not exist in the past, and the present mind does not exist, and there's also no mind in the future, tell me with what mind you will receive these cakes?" (Goldberg 2004: 9–10). Unable to answer, Deshan sought out her teacher, Master Longtan Chongxin, and eventually achieved enlightenment under his guidance—famously, when Longtan blew out Deshan's candle. Van Overmeire argues this story of Deshan and the tea lady provides an allegorical structure for Goldberg's memoir and primes her reader to consider that wisdom comes from unexpected sources, and darkness offers insight (Van Overmeire: 60–62). By opening her memoir with a failed attempt to narrate this koan, Goldberg mirrors Deshan's speechlessness, positions herself within the koan framework, and foreshadows how traditional teaching methods may collapse under the weight of personal trauma.

Having established the koan framework in Goldberg's memoir, Van Overmeire moves from analyzing Goldberg's narrative to examining the psychological mechanism that renders the literary device meaningful and transformative: projection. In her memoir, Goldberg recasts herself in the role of Deshan, the confused scholar who thinks they understand Zen. Her teacher Katagiri is Longtan, the enlightened master who blows out the candle, and her traumatizing father Bud is the tea lady who inadvertently offers lessons that reveal her ignorance.

Van Overmeire highlights how Goldberg initially constructs her identity by projecting opposite qualities onto her father figures: initially, she was spiritually aligned with her teacher Katagiri, but she felt estranged from Bud, whom she characterized as an ignorant materialist. Katagiri became her ideal parent: "Roshi became my mother, my father, my Zen master" (Goldberg: 102). Slowly though, as Goldberg's memoir progresses and she applies projection analysis, she comes to realize that Bud is like the tea lady in the koan in that he was naturally adept at meditating—"he didn't have a single thought" during meditation and wondered "What's the big deal?" (Goldberg: 20-21). Goldberg writes that Bud was "so enlightened [he had] no idea [he] was even awake" (Goldberg: 49, my pronoun replacements). Bud's changing role in Goldberg's identity story revealed her ignorance about who could be spiritually accomplished, and his death broadened the scope of this revelation. Van Overmeire concludes that, for Goldberg, "Like the death of a Zen master, Bud's death imparts insights in fundamental Buddhist teachings, allowing Goldberg to glimpse the nature of all things as empty" (Van Overmeire: 65).

Through projection, Goldberg realizes that just as Bud was not all bad, Katagiri was not all good. Recasting her teacher as Master Longtan seems an unlikely parallel, since Longtan's blowing out the candle provided Deshan's moment of enlightenment. But as Van Overmeire points out, "after discovering the dark side of Katagiri, Goldberg wonders: 'Did Roshi, knowing or not knowing, blow out our lights?' " (Van Overmeire: 63 quoting Goldberg: 145).

Van Overmeire's analysis demonstrates that projection is both a problem that creates false binaries and blind spots, as well as a solution that allows Goldberg to see more clearly. Through her recasting of personal figures into koan roles, Goldberg performs autobiographical projection analysis that ultimately reveals the illusory nature of the separate self.

Section Summary

Despite using different terminology and frameworks, Barbour and Van Overmeire both demonstrate how narrative structure in the autobiographical genres they explore accommodates the self/no-self paradox without

resolving it. Barbour's unselfing is an ongoing process that mirrors external travel with internal transformation, making the tension generative rather than immobilizing. Van Overmeire's narrations of failed koan experiences and projection analysis reveal no-self through interdependent, relational understanding, rather than absence or annihilation. And both Barbour and Van Overmeire illustrate that the narrator-dissolution tension is pedagogically productive. The tension between self and no-self experienced in autobiographical writing enables rather than undermines in them a greater understanding of the Buddhist experiences of the authors whose works they examine.

The Persistent Self as Literary Device? Identity Work as Spiritual Practice

The Persistent Self as Literary Device

The undeniable self/no-self-tension present in Buddhist autobiographical writing reflects a contradiction born from using the first-person narrative voice to document an experience of no-self. Both Barbour and Van Overmeire recognize in Buddhists' autobiographical writing a persistence of self that extends the act of writing ones' autobiographical piece into a practice of koan and/or unselfing. Further, Barbour and Van Overmeire explore the intersectional experiences of marginalized selves in Buddhists' autobiographical writing as a necessary persistence of self that sustains writing practices beyond individual experience.

Writing autobiographically presents two major hurdles for Buddhist authors: firstly, it inherently reinforces dualisms of subject-object; secondly, it demands chronological coherence. Both hurdles reinforce illusions of continuous identity that directly conflict with Buddhist teachings of impermanence and no-self. Despite these hurdles, the authors that Barbour and Van Overmeire examine turn the act of autobiographical writing into a form of spiritual practice, transforming personal narratives into dharma teachings by writing life stories that point beyond the persistent self.

In the travel narratives that Barbour explores, he demonstrates that "In writing about a journey, there is a second chance for a person to understand it in the light of Buddhist ideas" (Barbour 19) such that the very act of writing becomes a Buddhist practice. Barbour uses terms from theories of religion to explain how portraying transformation in Western Buddhist travel narratives is a form of religious action. For example, he uses Ricoeur's interpretation of the term "emplotment" to describe Western Buddhist travel writers' processes of taking scattered moments and weaving them into a meaningful religious narrative about a transformative physical and spiritual journey that constructs a religious identity that holds together two seemingly contradictory elements: the radical change brought about by unselfing experiences, and the continuity of the persistent self who is writing the narrative (Barbour: 307). It is emplotment that renders Western Buddhist travel narratives "a form of 'converting narrative' in which the process of transformation is still underway as the author reconfigures her life in light of a new understanding of Buddhism" (Barbour: 307–308). The work of emplotment, of narrating ones' religious transformation, negotiates discrepancies and creates space for two truths to coexist in a single, coherent story.

Barbour then turns to the work of Ann Taves to explain how Western Buddhist travel writers use the past self as spiritual material. Taves' term "deeming," a process of interpretation and evaluation, identifies what she calls "the significant thing"—Barbour's unselfing—and also describes what continues in the act of writing (Barbour: 308). He uses the term deeming to designate the process through which writers recognize, record, interpret, and assign religious significance to their experiences, thereby actively participating in the construction of religious meaning. In this way, writing the travel narrative becomes both a record and continuation of unselfing, as the act of writing perpetuates the creative, interpretive work required of religious transformation.

Van Overmeire, too, grapples with the persistence of self by developing a complex sub-theme around the duality of fact/fiction. He analyzes this duality in the works of three authors: Philip Kapleau, Janwillem van de Wetering, and Ruth Ozeki. Van Overmeire's sub-theme illuminates that the way that each of these authors employs the duality of fact/fiction demonstrates a persistence of self in autobiographical writing. The stubborn "I" is not a failure, but a feature that epitomizes the logical impossibility of koan and transforms readers into participants in Buddhist practice.

Taking a broad view of Kapleau's oeuvre, Van Overmeire tracks how Kapleau's descriptions of his foundational kensho experience of the *Mu* koan evolved dramatically, from a description of overwhelming joy exclaiming, "I have it! I know it! There is nothing, absolutely nothing. I am everything and everything is nothing!" in his first autobiographical book *The Three Pillars of Zen* (Kapleau 1967: 28), to merely "My mind's eye was opened to some extent" in *Zen: Dawn in the West* (Kapleau 1979: 267). By the early 1990s, Kapleau had rejected "(auto)biography in no uncertain terms," calling it "nothing so much as an egotistical attempt at self-elevation at the expense of the facts" (Kapleau 1992). An observer "I" yet persists in Kapleau's personal correspondence, not despite his rejection of autobiography, but in voicing his rejection of it.

Later in *American Koan*, Van Overmeire picks up the sub-theme of fact/fiction duality when he focuses on Van de Wetering's last autobiographical work in English, *Afterzen* (1999). As Van Overmeire describes it, "each chapter of *Afterzen* is structured around a koan and its solution" wherein Van de Wetering portrays his spiritual teachers as "collages, put together to carry certain ideas. The actors on this stage aren't linked too closely to [his] actual life" (Van Overmeire: 120). Van Overmeire's analysis explores how the author liberates "himself and the reader from the distinction of fact-fiction" and extends this freedom to reinvent koan as a liberation of the genre (Van Overmeire: 121). Van de Wetering's persistent trickster-"I" narrator questions what constitutes authentic spiritual authority, all the while blurring fact and fiction to transform readers into active participants in koan-solving.

In his penultimate chapter, Van Overmeire explores writing by Ruth Ozeki, specifically her novel *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) and her short memoir *The Face: A Time Code* (2015). Ozeki is a writer, film maker, and Zen priest for whom "writing autobiographically is"a way to deconstruct the self" (2018). He includes Ozeki's novel *A Tale* in his book because it "fuses autobiography with fiction, making it hard to distinguish between fact and fiction" (Van Overmeire: 139). Ozeki creates this fusion by riffing on Dogen's "Genjo Koan" that asserts studying the self means forgetting it, which leads to understanding everything (Van Overmeire :133). Van Overmeire shows how Ozeki immediately engages her reader in this liminality by deploying a second person narrator who speaks directly to the reader as "you," implicating them in an interdependent web and leaving them questioning their own relationship to the 'real' Ozeki. He then examines how Ozeki writes versions of herself into the narrative, including a writerly, meditating character named after herself, to show that "every character in the novel is fluid like Ruth. [They] are all in-between identities, floating between presence and absence, between present, past, and future. They are Ruth Ozeki and are not Ruth Ozeki" (Van Overmeire: 138-139). Based on his analysis of *A Tale*, Van Overmeire argues that interdependence is the reason that there can never be a stable self (Van Overmeire: 139), merely a persistent self that requires constant reconstruction rather than singular definition.

The persistent "I" that Van Overmeire recognizes and tracks across the autobiographical Zen writings of Kapleau, Van der Wetering, and Ozeki is neither fact nor fiction, and yet both. It teaches readers by forcing them to question who the narrator really is, and thereby, who is the reader. Through this sub-theme, Van Overmeire demonstrates how the persistence of a self that tells the story of its own dissolution is a koan that both author and reader must solve. He does not merely re-present koan but renders koan dynamic and present to his reader such that both writing and reading Zen autobiographical works becomes a form of spiritual

practice that can transform Americans into Buddhists. Van Overmeire illuminates how the persistence of self in Zen autobiography functions as a literary device that opens readers to experiencing Zen koan practice.

Identity Work as Spiritual Practice

What if the persistent "I" narrating a Buddhist autobiography is constructed through oppression and trauma? Balancing Orientalism with weighty histories of sexism and racism that pervade Western and Buddhist institutions, systems, and traditions, Van Overmeire and Barbour undertake complex yet sympathetic readings of the works they examine. Each scholar delves carefully and deeply into autobiographical Buddhist narratives of marginalized authors, examining how social invisibility and oppression create different experiences of Buddhist no-self. And each scholar concludes that marginalized authors strategically foreground identity categories as a necessary foundation before attempting any sort of self-transcendence.

In a chapter titled "Two Truths," Van Overmeire explores how marginalized Buddhist autobiographical writers navigate intersectional suffering while orienting themselves toward enlightenment in samsara. One such author who stands out for their work around starting points in the Zen spiritual journey is Zenju Earthlyn Manuel. Van Overmeire introduces Manuel as a black, queer, disabled, Soto Zen priest, author, and activist, who "rarely uses koan" (Van Overmeire: 93–94). In her teaching and writing, she is best known for combining traditional Zen practice with explorations of race, gender, sexuality, disability, and ancestral heritage. Both of her books, *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening through Race, Sexuality, and Gender* (2015) and *Sanctuary: A Meditation on Homelessness and Belonging* (2018), reorient Zen practice to "destabilize the type of Zen modernism that locates authentic Zen in Asia and texts" (Van Overmeire 94).

Despite a general lack of koan use in Manuel's work, Van Overmeire identifies the story of Qian (case 35 of the *Gateless Gate*) as the only koan that she references in her life writing. He clarifies that her interpretation and use of the story of Qian draws from the framing story, not the koan riddle. The framing story deals with the uncertainty of self, much as in Daoist sage Zhuangzi's dream of a being a butterfly. Manuel herself states, "This koan speaks to the task of bringing together the fragments and images we hold, the parts of ourselves we abandon, and the journey home" (Manuel 2018: 13–14). Van Overmeire proposes that the koan dramatizes a "radical uncertainty" about identity and the self in that "we cannot definitely say who we are" (Van Overmeire: 100). He interprets this uncertainty as a tragedy that Manuel characterizes as living in estrangement, a "homelessness" of the soul that is explored in her book *Sanctuary*.

Van Overmeire argues that for Manuel, "the act of "taking refuge" in Buddhism is not "leaving home" but coming home to a place "where the fullness of one's identity is recognized" (Van Overmeire: 100). She rejects traditional Zen ascetic ideals and finds her home in her body (Van Overmeire: 98). Her version of the two truths "maintains a focus on the particular body that suffers objectification" (Van Overmeire: 97). Van Overmeire connects this focus to Manuel's methodology, noting that, "Instead of koan, Manuel's books draw on a broader spiritual tradition that embraces her Black ancestry, indigenous religiosity, and Buddhist rituals beyond meditation across lineages and affiliations" (Van Overmeire: 94).

Emphasizing Manuel's point that "The embodiments of race, sexuality, and gender are in fact the fires through which we must pass to awaken" (Manuel 2015: 91), Van Overmeire demonstrates how her explicit engagement with the two truths manifests beyond her personal practice, teaching, and writing, to effect unprecedented changes in her community. Manuel's acute awareness that convert Zen was shaped by white men who were taught by Asian men led her to establish sanctuary sanghas—safe space practice communities that "only allow certain groups of individuals to participate" (Van Overmeire: 94-95). Explaining that for Manuel, "the ultimate should never be an escape from the provisional," Van Overmeire curates a nature metaphor from her works that clearly and compassionately explains the need for sanctuary sanghas: "We are all in the same garden, but

in different parts of it. Some plants need light and some need shade. Some are dying and some are not. We are in different parts of the garden because it is necessary" (Van Overmeire: 95). Through careful curations and insightful analyses of Manuel's works, Van Overmeire explains how she goes beyond extending koan to transform her persistent, marginalized identity into a new pathway for dharma transmission suited to the lived realities of American practitioners experiencing intersectional suffering.

Barbour also examines marginalized experiences in works like *Dreaming Me: An African American Woman's Spiritual Journey* (2001) by Jan Willis. He argues that this book "raises profound questions about the relevance of no-self to people who have been denied selfhood" (Barbour: 195). Willis's book is a not a typical travel narrative. It is a full autobiography that contains physical journeys within a lifelong spiritual journey. Barbour explains that Willis's autobiography describes the intersectional and unique religious experiences of a Black woman who encounters Tibetan Buddhism as "a crucial event in Willis's lifelong 'journey' of transformation" (Barbour: 195). Barbour's choice to include an atypical travel narrative in his book reveals his commitment to amplifying marginalized voices.

Willis is a black woman who, as a child, encountered terrifying violence from the KKK in mid-twentieth-century Alabama while simultaneously enduring derision from her own family for being light skinned. Barbour quotes this passage to convey the depth of her trauma:

> To get beyond the pervasive sense of pain and suffering I carried, I knew I would have to find healing, to find that place of belonging that is so basic for us all: feeling at home in our own skins. And so, from my earliest days, my solitary quest became to find a way to accept myself, and to love me (Willis: 13).

Barbour recounts that as a young adult, Willis eventually felt welcomed into the Baptist Church, earned degrees at Columbia and Cornell Universities, and participated in civil rights struggles beside Martin Luther King, Jr. in Birmingham where she said she "*stood with*, and therefore, *stood up* for myself and for my people" (Willis: 61). Through her civil rights activism, Willis learned of Buddhist protests against the war in Vietnam, and while studying in India during her junior year at Banaras Hindu University, she met Tibetans in exile. Willis wondered at the spiritual resources of the Tibetans she met who displayed resilience and joy in the face of the trauma they had endured. Years later, at a pivotal moment in her life, she would take up an invitation offered by one of the Tibetans she met in India, to go and stay at a monastery in Nepal. This journey would result in a life-changing meeting with a Tibetan in exile who would become her spiritual teacher, Lama Thubten Yeshe.

Barbour concentrates on a memorable interaction with Lama Yeshe that demonstrates a compassionate approach in formulating Willis's essential task: "Living with pride and humility in equal proportion is very difficult, isn't it? Very difficult!" (Willis: 160). Barbour takes a similarly balanced approach when he provides an example from Willis's autobiography to show how she describes experiences of unselfing without referring to the concept of no-self with metaphors like "It felt as though my mind suddenly became immeasurably vast. It encompassed everything, the very universe, itself." (Willis: 221). Barbour argues that Willis's descriptions of unselfing demonstrate the recontextualization of Buddhist concepts to effect experiences of selflessness without explicitly engaging with no-self doctrine. In other words, no-self plays an auxiliary role in Willis's Buddhist realization narrative.

After reading and analyzing Willis's book, Barbour concludes that "it would be simplistic and dangerous to say that denying the self is a spiritual panacea for the suffering of African Americans.... For people whose humanity was degraded and denied for centuries, it is necessary to affirm the worth of one's being, to struggle for the right kind of selfhood, and to insist that one be treated with dignity and respect" (Barbour: 197). This proclamation leads Barbour to warn his readers that "If no-self is taken to mean the denial of personhood, it is

a pernicious doctrine rather than an insight that brings liberation from suffering" (Barbour: 197). Barbour assesses from Willis's autobiography that writing her memoir was a crucial step in discovering and retracing early memories from her life, memories necessary for finding her true self (Barbour: 200). Although Willis "did not discuss the concept of no-self, it shapes her criticism of false ideas about herself that brought suffering" (Barbour 200). Barbour demonstrates that for marginalized people practicing Buddhism, the persistent self is not ego attachment but a factor of essential human dignity required for healing.

Section Summary

Barbour and Van Overmeire both demonstrate that the persistence of self in Western Buddhist life writing is deployed as a literary and spiritual tool by travel writers and autobiographers. For these Western Buddhist authors, writing becomes an ongoing practice through emplotment and deeming (Barbour) or through employing fact/fiction fluidity (Van Overmeire). These literary strategies extend unselfing and koan solving beyond autobiographical material, turning readers into practitioners who question narrator identity and thus inevitably question their own identity. Further, for Western Buddhist authors who represent marginalized voices, Barbour and Van Overmeire reveal how the persistence of self in their writing addresses denied humanity and affirms dignity and selfhood that is required for experiencing no-self. And as Van Overmeire shows in the case of Manuel, the persistence of self as pedagogy is reshaping dharma transmission for American practitioners facing intersectional suffering.

Conclusion: The Productive Paradox

This essay can only gesture toward the scholarly depth and interpretive sophistication of Barbour's and Van Overmeire's works, each of which merits sustained engagement. Both scholars demonstrate how reparative and reflexive reading practices provide methodological intervention to productively engage religious texts that appear contradictory. Their approaches extend genre theory beyond passive classification to show how hybrid genres can dynamically construct religious meaning and experience. Barbour shows how the authors of Western Buddhist travel narratives do more than describe unselfing—they perform Buddhist practice in the writing of their works and bring their readers along on their journey. Van Overmeire extends the performance of Buddhist practice in his analyses of American Zen authors by arguing that their use of koan implicates their readers in solving koan, thereby drawing the reader into Buddhist practice. Together, their work complicates simplistic approaches by showing how Western practitioners are creating new forms of dharma transmission suited to their cultural and temporal contexts.

Both authors show the connections of Western Buddhist life writing to historical Buddhist genres of autobiography and koan to argue that Western Buddhist travel narratives and American Zen autobiographies are, in fact, Buddhist and are deserving of serious scholarly attention alongside classical Buddhist literature. Eschewing tired appropriation critiques, they reframe the paradoxical problem of autobiographical writing in Western Buddhism to shift scholarship on religion and literature away from viewing these new hybrid genres as inauthentic. Instead, they reveal how the self/no-self tension generates new forms of religious knowledge and transmission. When Barbour introduces an author like Willis, and Van Overmeire foregrounds an author like Manuel, they reveal how race, gender, and sexuality fundamentally shape Western Buddhist practice and literature.

Barbour's sustained analysis across 30+ texts and Van Overmeire's immersive reading of koan-oriented autobiographies each connect autobiography studies, Buddhist studies, genre theory, literary theory, and theories of religious experience. Their work is testimony to the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches for understanding contemporary religious life writing and the development of Buddhism in the West. They have

opened pathways for studying other emergent Buddhist genres and investigating how literary innovation not only reflects but functions as religious adaptation.

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