

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document:

REWRITING EASTERN WISDOM:  
BUDDHISM AND HINDUISM IN  
AMERICAN LITERATURE FROM JACK  
KEROUAC TO MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

Directed By:

Professor Linda Kauffman, Department of  
English

While recent scholarship on post-1945 American writers has re-examined the role of religion, few scholars have focused on Asian religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. My dissertation explores the varied strategies by which American writers inscribe Asian religions in their fiction. I argue that Asian religions have been crucial in post-1945 American literature's engagement with American freedom. Key writers have used Asian thought to critique American individualism, while also reshaping Eastern beliefs through Western political ideals. My study thus illuminates a two-way relationship between Asian traditions and socially engaged American writing. By examining this body of literature, I uncover new ways of thinking about religion, transnationalism, and ethics.

Each chapter links a specific literary trope to a particular aspect of Eastern thought. My first chapter, "Crazy Wisdom and Beat Zen: Jack Kerouac, Tom Robbins, and Gary Snyder," explores how these influential Beat writers challenge American conformity by celebrating the Buddhist figure of the eccentric sage. My second chapter,

“Secret Arts and Paranoia: Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo,” shows how Pynchon’s *Vineland* and DeLillo’s *Underworld* demystify secret Eastern knowledge in order to challenge the assumption that secrecy warrants paranoia. My third chapter, “Asian Religion and African Dreams: Alice Walker and Charles Johnson,” demonstrates that Walker and Johnson reinterpret African American identity, portraying Hindus and Buddhists as African Americans’ spiritual ancestors. My fourth chapter, “Buddhist Nonself and Asian American Identity: Lan Cao and Maxine Hong Kingston,” explores how Cao and Kingston use Buddhist teachings of nonself to question what it means to be Asian American.

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AMERICAN LITERATURE FROM JACK KEROUAC TO MAXINE HONG  
KINGSTON

By

Kyle Garton-Gundling

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2013

Advisory Committee:

Professor Linda Kauffman, Chair  
Professor David Wyatt  
Associate Professor Peter Mallios  
Assistant Professor Lee Konstantinou  
Professor Emeritus John Caughey (Dean's Representative)

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## Acknowledgments

Many friends and helpers, too numerous to name, have made this dissertation possible. My chief thanks goes to my advisor, Linda Kauffman. She has been an exceptionally meticulous guide to my scholarship and has helped me learn on every level—from challenging the largest ideas to listening to the power of single words. Her unfaltering attention to my writing, generous face-to-face time, and insightful ideas have decisively shaped this study. Most importantly, she has consistently believed in my work. I also extend thanks to David Wyatt, who has consistently asked big questions that invite me to think about my work in new ways. I am grateful for the productive pressure he has placed on my biggest assumptions. I appreciate Peter Mallios’s energetic feedback, and especially his encyclopedic knowledge of the first half of the twentieth century, which has been crucial in my historical research. Additionally, Lee Konstantinou deserves many thanks for joining the committee *in medias res*, even before he arrived on Maryland’s campus. His comments about argumentative framing have challenged me to take my thinking to higher levels. I also thank John Caughey for crossing departmental lines to read this dissertation and for offering much helpful research advice.

On a personal note, my gratitude goes to my parents, who raised me to believe that ideas matter.

Finally, I thank my wife, Vickie, for being someone I can always count on.

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## Introduction

On November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012, Hawaiian voters elected the first Buddhist senator and Hindu representative to the U.S. Congress. The victories of Mazie Hirono and Tulsi Gabbard, respectively, were cultural landmarks in a country where seventy-three percent of the adult population—and ninety percent of members of Congress—identify as Christian (“Faith on the Hill”). To honor their faiths, both Hirono and Gabbard have varied the Congressional tradition of taking the oath of office on the Bible. In 2007, when Hirono was sworn into the U.S. House of Representatives, she took her oath without any book. Justifying her decision, she said, “I certainly believe in the precepts of Buddhism and that of tolerance of other religions and honesty and integrity” (Camire). Gabbard’s religion also played a role in her 2013 swearing-in ceremony, when she took her oath on the Hindu scripture the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Religion professor Stephen Prothero called Gabbard’s groundbreaking gesture “a time to shed some light from Asia onto American politics” (“Hindu Moment”). Prothero further proposed that the *Gita*’s “principle of selfless service” can enrich the “great tradition of reconciliation” of American founders such Jefferson and Washington and has the potential to counteract the extreme partisanship of current national politics.

Hirono’s and Gabbard’s election—and Prothero’s response to it—are signs of cultural trends that have been long in the making. Ever since a burst of public recognition in the 1950s (Fields 205, Iwamura 5, Seager 40), Asian religions have played an increasingly crucial role in shifting understandings of what it means to be an American. Buddhism and Hinduism have increasingly established themselves in the U.S.

through skillful adaptation to American cultures. But Americans' reception of Asian faiths has also fostered new ideas about what counts as American and which cultural sources can contribute to American politics. As shown in Hirono's and Gabbard's distinctive swearing-in ceremonies, the meeting point between Asian religion and American politics gains particular symbolic force when texts are at issue. This focus on writing is instructive: to understand the interplay between Asian religion and American culture, one must pay attention to American literature.

Key texts by major postwar writers have wrestled with Asian religions and the possibilities they raise for fashioning a socially relevant spirituality in a multiethnic nation. Each group of writers I discuss links a different aspect of Asian religion to distinct American concerns. I show how Buddhist "crazy wisdom" animates the Beat anti-conformism of Jack Kerouac, Tom Robbins, and Gary Snyder; Asian religious secrecy informs the skeptical ambivalence of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo; Eastern nonduality underlies the African American cultural projects of Alice Walker and Charles Johnson; and Buddhist nonself complicates Asian American identity in the works of Lan Cao and Maxine Hong Kingston.

The writers I examine have anticipated Prothero's call to "shed some light from Asia onto American politics." They do this by reconsidering what it means to be an American through Asian religion. Prothero's use of the phrase "shed some light" is crucial, alluding to the richly vexed word "enlightenment." As David L. McMahan points out, when nineteenth-century translators rendered the Pali Buddhist term *bodhi* ("awakening") as "enlightenment," the word gained a range of European political meanings surrounding representative government and individual rights (*Making* 4-5, 18).

Multiple enlightenments are at stake in the literature I discuss, as these texts work creatively to harmonize Eastern spiritual liberation and Western liberal government.

The spiritual projects my chosen authors engage in also speak to larger scholarly debates about the ethics of borrowing across cultures. Conrad G. Brunk and James O. Young have argued that, in spite of America's focus on religious freedom, "there are important moral obligations owed by those who appropriate the religious ideas and practices of others that may place limits on the exercise of these rights" (Brunk and Young 94). But these limits are difficult to define. In the case of Asian religions, scholars have criticized American seekers, past and present, for adopting Asian religions without considering their cultural context or caring about the voices of Asian practitioners (R. King, *Orientalism* 4; Cheah 20). The authors I examine are conscious of the racist history through which Buddhist and Hindu thought have come to the U.S. They unsettle ethnocentric assumptions by treating Asian religions not as objects of knowledge, but as socially relevant traditions from which to critique American racism, consumerism, and militarism.

Within the broad topic of cross-cultural adaptation, the example of Asian religions in post-WWII U.S. literature is especially provocative. The best-known tenets of Asian religions seem at first to be starkly incompatible with longstanding American ideals. What could American individualism and progress gain from Asian transcendence and renunciation? As Thomas Tweed observes, these tensions significantly inhibited Buddhism's popularity in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America (133). However, post-WWII writers have imagined new ways of walking Asian spiritual paths in the U.S. Their stories dramatize how the very transcendence that would seem to

alienate Eastern from Western thought actually enables a synthesis between the two. If, as Asian teachings stress, subjects and objects are never truly separate, then there are always ways to bridge with the seemingly incommensurable. Through contemplating Asian religions and cultures, writers have imagined more humane forms of American identity that retain key American motifs of freedom.

My topic unites two recent trends in literary criticism: an emerging emphasis on influences beyond national boundaries and an increasing attention to religion. First, much recent scholarship addresses America's global interconnectedness, in contrast to earlier, more insular models of American studies. In her important book *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*, Wai Chee Dimock argues that literary studies must attend to the "connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world" (3). Dimock is one of many leading scholars, including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Kwame Appiah, Shelly Fisher Fishkin, and Emory Elliott, who stress thinking beyond nation-centered models of literary and cultural studies. But although this new transnational paradigm has taken hold, Asian religions in American literature remain overlooked, in spite of their increasingly widespread influence. Moreover, even though scholars increasingly study primary texts from around the world, the critical theory they rely on is almost entirely European. By exploring writers who turn to the East, this study answers the call to consider non-Western knowledge traditions alongside Western approaches to literary and social criticism (Krishnaswamy 400-401).

My focus also speaks to a growing conversation in literary studies about religion and literature. Although there is much critical literature on religion in American literature up to Modernism, critics have only recently begun to study religion in post-

1945 literature. A likely reason for this is that the emergence of post-45 studies coincided with the rise of Marxist, deconstructionist, and cultural studies methodologies that tend to view religion as a mystifying symptom of other social forces (Mizruchi x). However, critics such as John McClure and Amy Hungerford have argued that scholars cannot adequately understand contemporary literature unless they acknowledge religious impulses in their own right. I follow this vein of criticism, filling a gap in scholarship on the influence of Asian religions on postwar American fiction.

Such an undertaking must inevitably reckon with Orientalism. Edward Said's seminal work has been, by far, the most used critical framework for understanding Western representations of Asia. His insights have helped reveal how depictions of Asian religions, in novels and elsewhere, systematically rely on stereotypes of the Orient as a mystical but dangerous place (Said 99). The writings I discuss are not exempt from such exoticism. But their deployment of Orientalism is self-aware, and these texts subvert the same stereotypes that have contributed to Asian religions' popular mystique in the U.S.

Existing scholarship on Asian traditions in American literature tends to fall into one of two categories: eulogies that emphasize Eastern philosophical doctrine and polemics that focus on Orientalism. The former type praises writers for bringing assumedly valuable wisdom into a new context, while the latter type scolds them for complicity in imperialism and stereotyping. Critics doing the first type of work include Todd Giles, John Whalen-Bridge, and Gary Storhoff. These scholars adopt Buddhist or Hindu metaphysics as their primary theoretical framework, measuring their fiction against doctrines of nonduality (Sanskrit: *advaita* (Rambachan 43)). This body of

scholarship occasionally mentions Orientalism but does not dwell on it. For example, Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff acknowledge that Buddhist-inspired writing will “engender suspicions that orientalist writers” [sic] are making “a picture of the Other designed especially to flatter the self” (*Emergence* 8), but they do not evaluate these suspicions. Their articles’ philosophical orientations generate productive readings and are important to our understanding of what these texts do, but this approach tends to leave out crucial political considerations.

Critics who fall into the second of the two categories I outline above tend not to discuss Asian religions or spirituality in general (Egan, Eperjesi, Schueller). When religion does come up, these critics mention it only to quickly pull the reader back down to earth. For example, here is Schueller’s summary reading of several of Emerson’s most famous essays, which were influenced by Asian philosophy: “[a]lthough these essays have been read mainly in the light of transcendental aesthetics...concerns of the embodiment of the nation remain in them” (162). Elsewhere, Schueller makes a similar point about Whitman’s poetry: “History emerges here as the unavoidable, even as the cadences of the poem attempt to elide it” (192). For Schueller, Orientalism and transcendent spirituality are playing a zero-sum game. If there is more of one, there must be less of the other.

Schueller’s critical approach plays an important role in understanding Asian influences on American literature, but it is not the end of the story. Orientalism and religious sentiments are not mutually undermining, as Schueller implies. While Orientalist approaches to spirituality rightly earn suspicion, this dynamic complicates, but does not invalidate, the texts’ spiritual dimension. Religiously concerned literature is

always entangled with critically fraught symbols that convey both mystery and insight, and this tension is what makes the texts in this study complex, vexing, and immune to simple dismissals. Therefore, my study does not confine itself to the narrow positions of either spiritual exaltation or critical dismissal. My approach bridges these two approaches, attending to how mystical transcendence and cultural difference relate to one another in important U.S. writing.

### Mapping the Terrain of Asian Religions

This work is a study of how religiously-oriented fiction tries to represent the unrepresentable. Both Western and Eastern thinkers are well aware of this conundrum. Protestant theologian Paul Tillich asserts, “[t]hat which is the true ultimate transcends the realm of finite reality infinitely. Therefore, no finite reality can express it directly and properly” (*Dynamics* 44). Along similar lines, Hindu scholar Anantanand Rambachan says that “the intrinsic nature of *brahman*...transcends all direct definitions and explanations” (64). Fiction writers in particular continue to struggle with this paradox. In the forward to “*Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree*” and *Other Works of Buddhist Fiction*, Charles Johnson asks, “How in heaven’s name can a student or practitioner of the Buddhadharma *write* about nonconceptual insights that are ineffable and must be directly experienced to be authentic?” (viii). Previous thinkers have called the problem of talking about an ultimate reality the problem of “otherness” (Gunn 178-179, Summerell 1). How, then, can a writer evoke this otherness and bridge the gap between finite humanity and infinite transcendence? For Tillich, this can happen through symbolic language (45). For Johnson, the answer is through gripping plots and allegorical quest narratives (ix). For Mircea Eliade, who remains a profoundly influential thinker in religious and cultural

studies, transcendent otherness comes across through a culture's division between mundane spaces and sacred spaces (20-21). All of these methods use materials from one's own culture to drive the imagination beyond its ordinary limits.

The ambiguities surrounding "transcendence" call for further discussion. Recognizing contemporary literature's ongoing religious stakes, literary critics have mentioned transcendence often, but usually without giving a precise definition. This avoidance is partly symptomatic of how transcendence inherently resists definition, but this fact has created disciplinary discomfort with such language. As Suzan Mizruchi points out, cultural studies tends to be skeptical of claims to transcendence (xii). Humanistic scholars are trained to focus on historical particulars and to avoid absolutes. However, literary critics have used this term often. In 1979, Giles Gunn periodized American literature according to what kind of "transcendence" it offers (203-207). More recently, John McClure writes that Don DeLillo crafts "the semisacred literary instrument of transcendence" (69). On the back cover of McClure's book, Harold Bloom praises the book's analysis of "American religious transcendence." McClure's work has influenced Amy Hungerford, who further argues for contemporary literature's "bid for transcendence" (16). In a study of 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry, Josephine Nock-Hee Park writes that Gary Snyder "popularized a new American transcendence" (59). This sampling suggests the unavoidability of transcendence in literature, but there is more to say about just what it means.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "to transcend" literally means "to climb over." I choose "transcendence" as the best available word to describe important epiphanies for many of the characters in the texts I analyze. My close readings discuss

how, for instance, Sissy Hankshaw uses Zen-like riddles to transcend social anxiety in Tom Robbins' *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, and Celie allows Hindu-inspired concepts of divinity to transcend racial bitterness in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. In these contexts, transcendence occurs when a character sees an underlying unity between two or more apparently opposed forces. Transcendence resolves tension without force, through a change of perspective. In the stories I discuss, transcendent moments bring characters both spiritual ecstasy and ethical guidance. Such experiences have limits and problems, which I also discuss. But by taking literary transcendence seriously, this study seeks to advance humanistic scholars' ability to talk about transcendence in general and specific religions in particular.

I focus on how transcendence operates in writers' treatments of Asian religions. Although this study uses the broad term "Asian Religions," the influences I trace are specific to Buddhism and its parent faith, Hinduism. A more precise term to unify the philosophical systems at issue is "dharma," a Sanskrit word that refers to teachings in both Hinduism and Buddhism (Iyer 61, 93; Rahula 8; Hiltebeitel 3; R. King, *Indian Philosophy* 171). According to the Dharma Academy of North America, a division of the American Academy of Religion, Hinduism and Buddhism are both "dharmic religions" that share central tenets ("Mission"). The most important of these are that worldly phenomena are impermanent and illusory (Iyer 68, Deshung Rinpoche 198); ultimate reality is undifferentiated and property-less (Coleman 37-38, Rambachan 43); karma conditions actions and their results (Iyer 89, Rahula 32); and reincarnation is a troubled cycle one transcends through meditative insight (Rahula 32, Rambachan 104-105). In this study, I use the terms "Asian Religions," "Buddhism and Hinduism," and "Eastern

thought” relatively interchangeably. For my purposes, these terms all refer to the above summary of Asian religious thought. One may call this the Hindu-Buddhist tradition, in the same way that people speak of the Judeo-Christian tradition. As Huston Smith writes, “Buddhism drew its lifeblood from Hinduism” (Smith 92). This dharmic tradition is the common interest of the writers I study.

Given the kinship between Buddhism and Hinduism, it is not surprising that these religions appeal to overlapping audiences. My focus on both Buddhist and Hindu influences reflects these religions’ intertwined reception in the U.S. As Colin Campbell argues, both Hindu and Buddhist practices have become inseparable from Beat, Hippie, and New Age movements (191, 112-113, 140). The texts I study reflect this history, often mentioning Buddhism and Hinduism together, although I specify whether a given reference is Buddhist or Hindu where appropriate. By comparing scholarly accounts of Buddhist and Hindu development in the U.S., it is clear that among Western converts, both religions have undergone convergent processes of reducing ritual, emphasizing rationality, and focusing on meditation for laypeople, not only monastics (Williamson; McMahan, *Making*). The texts I discuss both respond and contribute to these ongoing trends.

One can further understand Buddhism and Hinduism in the U.S. by differentiating between “religion” and “spirituality.” I follow Alexander and Helen Astin, who specify “religion” as an institutional affiliation with an attendant set of ritual observances and community membership. “Spirituality,” on the other hand, is a personal search for transcendent meaning that often involves little or no formal practice (5). Although spirituality may seem vague and difficult to study, it is becoming an increasingly

important term; the Pew forum on Religion and Public Life lists “spiritual but not religious” as one of its official categories of religious identification (*Landscape*).

This distinction allows one to see that Buddhism and Hinduism have influenced many more Americans than those who affiliate with these religions. A major factor of these traditions’ growing popularity in the U.S. is their tendency to offer American audiences teachings without demanding conversion. For example, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi positions Transcendental Meditation not as a religion, but as a form of mental training that can complement any religion one already follows (Griffin). Also, H.H. the Fourteenth Dalai Lama writes that people can flourish without religion, but not without a spirituality and ethics based on compassion (Gyatso, *Beyond Religion* xiii-xv). Thus, when I refer to Asian religions, I mean specific lineages of intellectual and religious doctrine, usually centered around monastic leadership. When I refer to Asian-influenced spirituality, this is a shorthand for how writers, fictional characters, and members of the public adopt varying degrees of Eastern thought without joining a specific religion. This trend is reflected in the literature in this study. All of the writers I discuss are deeply influenced by Asian religions, but very few claim a religious affiliation, and some explicitly disclaim one.

By exploring only the development of Asian religions in the U.S., while bracketing their Asian histories, it might seem as though I present Buddhism and Hinduism as stable systems distorted by transmission to the modern, fast-paced U.S. This is not the impression I wish to convey; rather, I treat Buddhism’s and Hinduism’s growth in the U.S. as continuous with these traditions’ long histories. To treat these religions’ Asian forms as static would be to repeat the bias of nineteenth century

European scholars of Buddhism, who thought of early Indian and Sri Lankan Buddhism as pure philosophy that later degenerated as it spread throughout Asia (Seager 29). As Stuart Hall reminds us, “there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental ‘law of origin’” (226). The Asian religions I reference are no exception. As others have noted, Buddhism underwent significant changes as it spread beyond India and established itself in China, Tibet, Japan, Thailand, and elsewhere (McClure 51, Storhoff and Whalen-Bridge 3). America joins a long series of new homes for Asian religions, one in which the novel plays a unique role.

#### *Asian Religions' Appeal in the West*

In the U.S., Asian religions embody both cultural otherness and transcendent otherness. Writers' imaginations easily forge links between notions of a higher reality and visions of another culture as exotic, strange, or mysterious. Venerating the mystery of the other culture becomes a vehicle for approaching the divine mystery. This dynamic fits easily with religious devotion, which concerns itself with a transcendent reality, an otherness that is inherently superior, not inferior, to oneself. Once this connection gains cultural currency, the symbol's ability to evoke transcendent otherness only works as long as the other culture remains exotic. This creative act connects religious understandings of otherness to theories of otherness in literary and cultural studies. Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Stuart Hall have shown how cultures invent others in order to denigrate them and flatter themselves. But what if the other is an object of admiration instead? As Said explains, positive Orientalism is still Orientalism, because it asks Westerners to view the East “almost in the manner of an audience seeing a dramatic

event unfold, or a believer witnessing a revelation, the different, the strange, the distant” (137).

This “revelation” has long been a part of American writing on Asian religions. In many texts, Oriental otherness symbolizes transcendent otherness. But the texts in this study complicate this dynamic, and spending time with them helps us explore important questions about faith and culture at a time when literary criticism increasingly adopts a transnational scope. Given that religions’ goals supposedly transcend culture, does one have less of an obligation to engage with a foreign religion’s native culture than, for instance, foreign music or dress? How can writers engage or inhabit Asian religions without exoticizing the cultures these religions come from? What, if anything, do writers interested in Asian religions “owe” contemporary Asians and Asian Americans? I will not attempt to answer these questions conclusively, but I will show an array of responses throughout the texts in this study.

It is also not enough to say that one should study both spirituality and Orientalism in these texts, as if these two categories are juxtaposed but essentially separate. I explore specific links between Eastern philosophy and its appeal as both a corrective and alternative to American mainstreams. This does not mean, however, that exoticism is justified. It means that the reception of Buddhism and Hinduism must be considered historically, as offering dramatically contrasting approaches to spirituality compared to American Protestantism. Asian religions have traditionally presented themselves as paths to liberation from all suffering and indeed from cyclic existence itself. But these traditions seem all the more radically appealing in contrast to what Max Weber famously

calls the “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” that is embedded in American history.

The versions of Asian traditions that have grown the most in the U.S. emphasize seated meditation over petitionary prayer and direct insight over believing in specific creeds. This turn inward connects to a goal of mystical union with an eternal present rather than being pushed along Western time’s forward thrust. For many seekers, Buddhist and Hindu teachings on reality as ultimately undifferentiated makes Christianity’s ontologically separate God seem remote by comparison. Also, Asian teachings on karma describe one’s own happiness and suffering, both in this life and the next, as the inevitable result of one’s own past actions. Many seekers saw and continue to see this notion as a more palatable alternative to Christian guilt, which often arose out of threats of punishment imposed by a judgmental God. Additionally, in the 1960s, many people found a synergy between the spiritual high of meditation and the chemical high of psychedelic drugs (Leary et al, Seager 43). By connecting Asian thought to contemporary trends, the texts I examine bring Eastern critiques of worldly existence to bear on specifically American histories of racism and consumerism.

### *Asian Religions in English and American Art*

The growth of Buddhist- and Hindu-influenced literature after WWII builds on a tradition of American and English writing on Eastern religions. Although references to Asian cultures in American writing go back to before the Revolutionary War (Schueller 1), the first major wave of American literature that concerns itself with Asian religion is Transcendentalism (Campbell 25-26, Goldberg 7-8). Text-based European scholarship on Asian religions effectively began in the 1780s with Sir William Jones’ studies of

Sanskrit, but Asian religious texts did not reach a significant audience in the United States until the 1840s (Versluis 7). In the 1840s, Emerson's and Thoreau's "Ethnical scriptures" column in the Transcendentalist magazine *The Dial* introduced readers to English translations of Asian texts like the *Baghavad-Gita* or the sayings of Confucius (Versluis 79) and influenced later generations of writers, especially the Beats (Prothero, Introduction 1-3). Ralph Waldo Emerson's ideas about spiritual "Unity in Variety" were influenced by the Hindu teaching of all phenomena's ultimate identity with God (Emerson 506-507, Goodman 627-628). Additionally, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (287) and Walt Whitman's "A Passage to India" explicitly convey fascination with Hinduism. The Transcendentalists connected Asian religions, refracted through Romanticism (Thanissaro), with projects of questioning authority and discovering personal authenticity. In these ways, they anticipated the Beats, whose engagements with Asian religion were more sustained and more rigorously connected to renouncing consumerism.

Writing on Asian religions continued to grow in the latter half of the nineteenth century, with an ongoing focus on Asian mysteriousness. English novels such as Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868), Marie Corelli's *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886), and H. Rider Haggard's *Ayesha: The Return of She* (1905) offered suspenseful plots that centered around Buddhist or Hindu rituals. American writing on Asian religions at this time included occasional Eastern-influenced monographs, such as the Theosophical Society's 1877 *Isis Unveiled, A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (Blavatsky), which lent Asian religions an air of the occult (Fields 92, Tweed 52-53). Others wrote about Buddhism as they imagined it in antiquity.

Englishman Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (1879), a narrative poem of the life of the Buddha, quickly became a best-seller (Clausen, Naravane). In the U.S., Paul Carus began to publish Buddhist texts in the 1890s (Seager 37). He also wrote a novella called *Karma: A Story of Buddhist Ethics* (1894), which took place in ancient India.

Developments in painting also influenced Western writers' interest in Asian religions. Increased trade between Japan and Europe, which took off in 1853, led to Japanese artistic influences on European and American painters from the 1860s through the 1890s, including Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Mary Cassatt, and James Whistler (Ives). These painters were not engaged with Asian religions in particular, but they generated interest in Japanese and Chinese art styles that influenced later generations of artists. Much later, Will Peterson, a San Francisco-based poet who inhabited the Beat circle in the 1950s, reasoned that Japanese monochrome painting embodies Zen experience. "Sunyata," he writes in 1956, using the Pali Buddhist word usually translated as "emptiness," is "expressed as vacant space in visual art." But simply displaying blank paper is not enough. Rather, Japanese monochrome painting uses dramatic negative space to evoke emptiness: "Only by filling the paper does it become empty...the idea of emptiness is not a concept reached by analytical reasoning, but one that must be perceived in aesthetic terms" (275). Exactly what these "aesthetic terms" are, and what techniques can bring them across, are being worked out in these writers I examine.

While nineteenth-century cultural exchanges brought gradual growth in American interest in Buddhism and Hinduism, a dramatic turning point came with the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. The first event of its kind, it brought together representatives from many faiths from around the world. Through this

gathering, numerous Americans in attendance—and many more who read newspapers' accounts—learned about Buddhism and Hinduism for the first time, and from in-person teachers, not translated texts (Goldberg 77, Williamson 27, Seager 35, Snodgrass 1, Tanaka). This event also saw the first known American to convert officially to Buddhism (Fields 129). Asian religions' best-known American adaptations can be traced to this gathering. Modern, fitness-focused American yoga owes its existence to the interest inspired by Swami Vivikenanda's charismatic opening address to the Parliament (Goldberg 79-80, Bardach).<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the Parliament's Zen contingent would later send a young D.T. Suzuki, arguably the most influential Buddhist teacher in the early-to-mid-twentieth century, to continue promoting Japanese Buddhism in the U.S. (Snodgrass 259-260).

While the Parliament gave Asian religions unprecedented exposure in the U.S., rising interest coexisted with a focus on Asian foreignness. For example, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American fiction showed varying degrees of admiration for Chinese religion, but generally suggested that Chinese people cannot successfully integrate into the U.S. Stories of this type include Mary Austin's "The Conversion of Ah Lew Sing" (1897), Willa Cather's "The Conversion of Sum Loo" (1900), Katherine Anne Porter's *My Chinese Marriage* (1902), and Joseph Hergesheimer's *Java Head* (1918). Several expatriate Modernist poets, including T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Amy Lowell, were also indebted to Eastern religions, often citing them as exotic contrasts to what they viewed as the corruption of the West (Stalling 147-148, Park 31-35, Sielke and Kloeckner 9-12).

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, Vivikenanda would probably have felt uncomfortable with contemporary Western yoga. Vivikenanda's yoga was focused on meditation, not bodily exercise (Jain).

In the early twentieth century, English novels continued to combine admiration for Asian faiths with stereotypes of foreignness and antiquity. Noteworthy instances include Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1902), E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), and James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933). In the U.S., W.E.B. DuBois's little-known but groundbreaking novel *Dark Princess* (1924) weaves a plot that spans Hindu mysticism and Chicago machine politics. The novel's African American protagonist meets an Indian princess who seeks to organize a revolution of dark-skinned peoples around the world and cites Hindu teachings as the source of her perseverance.

The writers and texts I have listed reflected and fostered growing Western interest in Asian religions. But the Second World War hindered Asian religions' already modest growth in the U.S., especially Buddhism. Although Japan's official religion during the war was Shinto, Buddhist centers in America came under suspicion by their assumed association with the Japanese enemy. During the war, D.T. Suzuki stayed out of the public eye (Fields 195), and several important Japanese Buddhist teachers were interred by Executive Order 9066 (Fields 192-194, Seager 57). After the war's end, Japanese Buddhist teachers resumed teaching, this time free from political suspicion. The war's end removed Buddhism's threatening associations. But at the same time, Eastern religions would soon become an appealing and even subversive alternative to American Protestantism for an emerging cohort of writers and readers.

The end of WWII brought some noteworthy—and divergent—allusions to Hinduism. J. Robert Oppenheimer invoked the *Bhagavad-Gita*'s emphasis on national duty to justify the Manhattan Project, and he famously quoted the text's cosmic imagery to capture the destructive power of the bomb: "I am Shiva, destroyer of worlds" (Hijiya

123-124). By contrast, in Theodore Dreiser's 1947 novel *The Stoic*, a character's discovery of Hinduism inspires philanthropy (Stenerson). She travels to India, and, alarmed by the poverty there, returns to America and learns to attend to the squalor in her own midst, donating money to build hospitals in New York. The notion that Asian religions are resources to confront American problems continues in the writing I study.

The postwar period sees American writing on Asian religions take a new direction. Instead of telling readers *about* Asian religions, the texts in question invite readers *into* Asian religions by imagining sympathetic protagonists who adopt Hinduism or Buddhism. This writing continues the Westernization of Asian faiths, entailing individualization and deritualization, which was already well underway before WWII. But unlike previous literature, the texts I focus on vividly dramatize what American convert Buddhism and Hinduism can look like and how these faiths can confront—and be confronted by—specifically American racial and economic histories. Consequently, this literature has been on the vanguard of Asian religions in the U.S. Writing Eastern thought into American narratives has profound demystifying consequences. These writers shatter Orientalism by making Asian religions less strange. By rewriting Eastern wisdom into the fabric of American life, these writers explore what it means to be American in tandem with what it means to be spiritual.

### Chapter Summaries

I trace these explorations through four chapters, each of which shows how a different cluster of writers highlights a distinct aspect of Asian religion. After WWII, the first major artistic movement to forge strong links with Asian religion was the Beats. For many of the Beats, Buddhism represented an ecstatic liberation from America's vapid

consumer culture, and this veneration led them to emphasize both Buddhism's spiritual transcendence and its cultural difference from the American mainstream. This tendency created a uniquely American approach to Buddhism which downplays lineage and celebrates individual spontaneity.

This dynamic is the theme of my first chapter, "Crazy Wisdom and Beat Zen: Jack Kerouac, Tom Robbins, and Gary Snyder." Each of these writers appeal to "crazy wisdom"—a Buddhist pedagogy of deviance designed to disrupt conventional thought—as inspiration for their contemporary non-conformism. The extant scholarly debate on Beat engagements with Asian religion is sharply split. Critics contend that the Beats are either shallow Orientalists or sincere devotees of Asian faiths (C. Jackson, Griswold, He; Prothero, Giamo, Giles). I argue that a more complex understanding is necessary, one that accounts both for the Beats' selective adoption of Buddhist thought and their receptivity to the new ideas of American identity that these philosophies inspire.

Key texts by Kerouac, Robbins, and Snyder illustrate the nuances of Beat Buddhism. In Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder stand in for Kerouac and Gary Snyder, respectively. But contrary to dominant critical views, I argue that Kerouac sets up Ray as an unreliable protagonist whose stereotyped view of Buddhism actually blocks his spiritual progress. Ray's crazy wisdom valorizes a tradition of Buddhist mavericks, but the text highlights this vision's entanglement with Orientalism. Kerouac's Beat perspective finds an heir in Robbins. His 1977 novel *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* engages directly with Kerouac, imagining a path to spiritual success where Ray Smith fails. Ray's struggle with celibacy contrasts with Sissy's sexual freedom, which emerges through a sexual relationship with the Chink, a crazy,

profligate guru who is a self-conscious caricature of Oriental stereotypes. In addition to criticizing Eastern transcendence, the Chink makes controversial claims about the infelicity of Westerners practicing Eastern religions. The Chink's criticisms and explorations intersect with my central concerns in this study.

Whereas Kerouac and Robbins push the boundaries of holy wildness, Gary Snyder uses Buddhist teachings to redefine the “wild” as a form of holistic order. Snyder’s long career connects with Kerouac’s work in the 1950s, coexists with Robbins’ popularity in the 1970s, and continues into the present day. Reading select pieces from throughout Snyder’s career, I show that his writing in the 1950s and 1960s promotes Buddhism’s relevance to Beat and Hippie movements, respectively. Beginning in the 1970s, as the countercultures he had championed faded, Snyder preserves Buddhist-informed countercultural ideals, but adapts them to a national audience that is progressively less receptive to or alarmed by calls for crazy wisdom.

Subsequent generations of writers follow the Beats’ practice of connecting Asian religions to American problems. Even writers who are religious skeptics have placed great importance on Asian religions as motifs in their work. My second chapter, “Secret Arts and Paranoia: Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo,” shows how Pynchon and DeLillo critique American paranoia through Buddhist and Hindu traditions of secret transmission. Pynchon’s *Vineland* (1990) imagines a form of ninjustu, influenced by both Buddhism and consumer capitalism, that gives political radicals tools to resist, not simply fear, governmental oppression. This potent art’s Japanese origin also counteracts contemporary paranoia toward Japan’s economic rise. Furthermore, *Vineland* critiques the shortcomings of 1960s infatuations with Asian religions, dramatizing both followers’

naïve zeal and these religions' tendency to prioritize metaphysical transcendence over political change. For Pynchon, ninjutsu offers a model of resistance that acknowledges sinister conspiracies while overcoming paranoia.

Whereas *Vineland* focuses on countercultural engagements with Asian religion, DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) foregrounds mainstream mistrust of them. *Underworld*'s characters repeatedly encounter Hindu and Buddhist mantras, but they dismiss them as foreign. By juxtaposing these Asian practices with Christian chants, the novel's form shows the reader hidden kinships between East and West that its characters fail to acknowledge. *Underworld* is charged with religious language and symbolism, but it does not valorize any one religion. Rather, the novel suggests that paranoia, whether against foreign religions or domestic institutions, inhibits one's ability to form an adequate picture of the varied influences that shape our lives.

Although many of the American literary voices exploring Asian religions have been white, recent years have seen the emergence of noteworthy ethnic literatures about Eastern religions. Crucial examples of this have appeared within African American literature, which is the focus of my third chapter, "Asian Religions and African Dreams: Alice Walker and Charles Johnson." Walker's and Johnson's novels allegorize Buddhism's relevance for African Americans by reimagining Buddhists as African Americans' ancestors. For both writers, Buddhist and Hindu teachings of nonduality—the idea that ultimate reality is undifferentiated—enable this complex imaginative move. Walker's and Johnson's fiction suggests that the universal insights of Eastern religions allow African Americans to claim Asian religions as their own. Their protagonists develop connections to Asian traditions that do not strictly depend on heredity, but the

texts still rely on descent as a metaphor for this connection. Walker and Johnson provocatively propose how Buddhist and Hindu nonduality can uniquely critique racism and enrich African American identity.

Walker and Johnson strive to celebrate African American heritage while also welcoming religious ideas from Asia. In a microcosm of Asian religions' growing acceptability in the U.S., Walker's and Johnson's debts to Eastern religion become more explicit as their careers progress. Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990) celebrate Asian religious principles, but attribute them to African sources. By contrast, Buddhism's influence becomes explicit later in Walker's *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004) and Johnson's *Dreamer* (1998). These novels rely on African American intermediaries who go on pilgrimages outside the U.S., learn about Asian religions from indigenous masters, and return to present Buddhist and Hindu thought in a form that emphasizes the concerns of contemporary African Americans. Taken together, these four novels seek to legitimate Asian religions for African American spiritual seekers. They build bridges between Asian religions and African American readers, and they strive to normalize black Buddhists in the eyes of non-African American readers.

The first three chapters reflect the striking fact that since the flowering of Buddhist and Hindu American fiction in the fifties, religiously themed prose narratives by Asian Americans are almost unheard of. My fourth and final chapter begins by exploring reasons for this absence, focusing on immigration history and its connections to different writing genres. I suggest that a specific set of social conditions must have coalesced before novels by and about people of Asian religious lineages could find a

large audience. These include the steady increase of Asian American immigrants since liberalized policies in 1965, the maturation of a second generation of immigrants, and Asian American studies' theoretical shift, circa 1990, toward problematizing the concept of coherent Asian American identity that had previously given rise to the very label "Asian American."

The last of these is especially important, as this theoretical move, I argue, allows Asian American novelists to reflect on Asian American identity in terms of Buddhist teachings of nonself. My case studies are Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace* (1997, 2003). Whereas the other writers in this study explore Asian philosophies largely without representing Asian people and practices, Cao and Kingston put readers up close to Buddhist materials: colorful shrines, shiny statues, food offerings, gritty pilgrimages, loud bells. By writing about Buddhism in the novel form, Cao and Kingston bring Asian Buddhism into an American context and attest to previously under-narrated varieties of Buddhist experience. Furthermore, by engaging with Buddhist teachings on the illusory nature of individual and collective identity, Cao's and Kingston's texts open up a space for fluid identity that can be both Asian and American, valuing Asian Buddhist tradition while also integrating American individualism and future-oriented thinking.

Both *Monkey Bridge* and *The Fifth Book of Peace* use Buddhism to reflect on multiple identities in the U.S. Chronicling the adolescence of a Vietnamese refugee in the late 1970's U.S., *Monkey Bridge* dramatizes the tensions between traditional Asian piety and new Western science. The protagonist feels torn between her Vietnamese and American identities. But a Buddhist epiphany of nonself releases her from the

compulsion to choose one identity exclusively. She reconciles her Vietnamese sense of familial duty with her American-influenced wish to pursue an independent career. And she learns to appreciate aspects of her traditional religion she used to spurn, making a new home in America with the help of Buddhist ideas.

While *Monkey Bridge* focuses on Vietnamese-American experiences already conditioned by Buddhist and Confucian traditions, Kingston narrates how Buddhist practice enters the lives of Vietnam veterans and peace activists. Throughout the text, Kingston uses Buddhist imagery to cultivate peace as both a mental and social condition without dwelling on nirvana as a religious concept. But Buddhist nonself inheres on the level of form, as characters' loss of an I-centered narrative voice parallels their immersion in Buddhist practices. Kingston, as well as Cao, begin to fill a gap left by non-Asian novelists who neglect Asian American religious life. By concluding with Cao and Kingston, I show how Asian religions in American literature have taken a long journey back to a greater consideration of Asian culture and history.

## Chapter 1: Crazy Wisdom and Beat Zen: Jack Kerouac, Tom Robbins, and Gary Snyder

After WWII, America saw an upsurge in church membership, church attendance, and religious identification. In a landmark mid-century study of American religion, Will Herberg cites a survey in which ninety-five percent of Americans identified as Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish, the three groupings that Herberg identifies as the contemporary American religious mainstream (46). According to Sydney Ahlstrom, factors behind this religious revival included a wish to feel and appear patriotic, an impulse to affirm a religious bulwark against Godless communism, and a yearning for spiritual consolation against the uncertainties of the nuclear age (949-952). A sampling of religious book titles from the fifties shows a strong recurrence of the word “peace,” suggesting that popular religious writers responded to readers’ wish to escape from dreadful contemplations of nuclear apocalypse (Prothero, Introduction 7).

This increasingly consolidated religious mainstream inspired a countertrend. As many scholars have recognized, religion and spirituality played an important role in the rift between the bourgeois mainstream and the bohemian Beat and, later, hippie countercultures (Roszak). For many of those disaffected by the religion of their upbringing, Asian religions were appealing because of their cultural distance from the perceived vices of the United States (Campbell 128, 190; Masatsugu 425). Literature played a crucial role in Asian religions’ growing popularity, as shown in Buddhism’s emergence in the 1950s. Influential documents included teachings by Japanese teachers such as D.T. Suzuki and Nyogen Senzaki, reflections by Western students of Buddhism

such as Alan Watts and Eugene Herrigel, and creative works by Beat writers and their literary descendants.

The Beats stand out for their inventive contributions to Buddhism's rapid emergence in the U.S. These writers blended mysticism with countercultural delinquency to form what Alan Watts called "Beat Zen" (8), although Zen was only one of many Asian sects that interested the east coast Beat writers and their colleagues in San Francisco. The most influential Beat Zen writers are Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, Philip Whalen, Albert Saito, and (a generation later) Tom Robbins. However, Watts coined "Beat Zen" as a term of disrepute. "Beat Zen" indulges in wild excess. It defines itself by its rebellion against "square" society, whereas "Zen" with no modifier transcends such oppositions (Watts 7). Subsequent criticism has continued to criticize Beat treatments of Buddhism as superficial and racist (Griswold, He, Jackson). On the other hand, more favorable scholarship has largely avoided the issue of cultural difference and focuses on how Beat writers express abstract Buddhist doctrines (Fields, Giamo, Giles, Prothero).

In contrast to these divergent approaches, I redefine "Beat Zen" as a set of rich engagements with Buddhism's cultural and philosophical implications for American freedom. Three key figures—Kerouac, Robbins, and Snyder—are highly self-aware about the role of Orientalism in countercultural adaptations of Asian religions. They fashion their literary engagements through "crazy wisdom," the Buddhist principle that a teachers' seemingly wild acts can point to deeper truths (Bell 59).<sup>2</sup> Their examples show how Beat Zen uses Buddhist ideas to critique American materialism, but also critiques its

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<sup>2</sup> Although Robbins is the only one of the three to refer to "crazy wisdom" in its precise Tibetan genealogy, I use the term more broadly to encompass the similar Zen deviance of Kerouac and Snyder.

own fascination with exotic Asia. Furthermore, even as Beat Zen defines itself through dissent, it seeks to synthesize Buddhist liberation and countercultural rebellion with American liberal freedom.

My discussion moves from Kerouac's 1950s Buddhist trek, to Robbins' 1970s retrospective on 1960s religious alternatives, to Snyder's sustained engagement with Zen from the 1950s to the 1990s. Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1958) shows how Asian stereotypes distract bohemian Ray Smith from salutary Buddhist philosophy. Robbins, modifying Kerouac's Beat ideals a generation later, portrays even wilder lifestyles while offering a more cautious route to Eastern wisdom in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1977). Kerouac's and Robbins's exuberant Beat Zen finds a counterweight in the more restrained Gary Snyder, whose long career spans from the early 1950s to the present. In select pieces over a forty year period, Snyder tries to retain the rebelliousness of Beat Zen while redefining its wildness as a higher order in disguise.

### Kerouac's Zen Lunacy

Kerouac's engagement with Buddhism was born out of pain. His French-Canadian background, and his working-class upbringing, made him the target of racist and classist stereotypes in his hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts (Grace, "White Man" 40-41). He also struggled with alcoholism throughout his life (Amburn 38). It is not surprising, then, that Kerouac related strongly to two of Buddhism's first noble truths (Giamo 181): life is pervaded by suffering, and this suffering is caused by craving (Smith 99-106). Kerouac's immersion in Buddhism lasted for roughly eight years, and his "Buddhist period" peaked from 1954 to 1957 (Giamo 180). His Buddhist writing during this time is a dynamic bundle of joy and sadness, alternating between highs of spiritual

enthusiasm and lows of insights sought but unattained. Buddhism did not become a stable spiritual home for Kerouac, and after 1960, he gave it up (Aronowitz 83). But during his fleeting engagement with it, Kerouac produced important reflections on how Buddhism was emerging in the U.S. Kerouac rewrites his quixotic quest for enlightenment in *The Dharma Bums*. Its flawed hero, Ray Smith, plays out the fraught relationship between Buddhist teachings and American preconceptions of Buddhist cultures.

*The Dharma Bums* is a cultural and literary landmark: it is the first novel set in America with a Buddhist protagonist. Ray seeks to adopt the altruistic motivation of a Mahayana Bodhisattva, one who delays entry into nirvana in order to teach other beings the path of liberation from cyclic existence (Smith 124). *The Dharma Bums* is based on Kerouac's experiences: just as Ray Smith stands in for Kerouac, Ray's friend Japhy Ryder is Gary Snyder, who spent time as a Zen monk in Japan after the year of Kerouac's life (1955-1956) on which the narrative is based (Miles 95). These two fictionalizations of historical writers are only the two most prominent of several; readers will also recognize Allen Ginsberg in Alvah Goldbrook, among other playfully transparent references.

Existing scholarship explores the role Buddhist teachings of suffering, emptiness, and nonself have played in Kerouac's creative vision (Giamo; Giles; Grace, *Literary Imagination*). But critics have paid little attention to the relationship between Kerouac's interest in Buddhism and his acknowledgement of Orientalism. The most sustained consideration of this topic argues that *The Dharma Bums* constructs a demeaning fantasy of Japan and China as a "theme park" for American spiritual tourism (Griswold

141, 146-147). This is one of many scholarly criticisms of Kerouac's apparent racism and sexism (Martinez 85, Panish 107-108). Indeed, Ray and Japhy distort Buddhist teaching and indulge in Asian stereotypes, most notably in an early scene in which Japhy invokes Tibetan tantra to justify his "Zen Free Love Lunacy orgies" (Kerouac, *Bums* 301).<sup>3</sup> But just as readers of *On the Road* should recognize "distance" between Kerouac and Sal Paradise (Blackburn 13), readers of *The Dharma Bums* should separate Kerouac and Snyder from Ray and Japhy. Ray's failings are not simply Kerouac's; they are conscious exhibitions of the problems of Orientalism.

Kerouac knows Buddhism better than Ray does. One can critique Ray's superficial obsession with Buddhist objects by citing Keroac's own writing and influences. *The Diamond Sutra*, Kerouac's favorite Buddhist scripture (Prothero, Introduction 17), states that "The Tathagata [Buddha] can not be fully known by any manifestation in form. And why? Because the phenomena of form is inadequate to incarnate Buddhahood. It can only serve as a mere expression, a hint of that which is inconceivable" (Goddard 103).<sup>4</sup> Kerouac's rhapsodic *The Scripture of Golden Eternity*, which he wrote more than a year before *The Dharma Bums* (Charters 409), recognizes this point. The speaker calls upon readers to see "holy ghosts, buddies, and savior gods" in all things (section 22), but only as a provisional method, for "[b]oth the word 'God' and the essence of the word, are emptiness" (section 14). Section fourteen concludes by chastising the reader that "[t]his is the lesson you forgot."

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<sup>3</sup> Japhy opposes "any kind of Buddhism or *any kinda* philosophy or social system that puts down sex" (298), and celebrates Tibetan sexual symbolism in which "I'm the thunderbolt and she's the void, you see" (299). However, Tibetan sexual tantra retains Buddhism's widespread mistrust of ordinary intercourse, and emphasizes controlling and transcending sexual desire, not indulging in it as Japhy does (Faure 50; Gyatso 2002, 192-197).

<sup>4</sup> Similar points appear elsewhere in Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible* (396), which includes *The Diamond Sutra*, and which Kerouac read assiduously (Fields 211).

It is also the lesson Ray Smith forgot. Just as worshippers of the Buddha are vulnerable to “arbitrary conceptions” of specific times and places (Goddard 396), Ray idolizes a romanticized ancient Buddhist Orient as a separate realm. His reification obstructs the Buddhist goal of transcending the division between subject and object. Ray’s vision is positive Orientalism, in which “the ‘good’ Orient was invariably a classical period somewhere in a long-gone India” (Said 99). Ray bears out this attitude, with China and Japan substituted for India.

By arguing that Orientalism blocks Ray’s spiritual progress, it may seem as though I have implicitly idealized traditional Asian Buddhism, a subtle repetition of Ray’s error. In this analysis, Ray’s faults reside in his failure to grasp traditional practices or learn them from “authentic” sources, not in the practices themselves. But I do not mean to imply that there is such a thing as perfect enlightenment, or that traditional Asian Buddhist practices are the best way to achieve it. Rather, my point is that Ray’s Orientalism prevents an insightful, sensitive evaluation of Buddhism from taking place.

For Ray, the mythic realm of ancient East Asian Buddhism contrasts from a degenerate modern America. Thus, *The Dharma Bums* links Eastern religion to countercultural critiques of capitalist consumerism, as one can see in the titular phrase itself, which links those who adopt bohemian lifestyles—“bums”—to Buddhism—“Dharma.” Accordingly, the Buddhist characters in the novel identify themselves as “Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming” (Kerouac 351). If one is against American capitalism, then one should be for something as far away from

America in both time and space as possible. As Jonathan Eburne points out, by defining themselves as exiles from the American mainstream, Kerouac and the Beats make otherness into a hip commodity, a process that may not have been their original intent but that they “realize with increasing distress” as their careers progress (55). This countercultural credential depends on the marginal status of the various minority groups with whom they claim affinities (55). *The Dharma Bums* exemplifies this dynamic: in order for Buddhism to remain relevant to Ray’s counterculture, Eastern religions must remain exotic relative to mainstream culture. *The Dharma Bums* is a conflicted engagement with this dynamic. It recognizes the faults of Orientalism even as it recognizes that exoticism is a large part of what draws Americans to Buddhism.

Critics who find Ray’s spiritual realizations credible have largely overlooked Ray’s retrospective jadedness in the novel’s opening pages. Looking back on his time as a “dharma bum,” Ray writes, “Since then I’ve become a little hypocritical about my lip-service and a little tired and cynical. Because now I am grown so old and neutral....But then I really believed” (282). Ray’s eventual failure is broadcast from the start, and the reason is already suggested later in the same passage. Using a Pali term for a Buddhist monk, Ray writes, “I believed that I was an oldtime bhikku wandering the world (usually the immense triangular arc of New York to Mexico City to San Francisco) in order to turn the wheel of the True Meaning, or Dharma” (282). If Ray used to think that the whole world is adequately contained within New York, Mexico City, and San Francisco, then it is little wonder that he encountered disappointment. The world refuses to conform to Ray’s stereotyped projections of Buddhist holy men and the environments they supposedly inhabit.

*The Dharma Bums* envisions Buddhism's strangeness early on when Ray speaks affectionately of the "Zen lunatics of China and Japan" and listens to Japhy Ryder tell "anecdotes about the Zen lunatics of the Orient" (285, 290). The content of this lunacy is not clear at first, except for Ray's repeated emphasis that the "Zen lunatics" are Oriental. Even without giving specific descriptions, this phrase invokes a stereotype of the Oriental Monk, who is inscrutable, otherworldly, and Asian (Iwamura 6). Ray's and Japhy's discussions of this ancient Orient come to focus on Han Shan, a ninth century Chinese Zen poet (Seaton). In Chinese culture, Han Shan and his friends have an apocryphal reputation as, "in good Zen fashion, poor but happy recluses, bordering on the crazy, who constantly do and say nonsensical things" (Henricks 7). Han Shan also criticized the hypocrisy of materialistic monks (11). In keeping with Beat rebelliousness, Ray and Japhy choose a Buddhist role model who is alienated from his contemporary Buddhist establishment. Han Shan thus becomes a countercultural kindred spirit, an ancient role model for Ray's and Japhy's Beat Zen.

Ray compares Japhy to Han Shan and idolizes both. Japhy explains that "'Han Shan you see was a Chinese scholar who got sick of the big city and the world and took off to hide in the mountains'" (293). Ray's reply—"Say, that sounds like you"—paves the way for a sustained comparison between Japhy and Han Shan throughout the novel. Japhy further emphasizes Han Shan's distance from themselves in both time and place when he says his poetry was "written a thousand years ago some of it scribbled on the sides of cliffs hundreds of miles away from any other living beings" (293). Japhy's praise of Han Shan's romanticized rootlessness also incorporates nostalgia, as shown in his overgeneralization, "In those days you could really do that" (293). Han Shan

becomes a symbol for an imaginary Buddhist realm that existed “[i]n those days,” which Ray and Japhy seek to recreate through their own mountain hikes.

Previous critics have noted that Ray likens Japhy to Han Shan (Miles 97, 103), but have not explored the resemblance’s racial overtones. One of the novel’s first descriptions of Japhy describes his face as Asian: “He wore a little goatee, strangely Oriental-looking with his somewhat slanted green eyes” (286). Japhy is like an Oriental monk not only in demeanor, dress, and lifestyle, but in his very skin. The word “strangely” has a double meaning: it is strange that Japhy, a white man, looks Oriental; alternatively, Japhy looks like a strange Oriental. Subsequent descriptions are less physical, but still involve Orientalist stereotypes. Ray observes that Japhy’s “eyes twinkled like the eyes of old giggling sages of China” (287). During Ray and Japhy’s mountain climb, Japhy “looked, with that mighty grawfaced rock behind him, like, exactly like the vision I had of the old Zen Masters of China out in the wilderness” (334). In both of these descriptions, the word “old” is ambiguous; it could mean either the Zen masters are old or that they exist in an olden time. Both meanings rely on clichés of sacred Asian antiquity. Rather than learning something new, Ray assimilates Japhy into “the vision I had” already. Whereas Kerouac’s favorite Buddhist texts emphasize dispelling one’s preconceptions (Goddard 103, 363), Ray’s Buddhism simply overlays stereotypes onto what he sees.

This point extends to the landscape, as Ray Smith reimagines American mountains as an ancient Buddhist paradise. Ray’s vision of Asia is so appealing that he wishes—and even pretends—he is there. When he and Japhy climb a peak in the Sierras, Ray remarks, ““Oh this is like an early morning in China and I’m five years old in

beginningless time!”“ (322). He recalls an earlier time when sages roamed the mountains. If it is the case that “[i]n those days you could really do that” (293), then Ray wants to inhabit those days. When he does, he feels young and liberated.

Just as Ray feels joy when he imagines himself in Han Shan’s China, he grows irritated when conditions disrupt this fantasy. When Ray tries to sleep outdoors in Riverside, California, a man warns him that the police will not allow it, and Ray returns, “‘This ain’t India, is it,’ I said, sore” (368). In Ray’s mind, the problem is not that well-populated municipalities tend to have stricter anti-vagrancy laws than remote national parks. The problem is that he is not in Asia. It does not occur to Ray that there are plenty of places in India where one could not sleep outdoors either. Instead, Ray equates the difference between urban and rural spaces with the difference between West and East. A similar moment occurs in Mexico when a Chinese-Mexican beggar tells Ray that it is too dangerous to sleep in the open because he would be robbed. Ray laments, “I wasn’t in America anymore. Either side of the border, either way you slice the baloney, a homeless man was in hot water. Where would I find a quiet grove to meditate in, to live in forever?” (371-372). Both America and Mexico are unfriendly to wandering pilgrims, but the latter slightly more so. In America, the law deters open-air sleeping; in Mexico, it is the lawless. Neither country can compare to Ray’s fantasy of India’s hospitality to transient spiritual seekers.

Although most mentions of Asia in the novel are rooted in antiquity, one discussion about contemporary Asia complicates Ray’s Oriental fantasy. Japhy expresses his excitement to Ray about going to Japan and wearing “the works, old T’ang Dynasty style things long black floppy with huge droopy sleeves and funny pleats, make you feel

real Oriental" (430). But Alvah Goldbrook says, "while guys like us are all excited about being real Orientals and wearing robes, actual Orientals over there are reading surrealism and Charles Darwin and mad about Western business suits" (430). In Japhy's usage, "real Oriental," means "very Oriental." But Ray's additional "s" turns "real Oriental," an adverb modifying an adjective, into "real Orientals," an adjective modifying a noun. What Japhy speaks of as a form of seeming, Ray ossifies into a mode of being. Here, Ray also distinguishes between abstract "real Orientals" and concrete "actual Orientals." To revisit Said's analysis, if the good Orient resides in an illustriously mythologized past, the bad Orient is a present decline that fails to uphold this ancient legacy (99). The contemporary Pacific Rim has, in Ray's and Alvah's view, been infiltrated by the American capitalism that the Beats already critique at home. There is a hint of bemused disappointment that modern Asia may not live up to his vision of an idealized and ancient Asia, which for him is the true Asia. Japhy tries to steer Ray away from this negative judgment: "East'll meet West anyway. Think what a great world revolution will take place when East meets West finally, and it'll be guys like us that can start the thing" (430). For Japhy, the Westernization of Asia is one side of a growing, positive exchange between two hemispheres.

The novel further shows East meeting West in San Francisco, which has the oldest and largest Chinatown in the U.S. (Yung 7). Ray and Japhy have an opportunity for intercultural engagement in their own locale. But in the novel's only scene that shows Asian Americans with more than a passing mention, Ray and Japhy continue to prefer an Orientalist fantasy to actual Chinese Buddhists. One day, Ray wanders drunk through Chinatown and stops to help a group of young men building a Buddhist Church. If Ray

likens Japhy to the East, he likens the Chinese of Chinatown to the West. Ray describes the builders in emphatically American terms as

young Sinclair Lewis idealistic forward-looking kids who lived in nice homes but put on jeans to come down and work on the church, like you might expect in some midwest town some midwest kids with a bright-faced Richard Nixon leader, the prairie all around. Here in the heart of the tremendously sophisticated little city called San Francisco Chinatown they were doing the same thing but their church was the church of Buddha. Strangely Japhy wasn't interested in the Buddhism of San Francisco Chinatown because it was traditional Buddhism, not the Zen intellectual artistic Buddhism he loved--but I was trying to make him see that everything was the same. (364)

Here, Ray assimilates the Chinatown Chinese into white middle America rather than Orientalizing them. He veers from one extreme of distancing Orientalism, to another extreme of cultural erasure. The volunteer builders remind Ray not of other Asians, but of white Americans such as novelist Sinclair Lewis and then-Vice-President Richard Nixon. The Chinatown Chinese perform American identity so well that substituting Buddha for Christ is a trivial cosmetic difference. Also, Ray calls their building a "church," a word which, although it had been used by the Japanese Buddhist Churches of America since the 1920s (Seager 56), has a distinctly Christian pedigree with no exact parallel in traditional Buddhism. This assimilation takes on spatial language as well: if Ray views Asia's central geographical feature as the mountain, for America, it is the "prairie all around." Ray's description is excessive; his language is *too* American. In fact, he is describing the "nice homes" and "bright-faced" industriousness characteristic

of the middle-class against which the Beats define themselves. These Chinese are not “Zen Lunatics.” They are ordinary people doing ordinary things. As such, they are not exotic and therefore not interesting, at least not to Japhy.<sup>5</sup> Although Ray is more receptive to this traditional Chinese Buddhism, he never repeats the encounter. This scene illustrates the longstanding, and still very present, division in American Buddhism between white converts and Asian Americans. Whereas most religions spread through personal missionary contact, Asian religion spread in America largely through books—such as *The Dharma Bums*—without widespread guidance from living practitioners (Seager 9-11). By re-enfolding Chinese Americans into white America, Ray maintains this division, unable to synthesize Asian and American realms.

Ray’s rarified visions of East and West ultimately sabotage his quest for enlightenment. About two thirds through the novel, Ray visits his family. One day, while meditating in a nearby forest, he reports, “I saw an ancient vision of Dipankara Buddha who was the Buddha who never said anything, Dipankara as a vast snowy Pyramid Buddha with bushy wild black eyebrows like John L. Lewis and a terrible stare, all in an old location, an ancient snowy field like Alban” (387). In a break from previous rhetoric, Ray uses Western points of comparison for a Buddhist figure. John L. Lewis was the longtime leader of the United Mine Workers of America, and Alban is a region of Italy known for wine during the Roman empire (Dubofsky and Van Tine, T.J. Leary 36).

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<sup>5</sup> Whereas Japhy dismisses immigrant Buddhism, Snyder prayed regularly with a Japanese Buddhist congregation in Berkeley in the early 1950s (Snyder, “Making” 154), and has praised the devotional aspect of Asian Buddhist groups that tend to be left out of white Buddhism (Carolan 1996). This disparity suggests that Kerouac made Japhy more culturally aloof than Snyder to emphasize the problems of treating Buddhism too narrowly.

But once again, a key attribute of a Buddhist paradise is its age, as Ray makes emphatically clear with the phrases “ancient vision,” “old location,” and “ancient snowy field.” This antiquity relates uneasily to traditional Buddhist practice. Ray believes that he has seen “the Pure Awakened Land” (388), in reference to a Mahayana Buddhist belief in celestial realms where one can easily attain enlightenment. But in Mahayana pictures and meditative visualizations, these pure lands are timeless (Seager 64), and although clearly seen, they are empty of inherent reality (McMahan, *Empty Vision* 159). These visualizations are not ultimate reality, which is free from all characteristics; instead, they are vehicles toward intuiting the emptiness of reality. In such visualizations, the traditional instruction is to combine sharp detail with the sense that the objects are made of light rather than solid matter (Gyatso, *Practice* 185-186). Relative to this teaching, Ray focuses on clarity at the expense of emptiness. His visions contain too many worldly attributes to achieve the practice’s goals. Therefore, these meditative experiences do not fundamentally change the way Ray views phenomena; instead, they give him a vision of an exotic East to be fascinated with.

Because the euphoria of Ray’s meditations is tied to specifics of time and place, both of the meditation’s content and the environment in which the meditation takes place, Ray is more vulnerable to disturbing emotions when conditions change. Also, by prematurely declaring himself “a Buddha,” he sets himself up for disappointment (Kerouac 386). Thinking that his epiphany allows him to cure his mother’s cold, Ray says, “I was afraid of getting too interested in this and becoming vain” (389). But soon afterwards, at a train station, Ray is “proud of myself because I used to be a brakeman” (397). Similarly, during his vision, Ray feels reassured that “[e]verything’s all right”

(388), but once he resumes travel, he feels “[m]ad” when a police officer shoos him away from the train station (397). This is not to say that Ray’s realizations are bankrupt; many of his thoughts on emptiness and nonself bear coherent resemblances to Buddhist doctrine (350, 386). But Ray’s insights are short-lived because of the limits implicit in the stereotyped lens through which he views Buddhism.

Ray tries and fails to transcend these limits once more when he works as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak, where he lives alone for two months. Ray describes his lookout point as “a funny little peaked almost Chinese cabin” (451). The word “almost” suggests that Ray’s ongoing overlay of Asia onto America is incomplete. Once ensconced in his cabin, Ray tries to overcome the “almost” and imagine himself in a Buddhist paradise as fully as possible. Looking out from Desolation Peak, Ray says, “the clouds were distant and frilly and like ancient remote cities of Buddhaland splendor” (455). This is the first time Ray directly compares his surroundings to a Buddhist pure land. Previously, Ray likens the mountains to China without specifically invoking pure lands (322); he elsewhere envisions a pure land discontinuous from his surroundings (386-387). Here, both of these moves converge, and thus Ray’s Orientalism becomes more subtle. The implicitly Asian “ancient remote cities” exist in a celestial “Buddhaland,” which replaces Desolation Peak. In this vision, the exotic is heavenly.

This spatial imaginary also includes a spiritual description of Japhy:

I saw that unimaginable little Chinese bum standing there, in the fog, with that expressionless humor on his seamed face. It wasn’t the real-life Japhy of rucksacks and Buddhism studies and big mad parties at Corte Madera, it was the realer-than-life Japhy of my dreams, and he stood there saying nothing. ‘Go

away, thieves of the mind!' he cried down the hollows of the unbelievable Cascades (460).

Like the dream Ray has earlier, Japhy appears as unequivocally Chinese. But unlike the dream, Japhy takes on a mythic dimension. This description is saturated with paradoxes. Japhy is both clearly visible and “unimaginable.” His face shows “humor” and is yet “expressionless.” The Japhy of his dreams is “realer-than-life.” He is silent, “saying nothing,” yet he shouts. These paradoxes show that Ray thinks in terms of Zen koans, unanswerable riddles that are designed to propel the mind beyond conventional, intellectual thought (Smith 133-136). This moment illustrates how much Japhy has taught him. Earlier, when mountain climbing with Japhy, Ray is not yet comfortable with koans: “with horror I remembered the famous Zen saying, ‘when you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing’” (Keouac, *Bums* 340-341). At the time, Ray takes Japhy’s remark too literally; but when Ray sees dream-Japhy on Desolation Peak, he has learned how to let koans work on his mind without pedestrian intellectual resistance. This is the moment at which Ray is supposedly enlightened (Miles 103), and the stylistic imitation of Zen koans is impressive evidence in Ray’s favor.

But Ray’s vision is still shaped by Orientalism, and as a result, his realization is limited to specific conditions. Although Ray feels exalted in the moment, he also remains bound to concerns of time and space, and feels the “‘sadness of coming back to cities.’” (Kerouac 460). It may seem as though Ray is tranquil when he “turned and went on down the trail back to this world” (461). But given Ray’s apprehension about his return—and the opening retrospective in which Ray discloses an emerging cynicism (282)—we know that going back to the world means going back to more problems. If

Ray were really enlightened, then he would not feel sad at the prospect of reentering the cities, given the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of the nondifferentiation of samsara and nirvana (Faure 39-40). True enlightenment would be impervious to circumstance. But by fixating on an image of exotic Asia, Ray is not using the relative truth of appearances to guide himself toward the ultimate truth of emptiness. Instead, he mistakes provisional truth for ultimate truth. Ray's realizations do not transcend changing conditions because of his attachment to Orientalist fantasies.

The problems of Orientalism are not only Ray's or Kerouac's. The cultural associations Buddhism carries have made Orientalism an unavoidable aspect of Buddhism's growth in the U.S. In this context, *The Dharma Bums* does not portray a successful fusion of East and West, but it sympathetically dramatizes the obstacles to such harmonization. As a groundbreaking work of American Buddhist fiction, *The Dharma Bums* juxtaposes the appeal of Buddhist transcendence with the risks of cross-cultural appropriation. In the late 1950s, when Americans were struggling to shore up categories of insiders and outsiders, *The Dharma Bums* focuses on how traditions travel across continents. A generation after *The Dharma Bums*, the problem of cross-cultural religion is taken on more directly—and optimistically—by Tom Robbins.

### Robbins's Crazy Wisdom

In Kerouac's time, Buddhism was a rising novelty in scholarly and literary circles (Seager 40). By contrast, in the 1970s, Robbins writes on Asian religions in the wake of an explosion of public recognition in the 1960s. Compared to Kerouac, Tom Robbins (b. 1936) is relatively unknown to scholars, but his high-selling writing shares similar themes and a readership that one critic characterizes as “almost entirely countercultural”

(Klinkowitz 135). More than any other novelist, Robbins carries the banner of the Beat Generation, as well as later countercultural movements of the 1960s. A recent collection of his interviews calls Robbins “the principal voice of American countercultural fiction” (Purdon and Torrey, back cover). Although Robbins resists being labeled “a ‘60s writer” (Bloom 142), he has consistently declared his dedication to being “subversive” and to deliver “the opposite of conventional wisdom” (Strelow 23; Rogers 5; Robbins, “Defiance” 180).

Robbins’s biography reads like a CV of countercultural credentials. He lived as a bohemian in the early days of the Beat Movement, hitchhiking around the country during 1952-53 (Purdon and Torrey xxi). Robbins went to Korea and Japan as a weather observation instructor for the Air Force, where he developed an interest in Asian religions; upon his return, he took master’s coursework in Eastern religions (Purdon and Torrey xxiii). In 1964, he had a transformative experience with LSD, which he says shattered his sense of individual selfhood and opened a way for the creativity that animates his work (Rentilly 125-126, Miller 154). His writing style is exuberant, playful, verbose, mischievous, excessive. He revels in anaphora, alliteration, titillation. He writes graphic sex scenes with gusto. He champions subversion and ridicules authority and dogmatism, especially in the form of U.S. militarism, consumerism, and sexism.

In spite of his wide readership and skillful artistry, Tom Robbins has received very little critical attention. Except for a handful of articles and one critical book in a series on “popular writers” (Hoyser and Stokey), most publications about him are interviews. Against this neglect, I recover Robbins as an important artist thoughtfully engaged with what it means for Asian religions to become popular in the United States.

Robbins's long career includes nine novels, all of which remain in print, and multiple appearances on the New York Times Bestseller list (Purdon and Torrey xxv). I will focus on his second novel, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1977). In addition to being his most famous and widely read work, it directly explores religion moving across cultures and engages with Kerouac to do so. Like *The Dharma Bums*, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* is a road novel with a strong infusion of Asian religion. This novel attempts to show a successful spiritual practice that is lacking in *The Dharma Bums*. While Kerouac pioneers Western adoptions of Buddhism, Robbins tempers his admiration for Asian religions with explicit caution. Paradoxically, the novel promotes the transmission of both Hindu and Buddhist teachings even as it admonishes Westerners against believing they can understand and practice a religion from a distant culture.

*Cowgirls* playfully engages with Kerouac by making its heroine, Sissy Hankshaw Gitche, Kerouac's onetime girlfriend. When asked if she is a virgin, Sissy replies, "Jack Kerouac and I came awfully close, but he was afraid of me, I think" (Robbins 64). Although the reasons for Kerouac's fear are not explicit, we learn that he grew envious of Sissy's superior hitchhiking ability, which stems from her exceptionally large thumbs. This endowment allows Sissy to upstage the most famous hitchhiker of them all; she boasts of "melodies, concerti, entire symphonies of hitch. When poor Jack Kerouac heard about this, he got drunk for a week" (47). Throughout her travels, the "rucksack" Sissy wears alludes to the "rucksack revolution" Japhy Ryder prophesies in *The Dharma Bums* (Robbins 170; Kerouac 351). Sissy's better hitchhiking reflects her better insight as well; she improves upon Ray Smith's Beat Zen because she pursues spiritual liberation without resorting to Asiatic fantasies.

Sissy's main spiritual teacher is the Chink, a Japanese-American hermit who lives in a cave on the outskirts of an all-female ranch in the Dakotas. He claims that a group of Native Americans, the Clock People, misnamed him with the wrong slur—"Chink" for Chinese rather than "Jap" for Japanese. However, no one but him ever sees the Clock people, leaving open the possibility that he made them up. If that is the case, the Chink chose to marginalize himself with a title that implies both the insult of hate speech and the sloppiness of ethnic conflation. The Chink is a deliberately outrageous caricature of old Asian wise men. When Sissy first sees him, we are told that his "problem was that he looked like the Little Man who had the Big Answers....He looked as if he had rolled out of a Zen scroll, as if he said 'presto' a lot, knew the meaning of lightning and the origin of dreams. He looked as if he drank dew and fucked snakes. He looked like the cape that rustles on the backstairs of paradise" (Robbins 163). The Chink is a mysterious guru, but he also relishes in sexual libertinism, vulgar speech, and teachings that focus more on appreciating one's present life than dissolving into a property-less transcendence.

These traits make the Chink an exemplar of Tibetan "crazy wisdom," a term profoundly aligned with Kerouac's earlier coinage, "Zen lunatics." The term "crazy wisdom" was originally propagated by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan-born guru who gained an American following in the late 1960s. It is his translation of the Tibetan philosophy of *drubnyon*, or erratically behaved sainthood. These sages practiced "disruptive holiness." Their outrageous actions—including drunkenness, fornication, and pranks—served to jolt their students out of conventional dualistic thought. By flouting distinctions between sacred and secular, pure and impure, "crazy wisdom" is supposed to help students realize the innate emptiness of all phenomena (Bell 59). Robbins has

repeatedly emphasized the influence of crazy wisdom on his fiction (Reising 109, Miller 151-152), defining it as “the opposite of conventional wisdom. It is wisdom that deliberately swims against the current in order to avoid being swept along in the numbing wake of bourgeois compromise” (Robbins, “Defiance” 180). Although the Chink never uses the term “crazy wisdom,” he carries on this tradition of unconventional Asian spiritual teaching. Furthermore, Robbins’s crazy wisdom shares the countercultural values of Kerouac’s Beat Zen, even though *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* makes jokes at Kerouac’s expense.

The Chink’s transmission of crazy wisdom comes up against a crucial obstacle: he maintains that Eastern religion can only be understood and practiced by Asians. He makes a multifaceted argument to Sissy starting with the premise that “Eastern spiritual currency is simply not negotiable in your Western culture” (*Cowgirls* 230). The Chink claims guru status, but refuses to carry out this role, saying, “Because of my Asian ancestry, I’ve inherited a certain amount of spiritual wealth. But—and you and Debbie and the pilgrims and would-be pilgrims have to understand this—I cannot share this wealth” (230).

Crucially, the Chink classifies Christianity as an Eastern religion imposed on European cultures with vital pagan traditions of their own. In the Chink’s view, Western religion is exemplified by Greco-Roman paganism and British druidism, which he describes as religions revering “The Horned One. The Old God. A bawdy goat-man who provided rich harvests and bouncy babes” (231). Instead of adopting “Oriental fineries” or continuing to suffer under Christianity’s stultifying yoke (231, 234), the Chink

suggests that Westerners should recover the nature-worship of pre-Christian Europe (234).

At first, the Chink's argument seems to be that cultures determine what their members can and cannot understand, and therefore all religions are culturally nontransferable. But the Chink's actual position is more specific. He believes that Eastern religion is ultimately superior to Western religion. Therefore, while Westerners cannot comprehend Eastern religion, Easterners, because of their traditions' greater capaciousness, can absorb Western religion. This position legitimates the Japanese Chink as one with the authority to assess all spiritual traditions. Accordingly, characters sometimes refer to the Chink as “[t]he billy goat” and “the old goat” (177, 358), thus likening him to the ““bawdy goat-man”” of pagan Europe (231). The Chink speaks for the spiritual legacy of Europe even though he is not European. But he also judges this legacy and finds it wanting.

To illustrate this point, the Chink compares Eastern religion—which for him includes Christianity—to light, and Western religion to heat. He says, “Buddha and Rama and Lao-tzu brought light into the world. Literal light. Jesus Christ also was a living manifestation of light” (233-234). This light symbolizes the idea that Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism all have “truths that are universal, that is, truths that can speak to the hearts and spirits of all peoples everywhere” (231). Western religion earns no similar complement. The Chink admires the fact that Western religion venerates plants and women, as evident in its celebrations of the natural seasons and veneration of goddesses as well as gods (232-233). But Western religion has “a heat that generated very little light. It warmed every hair on the mammal body, every cell in the reproductive

process, but it failed to switch on that golden G.E. bulb that hangs from the loftiest dome of the soul” (234). With this judgment, the Chink presupposes that a supreme enlightenment is the legitimate goal of all religion. Western religion falls short against this criterion.

The Chink then applies this judgment to Eastern religion’s expanding popularity in the West in the 1960s and early 1970s:

Throughout the Western world, I see people huddled around little fires, warming themselves with Buddhism and Taoism and Hinduism and Zen. And that’s the most they ever can do with those philosophies. Warm their hands and feet. They can’t make full use of Hinduism because they aren’t Hindu; they can’t really take advantage of the Tao because they aren’t Chinese; Zen will abandon them after a while--its fire will go out--because they aren’t Japs like me. To turn to Oriental religious philosophies may temporarily illuminate experience for them, but ultimately it’s futile, because they’re denying their own history, they’re lying about their heritage. (230)

The Chink says that when Westerners try to get light, or insight, from Eastern religion, all they get is a small amount of heat with which to “[w]arm their hands and feet,” their extremities, not their whole bodies. What meager light they can get from it will only “temporarily illuminate experience.” Their Western heritage, steeped in the heat of revelry, obscures the light of mystical insight. But although the Chink tells Westerners to “[a]dmit, first of all, to your spiritual poverty,” the situation is not hopeless. To obtain spiritual “light,” Westerners need another route that goes through their ancestral lineage. The Chink says, “the United States of America is the logical place for the fires of

paganism to be rebuilt--and transformed into light" (234). In other words, instead of taking refuge in Eastern religions, Americans should return to paganism—but then make paganism more like Eastern religions.

This teaching's haughty prescriptiveness is ironic, given the Chink's general refusal to teach people. But these apparent overgeneralizations make more sense as a reaction to Asian religions' growing popularity in the U.S. in the preceding two decades. In particular, this passage implicitly criticizes Kerouac himself, given his eventual abandonment of Buddhism, and his susceptibility to the criticism that his Buddhism is shallow and under- or misinformed. The Chink further extends his analysis to the 1960s as a whole, which he characterizes as a time of

Riots and rebellions, needless wars and threats of wars, drugs that opened minds to the infinite and drugs that shoved minds into the mushpot forever, awesome advances in technology and confusing declines in established values, political corruption, police corruption and corporate corruption, demonstrations and counterdemonstrations, recessions and inflations, crime in the streets and crime in the suites, oil spills and rock festivals, elections and assassinations, this, that and the other. (229)

In the face of this tumult, “[a] whole banquet of philosophies has been nibbled at and found tasteless,” which includes Buddhism and Hinduism (229). The Chink maintains that Eastern religion is a fad, a desperate and misguided refusal to face difficult times. Once the crises of the 1960s subside, the impetus toward spiritual practice will disappear and Asian religions in the West will fade. In this assessment, the 1960s make Asian religions both enticing *and* impossible to practice effectively. Cultural tumult drives

Western seekers toward Asian religions. However, they lack the stabilizing cultural legacy of spiritual practice across millennia. Thus, Westerners can only relate to Asian religions as exotica with limited applicability. Of course, it is not an original criticism to say that Buddhism and Hinduism are frivolous countercultural fads. But the Chink offers a distinctive position by simultaneously holding a favorable view of Asian religions and a negative view of all Western attempts to practice them. The answer for Westerners, according to the Chink, is not to do a better job of practicing Eastern religions, but to stop trying altogether and switch to paganism.

It is tempting to assume that the Chink's views are Robbins's own. But the novel works against the Chink's religious parochialism. His teachings on individual conscience weaken his seemingly authoritative pronouncements, and he does teach Eastern wisdom to Sissy, although not explicitly. In addition, the novel's rhetoric and symbolism also subvert the Chink's statements about religions' cultural boundaries. In this way, the novel seeks to convey Eastern wisdom to the reader in the same way the Chink teaches Sissy. Thus, a more open view unfurls from within the Chink's apparently restrictive position. Eastern wisdom is available to Westerners, as long as they stumble onto it through crazy wisdom rather than seeking it in a doctrinaire system.

Despite his strong opinions, the Chink does not want to be an authority figure. He refuses to be a spiritual teacher, saying that instead of seeking "more Oriental therapists" (225), Sissy should "[b]e your own master!" (227). In order for this call to carry weight, he must help those he interacts with think for themselves, even if they disagree with his position on Eastern religions' cultural opacity. Accordingly, although Sissy cites

the Chink as an authority on human nature (205-210), she thinks for herself to fill in gaps in the Chink's theories (209), and Sissy learns how to argue with the Chink (331).

Moreover, the Chink does share his Asian spiritual wealth, in spite of his statement that this is impossible. The Chink and Sissy model the guru-disciple relationship, an institution common to Hinduism and some sects of Buddhism (Williamson 15; Gyatso, *Practice* 189-190), and the novel acknowledges the Chink as one of Sissy's teachers (Robbins 262). But he does not simply give her information; he inspires her own awakening. When Dr. Robbins asks Sissy how she came to believe that “[i]t's more important to be free than happy,” she answers, “I may have always felt it....But it was the Chink who put it into words for me” (174). The Chink helps Sissy realize what she already knows. This dynamic resonates with Buddhist pedagogy, which states that the goal of spiritual practice is not to believe in propositions, but to realize one's own innate wisdom (Mingyur 61). Even before she meets the Chink, Sissy knows the “Great Secret” (Robbins 73), which is that “one can change things by the manner in which one looks at them” (72). This idea is a facet of the teaching, common to both Buddhism and Hinduism, that external reality is an illusory projection of one's own mind (Iyer 68, Deshung Rinpoche 198).

The Chink also adopts Zen methods by using koan-like enigmas to teach Sissy. The Chink gives Sissy paradoxical or nonsensical statements that drive the mind beyond its customary parameters. While not strictly Zen koans, they employ similar tactics of contradiction and surprise. When Sissy asks the Chink what he believes, at first he answers simply with his catchphrase, “Ha ha ho ho and hee hee” (238). The next morning, Sissy finds an inscription the Chink made that says, “I believe in everything;

nothing is sacred....I believe in nothing; everything is sacred" (238). This paradox makes no semantic sense, but it is understandable in light of Hindu and Buddhist teachings of nonduality. If there is no ultimate difference between subject and object, then everything and nothing are equivalent, and sacred and profane are also the same. This point, which the Chink makes obliquely, comes across more straightforwardly in a teaching by Tibetan Lama Deshung Rinpoche: "the true nature of all phenomena, and all beings, is simply Buddha-nature" (151). Therefore, "The perception of an enlightened being is no longer obscured by defilements, by belief in subject and object, and hence is no longer governed by this basic dichotomy that separates ordinary beings from enlightened beings" (17). If the difference between sacred and profane is only apparent and not essential, then it would be equally valid to declare that "everything is sacred" or that "nothing is sacred." By writing this, the Chink demonstrates advanced metaphysical insight. On a more immediate level, he expresses his ability to view all he sees with concern without being sanctimonious. The Chink avoids jadedness because "everything is sacred;" he avoids pomposity because "nothing is sacred."

However, the Chink does not simply transmit traditional Eastern doctrines; he gives them his own interpretation. Next to the Chink's playful paradox, Deshung Rinpoche's explanation may seem an uninspiring attempt to flatten everything into meaningless homogeneity. *Even Cowgirls* tries to capture something of Asian religions' belief in all-pervasive holiness without baldly positing a bland monistic mush. Dr. Robbins, a character that the novel identifies not only with the author, but also the Chink, says: "The trick is not to transcend things but *transform* them. Not to degrade them or deny them—and that's what transcendence amounts to—but to reveal them more fully, to

heighten their reality, to search for their latent significance” (239, emphasis in original). Although the reader need not grant any more authority to Dr. Robbins than to the Chink, his comments reinforce the ambivalence of the novel’s engagement with Asian religions.

Later in the novel, another koan-like paradox triggers an enlightenment experience in Sissy. The Chink explains to Sissy that the world needs “magic and poetry” to permeate all levels of society, including stereotypically prosaic enterprises such as politics and journalism (333). As subsequent passages make more clear, the Chink’s connection of magic and poetry is reminiscent of the Russian Formalist notion that literature defamiliarizes the familiar, and that “poetic imagery is a means of creating the strongest possible impression” (Schlovsky 18). When Sissy asks if such a poetic sensibility could ever prevail on a mass scale, the Chink replies, “If you understood poetry and magic, you’d know that it doesn’t matter” (Robbins 333). This statement may seem to be a dangerous retreat from politics, but the Chink does not mean to generalize that one should care about “poetry and magic” and not bother with the world at large. His comment has a more immediate purpose: he tells Sissy what she needs to hear at that exact moment.

It is *prima facie* absurd to dismiss what one has just said is crucially important, and yet the Chink’s apparent negation mysteriously resolves Sissy’s uncertainties. This moment is expressed by the convergence of several events: “The moon rose. / The clockworks struck. / A crane whooped. / She understood” (333). There the chapter ends, and the following chapter is a two-paragraph digression that defines poetry as “an intensification or illumination of common objects and everyday events until they shine

with their singular nature” (333). Although this passage does not have an explicit relationship to the narrative, the implication is that this is what Sissy has “understood.” Curiously, this passage seems to go against Buddhist and Hindu teachings on the emptiness of phenomena, instead presupposing that each object and event has its own inherent “nature.” But in this formulation, objects and events, although distinct, occur within a background of transcendent “illumination” that permeates everything. Furthermore, by presenting this realization without direct segues, the novel’s form imitates the sudden enlightenment of Asian spiritual practitioners (Cheng 595-600).

In interviews, Robbins remains skeptical about Western receptivity to Asian religions. In 2008, he said, “Americans may hold Buddhist ideals in our hearts and minds, but they’re not yet in our genes. That takes time” (Miller 154). In the following year, Robbins said that while Asian gurus may experience spontaneous enlightenment, “[w]e Westerners, however, lack the potential, genetically and culturally, to receive or process that kind of wake-up call” (Purdon and Torrey 173). Although Robbins is not necessarily using the word “genes” literally, the implications are enough to make cultural critics uncomfortable. Sissy is one-sixteenth Siwash Indian (Robbins 33, 55-56), and perhaps it is this fraction that has known these Eastern insights all along. The novel classifies Native Americans as Orientals (153), which means that Sissy’s claim to Eastern spirituality is validated on a technicality. Is Robbins following an inverted spiritual “one drop” rule, where any fraction of nonwhite blood renders one exalted rather than debased?

This possibility becomes less tenable when one analyzes the conditions behind the novel’s composition. Earlier, I argued that the Chink, because of his superior Eastern

wisdom, is in a privileged position to judge all other spiritual traditions. But standing behind this character is a Western author who presumably thinks he can do justice to an Eastern perspective. This fact itself undermines the Chink's position, or at least marks the author as an exception. Significantly, in interviews Robbins is optimistic about writers' ability to adopt the perspective of other racial and gender identities (Reising 117), much more so than Westerners' ability to understand Eastern religion. But if one views the latter negotiation as a subcategory of the former, then the novel stakes out an exception to the general license of perspectival freedom, only to undermine it with the sheer fact of the author's white Western identity.

The novel further synthesizes East and West by making Tibet a destination for American whooping cranes. Much of the novel's second half concerns a flock of the endangered birds, whose annual migration includes a stay at the Rubber Rose Ranch, where much of the novel takes place. These cranes symbolize courageous American individualism, an ideal the novel both values and complicates. Earlier, the narrator emphasizes that the cranes evolved in North America, paragons of "majestic beauty" that habitat loss has driven to the edge of extinction (Robbins 251-252). The narrator rhapsodizes, "[u]nlike those integrity-short teemers, including man, the whooper opted for quality instead of quantity....It would survive on its own terms or not at all" (252). Near the novel's end, the cranes change their migratory pattern and leave the country altogether. Observing this journey, the narrator rhetorically asks, "[i]s the most splendid and sizable American bird searching for a new home, scouring the globe in quest of a place where it can be private and free?" (360). Privacy and freedom underscore the birds' American-ness, and in a 2009 interview, Robbins accordingly valorizes "the

liberating example of the whooping cranes, who prefer extinction to compromise” (Purdon and Torrey 175). The cranes inherit Patrick Henry’s call to “give me liberty or give me death!”

Although the novel positions these birds as quintessentially American, their quest for life, liberty, and the pursuit of whooping crane happiness ironically leads them out of the U.S. After the whooping cranes leave the ranch, they travel on a winding path through North America, South America, Africa, Europe, and at last Asia. The reader learns of these sites through hearsay reports such as “they are believed to be somewhere in the interior of China” (360). At this point, the reader knows the narrator is Dr. Robbins, whose status as a character in the novel—even if it is the author’s own avatar—undermines the possibility of narrative omniscience. Nevertheless, the narrator finally drops the qualifiers and assumes the authority to “pass along the news that the cranes have just crossed the border into Tibet” (360). The point at which the cranes cross into Tibet, home of the crazy wisdom that Robbins prizes, is the point at which equivocation ends. Robbins uses animal symbolism to place American values in the service of an Eastern vision. Rather than rejecting American individualism altogether, the novel suggests that the American aspiration for freedom is most fully realized in Asian religious teachings. In this view, the Eastern freedom of spiritual liberation is more profound than the American freedom to create an “industrialized, urbanized, herding” society that the narrator identifies as the “one wrong way” to live (192). By imagining Tibet as the whooping cranes’ best new home, the novel nudges its American readers toward Eastern wisdom as well.

In addition to the many ways in which the novel unravels the Chink's proscriptions, history has refuted his prediction that Eastern religion will fade in America. Colin Campbell argues that ideas from Asian religion have become so integrated into American and European cultures that an "Easternization of the West" has occurred (ix).

In the face of this trend, Robbins still has reservations about Western practitioners of Eastern religions, but he has softened his position over the years. In a 2009 interview, Robbins revisits the topic of Asian religions in the West. Like the Chink, Robbins says he hopes for a pagan "revival of mystical nature worship" in the U.S. (Miller 154). But he does not repeat the Chink's insistence that Westerners take a spiritual detour around Asian religions altogether. Instead, his caution is more understated:

There are numerous paths to enlightenment. In Asia, these paths have been worn smooth by millions of experienced feet. The Western seeker, while he or she may have ready access to guides, maps, and road signs imported from Asia, must nevertheless stumble along overgrown, unfamiliar trails pitted with potholes and patrolled by our indigenous cultural wolves. Americans may hold Buddhist ideals in our hearts and minds, but they're not yet in our genes. That takes time.

Meanwhile, Asians are becoming increasingly Americanized. Who knows where this exchange will lead?" (Miller 154)

Robbins maintains that it is difficult for Westerners to practice Asian religions, but he does not say that they should not try; rather, he is open to "this exchange." Robbins still implies that one must have a particular religion in one's "genes" to practice it effectively, which hearkens back to the importance of the Chink's and Sissy's spiritual heritages. But by saying that Buddhist teachings are "not *yet* in our genes" (emphasis added), he

suggests that Buddhism can work its way into Westerners' genes with enough "time" and, presumably, practice. With these remarks, Robbins moves closer to Japhy Ryder's vision that "East'll meet West" after all (Kerouac 430).

### Snyder's Wild Etiquette

Japhy's goal of East meeting West has been realized in the life of his historical inspiration, Gary Snyder. His long career shows a sensitive engagement with Buddhism that changes along with the advancing century. Snyder (b. 1930) became involved with Buddhism in his early twenties, attending services at a Japanese Buddhist center in San Francisco in the early 1950s (Snyder, "Making" 154). His interest in Asian religion and culture deepened, and he spent most of 1956 to 1968 in Japan, receiving traditional Zen training in Kyoto (Murphy 7-9). Since his return to the U.S., his Buddhist faith has continued to animate his poetry and prose. No American writer of his generation has matched Snyder's combination of dedicated Buddhist practice, international experience, and prolific creative output.

Snyder has a crucial place in the Beat generation in spite of his ambiguous status as a Beat writer (Tonkinson ix). His influence on Kerouac's Buddhist period was profound, and Snyder was a key ally of the Beats as a self-aware counterculture. In a 1960 essay, Snyder affirms the Beat critique of "the American standard of living" and advocates both "economic" and "sexual revolution" (Snyder, "Notes" 10). He further identifies "the current interest of Occidentals in Zen Buddhism" as a crucial part of this project (13). Previous critics have examined the role of Buddhist philosophy in Snyder's poetry (Gray, Huang, Hunt, Johnston, J. Tan), but they focus on how Snyder uses Buddhist ideals to critique U.S. violence and pollution. This critical pattern has

prevented scholars from seeing a number of important connections between Buddhist and American concerns in Snyder's work. My analysis shows Snyder to be a more complex figure than critics have realized. He simultaneously challenges American excess and affirms American freedom.

Snyder's Buddhist engagement both inhabits and surpasses the Beat period. While Kerouac and Robbins celebrate subversion, Snyder offers discipline. By looking at key texts across Snyder's career, we can see an evolving effort to harmonize Beat wildness with Buddhist calm. Snyder defends Beat Zen both by praising its subversion and by redefining its rebelliousness as responsibility. Every level of Snyder's writing reflects this complexity. In his work, East meets West by weaving American content into Buddhist forms, and *vice versa*.

An early example of Snyder's synthesis of Beats and Buddhism is "Amitabha's vow" (1960), which is worth reproducing in full:

"If, after obtaining Buddhahood, anyone in my land  
gets tossed in jail on a vagrancy rap, may I  
not attain highest perfect enlightenment.

wild geese in the orchard  
frost on the new grass

"If, after obtaining Buddhahood, anyone in my land  
loses a finger coupling boxcars, may I  
not attain highest perfect enlightenment.

mare's eye flutters

jerked by the lead-rope  
stone-bright shoes flick back  
angles trembling: down steep rock

“If, after obtaining Buddhahood, anyone in my land  
can’t get a ride hitch-hiking in all directions, may I  
not attain highest perfect enlightenment.

wet rocks buzzing  
rain and thunder southwest  
hair, beard, tingle  
wind whips bare legs  
we should go back  
we don’t (*Myths and Texts* 40-41)

This poem is a Beat-ified rewriting of the Buddhist liturgy, “The Forty-Eight Vows of Amitabha.” These vows are a part of *The Sutra on the Buddha of Infinite Life*, one of the most important sutras in the Pure Land School of Chinese Buddhism (Inagaki xiii). Each vow begins with, “If, when I attain Buddhahood,” and ends with, “may I not attain perfect enlightenment.” For example, the first vow states: “If, when I attain Buddhahood, there should be in my land a hell, a realm of hungry ghosts, or a realm of animals, may I not attain perfect enlightenment” (Inagaki 12). With each following vow, the middle part varies, giving a list of flawed conditions that the speaker will not tolerate. These verses express the Bodhisattva’s commitment to remain in existence to help beings until everyone is enlightened (Smith 147).

Snyder adopts this form, but substitutes Buddhist cosmology with Beat culture. The speaker vows not to “attain perfect enlightenment” if anyone “gets tossed into jail on a vagrancy rap,” “loses a finger coupling boxcars,” or “can’t get a ride hitch-hiking in all directions.” Each of these items evokes Beat tropes of travel. Since Beats often viewed steady employment as complicity with a corrupt society (Whiston 28), Beats and their sympathizers were often technically guilty of “vagrancy.” Also, “coupling boxcars” is one of the tasks of a railway brakeman, an oddjob that represents Beat underemployment, as Kerouac attests (*On the Road* 154-155, *Dharma Bums* 283). Third, hitchhiking is one of the defining motifs of the Beat generation. The phrase “In all directions” conveys the freedom that Beat hitchhiking attempted to practice. It also echoes Buddhist appeals to the “ten directions”—the four cardinal directions, the diagonal directions, up, and down—that encompass infinite space (Inagaki 3).

By placing contemporary concerns within a Buddhist form, Snyder sacralizes Beat activities. In “The Forty-Eight Vows of Amitabha,” the speaker vows not to attain enlightenment if anyone will “give rise to thoughts of self-attachment,” “not acquire eloquence and wisdom,” and “not be able to view” every Buddha in the universe as clearly as one’s own reflection (Inagaki 12-18). Snyder’s substitutions shift the focus from Buddhist metaphysics to worldly activities, challenging the informed reader to see holiness in apparently secular Beat pursuits. Mainstream society would, and often did, criticize Beat behavior as delinquent (Menand; Prothero, Introduction 6). But in “Amitabha’s vow,” Beat activities deserve to be promoted by Buddhas.

Snyder’s vows further invert the elitism of their scriptural source. “The Forty-Eight Vows of Amitabha” imagines spiritual bliss in terms of luxury and high social

status. It would be intolerable if beings who hear this sutra “should not be reborn into noble families after their death,” lack “fine robes,” “not all be the color of pure gold,” and “should not be respected by all *devas* and people of the world” (Inagaki 12-17). By contrast, “Amitabha’s vow” valorizes low status. The speaker hopes that a vagrant would not be incarcerated, not that he would stop being a vagrant. He hopes that a brakeman would not lose his fingers while on the job, not that he would get a more prestigious job. And he wishes that Beats could hitchhike freely, not that they could have cars of their own and no longer need to hitchhike.

“Amitabha’s vow” gains additional coherence from its juxtaposition of contrasting styles. Snyder gives us two poems in one. Each of the three vows is followed by free verse that bears no obvious connection to the vows. The two styles contrast. The vows have long lines; the free verse has short lines. The vows are steady at three lines each; the free verse grows with two, four, and six lines. The vows are complete sentences; the free verse is fragmentary. The vows are punctuated and capitalized; the free verse is not. The vows carry on a continuous train of thought, whereas each unit of free verse distills a separate scene. The vows are hypothetical; the free verse conveys immediate sensations. The vows are in the first-person; there is no “I” in the free verse.

Although the free verse seems opaque, it actually complements the more coherent vows. Each free verse unit bears an increasing emphasis on travel and defiance. The first unit, “wild geese in the orchard / frost on the new grass,” contains no words of movement or tension. The second unit records difficulties in travel with “ankles trembling: down steep rock.” The third unit describes tumultuous “rain and thunder southwest” and

expresses adventuresome courage: “we should go back / we don’t.” With this progression, the wilderness scenes in the free verse move closer to the content of the vows. The poem’s two divergent styles converge on an affirmation of the freedom to travel in spite of all obstacles. Thus, “Amitabha’s vow” is a complex synthesis of Buddhist form and Beat content. It brings celestial Buddhist imagery down to ground-level Beat itinerancy. But it also brings Beat bohemianism up to Buddhist piety by declaring it sacred.

What “Amitabha’s vow” does for the Beat generation, the essay “Smokey the Bear Sutra” does for the hippie movement ten years later. Each poem speaks to its time. The hippies tended to be more politically active than the Beats, who preferred to “drop out” of the system rather than try to change it (Marwick 782, Whiston 28). This difference comes across in comparing the relatively apolitical “Amitabha’s vow” with the polemics of “Smokey the Bear Sutra.” Snyder wrote “Smokey the Bear Sutra” in 1969 and distributed it as a free, anonymous pamphlet. It did not appear in publication until 1986. This fact explains its lack of scholarly attention, but it is an important document in Snyder’s oeuvre and the history of American adaptations of Buddhism. “Smokey the Bear Sutra” rewrites a Buddhist scriptural genre for a hippie audience. While Snyder is right that the essay “follows the structure of a Mahayana sutra fairly faithfully” (244), it stands out for its innovations. The essay replaces traditional Buddhist tropes of Asia with American places, mixes Buddhist formality with countercultural irreverence, and departs from a sutra’s conventional opening. This text attempts to make Buddhism speak to the hippie counterculture at its apex in the late 1960s.

The text's central conceit is that Smokey the Bear is a Buddha. This conflation sets up Buddhist critiques of environmental destruction. The Great Sun Buddha, speaking "in the Jurassic, about 150 million years ago," prophesies that in the future, "[t]he human race in that era will get into troubles all over its head and practically wreck everything in spite of its own strong intelligent Buddha-nature." In Mahayana Buddhism, Buddha-nature is every being's inherent potential to become enlightened (Smith 2, 388). This potential is heavily obscured by ignorance, especially in those who pollute. One must carelessly objectify nature in order to abuse it. Later, the narrator calls forest fires a symptom of "the stupidity of those who think things can be gained and lost whereas in truth all is contained vast and free in the Blue Sky and Green Earth of One Mind." This admonition seems to misattribute accidental fires started by careless campers to corporate greed. But the larger point stands that environmental degradation is caused by those who objectify nature. A more insightful attitude would emerge from the doctrine of nonduality (Suzuki, *Lankavatara* xxix), such that oneself and nature are inseparable.

Snyder makes these points speak to contemporary America by inserting American place names into Buddhist figures of speech. The Buddha prophesies that a future "continent called America...will have great centers of power such as Pyramid Lake, Walden Pond, Mount Ranier, Big Sur, Everglades, and so forth; and powerful nerves and channels such as Columbia River, Mississippi River, and Grand Canyon." America has sacred spaces just as India has the Ganges River. The narrator later says, "those who recite this Sutra and then try to put it into practice will accumulate merit as countless as the sands of Arizona and Nevada." Snyder tweaks a common Buddhist hyperbole which describes immense quantities "as there are grains of sand in the river Ganges" or "as high

as Mount Meru” (Goddard 96, 91). By rewriting Buddhist expressions with American instead of Asian place names, “Smokey the Bear Sutra” suggests that mystical geography is not confined to Asia; it is right here.

Snyder’s substitutions give “Smokey the Bear Sutra” a different tone from canonical Buddhist texts. Whereas Buddhist sutras are rigorously formal, “Smokey the Bear Sutra” is irreverently playful. By deifying Smokey the Bear, the sutra plays on the comical tension between the Buddha’s mystical dignity and Smokey the Bear’s status as a mass-media cartoon mascot.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, Smokey is “austere but comic” (242). He holds a “vajra shovel” and raises “[h]is left paw in the Mudra of Comradely Display.” “Vajra” is a Sanskrit word for “diamond,” conveying clarity and strength; a mudra is a ritual gesture (Seager 29-30). The text thus describes Smokey’s signature pose in Buddhist terms, a move that simultaneously makes light of Buddhist decorum and valorizes Smokey’s appearance.

The sutra’s playfulness further comes across in its treatment of mantras. Buddhist sutras often present mantras for recitation, and “Smokey the Bear Sutra” accordingly presents Smokey’s “great mantra.” This Sanskrit mantra is in fact the mantra of Fudo Myo-o, a figure in Japanese Buddhism (Snyder 119-120). But in addition to this traditional mantra, “Smokey the Bear Sutra” adds “Smokey the Bear’s War Spell.” The sutra urges, “if anyone is threatened by advertising, air pollution, or the police, he should chant Smokey the Bear’s War Spell: drown their butts / crush their butts / drown their butts / crush their butts / And Smokey the Bear will surely appear to put the enemy out with his vajra-shovel.” This passage echoes traditional images of wrathful Buddhas that

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<sup>6</sup> I do not mean to deny the seriousness of Smokey the Bear’s message, or the authoritative demeanor he generally exudes. But it remains noteworthy that Smokey is a cartoon bear designed to be appealing to children.

destroy spiritual defilements represented as demons (Linrothe 8). Here, the enemies are physical agents of harm. However, the playful slang “butts” makes the chant more teasing than vicious.

While Snyder mostly adheres to the sutra form, “Smokey the Bear Sutra” changes one important convention: the sutra’s opening. Buddhist sutras consistently begin with the phrase, “Thus have I heard.” This phrase grants authority to the sutra by signaling that it comes from someone, traditionally the Buddha’s aide Ananda, who has heard the Buddha in person (Brough 424). But “Smokey Bear Sutra” bends this convention in two ways. It moves the phrase from the beginning to the end, and replaces the singular pronoun with the plural. Thus, the start of “Smokey the Bear Sutra” skips directly to a description of the Buddha and his surroundings. After finally promising that those who recite this sutra “will win highest perfect enlightenment,” the sutra concludes, “Thus have *we* heard” (243, my emphasis). Snyder changes “I” to “we” to treat the sutra as a communal catalyst rather than an individual testimony. And he moves the traditional opening to the end as an affirmation, a communal “amen” that seeks to solidify the sutra as a text by and for environmentalists.

This essay is an act of synthesis. It makes meeting points between Buddhist and hippie concerns. But it also gives another, even less expected meeting point. “Smokey the Bear Sutra” combines a broad critique of industrial civilization with an indebtedness to the institutions of the U.S. Because of Snyder’s longstanding opposition to large societies, industrial technology, and legislative politics (Snyder, “Place” 33-36), critics have not acknowledged the American government as a resource for Snyder’s writing. “Smokey the Bear Sutra” challenges this omission. The text criticizes modern pollution

as the result of “a civilization that claims to save but only destroys.” And yet, the essay’s central figure is a production of the National Forest Service, which is funded by the Federal Government. Therefore, American “civilization” does not “only [destroy],” but is capable of positive output. Snyder resists this point in his 1986 preface to the essay by saying that the Service was unaware “that it was serving as a vehicle for this magical reemergence” (244). Snyder works hard to avoid acknowledging the U.S. Government as the source of something good. Even so, Smokey wears “the broad-brimmed hat of the West, symbolic of the forces that guard the Wilderness.” The West does not simply destroy the wilderness; it can protect it as well.

Although Snyder’s implicit affirmation of the West may seem surprising, it makes Buddhist sense that Snyder would find merit even in U.S. institutions. If Snyder is serious about Buddhist nonduality, then he cannot treat the U.S. as a monolithic evil. Buddha-nature can be obscured, but never lost. Given this idea, even a degraded civilization must still be capable of manifesting wisdom. For Snyder, Smokey the Bear is a rare touchstone of holism in a culture increasingly alienated from nature.

In “Amitabha’s vow” and “Smokey the Bear Sutra,” Snyder inserts American content into Buddhist forms. But in his poem “For All” (1983), Snyder inverts this process by weaving Buddhist ideas into an American creed: the Pledge of Allegiance. For all the criticism Snyder has leveled against European American history, it is surprising that his poetry would retain the form of its primary loyalty oath. With his modifications, Snyder tries to harmonize American vows of allegiance with Buddhist interdependence, rather than simply replacing the former with the latter. Here is the poem:

Ah to be alive  
on a mid-September morn  
fording a stream  
barefoot, pants rolled up,  
holding boots, pack on,  
sunshine, ice in the shallows,  
northern rockies.

Rustle and shimmer of icy creek waters  
stones turn underfoot, small and hard as toes  
cold nose dripping  
singing inside  
creek music, heart music,  
smell of sun on gravel.

I pledge allegiance

I pledge allegiance to the soil  
of Turtle Island,  
and to the beings who thereon dwell  
one ecosystem  
in diversity  
under the sun

With joyful interpenetration for all. (*Axe Handles* 113-114)

Like “Amitabha’s vow,” “For All” is two poems in one: free verse and formal liturgy. But whereas “Amitabha’s vow” alternates between these two styles, “For All” places one after the other, as if two poems simply appear in sequence under one title. The first part is the cause, and the second is the effect. The speaker feels the joy of nature in the first section, and is inspired to make a declaration in the second section. The first section is the immediate experience, and the second is the declaration that these experiences inspire. The two sections of “For All” are, respectively, the “showing” of poetic imagery and the “telling” of propositional oaths. They are two sides of the same coin, the same experience. The two sections of the poem, while they seem separate, have the same “interpenetration” the poem ends with. This interpenetration has an important Buddhist meaning.

Unpacking the Buddhist resonances in “For All” fills a gap in existing scholarship on this poem. Tim Dean’s close reading shows how “For All” substitutes native, land-based terms such as “Turtle Island” for European legal constructions such as “the United States of America.” This strategy seeks to replace “the dominant myth of the United States” with “a more intimate relation to the land” (Dean 6). While Dean’s reading is persuasive, he misses the poem’s Buddhist content. For instance, Dean interprets Snyder’s use of the word “interpenetration” solely through antecedents in British Romanticism (8). While these connections are important, the word also has an important Buddhist context.

“Interpenetration,” and the related term “interdependence,” have become Western shorthands for the Buddhist doctrine of *pratitya-samutpada*, or “dependent co-arising” (McMahan, *Making* 149-153). The “interpenetration” in “For All” harkens back to the

“interdependence” in Snyder’s 1969 essay “Buddhism and the Possibility of a Planetary Culture” (41-43), in which Snyder argues for the need to respect the environment based on this teaching. This teaching examines how nothing stands by itself, concluding that nothing has an inherent nature independent of its constitutive factors. For example, a plant is dependent on the seed, soil, sun, and rain for its existence. Buddhism teaches that those who realize this truth will no longer see phenomena as solidly existing, and will thus experience blissful liberation from craving. Therefore, the last line of “For all,” “With joyful interpenetration for all,” is a wish for all beings to experience the joyful awareness of interdependence.

This point helps us understand “For All” as a uniquely American Bodhisattva Vow. The sentiment in “For All” is similar to a famous Tibetan prayer that Snyder would have known: “As long as the sky exists / And as long as there are sentient beings, / May I remain to help / Relieve them of all their pain” (Gyatso, *Practice* 82). This universal goodwill is the poem’s basic motivation. By pledging allegiance to all “the beings” of Turtle Island, the speaker expresses not only the wish for their happiness, but the determination to work for it. As others have noted, Snyder is an American poet in terms of his commitment to its land (Park 59-60). But “For All” is also an American poem in its revision of an American pledge. Although “For All” changes the emphasis in the Pledge of Allegiance, the poem retains an American sense of being a community founded on documents and declarations, “for the sake of an idea” (Obama).

Appropriately, “For All” is the last poem in the collection *Axe Handles*. It gives strong closure to the collection. It looks back on the whole book, whose poems are extremely wide-ranging, even for a Snyder collection. The book contains disparate

reflections on politics and personal matters, nature and technology, Asia and America, past and present. The fact that this collection ends with a nod to a key creed of the U.S. is significant and underappreciated. Snyder thus positions the ecological strivings of *Axe Handles* as a continuation of the American experiment.

By ending with a gesture of continuity rather than revolution, “For All” distills a larger shift in Snyder’s writing. Earlier texts such as “Amitabha’s Vow” and “Smokey the Bear Sutra” transmit the raucous energy of countercultural movements. These texts capture the mood of Beat Zen, which defined itself against an American mainstream it sought to subvert. From the mid-1970s onward, however, Snyder’s writing shifts from revolution to holism, while retaining his basic commitments to spirituality and environmentalism.

Snyder’s evolution, as well as the ambiguous place of Beat Buddhist literature in American cultural memory, gains further illumination by reading his 1990 essay “The Etiquette of Freedom.” In this text, Snyder sets out to “investigate the meaning of *wild* and how it connects with *free* and what one would want to do with these meanings” (5). He observes that “Wild and free” is “An American dream-phrase” that, although it inspires images of “a long-maned stallion racing across the grasslands,” it “also sounds like an ad for a Harley-Davidson. Both words, profoundly political and sensitive as they are, have become consumer baubles” (5). He notes that “the idea of ‘wild’ in civilized societies—both European and Asian—is often associated with unruliness, disorder, and violence” (5). Against such aspersions, Snyder recuperates the term “wild” by defining it positively rather than negatively. He criticizes dictionary definitions of the word as “dissolute,” “artless,” and “destructive.” He proposes instead that that which is wild is

“free,” “flourishing,” and “spontaneous” (9-10). He attributes these positive definitions to Buddhist and Daoist sources (10).

Having laid this groundwork, Snyder asks, “Where do we start to resolve the dichotomy of the civilized and the wild?” (15). He does this by defining the wild as a type of order, a counterintuitive move that nevertheless makes sense within Snyder’s body of work. In his straw-man definition, a wild society is “uncivilized, rude, resisting constituted government.” In his favored definition, a wild society is one “whose order has grown from within and is maintained by the force of consensus and custom rather than explicit legislation” (10). Here, “wild” and “order” are complementary. In sum, Snyder asserts that “To speak of wildness is to speak of wholeness” (12). The wild is not brute savagery, but a healthy balance, a self-regulating system.

In addition to promoting ecology, Snyder’s discussion implicitly reflects on his entire career. In his early period of *Riprap* and *Myths and Texts*, Snyder’s writing is arguably “wild” in its exuberance. This energy is what Alan Watts criticizes as “Beat Zen.” Snyder’s later definition of the wild does not contradict his early Beat enthusiasm, but recontextualizes it. The exuberance and irreverence in “Amitabha’s vow” and “Smokey the Bear Sutra” have faded, and are tempered with calm. In his 1960 address “Notes on the Beat Generation,” Snyder speaks approvingly of Beat “revolution” (11). In 1990, Snyder writes instead of “The Etiquette of Freedom.” Snyder’s terms of choice change from subversion to politeness. A young Snyder fondly called Han Shan “a mountain madman” (*Riprap* 33). But the Snyder of the 1990s and beyond would surely not use “madman” as a term of praise. By defining the wild through holism rather than subversion, Snyder takes the craziness out of crazy wisdom. Snyder’s ongoing

adaptations of American Buddhism speak to the mood of his times, while always retaining the spiritual imperative to defy oppressive forces and honor the natural world.

The work of Kerouac in the fifties, Robbins in the seventies, and Snyder up to 1990 shows that Beat Zen has outlived the Beat moment. These three writers were instrumental in a cultural breakthrough: they raised Buddhism's profile by linking it with a counterculture whose public recognition surpassed its strength in raw numbers. American perceptions of Buddhism, and other Asian religions, would never be the same. Beat writers harnessed exoticism and subverted it at the same time. The issues Kerouac, Robbins, and Snyder wrestled with—Asian religions' relevance to a politics of dissent, the ethics of borrowing across cultures, and the compatibility of Buddhist liberation with American freedom—have set the stage for succeeding engagements with Asian religions. As I will show, these themes continue to evolve in postmodern, African American, and Asian American writing.

## Chapter 2: Secret Arts and Paranoia: Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo

Snyder ends “The Etiquette of Freedom” with a festive call to “get loose and really wild.” He writes, “that’s the final meaning of the ‘wild’—the esoteric meaning, the deepest and most scary. Those who are ready for it will come to it. Please do not repeat this to the uninitiated” (24). Snyder’s admonition to keep the “esoteric meaning” hidden from the “uninitiated” alludes to systems of secrecy in Asian religions (Coleman 104). But Snyder’s professed esotericism is playful. His message is not “scary,” but life-affirming. And it is not “esoteric,” because anyone could read his essay. Snyder’s Beat mischievousness allows him to treat religious secrecy with a light touch.

Without the spiritual fervor of the Beat movement, contemplations of secrecy are liable to take a darker turn. Such is the case for Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo. Whereas most of the writers in this study claim strong affinities with Asian religions, Pynchon and DeLillo are skeptics. Their ambivalent interest in Asian religion leads them to highlight its secretive elements, casting light on a broader tendency in postwar American political thought: paranoia. What is at stake for Pynchon and DeLillo is the ability to diagnose governmental misconduct with clarity and courage, not paranoia. In Pynchon’s *Vineland* (1990) and DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), this project depends on creative portrayals of secrecy in Asian religions.

Previous criticism has largely discussed Pynchon and DeLillo under the rubric of “postmodernism” (Coale, McClure, Savvas). I acknowledge the usefulness of postmodernism to indicate a range of themes, such as consumer capitalism and existential

doubt (Jameson xii, McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 10); and styles, such as pastiche and fragmentation (Jameson 16-18, Richardson ix). The fiction of Pynchon and DeLillo embodies these characteristics and is therefore postmodern. However, following Hungerford, my readings of Pynchon and DeLillo do not center on postmodernism as a theoretical concept (xvi). Rather, I treat Pynchon and DeLillo more specifically as novelists of paranoia, and I explore how both authors suggest that paranoia can be mediated through—rather than intensified by—secretive elements of Asian religions.

Existing scholarship agrees on many of paranoia's defining characteristics, such as a sense of persecution by a sinister enemy (Hofstadter 29-31) and suspicion as a default attitude (Sedgwick 124-125). However, critics disagree on paranoia's merits (Knight, "Paradigms" 651). Depending on who one reads, paranoia is either tendentious scapegoating (Coale, Hofstadter, Pipes) or a justified response to actual conspiracies (Knight, *Culture*; Rushing). Both of these perspectives presuppose that paranoia *would* be the appropriate response to widespread conspiracies. Through their explorations of Asian religious secrecy, Pynchon and DeLillo unsettle this premise. Their novels suggest that even in the face of actual conspiracies, paranoia is not inevitable. Other, more empowered options are available, alternatives that take shape in both authors' treatments of religious secrets from the East.

By refracting paranoia through the secrecy of Asian religions, Pynchon and DeLillo make a previously unacknowledged contribution to discussions of American paranoia. I agree with existing scholarship that Pynchon and DeLillo diagnose the pervasiveness of paranoia (Allen, Apter, Hutchinson, Ostrowski), but their treatment of Asian religions builds specific responses to paranoia that critics have missed.

Noteworthy parallels between Asian religious secrecy and American governmental secrecy figure in Pynchon and DeLillo's treatment. The government has frequently invoked secrecy to protect citizens' security, and most people now think of governmental secrecy as the norm (Knight, *Culture* 28-32). Secrecy also plays an important role in many Asian religions. In many sects tied to both Buddhism and Hinduism students may only practice certain meditations after receiving a formal initiation from a qualified master, and they may not reveal the practice to those who have not received the initiation. Secrecy is standard protocol for the Self-Realization Fellowship, Transcendental Meditation, Siddha Yoga, and all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Williamson 162-163, Coleman 104). In his discussion of Tibetan Buddhism, James Coleman subtly captures the resulting mistrust: “[a]side from [its] complexity, the casual student is soon confronted by another unique barrier—secrecy” (104). The word “unique” marks secrecy as an exception to the American norm of transparency. Americans are not supposed to like secrecy: what does the secret-keeper have to hide?

Longstanding secret activities have accordingly been objects of disturbing revelations. In the 1960s and 1970s, many damning exposures shattered governmental credibility, including atrocities in Vietnam, the Watergate break-in, illegal domestic spying, and numerous other instances of misconduct (Bernstein and Woodward, Ellsberg). Concerning various massacres in Vietnam, soldiers' defense that they were just “following official orders” cast further suspicion on secretive authority (Turse 89). In the 1980s, scandals also arose to cast suspicion on Asian religions. A series of scandals broke involving sexual misconduct by Buddhist and Hindu teachers (Coleman 139, Goldberg 210-218, Seager 185-187, Williamson 115-118). Critics faulted

institutional secrecy as a cover for abuses of power (Seager 186, Williamson 266). The “guru-based Asian religions” were easy targets for labeling as cults; their emphasis on guru-devotion provoked criticisms of fanaticism and brainwashing (McCloud 98). In a political context that increasingly values “transparency” (West and Sanders 1), inherently secretive institutions struggle to gain mainstream legitimacy. While I do not mean to ignore the varied scale and severity of the above misdeeds, my point is that American people have mistrusted both their government and Asian religions for comparable reasons.

These events have contributed to what Pynchon and DeLillo portray as a reflexive jump from observing secrecy to feeling paranoia. The very existence of secrecy fuels paranoid suspicions of conspiracy. Against this tendency, Pynchon and DeLillo seek to distinguish secrecy from villainy, thereby breaking up paranoia’s totalizing logic. The complex plots of *Vineland* and *Underworld* suggest that secrecy is necessary but not sufficient for sinister conspiracy, a logical distinction that paranoid thinkers fail to make. In a social context where secrecy engenders paranoia, Pynchon and DeLillo highlight Asian religions’ hidden aspects. But *Vineland* and *Underworld* portray Asian religions with a spiritually productive secrecy that contrasts from the sinister secrecy of governmental entities.

Buddhism’s and Hinduism’s foreign origins, combined with their traditions of secrecy, have long made them targets for American mistrust. Pynchon and DeLillo emphasize this secrecy, and seek to dispel the mysteriousness surrounding it. In *Vineland*, Pynchon’s ninjutsu depends on secret transmission. Practitioners of this art do not react to government oppression with paranoia; instead, they courageously resist it.

*Vineland*'s positive portrayal of Japanese culture also counteracts 1980s paranoia against Japan's economic rise. Whereas Asian arts empower *Vineland*'s characters, in *Underworld*, obscure Asian mantras inspire fear. But DeLillo undermines American suspicion toward Asian religion by suggesting its hidden kinship with Catholicism. The novel pairs Western and Eastern chants in a series of uncanny moments, inviting the reader to make connections its characters refuse to face. The act of reading *Underworld* thus becomes an esoteric initiation in its own right. By showing Asian religions on both sides of American paranoia—as its antidote and its object—Pynchon and DeLillo demystify Asian religions while also questioning their central tenets. This move in turn opens up the possibility of viewing secrecy without paranoia.

### The Trouble with Transcendence in Vineland

There is a considerable body of criticism about religion in Pynchon's fiction. Scholars agree that religiously themed journeys, however comic, are prominent in his novels, although the degree of spiritual attainment Pynchon's characters achieve is a matter of dispute (Eddins; Kohn, "Seven Buddhist Themes"; Molloy). *Vineland* is no exception (Cowart, McClure, Porush). What I focus on, which previous treatments do not, is how *Vineland* frames countercultural responses to frightening conspiracies through Asian religion. My reading also illuminates the spiritual side of *Vineland*'s Japan, which critics have mentioned but have yet to explore (Carroll 257, Caesar and Aso, McClure 51).

*Vineland* shows three different ways that Asian religions address paranoia, only the last of which appears in a favorable light. First, 1960s radicals use Asian religious transcendence to express their belief that a new, enlightened society will soon overtake an

old, corrupt system. This utopian attitude overpowers fear against an oppressive government with naïve optimism that a beneficent revolution is immanent. But this approach fails when the counterculture fades after the 1960s. A second approach to Asian religions is commercial, assimilating the debts and credits of Buddhist karma to the accelerating global consumer capitalism of the 1980s. This complacent approach precludes paranoia by becoming a part of a system that one might otherwise fear. But it can only do so by avoiding a critical reflection on capitalism.

The third way Asian religions deal with paranoia is through secrecy of their own. By adapting the secret arts of Buddhist ninjutsu to the needs of urban bohemians, select characters benefit from a positive secrecy that acts as a refuge from dark governmental secrecy. Pynchon's innovative ninjutsu illustrates that secrecy is not always sinister, thus fracturing paranoia's tendency to suspect everything. This esoteric sect also dispels 1980s paranoia against Japan by making a Japanese tradition a tool of empowerment for the novel's downtrodden protagonists. By reflecting on an array of relationships between Asian religions and paranoia, *Vineland* fashions an insightful countercultural history of Asian religions in the U.S.

*Vineland* describes 1960s radical activity in religious terms, and the cynicism its aging members feel during the Reagan 1980s registers as a loss of faith. In the novel, a group of California college students (circa 1969) declares that their campus is an independent country. They name it "The People's Republic of Rock and Roll," which Pynchon playfully abbreviates as "PR<sup>3</sup>" (209). Witnesses "could feel the liberation in the place that night, the faith that anything was possible, that nothing could stand in the way of such joyous certainty" (210). These absolutes—"anything," "nothing," "certainty"—

express a religious sense of ultimate concern (P. Tillich, *Dynamics* 1). The ultimate concern of these student activists is the creation of new polities that are free from the power hierarchies of the United States.

The faith surrounding PR<sup>3</sup> quickly erodes. Frenesi Gates, who videotapes and participates in PR<sup>3</sup>'s secession, betrays the movement by sleeping with federal agent Brock Vond. He pressures her into spreading rumors that PR<sup>3</sup>'s leader, Weed Atman, is a double-agent. Frenesi feels powerless against Brock's charisma. Rather than resist him, she can only cling to an ill-founded faith that she already knows is receding:

[I]t could've been about the only way she knew to use the word *love* anymore, its trivializing days already well begun, its magic fading, the subject of all that rock and roll, the simple resource we once thought would save us. Yet if there was anything left to believe, she must have in the power even of that weightless, daylit commodity of the sixties to redeem even Brock, amiably, stupidly brutal, fascist Brock. (Pynchon 216-217, emphasis in original)

Frenesi's defiant but naïve hope speaks through the verbs "save," "believe," and "redeem," which echo Christianity. But "*love*," this redemptive "daylit commodity of the sixties," has lost its "magic." Frenesi should know better than to obey "fascist Brock" for the sake of "*love*." She blames her betrayal on an irresistible tide of disillusionment, rather than understanding choices like hers as the *cause* of such disillusionment. Her private mixture of nostalgia and despair encapsulates what will become widespread jadedness about 1960s radicalism.

Frenesi's experiences frame the appeal of radical politics in terms of religious faith, but also more specifically in terms of Asian mysticism. In the aftermath of PR<sup>3</sup>'s

bust, the narrator reflects, “in those days it was possible to believe in acid, or the immanence of revolution, or the disciplines, passive and active, of the East” (251). The transcendence these spiritual paths offer match the “liberation” and “joyous certainty” of 1960s radical movements (210). Both kinds of unlimited hope, the novel suggests, are unrealistic. The distance conveyed in the phrase “in those days” implies that such belief is no longer possible in 1984, the year of the novel’s present, or 1990, the year of its publication. For Frenesi, and presumably many others, the Watergate scandal “ended the gilded age” of the 1960s when sweeping political change seemed possible (72). During the Reagan 1980s, characters further resign themselves as “the Repression went on” (72). Looking back from the 1980s, as the ascent of the new Right brings steep cuts in social spending, the countercultural aspirations of the 1960s seem more distant than ever.

While never losing its sympathy with radical politics, *Vineland* critiques countercultural engagements with Asian religions. Many of the novel’s characters have sincere enthusiasm for Buddhism and Hinduism, but their superficial appropriations of them are a form of escapism. Pynchon’s talent for inventing humorous names highlights this satire. For instance, the leader of PR<sup>3</sup> is named “Weed Atman.” He embodies radicals’ convergent interest in marijuana and in Asian religions, as “Atman” is the Sanskrit word for the soul in Hinduism (Cowart 99-100). Furthermore, Weed observes that people believe in him with reckless devotion, which he mentally paraphrases: “‘Yes, my guru! Anything—chicks, dope, jump off the cliff, you name it!’” (Pynchon 229). The worship surrounding Weed suggests that 1960s radicals often mistook fervor for insight, and parodies the radical guru-devotion that swept many followers of Hindu-inspired meditation movements during the 1960s (Williamson 222).

Similar utopian impulses come across in major characters in the novel. Zoyd Wheeler, an aging hippie in the 1980s, has a caricatured view of Japanese spirituality that comes from American media. He “had watched television shows about Japan, showing places such as Tokyo where people got into incredibly crowded situations but, because over the course of history they’d learned to act civil, everybody got along fine despite the congestion” (9). Zoyd assumes that his friend Van Meter, a “lifetime searcher for meaning,” would have learned this “Japanese-style serenity” simply by having been a 1960s radical (9). Zoyd is predictably disappointed when the commune Van has moved into is filled with bickering (9).

Many of Zoyd’s fellow townspeople also share this naïveté. Early on in the novel, Zoyd finds himself in a crowd outside a restaurant called the Bodhi Dharma Pizza Temple (45). There, he observes a demonstration against government helicopters searching for marijuana fields. The gathering exhibits an outmoded belief in both “the immanence of revolution...[and] the disciplines...of the East” (251):

All the occupants of the place were chanting, something that, with vibes of trouble to come, he recognized--not the words, which were Tibetan, but the tune, with its bone-stirring bass, to a powerful and secret spell against invaders and oppressors, heard in particular a bit later in the year at harvest time, when CAMP helicopters gathered in the sky and North California, like other U.S. pot-growing areas, one again rejoined, operationally speaking, the third world. (49)

In this description, the protestors irresponsibly juxtapose serious and frivolous subjects. The novel’s portrayal of Vineland County gives little indication that the protestors are living in the desperation characteristic of “the third world.” In addition, the seriousness

of Tibetan ritual chanting, and the allusion to the Chinese “invaders and oppressors” who brutally conquered Tibet in 1959, contrasts starkly from the protestors, who appropriate this tradition in a pleasure-seeking attempt to protect their access to marijuana. The tone of the passage suggests that the protestors’ grandiose, self-declared connection to “the third world” is exaggerated. In addition, the restaurant’s name further satirizes casual invocations of the sacred. Calling a restaurant “Bodhi Dharma Pizza Temple”—and making a poor product that tastes like “a cough remedy (45)” —serves to imbue products with signs of virtue rather than to teach Buddhist nonattachment.

Although Pynchon satirizes American adaptations of Asian arts, the idea of a pure Asian original corrupted by American consumerism is Orientalist. Indeed, Pynchon’s fiction undermines all searches for pure originals. Peter Berger asserts that, for *Vineland*’s characters, “purity is never in fact an option” (15). Also, McClure interprets Inoshiro Sensei’s “shady” pedagogy as a continuation of Japanese martial arts’ historical development, which was “from its start unaristocratic, impure, and opportunistic” (51). But while *Vineland* renounces any recovery of a “pure” Japanese art, that does not mean such purity does not exist. In fact, *Vineland* acknowledges a pure Japanese spirituality, but it is beyond the reach of its characters.

Ninjutsu heretic Inoshiro Sensei contrasts this lofty realm from the hard reality of his tutelage. The martial arts he teaches are “for all the rest of us down here with the insects, the ones who don’t quite get to make warrior” (Pynchon 127). Presumably, those who do “make warrior” have more exalted options. They are the ones that his student, DL Chastain, imagines in clichéd tales of Japanese apprenticeships “someplace scenic up in the mountains” (123). In contrast to this elevated vision, her own tutelage takes place

“down here in the ensnarling city” (123). Here, Japanese scenery represents an unreachable transcendence. Inoshiro Sensei speculates that DL’s view comes from ““seeing too many movies”” (127), but he does not deny the “original purity of ninja intent” that DL thinks Inoshiro Sensei has corrupted (126-127). Inoshiro justifies his own deviations from it as acts of solidarity with “drunks, and sneaks,” whom he identifies with and wishes to empower with “our equalizer, our edge” (127).

Pristine, unavailable Japanese Zen distills a craving for transcendence that various characters express throughout the novel (112, 180, 223). However, the word “transcendence” is unstable, suggesting that “transcendence” is an incoherent concept whose pursuit is misguided. In a crucial example, Frenesi’s own thoughts about transcendence join spiritual naïveté with political utopianism. Frenesi, who spends much of the 1960s filming the radical movements she participates in, reflects on her visions within these movements:

Frenesi dreamed of a mysterious people’s oneness, drawing together toward the best chances of light, achieved once or twice that she’d seen in the street, in short, timeless bursts, all paths, human and projectile, true, the people in a single presence, the police likewise simple as a moving blade—and individuals who in meetings might only bore or be pains in the ass here suddenly being seen to transcend, almost beyond will to move smoothly between baton and victim to take the blow instead, to lie down on the tracks as the iron rolled in or look into the gun muzzle and maintain the power of speech—there was no telling, in those days, who might unexpectedly change this way, or when. Some were in it, in fact, secretly for the possibilities of finding just such moments (117-118).

Frenesi frames political protest in the language of spontaneous Zen enlightenment, in which immense spiritual realizations occur with no apparent buildup at unpredictable moments (Cheng 595-600). One goes “almost beyond will” toward a change that occurs “unexpectedly.” The protesters mystically overcome their flaws and disagreements, merging into “a single presence.” These descriptions of transcending shortcomings, and even selfhood itself, parallel the Zen principles stated in the influential nonfiction *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Just as the protesters merge into “a single presence,” D.T. Suzuki writes in his introduction to this volume that the Zen archer “becomes one with the perfecting of his technical skill” (10). And just as Frenesi’s transcendent activist faces police brutality without fear, the Japanese swordsman is totally “released from the thought of death” (Herrigel 108).

However, Frenesi’s transcendence has fault lines. Whereas Zen teaches the overcoming of all divisions whatsoever (Suzuki, *Essays* 73-74), for Frenesi, the division between “the people” and the authorities who wield “the gun” remains. Also, Frenesi’s grammar makes “transcend” a conspicuously empty signifier. As a transitive verb, one is supposed to say what is being transcended; intransitive uses of the word are rare or obsolete (OED, “transcend”). But Frenesi uses the word intransitively, asserting that the protesters simply “transcend” without stating over what. Throughout this passage, words such as “oneness,” “true,” “single presence,” and “transcend” all convey Frenesi’s religious fervor. But the vagueness of Frenesi’s diction is a facet of her revolutionary optimism that subsequent events destroy. All these apparent abuses of “transcendence,” the novel suggests, are not merely correctible sloppiness, but markers of a contradiction in the very idea of transcendence.

*Vineland*'s critique encompasses not only American adaptations of Asian religions, but Asian religions themselves. Pynchon is especially skeptical about transcendence as emphasized by monastic elites, who focus on textual scholarship and philosophical doctrine (Cheah 22-26; McMahan, *Making* 5). Buddhism and Hinduism consistently teach mediation as a path to supreme happiness irrespective of material conditions (Iyer 19, Seager 13), but for Pynchon, this goal is a mystifying distraction from meaningful engagements with the gritty world. In the 1980s, the hopes that the counterculture had expressed through Asian religious have fully receded. This situation leaves one no choice, according to one aging radical, except to "be extra paranoid" toward unchecked governmental oppression (262).

### *Capitalism, Karma, and Complacency*

If *Vineland* satirizes utopianism as an unsustainable answer to paranoia, it also criticizes the opposite extreme of complacency. According to Peter Knight, *Vineland* captures a broadening Left paranoia toward an increasingly global capitalism (*Culture* 74). But the novel also shows cooperating with capitalism as a way of avoiding paranoia. One need not fear the system if one is a compliant part of it. In *Vineland*, this strategy takes on a Buddhist form, coopting many of the same Eastern traditions that also fueled anti-corporate radicalism. Moreover, in addition to portraying reactions to capitalism in general, *Vineland* deals with a specific facet of capitalism in the 1980s: the rapid economic rise of Japan. Business and Buddhism come together in the figure of Takeshi Fumimota. His enterprise in "karmic adjustment" parodies economic paranoia against Japan, but simultaneously suggests the limits of capitulation to capitalism in combatting paranoia.

Takeshi's role in *Vineland* speaks to larger developments in Japan's global economic strength, and correspondent shifts in American attitudes toward Japan. During the "Zen boom" of the 1950s, and the continued growth of interest in Japanese religion and culture during the 1960s, American interest in Japanese culture expanded greatly (Seager 40-41; Fields 196, 221). American interest in Japan grew in tandem with Japan's post-war economic recovery, which was fueled by increased trade with the U.S. But this dynamic led to diplomatic problems. In 1965, America's trade balance with Japan shifted, and Japan has run a trade surplus with the U.S. ever since (Lutz). Tension grew between skyrocketing demand for Japanese imports and anxieties about Japanese competition. American business fears escalated in the 1970s, intensified in the 1980s, and peaked in the early 1990s (Lutz). As one journalist puts it, in the 1980s, "the Japanese high-technology assault on the American computer and semiconductor industries seemed scary" (Lohr). This concern fueled trade disputes over tariffs, market access, and currency exchanges (Lutz). These trade disputes soured American attitudes toward Japan (S. Johnson ix-x), and American writers often portrayed Japan's economic rise as a sinister return of WWII aggression (Cobb 87-88, S. Johnson 119). Even Zen became implicated. Many Americans came to believe that Japan's business success arose from Zen principles of mindfulness, a notion that R. John Williams says has some basis in fact (45-46). While Japanese competition created real pressures on U.S. businesses, 1980s American writing on Japan frequently took on a paranoid tone.

While Japanese business inspired fear, Japanese culture was appropriated for American consumers. For instance, Asian martial arts were mass-marketed for American entertainment in the 1970s and 1980s. Noteworthy examples of this phenomenon include

the film *The Karate Kid* (1984), the bestselling ninja novels of Eric Van Lustbader (1980, 1984), and the comic books, cartoons, and films about the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1984-present). In fairness to these productions, they tend to portray Asian martial arts as promoting courage, discipline, and non-aggression. However, they also rely on Orientalist stereotypes, and they retain American cinema's tendency to celebrate violence.

*Vineland* registers this American mixture of fear and fascination. A fictional Japanese TV show is “currently and inexplicably blowing away all its U.S. ratings competition” (159). Elsewhere, Zoyd notes “the Japanese buying up unprocessed logs as fast as the forests could be clear-cut” (5), a reference to exaggerated 1980s fears of “Japan ‘buying up’ the U.S.” (Schuman). But Zoyd also believes in what he calls “Japanese-style serenity” (Pynchon 9). His contradictory impressions of Japan represent widely held generalizations that *Vineland* challenges.

While *Vineland* contains various references to Japan, Takeshi’s status as the novel’s foremost Japanese character makes him especially important to analyze. His freelance business in “karmic adjustment” links karma with the language of insurance (172). The novel thus irreverently connects Japan’s mystical past with its contemporary economic rise. Takeshi is a likable character who jokes in the face of danger (164-165), urges DL to “[l]ighten up!” (176), and shows gratitude to those who help him (66-67). But he remains oblivious to the political struggles of the novel’s other characters, content to work within economic globalization. His clients are Thanatoids, ghosts whose unresolved karma from such grievances as “unanswered blows, unredeemed suffering, escapes by the guilty” block their smooth passage into their next rebirth (173). They are

stuck in an uneasy in-between state that the narrator likens to the *bardo* of Tibetan Buddhism (218). Takeshi offers to resolve their karmic imbalances for them—for a price.

DL, whose ninja order sentences her to work with Takeshi as penance for her accidental death touch, is skeptical of his business. She objects, “[i]t ain’t a-zackly Tokyo here, you know, you can’t just go free-lancin’ in “karmic adjustment,” whatever that is—nobody’ll pay for it” (172). DL assumes that Takeshi could only sell karmic adjustment in locales like Tokyo where belief in karma is presumably widespread. But she is wrong: Takeshi has steady work from the Thanatoids of Vineland County, and he and DL travel all over the world to pursue karmic leads (381). By portraying Thanatoid communities as widespread, Pynchon surprisingly uses a supernatural premise to de-exoticize Japanese and Asian thought more broadly. *Vineland’s* treatment of the Thanatoid realm recasts traditionally religious issues in stoutly secular terms, while still working within a religiously inspired cosmology.

In this way, Takeshi demystifies Japan. He belies the stereotype of the austere workaholic Japanese businessman in films like *Gung Ho* (1986). He is opportunistic, but not sinister. He performs a service that his customers value, with no social or environmental side effects. He is neither an aloof Zen master nor a single-minded business warrior. Thus, Takeshi pushes against the paranoia of 1980s American responses to Japanese business success. The spiritual plight of the Thanatoids, described with great pathos in the *Bardo Thodol*, becomes a matter of mundane exchange in Takeshi’s hands. But at the same time, his Japanese identity gives him a privileged point of access to the Thanatoid world. By uniting echoes of Eastern ethereality and Japanese

business opportunism in one character, Takeshi undercuts both of these caricatures. The stereotypes of Zen serenity and business ruthlessness are contradictory, and when referenced in the same character, they cancel each other out.

Takeshi further secularizes Asian religion by discussing karma in terms of modern finance and technology, blending venerable spiritual traditions with recent innovations. For instance, Takeshi admonishes an impatient Thanatoid by saying that the growth of computer databases is delaying karmic adjustment. Exasperated, he explains, “The amount of memory on a chip doubles every year and a half! The state of the art will only allow this to move so fast!” In traditional karmic adjustment, he went on, sometimes it had taken centuries. Death was the driving pulse—everything had moved as slowly as the cycles of birth and death, but this proved too slow for enough people to begin, eventually, to provide a market niche. There arose a system of deferment, of borrowing against karmic futures. Death, in Modern Karmic Adjustment, got removed from the process. (174-175)

In this analysis, karma is not morally significant, but merely a financial calculation of “borrowing against karmic futures.” Also, computer technology’s affect on karmic adjustment is the opposite of what one would expect. Presumably, computers’ ability to perform calculations increasingly rapidly would accelerate karmic adjustment. But computing also makes the task more complicated by bringing increasing amounts of data through which to sift. Answering the charge that the process takes too long, Takeshi lowers expectations by retorting that it used to be even slower. He is vague about when, where, and by whom “traditional karmic adjustment” took place. But his message

remains that the growing karmic credit economy has circumvented “Death.” This dynamic evokes a larger critique that capitalism has “trivialized the big D itself” (218).

Takeshi thinks that a key contributor to this trivialization is television, an American obsession that, in the 1980s, increasingly relied on imported Japanese hardware. The Thanatoids are compulsive screen watchers (170-171), a fact Takeshi believes worsens their plight:

We are assured by the *Bardo Thodol*, or Tibetan Book of the Dead, that the soul newly in transition often doesn’t like to admit—indeed will deny quite vehemently—that it’s really dead, having slipped so effortlessly into the new dispensation that it finds no difference between the weirdness of life and the weirdness of death, and enhancing factor in Takeshi’s opinion being television, which with its history of picking away at the topic with doctor shows, war shows, cop shows, murder shows, had trivialized the big D itself. If mediated lives, he figured, why not mediated deaths? (218)

In Takeshi’s analysis, television pretends to bring death under control. Death is not a stark reality one must confront but an innocuous plot device in transient episodes. Thus, modern media exaggerates the Buddhist *bardo*’s already disorienting affect on the deceased. Takeshi’s diagnosis speaks to the novel’s larger theme of mediation. As Brian McHale shows, *Vineland* highlights television’s vitiating effects on human life, such as encouraging sloth and conditioning its viewers to repeat stock phrases (*Constructing Postmodernism* 115-118).

The novel’s treatment of television speaks to the larger problem of mediation in a consumer society that a number of theorists have made famous: image saturation means

that there are no direct experiences, only mediations by corporate interests (Baudrillard; Jameson; McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*). *Vineland*'s treatment of television bears important affinities to Buddhist critiques of mediation as well. Just as *Vineland* points to mass media's disorienting effects, Buddhism teaches that the mediations of one's own karma and disturbing emotions are fundamental causes of suffering (McMahan, *Making* 197-198; Suzuki, *Essays* 73-74). But Buddhist thought seeks to describe universal conditions of existence, whereas *Vineland* focuses on how mediation works in a particular moment. Even so, these critiques of mediation are similar enough that philosopher Carl Olson has called Zen and critical theory "two paths of liberation from the representational mode of thinking" (Olson, front cover). The fact that Pynchon places the screen-fixated Thanatoids in an Asian religious system further reinforces this connection.

But whereas Buddhism teaches the transcendence of mediation through nirvana, no such solution is in sight in *Vineland*. For Takeshi, karma and rebirth are not constraints to be overcome, but the immutable conditions under which business takes place. Even successful clients could just as well become Thanatoids again after their next life. Takeshi's willingness to adapt rather than challenge existing systems capitulates to consumerism. Furthermore, the novel does not actually show what Takeshi and DL do to adjust their clients' karma, or how much their services help their Thanatoid clients. Therefore, the benefits of karmic adjustment remain unclear. Takeshi counteracts American paranoia against Japanese business, but he does not have an answer for the underlying discomfort with capitalism suggested by his own discussion of television.

Through secretive ninjutsu, the novel imagines a third option that avoids the extremes of wishful transcendence and uninspired hucksterism.

#### Ninjutsu: Fighting Secrecy with Secrecy

*Vineland* suggests that Japanese business is a much less worthwhile object of American fear than the American government itself. To cite just a few interrelated examples: federal agent Brock Vond, the novel's main villain, manipulates Frenesi into a betrayal that kills Weed Atman and brings down the People's Republic of Rock and Roll. After Frenesi goes into hiding, the government recurrently checks on Zoyd to make sure he stays out of touch with her. Years later, a renegade narcotics agent, not content to leave well enough alone, plants a ceiling-high column of marijuana in Zoyd's home. These acts of subterfuge train the novel's radical characters—except DL, whose ninjutsu trains her to confront, and not fear, her enemies—to become “paranoid” (Pynchon 117, 207, 262). Their paranoia is not false fear: the government really is working against them. *Vineland*'s plot speaks to tactics the government actually used against suspected radicals during the 1950s and 1960s, including secret surveillance, infiltration, blackmail, evidence tampering, and raids (Donner, Schultz). Accordingly, in *Vineland*, no one knows when a raid will come, or which friend might have been pressured into betraying a radical cause.

The terror of governmental secrets comes across vividly during a family reunion between the Beckers and Traverses, two families with substantial ties to union politics, anarchist movements, and other progressive or radical groups. Those in attendance variously discuss

Hitler, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Nixon, Hoover, Mafia, CIA, Regan, Kissinger, that collection of names and their tragic interweaving that stood not constellated above in any nightwide remoteness of light, but below, diminished to the last unfaceable American secret, to be pressed, each time deeper, again and again beneath the meanest of random soles, one blackly fermenting leaf on the forest floor that nobody wanted to turn over, because of all that lived, virulent, waiting, just beneath. (Pynchon 372)

The implied speakers engage in the paranoid tendency to attribute diverse events to a single sinister cause (Apter 366). Through a “tragic interweaving,” the plurality of “that collection of names” boils down to the singularity of “the last unfaceable American secret.” This passage also displays the paranoid reflex of seeing signs of conspiracy everywhere (Sedgwick 130-131), even “beneath the meanest of random soles.” Those conversing are unwilling to expose the secret, staying within a broad implication that political leaders are covertly working against their citizens. Scholars such as Frank J. Donner, Bud and Ruth Schultz, and others have documented many governmental anti-radical operations during the 1960s, making the vagueness of the Becker-Traverse conversation unnecessary. But that is the point: the picnickers do not mystify the “secret” for lack of data. They do so because the secret itself is so “virulent” that facing it would be unbearable. Here, secrecy and paranoia are inseparable: secrecy allows conspiratorial forces to evade accountability, leaving those who resist no choice but paranoia.

*Vineland*'s response to this paranoia is surprising. The novel finds no subversive joy in exposing dark government secrets. Rather than reveling in muckraking, the novel

suggests that victims of governmental oppression should fight secrecy with secrecy, as shown by the ninjutsu of Inoshiro Sensei. DL is “sworn to keep silent” about her training (124). Some of the moves she learns “are never spoken of” even by those who practice them (127). Many of these esoteric techniques “would only make sense ten years or more from now—requiring that much rigorous practice every day for her even to begin to understand—and until she did understand, she was forbidden to use any of them out in the world” (127). In contrast to governmental secrecy, this secrecy is not a cover for oppression. Rather, it is a safeguard to ensure the potency and ethical deployment of its techniques. The novel casts its version of ninjutsu in a more benign light than historical ninjutsu, since the latter relied on secrecy to carry out mercenary crimes (Tomiki). *Vineland*’s ninjutsu establishes a context for secrecy that is free from paranoia, and even upholds authority. By creating a refuge of benevolent secrecy, the novel disrupts paranoia’s universal suspicion.

Ninjutsu lends itself well to this project because of its ambivalent relationship to Zen Buddhism. Its links to Zen Buddhism retain some spiritual content, but it is distant enough from Zen to avoid a focus on transcendence. Like certain kinds of Zen, ninjutsu has a system of secret transmission between master and disciple. Similar secrecy also prevails in a variety of Japanese arts, including dance, swordsmanship, unarmed combat, flower arranging, and theater (Morinaga). Also, like other Japanese arts, ninjutsu inherited Zen’s focus on acting with carefully cultivated mindfulness, patience, and discipline (Herrigel, Morinaga).

However, Buddhism’s emphasis on nonviolence conflicts with ninjutsu’s martiality. The Buddhist goal of overcoming duality contrasts starkly from the ninja’s

focus on “gaining an advantage” over an adversary (Seager 13; Hayes, back cover). Furthermore, ninjas were not humanitarians; they were mercenaries hired by feudal lords to gain an advantage over their enemies (Tomiki). *Vineland*’s pop-ninjutsu reflects this ambivalence. It is characterized by untidiness, pedagogical shortcuts, and consumerism. These features satirize countercultural appropriations of Asian traditions. But as McClure notes, the “shady” aspects of this art do not discredit it; they are rather a mark of adaptability and a lack of pretentiousness. Pynchon’s ninjutsu alters traditional ninjutsu just as traditional ninjutsu changed Buddhism (52), and Buddhism transformed its own antecedents (Fields xiii-xiv).

Pynchon’s heterodox ninjutsu becomes, paradoxically, a suitable platform from which to teach sincere spiritual messages. It teaches the importance of deep concentration and meditation (Pynchon 155, 140). Through these means, DL trains to the point where “she didn’t think so much” (128). Her circumvention of thought is similar to Herrigel’s account of the Zen of Japanese archery, an active meditation that overcomes the separation between tool and user without transcendent abstractions. Inoshiro’s ninjutsu also teaches responsibility: its powers take years to master and should be used with exacting discretion (127). It uses the concept of karma to teach that one has important missions in life, and one’s actions have consequences (132, 163, 382). Like historical ninjutsu, these points are rooted in Zen, but they are distant enough from Zen’s transcendent orientation to be accessible to the novel’s unprivileged characters who cannot access Zen serenity “someplace scenic up in the mountains” (123). Ninjutsu’s discipline cannot completely overcome mediation, but as with other Japanese secret arts, it aims to make the mediated “quasi-immediate” (Morinaga 30).

The novel punishes DL for flouting ninjutsu's lessons, and rewards her for learning them. DL internalizes Inoshiro Sensei's teachings, which act as her conscience. DL's biggest mistake, as McClure points out (54), is when she accidentally puts a delayed death touch on Takeshi, thinking he was Brock Vond. When reflecting on this action, and her larger career as a ninjette, DL "could appreciate how broadly she'd violated the teachings of her sensei. She had not become the egoless agent of somebody else's will, but was acting instead out of her own selfish passions. If the motive itself was tainted, then the acts, no matter how successful or beautifully executed, were false, untrue to her calling, to herself, and someday there would be payback" (Pynchon 253). Elsewhere, when spite overtakes her, DL imagines Inoshiro Sensei yelling at her, "'didn't you learn anything?'" (259). Inoshiro's American affiliates similarly remonstrate DL for paying "no...fucking...attention" (155). Just as DL's powers backfire when she acts out of spite, they work well when she acts out of compassion. DL's ninja skills are instrumental in helping Frenesi evade detection when those who bust PR<sup>3</sup> give chase through a mountain (252-257). And at the novel's end, DL has a realization that frees her from "passion, enmity, folly" (380), which are "three poisons" that cause suffering according to Buddhism (Smith 112, 387). Thus, DL illustrates how an adapted Japanese tradition can answer the needs of American countercultures.

The theme of America as heir to Japanese tradition is reflected in the novel's landscapes. In *Vineland*, America has better Zen scenery than Japan. DL contrasts her Zen fantasy of "someplace scenic up in the mountains" with the reality of her training "down here in the ensnarling city" (Pynchon 123). However, the book does portray a "scenic" locale suitable for spiritual development. It is not in Japan, but in the redwood

groves of Vineland County. The narrator describes one morning in which “[t]he fog here had burned off early, leaving a light blue haze that began to fade the more distant trees” (35). This serene image recalls the motifs of Chinese and Japanese landscape painting, which often employ an ethereal “haze” effect (Slawson 119). Later, DL’s up/down dichotomy reappears at the Sisterhood of the Kuniochi Attentives. The narrator says, “[o]ut the window, screened by eucalyptus trees, could be seen once-white walls overgrown with ivy, a distant bright of freeway tucked into the unfolding spill of land toward ‘down there’—while up here the wind blew among the smooth gold and green hills, it seemed endlessly” (Pynchon 155). The scenic beauty DL cannot inhabit in Japan is present in California. Through these images, *Vineland*’s positions America as a fertile field for Japanese wisdom.

It is fitting, then, that DL’s culminating realization occurs in the U.S., not Japan (380). Looking back on her career as a ninjette, DL reflects, “[h]ad it only been, as she’d begun to fear, that many years of what the Buddha calls ‘passion, enmity, folly’? Suppose that she’d been meant, all the time, to be paying attention to something else entirely?” (380). Of these “three poisons,” folly—an ignorance of the interdependence of all phenomena—is the most fundamental, leading alternately to passion for what one craves and enmity toward what one hates (Smith 112, 387). DL’s self-described passion for “enlightenment through ass-kicking” is a symptom of what the “three poisons” doctrine diagnoses (Pynchon 198). Because she sees the world in a subject-object, us-versus-them framework, she counterproductively craves enlightenment as though it is an object to be grasped. She had thrived on her hatred for Brock, but DL finally realizes that the life of an adventuring martial artist, driven by “passion” and “enmity,” is less

rewarding than establishing friendships, especially her developing love for Takeshi, the “something else” she should have cultivated. As McClure points out, this “something else” is Takeshi, not a spiritual path (55). Thus, DL’s realization is more circumscribed than in its traditional Buddhist context. *Vineland* dramatizes the view that only certain aspects of Japanese wisdom can flourish in America, and comments on Asian religions’ development in the U.S. Inoshiro Sensei’s down-to-earth ninjutsu fits American—and specifically countercultural—needs. The novel suggests that Americans should leave Zen and its pretensions to transcendence behind.

#### Underworld’s Secret Initiation

While Pynchon’s *Vineland* centers on 1960s American countercultures, DeLillo’s *Underworld* focuses on the mainstream. Most of *Underworld*’s main characters are outwardly “normal” American citizens engaged in non-subversive activities. They include a corporate executive, an Air Force pilot, a history teacher, and a Catholic nun. The overarching context of *Underworld* is the Cold War, in which the USSR was Americans’ fundamental object of paranoia. But this context casts a paranoid light on a variety of other phenomena. *Underworld* dramatizes a cultural trend aptly diagnosed by George E. Marcus: “the cold-war era itself was defined throughout by a massive project of paranoid social thought and action that reached into every dimension of mainstream culture, politics, and policy” (2). Accordingly, the novel’s cast represents the majority of Cold War Americans for whom Asian religions seemed mysterious and disreputable. Several key moments in *Underworld* show Asian religions as objects of “paranoid social thought.” But these passages also enact productive aspects of Asian secrecy that the novel’s characters do not recognize.

Critics have pointed out that whereas the conspiracies in *Vineland* are very specific, *Underworld* portrays a more diffuse paranoia that often has no immediate object (Coale; Knight, *Culture*). Just as each novel portrays paranoia differently, there is a corresponding contrast in each novel's response to paranoia, although both are framed through Eastern esotericism. In *Vineland*, Asian religious secrecy benefits individual characters in ways the novel's plot makes visible. But in *Underworld*, the value of Asian religious secrecy eludes the novel's characters. It is up to the reader to uncover the mystical ideas hidden in the novel's patterned deployment of Eastern mantras. What *Vineland* does on the level of plot, *Underworld* accomplishes on the level of form. While *Vineland* narrates secret initiation, *Underworld* is a secret initiation.

By imitating Asian religious secrecy in its very form, *Underworld* invites the reader to resist characters' discomfort with Buddhism and Hinduism. As the novel famously states, “[e]verything is connected” (DeLillo 825). Asian religions are no exception, as a network of allusions suggests hidden parallels between Asian mantras and Catholic chants. The novel's characters make these links fleetingly and ultimately refuse to acknowledge them, an oversight that impedes their spiritual searches.

My exploration of these connections suggests Asian religions' relevance for subverting American paranoia, and marks a new development in scholarship on religion in DeLillo's fiction. Most of this work has dealt either with Catholicism, the religion of DeLillo's upbringing (McClure, Hungerford), or DeLillo's satire of consumer culture as a secular religion (L. Barrett, McGowan, Osteen, Schneck). Critics have overlooked DeLillo's references to Asian religions; to date, only one essay has appeared on this topic (Kohn, “Tibetan Buddhism”). In this remarkable piece, Robert Kohn shows that Tibetan

Buddhism pervades DeLillo's novels (157). He further argues that DeLillo's longstanding interest in Tibetan Buddhism led him toward deeper explorations of Catholicism in his later fiction (157). Exploring the cultural implications of these allusions, I show that Asian religions play a crucial role in DeLillo's critique of Orientalism, paranoia, and mysticism.

Throughout DeLillo's novels, Asian religions appear strange. In *Americana* (1971), DeLillo's first novel, the narrator feels uncomfortable toward his undergraduate Zen professor, whom he describes as "indifferent to westernization" (174). In *Running Dog* (1978), the main character hires a man to perform Tibetan rituals on his behalf against a backdrop of political intrigue and murder. In *The Names* (1982), a deadly cult has a cell in India, where the narrator remarks that "[m]asses of people suggested worship and delirium" (276). In *White Noise* (1985), the main character recalls that one of his ex-wives lives at an ashram where "[t]he usual rumors abound of sexual freedom, sexual slavery, drugs, nudity, mind control, torture, prolonged and hideous death" (25). In *Mao II* (1991), DeLillo explores the brainwashing techniques of the Korean-based Unification Church (Kauffman 372-373n1).<sup>7</sup> These instances exaggerate American discomfort with Asian religions and obscure their specific content.

In a 1982 interview, DeLillo made a similar point himself. When critic Tom LeClair asked DeLillo about Zen in his novels, DeLillo replied that it "has more to do with people playing at Eastern religion than anything else. I know very little about Zen. I'm interested in religion as a discipline and a spectacle, as something that drives people to extreme behavior" (LeClair 10). In other words, for DeLillo, "Eastern religion"

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<sup>7</sup> Although the Unification Church is based on Christianity, not Buddhism or Hinduism, its status as a cult is enhanced by its Asian headquarters.

matters less for its distinctive characteristics and more as a timely example of religion's appeal. However, several critics have rightly argued that *Underworld* marks a turning point by celebrating religious experience while it continues to critique fanaticism (McClure 94, Hungerford 74, Schneck 215-216). In addition to this development, *Underworld* is not merely "playing at Eastern religion," but engages with specific Asian ideas and practices, especially Tibetan Buddhism, more than anywhere else in DeLillo's corpus.

*Underworld* uses different formal techniques to invoke Asian religions than in DeLillo's other novels. Unlike *Americana*, *Running Dog*, and *White Noise*, in *Underworld*, Asian religions are not strongly associated with any one character. Instead, these traditions dart in and out of view through a subtle pattern of references. They do not play a causal role in *Underworld*'s plot. They are a presence, not a force. Crucially, *Underworld*'s references to Asian mantras usually occur near expressions of Catholicism. These juxtapositions highlight similarities in Eastern and Western religious practices, and casts Tibetan Buddhism as Catholicism's eerie shadow. DeLillo often presents characters' reactions to this proximity through free indirect discourse. In this context, this technique's unannounced focus on a single character makes seemingly free-floating thoughts even more unsettling.

Mantras' patterned recurrence in *Underworld* showcases the paranoid mentality that "[e]verything is connected" (DeLillo 825), and casts Tibetan Buddhism as uncanny. Freud defines the "uncanny" (*unheimlich*) as that which "was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open" (Freud 132). He further identifies the "double" (*doppelganger*) as a mysterious twin that embodies this secret (141-142). In

*Underworld*, Tibetan Buddhism is Catholicism's *doppelganger*. It is different enough from Catholicism to appear separately, but similar enough to create discomfort. Characters are dimly aware of these religions' similarities, but refuse to acknowledge them. Their resistance is shortsighted, as phrases from Asian religions unexpectedly recur in characters' minds. Mantras' sudden reappearance further fits Freud's definition of the uncanny as an involuntary resurfacing of a repressed idea (151). *Underworld* functions as an esoteric text in its own right, with manifold hidden connections known only to initiated readers who patiently excavate its secrets. One such avenue of esoteric knowledge is the Asian religions spreading in the U.S. after WWII. As Knight states, “[t]hat everything is connected remains, for the reader as well as much as for the novel's characters, a subliminal suspicion and an act of discovery, rather than a tritely proven observation” (“Everything” 830). Along these lines, the form of *Underworld* encourages readers to treat Asian religions with paranoia by wondering when they will surface next.

But *Underworld* does not indulge in Orientalism. I agree with existing criticism that *Underworld* scrutinizes paranoia beyond simply exhibiting it (Knight, “Everything” 832; Coale 119-120; O’Donnell x). Although the reader takes in Asian religions through characters’ paranoia, the novel gives the reader tools to question these reactions.

*Underworld* showcases the ambiguities of both Eastern and Western religious incantation, their power to focus the mind as well as the ease with which they become fetishes or empty rituals. By questioning characters’ fear of Asian religions, *Underworld* suggests that Westerners can better understand their European religious heritage through, not against, Buddhist and Hindu mantras.

### Uncanny Mantras

The novel's uncanny link between Catholicism and Tibetan Buddhism is embodied in two of its main characters, brothers Nick and Matt Shay. At the age of seventeen, Nick accidentally shoots and kills a bar waiter. He spends a corrective term at a Jesuit School, where a priest teaches him the power of words (DeLillo 295-297, 540-541). "These names are vital to your progress" (542), says Father Paulus. He starts with mundane objects such as the parts of a shoe, but moves on to more overt religion by giving Nick *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a medieval Christian meditation manual. Taken with the book's emphasis on short, intense prayer, Nick becomes "preoccupied with this search for the one word, one syllable. It was romantic. The mystery of God was romantic. With this one word I would eliminate distraction and edge closer to God's unknowable self" (296). Nick's ascetic drive to "eliminate distraction" paves the way for an obsessive and unsuccessful spiritual practice.

Nick settles not on a single syllable, but the phrase *todo y nada*, all and nothing, a paradoxical description of God adapted from the writings of sixteenth-century Catholic mystic St. John of the Cross. After years of practice in which Nick "repeated it, repeated it, repeated it" (297), Nick becomes a family man and affluent professional. But the intensity of his prayer leads Nick to focus on power rather than goodness, and Nick remains unable to sustain fulfilling relationships. Nick assiduously teaches his children the power of obscure words (102, 105, 119), but otherwise spends little time with them. Also tellingly, the reader first learns of Nick's prayer when he explains it to a swinger with whom he cheats on his wife (294-301). Although Nick's chanting does not redeem him, it sets up the novel's ongoing engagement with religious incantation.

Nick's work with Christian prayer has an uncanny parallel in his brother Matt, who goes to Vietnam as a military videographer. The narrator recounts that “[t]hey sent him to Vietnam, to Phu Bai, and the first thing he saw when he entered the compound was a flourish of spray-paint graffiti on the wall of a supply shed. *Om mani padme hum*. Matt knew this was some kind of mantra, a thing hippies chanted in Central Park, but could it also be the motto of the 131<sup>st</sup> Aviation Company?” (462). The mantra is eerie for three reasons: Matt does not expect to see it; he does not know who painted it; and he does not know what it means. He puts the mantra out of his mind, but later, it spontaneously resurfaces. One of the first things Matt films seems frivolous: “[h]e tossed a frisbee to a gook dog and watched the animal leap and twist” (462). But when editing this footage, Matt unexpectedly reengages with the mantra:

When he found a dot on the film he translated it into letters, numbers, coordinates, grids and entire systems of knowledge.

*Om mani padme hum.*

In fact the dog didn't leap at all but only watched the frisbee sail past, more or less disdainfully.

A dot was a visual mantra, an object that had no properties except location.

The jewel in the heart of the lotus. (463-464)

Since Matt does not understand the mantra, he cannot know its English translation, “[t]he jewel in the heart of the lotus.” The narrative thus pushes the boundaries of free indirect discourse by introducing knowledge Matt does not have into his train of thought, furthering the novel's evocation of paranoid connections.

The scene parallels Nick’s contemplative prayer practice, but with unsettling differences. Whereas Nick deliberately seeks out a short prayer, Matt encounters the *mani* mantra unexpectedly. Nick’s practice occurs in America, whereas Matt is in far-away Vietnam. Nick deals with a familiar Western Catholic tradition, whereas Matt has a brush with the exotic traditions of Tibet. Although both mantras require translation, the Sanskrit of *om mani padme hum* is even more foreign than the Spanish of *todo y nada*. Just as Nick and Matt are brothers, these two scenes are siblings, but Matt’s mantra is Nick’s prayer’s uncanny twin.

In addition to these connections, *todo y nada* and *om mani padme hum* have comparable meanings. Both use paradox to describe infinite reality.<sup>8</sup> In his commentary on the phrase *todo y nada*, derived from the writings of 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic St. John of the Cross, Thomas Merton explains that God includes everything and is therefore “all.” But God also surpasses all things, and therefore is no *thing* in particular (Merton 53-54). “All and nothing” describes God’s being; God is everything and nothing at the same time. The Tibetan mantra *om mani padme hum* involves a similar paradox. *Mani* means “jewel” and *padme* means “lotus,” while *om* and *hum* are invocational sounds with no semantic content (Studholme 110, 116). The Fourteenth Dalai Lama explains that the jewel symbolizes compassion, while the lotus symbolizes emptiness (Gyatso, *Practice* 136). The jewel of compassion requires the clarity of subject and object, while the lotus of emptiness transcends all distinctions. In sum, ultimate reality is both multifaceted and empty (Gyatso 136, Mingur 102-103). The “jewel” of compassion is an all-inclusive

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<sup>8</sup> Several articles have compared the instructions in *The Cloud of Unknowing* to Buddhist meditation and mantra practices (Llewelyn; Honda; Aitken; Loy, “Zen Cloud”). Also, one volume compares St. John’s teachings to the *Baghavad-Gita* of Hinduism (D’Souza). These comparisons focus on the power of incantation and repetition across traditions.

love which parallels the “all” of St. John’s God. Likewise, the “lotus” of emptiness echoes the “nothing” of the unconditioned God.

While the mantras’ meanings resemble one another, they remain distinct. St. John’s Catholic mysticism seeks a total “blackout of desire” (Merton 54), whereas the Tibetan practice exploits specific images and feelings as a means toward supposedly higher realizations (Seager 131, Coleman 107-108). In the words of Catholic theologian Lawrence Cunningham, St. John’s spiritual vision “is not the Void of Eastern thought nor the Great Doubt of the Buddha” (2006). Furthermore, Buddhist emptiness is not simply nothingness, but rather a condition of possibility (Minguyr 59-60). These two prayers are similar enough to be compared—indeed, the novel invites the reader to do so—but different enough to defy comparison. In this fraught kinship, the Catholic prayer occurs within the familiar context of a Jesuit school, whereas the Tibetan prayer is associated with the foreignness—and the wartime trauma—of Vietnam. In the Vietnam War, Buddhism was the religion of the exotic Vietnamese, both ally and enemy. But *Underworld* challenges Buddhism’s foreignness by intertwining it with Western religion.

Throughout the novel, Buddhism continues to resurface as Western religion’s strange shadow in the context of the Vietnam War. In one scene, Nick’s fiancée, Marian, listens to a radio broadcast in 1967 that is hijacked by student protesters. The activists read mock-news items including instructions on how to make your own napalm at home. The regular broadcast resumes, uncannily, in the middle of an ad for DuPont Chemical, a company that made napalm (Neer 37). She hears

[t]hree voices chanting liturgically, a priest reciting the same line over and over and two altar boys delivering fixed responses.

Better things for better living.

*Through chemistry.*

Better things for better living.

*Through chemistry.*

Better things for better living.

*Through chemistry.* (DeLillo 603)

The voices are not actually “a priest” and “two altar boys.” Marian only thinks of them as such because they are “chanting liturgically,” a description that conveys Marian’s impression through free indirect discourse. By having Marian hear the Du Pont slogan as a liturgy, DeLillo satirizes the secular religion of consumerism, a characteristic gesture (L. Barrett 100, McGowan 123-124). He also hints at how the catchy DuPont slogan is a cover for its part in America’s war machine. Here, chemistry is the new magic, an esoteric art that hides dark secrets.

DuPont’s mantra of manufacturing is followed by an unexpected allusion to Buddhism. Before the ad ends, Marian turns off the radio and has dinner with her family. Referring to an earlier news broadcast, Marian’s callous father says that he cares about injured protesters as much as “the life and death of a fly, on a wall, in a village, somewhere in China” (DeLillo 604). Marian’s mother responds, “‘I guess that means you can’t be a Buddhist. Because the Buddhists if I understand them correctly,’ her mother said, and then let the thought drift toward the ceiling” (604). If she had finished her sentence, she likely would have said that Buddhists believe in unconditional compassion for all beings, no matter how distant.

But why bring up Buddhism at all? The reference is forced; it was not already a topic of conversation. Furthermore, Marian's mother is not personally invested in Buddhism. Her caveat, "the Buddhists *if I understand them* correctly," indicates that she is not confident in her knowledge of Buddhists and does not identify as one (my emphasis). Also, she releases the topic as quickly as she seizes it. By saying that she "let the thought drift toward the ceiling," the narration suggests that Buddhism, or even "the thought" of it, is like an elusive ghost, traveling through the air without being fully present. And yet, Buddhism remains the uncanny attendant of a Western chant.

*Underworld*'s Eastern mantras include Hinduism as well as Buddhism. The novel explores Hinduism through an unlikely source: Lenny Bruce, who thinks about mantras in the middle of his performances. He wears a "Nehru jacket" (546), a high-collared buttoned shirt made famous in the West by Jawaharlal Nehru, and also favored by the Beatles. The historical Bruce was partial to this fashion (Friend), but the novel further emphasizes its connection to Hinduism. The garment is Bruce's "Hindu statesman number" and a "Hindu tunic" (DeLillo 584, 585). It could have been an "Indian tunic," or not mentioned at all. But the adjective "Hindu" is important because it shows that one can *have* a "Hindu statesman number." The spiritual dignity of the word "Hindu" can set up higher-impact ridicule than the less religious label "Indian." With Bruce's irreverence, nothing is sacred.

Bruce develops misgivings about this irony during his own performances. Throughout his routines, Bruce mockingly yells, "*We're all gonna die!*" (547, 584), a line "he'd come to love" as a "high-pitched cry of grief and pain that had an element of sweet defiance" (547). Bruce's "cry" is a dark response to the Cuban missile crisis, and his

decision to put it at the center of his routine is a bold exercise in black humor. However, the historical Bruce never used this phrase (Rosen 106), so one must account for why DeLillo has Bruce say this. The answer lies in what Bruce thinks but does not say:

[H]e should have been standing here chanting *We're not gonna die We're not gonna die We're not gonna die*, leading them in a chant, a mantra that was joyful and mock joyful at the same time because this is New York, New York and we want it both ways.

When he thought they were gonna die, he'd chanted the die line repeatedly.

But that was over now. He'd forgotten all that. There were other, deeper, vaguer matters. Everything, nothing, him. (DeLillo 629)

Bruce's sudden shift from a frivolous "Hindu statesman number" to a desperate "mantra" establishes Asian mantras as a return of the repressed. By wishing to lead people in "a chant, a mantra," Bruce wants to stop doing a "Hindu statesman number" and become, if not an actual Hindu priest, at least a sincere figure of spiritual solace.<sup>9</sup> Rather than turning the news of the day into macabre jokes, Bruce now wants to address "other, deeper, vaguer matters," which he identifies as "[e]verything, nothing, him," an allusion to *todo y nada*. The song lyric "New York, New York" also becomes a mantra, embodying the hopes and fears of the city. Bruce spontaneously turns one of his bawdy segments into a reflection on the horrors of sex slavery, during which time there is "an unguarded plea in Lenny's eyes" (629). But the audience predictably cools to his sobering change of course. Bruce's hopes are not realized, and he because returns to the

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<sup>9</sup> *Underworld*'s sections featuring Bruce are an example of what Lee Konstantinou calls postirony, a tendency among contemporary writers to convey sincerity while still writing in a putatively ironic postmodern style (*Wipe that Smirk*).

“old jokes” (633), his audience will continue to see his association with Hinduism as ironic, even though the reader knows of his underlying wish for sincerity.

By linking mantras and seriousness, but ultimately giving up on both, Bruce joins Matt Shay and Marian’s mother as characters who only flirt with Asian religions. The novel is not implying that these characters’ problems would be over if they took up these traditions in earnest. But it suggests that they miss chances to engage with traditions that have something to say to their situations, and that have more in common with Western incantations than they realize.

#### *From Paranoia to Hostility*

The novel shows that this dismissal of Asian religions can escalate from mistrust to antagonism. For example, in a passage of free indirect discourse, the Vietnam veteran Charles “Chuckie” Wainwright Jr. reflects on his deployment as a bomb runner in terms that connect enemies with exotic religions:

The bombs fluttered down on the NRV and the ARVN alike, because if the troops on both sides pretty much resemble each other and if their acronyms contain pretty much the same letters, you have to bomb both sides to get satisfactory results. The bombs also fell on the Vietcong, the Viet Minh, the French, the Laotians, the Cambodians, the Pathet Lao, the Khmer Rouge, the Montagnards, the Hmong, the Maoists, the Taoists, the Buddhists, the monks, the nuns, the rice farmers, the pig farmers, the student protesters and war resisters and flower people, the Chicago 7, the Chicago 8, Catonsville 9—they were all, pretty much, the enemy. (612)

Chuckie's sentiment is horrifying because of its jaded willingness to kill. His sweeping dismissiveness implicitly critiques the Vietnam War, which became notorious for the U.S. military's unrestrained destructiveness. But this seemingly indiscriminate catalogue of "the enemy" actually follows a coherent progression. Starting with "the Vietcong," the first ten items in this list are political and military groups. One expects a soldier to talk in such terms. But the next four items, surprisingly, are religious: "the Taoists, the Buddhists, the monks, the nuns." The bridge between political and religious groupings is a rhyme between "Maoists" and "Taoists," an ironic pairing. Although there is a euphonic kinship between "Maoists" and "Taoists," there is an immense ideological disparity. Furthermore, the religious labels in this list are not nation-based, and they all promote peace.

The monks' and nuns' presumed peacefulness makes such bombings seem all the more perverse. The next two items, "the rice farmers, the pig farmers," are also innocent, but with agrarian rather than religious meaning. The final six items, starting with "the student protesters," shift the list from Vietnam to the U.S. The phrase "the pig farmers" bridges the Vietnamese and American segments of this list, because pig farming is common in both the U.S. and Vietnam. Chuckie is sliding down a slippery slope: the items on this list move progressively closer to home. If one bombs a single enemy, then whoever else occupies the blast radius is also the enemy, and before long "pretty much" everyone is "the enemy," including one's own neighbors.

Chuckie has a futile discussion about the problems of this violence with a fellow soldier, Louis. The latter is far more enthusiastic about destruction than Chuckie, describing bombs religiously: "[a] glow enters the body that's like the touch of God"

(613). Chuckie uses a more subtle, less grandiose invocation of religion by alluding to karma: “he was developing a curious concern for the local landscape. Tired of killing the forest, the trees of the forest, the birds that inhabit the trees, the insects that live their whole karmic lives nestled in the wing feathers of the birds” (614). Whereas Louis invokes the Western God to celebrate nuclear weapons, Charles thinks about insects’ “whole karmic lives” in order to sympathize with them. Just as Charles has “a curious concern for the local landscape,” he is taking on the language of the region, whose people are largely Buddhist and for whom karma is an important idea. Here, a vague sense of karma as a determining influence makes the insects’ lives seem all the more tragic, deserving at least some respect. Again, Asian religion surfaces suddenly and fleetingly. Based on this sentiment, Charles voices his misgivings about “dropping bombs on people who never said a cross word to you” (615). But Louis is dismissive—“[d]on’t start in with me” (614), he says—and Charles continues the bomb campaign without resistance.

Characters in *Underworld* continue to describe Buddhists as enemies well after the Vietnam War. During the late 80s, baseball collector Marvin Lundy uses Buddhists as a prop in his argument that “[t]he cold war is your friend” because “the whole thing is geared to your dominance of the world” (171). He explains, “You see what they have in England. Forty thousand women circling an air base to protest the bombs and missiles. Some of them are men in dresses. They have Buddhists beating drums” (171). Marvin is referring to the Greenham Commons protest camps, which resisted a nuclear missile site in Berkshire, England from 1981-2000, but reached peak activity from 1982-1984 (Kidron). He reasons that because England is not one of the two principals in the Cold War, it cannot position itself as the primary bulwark against a sinister enemy. Therefore,

it suffers from more extensive political dissent than the U.S., especially from sexual and religious minorities. In this formulation, “Buddhists beating drums” are political and social undesirables. Their otherness makes them uncanny, and their “drums” suggests that they are chanting. Marvin’s claim about the nature of dissent is historically uninformed, however; Asian religions have played significant roles in a number of U.S. political protests (Hungerford 30, Kent). Nevertheless, this passage dramatizes how political paranoia makes it easy for Buddhists to become unwanted others.

### *Interfaith Internet*

The only character who decisively overcomes this type of us-versus-them paranoia is Sister Edgar. Ironically, the novel’s preeminent Catholic does the best job of internalizing Asian mantras, as her afterlife in the World Wide Web uniquely synthesizes Eastern and Western motifs. Sister Edgar initially seems to be an extreme version of a stereotypical Catholic schoolteacher, a joyless disciplinarian who uses scare tactics and humiliation to subdue her students. She practices charity, and yet disdains those she serves, keeping them at arms’ length. In a routine excursion sometime during the 1980s, Sister Edgar thinks that “latex was necessary here. Protection against the spurt of blood or pus and the viral entities hidden within, submicroscopic parasites in their soviet socialist protein coats” (DeLillo 241). Edgar’s free indirect discourse shows how Cold War paranoia pervades her everyday interactions.

Years later, a young girl named Esmeralda is raped and murdered in Sister Edgar’s parish, and the despairing nun joins a crowd looking at a billboard where the girl’s face is rumored to appear miraculously. In the crowd, Sister Edgar opens up to others in a way she has not before. She lets the people embrace her, and feels “an

angelus of clearest joy” (822). Her ecstasy is a turning point in her spiritual life (McClure 95-96), but after this transformative experience, “[t]here is nothing left to do but die” (DeLillo 824). Here is one of the novel’s rare religious moments with unambiguously positive effects. It contrasts from engagements with mantras: Sister Edgar’s moment of bliss occurs without ritual, and without rehearsed language. It is spontaneous, not planned.

After she dies, Sister Edgar passes into an afterlife “in cyberspace, not heaven” (825). Thomas A. Carlson has argued that this realm has predominately Christian associations (226-227). But while Christian tropes are present, an even more revealing framework is the *bardo* of Tibetan Buddhism. From a Christian perspective, Sister Edgar’s experience would be a bitter disappointment compared to perfect happiness in heaven. But Buddhists expect a problematic, limited afterlife. In fact, Edgar’s existence in cyberspace borrows from the *Bardo Thodol* (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*). This text has come up repeatedly in DeLillo’s novels (Kohn, “Tibetan Buddhism” 158), and it is a document that, as David L. McMahan puts it, has “become somewhat exaggeratedly representative of Tibetan Buddhism in the West” (*Making* 53). The role of the *bardo* in Edgar’s experience is an important element in my Catholic-Tibetan schema.

In the *bardo*, one possesses “not a body of gross matter,” but an ethereal form (Evans-Wentz 158). Similarly, in cyberspace, Sister Edgar has “shed all that steam-ironed fabric” of her earthly clothes (DeLillo 824) and is described as a “fluctuating impulse,” not matter (826). Also, in the *bardo*, one can pass through solid objects and traverse immense distances instantly (Evans-Wentz 158-159). Along the same lines,

Sister Edgar is “open—exposed to any connection you can make in the world wide web” (DeLillo 824).

Such parallels might also apply to a Christian afterlife, but although *bardo* beings can move freely, they are not truly free. They are “driven by the ever-moving wind of karma[;] thine intellect, having no object upon which to rest, will be like a feather tossed about by the wind” (Evans-Wentz 161). Therefore, the *bardo* is “terrific and hard to endure” and one is liable to feel “sorrow,” “terror,” or “awe” (161). Similarly, Sister Edgar “feels the grip of systems” (DeLillo 825). The fact that she is “exposed to any connection you can make in the world wide web” is not liberating, but unsettling. Just as the *bardo* is fearful, Edgar is “so uneasy....[S]he senses the paranoia of the web, the net. There’s the perennial threat of *virus* of course” (825, my emphasis). Since Sister Edgar was a germaphobe in life, DeLillo’s pun extends her anxiety even in death.

Despite devoting her life to God, Sister Edgar is unprepared for this afterlife. The narrator of the *Bardo Thodol* insists that there is nothing to fear, for the *bardo*’s frightful contents are illusory productions of one’s own mind (Evans-Wentz 103-104). By recognizing that these appearances are not real, one can experience the clear light of undifferentiated reality (89). Thus, even in the *bardo* one can attain enlightenment, or at least be spontaneously born in a celestial realm guaranteeing rapid progress toward enlightenment (110-112). Lacking this esoteric knowledge, Sister Edgar has trouble seeing things for what they are. For instance, she sees a website on the atomic bomb. As with Charles’ companion Louis, a religious feeling arises from this sublime vision: “The jewels roll out of her eyes and she sees God. No, wait, sorry. It is a Soviet bomb she sees” (826). Due to DeLillo’s consistent use of free indirect discourse, the reader

recognizes the mistake as Sister Edgar's, not the narrator's. Here, that which attracts the gaze is actually a cause of suffering, a potentially liberating idea emphasized in Buddhism that Edgar does not realize at first.

Sister Edgar's misrecognition ties back to the Tibetan mantra *om mani padme hum*, as evidenced in the striking description of her awed crying. The narration says “[t]he *jewels* roll out of her eyes” rather than the more obvious “the *tears* roll out of her eyes” (my italics). The word “jewels” harkens back to the translation of *om mani padme hum*, “the jewel in the lotus.” The *Bardo Thodol* teaches that reciting *om mani padme hum* can deliver one from the *bardo* into nirvana (Evans-Wentz 149-150n1). If Sister Edgar's cyberspace afterlife is a version of the *bardo*, this mantra is the password that can rescue her from it. She only enacts half of it herself. The closest approximation of a lotus that could complement Sister Edgar's teary jewels is the bomb blast she sees. It is a “spray plume” and a “superheated sphere” with “solar golds and reds” (DeLillo 825). Its round form and bright colors vaguely recall lotuses of Buddhist art, but as an ironic blossom of destruction.

And yet, after this highly refracted iteration of the *mani* mantra, Sister Edgar does gain liberating insight. In contemplating this bomb blast, “Sister begins to sense the byshadows that stretch from the awe of a central event. How the intersecting systems help pull us apart, leaving us vague, drained, docile, soft in our inner discourse, willing to be shaped, to be overwhelmed—easy retreats, half beliefs” (826). Her realization precipitates her release. Sister Edgar gains peace by merging with J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover appears elsewhere in the novel with no causal connection to Sister Edgar. But he

has shared her name, germaphobia, celibacy, and Cold War paranoia. In this culminating moment, Hoover is

hyperlinked at last to Sister Edgar—a single fluctuating impulse now, a piece of coded information.

Everything is connected in the end.

Sister and Brother. A fantasy in cyberspace and a way of seeing the other side and a settling of differences that have less to do with gender than with difference itself, all argument, all conflict programmed out. (826)

Sister Edgar transcends “difference itself” in a realization of Hindu and Buddhist teachings that ultimate reality is undifferentiated (Coleman 37-38, Rambachan 43). But her release is “[a] fantasy,” and the reader is left wondering to what extent such overcoming of “all conflict” is truly possible.

Having narrated this release, the novel ends with bittersweet hope. At this point, “[a] word appears in the lunar milk of the data stream...a single, seraphic word” (826). A long description of the word’s many associations, including “the thick lived tenor of things” and “its whisper of reconciliation,” builds up to the unveiling of the word itself, the novel’s last: “[p]eace” (827). By lyricizing the many meanings that inhabit this one powerful word, the novel ends with another chant. “Peace” is a short prayer like those recommended by *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The word further offers a pointed contrast from the Cold War and the Vietnam War that take up much of the narrative.

The novel ties the word “peace” to multiple religions. One can “summon the word in Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and Arabic, in a thousand languages and dialects living and dead, and locate literary citations, and follow the word through the tunneled

underworld of its ancestral roots.” These four languages are all associated with major religions, including Hinduism (Sanskrit), Christianity (Greek and Latin), and Islam (Arabic). The next paragraph is one sentence that says: “[f]asten, fit closely, bind together.” This is one of the most recognized meanings of the word “religion:” “that which *ties* believers to God” (OED, my emphasis). It shares a common root with “ligament” (OED). In an echo of the novel’s title, the metaphor of “the tunneled underworld” emphasizes the theme that “[e]verything is connected in the end” even if entities appear separate (DeLillo 826).

The novel’s concluding emphasis on religion and connectedness further reveals why Asian religions are uncanny in *Underworld*. The novel’s ongoing juxtaposition of Eastern and Western chant invites the reader to see similarities between these practices. But by touching on Asian traditions just long enough to dismiss them, the novel’s characters repress these links. Their avoidance does not succeed in banishing Asian religions; instead, it establishes them as Catholic Christianity’s uncanny double. Through characters’ repression, Tibetan Buddhism “was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open” (Freud 132). The novel’s end suggests that recognizing, not repressing, connections between religions can alleviate paranoia and bring “peace.”

However, *Underworld* does not simply normalize Buddhism or Hinduism. The novel connects Christian and Buddhist chant, not in unquestioned beneficence, but in their strangeness, highlighting how difficult it is to integrate such practices into one’s life. Even ending with the mantra “[p]eace” does not simply vindicate chant. The narrator, in a direct address to the reader, says that “you try to imagine the word on the screen becoming a thing in the world[,]...but it’s only a sequence of pulses on a dullish screen

and all it can do is make you pensive” (827). Contemplating the word “peace” is not enough to establish peace “in the world,” just as chanting Catholic or Tibetan mantras is not enough to heal characters’ spiritual struggles.

Even though both Pynchon and DeLillo approach Hindu and Buddhist thought with distance, their fiction offers provocative visions of how effectively Asian religions translate to American contexts. This finding complicates current scholarship on Asian religions in the U.S., which focuses on the role of sympathizers in adapting Buddhism and Hinduism (Cheah; McMahan, *Making*; Williamson). *Vineland* and *Underworld* do not preach enlightenment, and Pynchon and DeLillo cannot be called Hindu or Buddhist advocates. Their skepticism is precisely what allows Asian religions to advance their diagnoses of American paranoia. By delving into the anxiety of those touched by Asian religions, *Vineland* and *Underworld* suggest that paranoid thinking blocks informed skepticism toward Asian religions and their perceived relationship to Christianity. For these creative moves, Pynchon and DeLillo deserve recognition not only as observers of Asian religions in the U.S., but as dynamic agents in these religions’ ongoing development in the U.S..

## Chapter 3: Asian Religions and African Dreams: Alice Walker and Charles Johnson

The Beat writers in my first chapter and the postmodern writers in my second chapter have highly contrasting responses to Asian religion. But one thing they have in common is a white identity that, as Joseph Cheah explains, tends not to draw attention to itself as racially marked (3-4). In the U.S., nonwhite novelists interested in Asian religion have an even more complex task: they must write about a foreign tradition while occupying a minority position themselves, both within the culture at large and within communities of imported faiths. American converts to Asian religions, especially Buddhism, have been overwhelmingly white (Pintak; Selzer, “Black American Buddhism” 44). This fact makes it easy for scholars to write the history of Buddhism’s spread in America as a white history. For example, in a landmark study, Rick Fields calls a cohort of nineteenth-century American Theosophists, who drew heavily from Eastern philosophy, “The White Buddhists” (Fields 83).

A recent surge of literary activity from and about black Buddhists has begun to fracture this characterization. In a clergy where non-Asian teachers are overwhelmingly white, ordained black practitioners have written about their experiences, such as Jan Willis, Ralph Steele, and Joseph Jarman (Pintak). Articles on Buddhism among African Americans have appeared in the Buddhist periodicals *Shambala Sun* and *Tricycle* (Pintak, Heuman). Periodicals have noted the Buddhist (and Hindu) influences of black musicians such as John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, and Herbie Hancock (Goldberg 264-26;

Smith, Kyle; Truman). These voices attest to an emerging literary scene invested in nurturing Buddhism not just for Americans, but for African Americans in particular.

The fiction of Alice Walker and Charles Johnson has played an innovative role in emerging discourses of Buddhism for African Americans, what Linda Selzer calls “Black Dharma” (“Black American Buddhism” 43). Both Walker and Johnson have been inspired by Buddhism and Hinduism: Walker has drawn eclectically from African, Amerindian, and Asian spiritual traditions, choosing not to identify with any one religion (Walker, *We Are the Ones* 98). Johnson has been a Buddhist since 1981 (Rushdy 401), but Hinduism also plays a notable role in his writings, as both religions place a similar—and for Johnson, crucial—emphasis on the ultimate nondifferentiation between oneself and others. Furthermore, both writers believe that Asian religions have specific value for American minorities, especially African Americans.

Walker and Johnson write in the midst of significant obstacles to Asian religions’ reception among African Americans. These barriers speak to critical debates about blackness and cultural authenticity. Authenticity, understood as fidelity to one’s ethnic roots, has been a central concept in African American literature and culture, and critics continue to debate its value vigorously (Chinitz, Eversley, Favor, E. Johnson). Ideas of black authenticity have alienated African Americans from Asian religions. Whereas for white Westerners, Asian religion’s exoticism is a part of its appeal (Storhoff and Whalen-Bridge 4), for African Americans, Buddhism’s and Hinduism’s remote origins make them suspect. Many African Americans feel that it would endanger black heritage to follow foreign religions (Selzer, “Black American Buddhism” 45). For example, a black radio host once asked Charles Johnson, “[p]eople in the community are wondering how

did a brother get over there with Buddhism?" (Whalen-Bridge, "Shoulder" 301). In addition, African Americans who are interested in Eastern thought often feel uncomfortable going to Buddhist centers because most convert Buddhist organizations are predominately white (Pintak).

Walker and Johnson intervene in this cultural tension by reinterpreting Asian religions as expressions of authentic blackness. Walker and Johnson relate ambivalently to the idea that religious seekers should prioritize, as the Chink puts it, "their own history" (Robbins, *Cowgirls* 230). Walker's and Johnson's fiction relies on Eastern doctrines of nonduality to loosen the demands of authenticity. But it also acknowledges authenticity's investment in roots by imagining an ancestral connection between Asian religions and African American culture.

Walker's and Johnson's effort to bridge Eastern thought and African Americans targets multiple audiences. For African American readers, these texts strive to make Asian-inspired spirituality more accessible and applicable to dealing with racial trauma. Buddhism's teachings on emptiness and nonduality are especially valuable, Walker and Johnson believe, for both critiquing racism and transcending reactionary hatred against whites. For non-African American readers, Walker and Johnson seek to portray black practitioners of Eastern religions as a natural and valuable part of America's religious landscape.

My discussion of Alice Walker focuses on *The Color Purple* (1982) and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004). Then, I turn to Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990) and *Dreamer* (1998). As their work evolves, Walker and Johnson bring Eastern religion from the underground to the surface. *The Color Purple* and *Middle Passage* imagine

Hindu religious principles coming from African sources, hiding the influence of Asian religion as such. Later, *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* and *Dreamer* explicitly involve Buddhism, but they focus on African American spiritual seekers who transplant Eastern wisdom to a contemporary minority context. These works show each author's balancing act between promoting African American cultural pride and inviting spiritual influences from other cultures.

Although critics have discussed Buddhism's influence on Johnson, and to a lesser extent, Walker, they have not explored the specific novelistic strategies by which both writers nativize Asian religions. My investigation of these two writers raises important questions for contemporary literary criticism, African American studies, and cultural and religious studies more broadly. What are the ethical obligations of spiritual innovators such as Walker and Johnson with respect to a religion's more traditional representatives? Is it possible, or even desirable, for Asian teachings to play a significant role in African American culture and politics? Can a notion as seemingly abstract as nonduality support effective political change? More broadly, to whom, if anyone, does a religion belong, and by what criteria? What are the relationships between ancestry and religion in an increasingly globalized age? I cannot fully answer these questions here, but the following discussion will provide a basis for pursuing them.

#### Walker's Eastern Alternative

For Alice Walker, political freedom and spiritual liberation are inseparable. In her 1995 essay "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind," Walker argues that African Americans should "decolonize their spirits" from Christianity and recover the pagan spirituality of their ancestors.

Christianity, Walker says, is a religion that black people were “forced to have” instead of their gentler, earth-based “traditional worship.” She praises those who “speak in defense of the ancient Goddess/God of all pagans and heathens, Mother Earth,” lamenting that “We are empty, lonely, without our pagan-heathen ancestors.” If African Americans can recuperate a spirituality from their own roots, Walker asserts, they can achieve both spiritual transcendence and cultural pride.

Walker’s self-declared project of spiritual recovery has led previous critics to focus on influences in her writing from African and South American religions (Lauret, Marvin, Simcikova). But this picture becomes complicated once we explore Walker’s well-documented indebtedness to Asian religions, an influence critics have noted but without exploring issues of cultural difference. How can an apparently foreign spirituality be compatible with pride in one’s ethnic roots? We can trace an evolving response to this tension by exploring latent Hinduism in *The Color Purple* and explicit Buddhism in *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*, two novels that narrate journeys of spiritual growth. I argue that *The Color Purple* and *Now is the Time* mediate Asian traditions through African and Amerindian spiritual practices. In other words, characters in these novels learn Hindu or Buddhist metaphysics from African or Amerindian traditions. Through this process, Walker seeks to legitimate Asian religions for non-Asian minorities.

At the time of its publication, no one, including Walker, said much about *The Color Purple*’s Indian influences. But in later years Walker has detailed how she learned Transcendental Meditation (hereafter TM), a contemplative practice derived from Hinduism, in the late 70s, and has maintained an active interest in Eastern spirituality

ever since (White 298; Walker, *We Are the Ones* 90-105). TM's founder, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, promoted the practice as non-religious. It does not teach culturally specific Hindu deity worship, but focuses on transcending thought and experiencing union with unconditioned consciousness ("The Technique"). At first, Walker came to TM to help herself cope with the pain of her divorce in 1976 (White 466). But this personal impetus quickly led to a wish for others to enjoy the same benefits she experienced with TM, a motivation that had a significant impact on Walker's writing. In fact, Walker could hardly be more explicit about TM's influence, stating that "Meditation...has helped me write my books....*The Color Purple* owes much of its humor and playfulness to the equanimity of my mind as I committed myself to a routine, daily practice" (*We Are the Ones* 158). She adds that *The Color Purple* "was actually my Buddha novel without Buddhism" (99). Given these acknowledgements, it is surprising that critics have not explored how Asian religions relate to concerns of ethnic reclamation in Walker's novels. But if we investigate *The Color Purple*, we can see a delicate negotiation taking shape.

In *The Color Purple*, sisters Celie and Nettie change their spiritual orientation from the patriarchal Christianity of their upbringing toward a non-institutionalized spirituality that shares central features with classical Hindu metaphysics. Chief among these is the belief that all phenomena are manifestations of God, and that God is impersonal, unconditioned being-itself (Iyer 93-94, Rambachan 83-85). However, the novel disguises India's influence on its spiritual themes by implanting Eastern wisdom in characters with no knowledge of Hinduism. Both Celie and Nettie meet a wise person of

African descent who helps them realize that the religion of their youth is oppressing them, and that a more humane alternative is available.

For Celie, that mentor is Shug, a blues singer who brings an immense reservoir of spiritual resources to personal problems. When Celie is overcome with grief at her father's death and anger at her husband hiding Nettie's letter to her, she denounces God as “[t]rifling, forgitful and lowdown” (Walker, *Purple* 192). Shug responds to Celie that God is not the problem, but rather Celie's idea of God as “big and tall and graybearded and white” (194). In an often-cited passage, Shug offers a more palatable definition of God:

God ain't a he or a she, but a It.

But what do it look like? I ast.

Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from everything else, including yourself.

I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It. (195)

This pivotal definition echoes several key teachings of Hindu monism as expressed in TM. Here God is not separate from the world, but “God is everything,” absolutely immanent. God is unconstrained by time, equally present as “[e]verything that is or ever was or ever will be.” Furthermore, Shug believes that this ultimate reality is impersonal rather than personal, as indicated by her preference for the gender-neutral pronoun “It” with a capital “I” over the white male God of Christianity.

These tenets strongly resemble Hindu conceptions of ultimate reality. In particular, Shug's concise catechism resonates with passages from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's *Science of Being and Art of Living*, a seminal text of the TM movement that Walker likely read. Maharishi declares, "everything in creation is the manifestation of the unmanifested absolute impersonal Being, the omnipresent God" (Mahesh 268). Not only do Shug and Maharishi agree that ultimate reality is impersonal, but Shug's use of the neuter pronoun "It" with a capital "I" to refer to God also parallels the language of TM. Maharishi, arguing that God and the world are inseparable, writes, "the world is the creation of the impersonal, absolute God. It is sustained by It and eventually dissolves into It" (269). Even if Walker is not deliberately quoting Maharishi in *The Color Purple*, these parallels nevertheless point toward TM's influence on the novel.

This passage conveys its spiritual importance through its form as well as its content. Shug's description of God is a vernacular creed: it bears repetitive, verse-like declarations of what God "ain't" by what God "is." Her statements are evenly balanced between three negations--God looks like "nothing," "ain't a picture show," and cannot be viewed "apart from everything else"--and three affirmations--God "is everything," "[e]verything...that ever will be," and can be known by "when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that." Shug's subtle formalism makes her speech doctrinal without being stiff; she makes a religious invocation without disrupting her or Celie's verbal idiom.

Shug's spirituality finds a parallel in Nettie, who independently develops similar spiritual beliefs while on an Anglican mission in Africa. But Nettie does not simply learn this view from African religions. Instead, she gradually intuits a middle way between Anglicanism and the religion of the fictional Olinka tribe to whom she ministers. Early

in the mission, Nettie’s encounter with a roofleaf ceremony plants the seed of spiritual unity in her mind. An Olinka man says to her,

We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?

So there we sat, Celie, face to face with the Olinka God. And Celie, I was so tired and sleepy and full of chicken and groundnut stew, my ears ringing with song, that all that Joseph said made perfect sense to me. I wonder what you will make of all this? (154)

This moment introduces Nettie to the idea that divinity is not confined to a personal Godhead, but can pervade the world “in its own humble way.” At this point, Nettie’s investment in Anglican doctrine prompts her to disparage this dawning awareness as merely the result of fatigue and overeating. But this passage’s appeal to a variety of senses also enacts the beginnings of a spirituality of all-pervasive immanent divinity. These concrete sense experiences are what make Nettie receptive to the idea that the roofleaf is God as well as Jesus Christ. The sight of being “face to face with the Olinka God;” the taste of “chicken and groundnut stew;” and the hearing of “song” suggest that God is manifest in festive, sensual, worldly life. And Nettie’s question to Celie foreshadows Celie’s exploration of Asian spirituality as well.

In one of her last letters to Celie before coming home, Nettie reflects, “God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone—a roofleaf or Christ—but we don’t. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us” (257). Nettie’s liberation from Anglican and Olinka metaphysics is complete. The Anglican

God, who is by implication more “external” than “internal,” feels remote. On the other hand, the Olinka worship of the roofleaf plant is so immanent that it encompasses a limited range of phenomena. When Nettie explains that “The roofleaf became the thing they [the Olinka] worship” (154), the definite article indicates that the roofleaf is the *only* thing they worship. Both systems, in Nettie’s view, limit God.

Nettie’s remarks parallel Shug’s and, eventually, Celie’s belief in ultimate reality as impersonal, all-pervasive spirit rather than a personal deity. At the novel’s end, Celie also identifies God with everything, saying, “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (285). But although both Celie and Nettie develop spiritualties indebted to Hindu metaphysics, their mentors are African or African American, not Indian. Why is this? Arguably, Walker does not acknowledge Hindu sources in *The Color Purple* because she wants African Americans to claim this religion as their own. Critics have noted that one of the major aspirations of *The Color Purple* is to speak about Africa without being constrained by European systems of thought (Gruesser 153). Although the novel largely deals with escaping the yoke of Christianity, by extension, any foreign religion could undermine this project of ethnic reclamation. Acknowledging Indian sources might dilute, in the eyes of her readers, Walker’s vision of a vital spirituality by and for those of African descent. Thus *The Color Purple* portrays the tension between Walker’s interest in Hindu metaphysics and her commitment to celebrating a black spiritual heritage.

#### *From Hindu Transcendence to Buddhist Compassion*

As Walker’s career progresses, her ideas about spiritual ancestry begin to shift, culminating in a more direct acknowledgement of Asian religion in *Now is the Time To*

*Open Your Heart.* The ideas Walker develops after *The Color Purple* are complex enough to warrant further discussion, which will better contextualize my reading of *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*. This novel biographically parallels *The Color Purple*, because Walker writes both novels under the influence of a specific meditation practice from Asia—TM for *The Color Purple* and *tonglen* for *Now is the Time*. And both practices start from a personal crisis but broaden into a social vision. In 1993, Walker's mother died (White 466). To help deal with her grief, Walker listened to recordings of Pema Chödrön, a Tibetan Buddhist nun, teaching *tonglen* meditation (Walker, *We Are the Ones* 98). Whereas TM aims to transcend all thought in the absolute unity of Being, *tonglen* uses detailed visualizations of suffering beings to arouse visceral feelings of compassion in the meditator (H.H. Sakya Trizin 82-84). The practice is intended to develop one's compassion. One imagines breathing in the suffering of others and breathing out one's own happiness to them (Walker, *We Are the Ones* 98; Chödrön 109).

This counterintuitive approach actually worked for Walker who, after practicing the meditation daily for a year, felt both relief from her own grief and increased compassion for others (Walker 98). Walker subsequently met Chödrön, and the two gave a public dialogue that was marketed on video and CD under the title “Alice Walker and Pema Chödrön in Conversation” (1999). During their dialogue, Walker says, “the heart literally responds to this practice [of *tonglen*]....[I]f you keep going and doing the practice, the heart actually relaxes. That is quite amazing to feel” (Chödrön and Walker). According to Walker, *tonglen* meditation opens one's heart. With this description, the source for Walker's book title becomes clear. Although *Now is the Time to Open Your*

*Heart* does not discuss *tonglen* in particular, its engagement with Buddhism and concern for developing compassion is a direct result of Walker's specific meditation practice.

In her dialogue with Chödrön, one can also see Walker's developing ideas about the role ancestry plays as a spiritual concept. Explaining to Chödrön how *tonglen* helped her, Walker says, "I'm always supported by spirits and ancestors and people in my tribe, whomever they've been and however long ago they lived. So it was like having another tribe of people, of ancestors, come to the rescue with this wisdom that came through you and your way of teaching." This thought continues Walker's investment in ancestry. She calls Tibetans, the people who invented *tonglen*, "another tribe," but then calls them, ambiguously, "ancestors." Of course the Tibetans of antiquity are ancestors, most obviously of present-day Tibetans. But Walker implicitly claims Tibetans as her own ancestors as well, showing how important it is for Walker to describe spiritual solace in terms of something that comes from one's ancestors. Through her efforts to promote Buddhism to African Americans, and, as we will see, Amerindians, Walker develops a more nuanced idea of spiritual ancestry that allows for direct acknowledgment of these traditions' Asian origins.

Walker continues to elaborate her case for claiming Buddhists as African Americans' spiritual ancestors at a Buddhist retreat in 2002. This retreat, held at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California, was the first Buddhist retreat specifically for African Americans. In her presentation—the only one of Walker's many public talks that has been called a "dharma talk" (Walker, *We Are the Ones* 88)—Walker opens with a historical account of George Slaughter, a mixed-race child who was lynched for riding on a horse with an unacceptably fine saddle. Walker calls George "our

murdered ancestor” because he is black, but she also invokes Buddhism to expand a concept of ancestry that transcends ethnic identity:

I cherish the study and practice of Buddhism because it is good medicine for healing us so that we may engage the work of healing our ancestors. Ancestors like George. Ancestors like George’s father.

Both George and his father are our ancestors.

*What heals ancestors is understanding them.* And understanding as well that it is not in heaven or in hell that the ancestors are healed. *They can only be healed inside us.* Buddhist practice, sent by ancestors we didn’t even know we had, has arrived, as all things do, just in time. (109, emphasis in original)

This passage lists three ancestors, each less literally plausible than the previous one.

George may not be related to anyone in the room where Walker speaks, but he is memorable as a figurative ancestor because he is a black man killed by racism. But George’s father is more difficult to regard as an ancestor because he is white, and a part of the mob that killed his son. To forgive such a villain and embrace him as one’s ancestor requires a profound Buddhist sense of nonduality. Walker exhorts her listeners to feel compassion toward George’s father, saying that he was “*unfree*” because of racism (107). Finally, Walker takes the word “ancestor” even further: if Buddhism is “sent by ancestors we didn’t even know we had,” then this means that, spiritually speaking, Buddhists are African Americans’ ancestors. In this usage, an ancestor is not necessarily someone in one’s own family tree, ethnic group, or even country. An ancestor is someone from the past from whom one can learn valuable lessons. Of course this is not a new idea; Catholic parishioners routinely address their priests as “father.” But Walker’s

application of this idea is striking for its implicit rejection of biological descent as a criterion for ancestry.

For Walker, Buddhism's relevance for African Americans stems not only from histories of racial hatred, but also from spiritual tendencies within black southern culture. In 2009, Walker wrote a letter of encouragement to the graduating class of Naropa University, a Buddhist school in Boulder, Colorado founded by Chogyam Trungpa in 1974 (Hayward 91-93).<sup>10</sup> In this letter, she praises the school's mission of promoting Buddhist values, but also brings up African American regional experience. Referring to Tibetan Buddhism, she writes,

I see how beautifully it connects with, joins, African American Southern soul. If and when black people in the South begin to investigate Buddhism, a large part of their suffering will decrease and a large part of their peace of mind, which they have valued so highly, and with such persistence, will be enlarged. They will not fail to recognize the gift. (*Cushion* 53-54)

Walker's deep concern for African American Buddhism is apparent in how her letter changes course in order to make this point. This quotation does not fit neatly within the letter's larger organization. Moreover, Naropa University is not in the South, nor does it have a significant population of black students—just one percent as of 2012-2013 (“Facts at a Glance”). But here, Walker is more interested in imagining what could be than what is already the case. Her qualifier “[i]f and when” combines a sense of contingency and inevitability, yearning for a cultural development that she acknowledges has yet to “begin.”

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<sup>10</sup> Naropa University has also been a center for Beat Buddhism and its afterlives. The school houses the Jack Kerouac School for Disembodied Poetics, co-founded by Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldeman (Tonkinson ix, “About JKS”).

The “peace of mind” southern blacks “have valued so highly” is, however, ambiguous in the above passage. At a public appearance in 2013, I asked Walker what specific characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism she sees as harmonizing with “African American Southern soul.” Historically, Walker answered, southern blacks found peace of mind through communing with nature in a slow-paced, outdoor-centered culture. Thus, Walker said, southern blacks “were meditating without calling it that.” Walker proposed that Buddhist meditation would give a more “structured” way of expanding this peace of mind. Through Buddhist meditation, she said, “the black soul” meets “the Tibetan soul.” By supporting events such as the Spirit Rock retreat, speaking alongside H.H. the Dalai Lama (Walker, “Creative Journey”), and promoting meditation at her public appearances,<sup>11</sup> Walker is working to make Buddhism a greater presence in African American culture.

### Opening the Heart

Walker’s expanded notion of spiritual kinship finds narrative expression in *Now is the Time*. But whereas *The Color Purple* does not advertise its Hindu influences, *Now is the Time* explicitly engages with Buddhism. In this novel, the protagonist Kate Talkingtree seeks to recover an ancestral spirituality through Amerindian cultures, a quest reflected in her self-made surname, which used to be “Nelson.” Kate, like Walker, is part-Amerindian, so her turn to the spiritual wisdom of the Amazon reflects a desire to recover the spirituality of her ancestral culture. But rather than receive Eastern wisdom in Amerindian disguise, Kate returns to the Buddhism she abandons after her ancestral spirits help her see Buddhism in a new light.

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<sup>11</sup> At the event I attended, Walker reiterated that meditation has “been such a friend to me” and urged her audience to train their own minds.

At the novel's beginning, Kate grows disaffected with Buddhism because of a politically out-of-touch teacher (4-6). He criticizes "hot revolutions, with guns and violence," and praises the "cool revolution" of the Buddha's teaching (4). Kate, bristling at this facile dismissal of disaffected masses with limited options, leaves the retreat and "[dismantles] her altar" at home (11). The Buddhism she experiences is too white and affluent to understand the struggles of the poor and oppressed around the world. In search of a spirituality that better speaks to these concerns, Kate, who is part-Amerindian, goes to the Amazon on a retreat consisting of teachings, nature walks, and trances induced by the psychedelic plant yagé. During the retreat, Kate listens to the shaman teach about harmony with nature, and befriends the other attendees by sharing stories about their life's hardships. After Kate returns home, she must decide whether to stay in a stable but dull relationship with her longtime boyfriend, and how to continue her spiritual practice.

One night after this return, Kate has a dream in which she listens to a sermon from the ancestral Grandmother spirit she learned about during the retreat. Grandmother admonishes Kate not to throw out the Buddha with the bathwater. She instructs, "*You don't understand about Buddha....He would not mock those who take up arms against their own enslavement. Sometimes there is no way, except through violence, to freedom*" (196-197, italics in original). This is a direct rebuttal of Kate's previous Buddhist teacher, who condescendingly denounces all revolutionary violence. But Grandmother does not say, "White people don't understand about Buddha." She puts the onus on Kate; it is *she* who does not understand. This chastisement paves the way for Kate's reconciliation with Buddhism. The problem, the novel suggests, is that Kate tried to

learn Buddhism from someone who does not understand the suffering of oppressed people around the world. Only by rediscovering Buddhism through the spirits of her own ancestors can Kate recover a positive Buddhist spiritual practice.

To accomplish this goal, the Grandmother uses nature imagery to unite Buddhist and Amerindian traditions:

*When Buddha sat under the bodhi tree, he was sitting under Me. He was sitting under Me, she repeated, as tree. And he was sitting on Me as grass.*

*When you drink yagé, you complain about how bad it tastes. It tastes bad because you have killed it in order to have it. This is not necessary. For the Buddha, it was not necessary. Sitting under Me and on Me, he received the medicina....This is possible, receiving the medicina this way, if you open your heart. (197)*

Here, Grandmother proclaims the kinship of Buddhism and *medicina* as vehicles to spiritual insight. She even suggests Buddhism's advantages over the Amerindian path, saying that Buddhist meditation provides the same benefits of *medicina* without the killing or unpleasant taste. Grandmother thus characterizes this Amerindian path as spiritual shock therapy, a remedial course on the way back to Buddhism. But in order for this return to work, Kate must avoid the pitfalls of what she experienced before. Grandmother warns that for most people, spiritual retreat is not an option, because “[t]he moment they try to open their hearts,...the powers that be rush to implant a religion, generally foreign to their natures, into them” (197). This reference to Walker’s critique of Christianity, and her larger project of ancestral spiritual recovery, challenges Kate to

rediscover a Buddhist practice that is not “foreign to [her] [nature],” even though Buddhism is geographically distant from her ethnic roots.

Like Shug’s description of God in *The Color Purple*, Grandmother’s teaching contains liturgical elements. Grandmother offers a series of points and counterpoints, balancing spiritual affirmations with warnings against violence: “*How precious it is to have a human life to live! How sad to waste it in something so grim and blurry [as violence]. A thought can be like a gun; it can slay the enemy. Music can be like a sword; it can pierce the heart of the enemy*” (197). These repetitive, poetic analogies read like a prayer for training the mind to avoid violent thoughts, as these can poison even normally benign activities. Also, after explaining that the physical *medicina* is not necessary for spiritual insight, Grandmother asserts, “That is why people take the time to learn how to do that; open the heart. That is why they go on retreat. That is why they learn to meditate” (197). This anaphora gives a repetitive, rhythmic call to regular, diligent spiritual practice. At the novel’s end, Kate’s return to Buddhism and to her estranged boyfriend demonstrate that she has, in fact, “opened her heart” to spiritual and romantic commitment. The fact that Kate has this dream without the aid of yagé indicates that she can now “[receive] the medicina” without chemical aids. In addition, Grandmother’s remarks about the struggles of “*the very poor*” suggest that opening one’s heart is not only for personal healing, but is necessary for social change on a larger scale.

Kate’s nature-infused return to Buddhism gives new meaning to the description of the Buddhist teacher in the novel’s first scene. The Buddhist teacher has “a shining bald head....Every once in a while he reached up and stroked the silver earring in his left ear.... Because of the earring and because he seemed spotless in his flowing robes, she mentally

dubbed him Mr. Clean” (4). This description casts the teacher as immaculate—“shining,” “silver,” and “spotless”—and lofty, emphasizing his “head” and his upward reach to his earring. He is haughty, distant from the earth, bereft of vivid color, and out of touch with the worldly experience of impoverished masses. He represents the fantasy of a disembodied mind that arrogantly judges the world from a sterile remove.

By contrast, Kate’s yagé-induced visions approach Buddhism from the earth, emphasizing the ground the Buddha he touches and on which he sits, as well as his position under the bodhi tree. This earth-centered imagery teaches Kate to re-approach Buddhism from the lowly ground, not from the lofty position of the complacent teacher’s “shining bald head” (4). Near the novel’s end, Kate dreams that a snake, a creature demonized in Christianity but venerated as close to the earth in Amerindian lore, tells her that the Buddha is “*in alignment*” with Amerindian teachings on “[making] friends” with one’s fears (211). The snake “[smiles] benignly, like Mr. Clean from the Buddhist retreat she’d left an eternity ago” (211). This reference to the teacher who alienates Kate from Buddhism shows how far Kate has come. Whereas she reacts with distaste to the teacher before, she can now appreciate his good qualities, seeing him in the snake without resentment. This change in perspective allows Kate to rebuild her altar, return to the lover she left to go on her retreat, and have an informal wedding-like reception feast with friends who fly in from around the world. The novel ends with Kate placing an anaconda clock on her altar in the Buddha’s lap, symbolizing the harmony of Amerindian and Buddhist spirituality.

By bringing Buddhism and Amerindian paths together, Walker narrates a more nuanced, ethnographically detailed negotiation between traditions than she offers in *The*

*Color Purple*. Nevertheless, both novels emphasize the primacy of finding spirituality that is related to one's own ethnic roots. Celie, Nettie, and Kate's spiritual journeys succeed because Asian religion is mediated through contact with an ancestral culture. Walker wants to teach her readers to go beyond one's own culture *through* one's own culture. Finding spiritual solace in one's ancestors opens up ways of relating to sacred paths from elsewhere. Thus, Walker envisions how one can reach across cultures for transcendence while remaining culturally authentic.

### Johnson's Eastern Reconciliation

Whereas few critics have discussed Walker's Asian influences, Charles Johnson has already inspired voluminous criticism on his debt to Eastern thought (Byrd; Little; Nash, *Fiction*; Selzer, *Context*; Storhoff). But by discussing Johnson alongside Walker, a juxtaposition which no critic has made, the relationship between these two writers' commitment to both Asian religion and African American culture will become clearer. Existing analyses tend to treat Walker as a writer who emphasizes racial issues (Lister vii; Selzer, "Race and Domesticity" 2; Tapia 29), whereas critics often view Johnson as eager to transcend race and all forms of dualism (Little 136; Nash, *Fiction* 132; Conner 58-59). My work shows that both authors are engaged in projects more similar than these divergent accounts suggest. Just as Walker finds it important for ancestral cultures to mediate initially-foreign religions to contemporary ethnic contexts, Johnson's novels strive to give Asian religions an African or African American face. However, whereas Walker offers Asian philosophy as an alternative to Christianity, Johnson presents Eastern thought as complementary to Christianity.

Johnson became Buddhist in 1981 after finishing his second novel, *Oxherding Tale* (McWilliams xxx). By calling himself a Buddhist, Johnson shows himself to be more willing than Walker to declare a religious affiliation, but Johnson also resists identifying with a specific school in Buddhism. Although he is officially registered with a Rinzai Zen temple in Japan, Johnson maintains a “shamelessly nonsectarian” orientation (*Turning the Wheel* xviii), having had many Buddhist teachers from different schools without identifying strongly with any of them (Whalen-Bridge, “Shoulder” 308). Arguably, the common thread behind Johnson’s Buddhist path is his focus on Buddhism’s psychological analyses of the human mind, which intersects with his philosophical training as a phenomenologist (McCollough 13, 29-30; Nash, “Conversation” 214).

For most of his career, Johnson has not called attention to his Buddhism. Eastern religions are a driving force in his novels, but they are expressed primarily in the novels’ form rather than their exposition. Although Johnson discusses Buddhist philosophy a great deal in interviews, he has only briefly alluded to the fact that he is a Buddhist. More recently, that changed. After *Dreamer*, Johnson says that he entered a new phase in his career in which he wants to devote himself publicly to Buddhism, especially through his essays (Whalen-Bridge, “Shoulder” 300). Five years after the publication of *Dreamer*, Johnson’s essay collection *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* makes this emerging project even more explicit. In “A Sangha by Another Name,” Johnson boldly argues that Buddhism’s emphasis on nonduality is the best antidote to racism, concluding that “through the Dharma, the black American quest for ‘freedom’ realizes its profoundest, truest, and most revolutionary meaning” (57). By

examining *Middle Passage* and *Dreamer*, the reader sees how Johnson makes this case in narrative form. First, I show how *Middle Passage* imagines a Hindu-like religion originating from an African tribe. Then, I turn to *Dreamer*, whose primary conveyor of Eastern wisdom to America is, surprisingly, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

*Middle Passage* (1990) is the tale of narrator Rutherford Calhoun's spiritual education. From the novel's beginning, Johnson tailors Rutherford's vices to a Buddhist corrective. According to the second of Buddhism's four noble truths, suffering arises from attachment to self, phenomena, and experiences (Rahula 29-30). Rutherford is a textbook case: "I hungered—literally *hungered*—for life in all its shades and hues: I was hooked on sensation, you might say, a lecher for perception and the nerve-knocking thrill, like a shot of opium, of new experiences" (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 3). Rutherford is selfish, and his thieving and womanizing prevent him from developing trust-based relationships with others; indeed, he stows away on a slave ship to avoid marriage. But by interacting with the Allmuseri tribespeople whom the crew enslaves, Rutherford arrives at a boundary-shattering epiphany that destroys his grief-sustaining belief in the division between subject and object.

Through the Allmuseri, Johnson gives Rutherford access to Eastern wisdom from an African source. Johnson gives the Allmuseri a religion whose central tenets developed and coalesced in Asia, not Africa. Rutherford summarizes for the reader what he has learned by talking to and observing the Allmuseri. As in both Buddhism and Hinduism, the Allmuseri have a nondual metaphysic: "[t]he failure to experience the unity of Being everywhere was the Allmuseri vision of Hell. And that was where we lived: purgatory. That was where we were taking them—into the madness of multiplicity—and the thought

of it drove them wild" (65). In this view, slavery is a manifestation of the false belief in differentiation between self and other. Also, the Allmuseri take karma and rebirth seriously: "no word was uttered or deed executed that did not echo throughout the universe. Seeds, they were, that would flower into other deeds—good and evil—in no time at all. For a people with their values, murder violated (even mutilated) the murderer so badly that it might well take them a billion billion rebirths to again climb the chain and achieve human form" (140). Along the same lines, the Allmuseri share with Buddhists and Hindus the belief that external reality is the creation of one's own mind, making "each man utterly responsible for his own happiness and sorrow" (164). The conjunction of monism, karma, rebirth, and the primacy of mind over matter clearly mark the Allmuseri religion as philosophically Asian.

Critics have previously observed that the Allmuseri embody Eastern wisdom, but they have not sufficiently explored the cultural implications of this grafting (Little 142, Storhoff 174-175). Johnson's move advances his project, shared with Alice Walker, of making black Buddhists seem less strange by imbuing Buddhism, or something like it, with an African ancestral pedigree. But although both Johnson and Walker invent fictional tribes for *Middle Passage* and *The Color Purple*, respectively, Johnson's creative license is greater. Unlike Johnson, Walker has spent time in Africa (White 110-111). Not coincidentally, Walker's Olinka do not have any obviously non-African characteristics. Although Nettie arrives at a philosophically Eastern perspective from her contact with the Olinka, the Olinka themselves do not profess any distinctively Asian doctrines. By contrast, Johnson freely grafts Asian religion onto his African creation. This bold displacement simultaneously appeals to African nativism and highlights

Buddhism's relevance to everyone, regardless of genetic ancestry. Johnson's Allmuseri are more than a tribe of people; they are embodiments of spiritual transcendence.

The Allmuseri, paradoxically, are both particular and universal. They bear cultural particulars of places and names. But their being symbolizes the idyllic origins of all of humanity, as Rutherford's description suggests: "their palms were blank, bearing no lines. No fingerprints....[T]hey might have been the *Ur*-tribe of humanity itself. I'd never seen anyone like them. Or felt such antiquity in the presence of others; a clan of *Sphaeriker*. Indeed, what I felt was the presence of countless others *in* them, a crowd spun from everything this vast continent contained" (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 61). If fingerprints mark individuality, then the lack of fingerprints symbolizes a lack of differentiation, indicating that the Allmuseri are wise parents of humanity who are more in touch with primordial reality than other, less mature peoples. Rutherford's remark that the Allmuseri "might have been the *Ur*-tribe of humanity itself" resonates with the current prevailing theory that the human species originated in Africa, thus making Africans everyone's ancestors. Walker raises a similar point in a dharma talk, reminding her audience that because humans came out of Africa, one may think of African heritage not only for African Americans but for everyone (Walker, *We Are the Ones* 119).

Johnson takes this idea further, eventually revealing the Allmuseri to be a blend of tribes from around the world. We learn that the Allmuseri are a seafaring people who took influences from India, Central America, and even Europe (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 76-77, 65). In short, the Allmuseri are everyone's ancestors, but also everyone's contemporaries.

Despite this evidence of shared ancestry, Rutherford initially has difficulty relating to the Allmuseri. He has enough of a conscience to admire the Allmuseri's noble qualities but not enough to believe that these qualities are his to inherit. He laments, "I wanted their ageless culture to be my own....But who was I fooling?" (78). But as his knowledge of the Allmuseri increases, Rutherford realizes that "the Allmuseri seemed less a biological tribe than a clan held together by values" (109). He reflects that his brother, a Christian pastor devoted to charity, "might well have been one of their priests" (109). This shift from "biological" considerations to "values" sets up Rutherford's ability to learn from the Allmuseri.

Rutherford's move away from genetic determinism also helps him realize that the Allmuseri are not "ageless" (78), but change as others do. As Rutherford watches the Allmuseri grow increasingly despondent from their enslavement, Rutherford realizes that they are not a "timeless product" but "they were process and Hericlitean change, like any men" (124). The "emptiness" Rutherford sees in tribesman Ngonyama's eyes is not simply the emptiness of loss, but emptiness in the Buddhist sense of lacking of a fixed essence: change is possible. If "[w]e had changed them" (124), then by implication, the Allmuseri can change him. Rutherford initially thinks of the Allmuseri as living saints who "fell sick, it was said, if they wronged anyone" (78). This naïve view is discredited when the Allmuseri mutiny and kill most of the crew, even as they accept the karmic gravity of their actions, wondering whether their chance at freedom is worth the spiritual cost of their violence (140-141). Rutherford's growing awareness of change and emptiness are a crucial part of his maturation. Overcoming ethnic essentialism makes Rutherford more capable of adopting the Allmuseri's good qualities.

Rutherford's increasing receptivity to others begins without him realizing it. When an Allmuseri carves meat so skillfully that he "leaves no knife tracks" (76), one observer insists this feat must be a "trick" of "[m]irrors" (76). This offhanded remark actually presages Rutherford's ability to see his reflection, both literally and figuratively, in the Allmuseri. Here, Rutherford compares the Allmueri's meat carving to his own skill as a lock-picker (76). Soon afterward, Rutherford gives some of his food to an Allmuseri girl after "[h]er eyes burned a hole in my forehead" (78). For the first time, Rutherford feels penetrated by someone else's gaze, hinting at the erosion of Rutherford's solid sense of self. Also, whereas Rutherford previously cannot see himself as an Allmuseri (78), he later sees his reflection in an Allmuseri's eyes and realizes that they both are "remade by virtue of [their] contact with the crew" (124). Later, Rutherford encounters an Allmuseri God kept in a cage in the cargo hull, and he intuits that the God's name is Rutherford (171). This series of face-to-face moments progresses from mundane—the Allmuseri's carving skill is like Rutherford's thieving skill—to transformative: the God as Rutherford signals an underlying divinity that transcends the apparent separation between beings.

As everyone on board faces increasing threats from storms, navigational errors, disease, and insurrection, Rutherford reassures them of their safe return, in what he calls a "useful fiction" (162). Gary Storhoff reads this phrase allegorically, stating that the novel reimagines American history itself as "useful fiction" that can inspire positive change (150-151). In fact, the novel's primary "useful fiction" is the Allmuseri themselves. Through this fictional tribe, Johnson joins Asian religion to the origins both of Africans and of humanity in general. By locating Asian religions in Africa, Johnson's

“useful fiction” is that Eastern philosophy’s origins are black. This move seeks to make black practitioners of Asian religions seem less strange, both inside and outside of African American communities. But by also emphasizing the Allmuseri’s status as “the *Ur-tribe* of all humanity” (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 65), Johnson positions the tenets of Asian religions as universal wisdom relevant to everyone.

This wisdom—centered around a belief in ultimate reality as undifferentiated—matures in Rutherford’s mind through his performance of acts of kindness. As he comforts the ship’s occupants, his heretofore occasional glimpses into nonduality coalesce into the following epiphany:

[I]n myself I found nothing I could rightly call Rutherford Calhoun, only pieces and fragments of all the people who had touched me, all the places I had seen, all the homes I had broken into. The “I” that I was, was a mosaic of many countries, a patchwork of others and objects stretching backward to perhaps the beginning of time. What I felt, seeing this, was indebtedness. What I felt, plainly, was a transmission to those on deck of all I had pilfered, as though I was but a conduit or window through which my pillage and booty of “experience” passed....[E]ven I was the more peaceful as I went wearily back to help Cringle at the helm. (162-163)

Without realizing it, this epiphany fulfills Rutherford’s wish for the Allmuseri “culture to be my own” (78). Just as the Allmuseri bear “the presence of countless others *in them*” (61), Rutherford sees himself anew as “a patchwork of others.” This feeling of “indebtedness” allows him to feel ancient legacies “stretching backward to perhaps the beginning of time,” similar to the Allmuseri’s reputation as “a remarkably *old* people”

(61). Most importantly, Rutherford transcends dualism, the division of “the unity of Being” into self and not-self (65), by abandoning his habitual thoughts that separated himself from others. From this moment on, Rutherford is no longer a selfish “parasite” who is “hooked on sensation” (162, 3).

In this passage, Rutherford’s thought process also takes on characteristics of the Allmuseri language. Previously, Rutherford explains that “Nouns or static substances hardly existed in their vocabulary at all” (77). In the same way, most of the things that Rutherford says comprise his identity are actions, using verbs such as “touched,” “seen,” “broken,” and “passed.” Even the nouns Rutherford uses break down into processes, such as the “mosaic” that depends on the implicit act of stitching together. Furthermore, just as, in the Allmuseri Ngonyama’s speech, “the objects and others he referred to flowed together like water” (77), Rutherford’s long, flowing sentences embody a loss of static selfhood and a sense of identity with his surroundings. Rutherford uses a syntax of “indebtedness.” This epiphany marks a point of no relapse that sets up Rutherford’s happy ending. After he returns to shore, he embraces relationships and responsibilities rather than fleeing from them. He adopts an orphaned Allmuseri girl from the ship and agrees to marry Isadora, the woman whose marriage proposal drove him to sea in the first place.

Although *Middle Passage* presents an African culture with important non-African characteristics, Johnson is not simply flouting ethnography. Rather, the Allmuseri allegorize the relationship between enlightened wisdom awareness and ignorant dualism as a temporal fall from grace. In other words, Johnson imagines a utopian past that existed before human beings developed destructive thought patterns. In this vision, the

relationship between monistic and dualistic thought is not simply one of ideal versus real, but also past versus present. Rutherford reflects that the Europeans who, according to Allmuseri lore, once belonged to the tribe, “fell...into the madness of multiplicity,” the very place where, by enslaving them, “we were taking them” (65). Accordingly, the change Rutherford sees in the Allmuseri is ambivalent: “[w]e had changed them...into what sort of men I could not imagine....And of what were they now capable?” (124). Rutherford’s nervousness implies that the Allmuseri, through their exposure to the violence of enslavement, may no longer be as reliably nonviolent as they once were. His fear is realized when the Allmuseri rebel, seize control of the ship, and are, in Rutherford’s words, “fallen; now a part of the world of multiplicity, of *me* versus *thee*” (140). In these descriptions, unity is the essential beginning; multiplicity, the contingent decline. Johnson allegorically locates this primordial beginning in Africa, the cradle of humanity.

#### Martin Luther King Jr. as Eastern Sage

Whereas *Middle Passage* is somewhat fantastic, *Dreamer* turns sharply toward realism by focusing on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., not a fictional mystical tribe, as the conveyor of Eastern thought to African Americans. In *Dreamer*, Johnson’s characterization of King mediates Eastern wisdom to America through his enlightened activism. This is not to say that the novel ignores King’s Christianity, but rather that Johnson uses King’s status as a Christian figurehead as a platform for communicating Eastern messages. This idea is not without precedent. Various scholars have studied King’s debt to Gandhian nonviolence as both a political tactic and a way of life (Mary King, T. Jackson, Nojeim). But Johnson takes King’s Eastern influences farther than

historical accounts by making concepts from Asian religions an important part of King's personal faith.

In *Dreamer*, King does not find realizations of emptiness and nonduality from within Christianity, but gains them from his exposure to Indian religion. Johnson, portraying King's historical trip to India in 1959, describes how King comes to India "as a pilgrim" and feels "an ineffable peace, and had never felt so free" as he and his wife hear a Sanskrit chant in the distance (22). Much later, King wants to "probe deeper into their concept of Maya—the world as itself a cradle-to-crypt dream, in which all men were caught and only the blessed allowed to awaken" (224). As Gary Storhoff has noted, Johnson's Buddhification of King's lends additional meanings to the novel's title. "*Dreamer*" most obviously refers to King's landmark "I Have a Dream" speech. But it also refers to the fact that, in Hinduism as well as Buddhism, the physical world is a dream-like illusion (Storhoff 184). Furthermore, *Dreamer* imagines that Asian teachings rescue King in a moment of personal crisis, making his continued Civil Rights leadership possible.

In the novel, King's trip to India plants the seeds of profound realization that only germinate in America, where Eastern notions of ultimate nonduality come to life one night in King's kitchen. Marc Connor and William Nash recognize that Johnson rewrites King's famous kitchen experience in Buddhist terms, saying that this scene promotes "the amalgamation of various paths to spiritual, mental, and physical liberation" (xxiv). But their analysis treats Buddhism and Christianity like two colors of paint that blend equally in King. The scene is more complicated than that: in *Dreamer*, this "kitchen conversion" is the moment when King decisively brings Eastern wisdom to the United States, and to

African Americans in particular. Through King, Johnson does not simply blend Christianity and Buddhism together, but rather supplements Christian *agape* with Buddhist emptiness. In his memoir *Stride Toward Freedom*, King remembers one night when his resolve to continue his public campaigns wavers, having been severely tested by violent threats. He pleads to God for help, and receives a powerful answer:

I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. ‘I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.’

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: ‘Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth, and God will be at your side forever.’ Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. (134-135)

This experience, which King marks as a turning point in his career, is historically important but theologically unexceptional, appealing to standard Christian tropes of the believer’s supplication and God’s reassuring response. I say this not to belittle King’s

narrative, but rather to highlight the contrast of Johnson's radical revision. Instead of focusing on God, in Johnson's version, King has a Buddhist epiphany of nonduality: Again, I quote at length for comparison:

At last he began to pray. To whom—or what—he could not say. Not asking for anything then. Not fighting, only confessing, “Lord, I have nothing left...” His gaze drifted to the fragments of the cup that was no longer a cup. But where had the “cup” gone? His fist opened, disappearing into his hand. Where had his “fist” gone? Then it came quietly, unbidden. He was traveling light again, for the long, lurid dream of multiplicity and separateness, the very belief in an “I” that suffered and strained to affect the world, dissolved, and for the first time he felt like a dreamer gently roused from sleep and forgetfulness. Awake, he saw he was not the doer. How could he have ever believed otherwise? That which he'd thought practiced virtue, surrendered to vice, held degrees, opinions and elaborated theories, and traveled toward a goal was spun from a spiderweb of words, no more real than the cantels of the erstwhile cup before him. Later, he would tell reporters and his congregation the room was rayed with shadowless light, and the Lord said unto him, *Stand up for righteousness, stand up for the truth, and God will be at your side forever*, but in fact the light came from him--not without--and the *vox dei* he heard had been his own. *Not I*, he heard it whisper again in the suddenly transparent kitchen, but the father within me doeth the works...*I seek not my will but the will of the Father who sent me...*(82)

Johnson's rewrite downplays the Christian aspects of King's religious experience while adding Buddhist elements. In King's original, the coffee cup is just there, a mere prop

that does not command his attention. But Johnson makes the cup an object of contemplation that leads to an experience of emptiness. By seeing the cup as “fragments that [were] no longer a cup,” King realizes that the “cup” does not inherently exist, but is a concept that the mind constructs. This train of thought soon extends to include himself; he too is empty of inherent existence, “no more real than the...cup.”

As King’s sense of self breaks down, the division between himself and God dissolves as well. Originally, King presupposes a separation between himself and God, humbling the former and praising the latter. When he has “nothing left” and “can’t face it alone,” God provides support as though He is a separate person. But in Johnson’s version, King prays without an addressee, “[t]o whom—or what—he could not say.” Then, in an act of remarkable boldness, Johnson quotes King in order to contradict him, insisting that God does not provide external support, but rather “the *vox dei* had been his own.” There is an apparent contradiction in saying that the voice of divine truth is “his own,” and that the self from which the voice issues is empty. This tension resolves in an Eastern belief in nonduality where there is no differentiation between the self, God, and external objects.

Johnson’s style in this passage’s reinforces King’s realization. King’s original version consists of relatively short sentences. But the sentences in Johnson’s version grow progressively longer, paralleling King’s expansion of consciousness. The run-on list of actions done by “[t]hat which he’d thought practiced virtue” conveys King’s idea of selfhood dissolving. Like Rutherford’s epiphany in *Middle Passage*, Johnson’s sentences show his characters becoming open to everything by gently erasing the illusion of boundaries. In King’s version, God helps him conquer fear. In Johnson’s version, an

epiphany of emptiness transcends fear. This realization empowers King to continue his campaigns, and makes him a model from which the novel's other characters learn.

Although King admired Gandhi as an ethicist and political strategist, there is no evidence that Gandhi's Eastern perspective superseded King's Christian convictions, as Johnson suggests. However, Johnson does not view his fictional King as any less Christian for his Buddhist realization. In a 2003 interview, he states, "I've always been a sincere Christian *and* a Buddhist....There's no contradiction, at least not for the Buddhadharma, which emphasizes the interdependence of all things and avoids dualism" (McWilliams 296). Johnson's key clause is "at least not for the Buddhadharma." Elsewhere, Johnson himself describes Christianity as "metaphysically dualistic" in direct contrast to Buddhism (*Turning the Wheel* 49). Therefore, to assert that there is no contradiction between Buddhism and Christianity is already to privilege Buddhism over Christianity. One may draw parallels between the two faiths, but that does not mean that they are fundamentally reconcilable. Accordingly, Johnson's Buddhist revision of King must negate King's Christian convictions, a fact that challenges Johnson's characterization of King and his attempted Christian-Buddhist synthesis more broadly. Of course, *Dreamer* is fiction, not biography, so the charge of "misrepresentation" does not straightforwardly apply here. But Johnson's creative license prompts readers to ask what factual duties a writer has in fictional portrayals of historical figures.

### King's Buddhist Counterpart

King's main foil is Chaym Smith, a man who looks like King and has a prodigious intellect, but struggles with poverty, addiction, and bitterness toward those more prosperous than himself. Eventually, Chaym imitates King's mediation of Eastern

wisdom to the United States through activism, but the novel's early pages emphasize Chaym's contrast to King more than his similarities. The novel's plot gains momentum when Chaym asks to be King's body double. King reluctantly agrees, and Chaym undertakes intensive theological study in case an overscheduled King needs Chaym to speak in his place. But Chaym's motivations are not to help the nonviolent movement; rather, he selfishly wishes to prove his talent as equal to King's: “‘I can do anything *he* does. Just watch me—and I’ll fucking do it better’” (112).

Both Chaym and King have spent time in Asia and learned from its faiths, but whereas King brings these philosophies to bear on black uplift in America, Chaym fails to deploy his Eastern religious training. In fact, Chaym is far more highly trained in formal Buddhist practice than King, having spent a year in a Japanese Zen temple, but King's historical consciousness makes his realizations superior in spite of his lesser knowledge of Buddhism. Chaym's novice term at the *zendo* is naïve escapism, not engaged insight; he recounts that “[t]he world that hurt me so bad didn't exist no more, and I was happy” (98). But although his practice is “correct” (99), Chaym passively does what he is told rather than cultivating compassion for others. His enjoyable time abruptly ends when the head of the temple expels him on the racist grounds that “[o]nly a Japanese can experience true enlightenment” (99). Once this peaceful refuge exposes itself as tainted by racism, Chaym is devastated and his life rapidly deteriorates. Chaym continues to collect and recite scriptures, drawing from many traditions (58-59, 95-96, 153-54) and demonstrates formidable concentration and memorization. But his private recitations do not alleviate his problems, nor do they motivate him to serve others.

Because Chaym does not connect Eastern wisdom to his cultural position as an African American, he becomes bitter when he talks about Buddhist philosophy. Chaym defends his ability to stand in for King by saying, “Everybody’s playing a role anyway, trying to act like what they’re supposed to be, wearing at least one mask, probably more, and there’s nothing underneath, Bishop. Just emptiness” (86). In Buddhism, the notion that our personalities are habitual constructions points to the possibility of a blissful liberation from self-clinging. But Chaym sours this doctrine into a sardonic diagnosis of universal insincerity. Similarly, when supporting character Amy tries to persuade Chaym to join King’s movement, he calls her inspirational family “a fucking lie. All narratives are lies, man, an illusion....As soon as you squeeze experience into a sentence—or a story—it’s suspect....If you want to be free, you best go beyond all that.’ / ‘To *what*? / ‘That’s what I’m trying to figure out’” (93). In Buddhism, the notion that narratives are illusory does not foreclose their use, but rather points the way to the transcendence of time. Chaym reduces this idea to the cynical formulation that all stories are lies. And his follow-up shows that he does not know what, by contrast, could be true. Chaym’s personal despair leads him to resign himself to social injustice, even suggesting that blacks deserve their second-class status in mid-twentieth-century America (65-66).

Eventually, Chaym undergoes a redemptive transformation. His Eastern religious training finally comes to life through his contact with African American struggle and culture. One night, an angry man shoots Chaym, thinking he is King. As Whalen-Bridge has noted, this is a turning point after which Chaym loses his bitter edge (“Waking Cain” 513-514). Chaym’s unintentional act of sacrifice—in effect, taking a bullet for King—humbles him; he does not brag about his survival, and no longer speaks in tirades

(Johnson, *Dreamer* 153). This event marks the beginning of Chaym's participation in the Civil Rights Movement. Soon after, Chaym takes on a job doing restoration work at a church in southern Illinois. As Johnson scholar Rudolph Byrd deftly explains, this labor helps make Smith a part of something larger than himself, connecting him to a web of history manifest in the building's capacious blend of old and new features (Byrd 181-182). But although Byrd sees continuity between Chaym's church service and his time at the zendo, the church's inclusive architecture actually contrasts from the temple's non-inclusive rigidity. Whereas the church is "a layering of lives and architectural styles based not on the principle of either/or but of adding this to that" (Johnson, *Dreamer* 179), the temple is coldly sparse and clean, with "wooden floors polished so brightly by hand that they almost gleamed" (97). The temple's scrupulous cleanliness is a symbol for its misguided emphasis on racial purity, which leads to Chaym's eventual exclusion. With these descriptions, *Dreamer* inverts conventional judgments of tidiness as superior to messiness.

The contrast between the zendo and the church shows that Chaym gains greater spiritual realizations from the latter than the former. In effect, Chaym realizes Buddhist wisdom through an African American context. In his recollections of his time at the temple, Chaym seems to have experienced a realization of nonself, reporting that "I wasn't even aware of an *I*" (98). But this apparent liberation from selfhood only endures while the pressures that make him feel self-conscious are absent; Chaym has not actually changed the patterns of thinking that tend toward egotism. The fragility of his freedom exposes itself when a crisis—his racist expulsion—shatters his realization.

Because Chaym's redemptive work takes place in a church, his character development seems at first to suggest a synthesis of Christianity and Buddhism. Indeed, after his injury, Chaym spends much of his time studying both Western and Eastern texts ranging from "the Pentateuch" to the "Lotus Sutra" (154). However, his transformation remains grounded in Eastern philosophy. Chaym's post-gunshot notebooks are filled with transcriptions of Buddhist verses about "Enlightenment" (210). Also, according to the narrator, Matthew Bishop, Chaym's recent paintings show that "the play of colors...did not exist...outside the miracle of consciousness" (209). Matthew's interpretation is consistent with Chaym's religious training, and reiterates the Buddhist and Hindu belief that phenomena are illusory projections of one's own mind.

After working at the church, Chaym conveys humility and selflessness even in the midst of new turmoil. The FBI blackmails Chaym into helping their efforts to sabotage King's reputation. Chaym does not say what the agents who approach him want him to do, and the novel does not make clear whether Chaym complies. Shortly before Chaym disappears permanently, he meets with one of King's assistants one last time in the church and hands him a signed Commitment Blank, a promise to carry out the nonviolent ideals of the Civil Rights movement as defined by King (213). By signing the pledge he rejected before, Chaym aligns himself with King's application of spiritual values to social activism. Also, by asking the assistant to pray for him when he lacks the conviction to pray for himself (213), Chaym shows that in a moment of crisis he turns tentatively toward religion, not away from it as he did before. Here, Chaym imitates King's mediation of Eastern wisdom to the West by making it come alive in his works.

Thus, *Dreamer* suggests that one becomes enlightened not by moving to Asia, but by making a pilgrimage there, and then returning to improve the place of one's upbringing. The most highly realized people are not necessarily those whose culture invented Buddhism. And yet, *Dreamer* briefly revives *Middle Passage*'s trope of ethnic descent by revealing near the end that Chaym is an Allmuseri. He is a descendant of Bakela Calhoun, the Allmuseri girl Rutherford adopts at the end of *Middle Passage* (205). If the Allmuseri fall into the delusion of dualism in *Middle Passage*, they continue to decline in both moral uprightness and numbers through generations, until Chaym is "the last of his line" (205). Why would Johnson give Chaym this ethnic pedigree, when *Dreamer* is for the most part less invested than *Middle Passage* in treating Asian religion as African? The thoughts of Johnson's King help answer this question. King's great hope is that "the children of masters and slaves might realize that Race was an illusion, all children were literally—genetically—their own, and embrace one another as members of a single tribe" (84). Although King does not know it, this tribe is the Allmuseri. Because *Middle Passage* figures the Allmuseri as both a distinct tribe and the universal ancestors of humanity's spiritual potential, Chaym's distinction as an Allmuseri underlines, rather than undermines, the universal spiritual potential of all human beings.

More recently, Johnson has continued to connect King's ideals of equality to a Buddhist critique of race, particularly in relation to the political rise of Barack Obama. Shortly before Obama won the presidency in 2008, Johnson wrote an essay in the Buddhist magazine *Shambala Sun* titled "The Meaning of Barack Obama." Johnson views Obama's career, as many have, as a realization of King's hope: "whatever meaning we find is based on our deeds, our actions, and, as Martin Luther King Jr. once said, 'the

content of our character.’’ Johnson explicitly connects Obama’s appeal as a ‘‘post-racial’’ politician to Eastern notions of emptiness, asserting that ‘‘race is *maya*,’’ a Sanskrit word for the illusion of ‘‘dualism.’’ Obama’s success, Johnson asserts, shows that ‘‘true excellence is colorblind.’’ By linking Eastern metaphysics with liberal colorblindness, Johnson inserts American Buddhism into contemporary critical debates about race. Although he does not name names, Johnson puts himself at odds with scholars such as W.J.T. Mitchell and Tim Wise. Citing reactions that declared Obama’s election as a post-racial moment, Mitchell and Wise argue that the pursuit of colorblindness actually harms efforts to make racism visible (*Seeing Through Race, Colorblind*). Johnson thus lays the groundwork for Buddhism’s entry into further discussions about the value and viability of colorblindness in the U.S.

Chaym’s Buddhist loss of bitterness speaks to these competing views of colorblindness, as the reader struggles to determine whether Chaym’s change of heart represents progress or passivity. Chaym learns selflessness and diligence, but loses his ambitious edge. He practices patient support, not tireless activism. The novel’s dark, ambiguous ending further demonstrates that Chaym’s spiritual progress is not enough to stop racism’s pressures on his life. King’s reconfiguration as an implicit Buddhist, however, draws a clear connection between Eastern realizations and political progress. The fact that Chaym’s story ends before he fully solidifies his life’s direction attests to how much more work there is to be done. It does not undermine the notion that racial progress has a viable basis in Buddhist and Hindu doctrines of nonduality.

Chaym’s transformation in *Dreamer* parallels Kate’s in *Now is the Time*. Neither character learns Eastern religion from members of their own race, as Celie and

Rutherford do. Instead, both characters learn from non-black teachers explicitly trained in Asian religions. Chaym and Kate become disenchanted with their Buddhist practice, but they learn to see Eastern traditions in a new light, emphasizing how it relates to their own minority status. In addition, the relationship between *Dreamer* and *Middle Passage* is similar to that between *Now is the Time* and *The Color Purple*. Whereas *The Color Purple* and *Middle Passage* allegorically disguise Eastern teachers as Africans, *Now is the Time* and *Dreamer* explicitly acknowledge these ideas' Asian origins.

We can thus see a change in how Walker and Johnson deal with channeling Eastern wisdom to African Americans. An allegory of literal ancestry in their earlier work gives way to overt recognition of Asian traditions in their later work. In these works, the reader can see an evolving sense that literal ancestry is less important, although one's ethnic group remains an indispensable reference point when engaging with Eastern religion. Whether they deal with African origins or African American solidarity, Walker and Johnson emphasize ethnic identity to convey their view of Buddhism's relevance for African Americans. Their literary projects thus constitute a groundbreaking effort to make Eastern nonduality a tool for improving America as a multiethnic society. For Walker and Johnson, the liberating potential of Asian religion makes Buddhist and Hindus the ancestors African Americans did not know they had.

## Chapter 4: Buddhist Nonself and Asian American Identity: Lan Cao and Maxine Hong Kingston

In this study's first three chapters, I examine how non-Asian fiction writers engage with Asian religions as foreign presences adapting to America. In this chapter, I shift my focus to writers for whom these religions are not an import, but an inheritance. The history of Buddhism, which dates back 2,500 years (Smith 83), takes place predominantly in Asia, and Asian immigrants have practiced Buddhism in the U.S. since the mid-nineteenth century (Fields 72-73). However, Asian American writers have only recently produced a body of strongly Buddhist-inflected fiction in English—roughly over the past twenty-five years. For characters in these texts, American culture, not Buddhist tradition, is the newer presence with which to come to terms. In Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997) and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003), transnational narratives bring Buddhism to bear upon the Vietnam War. These two texts attest to Asian Americans' Buddhist experiences and work to harmonize the “American” in “Asian American” with Buddhist principles.

Cao and Kingston's writing occurs in the context of a dynamic history of Asian American activism, scholarship, and art. During the late 1960s and 1970s, American activists of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino descent helped form a pan-Asian identity to fight for social and economic equality (Maeda xi, Wei 1-2). This movement made many significant accomplishments, such as establishing Asian American studies as an academic discipline (Chang 181). But after the late 1980s, Asian American studies shifted toward emphasizing difference over pan-Asian solidarity (Wu and Song xiv-xv,

Xiaojing 3). In particular, Lisa Lowe's influential essay "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences" marked a turning point in the field (1991). Lowe reaffirms the value of "Asian American" as an identity category for political activism. But she stresses the need to avoid essentialism by emphasizing the many differences among Asian Americans, including national origin, language, class, and other factors (28). Lowe's argument gained considerable traction by 2000, the year in which her essay was anthologized in the important collection *Asian American Studies: A Reader* (Wu and Song xxiii). In 2003, Kandice Chuh built on Lowe's prerogative by arguing that Asian American studies should conceive of itself as a "subjectless discourse" (Chuh 9). In 2010, a follow-up to Wu and Song's 2000 collection, *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, treats a difference-based approach to Asian American studies as a given (Wu and Chen xv).

The same movement toward difference that took a theoretical form in Asian American scholarship has also nurtured Eastern religious themes in recent Asian American literature. As Josephine Nock-Hee Park explains, the Asian American literary movement of the early 1970s "left out from the canon...all those works which did not strike a note of defiance and whose literary expressions were illegible to the stated aims of the movement" (Park 17). This movement did not highlight religion in its activism or its literature. Accordingly, classics such as Toshio Mori's *Yokohama, CA*, John Okada's *No No Boy*, and Frank Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman* occasionally refer to Buddhism, but it is not a prominent theme.

But by the 1990s, a changing climate in Asian American scholarship, activism, and art fostered a proliferation of artistic themes, including Buddhism. As Michelle

Janette explains, a literary tradition that had been dominated by “tales of witness” into the 1980s began to produce more “tales of imagination.”<sup>12</sup> Tales of witness draw heavily from history and personal experience, and aim to “correct the record and claim a spot in the American psyche” (*My Viet* xix). Tales of imagination, on the other hand, tend to be less polemical and more contemplative, experimental, and topically diverse. They treat “their topics with the indirections of poetry rather than the linearity of explanation” (xxii-xxv). While these are not rigid categories, the label “tales of imagination” helps to clarify the place of recent Asian American Buddhist fiction in Asian American literary history.

Buddhism begins to emerge as a theme in Asian American fiction around 1989—close to when Lowe’s pivotal essay appeared.<sup>13</sup> This year saw the publication of Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey*, two influential works that were heavily underpinned with Chinese religions. Since then, several Buddhist-themed texts by Asian American fiction writers have been published.<sup>14</sup> These texts, especially *Monkey Bridge* and *The Fifth Book of Peace*, reflect on what it means to be Asian American while also grappling with Buddhism’s attempt to transcend individual and collective identities.

Both novels make an important intervention in discussions of Asian American identity that critics have not recognized. Scholars have widely accepted Lowe’s anti-essentialist priorities. However, as Viet Thanh Nguyen points out, academic arguments

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<sup>12</sup> Janette writes specifically about Vietnamese American literature, but I find her typology useful for Asian American literature more broadly.

<sup>13</sup> One exception is Younghill Kang’s overlooked *East Goes West* (1937). The narrator discusses Christianity far more than Asian religions, but occasionally refers to Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, and concludes with a reflection on karma.

<sup>14</sup> See Russell Leong’s *Phoenix Eyes* (2000), Marilyn Chin’s *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009), Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011), and Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013).

for subjectlessness are often unappealing to “actually existing political subjects” who rely on identity claims for their activism (925). Cao’s and Kingston’s stories suggest a way around this dilemma by offering Buddhism as a cultural resource for Asian American identity. Here, Buddhist nonself becomes pivotal. The Buddhist doctrine of nonself (Sanskrit: *anātman*) states that the self is an illusory collection of parts with no central essence (McMahan, *Making* 151; Rahula 51-52). By realizing the truth of nonself, according to Buddhism, one becomes free from the selfish desires that cause suffering. While Cao and Kingston do not discuss nonself explicitly, their novels portray Buddhist realizations that enable characters to embrace fluid identities, overcoming attachment to themselves and to specific groups. In *Monkey Bridge* and *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Buddhism simultaneously dissolves and celebrates Asian American identity. Buddhism critiques identity, but this very critique is a specifically Asian heritage.

By focusing on the interplay between Buddhism and Asian American identity in Cao and Kingston’s writing, I explore a previously unrecognized avenue in Asian American literature and American Buddhist studies. As some scholars have argued, the field of Asian American studies has tended to avoid religion because of an anti-religious bias among secular scholars (Cheah 129, Yoo 8-9). Defining texts in Asian American studies have explored Asian American racialization and resistance, but have not dealt with religion (Kim; Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*; Chuh). Over the last fifteen years, a small number of scholars have begun to fill this gap. To date, two essay collections focus on religion and Asian Americans (Yoo, Iwamura and Spickard). More recently, Joseph Cheah’s *Race and Religion in American Buddhism* is the first monograph to develop a rigorous theoretical framework that incorporates religion and race in an analysis of Asian

American communities (2011). In literary studies, occasional articles have treated Buddhism in the writings of authors such as Russell Leong and Lan Cao (K. Ho; Wong, Sau-Ling; Nguyen and Lutz). I advance this discussion by connecting Buddhism's literary expressions to larger contexts of multiethnic American identities.

Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace* speak not only to Asian American Buddhism, but also to the gap between American Buddhists of Asian and European descent. Scholarship on Buddhism in America has noticed a division between immigrant Buddhists from Pacific Rim countries and predominately white convert Buddhists. Asian American Buddhist practice tends to involve ritual and prayer, devotional practices that many people think of as merely "cultural." By contrast, Western convert Buddhists tend to focus on analytical meditation and leave behind what they view as the cultural trappings of Asian Buddhism (Coleman 7, Seager 8-10, Prebish 57-60). There is very little interaction between these two kinds of communities, and even mutual mistrust. Joseph Cheah documents a tendency among Western converts to view their version of Buddhism as "true" Buddhism. This "true" Buddhism is supposedly superior to Asian and Asian American Buddhisms, dismissed as "ethnic" phenomena weighed down by superstitious cultural accretions (Cheah 71-72). For all of Buddhism's emphasis on nonduality, Asian and Western Buddhist differences form a pivotal fissure within American Buddhism.

By dramatizing the transformative power of both Buddhist metaphysics and ritual practices, Cao and Kingston's texts work to overcome barriers between white and Asian American Buddhists. As I mentioned in my first chapter (38), most Western writers discovered Asian religion through books, not through cultural inheritance or missionary

conversions. Consequently, Asian religions' presence in American fiction tends to be abstract and philosophical, a set of individual mental exercises rather than a communal practice. My previous chapters explored Ray Smith's solitary meditations on emptiness in *The Dharma Bums* and Rutherford Calhoun's psychological discovery of nonduality in *Middle Passage*. Cao and Kingston continue to portray contemplative Buddhist breakthroughs like these. But they also depict funeral rites and food offerings, ghostly spirits and karmic consequences. In both texts, Buddhism is vividly alive. It coexists with non-Buddhist traditions of ancestor veneration, a Confucian-influenced element that is a prominent aspect of both Vietnamese and Chinese religions, especially on the household level (Ho, Jennifer 82). Cao and Kingston's writing positions these practices as complements to, not distractions from, a meditative quest for enlightenment.

#### Cultural Difference and Karma in Cao's *Monkey Bridge*

Lan Cao left Vietnam and came to the U.S. at the age of thirteen shortly before the fall of Saigon in 1975 (Janette, *My Viet* 166). Today, she is a law professor at the College of William & Mary and is a widely published expert on international economic development (Hardy). *Monkey Bridge* is her only published novel to date. In interviews, Cao has spoken on cultural adaptation, generation gaps, and climates of opinion in the U.S. after the Vietnam War, among other topics; but religion has not come up (Newton 173-174; Shan). There is no biographical evidence that Cao currently practices Buddhism. Her novel's engagement with Buddhism lacks the philosophical rigor of Charles Johnson, and, as we will see, the emphasis on meditation in Maxine Hong Kingston. But *Monkey Bridge* is seriously concerned with the Buddhist (and Hindu)

concept of karma, and its concluding move toward Buddhist nirvana attempts to reconcile American and Buddhist ideals of freedom.

Previous criticism on *Monkey Bridge* has either neglected the novel's Buddhist content or read it pessimistically. Hanh Nguyen and R. C. Lutz argue that the novel's protagonist, Mai Nguyen, does not take away any of the Buddhist lessons her mother Thanh wants to pass on (205), and that Thanh's actions fail on both personal and Buddhist terms (196). In their conclusion, Nguyen and Lutz try to recover Buddhist uplift from the novel. But they do not give textual evidence for this and merely say that the possibility of a favorable rebirth for Thanh is not decisively disproven by the text (205). Claire Stocks agrees that Thanh's religiously motivated choices fail to contain or exorcise past traumas that torment her, and less directly, Mai (Stocks 98). Michelle Satterlee argues that the novel uses karma as an alternative to Western views on trauma but does not connect karma to the larger context of Buddhist philosophy and its ultimate spiritual goals (Satterlee 154). However, attending to the novel's Buddhist motifs can show how *Monkey Bridge* connects Buddhist realizations with the ability to navigate experiences of immigration and fragmented identity.

Mai's struggles with her identity begin as a child in Vietnam. At a young age, Mai learns about both traditional spirit offerings and Western empiricism. Ancestor veneration is a feature of family life, but Mai's father is a "modern" thinker who introduces Mai to Western science (Cao 187-188, 163). Mai recognizes differences between these perspectives at a young age, but does not choose between them at first. When still in Vietnam, Mai's father dies in his sleep of sudden heart failure, and the mourning that follows shows that Mai remains uncertain about the spirit world. When

her grandfather Baba Quan explains that the deceased's spirit continues after death, Mai is still uncommitted, thinking, "I *could* adopt my grandfather's view" (85, emphasis added).

After she moves to the U.S., Mai learns to favor Western science and dismiss old-world beliefs in spirits. We do not see this process unfold, but we can infer it from how Mai comes to view her mother, Thanh. About four years after settling in the U.S., Thanh has a stroke. Sitting by her hospital bed, Mai describes how Thanh is drumming her right fingers against her left wrist, tying a ferocious knot with the sheet corners, carrying on in her usual convoluted language about karma I could not make out. 'Karma,' that word alone, whose sacred formula I could not possibly know, had become her very own singular mantra. This was alien territory, very alien, even to me. (10)

Mai unfairly associates the mental problems that can attend stroke victims with the belief in karma itself, regardless of the fact that Thanh believed in karma long before her stroke. Mai's allusion to Thanh's "usual convoluted language about karma" shows her dismissal. But now that Thanh is acting in a "ferocious" manner, Mai believes that her stroke has turned a merely irritating delusion into a deranged obsession. When Mai says, "[t]his was alien territory, very alien, even for me," the referent of "[t]his" is ambiguous. She could mean that, even though she had helped tend hospital beds in Saigon (2), the intensity of Thanh's unstable behavior is more extreme than she is used to. But she may also mean that the idea of karma itself has become foreign, "alien" to her. At this point, spiritual beliefs seem culturally distant to Mai, even when coming from her own mother. Mai subsequently remarks that her mother has "paranoia" and a "terrible sense of the

world” (17), clinging to an unfounded, “peculiar understanding of cause and effect” (23). Mai even questions her mother’s “fragile sanity” (24). Since the first fifty pages of the novel are from Mai’s perspective, Mai’s unsympathetic portrayal of her mother’s spirituality seems persuasive at first.

Before long, though, Thanh proves to be far more articulate and self-aware than Mai initially acknowledges. In fact, Thanh thoughtfully explores the relationships between Buddhist and Western traditions. Early in the novel, Mai finds Thanh’s diary (46), and the text alternates between Mai’s narrative and passages from Thanh’s diary as Mai reads it. In these pages, Thanh narrates major parts of her life story beyond what she has told Mai before, and Thanh writes about karma with considerable eloquence. Where Mai separates the physical from the spiritual, Thanh unites them. Thinking of the hospital staff, Mai wonders, “How could they have known it was not muscular but karmic movements and the collapse of Heaven that frightened my mother?” (8). But in her own writing, Thanh equates Western science with karma: “No one can escape the laws of karma....It’s something as exact and implacable as the laws of physics” (55). Similarly, Thanh opines, “[g]enetics and karma, they’re as intertwined as two strands of thread from the same tapestry. If you believe a pebble dropped into a pond makes circles after circles of ripples, you are a believer in the forces of karma” (169). Thanh even addresses Mai directly in her diary, insisting that “karma, my child, is nothing but an ethical, spiritual chromosome, an amalgamation of parent and child” (170). Although Thanh maintains traditionally Vietnamese customs and worldviews, she accepts Western science and views it as complementary to karma.

Thanh engages with Western literature as well as science, especially in her treatment of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Her allusions to Eliot's poem reclaim Asian religions from Western refraction. This appropriation was a noteworthy phenomenon in Modernist poetry. In particular, Ezra Pound drew from the scholarship of self-taught Orientalist Ernest Fenollosa, who believed that Chinese characters were not arbitrary signs, but direct representations of their objects. Based on this theory, Pound wrote English poetry that he believed followed Chinese models (Kern 156). But Fenollosa's theories of Chinese have been discredited (Park 33), and scholars of Modernism recognize that for most poets writing in English, "Chinese poetry is something that has been produced in and by the West" (Kern 156). Pound in turn influenced T.S. Eliot's interest in Asia, as evidenced by *The Waste Land*'s allusions to both Buddhism and Hinduism (138-139).

Thanh recontextualizes Eliot's references in an effort to recover East Asian religious lineage from Western filters. In her description of her life during the Vietnam War, Thanh describes an American-run camp, built to protect the inhabitants of her village from violence, as an "unreal village" (Cao 233), a nod to Eliot's line "unreal city" (Eliot line 60, 207). Thus, Thanh compares London ravaged by WWI to her own village displaced by the Vietnam War. Also, Thanh powerfully repurposes Eliot when she writes about the famous self-immolation a Vietnamese monk performed as a protest against South Vietnam's anti-Buddhist policies. Thanh writes, "the monk performed the ultimate act of sacrifice and pressed his palms in prayer, a sermon of fire, his body in an erect, uncollapsible lotus position, while flames, burning, burning, orange and ocher, the color of his saffron robe, enveloped and consumed the flesh he offered as an act of supreme

devotion” (253). The phrase “sermon of fire” alludes to the third section of *the Waste Land*, “The Fire Sermon.” Thanh’s repetition of “burning, burning” also alludes to line 308 of *the Waste Land*, “burning burning burning burning.”

Thanh’s allusion to Eliot suggests a larger point about the history of Western literature’s engagement with Asian religions. *The Waste Land*, although its dense allusions are predominately European, also engages with Asian religions. “The Fire Sermon,” alludes to an important Buddhist text of the same name (Rainey 99-100), and the poem’s last thirty-eight lines allude to the Hindu *Upanishads* (Eliot 74n401, n433). In one sense, Thanh is alluding to Eliot, who is alluding to Buddhist scripture. But in another sense, Thanh brings up Eliot in order to highlight the fact that she does not need him. Although Thanh clearly borrows Eliot’s language in her description of the self-immolating monk, Thanh grew up in a Buddhist culture and would probably have known about the Buddha’s fire sermon independently of Eliot. In the Buddhist text *The Fire Sermon*, the Buddha tells his audience to shun desire by comparing cravings of the senses to being on fire (Rainey 99-100). In Thanh’s interpretation, the self-immolating monk has literalized the Buddha’s metaphor. Thanh alludes to the same Buddhist text as Eliot, but with a far stronger sense of Buddhist lineage. Cao thus urges readers familiar with *The Waste Land* to think of the Fire Sermon’s Buddhist context.

Thanh’s engagement with Eliot casts new light on the novel’s opening epigraph, taken from *The Waste Land*:

(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you

Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (26-30)

Just as the word “shadow” dominates this ominous passage, shadows become a motif for lurking insecurities throughout *Monkey Bridge*. For example, Mai observes a “shadow war” one of her Vietnamese neighbors wages by rewriting her memories of her contentious husband (40). Also, Mai reflects on how Vietnamese soldiers “would turn the country into a narcotized landscape haunted by shadows” in order to “spook the invaders” (120). Thanh gives this motif a Buddhist turn when she writes of “the shadows of our family’s karma” (229). In this metaphor, karma is a shadow that follows oneself and one’s family for indefinite generations. In a poetic gesture of empowerment, Thanh uses Eliot’s shadows as material for her own writing. Now, a Buddhist alludes to Eliot, not the other way around.

Whereas Thanh makes a point of connecting her experiences in Vietnam to Western science and literature, Mai struggles to shore up boundaries between what she views as Vietnamese superstition and American rationality. Her success is partial at best, and on a few occasions, Mai feels drawn toward spiritual belief. Wishing for her mother’s successful rehabilitation, Mai recalls a Catholic prayer: “I did not believe, but just in case, what risk could there be in a little childhood prayer?” (71). This and other references to Catholicism remind the reader that Vietnam, given its history within French imperialism, is not a purely “Eastern” place, and that America, given its religious heritages, is hardly a monolith of secular rationalism. Also, when a Vietnamese American fortune-teller performs divinations that naïvely forecast the fall of Communism in Vietnam, Mai views these forecasts as “futile” (151), but again relents by thinking,

“what harm could there be in a little astrology?” (156). In addition, a sympathetic moment in front of her mother’s family shrine occurs when, in spite of “the sciences my father had taught me, but for one moment, I could not resist the urge to run my hand experimentally through the air, feeling for the medium through which my grandparents’ spirits were traveling” (163). However skeptical she is, Mai cannot entirely divest herself of spiritual impulses.

Mai’s tenuous relationship to spirituality draws her toward dread as well as hope. In the novel’s opening scene, Mai consumes unhealthy numbers of caffeine pills to remain alert at her mother’s hospital bed and to avoid bad dreams. She rationalizes her “philosophy” of avoiding “the undomesticated world of dreams” by saying to herself, “[w]hat harm could there be in that?” (11), the same formulation she uses in her sympathetic but condescending tolerance of Vietnamese rituals. Through this parallel, the novel suggests that both drugs and divinations can be ways of escaping from immediate reality, and that neither Mai nor Thanh is justified in feeling superior to the other’s perspective. Also, when Mai and her friend Bobby drive toward the Canadian border in what becomes an aborted attempt to telephone her grandfather in Vietnam, Mai harbors an awful sense that something will go wrong. She compares this feeling to her mother’s “paranoia, but, then, it had never occurred to me that her terrible sense of the world could circulate inside my skin” (17). The fact that Mai feels a foreboding similar to her mothers’ is not surprising; more striking is that Mai is herself surprised at this connection. Mai prefers to think that America insulates her from Vietnamese “superstition,” but she is wrong.

*From Karma and Suffering to Nirvana and Nonself*

Mai's unease escalates into a crisis late in the novel when Thanh commits suicide. In her last entry, Thanh explains that she left her journal for Mai to read, filled with a sanitized version of her family history to endear Vietnam to Mai. But the truth is a sordid tale of prostitution, revenge, and violence. Thanh's father, unable to pay a debt to his landlord after a crop failure, prostituted his wife to the landlord instead. Thanh is the illegitimate daughter of this relationship. Thanh's father resents the class system that led to his family's predicament, and he later defects from his Southern village to become a soldier for North Vietnam. He eventually murders his former landlord, an act Thanh witnesses (249). Also, as a result of Vietnam War fighting, Thanh cannot bury her grandmother in her home village, a failure that endangers her spirit's peaceful passage, according to Vietnamese custom (251). In the U.S., Thanh remains preoccupied with her family's monstrous accumulation of negative karma. In her suicide letter, she tells Mai that her death is a sacrifice that will satisfy her family's negative karma, leaving Mai with a metaphysical zero balance, an open future (253). Mai is left wondering what she could have done to be closer to her mother and prevent her from feeling hopeless (256), but still does not allow herself to grieve, focusing instead on maintaining her composure (257).

On the night before she leaves for college, Mai has a dream that marks a personal breakthrough. This religiously-charged dream enables Mai to experience her grief, gain greater appreciation for her mother, and contemplate Buddhism:

What I saw was a beautiful ladder, the same one my mother had described many times before, guarded by a secret creature with an inner light glowing through its skin, a light as faint and dormant as the faint flame of a candle glowing through a

screen of silk. The creature, my mother once said, always lies with its head cradled on the first rung, waiting for a human soul to pass by to infuse it with an inner life. As the passerby makes her way up the rungs, the creature would slowly stir, following the passerby the way it has followed hundreds upon hundreds of pilgrims generations and generations before, its translucent skin becoming more and more luminous the higher it and the passerby get, making their way up each step. The creature would approximate perfection, its skin would turn lustrous, its light would shine a brilliant shine the closer it gets to the top, but only at the very top of the ladder would the climber cast no shadows and achieve what every seeker seeks through all the ages to achieve: nirvana itself.

(259)

This passage's style implies a Buddhist sense of reality as illusion. In a departure from the novel's lush, sensual descriptions, this passage is strikingly vague. Previously, Mai vividly narrates: "[t]he American flag, flown sky-high from a sturdy iron pole, still swelled and snapped in the wind" (1-2). Also, Thanh, visualizing Vietnam's pastoral landscape, writes of "a lone water buffalo amid a shimmer of liquid green, a solitary leaf turning its belly toward the direction of the full sun" (254). Cao's sensory descriptions throughout the novel also apply to Mai's exposure to Vietnamese religion. There are considerable details about Thanh's religious materials, such as a spirit offering of "stir-fried tripe with fresh parsley and licorice basil, lettuce leaves, coriander, cucumber wedges, and chopped chili peppers...on top of a brand-new yellow-lace doily" (162). Elsewhere, a holyday ritual feast with Mai and Thanh's Vietnamese friends includes "a large pot of sweet-and-sour fish soup flavored with the tanginess of ripe tamarind....A

tender slice of sweet memory” (217). In contrast to Mai’s previous exposure to traditional religion, this passage, the novel’s most explicit appeal to religious transcendence, has the fewest ties to the physical senses. Nothing in this passage conveys a specific sight or sound. The only pieces of information about the “creature” are that it has a head and translucent skin, and the content of its “perfection” is unspecified. The predominant phenomenon in this passage is “light,” but without defined form or color.

One might ascribe this vagueness to the haziness of dreams, but this stylistic choice bears specific connections to Buddhist philosophy. This is the only time the word “nirvana” appears in the novel. “Nirvana” is the Sanskrit Buddhist term for the complete, permanent cessation of suffering achieved by the individual meditator. Since this transcendence is beyond all description, Buddhist writing tends to define nirvana by what it is not, rather than by what it is (Rahula 36). One who has achieved nirvana sees both oneself and all phenomena as lacking any inherent nature; all is emptiness, and therefore there is no ground for the attachments from which suffering arises (Rahula 37, Smith 116). Buddhism emphasizes letting go of attachment to the objects that stimulate the senses (Rahula 29). Paradoxically, “nirvana *itself*” is that which erases all sense *of* a self (emphasis added). By avoiding specific descriptions, Mai writes from a perspective free from such attachment. Her style imitates the unconditional quality of nirvana as theorized in the Buddhist tradition. Mai’s dream thus fulfills the lesson from the Buddha’s *Fire Sermon*.

My interpretation contradicts Michele Janette’s predominately ironic one. Janette writes that “rather than unveiling an ‘authentic’ truth, the novel urges us to see discursive formations” (“Irony” 54-55). Making her analysis more character-specific, Janette

asserts that “Thanh is more successful in destabilizing all narrative than she is in establishing any truth” (56). But in Buddhism, the incompleteness of all narrative *is* a liberating truth, because nirvana is beyond time and causation. Therefore, while I agree with Janette that the novel calls specific truth claims into question, it is important to acknowledge that from a Buddhist point of view, this maneuver is sincere, not ironic.

In addition to being vague about sensory details, this vision is also culturally nonspecific. The image of the creature, ladder, and passerby is something Mai’s “mother had described many times before,” but the source of this motif is obscure. There are no apparent Buddhist, Christian, or Confucian sources for this image, and the creature’s lack of definite characteristics leaves one with no cultural cues. Possible sources for this motif include Walter Hilton’s *The Ladder of Perfection*, a medieval treatise on Christian spirituality, or the Buddhist *Dhammadapa-Atthakatha*, in which the Buddha descends from a celestial realm on a ladder of jewels (Hilton, Lanman 119). But Mai’s dream offers too few details to sustain a close comparison to either of these texts, and that is the point. If nirvana is beyond all sensory specifics, then it cannot be tethered to a single culture. If this indeterminacy makes nirvana seem boring or incoherent, the symbol of unconditioned “light” implies a response: nirvana is not dull, but it is more like being bathed in pure light, clear but not hard, gratifying but not frenzied.

By dreaming of nirvana rather than dwelling on karma, Mai taps into a level of transcendence that Thanh does not. Even though Thanh writes about her feelings of spiritual connectedness, these impulses are overshadowed by pain and guilt. To Thanh, the nuns at the French school where she studied “were just like the Ba Xuyen farmers I knew, disciplined, reserved, unpretentious, perceptive in their knowledge of and faith in a

higher authority....I saw it not as blind faith but as dignity, a dignity that comes from the knowledge that uncertainty has no bearing on the deep-rooted faith that life is ultimately good” (178). Given that Thanh’s journal deliberately masks histories of deceit and violence, one may question this idealized description (227). But factual or not, such spiritual dispositions remain for Thanh “the nature of my longing” (229). The closest Thanh comes to talking about transcendence is when she asserts that motherhood “calls for a suspension of the self in a way that is almost religious, spiritual” (252). But she says “suspension,” not “dissolution;” the self that Buddhism aims to deconstruct is still there. In Buddhist terms, Thanh thus remains trapped in samsara, the cycle of birth and death that is propelled by karma and a belief in permanent selfhood (Rahula 30-32).

By contrast, Buddhist doctrine holds that one who has achieved nirvana accumulates no more karma, because the illusion of self upon which karma accrues is gone (Rahula 32, Reat 178, Yun-Ha 40.). In her suicide letter, Thanh writes that Mai’s distance from her, although painful, allows her to “recede from the shadows of our family’s karma” (Cao 229). Accordingly, in Mai’s dream, the climber at the top of the ladder will “cast no shadows,” finally free from the karma that follows the Nguyen family like a shadow. Although Thanh is the more traditionally pious character, Mai becomes more attuned than her mother to Buddhism’s ultimate goal. Mai’s glimpse of nirvana marks the end of her family’s burdensome karma. Thus, the novel’s motifs of karma and nirvana indicate that Thanh’s sacrifice works.

Mai’s dream also helps her regain affection toward her mother, if only in memory, and to recuperate positive values from the concepts of karma Mai previously derides. Mai realizes that “[w]e had inhabited the same flesh, and as I discovered that

night, like the special kind of DNA which is inherited exclusively from the mother and transmitted flawlessly only to the female child—the daughter—a part of her would always pass itself through me” (259). Mai has become more receptive to Thanh’s way of thinking and sees her mother’s influence as something to value rather than resist. Although Mai does not specifically reference karma, this passage strongly echoes Thanh’s earlier assertion that karma is a “spiritual chromosome” (170). In fact, Mai’s understanding of spiritual heredity is even more personal than Thanh’s. Where Thanh sees karma in “parent and child” (170), Mai more specifically genders the heredity as being from “mother” to “daughter.” This gesture is both intimate and empowering, especially considering the prestige of heroines in Vietnamese lore and their attributes of strength, skill, and intelligence (Pham and Eipper 51, Newton 181).

After this dream sequence, the novel ends with a beginning: Mai contemplates her entrance into Mt. Holyoke College, growing in confidence that “I would follow the course of my own future” (Cao 260). But this future is uncertain. The reader does not know whether Mai pursues spirituality further or what other life choices she makes after she enters college. In a 2000 interview, Cao explains that “I only wanted to see the initial stage in which she made the decision to leave the Vietnamese community....[I]t really almost does not matter what she ultimately decides after that” (Newton 182). The novel’s last line, a one-sentence paragraph, is: “Outside, a faint sliver of what only two weeks ago had been a full moon dangled like a sea horse in the sky” (Cao 260). Just as the moon wanes, the grip of her mother and the Vietnamese community also diminishes as Mai becomes less determined by her ancestry and more free to pursue her “own future.” But the beginning of Mai’s independence is not an abandonment of her past.

Jennifer Ann Ho observes that the waning moon's sea-horse shape resembles the coast of Vietnam and "symbolizes the continued influence that Viet Nam and her mother will have over Mai" (100). For Ho, this influence is a healthy balance of learning to accept a complex, constantly renegotiated ethnic identity (100). Mai has learned to value her mother without feeling pressure to imitate her.

Although Mai's future schooling, career, and spiritual path are unknown, the text tries to establish that Mai's "American future" (Ho, Jennifer 100) is also a Buddhist future. On the strength of a Buddhist-inspired epiphany, Mai embarks upon her college career, today's standard platform for American class mobility and self-discovery. As the final sentence's imagery suggests, she does this while still identifying as Vietnamese. Here, American freedom of choice intersects with the Buddhist freedom of nirvana. Furthermore, Mai's glimpse of transcendence is what enables her to view these facets of her identity as flexible nodes rather than irreconcilably opposed entities. To stay with the novel's extended metaphor of the physiology of vision, the human eye perceives unconditioned light as it is refracted into various conditioned forms. In Mai's dream, this dynamic allegorizes how the mind partitions reality into discrete pieces and reverses the process, ascending to unconditioned nirvana as pure light. This dream also allows Mai to value religion in general and her mother's piety in particular.

This development speaks to the division between Asian American immigrant Buddhism and Euro-American Buddhism. Mai seems to discard the ethnically marked rituals of her mother's traditional religion in favor of a Westernized Buddhism that privileges abstract philosophizing. To read this shift allegorically, as the older generation passes away, the younger generation sacrifices shrine maintenance as the inevitable cost

of Americanization. But while America changes Mai's spirituality, Mai's religious traditions also change her thoughts about America. She learns to see her mother's beliefs in karma and spirits as similar to Western beliefs in progress and psychology. No one is free from the fears and hopes that specific epistemologies help a culture's people deal with. Mai ultimately adapts to America without assigning primacy to its dominant values.

Mai previously sees religion as a poor substitute for science and a belfry of dubious propositions. Now, she appreciates religion as food for the human hunger for transcendence. Her dream of transcendent nirvana allows her to relate to points of view that had seemed foreign to her. According to Buddhist philosophy, one who has attained nirvana is free from the confining belief in solid, separate subjects and objects. Mai's dream of nirvana is not nirvana itself, but she begins to apply this ideal to particular tensions in her life. Specifically, Mai no longer clings to binary oppositions between science and religion, mother and daughter, Vietnam and the United States. Her suspicion gives way to empathy. In this way, Mai's Buddhist epiphany allows her successfully to inhabit multiple identities.

#### Forging American Buddhism in Kinston's The Fifth Book of Peace

Whereas Cao's protagonist is alienated from traditional religion before she learns to appreciate it, Maxine Hong Kingston cherishes the religion of her ancestors. *The Fifth Book of Peace* does not depict household rituals as often as *Monkey Bridge*. But Kingston, a second-generation Chinese American, strongly identifies with what she calls "the Chinese religion" of her upbringing, which encompasses Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism (Whalen-Bridge, "Buddhism" 180-181). Her experience is representative of

Chinese tradition; recent scholarship finds that for many centuries, “syncretism became the main tendency in Chinese religious life” (Lu and Lang 202; see also Overmeyer 315-316, T.H. Barrett 531-533). The porous interplay between Buddhism, Daoism/Taoism, Confucianism, and various folk religions is unique to China, thus justifying the label “Chinese religion” (Poceski 4).

Decades before writing *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston explores the label “Chinese religion” in *China Men* (1981). In one section, a second-generation schoolgirl asks her Chinese mother what their religion is, and she insists that “[w]e believe in the Chinese religion” (276), in spite of the child’s objection that Chinese is a race, not a religion. This passage, and Kingston’s more recent allusion to it, challenges easy analyses of the reception of Asian religions in the United States. Anyone who wants to can be a Buddhist, but not everyone can be Chinese.

While never losing her allegiance to “Chinese religion,” Kingston has become increasingly invested in Buddhism in particular. Her interest in Buddhism did not come from her Chinese upbringing, but from Beat writers (Whalen-Bridge, “Buddhism” 178). In 2009, Kingston said that “what really got me was reading the Beats. Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder. It just seemed like so much fun to be a Buddhist. Be a dharma bum!” (Carolan). The Beats’ influence takes us back to where this study begins and attests to Kerouac’s and Snyder’s lasting power to inspire interest in Buddhism. Kingston’s interest in Beat Zen eventually led her from books to personal contact: in 1984, Kingston visited China for the first time, traveling with a group of writers that included Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, Toni Morrison, and Leslie Marmon Silko (Simmons xi, Skenazy 147). In 1991, Kingston attended a Buddhist retreat designed for Vietnam Veterans led

by the famous Zen monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh (Perry 176), whom Kingston cites as one of her major influences (Carolan). As *The Fifth Book of Peace* chronicles, Thich Nhat Hanh's meditation retreats for Vietnam Veterans become Kingston's primary model for her own Vietnam Veterans Writer's Workshop, where Kingston makes a conscientious effort to integrate Buddhist and American faiths.

Kingston's fiction also focuses increasingly on Buddhism. She has said that her first major publication, *The Woman Warrior*, while steeped in Chinese myths, is not "a Buddhist book" (Whalen-Bridge, "Buddhism" 183). Nor does *China Men* dwell on Buddhism. A turning point comes with *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989), whose indebtedness to Buddhist sources is so complex that one scholar wrote a dissertation on Buddhism in the novel (Zuo). Partly a sequel to *Tripmaster Monkey*, *The Fifth Book of Peace* is the first of Kingston's books to offer an explicit discussion of Buddhist practices.

In Kingston's works after *Tripmaster Monkey*, Buddhism and writing are inseparable. In particular, *The Fifth Book of Peace* treats Asian mysticism and creative writing as parallel paths toward deep concentration and transformative insights. At the same time, Kingston is engaged with criticisms of both dharma and literature as escapist wishful thinking. Buddhism can express itself as a retreat from the world (Cioran 35-37; P. Tillich, *Courage* 186), while fiction can also seek to escape reality (Bersani 1-4, McCann and Szalay 152). Although Kingston does not cite specific intellectual critiques of Buddhism, her characters stand in for the types of concerns they raise. *The Fifth Book of Peace* concedes, bridges, and answers these critiques alongside other Buddhist apologists (Das vii; Nhat Hanh, *For a Future* 74), but her tool of expression is narrative, not exposition. While acknowledging their limits, the text presents the modes of religion

and writing as practices that make salutary, not evasive, use of the imagination. Furthermore, this project expresses Buddhist ideas increasingly in terms of liberal ideals such as individual freedom and legal rights. By connecting religion and writing to American politics, *The Fifth Book of Peace* valorizes imagination as that which allows us to envision better conditions and motivate action for change. Moreover, Kingston's synthesis of Eastern thought and Western politics generates new ideas about how to be both Chinese and American.

Kingston's treatment of Buddhism and fiction in *The Fifth Book of Peace* also intervenes in controversies specific to Asian American literature. Playwright Frank Chin has famously denounced the writing of Kingston, Amy Tan, and others as "fake" because they take creative license with classical Chinese stories (Chin, "Come All Ye" 3). Chin calls religion—Christian or otherwise—a part of the problem. He writes, "Western civilization is founded on religion. Asian civilization—Confuciandom—is founded on history. Confucius was not a prophet. He was not religious. He was a historian, a strategist, a warrior" (34). Whereas Kingston revels in "the Chinese religion," Chin asserts that true Chinese culture is not religious. To emphasize religion as an aspect of Chinese identity would be, in Chin's view, mystifying and overly romantic. In response, Kingston remarked in 1989 that she considers *Tripmaster Monkey*, whose protagonist partially caricatures Chin, "a love letter" in response to Chin's diatribe (Blauvelt 81). Kingston and Chin are contesting what Chinese culture should look like in American letters and how great of a role religions such as Buddhism should play in this image. *The Fifth Book of Peace* continues this tacit engagement with Chin, as well as other critics, by affirming religious dimensions of literature and literary aspects of religion.

*The Fifth Book of Peace* has a dramatic history that the text itself tells. In the late 1980s, Kingston was writing a sequel to *Tripmaster Monkey* that was closely based on her life. The novel would have been called *The Fourth Book of Peace*, in reference to three apocryphal Chinese books of peace (Carolan). The novel narrates Kingston's family's involvement with an anti-war sanctuary at a Hawai'i church in 1967 (Kingston, *Hawai'i* 15), but replaces Kingston's family with *Tripmaster Monkey*'s protagonist Wittman Ah Sing, his wife Tana, and their son, Mario. However, Kingston's house was destroyed in the Oakland-Berkeley fire of 1991, and her novel was lost.

The fire changed the way Kingston thought about fiction and approached her book in progress. Rather than simply reconstruct her novel, she decided to bracket it with nonfictional accounts in what she calls a “fiction-nonfiction sandwich” (“Conversations”). *The Fifth Book of Peace* has four sections. The first two, “Fire” and “Paper,” narrate Kingston’s loss of the book in the fire and her pursuit of the lost Chinese Books of Peace. The third, “Water,” is the novel she had begun. The fourth section, “Paper,” is a contemplative record of Kingston’s Vietnam Veterans Writer’s Workshop, which develops refines Kingston’s ideas about Buddhism and writing. In the pages leading up to the reconstructed novel, Kingston describes her pre-fire attitude toward the fiction she had intended to write. Her story of Vietnam antiwar activism “had to be fiction, because Peace has to be supposed, imagined, divined, dreamed” (Kingston, *Fifth Book* 61). She wanted to write “a happy ending to the Viet Nam war. That happy ending was to be reached with no violent action, no violent conflict, no apocalyptic climax” (61). Making a connection to Chinese Buddhism, Kingston also says that *The Fourth Book of Peace* was narrated by the Bodhisattva of compassion, Kwan Yin, who “does not let bad

things happen to anyone" (61). In other words, Kingston wanted to use Buddhist-inspired fiction to improve upon history.

After the fire, Kingston could not do this anymore. The fire's devastation overwhelmed her: "After the fire, I could not reenter fiction. Writing had become a treat for my own personal self" rather than something that could be directed toward helping others (61). In "Fire," as she treks through her burning neighborhood, she thinks that "God is teaching us, showing us this scene that is like war" (14). After this experience, writing a happy ending to the Vietnam War seems too easy. So Kingston reconstructs her novel-in-progress, but with a more modest tone. Kingston must accept that "I wrote past the place where the burned book left off. But found no happy ending. The War in Viet Nam won't come to a happy ending" (241), no matter what she might imagine in fiction. "Water" bears many marks of the fire's effect of Kingston's thought, as it gives a nuanced, ambivalent treatment of religion and fiction. These issues continue in "Earth," where "[t]hings that fiction can't solve must be worked out in life" (241).

#### *From Escapism to Activism in "Water"*

An early episode in "Water" portrays fiction as a form of wish fulfillment. On their first night in Hawai'i, Mario asks Wittman and Tana to tell him a story. The parents' collaborative effort is a political allegory about a homeless knight and princess. The knight has deserted a warmongering king, and the princess has run away from the country against which the bad king makes war. They have many adventures on their own, always practicing nonviolence; then the two happen to meet in a vacant house and have a boy. Mario announces to his parents, "Mommy, I feel happy, Daddy" (91). Wittman and Tana reveal, unsurprisingly, that the characters in the story are actually

Wittman, Tana and Mario, “[a]nd they lived happily ever after in their new home” (91).

This moment of familial tenderness may seem like unearned sentimentality, but that is the point. Whereas young Mario is easy to entertain and reassure, the reader knows that the Vietnam War cannot be swept away with a fairy tale.

Even though he is more politically aware than his preliterate son, Wittman indulges in escapism of his own. Wittman tries to outrace the negativity of world events, or at least ignore them, as the following passage shows:

Another of his vows-to-live-by was to stop reading the newspapers and listening to or watching news until the war is over. That would be news: THE WAR IS OVER. Allen Ginsberg declared the war ended already. What was being broadcast were numbers that kept getting higher, and putting you into despair so you didn't want to live. It's not good to be well informed. Being up on current events adds to the war, and makes war real. (117)

Here, Wittman prefers ignorance to activism. This passage also invites readers to interrogate Ginsberg's Buddhist- and Hindu-inspired anti-war activities, which included mass mantra chants in an attempt to change the world with divine sound waves, and in one particularly imaginative stunt, to levitate the Pentagon (Hungerford 30-32). But instead of bringing positive realities into being through chant, as Ginsberg attempts, Wittman focuses on denial. One the one hand, Ginsberg's insistence on the power of supernatural language to change political realities bore no immediate, world-altering effects. On the other hand, one may reply, at least he engaged in active protests, whereas Wittman misuses Ginsberg to give himself permission to flee from activism.

By invoking Ginsberg, Wittman suggests a bridge back to his namesake, Walt Whitman, who was a central influence on Ginsberg. Wittman's first name has an extra "t" and no "h," figuring what Kingston calls the Chinese American tendency to "spell it kind of funny" (Blauvelt 79). The last name "Ah Sing" is a play on Whitman's poem "*I Sing the Body Electric*" (my emphasis; see also Park 122). Kingston says that just as Whitman writes, "I sing the body from top to toe," she wants to "carry on in the tradition of Walt Whitman," with a particular focus on ethnicity, and "sing the Chinese American from top to toe" (Blauvelt 79, 80). The allusion to Ginsberg also calls upon Beat, and earlier Transcendentalist, valorizations of Hinduism and Buddhism (Stiles 36, 67-68, 108). Ginsberg "declared the war ended already" out of inspiration from Eastern metaphysics, which emphasize the power of mantras to change the world with their spiritual vibrations (Hungerford 37-38). Although Whitman was not Ginsberg's primary introduction to Asian religions, this affection for Eastern wisdom remained a source of affinity across time between the two poets. In Whitman's "Passage to India," the speaker generously praises India's "elder religions" (Whitman line 23). Ginsberg highlights Whitman's influence in "California Supermarket," calling Whitman "dear father" and "lonely old courage-teacher." If Whitman influenced Ginsberg, Ginsberg figuratively reciprocates by influencing the latter-day Wittman.

After invoking Ginsberg, Wittman provides a mystical justification for his escapism. He thinks that his "independent project was to work on perception....Mind creates what's out there....See the world peaceful and the war will end. Wittman had such faith from having been raised Chinese" (Kingston, *Fifth Book* 143). This rationalization arises from Wittman's laziness (Kingston, *Tripmaster* 241). In addition, whether he

knows it or not, Wittman is justifying his laziness in the metaphysics of Asian religions, which, particularly in Mahayana Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, teach that all phenomena are a projection of one's own mind (Deshung Rinpoche 198, Iyer 68). It follows from this that to change one's mind is to change the world.

After spending most of the novel in edgy lassitude, Wittman has a turning point by engaging more closely with Buddhism. Ennui has overtaken him; he feels as though “[t]he bad days and nights outnumbered the good days and nights” (Kingston, *Fifth Book* 191). He finds relief in a courtyard outside a Buddhist shrine room where he continues to try to escape through literature, passively “waiting for a poem to come” (191). After a passerby admonishes him against naïveté (192), Wittman goes inside. Now he is “determined to learn something. The ancestors made these images out of stone to last for thousands of years. Try to read them; there must be a message.” This language marks an important turning point. Rather than fleeing from knowledge (117), Wittman is “determined to learn something.” And rather than pursuing the instant gratification of wishful thinking, Wittman is inspired by the statues’ longevity measured in “thousands of years.” Whereas Wittman’s “faith from having been raised Chinese” was frivolous, now, Wittman defers more seriously to the heritage of “ancestors.”

Wittman imitates the postures and smiles of the various figures, and he “felt his attitude changing” (192). The content of this change is not clear at first, but Wittman soon comes across an anti-war protest that leads him to involvement with an AWOL sanctuary at a local church. He and Tana support this sanctuary by meeting the deserting soldiers, leading classes on literature and politics, and putting on a production of Megan Terry’s anti-war play *Viet Rock* (1965). Wittman is drawn to the protest by a sense of

“[f]un-in-crowds,” but this frivolous pleasure soon deepens as Wittman “felt a joy-in-human-beings coming back to him” (193, 198). Wittman goes from being an indigent draft-dodger to a selfless peace activist.

Although Wittman’s previous escapism is related to spirituality, Buddhism is also what delivers him to greater responsibility. Specifically, Wittman’s development reflects the Buddhist teaching of nonself. In Buddhism, the individual self is a delusion that causes suffering; therefore, realizing that the self is a limiting fiction frees oneself from suffering and makes it easier to give generously to others (Milarepa, qtd. in Snyder, *Mountains* ix; Shaitideva 1.52; Rahula 51; McCleod). After Wittman’s “attitude [changes]” in the shrine room, the narrative shifts focus away from his own thoughts and toward the testimonies of the AWOL soldiers he works with. Wittman remains the viewpoint character, but his self-clinging has left to make room for helping and getting to know the soldiers. Instead of statements like “admiration and envy coursed through Wittman” (Kingston, *Fifth Book* 132), the narration now relies on empathetic statements like “Wittman listened to the AWOL GIs go back over their lives, figuring out how they got to be who they were and how they came to be here” (216).

Wittman’s loss of interiority may seem like a disappointing failure to follow through with his growth as a character. But from a Buddhist point of view, this narrative change is precisely what signals his transformation. Buddhism, when disciplined by patience and selflessness, fosters Wittman’s self-improvement. Moreover, the novel portrays Wittman’s realization of Buddhist nonself as paradoxically consistent with an increased pride in his Asian heritage. As Wittman listens to a Japanese American pastor discuss the sanctuary, the narrator declares, “proud, proud was Wittman—a person of

one's own Asian ancestry declares Peace, declares Sanctuary" (197). In the narrative of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Buddhist nonself is a transformative aspect of Wittman's "own Asian ancestry."

In spite of Wittman's positive development, the novel highlights limits to creative action. During the sanctuary, the text asks the reader to see the limits of Wittman's production of *Viet Rock*, which uses AWOL soldiers, and whoever else volunteers, as cast members. The play is a hit; at its close, "[a]ctors and audience clapped and whistled, stomped and cheered bravo and brava, as if the play had ended in triumphant victory" (209). This description of raucous celebration clearly conveys nostalgia for the energy and solidarity of antiwar activism. But the phrase "as if" implies that the play is not, in fact, victorious, since it does not stop the war. Kingston is simultaneously asserting the power of creativity—whether through literature or religion—and pointing out its limitations. By acknowledging the war's inescapable shadow, she recognizes that the imaginative work of writing and spiritual practice do not solve geopolitical problems by themselves.

This ambivalence continues in "Water" after federal authorities bust the sanctuary. A narrative aside mentions the historical Linda Meyerson Tillich, a psychotherapist who was involved with the Sanctuary as a scholar and participant: Tillich "wrote in her Ph.D. dissertation: 'Vietnam duty provided the most unambiguous source of antiwar sentiment.' War causes peace" (227). Kingston's gloss is a complex refraction of Tillich's writing. This paraphrase marks Tillich as a supporting source for Kingston's visionary claim that "[w]ar causes peace," but this gesture of continuity does not fully capture the more cautious mood of Tillich's scholarship. Tillich, although

hopeful that the sanctuary shows that “our national spirit is not yet dead” (44), calls it “a flawed vision” (1), some of whose participants had “disastrously ignoble motivations” and whose problems were aggressively hidden by members of the anti-war movement (3). Kingston acknowledges these concerns in *Hawai’i One Summer* (15), but she leaves them out of “Water.” Even though Kingston holds close to history in “Water,” her selectivity reflects a project of valorization. This tension shows that Kingston’s chastened view of narrative coexists with a dedication to the soaring language of global hope. I do not mean to paint Kingston as a naïve visionary in contrast to Tillich’s realist scholarship. Rather, Kingston’s complex treatment of Tillich shows Kingston as a spiritual omnivore who creatively writes a variety of sources into her political and spiritual projects.

“Water” is a fiction chastened by Kingston’s experience of the Oakland-Berkeley fire. It denies fiction’s ability to change the Vietnam War on a large historical scale. But through its portrayal of Wittman, it affirms the power of fiction—and religion—to inspire personal change that can lead to broader activism. A nonfictional account of Kingston’s own Vietnam-era activism could not have done this, because Kingston was already politically involved before she moved to Hawai’i (*Hawai’i* 15-16). Kingston’s use of Wittman also allows his name to draw thematic connections. In this way, “Water” uses fiction to inspire hope without overturning historical events.

#### Merging Buddhism and Writing in “Earth”

Kingston’s activities in “Earth” are the real-life enactment of what Wittman learns. The Vietnam Veterans Writer’s Workshop Kingston leads seeks to make up for the incomplete work of the historical sanctuary. In a 1993 interview, after Kingston had

begun the workshops, she voiced her hope that her workshops and others like them could create “a true ending to the war with Vietnam” by making a reparative community (Seshachari 196). Although Kingston’s drive toward service comes from the limits of fiction, she continued to describe her real-life project in terms of writing: “I want to be able to manipulate reality as easily as I can manipulate fiction....What if I could strongly write peace, I can cause an end to war” (196). Writing does not cause change by itself, but it is a central catalyst of Kingston’s motivation.

In the workshops, which are modeled after Vietnam Veterans retreats by Thich Nhat Hanh (Schroeder 225, Carolan), Kingston links writing and Buddhism. Like Thich Nhat Hanh, Kingston leads a curriculum of Buddhist practices, including breathing meditation, walking meditation, and even eating meditation. She emphasizes mindfulness and ethics over doctrine and is “not trying to put anything religious over on anybody” (Kingston, *Fifth Book* 336), but the framework for the workshop is strongly Buddhist. Not only does Kingston follow Thich Nhat Hanh, she also invokes Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion, during some of the workshop’s events (318, 395).

Kingston’s own addition to this format is group writing (Schroeder 225). Her view of fiction’s powers has become more tentative, as I have discussed. But in the workshop, Kingston still praises writing as transformative, as the following session illustrates:

For today’s writing-in-community, I give a lesson on rewriting. Each time you rewrite, you’re going back into the tunnel, and bringing more knowledge out. You can safely examine the explosion again and again. You will see it more

clearly, see more details, and make better sense of it. You shine more light on some question, problem, hard time, suffering, memory, ignorance. You will return to the core event, and you will return home a different person. The story changes, and you change. And history changes, too, Viet Nam changes. (327)

Here, writing about the Vietnam War transforms one's experience, and even "history" itself. In this passage, Kingston engages in the redemptive thinking that Leo Bersani critiques. She claims that revisiting experience through writing can bring recuperative sense to past events. To Bersani, this would sound too much like treating prose narrative as more puissant than actual events. Furthermore, Kingston makes a point of *not* changing history in "Water;" this suggests that what Kingston tells her students does not work in her own writing.

For Kingston, this tension is productive. She tells the veterans, "'Writing is like meditation: you sit breathing in silence, only you add one thing--the writing. Instead of letting thoughts and pictures and feelings go by, you hold on to them. You slow them down. You find the words for them....Write things out, and you won't need to carry memories in your body as pain. The paper will carry your stories'" (266). For Kingston, writing is a demanding practice that sharpens one's concentration and brings one more in touch with one's experiences. The events themselves do not change; one's perceptions do. This idea resonates with the Ch'an (Zen) tradition that has influenced Kingston. Major texts in Chinese Buddhism teach that enlightenment and the everyday world are not two different places. Rather, the former is simply the latter viewed through exceptional insight. This insight is the Buddhist teaching that dualistic categories of self and other, pure and impure, and so on are mental creations without an inherent essence

(Suzuki, *Lankavatara* xxxi, 38, 55). Kingston attempts to use this idea to help Vietnam veterans reduce the power their painful memories have over them.

If writing is like meditation, meditation is also like writing. The Vietnam veterans struggle to eat in mindful silence. Once they finally succeed, Kingston writes, “It takes a year to create twenty minutes of peace. It feels as if, for those twenty minutes, all wars do cease” (*Fifth Book* 326). The key word is “create.” Just as writing can “create...[o]ne peaceful moment” (402), it can be made--not only felt--with meditation. Kingston departs from traditional Buddhist pedagogy by describing meditation as active creation of peace rather than a passive discovery of innate purity. For Kingston, both writing and meditation can create peace and overcome the psychic scars of violence.

Kingston deals with criticisms that she is conducting a frivolous, feel-good program. She recalls a moment during a retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh, in which “a paranoid psychologist called us ‘candyass Buddhists’ and stomped out” (268). In response, Kingston gives evidence that writing helps veterans, while also distancing herself from sentimentality. One member testifies that “‘Writing my pain, I am writing myself back to health....Poetry writing and journal writing are instruments in my healing.’ *Healing*. I avoid that New Age word. It implies that something’s wrong, that they’re unwell, and need fixing” (264-265). It is ironic that Kingston uses the term “New Age” pejoratively, given that Asian religions’ growing popularity in the U.S. is associated with the New Age Movement (Campbell 115-116). But Kingston’s skepticism toward “healing” has a Buddhist impetus, since in Buddhism, as Thich Nhat Hanh explains, a being’s true nature is Buddha-nature; the practitioner clears away obscurations rather than fixing inherent defects (*Love’s Garden* xv; McCleod). It remains undeniable, though,

that Kingston seeks some version of “healing;” she aspires to “help [veterans] write until the stories full of explosions become quiet” (Kingston, *Fifth Book* 314). But by distancing herself from the “New Age,” Kingston turns the doctrine of Buddha-nature from a seemingly unrealistic fantasy into way of discarding of unhelpful stigmas.

“Earth” parallels “Water” by giving Kingston a Buddhist-inspired loss of interiority similar to Wittman’s. As “Earth” progresses, excerpts from the veterans’ stories become so prominent that the text becomes more of a montage than a memoir. In the first two sections, “Fire” and “Paper,” Kingston’s mind is front and center; she focuses on her traumatic experience of the fire and reflects that she is “alive because of an idea” of her own selfhood (21). In “Paper,” Kingston sulks over public criticism of her writing, dismissively musing that “I’m sure the people who hate me haven’t read me. They are nonreaders” (56). This defensive, I-centered persona is one that the novel deliberately undoes as it progresses. Kingston writes herself as a self-centered character who eventually benefits from Buddhism’s emphasis on nonself and the compassion it supports. In “Earth,” the intense internal monologues of which these remarks are a part retreat to make room for the veterans’ voices. For Kingston, the reward of writing “Water” is not that it transforms history—indeed, “Water” contains many critiques of this view—but that it increases Kingston’s motivation to work with Vietnam veterans.

In an elegant encapsulation of this pattern, Kingston narrates a public reading that she promotes under her name, but then serves only as the introducer for the main event, the veterans’ selected readings. One of the veterans notes that the attendees “‘came to hear Maxine. And they’re getting us.’” Kingston the narrator accepts this jibe and admits to her “[b]ait-and-switch. But I mean to give the veterans my readers. My readers

should love them” (318). And according to her account, they do, as Kingston remembers that “[t]he people do not want to let them go” (320). What happens at this reading is what Kingston wants to happen with “Earth.” The reader, expecting Kingston’s writing, instead receives an unexpectedly large amount of material directly from the veterans, most of which also appears in Kingston’s anthology from the workshop, *Veterans of War*, *Veterans of Peace* (2006). Through this common narrative strategy, the stories of Kingston and Wittman both attest to how letting go of self-centeredness is a basis for communal revitalization. Thus, the form of the *Fifth Book of Peace* embodies the Bodhisattva vow, the Mahayana Buddhist commitment not to dwell in nirvana for oneself, but to remain in the world to help other beings reach enlightenment (Smith 124).

This shift from “I” to “we” is connected to Kingston’s sense of ethnic identity. In “Paper,” Kingston reflects that “[a]ll over Asia, people confidently say ‘we.’ Each naturally speaks for all the rest of the nation family. Americans say ‘I.’ I can speak for no one but myself, my opinion, my point of view” (56). According to this division, to write collaboratively is to cultivate Asian mores at the expense of American ones. However, as we will see, this does not mean that Kingston sees American culture as inherently opposed to compassion. Rather, American culture can be reformed and expanded with the help of Asian religion.

#### Rewriting Buddhism for America and Beyond

For Kingston, the workshop is a chance not only to teach Buddhist meditation to veterans, but also to express ideas that will make Buddhism more at home in America. For instance, Kingston makes original links between Buddhist principles and the Bill of Rights. The Writer’s Workshop includes lessons on the Five Wonderful Precepts (336),

Thich Nhat Hanh's explication of five basic rules of conduct common to all Buddhists (Nhat Hanh, *For a Future* 5-7; Smith 107-108). The precepts are prohibitions against killing, stealing, committing sexual misconduct, uttering harmful speech, and consuming alcohol and other intoxicants. The traditional formulation is terse and strictly negative (Indaratana 1-2, Smith 107), but Thich Nhat Hanh's version is longer and more positive, explaining what to do in addition to what not to do. Each traditional prohibition is preceded by an affirmative principle. For example, Thich Nhat Hanh sets up the precept against killing with the line, "I vow to cultivate compassion and to learn the ways of protecting the lives of people, animals, and plants" (Nhat Hanh, *For a Future* 5-7). By using this version of the five precepts, Kingston carries on Thich Nhat Hanh's project of presenting Buddhist principles in positive, not only negative, terms.

This positive turn also applies to the Bill of Rights, which Kingston explicitly connects to the Five Precepts. She reflects that "[t]he Precepts are not too different from the Bill of Rights. You could just as well put the first Amendment into practice. Speak. Write. Assemble. Practice a religion, or not" (336). Although Kingston changes the order and leaves out the petition clause, she invites readers to notice that the first amendment has five major provisions, the same number as the Five Wonderful Precepts and *The Fifth Book of Peace* itself.

Kingston tries to restore her disillusioned Vietnam veterans' damaged connection to the United States by telling them that "we are wonderful products of American culture. And we have great ideas, such as the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights, which I see as rights to be *practiced*--speak, write, assemble, build a sangha. The first Amendment is prescriptive; they are our American precepts" (384). This understanding

departs from American jurisprudence, which tends to view the Bill of Rights not as positive prescriptions for the people, but negative restrictions on the power of the Federal Government (Brant 223-224, Davey xiii, Hickock 2). The prominence of the word “no” in the Bill of Rights, especially the first amendment’s opening, “Congress shall make no law,” foregrounds what the government may not do, not what the people should or can do. This is not to say that Kingston is ignorant of this fact. Rather, Kingston deliberately reinterprets the Bill of Rights in more positive terms to empower her audience toward activism, replicate Hanh’s positive teaching on the Five Precepts, and suggest connections between Buddhist and American creeds.

Although Kingston’s project has specifically American stakes, she also wants to broaden the workshop students’ horizons beyond the nation. Toward this end, the last meeting of the workshop takes place in Plum Village, Thich Nhat Hanh’s religious headquarters located about fifty miles east of Bordeaux, France. Here, the veterans not only continue their meditation and writing but also receive teachings from Thich Nhat Hanh himself. They also get to know other Vietnamese expatriates. If, as Kingston says, “the only way I can integrate East and West is thinking about global politics or a global peace-making mission” (Simmons 164), then this event is a part of this mission. Furthermore, it realizes Kingston’s goal of making new endings in real life after her disillusionment with fiction.

To conclude the workshops, Kingston uses ritual to integrate Buddhist and Western traditions. The last meeting ends with an innovative “hugging meditation” (395-396). This practice combines meditative breathing with hugging, which is widespread in the West but not in Asia. Kingston explains to the veterans how Thich Nhat Hanh

invented this practice as “an American contribution to Buddhist ritual” (396), and then they proceed: “We stepped toward each other, put our arms around this dear person, and hugged, breathing three mindful breaths, then parted, and bowed again” (396). Although some of the veterans are reluctant to hug at first, they soon warm to the practice; Kingston remembers that “We became a mass of loving humanity. Laughing and talking too” (396). After having critiqued sentimentality in “Water” and earlier in “Earth,” Kingston narrates the end of the workshop with effusive warmth. Compared to Wittman and Tana’s unproductive fairy tale, the affect in this scene has far more preparation, coming at the end of a long journey of diligent writing, meditation, and fellowship. For Kingston, this happy ending would not be possible without a spiritual synthesis of Eastern and Western traditions.

The close of “Earth” combines aspirations for global peace with Kingston’s continuing interest in her Chinese religious identity, as she passes on spiritual advice from her late mother, who died during the book’s composition. Kingston declares that “[i]f the world, time and space, and cause-and-effect accord with my mother’s teachings--her Tao--then we have stopped wars years hence. We made myriads of nonwars. We have ended wars a hundred years from now” (397-398). Here, Kingston’s thoughts on history take on both a historical and a mythic dimension. She combines a practical wish to prevent war with an appeal to mystical power. By linking this attitude to Taoism, Kingston shows that her text not only promotes Buddhist principles and practices, but also reaffirms her “Chinese religion” by honoring her mother’s spiritual advice.

This comment also foregrounds Kingston’s Buddhist-influenced view of time. It echoes Kingston’s earlier sentiment that during group meditation, only “twenty minutes

of peace” creates the feeling that “for those twenty minutes, all wars do cease” (326). This statement does not limit itself only to present wars; there is an implied hyperbole that during these twenty minutes, “all wars do cease” throughout all time. This notion resonates with Mahayana Buddhism, which teaches that, like all phenomena, time itself is an illusion (Loy, “Mahayana” 18-19). The idea that all wars cease is a metaphor for this experience of transcendent timelessness. Kingston does not make this extreme claim outright, but her sense of time’s plasticity owes something to this philosophical background. Thich Nhat Hanh makes a similar point: being mindful of the present moment heals the anxiety of linear time and creates a sense of “unlimited time” (*Miracle* 2, 36, 91). This idea also parallels Kingston’s sense of how writing can manipulate time by slowing events down and seeming to change the past (*Fifth Book* 266).

In her later comment that “[w]e have ended wars a hundred years from now,” Kingston transfers the imaginative impulses of fiction writing away from the past and toward the future. This offers a way around the critiques of escapist fiction I mention earlier. To imagine a more peaceful future does not evade history, because the future has not yet happened. However, Kingston places her community in the future by saying “we have *ended* wars” instead of “we have *prevented* wars” (my emphasis). In this formulation, Kingston imagines the Vietnam Veterans Writer’s Workshop as a form of time travel. Spiritually informed writing and activism does not merely influence the future; it rewrites the future. Kingston’s creative remark crystallizes her project to create an activism that is grounded in both history and myth, materiality and spirituality.

*The Fifth Book of Peace* ends with an exhortation: “Children, everybody, here’s what to do during war: In a time of destruction, create something. A poem. A parade. A

community. A school. A vow. A moral principle. One peaceful moment” (402).

Kingston places nonmaterial things—a “poem,” a “vow,” a “moral principle”—on the same list with material things—a “parade,” a “community,” a “school.” This move implies a favorable estimation of the power of words and ideas, which can be as real as parades and schools. But “fiction” as such is not on this list, as if to say that fiction alone is not enough. Kingston wants not to rewrite the past with fiction, but to prepare for a better future by issuing calls to action to the next generation of “[c]hildren.” But although Kingston singles out “[c]hildren,” her move outward to “everybody” allows for no exceptions, and expresses the Mahayana Buddhist aspiration to liberate all beings, regardless of what they have done or where they are from.

Kingston’s Buddhist vision shares crucial affinities with Mai’s religious epiphanies. In *Monkey Bridge* and *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Asian American characters become more at home in America precisely by delving into their Asian religious traditions. Furthermore, they do so in ways that overcome typical differences between Asian and white American Buddhists. In both texts, devotion to one’s ancestors leads characters toward, not away from, Buddhist ideals of nonself. Also, the main characters in these two texts—Nguyen, Wittman, and Kingston herself—paradoxically connect Buddhism’s teaching of nonself to American archetypes of free exercise of one’s rights. In their narratives, Cao and Kingston use Buddhism to envision new ways of being Asian in America. They also use Asian practices to envision fuller ways of being Buddhist in America. These interventions place Cao and Kingston in the midst of ongoing transformations in transnational literature, Asian American studies, and American Buddhist communities.



## Postscript

Kingston's wish to "integrate East and West" echoes Japhy Ryder's prophecy that "East'll meet West anyway...and it'll be guys like us can start the thing" (Simmons 164, Kerouac 430). For Japhy, "guys like us" are implicitly white American bohemians who presciently import Asian religion into the U.S. Here, Japhy is not thinking about Asian Americans, nor is he thinking about women, but rather "guys." But in the decades following *The Dharma Bums*, U.S. literary perspectives on Asian religions have become steadily more diverse, a trend that is represented in the organization of this study. The growth of woman and minority writing on Asian religions in the U.S. shows how unevenly lofty ideals such as nonduality can express themselves in culture. Increasingly diverse voices will help Buddhist and Hindu American literature continue to wrestle with divisions between male and female, black and white, Asian and non-Asian.

I began this study with the Beats because their adoption of Eastern paths as countercultural marked a new direction in American art and culture. My endpoint in the early twenty-first century may seem to be less of an intellectual choice and more of a default stopping point, having nearly caught up to the present day. However, there are reasons to believe that the period of American literature I have explored is indeed drawing to a close, and a new phase of writing on Asian religions will rise to prominence in the coming years.

One period-marking shift facing Asian religions in American literature is the twilight of the Vietnam generation. Asian religions in American fiction will increasingly

be taken up by younger generations of writers for whom the Vietnam War and mid-century American countercultures were not defining personal experiences, as they were for most of the writers in this study. One can already see this trend emerging in two recent anthologies of American Buddhist fiction, *Nixon under the Bodhi Tree and Other Works of Buddhist Fiction* and its sequel, *You Are Not Here and Other Works of Buddhist Fiction* (2004, 2006). These collections feature authors of both Asian and non-Asian descent, although the latter are still a majority; and they include stories where the Vietnam War is central, peripheral, or absent.

Another factor is geopolitical. As the twenty-first century advances, Asian religions are poised to become even more globally important in a multipolar world. Many analysts are announcing the end of American preeminence and the rise of multiple world powers (Brzezinski 2, Zakaria 1-4). Two of the most important rising powers are China and India, and Japan will likely remain a strong, if slightly declining, economic power as well (*Global Trends* 15). These three countries have nourished the religious traditions that figure prominently in the writers I have discussed. In this emerging multipolar context, it is likely that Asian religions will expand their presence in American fiction, and this writing will continue to call upon Eastern transcendence as a resource to address contemporary social issues. These narratives will become even more transnational, as already evidenced in an American's Cambodian journey in Kira Salak's excellent short story "Beheadings" (Salak 91-124), and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), whose capacious, Zen-themed narrative moves between Japan, the U.S., and Canada. The cultural negotiations I have discussed will increasingly find narrative and historical expression not just within U.S. borders, but across national borders.

While fiction about Asian religions will likely become increasingly transnational, it will continue to take the same risks as the American texts I have studied. By pursuing ambitious syntheses of Asian religion and American liberalism, writers risk mishandling either or both “enlightenments.” They might misunderstand Asian religion, arbitrarily limit which of its aspects to consider, or exoticize it. They might also take American maxims out of context, reinterpret key liberal terms too loosely, or hold onto the rhetoric of American ideals when a more radical theoretical break would make more sense. The writers I have studied have forged ahead in spite of these dangers, motivated by sincere spiritual and political interests. Their work has contributed to evolving spiritualties that help people to negotiate multiple identities.

The writers in this study have established a porous, two-way relationship between American and Asian ideals. Their cross-cultural spiritual texts offer readers tools to navigate America’s complex terrain of cultural difference. In the midst of ongoing debates on how to treat others ethically in a multiethnic society, the literature I have discussed avoids two extremes. One is a toothless diversity that leaves cultural assumptions unchallenged, while the other is an equally unproductive resignation to difference that precludes dialogue. When writers make bold innovations such as those I discuss, debates about the ethics of cultural borrowing are inevitable and valuable. But the vision of truly humane exchanges across cultures, religions, and continents is too important to cast aside. This hope, embodied in writers from Kerouac to Kingston—and beyond—makes the risks of cross-cultural adaptation worth taking.

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