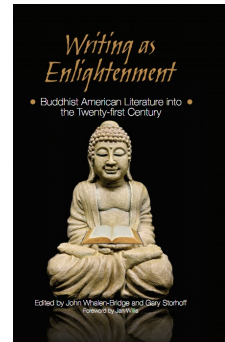


Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature into the Twenty-first Century, edited by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff

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This book, the third in a series on Buddhism and American Culture, follows on from earlier volumes that traced the emergence of Buddhism as a persistent influence in the recent history of American literature and society, and brings the narrative of American Buddhism into the present.

With the exception of Jan Willis, who wrote the foreword (and who is herself a subject of discussion in one of the articles), all the contributors are professionally active in English Studies. And as we shall see, some of the contributions are technical treatises that contribute primarily to that field. Yet the book as a whole transcends its disciplinary origin. If it does not quite manage to unite the humanities and social sciences, at least it makes contributions to areas of each.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first, “Widening the Stream: Literature as Transmission,” we first find an essay by Jane Falk on Shaku Soen and Okakura Kakuzo, two of the earliest transmitters of *buddhadharma* to the USA. On the face of it, this is well-trodden ground, but here it is presented through the lens of their writing rather than as straightforward

Religionsgeschichte. This immediately lends it a richness that has been lacking in the often-told narrative of how the swans came to the lake.

The next essay, by Linda Furgerson Selzer, makes such an important contribution to the study of Western Buddhism that it would justify the price of the book all by itself. The generally accepted paradigm in Western Buddhist studies is that there are two kinds of Western Buddhism: an immigrant Asian Buddhism and a convert white Buddhism. Selzer overthrows this paradigm by displaying the existence and significance of an African American Buddhism, significant perhaps not in absolute numbers (but then the same could be said about white Buddhists!), but in having its own tensions, its own inner dynamics, its own conflicted narratives of race, religion, and heritage. For the reader whose primary interest is in contemporary history of religions rather than literature, this will be the highlight of the book and a resource of enormous value.

Part 2, “The New Lamp: Buddhism and Contemporary Writers,” contains three essays that are more specifically aimed at practitioners of the literary disciplines. These chapters by Allan Johnston, Jonathan Stalling, and Gary Storhoff deal with the works of, respectively, Gary Snyder, Jackson Mac Low, and Don DeLillo and explore the influence of Buddhism on their work, and, in a way, the influence of their work on contemporary Buddhism.

In the third part, “Speaking as Enlightenment: Interviews with Buddhist Writers,” we find a series of interviews with Buddhist authors. Here the book moves away from a classical scholarly exposition on a topic and becomes a repository of primary documentation that will surely become a rich resource for future researchers on the interplay between Buddhism and twenty-first century America.

There are two long interviews, one in which Julia Martin interviews Gary Snyder and another in which John Whalen-Bridge speaks with Charles Johnson and Maxine Hong Kingston. This is followed by a third chapter, also by Whalen-Bridge, that contains a series of shorter interviews with a variety of poets and authors at Naropa University.

In all these interviews, the distinction between interviewer and interviewee tends to blur in a fittingly non-dualist fashion. Is Martin interviewing Snyder or is Snyder interviewing Martin? Does it matter?

Writing as Enlightenment is not a book that pretends to have the answers to all the questions it raises. Instead, every contribution invites us to dig deeper, to go back to the original writings and discover the interplay of Buddhism and American culture for ourselves. By way of example, I’ll admit

that I am not an admirer of Don DeLillo's work. Yet Storhoff's essay in this book has convinced me that I should really make the effort to revisit that author's work. I may or may not end up a DeLillo fan, but this book has at least created the possibility of that happening. Can any author or editor ask for more?

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