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John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff, eds., *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*;  
Book review, Ama, Michihiro

University of New York Press, 2009. 255 + xii pp. \$24.95 (USD). ISBN: 978-1-4384-2654-9

Since the 1950s the Buddhist literary movement in the United States has been shaped by various socio-political forces, efforts to seek alternative religious practice caused by a variety of spiritual crises, activities of the Western avant-garde, and a spread of Asian religious traditions. What constitutes "a Buddhist writer" is a curious question, but such an inquiry is perhaps not as important as understanding a certain writer's spiritual struggle and his/her engagement with society as well as the problems associated with them. Whether or not these writers consider themselves Buddhist, their works are informed of Buddhist ideas in one way or another. *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, in this respect, is an excellent introduction for both undergraduate and graduate students who wish to discover the present condition of artistic Buddhist expressions in the United States. This edited volume illuminates not only the ways in which literature and Buddhism intersect in the United States but also how that interplay corresponds to the formation of what we have seen as "American Buddhism."

A number of Euro-Americans are attracted to Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, including Buddhist American writers. The relationship between literature and Buddhism has been reciprocal as these forms of Buddhism affect the writers, while their poetry and prose along with their social engagement, as demonstrated by the Beats for instance, have helped spread Zen and Vajrayana in the United States. These writers incorporate Buddhist insights into their work, casting an impartial vision detached from the ego-centered concerns on their daily affairs through the voice of a poet and as different characters. Awareness of seeing things as they are also leads them to speak up against violence, materialism, racism, and the like in order to make this world a better place. Their literary expressions have been, however, often misinterpreted, so the contributors to *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* redefine the "practices" of Buddhist writers, including Ernest Fenollosa, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, Maxine Hong Kingston, Lan Cao, and Charles Johnson.

Despite the Buddhist American writers' different approaches to the text, the contributors recognize the Buddhist hermeneutics of emptiness and dependent co-arising as being central to Buddhist American literature.

The book is divided into three parts. The first (*Literature as Vehicle: Transmission and Transformation*) and second (*Zen, Vajrayana, and the Avant-Garde: A Pluralistic Poetics*) parts

focus on poetry production, while Part Three (Widening the Circle: Buddhism and American Writers of Color) deals with the creation of Buddhist prose. The division between the first two parts is unclear, since the Buddhist poems analyzed by the contributors are predominantly influenced by Zen and Vajrayana. A full consideration to other Buddhist traditions should have been given, without which there is the impression that transmission and transformation of Buddhism through literature in the United States are limited to these two types of Buddhism. In this orientation however, Hanh Nguyen's and R.C. Lutz's analysis of *Monkey Bridge*, written by Lan Cao, is exceptional. They tackle the representation of a Vietnamese Buddhist, who suffered the scars of the Vietnam War, failed to acculturate in the United States, tried to preserve her traditional values with her daughter but ended up creating a conflict between them, and wished to alleviate the consequences of negative karma. The editors of *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* are conscientious about the diverse ethnic backgrounds of the Buddhist American writers.

If we accept the premise of mutual relationship between Buddhism and literature, which has also become transnational, what can we say about literature's influence on Buddhism in the United States? To put it differently, how have the literary works produced in Asia, which are informed of Buddhist ideas, affected the formation of Buddhist American literature? For instance, medieval Japanese literature, and to some extent modern Japanese literature, were conditioned by the writers' personal relationship to Buddhism and aesthetic expressions connected to nature. Many of the major works in both poetry and prose (though they are not labeled as "Buddhist literature" in Japan) have been translated into English, such as *The Tale of Ise*, *The Tale of Genji*, *The Sarashina Diary*, etc., as has *The Buddha Tree* written by Fumio Niwa during the 1950s. Is there any connection between these and Buddhist American literature? In addition, transnational perspective raises another important question: whether or not the choice of *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* is appropriate. The book does not include a discussion of literary works from Canada or Latin America, which may fit into the same category. Although the exploration of these topics is beyond the scope of the book, it is worth keeping in mind, as this book will promote an examination of the correlation between Buddhism and modern literature.

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