

BUDDHISM AND THE PRODUCTION OF AMERICAN COOL

By

JAMES F. ROYAL

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2009

© 2009 James F. Royal

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the chair and members of my committee for their assistance on this dissertation. They provided thoughtful and considered feedback, and challenged my thinking in creative and constructive ways.

I'd also like to thank my wife, Maranatha Joy Hayes.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	3
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION: THE DISCOURSE OF COOL AND BUDDHISM	8
The Discourse of Cool and the Protestant Ethnic	11
Buddhism Meets Cold War Consumerism	22
Green as a Capitalist Analog	29
Buddhism and the Post Cold War Era	32
2 BUDDHISM GETS FRAMED.....	36
Emerson's <i>Morgenlandfahrt</i> : Reading Eastern Religion via Europe	37
Buddhism and Manifest Destiny?	46
Buddhism as a Capitalist Ideology?	48
19 th Century Interest in Buddhism.....	49
Buddhism Twice Told.....	52
3 KEROUAC AND GINSBERG: THE SUPERMARKET OF BUDDHIST IDENTITY..	61
Buddhist Style Saves America.....	74
Ginsberg: Eclectic Affinities	85
<i>Satori in Paris</i> : Americans (and French-Canadians) as Ethnics	97
Buddhism as Justification for the Beat Style	107
Kerouac and Ginsberg as Avant-garde Capitalists?	112
4 GARY SNYDER: BUDDHISM AS ECOLOGY AS COUNTERCAPITALISM.....	117
Snyder and Sustainability	121
<i>Endless Streams and Mountains</i>	125
Buddhism and Protest.....	142
<i>The Market</i>	144
Essays of the 1960s: <i>Earth House Hold</i>	151
<i>The Etiquette of Freedom</i>	159
The Renunciation of Control as True Freedom.....	162
5 CHARLES JOHNSON: BUDDHISM AND THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK.....	164
Johnson and Buddhism	165
Black Identity	168
Buddhism as Protest.....	174
<i>Turning the Wheel</i> : Essays on Buddhism	175
Buddhism Battles Capitalism, or Meditation Instead of Mediation	179

Reading Black Experience as Buddhist	182
<i>Middle Passage</i> as the Middle Way	190
Cool as a State of Mind.....	208
6 COOL PROJECTIONS: THE ART OF FILMING BUDDHISM	209
Representing the China-Tibet Conflict	213
Cool and the Representation of Tibet	217
<i>Kundun</i> and <i>Seven Years in Tibet: Americana in Shangri-La</i>	219
The Dalai Lama and Western Technology	229
The West as Protector of the Innocent East	235
The West as Producer of Knowledge	244
Keanu Reeves: the Buddha from Zen to Now.....	246
America Protects the Little Buddha, or the Conrads Go into the Heart of Darkness	247
Slumming with the Buddhists.....	252
The Matrix: “Buddhist” Critique as Cool	253
Buddhism as Ultimate Control	266
Attention-Energy as Fuel for the Matrix / <i>The Matrix</i>	270
Conclusion	274
7 ADVERTISING BUDDHISM: CONSUMING THE EXOTIC AT HOME.....	276
China and the Post-Cold War World.....	280
Advertisement as Opiate.....	285
Marketing the Commodity as Ethnic	286
“New Luxury” and the Luxe Life	288
Buddhism Made Me Cool.....	294
Meditating for Profit.....	297
Luxury Leisure	299
Protecting Asia’s Others	302
Luxury Soul Food.....	309
Cool Hybridity	311
Buddhism as Control.....	313
The End(s) of Cool Buddhism.....	314
LIST OF REFERENCES	316
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	331

Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

BUDDHISM AND THE PRODUCTION OF AMERICAN COOL

By

James F. Royal

May 2010

Chair: Malini Schueller

Major: English

One of the most remarkable facets of capitalism is its ability to incorporate disparate – even antithetical – systems into its ever-enlarging sphere of influence, especially in the 20th and 21st centuries as technology makes the world interconnected. To make such a transformation, consumer capitalism has employed a discourse of “cool” to rein in potentially threatening figures and ideologies and bring them back into the circuits of consumption. Especially ripe for analysis is the incorporation of Buddhism, since the creed is the fastest-growing of the world religions in the U.S. They key moment for its mobilization – the 1950s – occurred during a period of escalating tensions with communism, in which a flourishing consumer capitalism was touted as the way to defeat the U.S.S.R. During this period, representations of Buddhism entered pop culture as a challenge to mainstream consumerism. Yet, now representations of Buddhism support consumer capitalism, for instance, in ads and films. Thus, this dissertation seeks to understand how seemingly antithetical discourses can promote the proliferation of capitalism, and how political and capitalist imperatives can motivate representations of a foreign religion.

This dissertation examines postwar figures who have used Buddhism in their cultural productions, although it highlights writers from earlier periods who framed Buddhism for later adoption. Such antecedents include Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose use of Buddhism for capitalist-imperialist ends set the stage for the work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. While the Beats deployed Buddhism in a way that perpetuated capitalist individualism, Gary Snyder seriously challenges the capitalist paradigm by incorporating the experience of Buddhist enlightenment in his poems. Charles Johnson deploys Buddhism as a means to connect African-Americans to a spiritual heritage that is resistant to the dominant capitalist paradigm. Whereas each of these figures ostensibly provided a critique of capitalism, later uses of the religion, in 1990s film and 2000s advertisement, show a Buddhism that is more overtly pro-capitalist, a move that reflects America's identity crisis in the post-Cold War, especially in its relationship with China, but also Asia generally. Throughout this era, the discourse of cool has tried to appropriate seemingly subversive elements back into the capitalist fold.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: THE DISCOURSE OF COOL AND BUDDHISM

Cool. Perhaps no word in the English language projects so secularly such spiritual overtones. The importance of cool has transcended generations of consumers, and it appears to be an ideology whose strength endures remarkably well. Indeed, the notion of cool is a key guiding motif in the marketing of postwar and then post-Cold War consumer culture for middle-class America. Although the fundamental sense of cool has remained relatively unaltered over its lifetime, its application to objects and people has changed remarkably as consumer culture developed swiftly in the last half-century amid vast economic fluctuations. Analyzing the discourse of cool is central to understanding how capitalist representation, especially via mass media, channels potential threats into profitable avenues and how that discourse has operated to increase consumption, especially vital in periods of stagnant or negative economic growth. By spiritualizing the experience of consumer culture, this discourse has attempted to fashion material consumption into a transcendent experience free of market-based economics, mystifying the materialist (and often brutal) conditions of production.

From the 1950s on, a key strand of the discourse of cool has been based on the alterity of Buddhism, especially the use of the religion as a means to craft a critique of consumerism and create a range of countercultural identities that are putatively resistant to capitalism. This use of the religion, by writers such as the Beats, partakes in what Rey Chow calls the trope of the “protestant ethnic,” through which dissent from white American culture is articulated via ethnic alterity. But while Buddhism was used in early postwar America as a bulwark against consumerism, its representation in popular culture has shifted remarkably in the interim, depending on preponderant economic and

nationalist imperatives of a specific period. Briefly, via the discourse of cool Buddhism has been tethered to economic profitability first through its portrayal as an anti-capitalist position up through its more recent deployments in films and advertisements as an ostensibly pro-capitalist ideology that underwrites consumerism as well as America's technological ideology of control.

But while the 1950s become the period in which the discourse of cool circulated Buddhism, the roots of its representation as a religion for dissidents of capitalism developed in the 19th century, especially through figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The readings of the religion – or at least specific parts of it – by these authors were profoundly affected by the Orientalist slant of not only the men themselves but also the imperialist-colonialist milieu through which they received their texts. Emerson's eclectic use of parts of Buddhist doctrine as the basis for a new spiritualized American identity frames later deployments of Buddhism as a religion that resists capitalist depredations.

The Beats comprise the first major postwar landmark in the deployment of Buddhism as anti-capitalism. As the heads of the Beat movement, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg use the religion to craft countercultural identities that, they claim, resist the rabid consumerism then being promoted as a means to fight the communist Soviet Union. By deploying newly styled Buddhist-inspired personae that could then be promulgated by the media, Kerouac and Ginsberg participate in the discourse of cool as dissidents from the Cold War consensus identity, which conceived America in the narrowly defined terms of white, heterosexual Protestant men. At the same time, through their formulations Kerouac and Ginsberg validate American ideals of atomistic

individuality and leisure consumption, suggesting how the Beats operated as avant-garde capitalists rather than as the countercultural heroes they are so often made out to be.

Whereas the Beats offered a more dilettantish engagement with Buddhism in the 1950s and 1960s, another wave of interest in Buddhism as capitalist critique deals with the religion not as an exotic phenomenon but as a lived practice of dedication and discipline. For authors Gary Snyder and Charles Johnson, both of whom have practiced the religion for many years, Buddhism becomes less a way to establish a new identity of coolness than a concrete means to address and heal the social deformations caused by market-based economics. As the poetic leader of the Deep Ecology movement, Snyder has used Buddhism to model a new, healthy system of social relationships among humans and the environment in order to indirectly (but nonetheless effectively) combat the pernicious effects of commodification promoted by capitalist economics. In the face of an increasingly stagnant economy, the rise of sustainability discourse in the last 40 years forms the backdrop for Snyder's deployment of Buddhism in the service of ecology. For Johnson, Buddhism offers a way to transcend the dualistic trap posed by racialized identity politics, and he advocates a position that neither denies the injustices of racism on African-Americans nor reifies those injustices into the basis for a specific fixed identity. Through Buddhism, Johnson challenges the notion of an essentialized self-identity, so fundamental to one strain of Black Nationalism, and negotiates a space for African-Americans between the uncritical acceptance of the goal of equal access to America's consumerist culture and a spiritualized practice that recognizes the limitations of materialism. The ongoing

marginalization of these authors reflects in part their rejection of the identity formation based on alterity that is so essential to the notion of cool.

The immense popularity of Buddhism in 1990s was unprecedented, even to scholars such as Thomas Tweed, who noted that no one he knows predicted the upsurge in interest.¹ In the most recent deployment of Buddhism as cool, American films and advertisements of the last 20 years have taken the religion as a sign of Otherness that itself seems to promote consumption and America's technological lineage of control. Such pop culture has also deployed Buddhism as a means to articulate America's fundamental goodness in the existential crisis caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The religion has been represented as a way to negotiate the tension caused by America's relations with China, especially regarding economic issues that pose both an opportunity and a threat for certain classes of Americans, but also as regards China's ongoing conflict with Tibet, a disagreement that opens the opportunity for America to portray itself and the nature of capitalism as unassailably beneficent. These films and ads also portray Buddhism as endorsing the apotheosis of a control-oriented mindset and technology, both of which are increasingly loaded with the value of cool.

The Discourse of Cool and the Protestant Ethnic

Critics such as Peter Stearns associate the notion of cool with an emotional style that has shifted toward restraint, especially in the immediate prewar and postwar era.² However, cool is more than an emotional style; indeed, emotional style may not even be the primary mode of cool. Rather, cool is a specific style and strategy of postwar

¹ Thomas Tweed, p. xv.

² Peter N. Stearns, p. 3

American capitalism. Cool describes people, objects, and a lifestyle that seem to operate according to rules that lie beyond the quotidian, especially the market-based logic of consumer capitalism. Cool functions as a discourse that reins in potential threats to consumer capitalism, by re-working them representationally into the circuits of consumption. The notion of cool becomes especially necessary in developed economies where subsistence-level needs are no longer a primary concern; in such markets it's vital to stimulate desire and consumption, to stoke the coals of the economy through fashion. When cool is deployed, consumption can be organized and managed by providing a cool cachet to products, by adding semiotic value, by claiming the products – and by extension their consumers – operate according to a non-market logic that transcends consumer capitalism. As these products proliferate sufficiently, their cool cachet diminishes and they become merely the next uninteresting cultural form on which to base the next round of cool-making. Ultimately, cool is used by consumers as another means to express identity in an ongoing and profitable cycle of identity politics.

What's been defined as cool has changed since some of the earliest deployments of cool in the 1950s. However, central to the definition of cool in any period is the ability of the subject to be characterized as operating according to a non-market logic. What was cool in the 1950s may well have been sufficiently mainstreamed such that in the 1970s (or 1980s or 1990s) the object, person, or place is so ensconced in consumerism that it cannot be used by the individual to evoke any non-market appeal. Consider the early representations of the Harley-Davidson "hog" or the Volkswagen Beetle, both of which were marketed as cool "anti-establishment" vehicles, particularly in the 1960s. In print ads, the Beetle in particular was represented as a car

that was proud of its ugly looks and its great low price. The Beetle's advertising highlighted its character as non-market-based, whether that market be for good looks or class. And yet, of course, the car was simply appealing to a different style that was nevertheless on the same continuum with the high-priced and stylish cars aimed at bourgeois consumers. Now, both vehicles are heavily flogged at inflated prices to nostalgic yuppies, who realize the power of their discretionary income, and these vehicles are anything but cool. The ability of an object to be represented as operating according to non-market laws is vital for the establishment of cool.

For this reason, the definition of cool that I use shifts from period to period (and from chapter to chapter), as the deployment of cool to various subjects is modified according to prevailing or potential tastes. In the 1950s, the representation of cool could easily foil itself against the capitalist mass consumption that was officially sanctioned by cultural authorities. Figures such as the Beats, who ostensibly criticized consumerist practice, fit well into this schema. Just as useful to cool was the image of the man who would not grow up and take responsibility, a figure that the Beats and the consumption-oriented *Playboy* magazine could exploit. As a growing anti-establishment trend takes place in the 1960s and 1970s and references Beat figures such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, cool enlarges from just an anti-consumerist style to an increased emphasis on the negative ecological impact of consumption and even expands into the realm of psychotropic or hallucinogenic drugs, apparently further away from market-based logic into the area of the individualized mind. Yet, all the while, such critiques were articulated through an increase of the individual's desire for obtaining

what he or she wanted, a process that re-emphasized the atomistic individuality promoted by consumerist practice.

Another side of that 1960s and 1970s movement is comprised of various Civil Rights movements on the part of non-white Americans, who emphasize their non-white individuality in movements such as Black Cultural Nationalism. While these movements re-articulate cool as inherently black and far away from the stiff characterization of whiteness, they reify black identity as an essentialized category. Such an identity politics is challenged by Charles Johnson, who attempts to negotiate a space that does not rely on any identity formation, since for the Buddhist Johnson identity is a figment of the mind.

In the post-Cold War era, cool becomes re-defined and substantially enlarged as the era of the communist Soviet Union wanes. Cool becomes more explicitly aligned with consumerist practice, especially with high-tech goods that promise consumers an experience that is limited only by their individual imagination. More prominent in the idea of cool is the ability to control every facet of one's experience, a practice that is increasingly sated (even as such satisfaction is also deferred) by high technology. Such individualist style is characterized as beyond market logic, even as it increasingly relies on consumer goods and so multinational manufacturers. As important, America itself becomes cool, as its national identity is re-worked as a capitalist nation whose products are desired by the world. Increasingly, the importance of obtaining and maintaining cool becomes a focal point in popular culture of the post-Cold War era.

Using Michel Foucault's formulation of discourse, I'd like to situate the discourse of cool as one that articulates capitalist power in the regulation and disciplining of

subjects for the purposes of consumption. For Foucault, power “traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse.”³ In distinction to a purely juridical notion of power, one that merely prohibits action, the discourse of cool enables consumption by modulating representational strategies consisting of constraints as well as courses of action that are more overtly productive. This discourse produces what Foucault calls a “regime,” a system of power that produces, sustains, and circulates the discourse in a type of mutually reinforcing circular relationship.⁴ Similarly, the discourse of cool is circulated by a media apparatus, perpetuating the prerogatives of capitalist power as the discourse shapes and is shaped by that power.

By producing knowledge about cool and cool’s ability to garner socioeconomic power, the discourse of cool renders visible a whole set of strategies for participating in power. For example, by rendering cool as a visible phenomenon through the act of material consumption, the discourse of cool provides an observable rubric through which a subject’s cool can be adjudicated. Foucault explains that such discourse

is no longer built simply to be seen... or to observe the external space... but to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control – to render visible those who are inside it...to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them.⁵

Even as discourse produces subjects malleable to the dictates of power, it also articulates a means of power for these subjects. Through discourse, power produces subjects who can arrogate their own power by replicating the discourse and surveilling and disciplining other subjects, reinforcing and propagating a relational network of

³ Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” p. 61.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁵ Michel Foucault, “The Means of Correct Training,” p. 190. Foucault discusses the discourse inherent in architecture.

power – “supervisors, perpetually supervised.”⁶ Foucault states that through such surveillance, “disciplinary power became an ‘integrated’ system, linked from the inside to the economy and to the mechanism in which it [is] practiced.”⁷ Therefore, the discourse of cool offers various strategies for individuals to participate in power, by internally disciplining themselves and subjecting others to the rubric of cool.

The discourse of cool functions as a way to harness alterity and make it economically productive. In an age of mass-produced and fungible products, cool has become a marker of status that suggests its middle-class consumers operate according to a non-market-based logic that is not tied to capitalism. Cool confers cultural capital upon consumers, providing distinction, to use Pierre Bourdieu’s term.⁸ Alan Liu describes “the basic engine of cultural cool” as “the consumption by middle-class workers of forms of entertainment, journalism, and dress influenced by that part of culture excluded by definition from normal work – *subculture*.”⁹ He argues that white-collar workers experienced cool “through commodified forms of leisure safely tethered to the system of production.”¹⁰ Such “tethering” can be managed through mass media and advertising, which reduces alterity to merely a sign, easily consumed or easily avoided by turning a page or flipping a channel. Moreover, Liu argues that the middle class “identified less with the actor or even action of the outsider’s challenge to the system...than with the empty stage or site of the exotic on which that challenge was

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, p. 69. Briefly, Bourdieu defines distinction as a means to establish primacy over other, lower social groups. Distinction is based on cultural capital, economic capital, and social capital – all of which allow a dominant group to display its dominance or distinction.

⁹ Alan Liu, p. 100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

enacted."¹¹ In this situation the outsider is nearly erased from any given text, leaving only the outsider's context and style to be consumed. In effect, appropriating another's style becomes the means of appropriating its social position of cool for one's own identity, a process suggested by Dick Hebdige, Joseph Heath, and Andrew Potter.¹² This style can be further articulated through the ethnic outsider.

Such a process of identity formation based on ethnicity is underscored by what Rey Chow argues in her book *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Chow posits that the ethnic comes to be a trope for the protest-ant – that which protests.

Often appearing in captivity and longing for emancipation, the ethnic-as-commodity cannot simply be understood within the parameters of an older humanism with its existentialist logic but must also be theorized in terms of the forces of an inhuman, capitalistic logic, the roots of which, as Max Weber argues, can be traced back to religion – to the tradition of Protestantism.¹³

Chow asserts that theorizations of ethnicity often rely on Lukács's model of class consciousness. Lukács's model, she claims, is flawed because it envisions the ethnic group achieving consciousness as both commodity and non-commodity – victimized yet able to transcend commodification. Ultimately, this account situates the victim as someone whose "salvation lies in resistance and protest," which is "aimed at ... bringing about universal justice."¹⁴ Chow then argues that, for Weber, this account of resistance and protest is central to the capitalist spirit: "Resistance and protest... are part and parcel of the structure of capitalism; they are the reasons capitalism flourishes."¹⁵ She adds, "What is proclaimed to be human must also increasingly take on the significance

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹² Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *A Nation of Rebels*
Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*

¹³ Rey Chow, p. 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

of a commodity, a commodified spectacle."¹⁶ Such is the way that representations of religion come to be a foundation for commodification – by seeming to continually replenish what appears most human within us. For postwar America those most human components have become those seemingly non-American, non-capitalist elements, represented by what is increasingly portrayed as the most humane religion, Buddhism.

The expansion of capitalist representations into the area of religion fits well with Weber's schema of the move from rationalization (of the economy, of people) to the irrational. Weber argues that as a culture moves toward increased rationalization, there is a subsequent or concomitant move toward the irrational, which is manifested in the increasing prevalence of three qualities – aestheticism, eroticism, and brotherliness.¹⁷ Representations of religion, in particular, function as a way to recoup brotherliness, and quite possibly the other two qualities. All major world religions stress some vision of brotherliness, whether it be through Christianity's mottos of "love your neighbor" and "do unto others" or Buddhism's vows of loving-kindness and compassion, among others. Buddhism has functioned effectively as a marker of aestheticism and eroticism because of its representations in, for instance, *The Dharma Bums*, in which the religion functions as a justification for free love. Presented as the last bastions of humanity – sexuality, art, and fraternity – are exactly what appear to resist commodification. Yet this humanity, through its proliferation as a style, increasingly takes on the form of commodification.

Brotherliness as a value derived from religion also serves a further purpose. The representation of brotherliness can function effectively as a means of subduing and

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁷ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*

erasing potential threats from the ethnic, and even gendered, other. Because Buddhism is already well known as a religion of pacifism and compassion, thanks in part to writers such as the Beats, representations of otherness connected with Buddhism portray the other in similar terms. That is, brotherliness as a value defuses ethnic and gender tension and differences by supposing that we are all one, and that the lone desire of the other is merely to fulfill our (American) desire. Indeed, the idea of brotherly unity is a common misconception of what Buddhist enlightenment means. Because our desires and those of the other so neatly align, we can redeem those ethnics “appearing in captivity and longing for emancipation” in a spirit of brotherliness, which masks the institutionalized greed and consumerism purveyed by capitalism. Brotherliness has transformed into commodification, as the reading of Chow suggests. Because Chow’s (and Weber’s) model of capitalism has already built in protest as the *modus operandi*, it also already has “cool” – a discourse of alterity – structured in.

Buddhism is portrayed as resistant to commodification and thus pure, while also seeming defiled. In the words of Slavoj Žižek, during the colonial period the West believed that the desire for penetration and "the notion that the ultimate pillar of Wisdom, the secret *agalma*, the spiritual treasure, the lost object-cause of desire, which we in the West long ago betrayed, could be recuperated out there, in the forbidden exotic place."¹⁸ Žižek goes on to argue that colonialism was not only the assimilation of others, but “always also the search for the lost spiritual innocence of OUR OWN civilization.”¹⁹ The binary status of representations of Buddhism, therefore, come to offer a space for an American audience to criticize the Cold War consensus and later

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, p. 67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Chinese geopolitical maneuvers, even as it offers an opportunity for Americans to profit. Chow argues, "It is incumbent upon us to understand the historical affinity between Protestantism and capitalist entrepreneurship as such, an affinity whose rationale may be ultimately paraphrased as 'I protest, therefore I am': the more one protests, the more work, business, and profit one will generate."²⁰ In this way, the use of the ethnic religion as protest comes to symbolize the fundamental, even metaphysical, difference between the protester and what is being protested. Yet such protesters themselves have much to gain through the use of the ethnic, when such representations come to be parlayed into cool and subsequently profit. Chow concludes, "In this boundless capacity for moral self-production, -expansion, and -proliferation, ethnic captivity thus transubstantiates, its lines of flight readily morphing – and merging – into global capital's phantasmagoric flows."²¹ Particularly through the media, the discourse of cool negotiates a position that makes profitable the exploitation of ethnicity, here Buddhism, thereby strengthening the flow of global capital.

But where the discourse of cool tethered putative resistance to consumption into acts of productive consumption as part of the American postwar mandate to fight communism, the post-Cold War era has seen a different imperative focused on the rising economic powers of Asia. In the post-Cold War era and without a clear international superpower against which to identify, America has been portraying itself and its businesses as benevolent to Asia, a nascent area of globalization. Yet, when ideologically necessary, China becomes the antagonist, especially in regard to Tibet and economic issues. By positioning Asia, and especially Tibet, as innocent and in need

²⁰ Rey Chow, p. 49.

²¹ *Ibid.*

of rescue, the United States can create a narrative structure that represents itself as a savior, in contrast to the new “evil empire” – China. The imperialist-nostalgic representation re-creates an identity in which the United States has a clear *raison d’être*. The discourse of cool has represented Asia, and especially Tibet, as a commodified spectacle with a dual position of both purity and in need of saving by American capitalism and its technology, in cultural products such as films and advertisements. These films and ads imply that Americans are – or can become – cool, because we can consume or save the others of the world.

Central to this articulation of American identity has been Tibet. Žižek examines the “fantasmatic” hold that Tibet has on the United States, suggesting that the Asian nation has become “a screen for the projection of Western ideological fantasies.”²² Donald Lopez agrees, noting that “the European powers’ failure to dominate [Tibet] politically only increased European longing and added to the fantasy about life in the land.”²³ Žižek analyzes the binary nature of typical representations: “Tibetans are portrayed as people leading a simple life of spiritual satisfaction, fully accepting their fate, liberated from the excessive craving of the Western subject who is always searching for more, AND as a bunch of filthy, cheating, cruel, sexually promiscuous primitives.”²⁴ Such a representation undertakes what Renato Rosaldo calls “imperialist nostalgia” and fits well with the goals of the expansionary economic and political system of the United States.²⁵ Either way, as a representation Tibet can be used to justify

²² Slavoj Žižek, p. 64.

²³ Donald Lopez, “Kundun,” p. 228.

²⁴ Slavoj Žižek, p. 64.

²⁵ Renato Rosaldo, p. 70. Rosaldo explains: “In this ideologically constructed world of ongoing progressive change, putatively static savage societies become a stable reference point for defining (the felicitous progress of) civilized identity.”

economic expansionism; America can rationalize selling the Tibetans its products if the Tibetans are “filthy,” since we and by extension our products will modernize and save them, or if they’re “liberated,” America can consume their simplicity. Using Buddhism, the discourse of cool authorizes multiple positions.

This proposed discourse of cool offers a useful model to study the ability of capitalism to re-work threats into economically productive activity, but perhaps it may appear too monolithic and overdetermined. Such “top down” conceptions of mass culture tend to represent consumers as being manipulated by transnational capital, as dupes to slick marketing psychology. It’s important to recall the limitations of such theorizations and to gesture to how actual practice may limit the applicability of these models. Indeed, I would characterize the Buddhist performance of appreciation as one practice through which individuals enact resistance. While my later chapters on films and advertisements provide a “top down” exegesis, as my description of the discourse of cool suggests, I try to avoid the assumption of a totalizing reading that offers audiences little or no agency in how they consume texts. Perhaps a “bottom up” ethnographic reading would more effectively characterize the interstices through which consumers gain agency in their consumption. I’d like my analyses to show how these texts interpellate audiences as subjects in ways that maximize the benefits for their backers within a capitalist system whose mantra is profit. As retailing magnate John Wanamaker once lamented, “I know that half of my advertising doesn't work. The problem is, I don't know which half.”

Buddhism Meets Cold War Consumerism

While economic, imperial, and religious concerns clearly shaped the representations of Buddhism in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century, the aftermath of

World War 2 left new imperatives and challenges for capitalist America and how it dealt with what was foreign, as it faced off against the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Victory in the war had placed the U.S. in the clear position of lone capitalist superpower, and it also solidified the myth of American beneficence, as a “nation-state serving the general interests of all: economic expansion, national sovereignty, global peace, and security – the mantra of freedom, democracy, and human rights.”²⁶ Yet as Nikhil Pal Singh notes, the more accurate picture of the U.S. was as a “patron of older imperialisms and an agent of specifically capitalist freedoms.”²⁷ Nevertheless, the myth would be invoked again and again during the Cold War as a means to provide cover to market expansionism, promoted as a means to battle the spread of communism.

The extreme tensions of the Cold War, pitting capitalism against communism, marked a stark shift in American politics to the right. In the fight against the communist menace, America’s Cold War rhetoric ideologically positioned the consensus American as a white, bourgeois, heterosexual Protestant man – the so-called Cold War consensus identity – and above all as a citizen who supported the ongoing proliferation of the capitalist marketplace that would establish American might. It was capitalist America that represented good, freedom, and plenty, as Vice President Richard Nixon explained to Soviet General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev in the “Kitchen Debate” during the opening of the American National Exhibition in Moscow. America as a “Consumer’s Republic,” to use Lizabeth Cohen’s term, acted as a powerful representational

²⁶ Nikhil Pal Singh, p. 159.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

alternative to communism, as it re-envisioned the political entity of the nation increasingly in depoliticized, individualistic, and market-based terms.²⁸

The threat of communism to capitalist America set the tone for a conservative 1950s, even after the disbanding of Joseph McCarthy's communist witch hunts of the early part of the decade. The discourse of the period reduced political identities to two options, both related to one's stance on communism – hard or soft, according to Kyle A. Cuordileone. While McCarthy and other conservatives made much of those liberals who were soft on communism, the dualism was really established by *The Vital Center*, by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, which went on to dominate political thinking during the early Cold War period.²⁹ The terms *hard* and *soft* became gendered stand-ins for those masculine virtues that would strengthen the country against communist aggression and those feminine vices that would weaken it. “The dualistic imagery was ... the reflex of a political culture that ... put a new premium on hard masculine toughness and rendered anything less than that soft, timid, feminine, and as such a real or potential threat to the security of the nation,” explains Cuordileone.³⁰ While this ideology positioned Americans as needing to be tough in the international sphere, mass consumption was being encouraged at the same time domestically.

The dualism of “hard” and “soft” stances on communism intended to promote certain masculine values that could be used in practice. Hard stances on communism claimed the high ground for representing the real. After having suffered repeated attacks from hard-stance conservatives, the late 1940s saw a shift in liberal sentiment to a hard stance that purported to deal with the communist reality. “By the late 1940s a

²⁸ Lizabeth Cohen, p. 4.

²⁹ Kyle A. Cuordileone, pp. vii-viii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

new political 'realism' swept through the liberal intelligentsia as leading liberal thinkers and activists ... articulated their own 'tough-minded' anti-Communism, and held any position short of an unequivocal rejection of Communism to be hopelessly soft and sentimental," argues Cuordileone.³¹ The ideological alignment that went on during the period across the political spectrum – between the real and masculinity, and the sentimental and femininity – drove the establishment of an aesthetic ideology of realism. Suzanne Clark also notes how realism became equated with violence in the early Cold War period. The tensions of the period created a form of political realism that pretended to ahistorical truth. Then literary critics metamorphosed such political realism into literary realism, and the literary canon congealed, with scholars privileging ideologies of realism over sentimentality.³²

As America pursued military ventures in Asia, most notably in Korea and Vietnam, in the name of fighting communism, the Buddhist spirituality of the region became increasingly popular domestically. As Christina Klein shows, in the postwar period Asia became of new strategic interest to the U.S., as the nation developed its military, economic, and political power on the continent. In the Cold War, it was essential that the capitalists secure Asia before the communists did. Therefore, it became necessary to understand these Asian cultures, and so middlebrow culture produced a sentimental knowledge about Asia that negotiated for its consumers a path of affiliation and difference with those cultures.³³ Between the demands for realism and the impetus for sentimentalism, literary figures such as the Beats took a romantic turn to

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

³² Suzanne Clark, p. 10.

³³ Christina Klein, p. 12

Buddhism in part because it promised to reveal the unadulterated, non-marketable nature of reality.

As the power of communist countries grew across the world, the domestic rhetoric reflected the seeming ineffectiveness of U.S. actions. With the Soviet Union taking over eastern Europe and gaining access to nuclear weapons, and China falling to Mao Tse-Tung's communist army, McCarthy made quick use of such situations to accuse the U.S. government of being infiltrated with communist spies, who were causing "America's powerlessness in the world in the face of Communist expansion."³⁴ Such rhetoric was easily connected to fears of effeminacy for both the nation and its men, and then subsequently to fears of homosexuality. The McCarthyite witch hunt for communists led as well to the dismissal of hundreds of homosexuals from the State Department. McCarthy charged their infiltration to previous soft Democratic regimes, connecting liberalism with homosexuality, and playing on fears of a rampant American sexuality that threatened to weaken the nation.³⁵

Richard J. Corber goes on to argue that Cold War ideology positioned Americans who dissented from consumer capitalism and the bourgeois ideals of property as homosexuals who weakened the nation in the face of the communist threat – a politicization that "was crucial to the consolidation of the Cold War consensus."³⁶ He continues: "The homosexualization of left-wing political activity by the discourses of national security enabled Cold War liberalism to emerge as the only acceptable alternative to the forces of reaction in postwar American society."³⁷ Homosexual male

³⁴ Kyle A. Cuordileone, p. xi.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Robert J. Corber, pp. 2-3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

writers then saw themselves as a potentially subversive force that could shake at its foundations the supposed consensus of the heterosexual white male.³⁸ The conservative movement in the 1950s attempted to restrain the potential ideological depredations of homosexuality, in the name of strengthening capitalism and so national security.

This sustained emphasis on Americans to consume as a means to create a bulwark against communism resulted in a reformulation of the nature of American citizenship. The political notion of citizens as citizens gradually shifted to one in which citizens were also conceived as consumers, or what Cohen calls the *purchaser as citizen*.³⁹ Along with this shift, a notion of individualism began to develop through which one assisted the nation simply by consuming what one wanted. “Now the consumer satisfying personal material wants actually served the national interest, since economic recovery after a decade and a half of depression and war depended on a dynamic mass consumption economy,” argues Cohen.⁴⁰ In effect, consumption became a means to articulate the nation's democratic values. This ideology persisted throughout the Cold War, and individualism was increasingly and rabidly expressed through a market economy. The political dimension of citizenship was gradually erased in favor of a market expansionism that increasingly formulated the citizen as exclusively a consumer, in a process that Cohen calls the consumerization of the republic.⁴¹

Yet, if consumerism were to be the means to defeat communism, the masculinized, nationalistic ideology of the era ground hard against an America that had

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁹ Lizabeth Cohen, p. 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 8 – 9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

long been encouraged to see consumption as a feminizing activity. Adding further tension was the ongoing pursuit of leisure. Mass magazines of the era helped restructure consumption in ways that were economically and sometimes socially desirable. Periodicals such as *Life* and *Bride's* extolled consumption because "the purchaser as citizen... simultaneously fulfilled personal desire and civic obligation by consuming."⁴² Such popular outlets scorned excessive saving. Male-oriented magazines such as *Playboy*, first published in 1953, also helped defuse the tension between masculinity and consumption by suggesting how men could consume and still be masculine. Pictures of naked women assured readers of their heterosexual virility as they were told how to set up the perfect bachelor pad. Within the Cold War consensus framework, it makes sense then that Barbara Ehrenreich deemed *Playboy* a fundamentally conservative magazine.⁴³

Although non-consensus identities were made invisible in the mainstream, they nevertheless seemed to offer the possibility of challenging the domestic capitalist hegemony. Expressions of non-consensus identity then seemed to articulate protest, but that protest was often also a means to gain economic enfranchisement. Cohen demonstrates how African-Americans sought to gain entrance into ostensibly "public" sites of consumption, effectively aiming for political rights by demanding equal economic access. "Articulating black discontent in the language of liberal struggle to pursue individual rights in a free capitalist marketplace and then successfully securing those rights, moreover, only reinforced the legitimacy of the capitalist order as a way of

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁴³ Barbara Ehrenreich, pp. 50-51.

organizing economic life,” argues Cohen.⁴⁴ Other expressions of non-consensus identity could function similarly, with the chance to gain access to goods. That Ginsberg promotes his own homosexuality or that the Beats turn to African-Americans and Buddhism to articulate dissent suggests how they took advantage of the ability to protest and so gain literary and economic currency. Interest in Buddhism among American authors, especially the Beat writers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, as well as Gary Snyder and Charles Johnson indicates how they sought to challenge capitalism by turning to non-consensus practices, even as such protest could be re-circulated for profit via the discourse of cool.

Green as a Capitalist Analog

As the rapid economic expansion of the 1950s and 1960s faded, high economic growth became harder to foster. Under the pressure to consume, personal savings had been whittled away and consumer debt had increased. Toward the end of this era, a mass green movement and sustainability discourse began to emerge, in part through the efforts of poet Gary Snyder, who has used Buddhism to critique rampant consumerism. In the last 10 years, the green movement has gained wider currency, especially through the efforts of American corporations, not as a means to develop sustainable practices, but rather as one to generate more profits. The discourse of cool has been able to “greenwash” a trenchant critique and re-circulate it for the purposes of generating more capital.

The development of a mass green movement and sustainability discourse in the last 40 years has occurred during a period in which the ability to expand American consumption in systemically safe ways has continually decreased. David Harvey points

⁴⁴ Lizabeth Cohen, p. 189.

to the period around 1973 as a key moment in which capital controls were relaxed in response to slowing economic growth.⁴⁵ That move offered a means for consumers as well as corporations to increase their credit, effectively allowing greater consumption in the present at the expense of future consumption. But, although per capita credit continued to expand from the 1970s on (and had been expanding prior, but more slowly),⁴⁶ data from the Federal Reserve indicate that a more marked and longer-lasting ascent of credit as a percentage of GDP began only in the early 1980s,⁴⁷ in response to further financial deregulation. From that period onward, consumer credit as a proportion of gross domestic product continued to skyrocket, and consumption was increasingly shifted to the present, as evidenced by increasing and sustained levels of household debt that match the rise of credit.⁴⁸

At the same time, because the ability to increase domestic consumer demand was becoming more difficult and increasingly reliant on credit, business had to focus on ways to maintain profit growth. All else equal, that meant cutting costs, which entailed cheaper inputs – some combination of cheaper capital, cheaper labor, or cheaper physical material. Pressures have been brought to bear on each aspect, for example, through an increased supply of credit, increased productivity so that redundant labor can be laid off, and military intervention in economically sensitive areas of the world (i.e. oil-producing). This increased focus on cost as a driver of profit – an overarching

⁴⁵ David Harvey, pp. 62-63.

⁴⁶ *Charting the Economy*

⁴⁷ Mark J. Perry. Prof. Perry provides numbers from the Federal Reserve that show the steady ascent of credit as a percent of GDP.

⁴⁸ *Charting the Economy*

mandate for high efficiency – occurred in the same period that sustainability discourse was becoming prominent.

This temporal overlap suggests the importance of the business mandate for efficiency on the spread of sustainability discourse as a mass phenomenon, especially in the last decade. Indeed, the largest corporations in the U.S. now tout their “green” bona fides by citing how they’re undertaking “environmentally friendly” initiatives such as investing in energy-saving devices and processes. Yet, those actions are clearly driven by their own profit and efficiency concerns. Ultimately these initiatives are designed to stoke demand by lowering the price points of consumption, making the firm itself more competitive even as it promotes a pseudo-environmentalism that is still based on rabid consumption, only with the guilt of environmental destruction greenwashed away by a discourse of cool that promises to eliminate constraints on consumption.

These recent economic strategies – increasing the supply of credit, resources or labor – are supply-side interventions into the capitalist economy. These strategies focus on increasing demand only indirectly, either by lowering prices or by providing the financial means to consume. On this point a confluence of capitalist and Marxist concerns appears – the importance of supply-side interventions. Typically, Marxist theory has focused on the exploitation of labor by a capitalist class and has attempted to redress such exploitation by promoting labor’s re-appropriation of the means of production. Weber diagnoses the problem of capitalism as primarily one of overaccumulation – too much capital and not enough investment opportunities.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

Though Harvey reads Rosa Luxemburg as endorsing underconsumption as the fundamental instability of capitalist economies, he asserts that few theorists would agree with Luxemburg's assessment today. Instead, Harvey focuses on the problem of overaccumulation as fundamental.⁵⁰ Yet, the mere fact of oversupply is not enough to cause instability; there must be desire (or demand) for more capital. How would investment opportunities exist without (ever-increasing) demand for new or different goods? As Harvey points out, one means would be accumulation through dispossession, namely forcible military imperialism to open up markets for exploitation, both from the standpoint of supply and demand.⁵¹ Nevertheless, even if all productive capacity were appropriated, economic growth could not occur without sustained increases in demand. As practiced by corporations, sustainability comes to represent not a type of environmentalism, but rather a more efficient capitalism, with an ever-greater shifting of profit from labor to investors.

Buddhism and the Post Cold War Era

Since the end of the Cold War the use of Buddhism in the discourse of cool has shifted remarkably. While the religion was used previously as capitalist critique, recent uses of Buddhism in popular media such as films and advertisements have been increasingly directed by capital. Without the need to maintain the Cold War consensus identity, Buddhism has become a means to articulate that myth of American beneficence and superiority, below which is the self-interested ideology of market expansion. Such popular incarnations of Buddhism show the religion supporting high

⁵⁰ David Harvey, pp. 138 – 139.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 139. Harvey also later posits his own model for sustainable investing, which involves a temporal-spatial shift of capital. Such a strategy involves moving capital from geographical areas of relative liquidity to less-liquid areas and/or investing money that has a relatively long payback time, for example, in education or infrastructure.

technology and the ideology of individualistic control that undergirds it, both of which are branded cool. With the decline of the Soviet Union, the new focus of American interest has become Asia, especially China, with all its attendant threats and opportunities.

With a population four times that of the United States (1.3 billion to 310 million), China's middle class could foreseeably create or shift major trends in worldwide consumption, and the nation has already begun to make its influence felt, albeit primarily on a regional scale. Nevertheless, China now presents itself as a major competitor for strategic world resources, as Harvey concludes.⁵² As investment funds flow increasingly to China, so do critical commodities such as steel, aluminum, and perhaps most importantly oil. The recent spike in petroleum spot prices is due at least in part to China's increasing oil consumption. Such a price increase puts a strain on America's growth, where distances are great and the automobile comprises such a relatively large portion of economic activity. The oil issue – combined with a political twist – also played itself out in a Chinese takeover bid of Unocal in 2005. CNOOC, an oil company 70% owned by the Chinese government, made a tender offer for the American-owned petroleum concern. U.S. legislators quickly raised a hue and cry over the deal, lest the Chinese have so much control over the strategic asset as well as a government foothold on domestic soil. After over a month of intense political heat in America, CNOOC backed down and let America's Chevron purchase Unocal.

The purchase of such strategic assets was often compared to the furor surrounding the Japanese acquisition of significant assets in the U.S. during the 1980s. Characterizing the difference between the Japanese buying spree, which was accompanied by much American horror, with that of the Chinese today, financial

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

journalist Irwin M. Stelzer writes,

Japan was not a rival for influence in Asia, or in the world; China is. Japan was not a major competitor for scarce resources such as oil; China is. Japanese companies were privately owned; China's acquirers are state-run entities. Japan is a democratic country, and by and large an American ally; China most definitely is not. Japan did not engage in the wholesale theft of intellectual property, China does. Japan did not buy strategic assets: ownership of New York real estate has no implication for national security; ownership of oil resources does.⁵³

To further underscore China's increasing competition, China has even invested in Venezuela's oil infrastructure, with the promise from socialist Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez that oil that had been diverted from the United States would be re-routed to the Asian power.⁵⁴ More recently, China has struck a deal with Brazil for access to the South American nation's newly discovered oil fields. Stelzer concludes: "China has decided to use its state resources to convert its major companies into important multinationals – part of an aggressive policy of projecting Chinese power on a global basis."⁵⁵

As it strikes deals across the world, China increasingly positions the renminbi as a global currency – a move that threatens the dollar as the world's reserve currency and the economic centrality that comes with that title. The growing downward pressure on the dollar is palpable, as China negotiates deals with third-party countries such as Brazil without using the dollar. Instead, the two nations have agreed to accept the other's currency in trade. The *Financial Times* headline stokes the fear of such realignment – "Brazil and China eye plan to axe the dollar."⁵⁶ China's move follows its recent call to abandon the dollar as the world's reserve currency and instead adopt the IMF's special

⁵³ Irwin M. Stelzer

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Jonathan Wheatley

drawing rights as an international reserve currency.

This clear diminution of American power has occurred concomitantly with greater resistance from Asian nations and others to American hegemony in the financial markets, as China's currency moves attest. As Harvey suggests, one possible American response to this decrease in hegemony is to shore up its power (e.g., control of Middle East oil resources) through military force. Harvey sees such a move as ultimately recapitulating the fall of the Soviet Union due to excessive military expenditures: "Will the US, in its blind pursuit of military dominance, undermine the economic foundations of its own power?"⁵⁷ Harvey proposes another alternative – namely, a renewal of social and physical infrastructure and a redistribution of wealth – but argues that this strategy would operate in violent conflict with the long-reigning dominant oligarchy in America, and thus is untenable.⁵⁸ Popular representation comes to gloss over this potential military conflict as an expression and recapitulation of the myths of American nationhood, myths that include the inherent goodness of America as well as manifest destiny, but on a transnational scale. Will the discourse of cool negotiate a means to profit from this tension?

⁵⁷ David Harvey, pp. 80-81.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

CHAPTER 2 BUDDHISM GETS FRAMED

“It is no uncommon thing to hear a New Yorker say he is a Buddhist nowadays.” So ran a line from the *New York Journal* – in 1893!¹ While it might seem at the zenith of its vogue in the U.S. at the end of the twentieth century and start of the twenty-first, Buddhism has a history in America that stretches back at least as far as the early 1840s, when Ralph Waldo Emerson made selective use of Buddhist tenets for his eclectic philosophy. Thomas Tweed notes, of major eastern religions, Buddhism enjoyed a surprisingly wide currency from the time of Emerson’s first interest in it.² As the first American man of letters to take a serious look at Buddhism, Emerson gave intellectual cachet to the religion, even as he counterintuitively tried to draft an American identity capable of nation-building from it. Writing at a critical moment of capitalist solidification in the U.S., Emerson felt deeply the need to re-work a spiritualized American identity using Buddhism in the context of a burgeoning market economy that threatened to profane America.

Emerson’s eclectic and decontextualizing use of Buddhism pre-figures later deployments of the religion for a more mainstream American audience. Such deployments include the contested representations of Buddhism at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, in which American exposition organizers and Japanese proponents of Buddhism vied to present the religion. Connecting this landmark event and the major subsequent deployment of Buddhism via the Beats was D.T. Suzuki – the most important conduit for Zen to the West and a critical influence on the Beats. From

¹ Thomas Tweed, p. 28.

² *Ibid.*

the late 1950s and with a little help from the Beats, Buddhism exploded into popular culture, with prominent exposure in films such as *Kundun* and *The Matrix* and even on to advertisements of the last 20 years. Because of Buddhism's increasing appearance in U.S. culture as a counterpoint to capitalism, a look at some of the first uses of the religion can become particularly enlightening for understanding its deployment in the present moment.

Emerson's *Morgenlandfahrt*: Reading Eastern Religion via Europe

Given his milieu's provincial unreceptivity, Emerson attempts to foil many of the received ideas of his period and place by purposely importing Buddhism, in a type of controlled dissent that is consonant with what Thomas Tweed sees as the guiding theme of American adoption of the eastern religion in the nineteenth century.³ Tweed details the range of ways that Buddhism made its way into Puritan New England and delves into the numerous societies and the serious, if not always comprehending, treatment that the religion received from its American devotees. Tweed argues that Buddhism offered Americans of the time an opportunity to dissent from the mainstream Christian culture, but in a way that limited the potentially revolutionary character of dissent. That is, people who took up the flag of the eastern religion would relate its concerns directly to those of the dominant culture, translating Buddhist ideas into terms and arguments that might resonate with a Christian audience. Moreover, Emerson's use of Buddhism as dissent echoes Rey Chow's argument that the ethnic comes to represent the protest-ant outsider. Emerson's incorporation of Buddhism functioned as a critique of a provincial, materialist culture, a culture that he wanted to expand to include higher goals such as non-marketability, as the nation worked its way across a

³ *Ibid.*

new continent. At the same time, Emerson's formulation addressed the ideology of the self-made man, who was supposed to be resistant to the effects of consumption, a common ideology in antebellum America.

The appearance of Buddhist texts in the hands of Ralph Waldo Emerson came as the result of the extensive European colonial system, which sought to produce knowledge of the East. A variety of texts from India came to the nineteenth-century U.S. by way of Europe. In particular, scholars and travelers of England, France, and Germany were taken with Indian thought, and translated some of the first Indian works into western languages. According to Dale Riepe, the first sustained scholarly study of Asian thought started in France in the eighteenth century, and matched ongoing work in Britain by Sir William Jones and Charles Wilkins, translators of great Sanskrit texts of India into English. Institutions such as the *École des Langues Orientales Vivantes* and orientalist societies in Paris and London furthered interest in and study of the mysterious East. By 1844 American speakers of French could peruse Eugene Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du bouddhisme*.⁴ Such French works played up the supernaturalism in Indian thought, and Buddhism and Hinduism were viewed through this lens, in works such as the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Riepe points out that American transcendentalists were influenced by French thinkers, most especially by Burnouf, and that those orientalist readers in the Boston area "hungrily picked at the available scraps provided in translations from India and Europe."⁵ Because of this filtering through Europe, Indian thought is associated with German idealism, English spiritualism, and

⁴ Dale Riepe, p. 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 19 – 20.

French eclecticism, according to Riepe.⁶ It was in such a colonialist-mediated context that young Emerson came to the religions of India.

According to Riepe, Emerson was first exposed to Indian thought in the 1820s, at the insistence of aunt Mary Moody Emerson. She gave her twenty-something nephew the religious works of Ram Mohun Roy, a founder of Neo-Hinduism who was an early Indian voice arguing against the Christian bigotry of the British.⁷ His aunt's interest in Buddhism led to Emerson's own readings, and he read translations of eastern work in the *Edinburgh Review* and *Asiatic Journal* during the 1820s and 30s.⁸ John G. Rudy argues that Emerson was probably aware of Buddhism as early as 1833, following his attendance at a Burnouf lecture series at the College Royale de France. The scholar asserts that these lectures went into Burnouf's 1844 book on Indian thought, which Emerson "certainly knew."⁹ In 1835 Emerson was aware of Buddhism, yet not thoroughly enough to distinguish the tenets of Hinduism from those of Buddhism, nor to which religion the foundational text of the *Bhagavad-Gita* belongs.¹⁰ According to John McAleer, in 1837 Emerson then began a comprehensive slate of readings on a range of religions – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, and Zoroastrianism – and by 1845 considered himself sufficiently a master on the subjects.¹¹

Nevertheless, even until 1845 Emerson's knowledge of Indian thought relied on secondhand sources. For example in an 1845 letter Emerson states that he awaited the arrival to Concord of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, parts of which he had studied without actually

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 10 – 11.

⁸ Elisabeth Hurth, p. 230.

⁹ John G. Rudy, p. 221.

¹⁰ Dale Riepe, p. 35.

¹¹ John McAleer, p. 463.

holding the complete text.¹² Though Emerson's knowledge of Indian philosophy came from many sources, Riepe says Emerson "owed a major debt" to a translation of Victor Cousin's work titled *Course of the History of Modern Philosophy* (1852) from lectures given in Paris in 1828-29.¹³ This point notwithstanding, Emerson did have some experience with primary sources. In distinction to Riepe's later foundations on secondhand sources, Rudy traces such foundations to Burnouf but also to 1842-44, when Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were publishing selected passages from various oriental texts in *The Dial*. Thoreau handled most of their efforts on Buddhism.¹⁴ At the earliest in the mid-1840s Emerson had at least a passable knowledge of a Buddhism inflected heavily by European sentiments, and was arguably the leading exponent of such thought among his contemporaries.

The dissenting spirit that American readers such as Emerson saw in Buddhism came from a number of sources. First, the European flavor of Buddhism, based on an already-exoticized Asian religion, must have produced a cosmopolitan and decadent appearance in the face of a Puritan-inspired mid-nineteenth-century Massachusetts. According to Riepe, Indian philosophy "appealed to the alienated" of American culture during the period,¹⁵ and Schopenhauer's consideration of the religion must have added such cachet as well. Also adding cachet in America was the "half-savage, half-decadent" image of the Indians that the British promulgated from 1836, as Britain rapidly

¹² John G. Rudy, p. 220.

¹³ Dale Riepe, p. 36.

¹⁴ John G. Rudy, p. 9. According to Rudy, *The Dial* issue appeared in January 1844, with the work titled *The Preaching of Buddha*. The work included aphorisms from a French translation of *White Lotus of the Good Law* and featured in the front matter a passage on the origin of Buddhism by Burnouf. Rudy states, "The text marks, for all practical purposes, the first appearance in America of a distinctively Mahayana *sutra* (book)."

¹⁵ Dale Riepe, p. 20.

industrialized and tensions with India mounted.¹⁶ By exploiting the various sentiments surrounding Buddhism, Emerson could define himself oppositionally to the capitalist culture and express his belief in non-marketable truths, as against than the increasing materialism encouraged by Protestantism. As Max Weber argues, Protestantism ideologically supported the accumulation of worldly goods as a sign of divine favor;¹⁷ by challenging the religious basis of such an ethos, Emerson questioned its material consequences.

In a journal passage dated Oct-Nov 1845, he makes a case for Indian philosophy:

The East is grand -- & makes Europe appear the land of trifles. Identity, identity! friend & foe are of one stuff, and the stuff is such & so much that the variations of surface are unimportant....form is imprisonment and heaven itself a decoy. That which the soul seeks is resolution into Being above form...liberation from existence is its name.¹⁸

Emerson's extreme deprecation of his European heritage and apparent approval of the East belie his true motivation in this passage – the attempt to justify a kind of intellectual/religious incorporation of the East. A typical western response to Buddhism focuses on the unity of experience created by its practice, which Emerson clearly expresses. In fact, Buddhism remarks that phenomena are interpenetrative – not a unity and not not a unity too.¹⁹ Emerson defends his position as “friend & foe are of one stuff,” but this defense is also a preliminary justification for a consumption of the other. If friend and foe are indeed the same, why shouldn't they be American? Emerson clearly prefers the transcendent aspect of humanity, “the stuff,” over “the form,” a traditional western

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

¹⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson in His Journals*. pp. 348 – 349.

¹⁹ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, p. 67.

take on immortality in which some essence (“stuff”) is eternal while another unessential part (“form”) is transitory. In a related passage dated Spring 1859 he expresses the same theme in comparing Christianity with eastern religions: “For, here in India – there in China, were the same principles, the same grandeurs, the like depths moral & intellectual.”²⁰ The author disregards the marked differences in Christianity and Buddhism to profess their apparent congruence. In these last two passages Emerson’s words mask an egotism that sees the world as a reflection of itself. As Emerson remarks in *The Young American*: “An empire is an immense egotism.”²¹

Curiously, by positioning himself as a dissenter from New England culture on the basis of such eclectic thought, Emerson engages in a similar logic to that of the acquisitive materialism that he attempts to critique. Riepe asserts that Emerson, like other American idealists, wanted to join the advantages of a spiritual community with the strengths of a pragmatic world. Emerson could not

envision a political straightjacket for a country developing with the rapidity of America. So he emphasized what Americans could learn from other civilizations. He believed we could learn much from the wisdom of the Indians, especially in those affairs where they kept a firm hold on the realities that transcend the phenomenal.²²

Yet, as McAleer argues, Emerson incorporated into his own philosophy those elements of Buddhism that “harmonized with his own system.”²³ This privileging of intellectual consumption over material consumption suggests Emerson’s profound unease with commercial culture, yet his eclectic quotation of eastern religious texts offers a similar model of consumption. Emerson took exotic ideas and purposely played with the

²⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson in His Journals*. p. 484.

²¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Young American,” p. 232.

²² Dale Riepe, p. 38.

²³ John McAleer, p. 464.

exoticism to fashion a critique of provincial New England. Emerson's eclecticism models appropriation and consumption, and the eclectic taste should be seen as the most advanced style of consumption in a developed market.

Emerson's eclecticism leaves him in a somewhat vexed position, inasmuch as he asserts a spiritualized identity based on appropriation. "Pre-Civil War America witnessed the rise of the self-made man – an icon that emerged with a concomitant campaign against masculine appetite and consumption," argues Suzanne Ashworth.²⁴ While Emerson's American identity focuses on higher, nonmarketable truths, it draws upon the varied directions of his reading. Since the nineteenth century saw consumption as degrading society, as many scholars note, Emerson's eclectic quotation implicitly marks a consumption of texts that threatens to profane him. Ashworth further points out that "unbridled masculine consumption – eating, drinking, smoking, sexing, *and reading* – was a source of cultural adulteration and decay."²⁵ (author's emphasis) According to such logic, Emerson's catholic and voracious tastes are potentially suspect, irrespective of subject. As Emerson says in *The American Scholar*: "Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use?"²⁶ One way to redeem such consumption occurs in crafting a strong spiritualized American identity that re-values reading.

Emerson also tries to shore up reading as a spiritual activity by the rigorous subject matter it consumes, such as foreign religion. In reading Thoreau as profoundly concerned with masculinity, Suzanne Ashworth presents a model from which to view Emerson's selection of Buddhism, and other Asian religions, as the subject of study.

²⁴ Suzanne Ashworth, p. 179.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

²⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," p. 56.

Thoreau believes reading can be redeemed from mere mass consumption, she argues, through serious reading practices that challenge the intellect. Similarly, In *Quotation and Originality* Emerson admits that “quotation confesses inferiority,”²⁷ but later he explains, “We are as much informed of a writer’s genius by what he selects as by what he originates.”²⁸ Because the great writer adduces proofs in his own writing of his specifically high literary reading, his consumption of texts can be seen as a method to evoke and re-produce his own “genius.” Consumption of texts is validated specifically because it leads directly to spiritualized production, or as in *The American Scholar*, books “are for nothing but to inspire.”²⁹

Emerson’s selection of Buddhism as a proper subject for study resounds in numerous ways. By taking ideas from Buddhism, Emerson makes reading/consumption an activity that is primarily concerned with the highest spiritual ideals of New England Christian culture. Moreover, even as he dissents from his culture, he relates his choices to that culture’s ideals of strength and masculinity in pursuit of nation. At the same time, he seems to revoke the materialism of American consumer culture, paradoxically, given his previous defense of quotation in capitalistic terms. Implicitly, Emerson affirms the logic of consumption as character-forming.

While it uses Buddhism to illustrate Transcendentalism, Emerson’s eclecticism proposes a model of the consuming and totalizing self, which can neatly do the work of nation-building. Despite his advocacy of Buddhism, the self that Emerson proposes is not well-tuned with the nondual tenets of the Asian religion. Buddhism proposes that phenomena are both unified and many – they interpenetrate yet are distinct. The

²⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson’s Complete Works Volume 8*. p. 179.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

²⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” p. 56.

tendency of the western practitioner is to seize on the unity of experience that Buddhist practice offers, to the detriment of plurality. Through a realization and actual feeling of this interdependence via meditation, the Buddhist practitioner experiences “no-self,” a state in which one is united with all things and yet remains distinct from them.³⁰ Thus one does not experience the universe by consumption but by relinquishing the borders of what one considers the self. In contrast to such a nondual experience, Emerson expands the borders of his self through his eclectic formulations. As Robert Samuels argues, “Western thinkers, like Emerson, want to turn to the East, not to efface the self, but rather to re-enforce the unity and sameness of the subject by identifying the self with the perfection of the natural realm.”³¹ Thus by consuming the natural realm one can seemingly achieve the images, for instance, purity and wholeness, that one projects on to it. In this way Emerson finds himself among the nature and religions that he seeks to incorporate into his self.

Emerson offers a totalizing vision of the self as the universe in an oft-cited and provocative passage from his essay *Nature*. He states:

Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental. To be brothers, to be acquaintances, – master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance.³²

The passage seems to indicate that the speaker has transcended the limits of his ego in a way suggestive of Buddhist enlightenment. Yet following his proclamation that “all mean egotism vanishes,” Emerson refers directly to himself five more times in the next

³⁰ See Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, pp. 50 – 53.

³¹ Robert Samuels, p. 162.

³² Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 10.

five clauses; in fact, egotism has not vanished. So great is the totalization that even “nearest friends” are a “trifle and a disturbance,” while being a mere master or servant is irrelevant when one is taken up by God. As Samuels argues, “The movement in this passage from the transparent ‘eye’ to the speaking ‘I’ serves to reestablish the self in the form of a linguistic and visual center.”³³ Social relationships, which are vital in Buddhism,³⁴ are completely negated in favor of a boundless ego that must contain a “university of knowledges.”³⁵ Here nature mirrors the self in the classic western word game of claiming to destroy the ego even while re-affirming it. As Emerson says, “The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature.”³⁶

Buddhism and Manifest Destiny?

In *Experience*, Emerson bravely declares, “I am ready to die out of nature and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West.”³⁷ Such sentiments seem to clearly indicate the idolization and idealization of the West as the destiny of the U.S. Still, when it comes to supporting the expansion of the U.S. in practice, Emerson’s history offers a picture of an ambivalent proponent. While his eclectic thought models nation formation, throughout his lifetime he expresses hesitant doubts about the project of manifest destiny. At times Emerson supports the idea because he sees a continent that has the chance to realize a spiritual nation, and he conceives the land of opportunity primarily in spiritual terms. Emerson also wavered during Texas secession from Mexico in the mid-1840s.³⁸ However, in an entry from “Journal U” he almost seems resigned to American expansionism, preferring to take a

³³ Robert Samuels, p. 165.

³⁴ See Peter Hershock, *Liberating Intimacy: Enlightenment and Social Virtuosity in Ch’an Buddhism*

³⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” p. 69.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience,” p. 485.

³⁸ Gay Wilson Allen, p. 443.

long view even as he fights against expansion:

The question of the annexation of Texas is one of those which look very differently to the centuries and to the years. It is very certain that the strong British race which have now overrun so much of this continent, must also overrun that tract, & Mexico & Oregon also, and it will in the course of ages be of small import by what particular occasions & methods it was done.³⁹

Mixed with Emerson's ambivalence is a certain pride in the strength of the U.S. as a growing nation, although the onus for such violent expansionist efforts is clearly placed on "the strong British race."⁴⁰

Eclecticism provides the ideological support for this process of nation-building and its attendant consumption of land and people along the lines of the anthropological idea of "hybrid vigor," which suggests that by mixing breeds one can obtain the strengths of both species while breeding out the unwanted qualities. Indeed, Christy defends Emerson's eclecticism, citing the fact that the Transcendentalists had little interest in taking eastern thought in its entirety. In describing Emerson's use of the Vedanta system, he states that Emerson "remained ignorant" of much, and that he "took only that which he could accept and mix successfully with his inhibitions and preconceptions."⁴¹ The idea of mixing not only relates to the model of dissent in which one addresses concerns to the mainstream, but also to the practice of crossbreeding to produce strength, at least figuratively. Indeed, Emerson actually believed that British

³⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson Volume 9*, p. 74.

⁴⁰ David M. Robinson, p. 225. Robinson argues, "Emerson is much less disturbed or critical about this phenomenon than modern readers would expect or hope, presenting this process of colonization and cultural oppression as an inevitable and ultimately positive process." The process must be positive because what is maintained is the affirmative principle. Robinson also cites Emerson's essay *American Civilization* and how the author handles typical imperialistic assertions of superiority while noting its limitations.

⁴¹ Arthur Christy, p. 182.

colonial power arose from the nation's mixed racial heritage.⁴² The project of incorporating the foreign culture offers a spur to national competitive instincts to realize hybrid vigor by appropriating the strengths of the foreign.

Buddhism as a Capitalist Ideology?

Emerson's interest in Buddhism reflects his own and wider societal concerns with the self-made man in a democratic-capitalistic society. "Self-made masculinity was a white, middle-class ideal, defined by 'success in the market, individual achievement, mobility, wealth,'" emerging as capitalism re-defined the country, Ashworth argues. "In consequence, manhood was no longer a matter of family ties, craft traditions, or communal status. In the midst of economic booms and westward expansion, men could make themselves."⁴³ Like the promises of seemingly unlimited land and unfettered economic opportunity, Buddhism provides a way for the American to make himself, to protest. Although derived from a remarkably different Asian context, Buddhism is partly malleable to America's ideology of individual effort as a way to attain salvation, be it materialist or spiritual. Buddhism offers the opportunity for Nirvana literally in the here and now through extensive and devoted meditation. Interestingly, Buddhism also holds out the possibility of instantaneous enlightenment – a sudden flash of insight – which might be reconciled with capitalistic conceptions of providence (winning the lottery, for example). In contrast to a Puritan heritage that offers the possibility of salvation to only some people, Buddhism presents Emerson with the opportunity to be the godhead – the soul's direct experience of divinity – the ultimate self-made, self-reliant man.

⁴² Malini Schueller, p. 170.

⁴³ Suzanne Ashworth, p. 185.

19th Century Interest in Buddhism

Emerson's interest in Buddhism frames much of the later 19th century's preoccupation with it. Thomas Tweed cites three key inflection points between 1844 and 1912 in the development of American interest in Buddhism. As Buddhism emerged into American culture, interpreters emphasized similarities in Buddhism and Catholicism or between Buddhism and other non-Christian religions. Tweed posits 1858 as an inflection point in discussions of the religion, and notes how interpreters emphasized Buddhism's distinctiveness from other religions, often by characterizing it as a religion of negation or nihilism. By 1879 public discussions of Buddhism were on the upswing, and "Buddhism became increasingly attractive to many of the spiritually disillusioned just as Christianity became increasingly problematic."⁴⁴ Public discussion of Buddhism peaked from 1893 -- the date of the Columbian Exposition -- to 1907.⁴⁵ The Columbian Exposition of 1893 helped the popularity of Buddhism explode, and Tweed argues that "no single event had more impact."⁴⁶

In the decade or so leading up to and subsequent to the Columbian Exposition, a variety of writers stoked American interest in Buddhism. British writer Edwin Arnold published *The Light of Asia* in 1879, and told the story of the Buddha in free verse, noting similarities between the lives of the Buddha and Jesus. The book was a tremendous success and is estimated to have sold between one-half million and one million copies in the U.S -- a figure that ranks it comparably to the sales of *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, *Ramona*, and possibly *Huckleberry Finn*.⁴⁷ Arnold's sympathetic account of

⁴⁴ Thomas Tweed, p. xxxii.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

the Buddha's life received "enthusiastic" reviews by the New England intelligentsia, including William Henry Channing, George Ripley, and Oliver Wendell Holmes.⁴⁸ More scholarly study and discussion also developed, for instance, with Henry Clarke Warren's publication *Buddhism in Translations* in 1896. Among such scholars were Protestant missionaries who, in their accounts of Buddhism in American periodicals, shaped a generally negative impression of the religion. Nevertheless, such hostile reception, especially to popular sympathetic interpretations to Buddhism, contributed to the ongoing discussion of the religion in America.⁴⁹

One of the most important groups in popularizing Buddhism was the Theosophical Society. The Theosophists helped direct American attention to Buddhism, when Henry Steel Olcott and Helena Blavatsky took the formal vows of Theravada Buddhism in Ceylon in 1880, promising to take refuge in the Buddha, the dharma and the *sangha* (the Buddhist religious community). Their public conversion perpetuated further interest in the religion, even as Olcott dismissed its significance, instead indicating that they had long been Buddhists. After this public commitment to the religion, Olcott published *Buddhist Catechism* and the Theosophical Society published the periodical *The Theosophist*, which often featured sympathetic takes on the religion. Other Theosophical periodicals such as *The Path* explored the religion further. Tweed notes the importance of periodicals in promoting the widespread debate about Buddhism.⁵⁰

Treatments of Buddhism appeared in more specialized periodicals as well as more mainstream publications. The West Coast featured two English-language

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 30 – 31.

Buddhist magazines, *The Buddhist Ray* (1888-1894) and *The Light of Dharma* (1901-1907). The former periodical seems to be the first Buddhist magazine in the U.S. and merged occult themes with more typically Buddhist articles. *The Light of Dharma* was a higher quality and more influential publication, with some of the most prominent Asian authors on Buddhism appearing there, including D.T. Suzuki, Soyen Shaku, and Dharmapala. Noted American sympathizers also appeared there – Olcott, Paul Carus, and Maria deSouza Canavarro. Japanese authorities on the religion were also prominent. While the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* provided scholarly and philosophical takes on Buddhism, popular periodicals such as *Atlantic Monthly* and *Overland Monthly* also featured treatments of the religion. Also dealing with Buddhist topics were a range of Protestant magazines, including *Biblical World*, *Christian Literature*, *The Andover Review*, and *The Baptist Quarterly*.⁵¹ Also involved in the debate were more liberal and religious radical periodicals such as the new *Dial*, *Unitarian Review*, *Arena*, and *Christian Examiner*.⁵²

One of the most interesting stagings of Buddhism in the popular press occurred in *Open Court*, published between 1887 and 1936, which was the successor magazine to *The Index*. *The Index* was the publication of the Free Religious Association, which consisted of New England religious liberals and radicals for whom Unitarianism was too constraining. The editor of *Open Court*, Paul Carus, arranged an interview between Soyen, John Henry Barrows, a leading Protestant minister behind the Parliament of Religions at the Columbia Exposition, and Frank Field Ellinwood, a Presbyterian lecturer in comparative religion at the University of the City of New York. Carus was upset

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 31 – 33.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

about a lecture given by Barrows at the University of Chicago in 1896, so he invited Soyen to defend the religion. Tweed explains,

Instead of offering his own corrective, however, he asked Soyen to ‘set him right.’ He would respond himself, Carus explained, but Barrows might counter by citing the findings of an authoritative Western scholar who shared Barrows’s Christian bias – Sir Monier Monier-Williams. So Carus decided to ‘leave the defense of Buddhism to a prominent foreign Buddhist.’⁵³

To avoid the problems of language frequently encountered in debates with non-native speakers, Carus directed Soyen to “be as polite as possible in your letter,” and even drafted a proposed first response that “might impress Dr. Barrows” and sent it to Soyen. Carus did verbally concede that Soyen had to make his own case. Ultimately the January 1897 issue of the magazine featured the debate among the three men. Until about 1907 pieces about Buddhism continued to appear in the magazine, which had the stated goal of reconciling science and religion and promoting tolerance.⁵⁴ This staging in American media suggests that Asian practitioners of the religion had some agency in how they represented Buddhism, even if that took place in the larger context of American debates.

Buddhism Twice Told

A key moment in the passage of Buddhism from Asia to the United States occurred at the World’s Parliament of Religions, a part of the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The exposition offered Japanese Buddhist priests and laymen the opportunity to present Japanese Buddhism to an interested American public and scholars. This fact suggests the ways in which Orientalism does not totalize the representation of the Other, even as the larger exposition participated in American

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 32 – 33.

nationalistic, religious, and racist agendas. From its foundations the Columbian Exposition was intended as a display of American global ascendancy – offering a framework for viewing the hierarchy of the world’s nations and races, with the U.S. representing the culmination and expansion of European culture, argues Judith Snodgrass. The exposition’s name and date hailed from the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of the New World.⁵⁵ At the numerous exhibits of art, science, and technology, the U.S. could demonstrate its technical capabilities and superiority – proving that it had finally come of age and had developed into a modern technological nation. As Robert Rydell argues, the exposition as a form “offered fairgoers an opportunity to reaffirm their collective national identity in an updated synthesis of progress and white supremacy.”⁵⁶ A similar forum, the Auxiliary Congresses, of which the World’s Parliament of Religions formed a part, intended to display the complement to technological development, America’s advanced spiritual and social development.

The hegemonic ideology of the exposition was supported further by symbolic architecture, a proposed Dome of Columbus. The dome, which was never built, featured the western hemisphere and traced Columbus’s expedition to the Americas, with the United States sitting atop the world, and Europe, symbolically in decline, toward the bottom.⁵⁷ As Snodgrass later notes, the Dome of Columbus embodied America’s ideology of manifest destiny,⁵⁸ which would soon be expanded to the Pacific Ocean with such conquests as the Philippines and Hawaii, among others. While in the World’s Parliament of Religions the stated purpose was brotherhood and goodwill, the objective

⁵⁵ Judith Snodgrass, p. 21.

⁵⁶ Robert W. Rydell, p. 4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

⁵⁸ Judith Snodgrass, p. 23.

of the exposition clearly was to demonstrate the American superiority that would bring such values to the world.

The World's Parliament of Religion's development reflected the organizers' belief in American Protestant Christian superiority. Snodgrass shows that because of such beliefs, the parliament displayed all other religions as merely inferior versions of Christianity. It became "an arena for the contest between Christians and the 'heathen,' with all that implied in terms of late nineteenth-century presuppositions of evolution, civilization, and the natural right of the West to dominance over the East."⁵⁹ Like Rydell, who says expositions portrayed the nonwhite world as "barbaric and childlike,"⁶⁰ Snodgrass argues that the parliament became a conscious display of Social Darwinist principles, with exhibits of "the rightful place of the people of the world in the hierarchy of race and civilization."⁶¹ Rydell presents a similar view, noting that in their design expositions give scientific credibility to widespread racist attitudes, helping build popular support for foreign and domestic policies.⁶² While organizers situated the Japanese presentation rhetorically to show Western dominance, the Japanese delegates fought this positioning in their exposition displays.

The Japanese presentation on Buddhism to the parliament reflected Japan's domestic political and religious situation, as well as its economic situation vis a vis the U.S. Informing this intercultural exchange was the larger issue of power relations between Japan and the U.S., and the West generally. Early on in Japanese and American relations, U.S. military superiority forced the Japanese hand, when

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Robert W. Rydell, p. 40.

⁶¹ Judith Snodgrass, p. 2.

⁶² Robert W. Rydell, p. 6.

Commodore Matthew Perry entered Japanese ports with an armed fleet and a letter to the Japanese emperor from U.S. President Franklin Pierce. After the show of military power, a few years later the U.S. had opened Japanese markets to the West, a move that also unlocked refueling ports for American trading vessels on the way from San Francisco to Shanghai, as Tweed notes.⁶³ The defeat of the Tokugawa government's isolationist policy led to instability, and ultimately the rise of the Meiji administration, which favored more open relations with the West.⁶⁴

Forced to accept treaties that made it subservient to Western powers, Japan attended the conference with “the perception that favorable modification of the treaties depended on demonstrating that Japanese civilization was ‘equal’ to that of the West.”⁶⁵ Snodgrass goes on to argue that Japan’s top objective at the parliament was to take aim at the West’s belief in its own cultural superiority. To that end, Japan exhibited the Hōōden, a display of decorative art and architecture as well as Eastern Buddhism. The delegates believed that Buddhism demonstrated Japan’s superiority to the West, and that by presenting Buddhism in this forum, Japan could show the western powers some of its cultural superiority, and cultivate national pride at home in the Meiji revival of Buddhism.⁶⁶

The Buddhism that appeared in the U.S. – at least at the Columbian Exposition – reflected the political, religious, military, and economic situation between the U.S. and Japan in the years leading up to the exposition. Although the Orientalist critique often presumes that the West one-sidedly manipulates eastern culture through its own ideas,

⁶³ Thomas Tweed, p. 28.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Judith Snodgrass, p. 2

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Snodgrass demonstrates that the Japanese themselves had a consciously political agenda in officially presenting Buddhism to the U.S. Japanese delegates introduced not Northern or Southern Buddhism – the two forms recognized by western scholars – but rather Eastern Buddhism, which had been forged in the crises of the Meiji period and by the conscious determination to deliver a version of Buddhism for the contemporary nation.⁶⁷ The Japanese repackaged this Buddhism on the basis of the West as the standard of modernity.⁶⁸ Snodgrass later shows that the creation of Eastern Buddhism resulted from Japan’s negotiation of the demands of western scholarship, which viewed prior forms of Buddhism as flawed.

Japan’s purpose in presenting this re-worked form of Buddhism reflected certain nationalistic aims. Argues Snodgrass, “Eastern Buddhism was the full exposition of the Buddha’s wisdom, and it was preserved in Japan alone, the one Asian nation, the Japanese claimed, intellectually and spiritually capable of comprehending its profundity.... the Japanese delegates argued that it was the religion best suited to become the universal world religion.”⁶⁹ This new Buddhism was exported to Hokkaido beginning in the 1870s as part of increasing Japanese imperialism, and was used to form the cultural basis of many cities in the region.⁷⁰ “In fact, one dominant aspect of the Meiji religious world was the attempt by thinkers of various orientations to *construct* a transcendent notion of Buddhism that might include all sectarian and doctrinal divisions within a single, unified history,” argues James Edward Ketelaar.⁷¹ Ketelaar goes on to claim that even after this construction of a transcendent Buddhism failed in the early

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁷⁰ James Edward Ketelaar, p. 543.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 543 – 544. Author’s emphasis.

20th century, the patriotism and social conscientiousness elaborated by this new Buddhism continued on strongly.⁷² Such a nationalistic inflection in presenting Buddhism reflects the Japanese preoccupation with achieving an equal footing with the West, but also shows the understanding that the West would consume whatever might be used to express dominance, even if such dominance were only expressed by consuming the other. Therefore, the type of Buddhism at the exposition reflected larger political, religious, and economic discourses – not only of the U.S., but also of Japan.

The presentation of Buddhism to the U.S. also reflected Japanese domestic concerns. An older, family-temple-based system of Buddhism that had predominated in Japan was suppressed during the Edo period, and during the mid-Meiji period the flourishing of Western science and Christian culture led many Japanese to decry this form of Buddhism as unscientific.⁷³ In the presentation of their newly re-worked Buddhism, the Japanese government wanted to encourage the support of Buddhism from the Western-educated elite of Meiji Japan, according to Snodgrass. Delegates presented Eastern Buddhism as the incarnation of the highest truths of western philosophy and religion.⁷⁴ With an understanding that modern science was in tension with traditional Christianity, the delegates positioned Japanese Eastern Buddhism as the best religion for the contemporary world. While the conference was designed to show the superiority of Christianity over all world religions, the Japanese aimed to present the superiority of Eastern Buddhism, with a second primary objective of

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 546.

⁷³ Tamamuro Fumio, p. 504.

⁷⁴ Judith Snodgrass, p. 198.

impressing the domestic Japanese with the positive reception of the religion in the West.⁷⁵

The importance of the World's Parliament of Religions in furthering Buddhism in the U.S. should not be underestimated. Although U.S. economic, military and cultural concerns clearly shaped the structure and content of the Columbian Exposition, the Japanese presentation on Buddhism built an important foundation for later development of the religion in America. By generating sustained interest in the religion, the forum provided the groundwork for parliament speakers to return later on lecture tours in the new century. For example, the Sinhalese lay preacher Anagārika Dharmapala and Zen Patriarch Soyen Shaku read papers at the parliament and then subsequently made multi-year tours – Soyen in 1905-1906, and Dharmapala in 1897 and from 1902 to 1904. Soyen even published his lectures in 1906 under the title *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*. Probably more important was Soyen's influence in bringing D.T. Suzuki to the U.S.⁷⁶ Even as a Zen layman, Suzuki became a key individual in promoting Buddhism in the U.S., especially during an eight-year trip to America around mid-century. Suzuki influenced Beat writers, who would take the religion as a basis to establish an anti-capitalist discourse. According to Tweed, Dharmapala also strongly influenced the direction of Buddhism in the U.S., having founded the American branch of the Maha Bodhi society in 1897. The organization quickly spread in a few years to have branches in major American cities such as Chicago, New York, and San Francisco.⁷⁷ While political, economic, and military considerations affected the Buddhism that Americans experienced in the World's Parliament of Religions, the forum provided Buddhism a

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Thomas Tweed, p. 31.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

significant foothold in the U.S., from which it would later attain even more widespread appeal, especially around the mid-20th century.

Some of Suzuki's earliest writings also positioned Buddhism as a religion that resisted the depredations of capitalism on the individual, a framing that the Beats later adopted. In his article *The Zen Sect of Buddhism*, published in 1906-7, Suzuki claims that the religion thrived in Japan because it debuted during an efficient military government. Moreover, Suzuki makes pointed gestures toward the degenerating effects of capitalism, showing that Buddhism presents meditation and mental discipline not just within the framework of the religion, but as a boon in "these days of industrial and commercial civilization."⁷⁸ Snodgrass reads Suzuki's article as emphasizing "the positive and energetic aspects of Zen... its adaptability and appeal to the practical mind; its 'simplicity, directness, and efficiency.'⁷⁹ And Lawrence Buell notes that Emerson had a particularly strong impact on Suzuki. Buell writes, "Suzuki recalled near the end of his life 'the deep impressions made upon me while reading Emerson in my college days.' Coming to know Emerson was integral to 'making acquaintance with myself.' Suzuki's first publication was 'Essay on Emerson.'⁸⁰ From nearly its first direct introduction into American culture by the religion's representatives, Buddhism was positioned, at least in part, as a way to mitigate the effects of capitalism. Interestingly, through the figure of Suzuki, Emerson's reading comes to have potentially second-order effects on the representation of Buddhism in America.

⁷⁸ D.T. Suzuki, p. 265.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Lawrence Buell, p. 196. Buell adds that Suzuki quotes from Emerson's *Representative Men*.

CHAPTER 3 KEROUAC AND GINSBERG: THE SUPERMARKET OF BUDDHIST IDENTITY

On the eve of the publication of *On the Road*, author Jack Kerouac visited New York City. He was there to witness the reception of his novel, a review of which was to appear in *The New York Times*. Times critic Gilbert Millstein praised the work and compared its author to Hemingway.¹ Kerouac was about to become the voice of a generation. “The next morning, the phones started ringing and never stopped,” explains Max Kealing. “Overnight, Kerouac's life had changed forever.”²

In the immediate wake of his genre- and generation-defining novel, Jack Kerouac became a celebrity. Soon, he was making an appearance on *Nightbeat*, one of the first talk shows on the fledgling medium of television.³ Interviewers were clamoring to know about the so-called Beat Generation that formed the basis of the novel. In early 1958, *Time* magazine sent out a photographer to shoot Kerouac for a pending book review.⁴ Newly formed *Playboy* magazine was interviewing Kerouac, and *Playboy's* progenitor *Esquire* was buying from Kerouac, as was *Pageant*.⁵ The more ostensibly literary *The Saturday Evening Post* was soon paying Kerouac \$1,350 for articles.⁶ Steve Allen, Norman Granz, and Bill Randall had offered the author three separate contracts to read his work on LPs.⁷ Kealing notes, “Kerouac had become a media darling before people

¹ Bob Kealing, p. 23.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵ Paul Maher Jr., p. 356. Maher notes that *Esquire* purchased a baseball story from Kerouac for \$400, while *Pageant* paid \$300 for its story.

⁶ Bob Kealing, p. 24.

⁷ Paul Maher Jr., p. 368.

Gerald Nicosia, p. 565. According to Nicosia, Kerouac bragged to Lucien Carr about working with the millionaire Allen.

knew what that was.”⁸ Not long after they hit the mass media, Beat poets were finding “letters from girls in Kansas telling them that their town was ‘Squaresville itself’ and asking them to come and ‘cool us in.’”⁹

Indeed, Kerouac had become so popular that even Hollywood was looking to bring him to the silver screen. Warner Brothers offered Kerouac \$110,000 for the film rights to *On The Road*, but Kerouac's agent firmly held out for \$150,000 when word of Marlon Brando's interest in the project came to light, and a deal was never reached.¹⁰ One Twentieth Century-Fox exec wanted to re-work the novel with the car crash death of character Dean Moriarty, so that the movie would “capitalize on the real-life death of actor James Dean, who coincidentally shared [Moriarty's real-life basis] Cassady's birthday.”¹¹ As part of the offer, Warner proposed that the good-looking Kerouac play the novel's protagonist, Sal Paradise.¹² In the end, Tri-way production company bought the movie rights to the novel for \$25,000, and MGM picked up the movie rights to *The Subterraneans* at \$15,000.¹³

In the haste to capitalize on such media publicity, Kerouac's publisher, through Malcolm Cowley, rushed the author to compose another work that dealt with the Beat Generation, a book that soon became *The Dharma Bums*.¹⁴ Kerouac drafted the novel in ten sessions at the end of 1957, and consumed massive quantities of amphetamines to sustain him in the effort.¹⁵ Within a year – from the debut of *On the Road* to the publication of the Buddhist-influenced *The Dharma Bums* – Kerouac had been taken up

⁸ Bob Kealing, p. 24.

⁹ Graham Caveney, p. 95.

¹⁰ David Sterritt, *Mad to Be Saved* p. 164.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹³ Steve Turner, p. 179. In the end Francis Ford Coppola ended up with the movie rights (209).

¹⁴ Ann Charters, p. 293.

¹⁵ Barry Miles, p. 219.

by the consumerist public and capitalist media that he seemed to rail so hard against in the earlier book. In total, from 1957 to 1959 he published six novels and a book of poems, which had been stored up from when no one wanted to publish him. As Kerouac lamented to Ginsberg soon after his career took off, "Fame makes you stop writing."¹⁶ Kerouac's persona was being transformed into cool.

Whereas Allen Ginsberg's celebrity took a bit longer to be established in the mainstream media than Kerouac's, it was no less enduring. Although Bradley Stiles asserts that Ginsberg was uninterested in fame,¹⁷ much evidence suggests the contrary, not the least of which is Ginsberg's background of six years in journalism, advertising and market research. Steve Turner declares: "Ginsberg knew the value of promotion and visibility, and his willingness to be a forthright public poet and activist meant that the media continued to pay attention to him."¹⁸ Certainly the seminal event in Ginsberg's career was the famed reading at San Francisco's Six Gallery, where the poet recited his long-form poem *Howl*. Provocation -- and subsequent celebrity -- were key elements in the work of Ginsberg, whom David Sterritt calls "the most insistently public figure of the core Beats."¹⁹

The publication of *Howl* was met with obscenity charges, an outcome that was not unexpected by Ginsberg and poet-publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who had already contacted the American Civil Liberties Union in case the work had trouble passing US

¹⁶ Gerald Nicosia, p. 564.

¹⁷ Bradley J. Stiles, p. 70.

Steve Turner, pp. 167-168. Turner notes that Ginsberg was always carrying a camera and hoarded press clippings (169). That Ginsberg was a lifelong and vocal proponent of Kerouac to anyone who would listen suggests not only Ginsberg's literary judgment (perhaps), but also his ability to market Kerouac -- and most especially himself through Kerouac. One of the best means of self-promotion is to promote others (as Dylan also did for the Beats), especially good marketing advice in a rapidly expanding market for celebrity.

¹⁸ Steve Turner, p. 167.

¹⁹ David Sterritt, *Mad to Be Saved* p. 131.

customs on the way from its British publishers.²⁰ After a tortuous series of proceedings, finally Judge W. J. Clayton Horn ruled the book not obscene, but the experience highlighted Ginsberg as a political and social rebel who was concerned with overturning typical capitalist values, as Sterritt argues.²¹ Turner posits that Ginsberg was well aware of what the practical outcome would be for himself -- "publicity which would help cement his reputation as a spokesman for the Beat Generation."²² Indeed, such rebellion occurred against the literary establishment and its strictures on self-promotion and commercialism. Raskin agrees that tactics such as disrobing were an attempt to court the mass media, but argues that for Ginsberg they were a complement to the spirit of fun with which he imbued his performances.²³ In this way, Ginsberg transforms public space into a realm where leisure activities are permissible, even desirable.

Such a pedigree positioned Ginsberg well to be taken up by the 1960s counterculture, and, in particular, by Bob Dylan, who took advantage of Ginsberg's image as a rebellious poet. As Richard E. Hishmeh argues, using various media Dylan and Ginsberg crafted their relationship consciously and publicly, with Ginsberg appearing in, among others, Dylan's album *Bringing It All Back Home* and D.A. Pennebaker's documentary on Dylan, *Don't Look Back*. The latter work features what is called the first rock video, for Dylan's song *Subterranean Homesick Blues*, which takes a key Kerouac word and showcases Ginsberg in the background and even hints at his

²⁰ The obscenity case put Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti in interesting company: around the same time *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner was battling obscenity charges for publishing pictures of naked women.

²¹ David Sterritt, *Mad to Be Saved*. p. 131.

²² Steve Turner, p. 167.

²³ Jonah Raskin, pp. 175-176. Raskin notes British poet Denise Levertov's respect for *Howl* but her disdain for Ginsberg's public persona. He writes: "In the eyes of a great many poets, teachers, and critics of poetry, he was behaving unpoetically by promoting his poetry. 'It seems Allen Ginsberg is conducting a regular propaganda campaign,' Levertov complained to William Carlos Williams after a visit from Allen, and after seeing his picture in *Mademoiselle*. 'He will damage his work surely if he puts so much energy into advertising.'"

presence in the lyrics with "duck down the alleyway looking for a new friend." For his part, Ginsberg mentioned Dylan in his work *Beginning of a Poem of these States*.

Also notable is Dylan's 1965 appearance on Les Crane's TV talk show, during which the singer discussed future media collaborations with Ginsberg.²⁴ Hishmeh argues, "Together, these events comprise the foundation of a public friendship that would be as carefully constructed and consciously manufactured as any marketing or publicity strategy in today's corporate entertainment industry."²⁵ Moreover, Dylan told *Playboy*: "It was Ginsberg and Kerouac who inspired me at first."²⁶ Dylan admitted that Ginsberg's poetry provided him the first indication of a new cultural consciousness of regeneration.²⁷ The upshot of this sponsorship for Ginsberg: "It is around 1965 when Ginsberg really begins to make this transformation from strictly a poet to a cultural icon. Ginsberg's friendship with Dylan provided the catalyst that facilitated his movement into mainstream recognition from a new generation of youth culture. His affiliation with Dylan allowed Ginsberg, with some acumen, to dabble in mediums [sic] beyond just poetry."²⁸ Ginsberg soon appeared regularly on TV and radio: "His was the voice that could be relied upon to give a good quote, an embodiment of sexual, political, and artistic dissidence."²⁹ Such dissidence became the Ginsberg brand.

Ginsberg's status as subversive cultural icon continued until the end of his life. In 1993 Ginsberg appeared in a Gap ad campaign (as did Kerouac around the same time). Hishmeh writes, "With glasses and beard, Ginsberg sits cross-legged in with his arms in

²⁴ Richard E. Hishmeh, pp. 395-396.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

²⁶ Ellis Amburn, p. 342.

²⁷ John Tytell, *Naked Angels* p. 20.

²⁸ Richard E. Hishmeh, pp. 396.

²⁹ Graham Caveney, p. 120.

his lap, Buddha-like. He's wearing gap khakis, and the ad simply reads, repeatedly, 'Allen Ginsberg wore khakis.'"³⁰ With his rebellious persona, Ginsberg takes a step that could be read as selling out. As a putative subversive, he does that which should not be done -- appear in an ad promoting consumption. We're led to believe, as Hishmeh argues in the case of Dylan's appearance in an early 1990s Victoria's Secret ad, that such a move is perfectly consistent with the subject's ethos of rebellion; for a paragon of countercultural iconoclasm, the act of promoting tabooed consumption becomes an act of rebellion itself.³¹ Ginsberg had to defend his appearance on the grounds that his fee went to good causes.³² Regardless, as is the case with the adoption of Kerouac by mainstream media, Ginsberg's verbalized anti-capitalist stance -- derived strongly from Buddhism -- is reworked as cool by capitalist representation.

To construct their critique of capitalist America, Kerouac and Ginsberg turn to Buddhism to offer an alternative system of values and vision of life. Following Emerson's nineteenth-century framing of Buddhism, as explained in the introduction, Kerouac and Ginsberg take up Buddhism with similar aims. They position the religion as finally revealing the real nature of reality -- one that is non-capitalist -- by highlighting competing Buddhist notions of rationality, individualism, and non-attachment. By relying on Buddhism to provide an alternative, non-western rationality, these Beat writers suggest that rationality per se is not the problem, but rather western rationality deployed in the service of capitalism. Rather than overthrow the notion that there is a real world, as Buddhism advocates,³³ these Beat writers reify the notion of the real with their

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 395-396.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 404.

³² Jonah Raskin, p. 176.

³³ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism* p. 56.

representation of Buddhism as a kind of super-rational practice and invoke Buddhist non-attachment as a defiant and libertarian individualism that is allegedly not beholden to capitalist mandates. As John Tytell puts it, “Zen provided them with something like Surrealist antilogic which perfectly suited their notion of what was sane behavior.”³⁴

To examine how the Beats use Buddhism to support their already-freewheeling lifestyle, this chapter will survey Kerouac’s works dealing with Buddhism, especially *The Dharma Bums*. The novel emphasizes how he deploys the foreign religion as cultural critique, in a process of conflating the ethnic with protest. For instance, in *The Dharma Bums* Kerouac relies on the religion’s notion of non-attachment to avoid the work-to-consume lifestyle of the era. Along with a rationality that sees only the irrationality of consumption, non-attachment forms the backbone of his critique of consumer capitalism. At the same time he uses non-attachment as a rationale for a kind of nihilism of alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, and masculine libertinism – suggesting Rosemary Hennessy’s view of sexual identity as informed by capitalism. For Kerouac, the aggressive expression of heterosexuality becomes validated by an expansionary 1950s capitalist economy.³⁵ Non-attachment also supports the author’s famed “Spontaneous Prose” style, which seems to advocate a nearly irrational conjunction of words, as evidenced in *Old Angel Midnight*. *Desolation Angels* and *Satori in Paris* deploy Buddhism similarly.

This chapter will also examine some early works of Allen Ginsberg, who

³⁴ John Tytell, *Naked Angels* p. 26.

³⁵ Rosemary Hennessy, p. 22. Hennessy argues that by distorting social relations and organizing affect in specific ways, capitalism sets out legitimate and illegitimate ways of experiencing feeling, with the result that certain sexual practices are proscribed (e.g., homosexuality), while others are accepted and promoted (e.g., heterosexuality).

deployed Buddhism in a like manner to Kerouac. In making a critique of capitalism he reifies the notion of rationality as foundational, using Buddhism as support. Ginsberg critiques modern America in numerous works that exhibit the destructiveness of capitalism on people and the environment. With Buddhism, Ginsberg seeks to challenge consumerist culture, bringing a new set of values to the mainstream, but perpetuates the process of consumption that he would like to critique, by invoking an identity based on a range of religious practices, a kind of shopping at the marketplace of religious faiths. It is the consumer culture's other – spirituality, especially Buddhist spirituality – that will again provide the meaning mined out by consumer capitalism. In Ginsberg's work Buddhism acts as a rejuvenating force to counter the evils of capitalism.

Critics have often read the Beats as espousing a position that is irreducibly antithetical to the consensus-bound, capitalist era of the 1950s. Omar Swartz asserts that Kerouac stood for a less materialistic outlook, and Paul Portugés reads Ginsberg similarly.³⁶ Critics such as Swartz and John Tytell take the Beats at their word, that they were primarily a spiritual movement and their work opposed the dominant capitalist values of the time.³⁷ Nancy Grace reads Kerouac's oeuvre as an Americanized form of wisdom literature, one that takes the form of the spiritual quest but that is not really articulated against the pro-capitalist push of the 1950s.³⁸ Isaac Gewirtz sees Kerouac's resentment against American consumerism and technology as predisposing him to an

³⁶ Omar Swartz, *The View from On the Road: The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), p. 25. Later, Swartz highlights a 1995 Volvo ad that references Kerouac and goes so far as to say, "Volvo rapes Kerouac's vision of a society that rejects commodification" (37).

Paul Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson Publishers, 1978), p. 45.

³⁷ Omar Swartz, p. 92.

John Tytell, "The Beat Generation and the Continuing American Revolution," p. 57.

³⁸ Nancy M. Grace, p. 22.

interest in Buddhism since it already fit his preconceived romanticized worldview; that is, Buddhism acted more as a graft onto a prior belief structure.³⁹ Others such as Robert Hipkiss see Kerouac faithfully representing Buddhist doctrines.⁴⁰ On the other hand, some critics such as Paul Goodman interpreted the Beats as conservative and as merely altered mimes of the status quo,⁴¹ while Bradley Stiles see Kerouac's interest in Buddhism as just another fascination for the ethnic that can avoid work.⁴² A closer reading of texts by Kerouac and Ginsberg reveals significant complicity with the capitalist position that they ostensibly critique.⁴³

While critics typically read the Beat project as a reaction against the confining norms of 1950s America, Manuel Luis Martinez argues that such a dualistic reading elides how the Beats' activities functioned as "self-subverting subversion."⁴⁴ Martinez writes:

The Beats, in constructing a consciously individualistic aesthetic and politic, a nonbourgeois ethic, created a libertarianism that precluded any meaningful communal effort, thus weakening any effort at society-wide change. The result is an endorsement of an atomistic individualism that must conform because its recourse against systemic forces is inadequate. The conscious decision to champion the "negative" libertarian aspect of a "free society" in fact played into the hands of reactionary politics in the same way the democratic theories and views of the individual that Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman popularized were used to justify westward expansion and reckless laissez-faire capitalism.⁴⁵

³⁹ Isaac Gewirtz, p. 155.

⁴⁰ Robert A. Hipkiss, p. 66.

⁴¹ David Sterritt, *Mad to Be Saved* p. 103. Sterritt also notes that *Mad* magazine lampooned the Beats as conformists, with the same uniform of alleged non-conformity.

⁴² Bradley J. Stiles, p. 87. Stiles writes, "His appropriation of Buddhism represented just another attempt to see out the fellaheen, and was as unsuccessful at achieving his aim." He later argues: "Kerouac's understanding of Buddhism betrays his understanding of Buddhists as fellaheen, particularly when contrasted with Catholicism."

⁴³ Barry Miles, p. 201. Curiously, at just the moment that Kerouac becomes most interested in Buddhism (1954), he takes up the cause of Senator Joe McCarthy and his Communist witch hunt. Miles adds: "From 1954 until his death, Jack's politics were about as far right wing as was possible, short of joining the American Fascist Party."

⁴⁴ Manuel Luis Martinez, p. 8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

The Beat project was articulated through ethnicity, but focusing his studies on the appropriation of Mexican and Black identities, Martinez stresses that the Beats' identification with the ethnic has been misread as a "direct attack" on bourgeois conformism. Rather he suggests the Beats participated in a long tradition of dissent within the system, eschewing participation in capitalist America in favor of "preserving the prerogatives of the self-subsisting and alienated individual."⁴⁶ As Sterritt notes, the Beats proposed simply the replacement of one set of style with another that was perhaps more elastic but nonetheless normative.⁴⁷ The Beats' use of Buddhism serves precisely this function as a foundation for individualist privilege and style.

This individualist privilege has clear free-market overtones, despite the Beats' espoused dismissal of the market. Martinez argues that the trope of physical movement in Beat works functions most centrally as tacit support for the free market and the ability to take on liminal identities, but that the Beats fear true marginality and its strictures.⁴⁸ This fear of the other often re-appears when the Beats express a purportedly non-egoic Buddhist consciousness that alleges to have transcended the dualisms of the 1950s such as capitalism/communism and white/non-white. In works that purport to have eschewed such dichotomies, as Stiles argues for Ginsberg⁴⁹ and I suggest for Kerouac's putative enlightenment in *The Dharma Bums*, a third identity is formed at one remove that neatly encapsulates such differences as mere stylistic variance. While the Beats try on various subjectivities, "those shifts are never dangerously liminal, for they

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁷ David Sterritt, *Mad to Be Saved* p. 103.

⁴⁸ Manuel Luis Martinez, p. 91.

⁴⁹ Bradley J. Stiles, pp. 110-112.

become products, merchandise for which Kerouac advertises,” says Martinez.⁵⁰ As a result, communalism as a strategy for the Beats, posits Martinez, becomes marginalized.⁵¹ Although he shows that Ginsberg participated in re-affirming a pro-market individualism, Martinez argues that the poet ultimately accepted communalism, in part because of his already-marginalized status as a homosexual Jew. I would argue that Ginsberg’s later active Buddhist practice also opens up this communal possibility, while his earlier poems do participate in the dynamic Martinez critiques. However, Martinez is, rightly, less charitable to Kerouac. For the Beats, religious difference becomes another freedom of choice – a means to express white identity.

Although their appearance in the mass media seems antithetical to their stated eth(n)os, the writers espoused some of the same values of mass media that promulgated a consumption-based ethos. The mass media appear to be central in the distribution of (at least part of) the Beat ethos – not only in the 1990s Gap ads and such, but also in the period *before* the Beats’ public reception. David Sterritt observes that Hollywood had been playing on the Beat type since the end of the war, and gestures toward *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause*.⁵² Yet even if their type was portrayed in such films, the films played more on the angst of that 1950s generation without exactly naming the Beats. The Beat sensibility was not simply some clean discontinuity with the rest of American culture, but also a product of that culture. When the Beats were dealt with specifically, Hollywood parodied, mocked, or otherwise misrepresented

⁵⁰ Manuel Luis Martinez, p. 91.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵² David Sterritt, *Screening the Beats* p. x. Sterritt also cites “exploitation films” such as *Beat Girl* and *A Bucket of Blood*, as well as more mainstream offerings that featured and mocked Beat-inspired characters such as *Bell, Book, and Candle* and *Funny Face*. He also notes the emergence of Beat-like characters on TV: in *Route 66* and *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, with its beatnik Maynard G. Krebs. Sterritt also highlights a range of other creative projects that took the Beat project seriously, including John Cassevetes’ *Shadows* and Shirley Clarke’s *The Connection* (xi).

them.⁵³ The print media was also willing to stage the Beats' personae to the media's own ends even before the Beats had hit nationwide fame, and were plenty willing to continue their coverage afterward as well.⁵⁴ Regardless, such treatment pulled the Beats into pop culture even as it primed bourgeois Americans to reject the movement.

Such mass media also included *Playboy*, founded in 1953, which unabashedly addressed upwardly mobile middle-class men and showed them how to live in the consumer society as well as how to consume -- cars, travel, parties, and most apparently, women. As Barbara Ehrenreich has noted, the Beats envisaged similar patterns of leisure consumption,⁵⁵ but for an audience of men who didn't want to take part in the "rat race." Like the middle-class men's magazine, they advocated a libertine position on sex, showed men how to travel (on the cheap), and how to enjoy the swinging jazz parties of the era. "From the outset [1953]," argues Bill Osgerby, "*Playboy* sought to develop a cachet ... by projecting an image that combined *savoir faire* and disdain for convention with a sense of Ivy League élan."⁵⁶ What better models for the youth-oriented subculture than the globe-hopping Columbia dropouts who formed the nucleus of the Beats?

Well before the Beats became a widespread phenomenon, *Playboy* had seized on its formula for success – promote masculine middle-class leisure. Only after *Playboy*

⁵³ David Sterritt, *Mad to Be Saved* pp. 140-141. Sterritt later writes: "Spurred more by the bizarre aura than the actual nature of the Beat sensibility, Beat-related movies tend to conflate wildly divergent (and wildly unrelated) cultural artifacts into hodgepodes labeled 'Beat' with only the slimmest justification" (143).

⁵⁴ Tom Clark, p. 178. Clark points out that *Mademoiselle* took publicity shots of several Beat figures, including Kerouac and Gregory Corso. Corso provided Kerouac with a crucifix for the shoot, but the magazine's editors airbrushed it out of the final photos. Clearly, Christian iconography would not provide the necessary image of rebelliousness that the magazine's editors wanted. Later, Clark notes that *Life* and other popular magazines continued to trumpet the Beat lifestyle after the Beats had achieved national fame.

⁵⁵ Barbara Ehrenreich, p. 60.

⁵⁶ Bill Osgerby, p. 140.

had been in print for four years did Kerouac finally land a publisher for his much-rejected *On The Road* (composed in 1951; published in 1957) in the midst of economic recession. It was almost as if the dour economic climate demanded the leisure of middle-class America on the cheap. The novel's prominence snowballed into commercial demand for other works (many of which had been drafted much earlier) as well as *The Dharma Bums*, which had been written to order following *On The Road's* success. *Bums* showed the Beats in swinging San Francisco, but even *Playboy's* "swinging bachelor pad" pre-dated its *Bums* representation (in the form of Japhy Ryder's hut) of 1958.⁵⁷

Paradoxically, the Beats achieved the postwar American dream of rabid consumption and leisure by refusing to partake in the rat race. They became cool by stating their protest of capitalist protocol. Yet, the Beats participated in the much larger deployment of individualist, consumerist values that they purported to critique.⁵⁸ This result seems apt for a movement that typically relied on fictionalizing their own lived experience, such that the authors themselves became the heroes of their works. Incredibly, in the late 1950s FBI director J. Edgar Hoover proclaimed that the Beats posed a larger threat to the U.S. than did the communists.⁵⁹ If in earnest, such a radical mis-reading indicates an underestimation of the power of discursive practices to reshape action in politically useful ways. Hoover's vilification was all the better for those who could profit by the radicalist image.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131. Osgerby cites 1956 as one of the earliest examples of the *Playboy* bachelor pad, which made frequent appearances in the magazine for more than two decades.

⁵⁸ Barry Miles, pp. 217-218. Miles notes how Alan Watts claimed responsibility for the "Zen Boom" in his autobiography, which Watts argues progressed from pseudo-intellectuals to the Beats. Miles notes that Watts was not criticizing Gary Snyder, and notes the contradictions of Watts' essay *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen* being "one of the essential source books of the time."

⁵⁹ Jonah Raskin, p. 202.

Buddhist Style Saves America

Although Kerouac had already disavowed his personal commitment to Buddhism by the time of their writing, his thinly veiled fictional autobiographies *The Dharma Bums* (1958) and *Desolation Angels* (1965) deploy Buddhism as a critique against capitalist America.⁶⁰ In *Bums*, Kerouac uses the character of Japhy Ryder, an alias for Gary Snyder, as the key proponent of the religion, while the roman a clef puts Ray Smith, Kerouac's alter ego, in the position of hierophant. Significantly, Snyder has later suggested in interviews that Kerouac deliberately embellished the Ryder character to fit his tale.⁶¹ As a logger from Oregon, Japhy is portrayed as having quintessential masculine features, for example, strength and strident heterosexuality, which his practice of Buddhism seems to augment. For Japhy, Buddhism comes to be the means to combat the Cold War consensus, but a close reading shows how Kerouac reveals the character's ambivalence to consumerist culture. Indeed, what Japhy – and by extension Kerouac – seem to argue against is not the substance of material culture, but rather the style, a point that Hebdige, Heath, and Potter stress is the real meaning of subculture. Buddhism, therefore, offers a new style, a Beat aesthetic, for rationality, individualism, and non-attachment. As the novel that is most often cited as the definitive description of the Beat Generation, *The Dharma Bums* shows the movement's interest in Buddhism, but *Desolation Angels* takes up the narrative thread almost where *Bums* leaves off, exploring in greater detail the narrator-cum-Kerouac's experience on the mountaintop with Buddhism and his subsequent disillusionment.

Japhy's ambivalence to consumer culture is evident early on, as Kerouac

⁶⁰ Gerald Nicosia, p. 531. Nicosia states that Kerouac no longer claimed to be a Buddhist by 1957, before he had drafted *The Dharma Bums*.

⁶¹ Paul Maher Jr., p. 380.

contrasts the character against middle-class America. Tytell finds this easy “demarcation” a bit “too programmatic.”⁶² At a party with other Zen Lunatics, as Kerouac labels the Beats, Japhy drinks heavily and presents his social vision:

See the whole thing is a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least fancy new cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume, I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of 'em Zen Lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures.⁶³

Here, Japhy posits Buddhism as a new and very male rationality that is allegedly more rational than that which has formed the basis of capitalist America. In contrast to the rationality of consumerist America, which throws everything out "a week later," Japhy's new vision of rationality based on Buddhism stresses the idiocy of working, especially for "all that crap they didn't really want anyway." His justification seems to rely on the idea of karma, with the phrase "work, produce, consume" reiterated in order to suggest the cyclical and imprisoning nature of such consumerism. In contrast, Japhy seems to provide the utopian dream of those in the middle-class rat race – no work, only free time and leisure, and a nod to the *Playboy* ideal – “making old girls happier.”

This vision appears as the diametric opposite of those bound by their desire to consume.

Moreover, Kerouac's consistent use of the phrase “Zen Lunatics” throughout the

⁶² John Tytell, *Naked Angels* p. 171.

⁶³ Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* pp. 97-98.

novel has multiple valences. First, he's suggesting the crazy nature of those figures, such as Japhy and Ray, who get drunk, party, and refuse to work, who are supposedly cast in the mold of Han-shan, a 9th century Chinese Buddhist poet. The juxtaposition of *Zen* and *Lunatics* seems to operate as a justification for their behavior – a modus operandi in Kerouac's own life.⁶⁴ The phrase ties their unhealthy conduct (such as drug use) to the religion, implicating Buddhism in their libertine practices.⁶⁵ Oddly, it's exactly this lunatic behavior that is being extolled as rational. Second, Kerouac also uses the phrase ironically, in the sense that middle-class America will view their antics. Against the background of the Protestant work ethic, the dharma bums look like lunatics. Therefore, Kerouac's use acts as a re-appropriation of the term. Third, the pursuit of spirituality in the form of the "do-nothing" mentality of Buddhism must seem inane to capitalist America. Yet Kerouac holds up this mentality as supremely rational, even the foundation of what is real, in contrast to what he sees as the beliefs of middle-class America. The new vision of rationality afforded by Buddhism -- which seems to be complete egoism and irrationality in Kerouac's representation -- seems to perpetuate the very over-rationalization that the Beats apparently protest, in a move echoing Weber's claim that we move to the increasingly irrational as a response to rationalization. At the same time, by proclaiming that they do nothing, the characters extol the 1950s ideal of leisure time. Also consider Japhy's vision of the ideal Zen Lunatic -- with poems appearing in his head "for no reason" and performing "strange

⁶⁴ Isaac Gewirtz, p. 164. Gewirtz writes: "Reassured to learn that Zen masters were reputed to have occasionally drunk to excess, [Kerouac] interpreted this as a license to indulge his alcoholism, a self-indulgence that was to become a point of contention between him and Snyder."

⁶⁵ Steve Turner, p. 214. Turner even notes how Kerouac compares drug use to meditation in his poem *How To Meditate*: "instantaneous ecstasy like a shot of heroin or morphine." The logic of consumption underlying Kerouac's use of Buddhism can be no more direct.

unexpected acts." The Zen Lunatic appears as a model of irrationality, or at least non-rationality.

Kerouac's invocation of Buddhism's "do-nothing" mentality shows how he is misreading this key aspect of the religion and even conflating Buddhism with other Asian religions. While in *The Dharma Bums* Kerouac characterizes "do nothing" as a defiance of the Protestant work ethic, in *Desolation Angels* he provides a different gloss on this term, suggesting that the Buddhist doctrine allows him a rational way "to dream all day."⁶⁶ In the later novel Kerouac explicitly gives the basis for the Beats' refusal to work, *Wu Wei*, a Chinese term in the Taoist tradition. In Chinese, the word literally means *do nothing*, but it signifies a state of attention in which individuals feel as if they were doing nothing; that is, they have achieved such a developed state of non-egoic consciousness that they experience their actions as if the actions were the manifestation of some other will. Therefore, the standard definition implies by no means a practice of literally doing nothing. In *Angels*, Kerouac as narrator writes that after coming down from the mountain he intended to be "a man of contemplations rather than too many actions, in the old Tao Chinese sense of 'Do Nothing' (Wu Wei) which is a way of life in itself more beautiful than any, a kind of cloistral fervor in the midst of mad ranting action-seekers of this or any other 'modern' world."⁶⁷ Moments later he adds, "As an artist I need solitude and a kind of 'do-nothing' philosophy that does allow me to dream all day and work out chapters in forgotten reveries that emerge years later in story form."⁶⁸

This characterization of the do-nothing lifestyle seems starkly at odds with that

⁶⁶ Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels* p. 247.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

presented in *Bums*. Here he uses the do-nothing mentality as a rational way to transcend the “mad ranting” lifestyle that he valorized earlier with Buddhism. Ironically, the religion has become a “cloistral fervor,” which is strangely paradoxical in its insistence on passion, because as a Buddhist Kerouac says that he wants to avoid passion. Later, this fervor transmutes into dreaming all day. Kerouac also notes the beauty of the do-nothing practice, showing his interest in the stylish Buddhist aesthetic. In either case – as rationale for doing nothing or for doing whatever he wants – Kerouac validates the “personal impulse,” to use Merrill’s term.

Yet for all the author’s bluster against consumerism, Kerouac's characters show an ambivalence toward it, suggesting that the author is not against material objects but rather their style. For example, Japhy rants against “cars, at least fancy new cars, certain hair oils and deodorants.” Here he draws a distinction between used cars and the stylishness and showiness of the new models. Similarly does he deal with “certain” hair oils, clearly leaving open the option that some types are acceptable. Even the “unreal” vision afforded by “TV sets” seems to be balanced against his repeated “visions,” a subtle indication and revalidation of the psychedelic influence of the milieu. This ambivalence is almost lost in the rambling and passionate style of his ranting, which continues without a full stop, only commas, to mark the phrases. It’s almost as if such passion is meant to cover his ambivalence, with the constant flow of words staunching all potential criticism and all commitment, even to a phrase. Up for question here is not whether Japhy despises consumerism, although at first blush it does appear so. Rather, given that Kerouac holds out Japhy as the figure in the novel to be emulated, it seems that readers should be copying Japhy's method of protest. As a

self-styled member of the counterculture, Japhy enacts a protest that concerns fashion rather than substance. While Japhy rails against "commuters trapped in living rooms,"⁶⁹ hitchhiking or the cross-country joy rides undertaken by the Beats are fashionably acceptable, unlike the commute of the 9-to-5 drudge.

For Japhy, Buddhism offers an alternative to the Protestant work ethic, which forms the ideological basis of American capitalism, according to Weber. Indeed, consumerism is notably absent in the passage, with its insistence on spirituality, happiness, and "visions." Perhaps such a move aims to avoid fundamental and materially based concerns such as hunger and thirst, which would interrupt and thwart the vision. Rather than work, the archetypal dharma bum would take part in a "rucksack revolution," putting into practice the Buddhist ideals according to Japhy. These ideals include making everyone happy and free, presumably instantiating the Buddhist practice of non-attachment, although this practice is not explicitly referenced. Kerouac contrasts such ideals with the mundane existence of the middle class of the 1950s. The dharma bum seems to be always at play, "making young girls happy and old girls happier." Implied in such Buddhist play is recreational sex, which is dealt with more explicitly elsewhere in the novel, in particular the yabyum scene. Moreover, given the phrasing, Japhy seems to imply that such a Buddhist-inspired rucksack revolution is strictly a heterosexual male endeavor and perhaps one of only university-educated white individuals as well.

One of the most interesting uses of Buddhism in the novel is as a justification for recreational sex, even orgies. Weber points to just such an eroticism as the result of

⁶⁹ Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* p. 14.

rationalization. In Weber's formulation, eroticism appears to withstand capitalist rationalization, and so it becomes reified as an enduring expression of what is essentially human. Kerouac presents such eroticism rather soon in the novel, providing a marked contrast to bourgeois sexual mores. Ray prefaces the yabyum scene thus: "I had a lot more to learn, too. Especially about how to handle girls – Japhy's incomparable Zen Lunatic way."⁷⁰ In the scene that follows, Japhy explains to Ray and Alvah Goldbook (the Ginsberg figure) the sexual process that he enacts with Princess. Sitting naked on the floor with Princess in his lap, he says: "This is what they do in the temples of Tibet. It's a holy ceremony, it's done just like this in front of chanting priests. People pray and recite Om Mani Pahdme Hum, which means Amen the Thunderbolt in the Dark Void. I'm the thunderbolt and Princess is the dark void, you see."⁷¹ Soon Alvah and Ray are also involved, and all four participants agree to make a recurring appointment for the orgy on Thursday nights. Here, Kerouac uses Buddhism to provide a religious and metaphysical pretext for the orgy, a practice that stands in direct contrast to the sexual prudishness of Protestant America. Such practices are not typical in the Zen school; however, Japhy turns to Tibetan Buddhism to bolster his sexual practices. Yet, a page later, narrator Ray Smith refers to the practices as "Zen Free Love Lunacy orgies."⁷² This conflation of terms suggests how the religion is being appropriated for a Buddhism-justified consumption and control of women, in this case seducing a young college student with the exoticism of the practice.

Japhy confirms the idea of consumption when he talks about the practice further, using diction with strong capitalist overtones:

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

The Bodhisattva women of Tibet and parts of ancient India...were taken and used as holy concubines in temples and sometimes in ritual caves and would get to lay up a stock of merit and they meditated too. All of them, men and women, they'd meditate, fast, have balls like this, go back to eating, drinking, talking, hike around, live in viharas in the rainy season and outdoors in the dry, there was no question of what to do about sex which is what I always liked about Oriental religion. And what I always dug about the Indians in our country....⁷³

Punning on the words “lay” and “balls,” Japhy describes what could be the Protestant work ethic’s other, yet these women earned “stock” because of their subservience to the sexual demands of the men. The phrase “were taken and used” offers the women little agency. In fact, merely because of their sexual subservience, they are termed bodhisattvas, enlightened beings. The sentence structure suggests that meditation for these women -- one method of obtaining merit in Buddhism – is merely an afterthought. Here, Buddhism acts as a justification for taking sexual advantage of women, since that is what “playing at being Asian” is all about. That Japhy undertakes most of his sexual escapades in his monastic hut underscores much of the era’s media fascination with the “swinging bachelor pad,” which had been espoused in such magazines as *Playboy*, *Rogue*, and *Satan*.⁷⁴ Japhy’s bachelor pad eschews obvious markers of middle-class consumption.

That style forms the crux of subculture’s existence is borne out by how Japhy approaches Buddhism and justifies his position in life. Consider how Japhy says that he takes on the values of an “authentic” Asian Buddhist:

You know when I was a little kid in Oregon I didn't feel that I was an American at all, with all that suburban ideal and sex repression and general dreary newspaper gray censorship of all our real human values but and when I discovered

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁷⁴ Bill Osgerby, p. 133. Osgerby details the fascination that men’s magazines had with detailing the archetypal bachelor pad of the 1950s. Magazines such as *Rogue*, *Satan*, and *Escapade* followed *Playboy*’s lead in delineating a masculine domestic space for their male readership. Note the magazine names that connote unrepentant non-conformity.

Buddhism and all I suddenly felt that I had lived in a previous lifetime innumerable ages ago and now because of faults and sins and that lifetime I was being degraded to a more grievous domain of existence and my karma was to be born in America where nobody has any fun or believes in anything, especially freedom. That's why I was always sympathetic to freedom movements, too, like anarchism in the Northwest, the oldtime heroes of Everett Massacre and all....⁷⁵

Here, his discovery of “Buddhism and all” – a phrase that already suggests his disingenuousness toward a serious practice – seems to immediately allow him to recognize his reincarnation, one of the more exotic aspects of Buddhism. Through the various phrases, he re-works his life in Buddhist terms. The act of vocalizing the Buddhist ethnic functions as a symbolic protest against the Cold War consensus, namely the suburban ideals of capitalist America and its cheerleaders who suggest that the nation is, in fact, the leader of the free world. Buddhism, Japhy implies, will return to us “our real human values,” echoing the notion that religion, especially Buddhism, offers a wellspring for that which is most human within us. Japhy hints that his real attraction to Buddhism is its anarchic quality, the fact that it appears to have no rules or proscriptions on behavior, a position that might be conventionally termed irrational. Such a motivation toward libertinism, at least as it’s presented in the novel, seems to be an extension – rather than a condemnation – of consumerist behavior.

This use of the Buddhist other to articulate dissent from the Cold War consensus and capitalism participates in stereotyping, but also projects a hybrid national identity. This national identity incorporates the Buddhist other but by means of speaking for it. *The Dharma Bums* has no culturally raised Buddhists, but instead has white converts explicate the religion. Swartz provides an apologia for Kerouac: while he admits that Kerouac portrays all non-white ethnicities paternalistically, he claims that such

⁷⁵ Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* p. 31.

depictions are never malicious and that, rather, Kerouac poeticized life generally.⁷⁶ Sterritt is suspicious of Kerouac's representations of ethnicities and suggests that they represent Kerouac's naivete.⁷⁷ Stiles argues that Kerouac does stereotype the ethnic (referring, in his case, to the fellaheen) but that it is not borne of class distinctions but rather interiorized from pop culture.⁷⁸ Grace sees this trend of "ventriloquizing" as "the root of his narratives while continually decentering him in those moments when he assumes the vocal masks of others, this play configuring self as mediated processes."⁷⁹ Grace notes that such ventriloquism "[creates] the illusion of being an entire nation, if not the world."⁸⁰

That Kerouac participates in such ventriloquism is fitting for an author whose novels are all fictionalized accounts of his own life using variously named but similar protagonists. Kerouac's narrativized alter egos often adopt various ethnic or religious identities and move so fluidly among them that these characters come to represent the multiplicity of a straitjacketed America in which non-whites are not allowed to represent themselves. Rather than merely decentering the speaker as Grace suggests, Kerouac's articulations of ethnics establishes a center (the author) that becomes ever more centralizing to the locus of articulated (and decentralized) ethnic voices. Regardless of Kerouac's intent or naivete, such depictions participate in the schema proposed by Chow, in which minorities are figured as either innocent or corrupt and against which America as a nation is formulated. This trope appears later in *Satori in*

⁷⁶ Omar Swartz, p. 87.

⁷⁷ David Sterritt, *Screening the Beats* pp. 17-18. Sterritt even writes that Kerouac's vision of minorities "is worthy of simplistic scenes in the Walt Disney studio's *Song of the South* (1946), not to mention King Vidor's *Hallelujah* (1929).

⁷⁸ Bradley J. Stiles, p. 86.

⁷⁹ Nancy M. Grace, p. 44.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Paris.

Kerouac's hybrid identity extended to the realm of religion, in which he re-crafted a Christianity that could subsume Buddhism. He explores this hybridity directly, but briefly, in *The Dharma Bums*. In Chinatown Japhy and Ray approach an African-American woman preaching to an ambivalent throng of Buddhists. When Japhy complains about "all that Jesus stuff," Ray retorts: "What's wrong with Jesus? Didn't Jesus speak of Heaven? Isn't Heaven Buddha's nirvana?"⁸¹ Ray later says, "I felt suppressed by this schism we have about separating Buddhism from Christianity, East from West, what the hell difference does it make?"⁸¹ Kerouac's alter ego is interested in erasing the difference between the religions and creating a hybrid religion – a move that typically causes the erasure of the other. Stiles notes the ability of such a religious formulation to be easily assimilated into American culture.⁸² Similarly, citing Kerouac's notebooks, Gewirtz suggests that Kerouac had started integrating the religions by 1955, and even had begun to think of Buddhist trinitarianism, which Gewirtz thinks may have mitigated his hostility to Christianity in the 1950s.⁸³ "By the spring of 1955 [Kerouac] had begun to see Buddhism as the spiritual paradigm in which Christianity could be enfolded and find meaning; that is, he had become a Christian Buddhist."⁸⁴ Toward the end of the 1950s, Kerouac returned to a primarily Christian outlook with some Buddhist inflections. Grace also notes Kerouac's turn to Christian Buddhism, but suggests that Kerouac's hybrid religion is more Christian than Buddhism, citing Kerouac's use of the

⁸¹ Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* p. 114.

⁸² Bradley J. Stiles, p. 91.

⁸³ Isaac Gewirtz, pp. 162-163.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

notion of soul within a Buddhist frame as but one example.⁸⁵ Kerouac's experience suggests powerfully the narrative of hybrid identity in which the other is subsumed and gradually erased.

Ginsberg: Eclectic Affinities

Allen Ginsberg first approached Buddhism through the essays of D.T. Suzuki in Spring 1953, while he was studying Chinese painting.⁸⁶ Ginsberg's early experiences with Buddhist texts were not particularly enlightening, and he found his Buddhist sources "vague and nebulous."⁸⁷ With reading suggestions from Kerouac such as Goddard's *Buddhist Bible* and Rhys David's *Dialogues of Buddha*, Ginsberg studied further in 1954 and 1955, and still found Buddhism to be difficult and meditation impossible without a mentor to guide him.⁸⁸ In that same period, according to Bill Morgan, Ginsberg still didn't really understand Buddhism, and thought that Kerouac was going nowhere with his practice.⁸⁹ However, Portugés claims that Ginsberg took a bodhisattva oath around this period, and Stiles says that the poet was a self-proclaimed Buddhist since the early 1950s.⁹⁰ Yet, Tony Trigilio notes that Ginsberg often considered himself a "flaky Buddhist," and did not take a bodhisattva oath until 1972.⁹¹ Jonah Raskin cites the influence of Buddhism on *Howl* (1955) as suffusing the poem with the theme of life as suffering,⁹² but that influence is really subsidiary at best and Raskin doesn't press the point. Trigilio points out that Ginsberg's practice was

⁸⁵ Nancy M. Grace, pp. 156-157. Grace also notes that in the mid-1950s Kerouac read Christian theologians and mystics as well as Buddhist documents.

⁸⁶ Ann Charters, p. 191.

⁸⁷ Bill Morgan, p. 157.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 175, 198.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁹⁰ Paul Portugés, p. 70.

Bradley J. Stiles, p.98.

⁹¹ Tony Trigilio, pp. x-xii.

⁹² Jonah Raskin, p. 228.

“eccentric and erratic” and that the poet’s main poetic emphasis on Buddhism in the 1950s was to use Buddhist terminology in his work.⁹³ Even as late as the mid-1960s Ginsberg was still content with his “deliberate conflation of Hinduism and Buddhism.”⁹⁴ It was only much later that Ginsberg began to more seriously practice Buddhism and incorporate it more strategically in his work.

Ginsberg toured India in 1962-63, hitting Bombay and Delhi, where he met up with Gary Snyder. Ginsberg also met the Dalai Lama, and toured opium dens and red-light districts, according to Caveney.⁹⁵ In the late 1960s he was “in constant demand to raise funds” on behalf of various religious groups, including Buddhists and the Krishna Consciousness movement, and helped various eastern gurus publicize themselves.⁹⁶ Not until 1972 did Ginsberg take the formal vows of Buddhism and begin to take meditation more seriously. Ginsberg’s subsequent poetry collection *Mind Breaths* featured some of the techniques he learned. Ginsberg decided to be mentored by Lama Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche – “a Tibetan Buddhist whose ‘wild wisdom’ had more in common with the earlier Beats.”⁹⁷ Trungpa was known for his heavy drinking and womanizing, which were not forbidden in his branch of Buddhism, according to Morgan.⁹⁸ “This freedom from puritanical strictures was endearing to Allen,” writes Morgan, continuing, “He reminded Allen a great deal of Kerouac.”⁹⁹ Trungpa’s Crazy Wisdom School, as it was known, claimed “the authority of a lineage... and simultaneously [worked] actively to undermine the authority of lineage-making,”

⁹³ Tony Trigilio, p. xii.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁹⁵ Graham Caveney, p. 103.

⁹⁶ Bill Morgan, p. 432.

⁹⁷ Graham Caveney, p. 150.

⁹⁸ Bill Morgan, p. 494.

Tony Trigilio, p. x.

⁹⁹ Bill Morgan, p. 494.

according to Trigilio.¹⁰⁰ This point is consistent with Martinez's claim that the Beat project undermines communal change in favor of a pro-market individualism. Nevertheless, Ginsberg became disciplined in sitting, sometimes up to 9 hours a day. Caveney argues that during this period the poet alternated between actions based on the desire for anonymity and those based on self-advertisement.¹⁰¹ In fact, not long before his death, Ginsberg called then-President Clinton to see if the nation might honor him with some type of literary lifetime achievement award.¹⁰²

Like Kerouac, Ginsberg's work in the 1950s approaches Buddhism as protest. While Buddhism is represented as a rejuvenating force to the evils of capitalism, his poems suggest that the eclectic use of religion might heal the damage of capitalism, when such eclecticism itself seems an effect of late capitalism, as Richard Peterson, Roger Kern and Pierre Bourdieu argue.¹⁰³ They posit that a move toward eclecticism characterizes postwar elites; no longer does appreciation for specific genera typify the cultural elite. In his poetry of the 1950s, Ginsberg distinguishes himself as eclectically religious and as the poet laureate of the counterculture, and perpetuates the logic of consumption that he would like to critique. As it does in much of Kerouac's work, Buddhist-related terms in Ginsberg's works become buzzwords that connote protest, rebellion, exoticism, and countercultural style.

In poems such as *A Supermarket in California* (1955) and *Sunflower Sutra*

¹⁰⁰ Tony Trigilio, p. x.

¹⁰¹ Graham Caveney, p. 152.

¹⁰² Jonah Raskin, p. 208.

¹⁰³ R. A. Peterson and R. M. Kern, pp. 900-907. Kern and Peterson document the change in attitudes of consumers of culture, from one of snobbishness to one of discriminating acceptance. They write: "As highbrow snobbishness fit the needs of the earlier entrepreneurial upper-middle class, there also seems to be an elective affinity between today's new business-administrative class and omnivorosity" (906). Pierre Bourdieu, p. 3.

(1955), Ginsberg evokes his disgust with industrial and commercial capitalism, and their depredation of the physical and spiritual world. In *Supermarket* the narrator takes an evening stroll to the local supermarket. Along the way he apostrophizes Walt Whitman, a poet well-known for his enumeration of the natural world. In contrast to Whitman's catalogs, which enumerate nature's free bounty, among other things, the narrator enters the garish manmade world of the "neon fruit supermarket" and exclaims, "What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night!"¹⁰⁴ The natural world has been encapsulated in the supermarket, where a "store detective" follows the narrator "in [his] imagination."¹⁰⁵ The narrator again addresses Whitman, saying, "We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier."¹⁰⁶ Although the speaker does not buy anything, he nevertheless takes food and eats, suggesting that the way around the consumerism is outright theft based on individual caprice. Ginsberg re-works the word *possessing* not as an expression of ownership but as one of consumption, with an implied sexual connotation as well. Here the poet suggests that the move toward a commercial culture – in which the products of nature become someone's private property to sell – has led to networks of regulating authority. These networks have left the author paranoid about such control.

For the homosexual Ginsberg, following in the footsteps of the homosexual Whitman, the homogeneity of the Cold War consensus identity seems particularly ostracizing. In light of Hennessy's suggestion that American sexual identity is structured by capitalism, Whitman provides Ginsberg an image of a rebellious life that

¹⁰⁴ Allen Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California," p. 136.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

models how the latter poet may be able to articulate his sexuality as a counter to capitalism. The imagined discussion with Whitman continues, when the narrator says, “I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd.”¹⁰⁷ While throughout his life Whitman explored America on foot and investigated the land, the narrator is left with the absurd experience of an odyssey in the supermarket in order to explore the natural world. Ginsberg suggests that overgrown and bland commercial culture has replaced the hopefulness of life in Whitman’s America.

To reinforce the point, the poet closes with another apostrophe to Whitman: “Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?”¹⁰⁸ In contrast to the bourgeois home with its car and other technology, the poet and Whitman use their own feet to walk leisurely to their lovelorn cottage, which is bereft of socially acceptable heterosexuality. By the juxtaposition of images, Ginsberg suggests that bourgeois consumer culture is directly tied to the “lost America of love” – a nation that has lost its spiritual grounding in its pursuit of property and prosperity. Indeed, the uniformity of such property (“blue automobiles in driveways”) connects closely with one of Kerouac’s attacks on consumerism, namely its homogeneity. At issue, at least in the final example, is the style of consumerism.

Whereas *Supermarket* provides a narrow spectrum of spiritual consequences of capitalism, in *Sunflower Sutra* Ginsberg elaborates on the depredations of industrial culture to the physical and spiritual world, suggesting, even in the title, a move toward religion, especially eastern religion. The Sanskrit word *sutra* connotes a sermon, in particular one from the Buddha, a use of diction that positions the poet as Buddha-like.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Ginsberg sets up this poem early as a sermon on industrial culture. In the poem, the speaker, ostensibly Ginsberg, is sitting and crying alongside a locomotive with Jack Kerouac, who spies a sunflower. The setting is bleak, and the pair sits “surrounded by the gnarled steel roots of trees of machinery,”¹⁰⁹ while “the oily water on the river mirrored the red sky...no fish in that stream.”¹¹⁰ The speaker clearly highlights the destruction of the physical world as a result of industrial capitalism. The “gray” sunflower also bespeaks of its destruction by industrialism – “crackly bleak and dusty with the smut and smog and smoke of olden locomotives in its eye – corolla of bleary spikes pushed down and broken like a battered crown.”¹¹¹ The speaker suggests that the sunflower symbolizes mankind through the diction, such as “eye,” “hairy head,” “ear,” “arms,” and “face,” that personifies the flower. This personification is developed further, specifically in ethnicized terms, as suggested below.

In an apostrophe to the sunflower, Ginsberg takes particular aim at modern capitalism, blaming the “industrial – modern – all that civilization spotting your crazy golden crown.”¹¹² Yet the sunflower somehow eludes this destruction, at least in its interior, much like dualistic representations of the uncommodifiable/pure ethnic that Chow presents. In this first passage, part of the valorization of the sunflower includes its irrationality, its “crazy golden crown.” In describing the sunflower’s birth, the narrator says, “A perfect beauty of a sunflower! a perfect excellent lovely sunflower existence!”¹¹³ Since that time, the sunflower has taken on the characteristics of the industrial-capitalist culture to which it has been exposed.

¹⁰⁹ Allen Ginsberg, “Sunflower Sutra,” pp. 138-139.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

Poor dead flower? when did you forget you were a flower? when did you look at your skin and decide you were an impotent dirty old locomotive? the ghost of a locomotive? the specter and shade of a once powerful mad American locomotive? You were never no locomotive, Sunflower, you were a sunflower!¹¹⁴

The use of the second-person voice here allows Ginsberg to fulfill the mission of sermon, by speaking directly to the reader while ostensibly speaking to the sunflower. He suggests that the essence or soul of the sunflower is finally distinct from that of its milieu.

In a dual move, the passage characterizes both the ethnic and American cultures. The sunflower is represented as corrupted by modern American culture and yet somehow also uncorrupted, much like the ethnic positioning that Chow describes. Its skin has been darkened by industrial culture, a move that pointedly suggests the darker skin tones of non-white races. A homily format recapitulates well the representation of America as highly advanced, modern, and morally superior, even as the format purports to condemn its subject. The format implies that it is sophisticated Americans who can warn the ethnic other of the dangers of such modern contrivances, lest they lose their human qualities, especially their irrationality – their "crazy golden crown." Therefore, the poem participates in what Renato Rosaldo calls "imperialist nostalgia," in which undeveloped cultures act as representational foils for the technological development of developed countries.¹¹⁵

In the process of criticizing industrial culture, Ginsberg allies the Beat movement (originally white men) with the marginalized ethnic. Like the ethnicized positioning of the sunflower, Ginsberg envisions the university-educated (Ivy League, even) Beats as

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Renato Rosaldo, p. 70. Rosaldo explains: "In this ideologically constructed world of ongoing progressive change, putatively static savage societies become a stable reference point for defining (the felicitous progress of) civilized identity."

marginalized figures amid industrialized America. Ginsberg's moral in line 60 ("We're not our skin of grime") showcases how the poet conflates the industrial excesses with the darkened skin of non-white ethnics, and then specifically highlights some group with the first-person plural pronoun. Ostensibly that group is the audience, but it could also be the speaker and Kerouac, who was named early in the poem. Therefore, the poem appeals for an understanding of the Beats since they have ethnicized themselves, a rhetorical tactic that strategically marginalizes the Beat movement as much as it asks for acceptance. This tactic is also prevalent in *Howl*, in which Ginsberg's own experiences at Columbia are interwoven with the marginalized experiences of black America.¹¹⁶

To properly conclude the homily, Ginsberg finishes with the moral, setting it off with a dash: "—We're not our skin of grime, we're not dread bleak dusty imageless locomotives, we're golden sunflowers inside, blessed by our own seed & hairy naked accomplishment-bodies."¹¹⁷ Through the use of the first-person plural pronoun, Ginsberg also positions the reader as inherently and fundamentally resistant to industrial corruption, a position that recapitulates the stereotypical characterizations of the ethnic delineated by Chow. While suggesting that the way out of capitalism is through religion, the poet seems to rely on an idea of essence that transcends the physical, an idea more in keeping with the Christian ideal of soul than the putatively Buddhist ideals of the poem. Portugés suggests that the poem provides a vision of eternity suggesting the purity of all people, reflecting Ginsberg's Blake-inspired vision of

¹¹⁶ Gordon Ball, p. 243. Ball also notes the *mélange* of African America with other mystical traditions such as kaballah in *Howl*.

¹¹⁷ Allen Ginsberg, "Sunflower Sutra," pp. 138-139.

1948, and calls the poem “transcendental.”¹¹⁸ More tellingly, Merrill points out that an earlier poem in the same volume, *In back of the real*, foreshadows *Sunflower Sutra* but uses even more blatant Christian elements to understand the industrial condition of America.¹¹⁹ In *Sunflower Sutra*, the consumption of religion plays out in how Buddhist terms come to represent western metaphysical and ontological ideas of the soul, such as its existence and its eternal nature. As Stiles notes that the existence of the soul was one of Ginsberg’s fundamental beliefs around the period of the poem.¹²⁰ This “sutra” seems less like a transcendental Buddhist insight but rather an excuse and even justification for all consumerist and industrialist excess, since “we’re” eternally resistant to corruption and “golden sunflowers inside.”

While *Sunflower Sutra* suggests Ginsberg’s invocation of some type of Buddhist spirituality as a way out of the materialism of capitalism, in *Kral Majales* (1965) the poet moves more directly toward religious eclecticism as an answer to the materialism, antagonism, and dualistic politicking of the Cold War. However, such eclecticism seems to be derived from the advance of capitalism, as R. A. Peterson, R. M. Kern, and Bourdieu posit. Eclectic religion offers a means to stress the elements laid out by Weber – fraternity, aestheticism, and eroticism – as an apparent antidote to capitalism’s increasing rationalization of more and more of life. Each of these elements is clearly present in *Kral Majales*.

In a typical move, Ginsberg fictionalizes some true event that happened to him – namely being named the King of May 1965. In the poem, Ginsberg foregrounds his act

¹¹⁸ Paul Portugés, pp. 54, 76.

¹¹⁹ Thomas F. Merrill, pp. 100-101.

¹²⁰ Bradley J. Stiles, p. 95.

of composition, telling that he is composing the poem in an airplane as he was being deported from Prague to England. The poem begins by faulting both factions of the Cold War at length: “And the Communists have nothing to offer but fat cheeks and eyeglasses and lying policemen and the Capitalists proffer Napalm and money in green suitcases to the Naked.”¹²¹ He goes on: “And when Communist and Capitalist assholes tangle the Just man is arrested or robbed or had his head cut off.”¹²² Here Ginsberg suggests that in this worldwide struggle neither superpower is right – both have committed atrocities in the name of furthering their own cause. After discrediting both sides of this dichotomy at some length, he sets up a third alternative – an eclectic religious identity characterizing the Beat hipster – that is now opposed to both superpowers. Merrill refers to this new dichotomy as “we-feel-and-love-one-another-versus you calculate-and-brutalize-humanity attitude of hipdom.”¹²³

In the poem, Ginsberg references religion in a variety of ways and hints at the Buddhist Middle Way as an intermediate ground between the Cold War factions. Indeed, the title *Kral Majales*, which means the King of May in Czech, suggests the pagan origins of a spring ritual to celebrate the re-birth of life. The speaker avers that the King of May disrupts the capitalism/communism dichotomy through his natural, human, and erotic power; in effect, it is his well-developed religious-based humanity that will cut through the Cold War dichotomy. To support his assertions, Ginsberg again offers a Whitman-esque repetitive structure: “And I am the King of May, which is the power of sexual youth, and I am the King of May, which is industry in eloquence and action in amour, and I am the King of May, which is long hair of Adam and the Beard of

¹²¹ Allen Ginsberg, “Kral Majales,” pp. 353-355.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Thomas F. Merrill, p. 149.

my own body.”¹²⁴ The King of May comes to represent and celebrate areas of life that are human and that cannot easily be reduced to an economic system, such as eroticism. Instead of the mechanical industry, the speaker offers “industry in eloquence.” Here a direct aesthetic development of a human being’s skill comes to replace the development of machines. Similarly, the King of May symbolizes “action in amour” rather than military action, which characterized both sides of the Cold War. Finally, the King of May also represents features that have no economic analogue, but that are disruptive to a conservatively minded social order of the Cold War era – long hair and beard – which suggest the fertility of humanity or eroticism.

Ginsberg goes on to suggest his eclecticism and its relationship to the King of May. He states, “And I am the King of May, naturally, for I am of Slavic parentage and a Buddhist Jew who worships the Sacred Heart of Christ the blue body of Krishna the straight back of Ram the beads of Chango the Nigerian Shiva Shiva in a manner which I have invented.”¹²⁵ Here the poet combines religions from across the world, suggesting the inherent one-ness of the religious ethos, and the fraternity among major religious divisions. The speaker says that not only is he part of this syncretistic religion, but that he himself has invented the practice. Ginsberg seems to posit as a solution to capitalism – namely, an eclectic religious identity – that which capitalism has encouraged.

The poet finishes in a similar vein, suggesting how he occupies a liminal or hybrid space, even a Middle Way, between competing factions. Having been kicked out of Cuba and Czechoslovakia, he writes: “And *tho’* I am the King of May, the Marxists

¹²⁴ Allen Ginsberg, “Kral Majales,” pp. 353-355

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

have beat me upon the street, kept me up all night in Police Station, followed me thru Springtime Prague, detained me in secret and deported me from our kingdom by airplane. Thus I have written this poem on a jet seat in mid Heaven.”¹²⁶ Through his criticism of American capitalism and Russian-backed communism, Ginsberg is symbolically in the interstices of the polarizing Cold War factions. As the poet flying in the sky, Ginsberg literally is in the space between nations, and this position “in mid Heaven” resonates with his insistence on eclectic religion as an answer to the conflict.

In the poem Ginsberg’s unwillingness to choose a religion participates in the 1950s transformation of the idea of political freedom into the market-based notion of freedom of choice. The poem’s resolution partakes in what Trigilio calls “intersubjective relationships in which language mediates the boundaries between absence and presence while valorizing individualist presence.”¹²⁷ Even as Ginsberg posits an eclectic religious identity that is supposed to transcend the Cold War dualism, he still instantiates an individualist identity as central to any such resolution. This third way seems to recapitulate the identity politics that he would like to critique, merely at one remove. In effect, Ginsberg’s solution becomes not a Middle Way but rather another fixed identity that purports to be unfixed, or egoless. As Stiles penetratingly observes in other Ginsberg works,¹²⁸ the poet’s third way itself becomes the new ego-based identity – an effect that Emerson similarly perpetuates, as I’ve argued in Chapter 2. In the process of creating his third way, Ginsberg valorizes his identity as countercultural rebel, an image that has had a long shelf life.

Ginsberg’s ability to self-promote (in a dual valence) was tremendous. At the time

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Tony Trigilio, p. 182.

¹²⁸ Bradley J. Stiles, pp. 110-111.

of the Czech festival that he describes, Ginsberg was lauded among students, café society, and the literati, according to Gordon Ball.¹²⁹ Yet, Ginsberg virtually crowned himself the King of May, when Czech writer Josef Skvorecky declined the title just before the ceremony due to illness. In Staromestske Square Ginsberg was conferred the honor before 100,000, but his reign was short, after the Secretary for Cultural Affairs overturned the ruling upon learning of Ginsberg's ascendance.¹³⁰ Caveney writes, "Ginsberg's political excursions to Cuba and Eastern Europe are, in many ways, the mirror-image of American foreign policy, the need to find new frontiers (expansion being the nation's Manifest Destiny) ironically echoing the poet's attempt to extend his own psychic boundaries."¹³¹ This irony is not ironic at all, but rather exemplifies the microeconomic process writ large or vice versa. Ginsberg's ability to self-promote accrued massive benefits (monetary and otherwise) to himself. Upon his return to Prague in 1990, Ginsberg was presented with the King of May crown that the Communists had taken from him.¹³²

Satori in Paris: Americans (and French-Canadians) as Ethnics

Kerouac's modus operandi in promoting Buddhism can be corroborated by one of his last novels, *Satori in Paris* (1966), which, despite its title, offers little reference to the religion and certainly nothing so much as an obvious endorsement. In fact, Turner is baffled by the title and argues that, if anything, the novel marks Kerouac's return to Catholicism.¹³³ Told in a rambling and incoherent stream-of-consciousness style, the story foregoes the fictional pretense of other Kerouac works. In *Satori*, Kerouac relates

¹²⁹ Gordon Ball, p. 245.

¹³⁰ Graham Caveney, p. 115.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹³² Gordon Ball, p. 245.

¹³³ Steve Turner, p. 196.

his drunken journey to France to discover his aristocratic heritage, and lures the reader in with a McGuffin. He sets up the story by saying that in France he had a *satori* – a Japanese term that denotes an enlightenment experience – and then proceeds to declare his ignorance of exactly why and how this *satori* came to be, challenging the audience to find the experience that caused his *satori*. Much as he does with Buddhism, the author takes on the mantle of French-ness and rejects his American background as a means to suggest his outsider, and thus rebellious, status. Whereas such a move might work in an American context, with the audience reading the turn to France as a rejection of American values, in France the gesture seems empty of meaning in the rebellious way that Kerouac intends it.

In the novel, after a period of attempting to showcase his insider status as a French speaker, Kerouac reverts to his Americanisms in order to distinguish himself from the French, in the process coming to the realization that being American is also an ethnic category. This realization is exactly what his *satori* consists of, yet the author cloaks his epiphany in Buddhist diction, suggesting the realization's relative ineffectiveness in altering the behavior of the rapidly declining and increasingly inebriated real-life Kerouac. While Kerouac comes to some understanding of the ineffectiveness of deploying the ethnic as rebellion, he nevertheless re-ethnicizes his discovery by the use of the Japanese term for enlightenment. Kerouac's rapid assumptions of various ethnic identities – his "ventriloquism," to use Grace's phrasing¹³⁴ -- illustrates how Kerouac is creating a hybrid national and individual identity, one that parallels Ginsberg's eclectic religion-making.

Kerouac begins the novel by explicitly connecting *satori* with his travel to Paris,

¹³⁴ Nancy M. Grace, p. 44.

again invoking one of the most expensive modern luxuries and noting how "rich" his experience was. But he expands this connection with *satori* to a host of other things.

Kerouac starts:

Somewhere during my 10 days in Paris (and Brittany) I received an illumination of some kind that seems to've changed me again, towards what I suppose'll be my pattern for another seven years or more: in effect, a *satori*: the Japanese word for "sudden illumination," "sudden awakening" or simply "kick in the eye." Whatever, something *did* happen and in my first reveries after the trip and I'm back home regrouping all the confused rich events of those 10 days, it seems the *satori* was handed to me by a taxi driver named Raymond Baillet, other times I think it might've been my paranoiac fear in the foggy streets of Brest Brittany at 3 A.M., other times I think it was Monsieur Casteljaloux and his dazzlingly beautiful secretary (a Bretonne with blue-black hair, green eyes, separated front teeth just right in eatable lips, white wool knit sweater, with gold bracelets and perfume) or the waiter who told me "*Paris est pourris*" (Paris is rotten) or....¹³⁵

And he continues on with explanations by listing other possible causes of the enlightenment experience.¹³⁶ In keeping with the thematic trends of *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac connects Buddhist enlightenment with two of his favorite subjects – travel and sex.

From his extensive description of the genesis of the *satori*, which goes on well after the passage cited above, it seems that Kerouac has developed his enlightenment simply by being in France, rather than through some extensive meditative practice. Indeed, this characterization seems consistent with a typical theme of travel experiences in foreign places, in which one sees the relative position of one's own country and feels newly liberated from confining cultural practices. This setup of the novel evokes another characteristic travel narrative, in which one has experienced paradise amidst the ethnic other. Yet despite all this supposed conviction that he has

¹³⁵ Jack Kerouac, *Satori in Paris & Pic* pp. 7-8.

¹³⁶ Kerouac's definition of *satori* as "kick in the eye" seems quite close to Ginsberg's artistic pursuit of "eyeball kicks" – juxtapositions of words that startled, which Ginsberg pulled from Cezanne.

experienced enlightenment, Kerouac calls the events "confused," seeming to imply not only his extensive drunkenness on the trip but also the irrationality of his experience, much like events in *The Dharma Bums*. Enlightenment has rarely been represented as a confused event.

Kerouac relates his experience to a specifically American audience, since this audience is likely to see Kerouac's trip as a form of social protest, as suggested above. In fact, at the end of the three-page first chapter Kerouac seems particularly aware of his audience, especially his American audience, involuntarily mentioning his concern for them when he discusses whether his novel -- "if it's ever translated it all" -- will appear in France. He's worried whether his mention of the real name of the cab driver might cause problems for the Frenchman. Kerouac implies that an American audience simply won't care who the cab driver is, but he is more concerned about representing the encounter as some type of enlightenment. Therefore, the positioning of the cab driver allows Kerouac to articulate his rebellion, his cool, by finding enlightenment in the prosaic, albeit foreign prosaic. This theme of the prosaic is reiterated by the names of several working-class jobs that appear in the first chapter, perhaps reflecting the growing working-class sentiments in Europe in the mid-to-late 1960s. Moreover, to further express his distance from contemporary American tourism, Kerouac makes sure to mention how he avoided the Eiffel Tower. In fact, he makes a point of apostrophizing the reader and criticizing him/her for assuming that he would visit such a tourist cliché. Instead, on the way to his hotel he swings by La Madeleine, a Catholic Church.

In the passage, Kerouac also clearly connects sex with Buddhist enlightenment. As in *The Dharma Bums*, where Buddhism acts as a means to articulate a rebellion

against Protestant American sexual mores, this passage suggests Weber's comment on eroticism and aestheticism as a reaction against over-rationalization. In his description of Casteljaloux's secretary, Kerouac highlights the woman's good looks -- "dazzlingly beautiful" – but pushes past this aesthetic description, which need not imply sexual interest, to one that is more erotic in nature. To this end, he highlights her hair and eyes but also significantly her "eatable lips" and perfume. This representation of woman as consumable seems particularly apt in the *Playboy* era. With her gold bracelets and wool sweater, she has the perfect bourgeois baubles for the jet-setting bachelor (and divorcé) Kerouac.

Kerouac distinguishes himself from the typical American tourist by representing himself as knowledgeable about French culture, in part through his ancestry. His characterization illustrates how he takes on multiple ethnic identities fluidly, in his observation of two incidents between Americans and French in a cafe. He juxtaposes these two representations of America with his own "sophisticated" tastes, which appear in the paragraph immediately before. First, he explains that he's attending the Opera, and then while eating, he expounds upon how the French eat, showing the niceties of their prandial behavior. Onto the scene appears "an American guy," who "is so mean looking in his absolute disgust with Paris" that Kerouac will not approach him."¹³⁷ Here, Kerouac mocks tourist stereotypes of France, and imputes the American's dour countenance to not experiencing Notre Dame or "a cherry tree in blossom in the sun with pretty girls on his lap and people dancing around him" or "some small cafe they told him about back in Glennon's bar on Third Avenue."¹³⁸ The American tourist curses the

¹³⁷ Jack Kerouac, *Satori in Paris & Pic* pp. 38-39

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

French barman and "stalks out in poor misunderstood raincoat and disillusioned rubbers--".¹³⁹ That such an American tourist with typical expectations ends up disillusioned, and even poor, serves to highlight how Kerouac is somehow authentically French and able to navigate a foreign culture, to have "rich" experiences. Indeed, not long before, Kerouac had been enjoying "the famous cafes on the boulevard... watching Paris go by, such hepcats the young men" – the cool life of the bon vivant.¹⁴⁰

Kerouac's second encounter with ignorant Americans fares no better, but nevertheless serves to effectively foil the worldly writer. In the same cafe Kerouac spots two American teachers -- from Iowa, he says -- "sisters on a big trip to Paris."¹⁴¹ This mocking tone for the American heartland continues as Kerouac infers that the pair "apparently got a hotel room around the corner and aint left it except to ride the sightseeing buses which pick em up at the door."¹⁴² The women approach the barman asking for some oranges, but in English, which "amazes" Kerouac. Naturally, the barman does not understand. But rather than speak the language, the women proceed to use hand gestures, "pointing" and "showing two fingers" to obtain what they want.¹⁴³ After he packs up the fruit, the barman responds, "*Trois francs cinquante.*"¹⁴⁴ Kerouac writes, "In other words, 35¢ an orange but the old gals dont care what it costs and besides they dont understand what he's said."¹⁴⁵

Kerouac's follow-up comment reveals in two ways his alleged insider status in France. First, he understands the language, a fact which is highlighted throughout the

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

novel. Second, he can translate currency, seemingly quickly, navigating the costs for himself and his readers deftly. However, he also contrasts the relatively well-off position of the women with that of himself. By using this juxtaposition in an elaborate analogy, Kerouac constructs a trade-off between speaking the language (being an insider) and having money. Meanwhile, the ignorant “old gals” of undisclosed age remain unable to communicate with the barman. Finally reduced to incompetence, one woman decides to hold out her hand and allow the barman to take the proper amount, and “the two ladies burst into peels of screaming laughter... and the cat politely removes three francs fifty centimes from her hand.”¹⁴⁶ Such inane feminine behavior is contrasted with the politeness of the barman, whom Kerouac compliments by calling him a “cat,” a recognition of his cool. Immediately after this scene, Kerouac shows his connection to the barman, and thus his insider status, by asking what's good at the restaurant. These two cool “French” men can finally enjoy the restaurant in peace after the despicable incident with the two American women, or so Kerouac seems to suggest.

As a traveler in search of his ancestry in France, Kerouac highlights his ethnicity, in particular his French-ness, but also represents himself as being of international descent. Before the two encounters with Americans mentioned above, the author has already set himself up as international, albeit in a lighthearted and fictional way. For example, in one ramble he writes, “In times to come I'll be known as the fool who rode outa Mongolia on a pony: Genghiz Khan, or the Mongolian Idiot, *one*.”¹⁴⁷ He playfully continues to trace his world-spanning ancestry: “Of course, outa Mongolia and the Khans, and before that Eskimos of Canada and Siberia. All goes back around the

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

world, not to mention Perish-the-Thought Persia.' (Aryans)."¹⁴⁸ This litany of ethnicities serves as a reminder of how Kerouac is employing the exotic as a means to distinguish himself. Just before these lines, the author notes how he had gone out to a concert with an Arab girl, who had asked him "to take her to the beach at Tunis."¹⁴⁹ Each of these instances works as further evidence that Kerouac is cool because he enjoys the ethnic and therefore protests mainstream America. Again, the American centralizes ethnic cultures in himself – the trope of hybrid identity.

Kerouac highlights his fluency in French, and explicitly connects such ability with his *satori*. To show his real French-ness and thus cool in front of his American audience, Kerouac feels he must appear fluent. He writes, "Maybe that's when my Satori took place. Or how. The amazing long sincere conversations in French with hundreds of people everywhere, was what I really liked, and did, and it was an accomplishment because they couldnt have replied in detail to my detailed points if they hadnt understood every word I said."¹⁵⁰ Kerouac is clearly proud of his speaking ability, which he terms an "accomplishment," and boasts in front of his American audience. However, his defiant tone suggests that he is ill at ease with his imputed French identity. He confirms this supposition when he mocks his former American teachers of French language who laughed at his accent, by including quotation marks around the word teachers.

Yet, this quality of French-ness seems to be dropped immediately in the next paragraph. Kerouac writes, "Suffice it to say, when I got back to New York I had more fun talking in Brooklyn accents'n I ever had in me life and especially when I got back

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

down South, whoosh."¹⁵¹ Here, Kerouac seems to realize the ephemeral nature of such posturing as ethnic. He shows that even in America there are regional differences that can make one exotic or otherwise distinct from the surrounding culture; one needn't go abroad to find distinction. This realization is borne out further when Kerouac ventures to Brittany and endures a drunken, rainy, and almost-sleepless night on the streets of Brest. Immersed in provincial France for just one day, he develops homesickness and yearns to return to Florida, foregoing the goal of his journey. Apparently, his Frenchness does not extend much beyond the borders of Paris, although he has spent much of the novel proclaiming he's a Breton. While Kerouac seems to reveal the problematic nature of adopting the ethnic, he nevertheless is unable to act on his alleged *satori*" But couching such a realization in Buddhist terms, yet another ethnicizing of his experience, reifies the problem of representation that he seems to disclose.

Kerouac ties the novel together in a kind of karmic circle, ending where he began, with a discussion of the cab driver Raymond Baillet and how he whisked Kerouac to the Orly airfield. Left unsaid is how exactly the experience with Baillet constitutes any type of *satori*. *Au contraire*, the experience seems to support the Protestant work ethic, because Kerouac takes Baillet's insistence on working on a day of rest as a sign of his enlightenment. On the way to the airport Kerouac insists that they stop for a beer. When they leave the bar, they jump into the cab and resume the trip. Kerouac writes, "He tells me his name, of Auvergne, I mine, of Brittany."¹⁵² Again, even until his final moments in France Kerouac is attempting to establish his French identity. Finally they reach the airport and the cab driver briskly removes the bags and

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 118.

climbs back into the car. He speaks in French, which the author translates thus:

Not to repeat myself, me man, but today Sunday I'm working to support my wife and kids – And I heard what you told me about families in Quebec that had kids by the twenties and twenty-fives, that's too much, that is – Me I've only got two – But, work, yes, yowsah, this and that, or as you say Monsieur thissa and thatta, in any case, thanks, be of good heart, I'm going.¹⁵³

Kerouac makes a special point of mentioning that Baillet is speaking French, in order to highlight Kerouac's connection to the French. Given his pointedly un-French diction, at least the diction Kerouac ascribes to him, the cabbie appears as a *mélange* of different cultures himself, suggesting how Kerouac tries to valorize hybrid identity.

The passage might be interpreted to mean that Kerouac finds his *satori* in Baillet's insistence on his duty to his family. Following this line, the cab driver's fumbling over words at the end of the passage suggests a preference of action over speech, a typical Buddhist injunction. Perhaps, even, this speech is the typical cab driver's plea for a sizable tip, in which case he is representing the traditional Buddhist value of humility by the religion's sanctioned practice of begging. But what seems more likely is that this passage displays the human compassion that Kerouac was seeking in Catholicism and Buddhism throughout the novel and his own life, as he mentioned earlier: "I'm not a Buddhist, I'm a Catholic revisiting the ancestral land that fought for Catholicism against impossible odds yet won in the end."¹⁵⁴ Catholicism and Buddhism both stand in distinction to the Protestantism of America, a country that had elected its first Catholic president only six years before the novel was published.

Kerouac's wavering between the two religions suggests that he's looking for an alternative to the Protestantism that undergirds America's push toward capitalist

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

development. Yet, in the passage, Kerouac places special emphasis on the word *work*, mentioning it twice. Baillet's hard work is motivated by his love and concern for his family, an existential situation that Kerouac sees as sublimating onerous work. Baillet even has to work on the day of rest, Sunday, which Kerouac notes by name. Therefore, the passage asserts work – here in the guise of the working class – as a means of achieving divine favor, or even enlightenment. Similarly, Michael Hrebeniak notes this move toward glorification of work in later Kerouac novels, with its “blue-collar anti-Bohemianism and elevations of American workers to an iconic status,” and remarks on Kerouac's late-career devolution into “nostalgia for the hegemonies of Church and State.”¹⁵⁵ Indeed, in the last years of his life, Kerouac saw the New Left as a Communist plot to cripple the United States.¹⁵⁶ In *Satori in Paris*, Kerouac's hodge-podge of religions echoes Ginsberg's eclectic consumption of religion and the exploding eclectic spirituality of the mid-to-late 1960s, which expressed its contempt for bourgeois culture.

Buddhism as Justification for the Beat Style

Well before Jack Kerouac was recognized as stylistically innovative, Allen Ginsberg praised him in the dedication to 1955's “Howl.” Ginsberg lauds Kerouac as the “new Buddha of American prose, who spit forth intelligence ...creating a spontaneous bop prosody and original classic literature.”¹⁵⁷ Kerouac's style, named by the author as Spontaneous Prose, was elaborated in short-form works such as *The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose*. Spontaneous Prose was supposed to be “an ecstatic abandonment of conscious control of language, an intuitive response to the inner voice,”

¹⁵⁵ Michael Hrebeniak, pp. 132-133. Hrebeniak adds, “As the romantic aspiration toward literary fame fades, Kerouac reverts to the folksy proletarianism of his parents and unleashes the latent hostility toward liberal values upon which the New Republicanism preys.”

¹⁵⁶ Steve Turner, p. 203.

¹⁵⁷ Allen Ginsberg, “Howl,” p. 126.

to use Tytell's gloss, or what Kerouac called "an undisturbed flow from the mind."¹⁵⁸ This style has been documented as influenced by jazz and Buddhism, as Ginsberg implies above.¹⁵⁹ Yet Kerouac's style was well formed by 1951, and most scholars date the start of Kerouac's interest in Buddhism to late 1953 or early 1954, when he checked out Dwight Goddard's *Buddhist Bible* from the San Jose library, although at least one critic posits an earlier date.¹⁶⁰

Nancy Grace puts the date even earlier, at 1950, at which Kerouac begin a serious study of Buddhism (and points out that this study was before *On The Road* was drafted),¹⁶¹ but later dates Kerouac's serious study beginning in 1953 and recorded in *Some of the Dharma* from 1953 to 1956.¹⁶² For his own part, Kerouac himself originates his interest in his reading of Thoreau's discussion of Buddhism and *The Life of Buddha* by Ashvaghosa in early 1954.¹⁶³ Hrebeniak adds that Kerouac attended D.T. Suzuki's 1953 lectures at the New School, while Sterritt says that Kerouac discovered Buddhism during his time at Columbia, but admits that it might have been in 1952 or 1953 in the Lowell library.¹⁶⁴ As the datelines of most critics indicate, even before that interest in Buddhism, Kerouac had drafted one of the most stylistically innovative works

¹⁵⁸ John Tytell, *Naked Angels* p. 142.

¹⁵⁹ David Sterritt, *Screening the Beats* p. 57. Sterritt writes: "Kerouac had refined this technique [spontaneous writing] in 1951 after listening to the fluid 'lyric alto' style of jazz saxophonist Lee Konitz, deciding 'to write the way [Konitz] plays.'"

Regina Weinreich, pp. 42-43.

¹⁶⁰ Paul Maher Jr., p. 284. Maher cites December 1953 for Kerouac's interest.

Steve Turner, p. 147. Turner cites February 1954 as the beginning of Kerouac's study of the *Buddhist Bible* and Paul Carus' *The Gospel of Buddha*.

Robert A. Hipkiss, p. 64. Hipkiss cites January 1954.

¹⁶¹ Nancy M. Grace, p. 79.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 133. Still later, Grace returns to the date of early 1954 at the San Jose library (147).

¹⁶³ Barry Miles, pp. 194-196. Miles notes how Kerouac discovered the *Buddhist Bible* as a means to fight the quack spiritualism of Edgar Cayce, which the Cassidy family was increasingly adopting.

Gerald Nicosia, p. 451. Nicosia refers to the same date as Miles, but also indicates that Kerouac may have been familiar with the Buddha's life since 1951.

¹⁶⁴ Michael Hrebeniak, p. 236.

David Sterritt, *Screening the Beats* pp. 48, 114.

in his oeuvre, *On The Road*, in 1951. The various myths of its spontaneous composition are well documented. The book had trouble finding publishers, until 1955, when Viking decided to take a chance on it, and only after major revisions did it finally appear, in 1957. Such expurgations included passages describing sex between the fictionalized Kerouac and Neal Cassady personae. An unexpurgated version of the original *On the Road* has recently been published.

Yet if Kerouac's literary debt to Buddhism is well noted, it is also at least partially mis-stated. Whereas Kerouac's jazz influences, such as those of Charlie "Bird" Parker, had been absorbed years before Kerouac perfected his style, Kerouac's interest in Buddhism only bloomed well after he had substantially developed Spontaneous Prose, a technique that dates to at least as early as 1948.¹⁶⁵ Tytell insinuates as much too, when he notes that Mahayana Buddhism re-affirmed Kerouac's art,¹⁶⁶ suggesting that Kerouac's art must have already existed beforehand. Buddhism could well have influenced the further development of the Kerouac style, and it did -- as a means to draw the irrational into language, to explore the farthest bounds of literary expression and to bolster his capricious style with a well-developed system of religious and critical practice. In short, Buddhism provided Kerouac with justification to do anything – or as Kerouac said: "Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better."¹⁶⁷ These elements are present in the work *Old Angel Midnight*.

Despite the fact that its influence on Kerouac came only later, Buddhism lends itself very well to the Beat mythos of the desperately frantic Kerouac pounding away at his typewriter for days at a time to capture the spontaneous moment free of literary

¹⁶⁵ David Sterritt, *Screening the Beats* p. 57.

¹⁶⁶ John Tytell, *Naked Angels* p. 74.

¹⁶⁷ David Sterritt, *Screening the Beats* p. 58.

artifice. Ginsberg too was fascinated by the immediate experience, as he searched for his “eyeball kicks,” and Portugés argues that Ginsberg undertook a spontaneous method and posted Kerouac’s *Essentials of Spontaneous Composition* before his desk.¹⁶⁸ And both authors attempted improvisation before literary audiences, although Ginsberg did not improvise a poem until 1971.¹⁶⁹ Not only does Buddhism emphasize the immediacy of experience but it also validates that immediacy with transcendental significance and stresses improvisation. Such improvisation was a key aspect of the best jazz players too. More significantly, such a technique gains legitimacy and power in a world dominated by mechanical reproduction. The emphasis on Buddhist-inspired improvisation, therefore, seems to offer a defense against the capitalist system of representation. Sterritt makes a similar argument for the improvisational emphasis of bebop: “The ability to craft, manipulate, and ‘improve’ a performance via recording-studio technology puts a premium on off-the-cuff spontaneity, which may be regarded as a mark of intellectual alertness and emotional ‘cool’ as well as creative ability.”¹⁷⁰ By using Buddhism as a rationale for improvisation, Kerouac and Ginsberg attempt to restore the spontaneous qualities that are destroyed by mechanical reproduction even as they craft their own cool personae.

Yet, highly ironically, Kerouac and Ginsberg are performing this improvisation in a medium that is to be reproduced. More ironically: despite Kerouac’s vocal promotion of a “first word, best word” technique, he is known to have heavily redacted his material, even without the demands from editors, such as their insistence on cuts for *On The*

¹⁶⁸ Paul Portugés, pp. 56-58.

¹⁶⁹ David Sterritt, *Mad to Be Saved* p. 197.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Road.¹⁷¹ In fact, Malcolm Cowley edited Kerouac's groundbreaking novel "alone and unilaterally."¹⁷² Moreover, given Kerouac's well-known penchant for note-taking and writing journals, even as action was occurring, spontaneous prose seems less spontaneous than an act of repeated (and perhaps masterful) practice. Similarly, during the composition of *Howl*, Ginsberg repeatedly revised his work over a period of months, even as Kerouac sat by as his writing coach and lambasted his friend's efforts, according to Sterritt and Raskin.¹⁷³ Gewirtz notes that Kerouac had written and re-written his texts assiduously, citing drafts of journals and short stories.¹⁷⁴ Kerouac and Ginsberg achieve cool by mystifying the process of literary creation with Buddhism.

In *Old Angel Midnight*, Kerouac investigates a style that is often virtually impenetrable due to its seemingly irrational conjunction of words. The text begins, "Friday afternoon in the universe, in all directions in & out you got your men women dogs children horses ponies tics perts parts pans pools palls pails parturiences and petty Thieveries that turn into heavenly Buddha."¹⁷⁵ This passage seems to suggest, along typical Buddhist lines, that everything is Buddha nature. At the start of the text Kerouac quickly orients the reader to a theme, a common literary strategy, despite the unconventional grammar and mechanics and seeming incoherence. But consider how he uses incoherence later on in the text: "'Spit on Bosatsu!' says Gregory Corso – 'Oo that's a beautiful?' I say – Dash dash dash dash mash crash wash wash mosh posh tosh tish rish rich sigh my tie thigh pie in the sky – Poo on you too, proo the blue blue,

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹⁷² Ellis Amburn, p. 243.

¹⁷³ Jonah Raskin, p. 168.

David Sterritt, *Mad to Be Saved* p. 197.

¹⁷⁴ Isaac Gewirtz, p. 188.

¹⁷⁵ Jack Kerouac, *Old Angel Midnight* p. 1.

OO U Nu, hello Buddha man.”¹⁷⁶ In this latter passage incoherence and the irrational seem almost as if they are leading to the Buddha – a valorization of the irrational that Weber sees as concomitant with increasing capitalist rationalization. Kerouac uses Buddhism as a philosophical justification for the irrational approach of his famed spontaneous prose style. Through such passages, Kerouac interprets Buddhism as a religion that validates any individualist style, especially those that are irrational or offbeat. This mis-reading opens the door to the creation of innumerable styles that can be later marketed and mined for profit, in the process of crafting a consumption-based ethos of individualism.

Kerouac and Ginsberg as Avant-garde Capitalists?

Despite their stated and avowed resistance to capitalism in various works, Kerouac and Ginsberg exemplify some of the very same values of consumption -- perhaps the most interesting ambiguity of their position. While Kerouac and Ginsberg enumerate the contradictions of the feuding capitalist and communist worldviews, they subtly instantiate capitalism through their literary and life styles. Although their appearance in and even courting of the mass media seem antithetical to their stated ethos, they inherently espoused some of the same leisure-oriented values of magazines such as *Playboy*, by emphasizing their consumption of alcohol, travel, and sex, for example. That the Beat lifestyle should be so complementary to what Barbara Ehrenreich sees as the fundamentally conservative *Playboy* indicates that this lifestyle functions less as a protest against capitalism and rather more like a comment on its exaggerated style.¹⁷⁷ It is the Beats who achieve cultural capital through the

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁷⁷ Barbara Ehrenreich, pp. 50-51.

eclecticism of the outré; they come to epitomize “cool” by being “uncool,” that is by seemingly turning away from what was socially acceptable. While Ginsberg and Kerouac were busy expressing a critique of capitalism, they were also, perhaps unwittingly, building personas that could later be rendered cool by the mass media. Here, it is important to remember that Chow’s paradigm for the representation of the ethnic as protestant does not require authorial intention in order to profit. That such images come to be profitably circulated, exploited, and canonized seems itself to be sufficient evidence that the representation of the ethnic has an important symbolic function vis-à-vis the Cold War consensus.

As portrayed in works by Kerouac and Ginsberg, the Beat lifestyle mirrors many of the values espoused by magazines that taught men of the 1950s and 1960s how to enjoy leisure, such as *Playboy*, but also *Rogue*, *Satan*, and *Escapade*. *Playboy* portrays the consumerist complement to the Beats’ non-attachment ethos. Even in its title, *Playboy* insists on a boyish escapist fantasy of leisure, opposing it against the more serious dogma of work, responsibility, and traditional manliness that were expected. The magazine’s mission, and demonstrated even in its title, is to inform bourgeois men how to be and remain real men despite the feminizing influences of mass culture, as Bill Osgerby argues.¹⁷⁸ *Playboy* promised a lifestyle to men who could consume – and afford to consume – the right way. The magazine was immediately successful, quickly selling out its first-issue run of 70,000 copies, and it went on to record monthly sales of over 4.5 million copies by the late 1960s.¹⁷⁹ As part of its mission to show men how to be men, the magazine published several contributions

¹⁷⁸ Bill Osgerby, p. 121.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

from Jack Kerouac in the late 1950s as well as the article *The Beat Mystique*, a long discussion of the Beat phenomenon, even while *Playboy* executives were “suspicious of the movement’s sullen nihilism and sloppy anti-materialism.”¹⁸⁰ To the January 1965 issue of the magazine Kerouac contributed a story about a hitchhiking experience in which a young blonde woman picks him up.¹⁸¹ Despite the misgivings of executives, *Playboy* helped make the Beats cool by re-working their personas into commodities.

“Hedonistic nonconformity” is an apt turn of phrase for the lives of Kerouac and Ginsberg. This representative Beat man ostensibly valued many of the same practices that the bourgeois man would. Fulfilling the supposedly repressed desires of the middle-class man, Kerouac portrayed the lifestyle of libertinism and casual sex. Whereas Kerouac and Ginsberg detailed a life of drinking and parties, Hugh Hefner’s magazine provided its readership new cocktails, new jokes to tell between sips, and the “Basic Bar” – all the de rigeur liquors and “an awesome stockpile of sterling bottle-toppers, chrome cocktail shakers and push-button olive grabbers.”¹⁸² Appealing to desires of the bourgeois consumer, the Beats portrayed a life of constant travel across the U.S. and the world – invoking one of the most expensive luxuries of consumer capitalism. Ginsberg in particular was among the most vagabond, traveling repeatedly across the country, and making trips to India, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, England, among many others. Kerouac is noted too for his extensive trips, detailed most famously in *On the Road*, where the characters crisscross America, as well as to Mexico, Morocco, and France. As for *Playboy*, “Foreign climes were also presented as a playground for masculine hedonism. Playboy’s matrix of affluent consumption and sexual pleasure

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹⁸¹ Paul Maher Jr., p. 317.

¹⁸² Bill Osgerby, p. 130.

was especially clear in the ‘tourist gaze’ of its regular ‘travelogues’ dealing with the world’s fashionable resorts,” argues Osgerby.¹⁸³ Similar to the drug use espoused in Beat literature, the Playboy Foundation funded the creation of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws in the 1970s.¹⁸⁴ So, whereas Ginsberg and Kerouac took a verbal stand against capitalist culture, they promote some of the very same values that a men’s magazine such as *Playboy* would extol.¹⁸⁵

So, does the Beat rebel reject the mainstream values wholly and establish a completely new system of values, or is this figure really the harbinger of the same order, bringing capitalism to as-yet untouched areas? Or perhaps it is the system of capitalist representation that brings such ostensibly countercultural values into play? As the life and work of Kerouac and Ginsberg seem to suggest, the Beats’ cool is a style ready to be exploited in the capitalist system rather than a strategy to overcome it. Indeed, Ginsberg and Kerouac gain cultural capital because they are able to master this form in an era when it was first emerging as a marker of distinction. As Turner notes in 1996, Kerouac’s books were all back in print, his estate was valued at \$10 million, and *On the Road* remained a film prospect with a movie mogul like Coppola.¹⁸⁶ For an individual such as Ginsberg, who profoundly criticized the dominant orders of the Cold War, to be represented as a harbinger of capitalism, as “cool,” hints at the enormous power of capitalism to re-work even intractable objects into its circuits of

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134. Osgerby also highlights the importance of technological gadgets for *Playboy*: “Breaking with traditional notions of machinery as bulky and cumbersome, the 1960s concept of the ‘gadget’ conceived technology as a miniaturized and individualized consumer product – precise, functional and emblematic of stylish cool.” Technology is a theme that re-appears much later in connection with Buddhism, as I discuss in Chapters 5 and 6.

¹⁸⁶ Steve Turner, p. 209.

consumption. In fact, it poses a much more powerful question: is it possible to even frame a popular debate or critique that seriously challenges this dominant order? Gary Snyder seems to think so.

CHAPTER 4 GARY SNYDER: BUDDHISM AS ECOLOGY AS COUNTERCAPITALISM

One of the most prominent Buddhist parables involves the Zen Master Hui-Neng who, when asked to explain a sutra, pointed to the moon. He stated, "Truth can be compared to the moon, and words can be compared to a finger. I'm pointing at the moon, but do not confuse my finger for the moon." In essence, Hui-Neng admonishes practitioners against taking the form of a gesture as the ultimate realization of ineffable truth, a reading that D.T. Suzuki affirms.¹ The Zen master's response stands in a long tradition of the religion's distrust of words, and yet, as even he acknowledges, words have the power to direct our attention to the moon of truth. "Emptiness is never explicitly referred to, since to refer to the Void as a concept is automatically to fall into the error of distinguishing the indistinguishable," writes Jody Norton.² Similarly, by pointing to the moon through his poetry, Gary Snyder models not only the form of enlightenment, but also one of the key practices to develop it – keen observation. Through this focus, Snyder provides the means for readers to avoid mistaking the finger for the moon, that is, for reifying a gesture, object, or experience as ultimate Buddhist truth. Effectively, Snyder uses words to highlight the inadequacy of words.

As a member of the San Francisco Renaissance, Gary Snyder brought serious study of Buddhism to the attention of Beat figures such as Jack Kerouac and Allen

¹ D.T. Suzuki, pp. 64-65. Suzuki describes those who grasp at the moon thus: "[T]hey are gazers at a special object which can be picked up among other relative objects and shown to others as one points at the moon; they cling to this specific object as something most precious, forgetting that this clinging degrades the value of their cherished object because it is thereby brought down to the same order of being as themselves; because of this clinging to it and abiding in it, they cherish a certain definite state of consciousness as the ultimate point they should attain; therefore they are never truly emancipated."

² Jody Norton, p. 62.

Ginsberg.³ While such Beats consciously drop the name of Buddhism into their texts, in effect using it as a code word for the exotic or other, Snyder often fashions his work to reflect Buddhist experience without such overt reference to the religion. As Jody Norton has argued of his early works, Snyder “builds absences into the structure, imagery, and syntax of his texts in order to inscribe the essential Zen Buddhist perception of the identity of sunyata (Emptiness) and tathata (suchness, objective reality) in the form of each poem.”⁴ While Snyder is personally motivated by the non-attachment and rationalist sensibilities of Buddhism that would put consumer capitalism in stark relief, in many of his poems he does not deploy an outright attack on consumer capitalism, instead focusing the reader’s attention on the act of seeing ever more clearly as a way to challenge the capitalist paradigm.

In this way and in contrast to the works of Kerouac and Ginsberg studied here, Snyder models for the reader the experience of insight that Buddhist meditative practice develops. As he says in the Afterword to *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, his job is “the work of seeing the world *without*...language” and then bringing “that seeing *into* language.”⁵ Norton argues that his poetry makes use of “a ruled play of absences that

³ The Beats and San Francisco Renaissance should be seen as more or less distinct movements despite their extensive entanglements and intersections, such as Kerouac’s use of Snyder as the real-life alter ego of *The Dharma Bums*’ Japhy Ryder. The Beats developed as an East Coast phenomenon in the areas surrounding New York City. Therefore, unlike many critics, I view Snyder’s work as discontinuous with the work of primary Beats such as Kerouac, Ginsberg, Corso, and Burroughs. This footnoted example is but one of the many ways in which they differ. As David Rivard says, “Snyder ‘the Beat’ is an intellectually lazy creation of anthologists and critics” (5). David Rivard, pp. 5-9. Patrick D. Murphy, p. 7. Murphy feels similarly and notes that Snyder himself “strongly dissents from identification with the Beat Movement.” Murphy also notes the tendency of media sensationalism to group them together.

Snyder concurs: “I’m not a Beat in a literary sense... I’m a historical part of that circle of friends, and I was part of the early sociological and cultural effect of it. My work did not fit with the critics’ and the media’s idea of Beat writing, ever.”

Dana Goodyear, p. 71.

⁴ Jody Norton, p. 41.

⁵ Gary Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* p. 67.

has allowed Snyder to cause the most conditional of conditional realities – language – to signify that for which no words are adequate.”⁶ In his poetry Buddhism is not a buzzword that connotes cool, but rather becomes a mode of perception from which the reader can become grounded enough to understand the depredations, especially on the environment, posed by capitalist rationalization.

Critics have noted the influence of Ezra Pound on Snyder, both in subject and style, but Snyder goes much beyond Pound in his use of nature. Jacob Leed notes that Snyder eschews the flowery poetic style and focuses closely, economically, and concretely on the subject while being attuned to the “music of the phrase” à la Pound.⁷ Ayako Takahashi points out that Snyder represents objects directly as the Imagists did, but that, unlike Pound, Snyder uses nature as “personal experience” in his poems rather than a “means of expression,” a fact that is due to a Zen influence.⁸ Kern too cites Pound’s influence, suggesting Snyder turns to the primitive in a typically modernist vein.⁹ But Snyder’s use of Buddhism is not simply primitive; instead, it informs a poetics that seeks to encapsulate the “non-linguistic, pre-linguistic, pre-verbally visualized or deeply felt areas” of life.¹⁰ His poetry emphasizes seeing and tries to pull the visible into language.

As the poetic leader of an ecology movement who employs Buddhism as a theoretical and practical bolster, Snyder uses his experience in the Zen tradition to reflect his ongoing commitment to the religion not just as a rhetorical or textual device in

⁶ Jody Norton, p. 65. Norton continues: “The very absoluteness of this inequivalence has led Snyder to level the usual structural hierarchy of poetic texts, so that his poems take place as much within their lacunae as within their language.”

⁷ Jacob Leed, p. 190.

⁸ Ayako Takahashi, pp. 315, 318.

⁹ Robert T. Kern. *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* pp. 221-223.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 223. Snyder quoted here.

his poetry but as a lived practice. Whereas Kerouac and Ginsberg (at least in his earlier works) argue against the style of consumer culture, Snyder focuses often on consumerism's destruction of the environment.¹¹ For Snyder, the practice of Buddhism leads to a grounding in one's geographical place, if one would observe closely. By observing nature – one's own as well as that "outside" – humans can determine their place in the natural realm and alter their conduct so that the environment is not destroyed. Therefore, at his best Snyder attacks capitalism by re-focusing his efforts concretely on a new and proper relationship with the environment, rather than directly attacking the system of relations (or even objects) that constitutes capitalism, because he is well aware of capitalism's ability to re-work threats into further consumption.

As Tim Dean argues, "Nature precisely puts the self in its place, modifying its status as just one among many natural phenomena, yet also according it a sense of place within the variegated phenomenal field."¹² For Snyder, overcoming capitalism involves re-establishing a proper relationship with the environment, and that can be accomplished through a Buddhist practice of close observation. The author criticizes economies that are not close to the land, and therefore, are unsustainable. Despite the increasing contemporary prominence of sustainability discourse at a mass scale, Snyder remains relatively inconspicuous, defying the easy mass-media commodification of the Beats. Whereas the Beats actively participated in the creation and exploitation of marketable personae, Snyder orients his focus toward a practice that informs ecology. Nevertheless, the ecology ethos -- one that many firms realize makes them more competitive -- is being rendered cool, at least partially, by capitalism.

¹¹ Tim Dean, "The Other's Voice," p. 494. Dean notes the absence of jeremiads against cultures in early Snyder, such as *Riprap*, even as the Beats were busy banging the drum against America.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 490.

This chapter will cover several of Snyder's books including *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes & Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries* (1969), and *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, the last a poem cycle that was begun in 1956 before its final fully realized publication in 1996. While many of Snyder's poems do not explicitly mention Buddhism (instead incorporating it into their structure), his essays often do, in order to substantiate Buddhism as a religion with nation-changing implications. For example, several essays in *Earth House Hold* employ Buddhism as a means for social engagement and activism, a common use of the religion as it is practiced in the West.¹³ The essays of *The Practice of the Wild* espouse similar themes while making only few explicit references to Buddhism. *Mountains and Rivers Without End* shows the later Snyder's concerns with capitalist destruction, in poems such as *The Market*, but also the rejuvenative power of Buddhist practice, in *Endless Streams and Mountains*. Rather than dropping the name of Buddhism as a code word for counter-capitalism, the latter poem subtly shows Snyder instructing the reader on how to not mistake the finger for the moon.

Snyder and Sustainability

Snyder has been engaged in Buddhist practice for over 50 years. While much of his political stance is now informed by the religion, Snyder's family has roots in union movements, a fact that shaped his early politics. His grandfather was an organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World,¹⁴ and his mother belonged to a trade union.¹⁵ His father was a union organizer on the Grand Coulee Dam project, and Snyder himself

¹³ Richard Seager, p. 104. Seager details American Buddhists opening a Yonkers bakery that employed the homeless and needy, creating a homeless shelter, and running "street retreats" in rundown areas of New York City.

¹⁴ Bob Blanchard, p. 28.
Barry Hill, p. 118.

became a member of the left-leaning Marine Cooks and Stewards union at 18.¹⁶ As an undergraduate at Reed College, Snyder began practicing sitting meditation.¹⁷ During graduate work at Berkeley, Snyder studied Asian languages and spent summers as a lookout for the U.S. Forest Service.¹⁸ His time in the Bay area was also marked by weekly meetings with Kenneth Rexroth in which they discussed Orientalist matters, from about 1952 to 1955.¹⁹ All the while Snyder was preparing himself seriously, both mentally and physically, for the role of Buddhist practitioner, and so great was his devotion that he was even represented in “yellowface” portraits.²⁰ Because of his intense studies, argues Timothy Gray, Snyder “was cathected as the most convenient (white) vehicle of knowledge. Snyder gave the Beats a ‘safe’ way to grasp Asian knowledge.²¹ In 1956 he travelled to Japan to practice Rinzai Zen, a sojourn that lasted the better part of 12 years. While there, he lived intermittently in the temples of Shokoku-ji and Kaitoku-ji, became a disciple of Zen masters, undertook koan and meditation practice (up to 10 hours per day), and translated and studied Japanese texts.²² Although Snyder self-identifies as a Zen Buddhist, he has explored a variety of

¹⁶ Dana Goodyear, p. 67.

¹⁷ Patrick D. Murphy, p. 5.

¹⁸ Barry Hill, p. 118.

¹⁹ Timothy Gray, p. 531. Gray also notes that Rexroth was rather displeased with Snyder’s friends, especially Ginsberg and Kerouac, “the majority of whom he saw as drunken pretenders in matters of Orientalist knowledge.”

²⁰ *Ibid.* Gray writes of Snyder, “Unlike Kerouac, he was no dilettante, and for many he seemed to embody the mystery of the East. In fact, as San Francisco Renaissance Orientalism hit a fevered pitch, Snyder was subject to a barrage of ‘yellowface’ portraits by those who worshipped him as the West Coast’s homegrown incarnation of Asian culture.” Later (535), Gray shows that Snyder eventually participates in some of the Orientalist jokes about himself, “propagating his own iconography.” Gray notes the similarity to the blackface minstrel tradition. He also highlights the tension caused by Snyder’s too-serious practice: “As Snyder appears in yellowface, he prompts a variety of reactions, from the homoerotic desire of Kerouac, to the white intellectual anxiety of [Lew] Welch, to the xenophobia characteristic of a long line of white West Coast laborers fearful of losing their jobs, to his own slightly amused self-evaluations.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 536. Gray continues, “The only crisis the Beats suffered came when he crossed the Pacific. At that juncture, they were forced to imagine just how ‘Oriental’ their leader had become.”

²² Bob Blanchard, p. 29.
Dana Goodyear, p. 68.

sects, including Soto, Yamabushi, Jodo, and Kegon.²³ With such serious devotion to this practice and his long stay in Japan, Snyder became a vexing figure to the dilettante-ish Beats, as Gray convincingly argues.²⁴

When Snyder returned to the U.S. in the late 1960s, he settled in northern California. Soon after Snyder became a poetic force in the rising “deep ecology” movement. At the birth of green activism Snyder started to be recognized as a serious public intellectual, and the era saw him at many environmental conferences.²⁵ He has been recognized for his work, with several awards including the Pulitzer Prize in 1975 for *Turtle Island*, and the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, in 2008. Despite these prominent awards, Snyder is virtually unknown among a broad audience. Snyder is still actively involved in the ecology movement and advocates bioregionalism, a practice of re-inhabiting a geographical place in ways that promote the true long-term sustainability of the natural habitat. Snyder has put this strategy into action by founding, with his neighbors, the Yuba Watershed Institute. The organization operates a joint management of 3,000 acres of local public timberland, in conjunction with the Bureau of

Barbara Papparazzo, p. 106. Papparazzo notes that Snyder saw many ancient landscape scrolls in the Buddhist temples of Kyoto, during his time in Japan.

²³ Patrick D. Murphy, p. 16.

²⁴ Timothy Gray, p. 534. Gray provides an excellent picture of how Snyder’s practice caused a stir among the Beats and then a good deal of tension when it was realized that he was indeed very serious in pursuing his Asian studies. Gray argues that Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* shows the liberal community’s desire for a multicultural bohemian icon. Gray writes, “Kerouac wants Snyder to find a way to embody the mystery of the East without becoming totally Asian himself. Snyder can only fulfill his mission as semiotic sign of Orientalist fantasy if he straddles the color line his Beat friends have drawn for him” Gray also notes how Ray Smith, protagonist of *Bums*, follows Japhy Ryder’s lead to act as a mountain lookout, “as though Japhy’s finger were pointing the way.” That Kerouac and Smith imitate Snyder and Ryder indicates the extent to which the former took the gesture (“finger pointing the way”) as enlightenment and reified it into a commercial style.

²⁵ Dana Goodyear, p. 72.

Land Management.²⁶ Such actions and statements contrast markedly with the sustainability discourse represented by the mass media and corporate entities.²⁷

Amid all the mass-media discourse of sustainability, ecology, and “greenwashing” of the economy, references to Snyder – who could be rightly considered the poetic voice of ecology – are virtually nonexistent. Snyder has never been rendered mainstream cool – and remains virtually unknown among the broader public -- although he does have his loyal coterie of admirers. In contrast, Kerouac and Ginsberg continue to be seen by the broader public as truly countercultural. That much of the popular discussion on sustainability excludes Snyder implies capitalism’s incessant need for protests that perpetuate and augment the flow of capital. The centrality of the notion of protest to the green movement can be easily compared to that of ethnic captivity voiced by Chow: “In this boundless capacity for moral self-production, -expansion, and -proliferation, ethnic captivity thus transubstantiates, its lines of flight readily morphing – and merging – into global capital’s phantasmagoric flows.”²⁸ Popular sustainability discourse centers on selling things, maintaining current levels of consumption, and even increasing desire for products.²⁹ It’s little wonder that a practice that encourages poverty and non-attachment has not been assimilated into the mainstream, while practices such as increased efficiency that only make it cheaper to consume are valorized. Snyder’s

²⁶ Bob Blanchard, p. 30.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31. Blanchard as well notes the contradictions in sustainability rhetoric even as natural resources are being drained into capitalist economies.

²⁸ Rey Chow, p. 49.

²⁹ Consider much of the discourse and solutions provided for the problem of global warming or skyrocketing petroleum prices. The proposed solutions usually focus on reducing the local cost of consumption, i.e., more-efficient engines, light bulbs, etc. In effect, efficiency gains reduce the cost of consumption, which encourages further consumption, since one can consume more at no greater cost. Such solutions appear rational only at the local level, whereas at the global level these solutions have a multitude of ironic consequences, including exacerbating the very problems they were designed to fix. What is rarely demanded, even by self-proclaimed environmentalists, is a fundamental change in behavior, which is exactly what Snyder proposes.

position is radical enough that it calls into question the foundations of consumer capitalism, making it difficult for a hegemonic representational apparatus to re-work the poet as cool.

It is precisely at this point that Gary Snyder makes an intervention with Buddhist practice, emphasizing non-attachment as a means to combat personal craving (and so capitalism) and decrease imperialism, which to him is also figured as mankind's depredations of the natural environment.³⁰ As Allan Johnston notes, the Marxist critique is, for Snyder, deficient because of its anthropocentric focus and its neglect of those "most ruthlessly exploited classes: / Animals, trees, water, air, grasses."³¹ Perhaps not surprisingly, then, in some works Snyder yokes capitalism and Marxism together into the same tradition, a point that I will discuss later.

Endless Streams and Mountains

The volume *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, which is considered Snyder's magnum opus and his contribution to the modernist long poem, opens with the poem *Endless Streams and Mountains*. But Snyder prefaces the entire book with an epigraph from Dōgen, the 13th century founder of Soto Zen and the author of the *Treasury of the True Law* (or *Shōbōgenzō*), who writes:

If you say the painting is not real, then the material phenomenal world is not real, the Dharma is not real. Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but a painting.³²

Dōgen had a profound effect on Snyder as he was composing the book over its extended drafting, especially due to his *Mountains and Rivers Sutra*, according to

³⁰ Allan Johnston also sees Snyder focusing on desire as a key driver of "modern economic systems." He suggests that Snyder is looking for "more appreciative, less exploitative" interaction. Allan Johnston, p. 121.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122. The quote comes from Snyder's "Revolution in the Revolution in the Revolution."

³² Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* p. ix.

Murphy.³³ Dōgen's comment on the indistinguishability of art and life foregrounds much of what the book as a whole discusses, but especially what Snyder does in *Endless Streams and Mountains*. Here Snyder eschews the easy name-dropping of Buddhism into the text; he instead opts to show the keen-eyed observation that is developed through Buddhist practice and that allows the development of non-attachment and egolessness. Snyder relates typical Buddhist themes, in particular the theme of interdependence, which takes the form here of the indistinguishability of art and life, the observer and the observed.³⁴

Snyder begins the poem by narrating very closely a scene of nature along the riverside, and specifically foregrounds the act of observation, albeit subtly. He writes,

Clearing the mind and sliding in
to that created space,
a web of waters streaming over rocks,
air misty but not raining,
seeing this land from a boat on a lake
or a broad slow river,
coasting by.

The path comes down along a lowland stream
slips behind boulders and leafy hardwoods,
reappears in a pine grove.³⁵

Snyder does give subtle clues that there is an observer watching the whole scene. For example, the narrator writes that he is “clearing the mind and sliding into that created space,” which suggests that the viewer is preparing to observe the scene, much as a

³³ Patrick D. Murphy, p. 178. Murphy also notes the importance of Japanese Nō drama as an organizing principle for the book.

³⁴ Peter Hershock, *Buddhism in the Public Sphere* p. 16. Hershock writes: “It is among the key teachings of early Buddhism ... that all things arise interdependently. It cannot be, then, that consciousness is conditioned by sense organs and sense objects without in some degree also conditioning them. And while the Buddhist teaching of interdependence does not insist that this mutual conditioning is always and invariably symmetrical, it does rule out drawing sharp ontological boundaries among the relational foci ... that are comprised in the total environmental situation. It also means that *degraded environments are necessarily correlated with degraded patterns of consciousness.*” (author's emphasis)

³⁵ Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* p. 5.

meditator begins practice. Similarly, the observer is not quite aware of his observational position; perhaps he watches from a boat. Snyder also provides a seemingly observer-less perspective through more subtle techniques such as using verbals (i.e., gerund-like constructions that instantiate an action, but without a subject) instead of typical subject-verb conjugations. Such a strategy allows Snyder to elide the subject, and in effect, suggest that events are simply happening, a point that Norton also makes.³⁶ For example, the poet uses “clearing,” “sliding,” and “seeing,” without anyone clearly performing the action.

But soon even this tenuously present observer disappears from the poem, and it's as if the "created space" narrates itself, for instance, in the second stanza. The elements begin to live as themselves, with the path showing movement or implied movement (“comes,” “slips,” “reappears,”), a trait of Snyder’s poetry that Barry Hill describes as “things being there in their own right,” which is a function of Snyder’s long-standing “ability to erase his ego.”³⁷ Takahashi points to Snyder’s deep involvement with the wilderness, “until there is no border between self and the wilderness.”³⁸ Kern too notes the ability of the speaker to subordinate himself to what he observes.³⁹ Indeed, the passive observation embodied in these first stanzas evokes typical Buddhist tropes of rivers as metaphors for life and life “coasting by.” Through this instability of the observer and his subsequent absorption into the scene being narrated, Snyder evokes

³⁶ Jody Norton, p. 43. Norton states: “Elision of the subject is often accompanied by a replacement of verbs with verbals. Use of these two forms of ellipsis enables the poet to present activity not in terms of an ‘I’ who takes action but simply as action that is taking place.”

³⁷ Barry Hill, p. 123.

³⁸ Ayako Takahashi, p. 320.

³⁹ Robert Kern, “Mountains and Rivers Are Us,” p. 128.

a Buddhist experience without calling it such by immersing the audience in the keen observation too.

Snyder evokes a spatial dimension in this poem that is implicitly Buddhist. The speaker's keen observation creates a nondual space in which observed phenomena do not rely on the observer (i.e., there is relational otherness, as I'll discuss later). Through penetrating observation the Buddhist idea of emptiness is discovered, a realization that creates the space for all action to occur. As a result, the path suddenly animates itself, but it's described as simply a path, a technique of generalized imagery, that de-emphasizes intellection – a key Buddhist stance, Norton argues.⁴⁰ Such generalized imagery also allows the reader to avoid being caught by details and so remain in the flow of the scroll.

Anthony Hunt notes the importance of space to the Sung Dynasty landscape model from which Snyder draws his poem and the original's specifically Buddhist dimension. He argues that "Snyder's concept of space always includes the possibility of Buddhist enlightenment."⁴¹ The epigraph from Dōgen also invokes the importance of this spatial dimension to the poem, in which space, whether conventionally real or representational, is always a location of potential enlightenment. Therefore, Snyder attempts to rework the explicitly Buddhist space of the landscape scroll into the form of the poem, for example, through ambiguities and verbals that gesture toward the nondual world beyond the speaker's language. As the poem develops and the mind is cleared, the various represented spaces lose their neat demarcations and begin to merge and interpenetrate. This relative erasure of the narrator participates in what R.J.

⁴⁰ Jody Norton, p. 46.

⁴¹ Anthony Hunt, p. 21.

Schork calls Snyder's "implicit criticism of anthropocentrism,"⁴² and it contrasts sharply with the constantly re-instantiated ego in the episode of Emerson's transparent eyeball, which I discussed in Chapter 2.

These first two stanzas begin to lay out Snyder's claim of the indistinguishability of art and life, the observer and observed. Snyder spends the first half of the poem laying out the scene that begins above, and aside from showing the observer as he settles in, the author never breaks the aesthetic distance. Then, about halfway through the poem Snyder breaks that distance by saying that "the watching boat has floated off the page."⁴³ Here, Snyder uses the boat to symbolize the observer, who has just finished verbalizing the painting on an ancient Chinese scroll. Only after the narrator has finished relating this highly realistic scene does he mention that the scene he has just described appears as a painting upon a scroll, that it is, in fact, not a real scene. Rather, this ekphrastic poem details a 12th century ink-on-silk hand scroll from the Sung Dynasty, which is named *Streams and Mountains Without End (Ch'i-shan wu-chin)*.⁴⁴ This subterfuge underscores the Buddhist theme of the indistinguishability of art and life.

Snyder critiques the typical privileging of "real" experience over that which has been created by humans. So long as we believed the scene was real, we treated the scene with a certain respect that we would not accord to merely a fiction. Therefore, Snyder plays with the Westerner's expectations of what constitutes the real, and calls

⁴² R.J. Schork, p. 173. Schork notes Snyder's tendency to reply to high modernists such as Pound and Eliot, but he argues the poet takes on the personae of nonhuman forms so as to criticize anthropocentrism.

⁴³ Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* p. 6.

⁴⁴ Barbara Papparazzo, p. 107. Papparazzo explains the origin of the poem. Also, the Chinese translation of "mountains and rivers" is *landscape*.

into question our valuing of one set of “real” experiences over another. Such play, for Snyder, ultimately shows these distinctions to be impermanent, a key element of the poet’s work.⁴⁵ Kern too suggests that Snyder is concerned with the interdependence of art and nature, “the potential equivalence or continuity between looking at a painting and being in the world.”⁴⁶ Later in the poem Snyder will re-affirm this realization of interdependence with another experience, essentially the final epiphany of the poem.

In the second section of the poem, after he has revealed that the first section is a painting upon a scroll, Snyder again traces the interplay of the observer and the observed. In particular, he stresses how the observer is an active component in making meaning out of that which is observed, in this case, the scroll. He suggests that what seems objective is never just given, but rather the observer actively contributes to the experience. To illustrate this interplay, Snyder details some of the commentary that appears on the scroll:

—Wang Wen-wei saw this at the mayor's house in Ho-tung town, year 1205.
Wrote at the end of it,

‘The Fashioner of Things
has no original intentions
Mountains and rivers
are spirit, condensed.’

‘...Who has come up with
These miraculous forests and springs?
Pale ink
On fine white silk.’

Later that month someone name Li Hui added,

‘...Most people can get along with the noise of dogs

⁴⁵ David Rivard, p. 6. Rivard argues: “A Snyder poem is a way of experiencing the impermanence of all things and thoughts.”

Barbara Papparazzo, pp. 107, 109.

⁴⁶ Robert Kern, “Mountains and Rivers Are Us,” p. 128.

and chickens;
Everybody cheerful in these peaceful times.
But I – why are my tastes so odd?
I love the company of streams and boulders⁴⁷

In a move that would seem blasphemous to the Western art world, those owners who have succeeded the original artist have affixed their names to the text, a tradition in East Asian landscape painting.⁴⁸

This emphasis on the commentary illuminates the relational aspect to the work of art in which the observer creates meaning as well as the artist. These commentaries show a work of art that is living, rather than one that has been reified and fetishized into a priceless commodity, a point which is particularly salient, since Snyder later reveals that he is in the Cleveland Art Museum. Here, observers have applied their own comments on the work of art, which further develops the piece. The comments have become an integral piece of the critical and experiential framework that actually comprise the work. Through this structure, Snyder shows the Buddhist theme of the indistinguishability of art and life, observer and observed.

Snyder also explores similar Buddhist themes in the content of the commentaries, which appear like koans, without explicitly naming them Buddhist. For example, the first commentator asks, "...Who has come up with/ These miraculous forests and springs?/ Pale ink/ On fine white silk."⁴⁹ In this commentary Snyder equates the world of art and the real world by comparing the forests and springs with the ink on the silk canvas, again suggesting the indistinguishability of real and created space. Snyder implies that, like the artwork, the real world has some author, but the

⁴⁷ Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* p. 7.

⁴⁸ Barbara Papparazzo, p. 111. Papparazzo explains the tradition.

⁴⁹ Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* p. 7.

author is absent, leaving the observers to determine the significance of their experience as they work through the artwork. Yet, this situation is different from typical postmodern and previous interpretive methodologies, in that the piece's meaning does not inhere exclusively in either the work itself or in the observer. Rather, it is the relational expression of some middle way between these poles that determines meaning.⁵⁰ The commentator notes that "the Fashioner of Things has no original intentions," and thus, the value of experience is never given, but rather worked out among the participants (the artwork, the artist, and the observers) – a typical Buddhist worldview that is based on the principle of the emptiness of all things.⁵¹ Whether the "mountains and rivers" are the real ones or those painted on the canvas, they're the spirit of each individual who observes the artwork closely.

Snyder's inclusion of the second commentary provides a new facet of the artwork. While the first commentary is more explicitly spiritual, the second seems to be focused on the material, especially that which seems banal or lower class. On this piece of artwork hanging in a museum, a sacred place for high culture, the second observer notes the people are satisfied with the noise of animals. The speaker notes his "odd" tastes, and his love for "the company of streams and boulders."⁵² Yet, this observer is not looking at streams and boulders but at representations of them. Again, Snyder is toying with the typical Western division of art and life. Also, with this

⁵⁰ Peter Herschok, *Reinventing the Wheel* p 233. Or as Herschok puts it: "[While] Buddhist hermeneutics allows the importance of authorial intent, of coherence analysis, and comparative criticism in determining what a problematic text or event means, the final resort is always and explicitly practice or conduct itself."

⁵¹ Peter Herschok, *Buddhism in the Public Sphere* p. 7. Herschok writes: "In Buddhist contexts, it is understood that all things should be seen as arising interdependently, but also without any fixed nature, in an ongoing fashion, with troubling liabilities in any particular situation, and in consonance with always revisable patterns among the intentions and values of all beings arising therein."

⁵² Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* p. 7.

commentary, Snyder is displaying the incongruity of such proletarian tastes in an American art museum, which is a symbol of the commodification of high culture.

Snyder explores this commodification of art particularly by citing commentaries on the scroll that note the history of its observation. So, the comments began in 1205 with Wang Wen-wei. "Later that month" another comment appears from Li Hui. At some indeterminate point later T'ien Hsieh of Wei-lo added a commentary, which was followed in 1332 by a note from Chih-shun. "In the mid-seventeenth century one Wang To had a look at it" and left his trace.⁵³ Snyder clearly shows the piece of art as a living text, in which the observer and the creator have key parts to play in the interpretation. Toward the end of the scroll the text mentions a significant change in the development of this document: "The great Ch'ing dynasty collector Liang Ch'ing-piao owned it, but didn't write on it or cover it with seals."⁵⁴ This change signifies the key alteration in the history of the work. Significantly, it's a collector, presumably someone who sees art as an investment, who begins the process of commodification. The scroll notes, "From him it went into the Imperial collection down to the early twentieth century. Chang Ta-ch'ien sold it in 1949. Now it's at the Cleveland Art Museum, which sits on a rise that looks out toward the waters of Lake Erie."⁵⁵ By including these supplementary comments from the scroll, Snyder shows how humans reify that which they revere. Significantly, it's the Chinese who begin this process; Snyder does not stereotype them as being innocent of the abstraction of relationships into objects that forms the basis of commodification. But neither does America escape a critical comment, since the scroll is housed in the Cleveland museum, therefore perpetuating the process of commodification.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Snyder implicitly critiques this abstraction of the scroll into *objet d'art* by juxtaposing it against his understanding of fluidly interacting relationality, and he suggests how the perception of commodification itself helps enables that process. In the third and final section of the poem, he shows that, regardless of the commodified state of the artwork, the motifs represented in it continue beyond the bounds set by those minds intent on reification. Snyder even hints as much in the final clause of the second section, when he mentions “the waters of Lake Erie” that wait outside the walls of the museum. The water comes to symbolize the continuation of the scroll beyond the strictures of the art museum. Unlike land, which can be settled, water is unstable. Indeed, in its formlessness and in the way that it is shaped to whatever container holds it, the water represents ineffable and formless truth, continuing a traditional Buddhist representation of water. According to Snyder, the proper understanding and enduring nature of existence lead to freedom from objectifying phenomena.

Snyder explores the motif of water as formless truth in the third and final sections, in which all material elements in the scroll – and thus the real world – take on characteristics of water. As important is the interplay between the water elements and the normally stationary objects, such as boulders and mountains. The narrator describes the scroll once again:

Step back and gaze again at the land:
it rises and subsides –

Ravines and cliffs like waves of blowing leaves –
stamp the foot, walk with it clap! turn,
the creeks come in, ah!
strained through boulders,
mountains walking on the water,
water ripples every hill.

-- I walk out of the museum -- low gray clouds over the lake -- chill march breeze.⁵⁶

The most stable element, the land, takes on wave forms by rising and subsiding, while the ravines and cliffs embody waveforms more explicitly, albeit of leaves. To highlight the important interdependence and indistinguishability of all elements – both in the painting and in real life -- Snyder shows the commingling of the water and the land. While boulders strain the creeks, mountains walk on water and “water ripples every hill.” This interpenetration echoes a key motif in traditional Buddhist literature, namely that mountains depend on rivers, while rivers depend on mountains. Yet these spaces become ultimately nondistinct. Hunt argues that Snyder incorporates elements of Noh drama (“walk with it clap!” and “ah!”),⁵⁷ which highlight the increasing activity of the speaker as he leaves the trance-like state and emerges into everyday consciousness. Likewise, nature appears freshly alive and active, both in the scroll and outside, marking a confluence of life in the various elements of the scene (speaker, scroll, “real” nature).

To further highlight the theme of interdependence, Snyder shows the narrator exiting the museum, and it's as if he is entering the same world represented on the scroll, though the experience differs from that represented on the scroll. Regardless of the boundaries of the museum, the water continues, although in a different, real form. After witnessing both the created and real space of nature, the narrator seems inspired to begin his own creation. The narrator channels the spirit of the water, calling on the "sunken rivers" to "come again/ stand by the wall and tell their tale."⁵⁸ Then, to once again stress the sameness of real and created space, the narrator mentions the process

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Anthony Hunt, p. 12.

⁵⁸ Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* p. 9.

of painting or calligraphy and ties it explicitly to the experience of the real space: "Walk the path, sit the rains,/ grind the ink, wet the brush, unroll the/ broad white space:/ lead out and tip/ the moist black line."⁵⁹ Snyder concludes the poem thus: "*Streams and mountains never stay the same*" [author's emphasis].⁶⁰ Snyder suggests that, although the streams and mountains maintain continuity through the various boundaries of life, including those of the mind, they are altered in the process and are continually in flux. Wendell Berry refers to such constant flux as travel, and notes that the motif recurs throughout the poem, even in the origins of the scroll which has moved from China to the Cleveland art museum and even then into the mind.⁶¹ Here Snyder reiterates the Buddhist themes of impermanence and emptiness, doctrines that lend themselves to the avoidance of reification, and calls into question the given notion of reality as more or less fixed.⁶²

While I've argued that Snyder invokes "Buddhist" seeing in the above poem – through the relinquishment of the ego – that intends to allow things to be as they are and to speak for themselves, the representation of reality is always mediated through an author. (And the language itself is yet another medium.) David Barnhill rightly argues that Snyder's poetry involves much more than just "speaking about nature or stating one's perception of nature, which tends to treat nature as mere object. Snyder insists that nature is subject."⁶³ As such, Snyder intends to function as a shaman, rendering the voices of the natural world, rather than simply speaking for it. This process has an

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Wendell Berry, p. 149.

⁶² Peter Herschok, *Buddhism in the Public Sphere* p. 7.

⁶³ David Barnhill, p. 124.

explicitly political dimension for Snyder, since nature has no representative in government. Snyder writes:

From the standpoint of the 70's and 80's it serves us well to consider how we relate to those objects we take to be outside ourselves – non-human, non-intelligent, or whatever. If we are to treat the world (and ourselves) better, we must first ask, how can we know what the non-human realm is truly like? And second, if one gets a glimmer of an answer from there – how can it be translated, communicated, to the realm of mankind with its courts, congress, and zoning laws? How do we listen? How do we speak?⁶⁴

Such shamanism, Dean argues, reduces the individualism of the speaker “in favor of a nonanthropocentric web of relations.”⁶⁵ Yet, regardless of how pure Snyder's intentions are, such a project is fraught with concerns. How does Snyder have (or take) the ability to speak for others or through others, even those others who are unable to speak, for instance, the natural world? Much criticism of Snyder's method has arisen on this point, especially from feminist and Native American camps, who feel that their voices are being wrongly appropriated.⁶⁶

Snyder has often been attacked for his use of women in fairly stereotypical ways. Susan Kalter argues that “despite [the] predominance of dialogism in his poetry, Snyder's very techniques push toward a monology by seeking to control the inner speech of his audience.” She asserts that Snyder's inclusion of various other (even non-human) voices discloses Snyder's “will to unity” and that the author has a secret desire to control.⁶⁷ Kalter points to Snyder's oft-criticized and “self-restricting” depictions of women as well.⁶⁸ Tim Dean also sees the issue in a similar light and discusses how Snyder genders the land as “holy mother and the feminine Muse.” Dean thinks that

⁶⁴ Gary Snyder, *The Old Ways* p. 9.

⁶⁵ Tim Dean, “The Other's Voice,” p. 482.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 489 – 490.

⁶⁷ Susan Kalter, p. 13.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Snyder's project ultimately elides the question of gender and suggests that, although he provides some radically progressive elements, Snyder "simply repeats other patriarchal values and structures of inequity exemplified by that dominant culture."⁶⁹ I'll return to this point when I discuss a few of Snyder's essays, which make more obviously dubious claims on gender.

For some of his other poems that do not necessarily take the approach of *Endless Streams and Mountains*, Snyder has been accused of selectively appropriating Buddhist and Native American practices, a borrowing that, Bron Taylor suggests, "presages" the appropriation done by the Deep Ecology movement.⁷⁰ Similarly, Leslie Marmon Silko, Wendy Rose, and Geary Hobson take exception to *whiteshamanism*, a practice of white writers appropriating Native American culture and through its use claiming that their writing has a healing function, an argument that points squarely at Snyder. They insist that such writers are inauthentic and demand that these writers rely on their own traditions and culture, rather than stealing that of Native Americans.⁷¹

Yet, while these critics assert that Snyder should use his own culture, they tend to essentialize Native American culture as fixed and impossible to understand or experience for those who are not Native Americans. Such a defense of culture seems to perpetuate the representation of ethnic culture as one that can never be (or at least should never be) meaningfully appropriated. In response to such criticisms, Snyder

⁶⁹ Tim Dean, "The Other's Voice," pp. 178-179.

⁷⁰ Bron Taylor, p. 185. Taylor ultimately takes a moderate position on the appropriation of cultural practices, noting that some exchange can be good and that mixing is an inherent part of religious exchange.

⁷¹ David Barnhill, p. 117.

Tim Dean, "The Other's Voice," pp. 489-490. Dean explains the positions of Silko and Hobson.

seems to make a universalist gesture, but one that nevertheless seems rooted in the specificity of place. Snyder defends himself thus:

Ultimately we can all lay claim to the term native and the songs and dances, the beads and feathers, and the profound responsibilities that go with it. We are all indigenous to this planet...Part of that responsibility is to choose a place. To restore the land one must live and work in a place. To work in a place is to work with others. People who work together in a place become a community, and community, in time, grows a culture. To work on behalf of the wild is to restore culture.⁷²

Snyder asserts that practices such as shamanism are a longstanding cultural expression, a fact that precludes any one group from claiming priority on them. Instead, Snyder focuses on the relational nature of place, in which community must develop.

Turning to Bakhtin's notion of "another," which neither denies difference or assumes total difference, Barnhill argues that Snyder appreciates the practices of "another" that can add functional value and that he has a responsibility to learn from such practices.⁷³ From this perspective, Barnhill suggests, shamanism is a form of relating to nature, "giving it a 'subject position' and considering it fully alive."⁷⁴ Such a re-orientation requires the subordination of the ego and has the possibility to transform cultural interactions from merely binary exchange into virtuosic relationships; Dean argues similarly.⁷⁵ Barnhill cites Patrick Murphy, who argues for "the feminist project of developing another mode of human behavior, one founded on relational otherness rather than alienational otherness, an affirmative praxis necessary in this time of negative critique." Barnhill immediately comments: "The affirmation of such a

⁷² Freeman House, p. 234.

⁷³ David Barnhill, pp. 125, 127.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁷⁵ Tim Dean, "The Other's Voice," p. 473. Dean writes: "We could interpret speaking for the community as entailing a dramatic subordination of the poet's or shaman's individuality to the collective well-being – a form of self-dispossession rather than self-aggrandizement." Later (491), Dean writes that Snyder's poetry "encourages a kind of self-dispossession that comes with opening the self to otherness, particularly the radical otherness of the nonhuman."

transformational praxis is not limited to feminism, and it has been central to Snyder from the beginning."⁷⁶ Yet, even if it has been central, as I believe it has, and derived from his Buddhist experience, that need not mean that Snyder is applying such a practice evenly. As Kalter suggests, Snyder has a tendency to create stereotypical depictions of the feminine,⁷⁷ especially in his essays.

Some critics point to Snyder as a kind of neo-Romanticist following in the footsteps of Emerson. Nick Selby, for instance, suggests that Snyder's poetry "is deeply rooted in Romantic notions of the sublime "⁷⁸ Selby suggests that *Mountains and Rivers* enacts "a romantic model of individualism, the outsider who is at one with nature"⁷⁹ and that the poet creates "a model of romantic subjectivity that privileges the gaze of a superior spectator."⁸⁰ For him, *Mountains and Rivers* becomes a recapitulation of Emerson's totalizing gaze, notably in the "transparent eyeball" scene from Emerson's *Nature* essay, which creates a model of all-encompassing nationalism.

Yet, as I have suggested through a reading of that scene in Chapter 2, Emerson consistently rearticulates his self-identity even as he claims to have erased himself. Emerson's "I" (and eye) is always present, and his gaze becomes exactly what Selby and others have asserted -- the spectatorship of the subsuming self. Emerson's gaze contrasts sharply with Snyder's keen observation. As suggested by the close reading of *Endless Streams and Mountains* above, Snyder's observation becomes not a model for colonialist explorations, but rather a vehicle for appreciation, egolessness, and letting-

⁷⁶ David Barnhill, p. 136.

⁷⁷ Susan Kalter, p. 41.

⁷⁸ Nick Selby, p. 42.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

be, or enlightenment.⁸¹ Selby, oddly, even admits that the identity of Snyder's observer is unstable.⁸² Murphy too sees Snyder's vision as discontinuous and distinct from the Romantics and hardly a longing after unity with nature.⁸³ To the extent that his spectator acts as "one with nature," it is a function of his focused observation that demonstrates the ultimately illusory, even if temporarily and conventionally real, nature of the boundaries of self and other, as Ayako Takahashi and Jody Norton similarly argue.⁸⁴ Kern makes the same point, using Snyder's poem *The Old Dutch Woman* as an example,⁸⁵ and rightly suggests that Snyder's work can be seen as "a reversal and displacement of Emerson's sense of nature."⁸⁶

Moreover, unlike Romantic representations of the sublime, Snyder's observer is not struck dumb or awed into worshipful silence at the enormity of nature. Instead, through careful attention Snyder's observer discovers a place -- neither superior nor inferior -- within nature that mankind can occupy while letting nature be. Letting nature be also entails not simply personifying nature in the Romantic vein but letting it voice

⁸¹ Jody Norton, p. 47. Norton argues similarly: "The elision of a subject through whose eyes and in whose terms nature is perceived ... prevents the suggestion of an anthropocentric, dominant/subordinate relation between man and nature."

⁸² Nick Selby, p. 47.

⁸³ Patrick D. Murphy, pp. 144-145. Murphy emphasizes the differences in the projects of Thoreau and Snyder: Whereas Thoreau focused on being away from mankind in order to be reunited with something missing (nature), Snyder really discusses "people conducting practice in place" and is not at all concerned with escaping to some Edenic ideal.

⁸⁴ Ayako Takahashi, p. 318. Takahashi writes: "Snyder, as the yogin and poet, draws upon nature as an *other* without discriminating from the *self*." Elsewhere, Takahashi notes: "Snyder is deeply involved with the wilderness, until there is no border between itself and the wilderness" (320). This is simply not Emerson's romanticism.

Jody Norton, p. 43. Norton declares: "By eliding the solitary speaker as well as the One in many of his poems, Snyder follows Buddhism in tacitly asserting the illusory nature of the self."

⁸⁵ Robert Kern, *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* p. 227. Kern discusses the interplay of masculine and feminine elements in the poem, suggesting "not appropriation or domestication -- neither imposition of the self upon the other, nor, for that matter, surrender of the self to the other -- but an acknowledgment of difference as well as a mutual interplay between self and other."

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 260. Later (266), Kern points out that Snyder's book *No Nature* directly and playfully references and contradicts Emerson's book of essays *Nature*. I'd add that Snyder's title also invokes Buddhism as well.

itself as much as possible – a move that Snyder ultimately makes. Dean mentions the possible pitfall of Snyder’s poetry engaging nature as merely another aspect of the human, but argues that Snyder avoids this step through the impersonality of his voice.⁸⁷ As Selby notes, there’s an irony in using language to create an “unmediated ... poetic space,”⁸⁸ but that’s merely a more recent example of the finger pointing toward the moon. Snyder is not just aestheticizing nature; he’s issuing a call to action – observe and appreciate.

Buddhism and Protest

To substantiate his critique of capitalist America, Snyder turned to Buddhism, which he felt offered a healthy and sustainable model on which to base American culture. Although Snyder does sometimes employ the trope of the Protestant ethnic as I’ve described it in Chapter 2, he shows and explains the value of Buddhist practice in undermining some of the fundamentals of capitalism, through a practice that seeks to undo the self/other binary. Therefore, Snyder’s position is not reducible to merely another example of the deployment of the Protestant ethnic, as is often the case with Kerouac and Ginsberg. For example, in the essay *Buddhism and the Coming Revolution* Snyder valorizes “the joyous and voluntary poverty of Buddhism.”⁸⁹ This experience of poverty comes directly out of the practice of meditation, which teaches non-attachment. By practicing non-attachment, Snyder suggests, we appreciate that which we already have and so do not crave more. Appreciation entails not an abdication of material goods, but rather a re-orientation of conduct such that the ongoing attachment to goods becomes unnecessary – a direction rather than a position. In

⁸⁷ Tim Dean, “The Other’s Voice,” p. 482.

⁸⁸ Nick Selby, p. 58.

⁸⁹ Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold* p. 92.

response, Weber might argue, as he similarly does in *Protestant Ethic*, that such poverty leads to surplus capital, which can then be used for the further expansion of the economy.⁹⁰ However, Weber's point misses the mark: capitalism is not driven by a supply of capital but rather by increasing desire or demand for myriad new products. As Buddhism would argue, such desire is mitigated or eliminated by active appreciation or keen observation,⁹¹ which Snyder duly attempts in much of his poetry.

That Snyder proposes a practice inimical to sustained increases in consumerism is borne out by his lack of popularity, even today. While Dana Goodyear suggests that the literary establishment just doesn't understand Snyder, despite his slow emergence into the university classroom, at Harvard, for instance, Snyder is more resigned to the fact. He notes: "There are people who just don't want to deal with it...A certain percentage of my poetry requires for a scholar to become more acquainted with Native American and East Asian thinking. It is considered somewhat marginal to mainstream America. Fair enough."⁹² Kern too mentions Snyder's "discursive pluralism" – the practice of including eclectic source material and "discourse sometimes regarded as inappropriate or even alien to poetry."⁹³ Yet Snyder is well aware of how his categorization as nature poet marginalizes him from traditional academic study, even as he was a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets as of 2008. He says: "Being called a nature poet is like being called a woman poet, as if it were a lower grade of

⁹⁰ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

⁹¹ Peter Herschok, *Reinventing the Wheel* p. 181. Herschok writes: "An openness to creatively rich relationships of mutual contribution depends on shifting our awareness from an orientation toward control to that of appreciation. In the absence of such a shift, our relationship with things eventually comes down to equally momentary instances of use and (either permanent or temporary) dismissal."

⁹² Cited in Dana Goodyear, p. 73.

⁹³ Robert Kern, *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* p. 249.

writing, and one based in romanticism.”⁹⁴ Such categorization has thus, in some sense, cut Snyder off from the larger body of canonical work that is more properly called Literature and that is, therefore, worthy of study regardless of authorship.

The Market

Although Snyder’s critique of the capitalist order in *Endless Streams and Mountains* eschews the easy denunciations of Ginsberg and Kerouac, it is nonetheless more effective for the practice. Another poem in *Mountains and Rivers Without End* illustrates just such concern in much more openly critical terms. In the poem *The Market*, Snyder highlights the markets of five different cities, in order to detail their destructiveness and depravity. In the process, the market comes to symbolize, much as it does in typical economic parlance, the larger capitalist system. Indeed, the word *market*, through metonymy, comes to mean not just the city’s market, but the city itself – a move that recapitulates the capitalist’s nomenclature for the urban space. In this sense, it is the city, rather than a panoply of goods, that is being sold. Snyder begins with two American cities, whose markets appear relatively innocuous, before moving on to describe markets in Saigon, Kathmandu, and Varanasi (also known as Benares). The progression from the tidy and even glamorous markets of San Francisco and Seattle and on to that of Varanasi marks a descent into the chaos of the human and natural world, and Snyder suggests how the brutishness implied by capitalism is mystified by a façade of glamour in America. In particular, Snyder criticizes the power of capitalism to equate all products through the system of exchange value, since this system levels the natural diversity of the world into a chaos of mere economic equivalencies.

⁹⁴ Dana Goodyear, p. 73. Goodyear cites Lawrence Buell at Harvard University as a prominent critic who has begun to teach Snyder as part of the emerging field of eco-literature.

Snyder begins the poem in the United States, where the market of San Francisco sees "John Muir up before dawn/ packing pears in the best boxes/ beat out the others -- to Market/ the Crystal Palace."⁹⁵ Snyder's use of Muir operates ironically; as a noted opponent of capitalism and proponent of environmental conservation, Muir sought to avoid capitalist profiteering on nature. Yet, here Muir functions as a leading retailer in, a Snyder pun, a capitalized "Market." Snyder structures the phrasing "beat out the others -- to Market/ the Crystal Palace" to offer a dual valence: the word *Market* can act as either a noun or verb. First, as a known, the Crystal Palace functions as the specific incarnation of the market. In the second sense, it's as if Muir himself is marketing the Crystal Palace, making it – and by extension, the entire process of consumerism -- more acceptable. The ironic appearance of Muir underscores a common representation of the capitalist marketplace as inherently natural as well as tremendously pure, clean, and even glamorous, as evidenced by Snyder's use of the phrase "Crystal Palace." The original Crystal Palace was constructed in London to house The Great Exhibition of 1851, which showcased the products and technologies of the world. San Francisco also had its own Crystal Palace, which housed a variety of merchants, but the repetition of the image suggests how the U.S. has taken over the role of dominant hegemonic power from the British. With its images of the palace and "the best boxes," the market of San Francisco appears neat and tidy, especially in contrast to subsequent markets.

In the next market, that of Seattle, the glitz of San Francisco seems to be erased and replaced with what is the first in a series of problems. The narrator tells the story of when he was bringing home "Guernsey milk" by bike and "broke all nine bottles."⁹⁶ He

⁹⁵ Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* p. 47.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

notes how much he paid, "ten cents a quart," in order to contrast the current situation with "when we had cows."⁹⁷ The narrator's family turned to the market for basic subsistence needs only after their own cows became unable to lactate, as evidenced by the lines "one cow once/ lay with milk fever."⁹⁸ The narrator and his family seem to be implicated in the process of market development, since milk fever is preventable with proper diet. Their inattention to the requirements of their environment, namely their cows, necessitates a turn to the market and its subsequent commodification of all objects. Associated with this market development is ecological decline, as the family attempts to extract more milk than the cow is able to produce, leading to its milk fever. Here Snyder suggests the process of karma, in which inattention is succeeded by a situation in which resources are only impoverished further, and therefore leads to further inattention in a cycle ad infinitum. Indeed, Buddhism scholar Peter Hershock argues that greater reliance on markets signals the impoverishment of dramatic resources to cope with a troubling situation. Hershock posits that the market instantiates lack or wanting,⁹⁹ which seems to be evidenced in the poem by the nine broken bottles.

The poem proceeds to Saigon, in which Snyder produces his strongest critique of capitalism. Snyder critiques the power of capitalism to level all objects into a relationship of exchange value. This process leads to a system in which even the environment and humans are transformed into objects that can be traded. As Snyder is describing the process of people going to market in Saigon, he lays out a series of exchanges that enable the market: "Valley thatch houses/ palmgroves for hedges/ ricefield and thrasher/ to white rice/ dongs and piastre/ to market, the/ changes, how

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Peter Hershock, *Buddhism in the Public Sphere* pp72-73.

much/ is our change.”¹⁰⁰ These lines describe the components or inputs of the marketplace, and Snyder makes interesting use of double entendres to highlight his point. While the field and thrasher are transformed to white rice, the money – dongs and piastre – head to market. The word *dong* can symbolize a currency as well as a minority people of Vietnam, suggesting exactly the type of commodification that Snyder critiques. Moreover, the word *dong* operates as slang for *penis*, implying further the commodification of bodies in the process of production. It’s as if the procreative power of humans has been subjugated to market forces. Even the phrase “palmgroves for hedges” offers an economic valence: the hedges might be a border around a property or a strategic move to diversify products, that is, palmgroves as a supplement to rice. Snyder also puns on the word *change* as both money and personal development, challenging assumptions about the efficacy of exchange as a means of changing our selves. Through these double entendres Snyder shows how the environment and humans have been objectified into tradable products. Using a colon, Snyder finishes with the question of change, which he answers more directly in the section on Kathmandu.

In the fourth section of the work, the market of Kathmandu, Snyder shows the sheer absurdity and chaos of an economic system that equates all products and objects through exchange value. He brings out the complexity of such a situation and the human inability to understand the exchange value of money. Snyder writes,

Seventy-five feet hoed roads equals
one hour explaining power steering
equals two big crayfish =
all the buttermilk you can drink
= twelve pounds cauliflower

¹⁰⁰ Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* p. 48.

[...]
= a lay in Naples = beef
= lamb ribs = Patna
long grain rice, 8 pounds
[...]
= piecing off beggars two weeks
[...]
= a christmas tree = a taxi ride
carrots, daikon, eggplant, green peppers
oregano white goat cheese
= a fresh-eyed bonito, live clams
a swordfish
a salmon
a handful of silvery smelt in the pocket.¹⁰¹

Snyder lays out myriad products in equivalency, suggesting how the capitalist system equates any type of product or object through the exchange value of money. Snyder interlinks work, such as hoeing or explaining power steering, with food, sex, and natural life. In effect, Snyder produces a kind of global network in which everything can be equated, even the word *equals*, which seems to readily morph into its symbolic equivalent.

By this process of equivalence, both the human world and the natural world are commodified. Bodies become labor and products, as exemplified by the phrase "a lay in Naples," which represents the literal prostitution of humans to the system of commodification. Through a line break that separates Patna from its most famous product, rice, Snyder even suggests that the city of Patna, rather than its product, is up for sale. Here, the metonymic use of Patna further symbolizes the process of equivalence that the market brings. Similarly, the natural world in the form of fruits, vegetables, and fish takes on a functional economic equivalence, and Snyder is quick to explain, in the example of "fresh-eyed bonito, live clams" that this nature is alive. The

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

“christmas tree” operates similarly: as nature cut off from its roots and used as a glorification of consumption. All this bounty finally boils down to that which has absolutely no use value, money, “a handful of silvery smelt in the pocket.” The components of this list, which have value in and of themselves as parts of a functioning ecosystem, have become valueless outside a system of trade, that is, they have been commodified.

In this section Snyder also explores the sordid workings behind the scenes of this global network of commodities. He writes of “meat scum on chop blocks/ bloody butcher concrete floor.”¹⁰² Then in an interesting irony, he writes that “when the market is closed/ the cleanup comes/ equals/ a billygoat pushing through people/ stinking and grabbing a cabbage/ arrogant, tough,/ he took it – they let him –/ Kathmandu -- the market.”¹⁰³ Here Snyder plays off his previous diction by using the word *equals* to describe the cleanup: the globalizing network has produced a natural world that takes back by force that which has been commodified. Indeed, Snyder uses the word *cabbage* for its multiple meanings – as a vegetable and as slang for money. This double entendre reinforces the theme of the commodification of nature.

Snyder concludes the section on Kathmandu thus: “I gave a man seventy paise/ in return for a clay pot/ of curds/ was it worth it?/ How can I tell.”¹⁰⁴ Snyder suggests here that, absent some global system of equivalencies, he has no ability to measure the value of an object. It seems that even the use value of the curds has been sublimated to exchange value, since a common measure of food would be its nutritive value or perhaps its taste. The last two lines set up what appear to be two questions, yet Snyder

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

only punctuates one as such. Through the lack of a question mark in the second line, he indicates that he has no ability to answer the question; it becomes merely a rhetorical statement.

The final section of the poem occurs in Varanasi (or Benares), which lies on the Ganges and is considered a holy city by Hindus and Buddhists. The city is known as the site of the Buddha's first sermon and was an ancient center of commerce and industry. Yet, in Snyder's poem, the market of Varanasi seems to plunge the city into utter chaos, taking up where Kathmandu left off. He writes, "They eat feces/ in the dark/ on stone floors/ one-legged monkeys, hopping cows/ limping dogs blind cats/ crunching garbage in the market/ broken fingers/ cabbage/ head on the ground."¹⁰⁵ Here nature has taken over the market, but has been substantially disfigured. In this holy city, the human element, represented metonymically by "broken fingers/ cabbage/ head on the ground," has been destroyed. Punning again on the phrase *cabbage head* as money, vegetable, and ignorance, Snyder suggests that commodification poses a hazard to human life. In a karmic circle, the market has created the conditions of its own destruction. This human destruction is reiterated in the penultimate stanza, when the speaker talks of "young face/ open pit eyes/ between the bullock carts" and the "dark scrotums spilled on the street/ penis laid by his thigh/ torso/ turns with the sun."¹⁰⁶ Not only does the market harm human life but also the prospects for reproduction, echoing the growing evidence of the pernicious effects of industrialism on humans and their environment.

Despite this critique of the market, Snyder implicates himself in the process of commodification and the market's development and destructiveness. He finishes the

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

poem with a short statement: "I came to buy/ a few bananas by the Ganges/ while waiting for my wife."¹⁰⁷ He juxtaposes the holy river of India against the destructive development of the market. Importantly, the speaker notes his own presence and that he has observed the scene that he has just narrated, implicating himself in its existence. This move ties the speaker inextricably into the destruction of Varanasi, not just as a mere observer but as one whose presence conditions that environment, replicating Hershock's insistence that "*degraded environments are necessarily correlated with degraded patterns of consciousness.*"¹⁰⁸ Or to put it in the words of Hui-Neng, "If you see wrongs in the world, it is your wrongs that are affirmed."¹⁰⁹ As Buddhism would argue, his presence at Varanasi is finally not distinct from the destruction that he observes, implying that Snyder is critiquing his own motives in traveling as well as the travel industry generally, since he foregrounds his presence there. Yet Snyder takes this implication further, by suggesting that his purchase of bananas ties him more directly to the chaos created by the market.

Essays of the 1960s: *Earth House Hold*

For all his subtlety in later works, Snyder seems to engage more overtly in the trope of the protestant ethnic in essays from the 1960s. As an essayist, Snyder often pointedly suggests how Buddhism can and should lead to social revolution. This objective falls within a common theme in the deployment of Buddhism in America, and is even consistent with many of the earliest American interests in Buddhism, during the 19th century: the use of the religion for social change, such as prison outreach, social

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Peter Hershock, *Buddhism in the Public Sphere* p. 16. Author's emphasis.

¹⁰⁹ Peter Hershock, *Reinventing the Wheel* p. 130. Hershock quotes Hui-Neng from the *Platform Sutra*.

justice and the mitigation of imperialism.¹¹⁰ Snyder readily admits this change of direction for the religion. In several of the essays of *Earth House Hold* (*Buddhism and the Coming Revolution*, *Passage to More Than India*, and *Why Tribe*) Snyder eschews the Cold War binary, and instead posits a practice of meditation that, he says, allows humans to reach their full potential as a liberated society of individuals. As important for Snyder is the positive ecological impact that such a social change would have. Yet in the essay *Why Tribe* Snyder seems to essentialize what he calls the *Great Subculture*, defined by the author as virtually any non-mainstream religious group throughout recorded history, including Buddhists and Native Americans.

Snyder valorizes the Great Subculture because he views it as resistant to the destructiveness of capitalism and as the propagator of socially unacceptable truths. Such a position, argues Murphy, probably derives as much from Snyder's milieu as his recent return to the U.S. in the late 1960s. In the midst of the hippie and drug cultures of San Francisco in that era, Snyder seems to write to an audience that would already largely agree with him. Murphy stresses Snyder's relatively narrow coterie at that time, his lack of exposure to popular media, and his susceptibility to that era's "euphoric revolution-in-the-wind mentality."¹¹¹ In the essays of *Earth House Hold*, Snyder's rhetoric clearly plays its message toward such an audience. Here Snyder more overtly participates in the trope of the Protestant ethnic, or as Murphy more specifically puts it:

¹¹⁰ Thomas Tweed

Richard Seager, p. 35. Seager mentions the efforts of Henry Steel Olcott, a disaffected Presbyterian and one of the first American Buddhist converts, who helped Buddhists in Sri Lanka defend themselves against American and European Christian missionaries.

James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism* pp. 227-228. Coleman highlights more recent interest in reaching out to prisoners and meditating with them, and notes the larger interest in charity and social causes.

Ken Jones, pp. 173-184. Jones devotes an entire chapter to delineating the contemporary practice of socially engaged Buddhism in America.

¹¹¹ Patrick D. Murphy, p. 53.

“[T]his excessively optimistic perception of the possibility of swift cultural change is very American and very non-Buddhist.”¹¹²

In *Buddhism and the Coming Revolution* Snyder re-articulates the religion for an American audience that has an extensive history of social protest. After describing the basic tenets of the religion, the author then criticizes it because it does not pay attention to “historical or sociological problems” and that it liberates only “a few dedicated individuals.”¹¹³ In fact, he pushes the criticism further by challenging the religion’s complicity with the status quo: “Institutional Buddhism has been conspicuously ready to accept or ignore the inequalities in tyrannies of whatever political system it found itself under.”¹¹⁴ In such a situation of complete passivity, Snyder argues, the Buddhist emphasis on compassion – the real heart of the religion – would be lost. Therefore, Snyder justifies the relatively new use of Buddhism for social activism in America.

From here, Snyder elaborates on his vision of the current state of the world, showing in negative terms how Buddhism can be used for social change. In particular, Snyder avoids the too-easy Cold War dualism, criticizing both capitalist and communist positions. He writes,

The national polities of the modern world maintain their existence by deliberately fostered craving and fear: monstrous protection rackets. The ‘free world’ has become economically dependent on a fantastic system of stimulation of greed which cannot be fulfilled, sexual desire which cannot be satiated and hatred which has no outlet except against oneself, the persons one is supposed to love, or the revolutionary aspirations of pitiful, poverty-stricken marginal societies like Cuba or Vietnam. The conditions of the Cold War have turned all modern

¹¹² Patrick D. Murphy, p. 93. Murphy continues: “At the same time, the later essays in *Earth House Hold*, also demonstrate that Snyder had then – as he continues to have at the end of the millennium – a very detailed, long-range vision for the future of an American society that if it were to come into being would not be recognizably American to most of the nation’s citizens today. That much of what he had to say at that time still holds relevance in his mind for the future can be seen by his decision to include nearly two-thirds of *Earth House Hold* in *The Gary Snyder Reader* published in the summer of 1999.”

¹¹³ Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold* p. 90.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

societies – Communist included – into vicious distorters of man’s true potential. [...] The soil, the forests and all animal life are being consumed by these cancerous collectivities; the air and water of the planet is being fouled by them.¹¹⁵

Snyder lays out what is at stake in this drama, and suggests through his critique how Buddhism will end the stimulation of greed, desire, hatred, and ecological destruction that are fostered by capitalist and communist practices. Indeed, Snyder ties Buddhism to the thorough remaking of nations, and adds, “The practice of meditation...wipes out mountains of junk being pumped into the mind by the mass media and supermarket universities. The belief in a serene and generous fulfilment of natural loving desires destroys ideologies which blind, maim and repress.”¹¹⁶

While Snyder uses Buddhism to underwrite his vision of social change, the author is clearly indebted to Marxist thought, and he admits as much in the essay *Why Tribe*.¹¹⁷ In *Buddhism and the Coming Revolution* he explains that his responsibility to the community involves “supporting any cultural and economic revolution that moves clearly toward a free, international, classless world.”¹¹⁸ He even cites the IWW slogan, “Forming the new society within the shell of the old.”¹¹⁹ While borrowing ideas from the labor camp, Snyder ultimately seems to reiterate the commonly held American value of individual liberty. His position “means affirming the widest possible spectrum of non-harmful individual behavior – defending the right of individuals to smoke hemp, eat

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114. “It’s an easy step from the dialectic of Marx and Hegel to an interest in the dialectic of early Taoism, the *I Ching*, and the yin-yang theories. From Taoism it is another easy step to the philosophies and mythologies of India – vast, touching the deepest areas of the mind, and with a view of the ultimate nature of the universe which is almost identical with the most sophisticated thought in modern physics – that truth, whatever it is which is called “The Dharma” (*Why Tribe*).

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Snyder, p. 92.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

peyote, be polygynous, polyandrous or homosexual. Worlds of behavior and custom long banned by the Judaeo-Capitalist-Christian-Marxist West.”¹²⁰

While Snyder does appear to follow along the lines of the traditional American conception of individualist freedom, he qualifies his statement with the word *non-harmful*, which would rework a host of traditionally accepted American practices that he as a Buddhist views as detrimental. He draws a sharp distinction between valuing atomistic individualist freedom as an end in itself, a position heavily endorsed by American capitalism, for instance, and freedom as a means to some end that is not simply the expression of individual libertinism. Yet, paradoxically, the use of drugs marijuana and peyote, which Snyder defends, can be quite harmful. This contradiction is never resolved. Interestingly, he categorizes the Western tradition as both capitalist and Marxist, suggesting these ideologies operate dialectically. As I suggested earlier, both systems focus heavily on controlling the means of production, without focusing on, for Snyder, the much more important task of establishing a proper social relationship with the natural world. Snyder seems to reject the ideological basis for much of the communist and capitalist positions, even as he himself affirms the value of some of their ideals or at least re-works them in new ways. Therefore, he attempts to work out a middle way between this Cold War dualism.

Again, in closing the essay, Snyder presents a vision of social change that is radically at odds with the prevailing Cold War norms and that is underwritten by Buddhism. The author notes, “If we are lucky we may eventually arrive at a totally integrated world culture with matrilineal descent, free-form marriage, natural-credit

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

communist economy, less industry, far less population and lots more national parks.”¹²¹ Inexplicably, Snyder transitions from the compassion of Buddhism to this specific vision of social utopia. He leaves unanswered the question, for instance, of why matrilineal descent would encourage and sustain social revolution. Indeed, in this rhetorical move he seems to essentialize women, a specific instance of a general problem that occurs in the essays *Passage to More Than India* and *Why Tribe*. Moreover, although Snyder’s vision of less industry and population is prima facie beneficial for the environment, how Buddhism supports this specific vision and causes it to occur is unclear, since, as Peter Hershock writes, the Buddhist canon includes no specific environmental ethics. As a caveat, Hershock notes the historical nature of western conceptions of the ecological crisis, which is not transcendent but rather a direct manifestation of a series of “values, intentions, and actions” that originally created the crisis.¹²²

In *Passage to More Than India* and *Why Tribe* Snyder elaborates on a specifically American version of what he calls the *Great Subculture or the Tribe*. Written in the context of the late 1960s hippie movement, these essays show Snyder valorizing the movement for its spiritual ideals and its resistance to capitalism. The Great Subculture, as defined by the author in *Passage*, consists of a whole range of spiritual seekers who are marginalized in their respective eras. Snyder explains,

This subculture of illuminati has been a powerful undercurrent in all higher civilizations. In China it manifested as Taoism, not only Lao-tzu but the later Yellow Turban revolt and medieval Taoist secret societies; and the Zen

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹²² Peter Hershock, *Buddhism in the Public Sphere* pp. 14-15. Hershock writes, “Whether in the earliest strata of Buddhist traditions or in the context of later Mahayana, Theraveda, and Vajrayana traditions, critical attention has always been given to carefully attending to and appropriately responding to situations in such a way as to clear them of karma conducive to further suffering or trouble. Currently prevailing conceptions of the environment and the forces assailing it are endemic to our particular place in human history.... That is, these conceptions reflect the karma – a pattern of value-intentions-actions – that is in many ways uniquely symptomatic of our own times.”

Buddhists up till early Sung. Within Islam the Sufis; in India the various threads converge to produce Tantrism. In the West it has been represented largely by a string of heresies starting with the Gnostics, and on the folk level by 'witchcraft.'¹²³

Snyder compares these dedicated religious seekers to America's hippies, who should be seen in the same lineage, the author argues, because they live communally and use marijuana and LSD for spiritual purposes. In this passage, Snyder essentializes these various subcultures as resistant to the mainstream. This type of binary formation plays out further. Indeed, it seems as if anything non-mainstream can be counted as a member of the Great Subculture, in a move that recalls Chow's criticism of the Protestant ethic as somehow resistant to capitalism. Snyder valorizes the spiritual practices of Native Americans, in particular their use of narcotics to obtain visions. He also lauds the Brotherhood of the Free Spirit as well as the gypsies of Big Sur, who have the works of Zen Buddhist D.T. Suzuki in their camps out in nature. Snyder even has a term for the portion of white America that is allegedly resistant – "white Indians." In a large leap, Snyder writes, "Those who do not have the money or time to go to India or Japan, but who think a great deal about the wisdom traditions have remarkable results when they take LSD."¹²⁴ Even users of hallucinogens are members of those resisting capitalism. Snyder is clearly making appeals that would ring true to an audience of late 60s hippies who espoused social revolution.

Why Tribe continues much of the same representation of ethnic people and practices as resistant to capitalism, but at times Snyder shows he is aware of the too-easy dualism of resistance/mainstream. For example, of movements that are resistant and thus members of the tribe, Snyder names "peasant witchcraft in Europe, Tantrism

¹²³ Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold* p. 105.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

in Bengal, Quakers in England, Tachikawa-ryū in Japan, Ch'an in China....Paleo-Siberian Shamanism and Magdalenian cave-painting; through megaliths and Mysteries, astronomers, ritualists, alchemists and Albigensians; gnostics and vagantes, right down to Golden Gate Park."¹²⁵ Earlier he mentions the European gypsies as members of the tribe, and also notes, "All the anarchists and left-deviationists – and many Trotskyites – were tribesmen at heart."¹²⁶ Spiritual practice clearly underlies much of what he sees as resistant, but he focuses nevertheless on subcultural religious practices.

Interestingly, he stresses the value of Buddhism, such as Ch'an, in exploring "to the deepest non-self Self."¹²⁷ Subsequently he criticizes Buddhism (and Hinduism) as being too mainstream in places such as China and India, since the religions are "social institutions [that] had long been accomplices of the state in burdening and binding people, rather than serving to liberate them. Just like the other Great Religions."¹²⁸ Snyder's valorization of seemingly any religious subculture reveals a clear schism, indeed, one that already presupposes the ultimate failure of any subculture that becomes mainstream.

Still, at times Snyder does avoid the wholesale conflation of the ethnic with resistance, as in his depiction of Buddhism and Hinduism as distinct from their historical cultures, for example. He writes, "The 'truth' in Buddhism and Hinduism is not dependent in any sense on Indian or Chinese culture; and that 'India' and 'China' – as societies – are as burdensome to human beings as any others; perhaps more so."¹²⁹ Nevertheless, Snyder generally portrays the ethnic in terms of its ability to resist the

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.115.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

mainstream, especially capitalism. For the Snyder of *Earth House Hold*, Buddhism allows “the next great step of mankind,” which “is to step into the nature of [one’s] own mind, thus abolishing the “nationalism, warfare, heavy industry and consumership” that “are already outdated and useless.”¹³⁰ Therefore, he seems to recapitulate the trope of the protestant ethic.

The Etiquette of Freedom

The later part of Snyder's oeuvre, such as the collection *The Practice of the Wild*, showcases the systems-based thinking that comprises the author's environmental consciousness. While Buddhism still plays a key role in informing his environmentalism, Snyder shows his erudition across a broad range of life sciences, and successfully integrates the religion with insights provided by the scientific disciplines. For example, in the essay *The Etiquette of Freedom*, Snyder argues that we should turn to nature and study it in order to develop a more complete picture of what constitutes freedom and to see how current socioeconomic practices oppose this vision of true freedom. While such a project is prone to essentializing nature as some undefiled other to capitalist exploitation, as is typical of many Beats, Snyder eschews this easy dichotomy and argues that wildness characterizes all natural systems and constitutes the basis of true freedom.

Snyder carefully redefines the words *wild* and *free* according to his new valences, well aware of their consumerist connotations. In contrast to the clichéd visions of an "American dream-phrase" or "an ad for a Harley-Davidson," Snyder proposes that true freedom consists in taking on "the basic conditions as they are -- painful, impermanent, open, imperfect -- and then be grateful for impermanence and the

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

freedom it grants us. For in a fixed universe there would be no freedom."¹³¹ Snyder here recapitulates the Buddhist vision of existence, with its insistence on the lack of a fixed identity as the guarantor of true freedom. Similarly, he defines the word *wild* in terms that are consonant with a systems and Buddhist worldview: "The world is nature, and in the long run inevitably wild, because the wild, as the process and essence of nature, is also an ordering of impermanence."¹³² So for Snyder, the *wild* constitutes a self-ordering system whose relationships are continually in flux, and the author notes how popular conceptions of the wild consistently have negative connotations in civilized societies -- "both European and Asian" -- that exploit natural processes and found worldviews that are based on fixity.¹³³

Along typical Buddhist lines, in this essay Snyder takes pains to show the indistinguishability of nature and human culture. On this reading, everything is natural -- "New York City, or toxic wastes, or atomic energy."¹³⁴ But natural systems, especially human systems, can cut themselves off from the rejuvenative power of the wild by refusing to recognize its power. Snyder proceeds to detail how modern civilizations define wildness as an absence of some positive characteristic:

Of animals – not tame, undomesticated, unruly.

Of plants – not cultivated.

...

Of societies – uncivilized, rude, resisting constituted government.

Of individuals – unrestrained, insubordinate, sensuous, dissolute, loose.¹³⁵

Such definitions rely on the human ego's need to control, and they delineate as positive those that can be controlled and negative those that cannot be. This process then

¹³¹ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* p. 5.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

alienates civilization by definition, and subsequently in practice, from the wild.

Appropriately, Snyder offers definitions of the wild that express its values in positive terms:

Of animals -- free agents, each with its own endowments, living within natural systems.

Of plants – self-propagating, self-maintaining, flourishing in accord with innate qualities.

...

Of societies -- societies whose order has grown from within and is maintained by the force of consensus and custom rather than explicit legislation. Primary cultures, which consider themselves the original and eternal inhabitants of their territory. Societies which resist economic and political domination by civilization. Societies whose economic system is in a close and sustainable relation to the local ecosystem.

Of individuals -- following local custom, style, and etiquette without concern for the standards of the metropolis or nearest trading post. Unintimidated, self-reliant, independent. "Proud and free."¹³⁶

It is just such wildness, according to Snyder, that modern metropolises such as New York City and Tokyo are missing, because unlike other natural environments, they are more or less completely intolerant of nonhuman creatures. Such a natural environment extirpates the inherent self-ordering that occurs in wild systems, a move that results in the destruction of human wholeness. As part of that process, the wild becomes commodified and its value becomes expressed always in human terms. Meanwhile, as Snyder points out, the wild has been moved to and set aside on public lands, which comprise just 2% of the United States.¹³⁷

Using this Buddhist-inspired model, Snyder takes to task the Enlightenment thinkers, in particular, upon whose ideas the modern mechanistic system of production is based. He notes that Descartes, Newton, and Hobbes ("all of them city-dwellers") rejected the organic world in favor of "sterile mechanism and an economy of

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

'production.'"138 For Snyder, the central irony of the Enlightenment project and its hysteria over eliminating chaos is that it simply re-created what it sought to eliminate, only more powerfully. Snyder writes: "Instead of making the world safer for humankind, the foolish tinkering with the powers of life and death by the occidental scientist-engineer-ruler puts the whole planet on the brink of degradation."139 Rather than accepting the necessarily relational aspect of the wild, contemporary civilization has sought to impose its own will through control. Importantly, Snyder is also careful to point out how the Chinese too had become removed enough from the wild to aestheticize it in landscape poetry by the fifth century A.D.

The Renunciation of Control as True Freedom

After setting up the destructiveness of mankind's desire to control the wild, Snyder proposes how we might rectify that situation. He concludes: "To resolve the dichotomy of the civilized and the wild, we must first resolve to be whole."140 Such a process would entail surrendering the notion of control as a fundamental value informing our mechanized culture. This move would challenge that culture's insistence that the ability to control is coterminous with freedom. Berry suggests that similarly *Mountains and Rivers Without End* – in its syntax, structure, and organization – showcases the impossibility of controlling the planet, and yet he argues that "the poem does not imitate controllessness."141 Snyder aspires to an ethos of appreciation that renders the value of control as just one more among a suite of options for engaging the world wholly, as opposed to the karmically and systemically reinforced use of control

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁴¹ Wendell Berry, p. 153.

because everything seems out of control. The re-ordering caused by Snyder's intervention elides the Cold War dualism of capitalism and communism, and their fundamental disagreements about who gets to control production.

That Snyder remains virtually unknown among the broader public, despite his relative importance in the San Francisco Renaissance and in the coterie of the media-darling Beats, indicates that his interrogations of the notion of control and of market-based economics are anathema to the larger capitalist apparatus that thrives on the sale of control-oriented technologies as the incarnation of freedom. Therefore, Snyder is difficult to re-fashion as cool, even as sustainability discourse comes into increasing prominence in the mass media. The marketing of control as freedom and the use of Buddhism for this purpose will be examined in films and advertisements in Chapters 6 and 7, respectively.

CHAPTER 5
CHARLES JOHNSON: BUDDHISM AND THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK

In describing the purposes and ability of art, Charles Johnson elaborates on a position that has much Buddhist resonance:

I can't deliver another human being to you on the page. But I can deliver an aesthetic experience on the page that you can undergo. And – who knows? – you may be moved by it. So what, then, is a book? I've decided, finally, that literature is, at best, just a finger pointing at the moon, as Zen writers love to remind us. It isn't – can't be – the moon (or reality) itself. An interpretation of the moon, certainly, one more or less accurate and provisionally useful.¹

Much like Gary Snyder, Johnson undertakes a mission of pointing to the ultimate truth as understood by Buddhism. Unlike Snyder, Johnson does not pursue a representation of enlightenment through the act and art of observing closely. Rather he constructs novels that incorporate Buddhist themes and narrative structures.

Of particular importance for Johnson are questions of race and identity, and he uses Buddhism to interrogate traditional static formulations of racial identity, whether they derive from a white hegemony or black cultural movements, ultimately to conclude that there is no such thing as identity or race because there is no ego:

I personally don't believe in the existence of the ego. I think it's a theoretical construct. There's no empirical verification for it at all. And if there is such a thing as identity, I don't think that it's fixed or static; it's a process.... That identity, if it is anything at all, is several things, a tissue of very often contradictory things, which is why I probably have a great deal of opposition to anything that looks like a fixed meaning for black America.²

Yet, Johnson's position operates tenuously, negotiating a path between political identity for black Americans that might allow them greater economic enfranchisement and the rampant consumerism that he sees as the result of full enfranchisement. Thus, using Buddhism to advocate for a non-racialized human identity, Johnson pursues a middle

¹ John Whalen-Bridge, "A Conversation with Charles Johnson and Maxine Hong Kingston," pp. 73 – 74.

² Jonathan Little, "An Interview With Charles Johnson," pp. 99 – 100.

way that encourages neither a full reliance on a black identity nor uncritical acceptance of consumerist practice.

Johnson and Buddhism

The basic critical delineation of Johnson has largely been set. According to John Whalen-Bridge, critics over the last 25 years have generally described Johnson as:

- an artist focused on integration, in the wake of Ellison
- a writer using social, aesthetic, psychological, and political integration “to resonate with and reinforce one another”
- a writer who uses comedy and parody to bring readers to some type of liberation, “a liberation that is often compared to the Buddhist regulative ideal of enlightenment”
- a black male author who purposefully eschews any classificatory schema³

Each of these elements is tied up intimately with Johnson’s practice of Buddhism, and should be seen as complementary parts of his artistic vision. Johnson’s integrationist perspective allows him to remain aesthetically fresh and innovative, rather than becoming a genre writer. Indeed, some of Johnson’s first experiences with novel-writing showcase the damaging influence (“misery-filled protest stories,” he calls them) of mimicking naturalist authors such as James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and John A. Williams.⁴ Later, more mature novels such as *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage* become what James W. Coleman calls “multi-traditional, multicultural, and multiracial,”⁵ and they avoid the Black Arts themes and aesthetic that Johnson finds so constraining.

In describing some of Johnson’s short stories, critic Gary Storhoff describes

³ John Whalen-Bridge, “‘Whole Sight’ in Review: Reflections on Charles Johnson,” p. 245.

⁴ Virginia Smith, p. 659.

⁵ James W. Coleman, “Charles Johnson’s Quest for Black Freedom in *Oxherding Tale*,” p. 632.

several currents that run throughout Johnson's oeuvre and contends,

For Johnson, the writer's duty is to undermine the reader's confidence in a world of material objects entirely independent of the conceiving mind, in the social constructions of race and identity that we supposedly take for granted, to remind the reader of the metaphorical nature of reality, and of his/her part in the creation of reality.⁶

Although Storhoff focuses specifically on the influence of George Berkeley's Idealist metaphysics on two of Johnson's stories, the range of philosophical thinking that informs Johnson's aesthetic position is much broader, as Storhoff has argued elsewhere. Such influences include Du Bois, Heidegger, Hegel, Husserl, Ricoeur, Fanon, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, argues Linda Selzer in describing another Johnson work.⁷ Ashraf H. A. Rushdy has also shown the influence of phenomenologists, while Johnson himself has weighed in on the influence that Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Vedanta have had on his life and work, a position supported by much critical work as well.⁸ Perhaps above all is the influence of Buddhism: Johnson began daily meditation practice in 1981, and now translates Sanskrit works on Buddhism from the *Devanagari* originals.⁹ Johnson has even referenced his novels in Buddhist terms, calling *Oxherding Tale* his "platform" book, an allusion to *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (Hui-Neng), a key text of Zen Buddhism.¹⁰ That Buddhist influence too is evidenced in the quote above, and the religion forms the spiritual basis for Johnson's critiques of capitalism and racial identity.

⁶ Gary Storhoff, p. 543.

⁷ Linda Selzer, "Master-Slave Dialectics," pp. 105 – 114.

⁸ Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, pp. 372 – 373.

Charles Johnson, "The Dharma and The Artist's Eye," pp. 4 – 5.

Rudolph P. Byrd, p. 307. Byrd shows Johnson's use of each religion in *Oxherding Tale*.

William R. Nash, *Charles Johnson's Fiction* p. 5. Nash notes the heavy influence of Buddhism and phenomenology on Johnson.

Jonathan Little, *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination* p. 80.

⁹ Charles Johnson, "The Dharma and The Artist's Eye," pp. 4 – 5.

¹⁰ Rudolph P. Byrd, p. 305.

As should be evidenced in the wide variety of his antecedents, Johnson has advocated a position that integrates Western philosophical and creative traditions with the concerns of African-Americans, in order to forge innovative work from African-American artists. To this end, Johnson uses intertextuality extensively in his works, as many critics have noted.¹¹ This strategy highlights a key Buddhist theme that Johnson wants to reiterate -- the interdependence of all individuals. John Whalen-Bridge argues that Johnson incorporates the figure of the dharma bum (primarily a white, middle-class male tradition) into his novel *Dreamer*.¹² The Beat character in the novel is just as dilettante-ish in his interest in eastern mysticism as the characters that Kerouac describes. Barbara Thaden, among others, states that Johnson uses the plot and structures of a variety of genres, such as the romance, the sea story, the epic, and the slave narrative, as well as consciously using the work of mentor John Gardner as a model and engaging in historiographic metafiction.¹³

Johnson has also employed forms such as the picaresque, the adventure story, and the confession narrative, and has refashioned Homer, Melville, and Defoe as well as Douglass.¹⁴ Rudolph P. Byrd shows how Johnson relied on Jean Toomer and Ralph Ellison, but states that Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* and Kaku-an Shi-en's *The Ten Oxherding Pictures* – a key work in Zen Buddhism – play an even more central role in the construction of his own novel *Oxherding Tale*.¹⁵ Little too notes the influence of the Buddhist work.¹⁶ Thaden argues that Johnson often subverts such genres, intentionally

¹¹ William R. Nash, *Charles Johnson's Fiction* p. 30. Nash suggests that Johnson's aesthetic seeks to expand the possibilities open to African-American artists.

¹² John Whalen-Bridge, "Waking Cain," pp. 511 – 512.

¹³ Barbara Z. Thaden, p. 754.

¹⁴ Daniel M. Scott III, p. 646.

¹⁵ Rudolph P. Byrd, pp. 307, 316.

¹⁶ Jonathan Little, *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination* pp. 82 – 83.

toying with their tropes in order to parody and invert the audience's expectations.¹⁷ For example, she suggests that in *Middle Passage* Johnson uses Frederick Douglass's *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* to challenge the traditional slave narrative and its glorification of freedom, and she argues that for Johnson's protagonist "freedom is only another type of slavery."¹⁸ Sonnet Retman argues that Johnson's transgressions of genre reflect his belief that good fiction "should also strategically stage these traversals in the service of liberty for the benefit of the reader and writer."¹⁹ Retman agrees with Thaden and further asserts that Johnson's playing with the genre of the slave narrative and the "ontological implications" of the genre's realist representationalism refuses "the prerogatives of social realism as a dubious inheritance bequeathed black writers from slavery."²⁰ Through a theory and practice of intertextuality based on his Buddhist understanding, Johnson plays with and refashions the tropes of many genres into a discussion of Buddhist experience. For example, Johnson credits himself with creating "the first protagonist in black fiction to achieve classically defined *moksha* (enlightenment)."²¹

Black Identity

Johnson has rejected movements that seek to establish and elaborate a specifically black identity, such as the Black Arts Movement and Afrocentrism. Johnson

¹⁷ Barbara Z. Thaden, p. 757.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*,

¹⁹ Sonnet Retman, p. 418.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 420 – 421. Retman argues that slave narratives are carefully constructed performances meant to evoke specific facets of black subjectivity. She writes: "In order to be persuasive in their argument against slavery, the narratives presented a carefully constructed public self to a predominantly white, female audience. This representation reflected the values of abolitionist Americans would find most compelling and, accordingly, was shaped out of the most popular literary genres of the day, the picaresque and the sentimental novel. The narratives argued for abolition in at least two ways: They detailed the atrocities of slavery in order to appeal to the (white) readership's compassion, and they also proved the slave's humanity in spite of his or her race by virtue of the writer's 'rational' ability to assemble a coherent story."

²¹ Aida Ahmed Hussien, p. 240.

briefly dallied with the Black Arts Movement in college, following a 1968 lecture by Amiri Baraka, the founder of the Black Arts Movement in 1965.²² As the artistic arm of the Black Power Movement, Black Arts demanded a black aesthetic that would reject white-defined aesthetic standards and be controlled by the black literary community, as a means to effectively represent the concerns of black Americans. Cynthia A. Young also cites Amiri Baraka as one among many 1960s leftists – whom she calls the U.S. Third World Left -- who articulated a colonialist model of oppression that insisted on “the interconnections between U.S. minorities and Third World majorities in a moment of global decolonization.”²³ Young notes how this group emphasized the commonalities between urban communities of color and Third World communities in order to create a common framework and struggle with those in the Third World. Baraka was one of several who applied the colonialist model to America’s oppression of black Americans, and argued that, therefore, armed resistance was the path to liberation as it had been in other colonies.²⁴ Young also adds that while this movement was productive, it also “reduc[ed] the Third World in some instances to a set of icons, a set of projections and imaginaries.”²⁵ This reduction of humans to icons is exactly the abstraction that Johnson would like avoid through his integrationist perspective.

Soon after his introduction to the movement Johnson rejected the position, according to Nash, because of his training in philosophy and Buddhism.²⁶ Johnson has characterized the goals of the Black Arts Movement as replacing "white hegemony with

²² William R. Nash, *Charles Johnson's Fiction* p. 19.

²³ Cynthia A. Young, p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 4 – 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁶ William R. Nash, *Charles Johnson's Fiction* p. 15.

black hegemony in all areas of human experience."²⁷ Elsewhere, Johnson has criticized the movement for not "answering enough questions. It wasn't going deep enough in terms of investigating phenomena.... our relationship to the environment, for example, our relationship to technology. All the human questions."²⁸

That lack of depth also informs Johnson's ultimate rejection of Marxism. Johnson is familiar with the positions of Marx, having taught him as a doctoral teaching assistant. While he finds Marxist critique of capitalism to be useful, Marx's ultimate solution to social and economic problems is untenable, for Johnson.²⁹ Selzer notes that in the short story "Exchange Value" Johnson uses Marx's position to critique the similar oppressions of capitalism and racial identity. Selzer contends, "By improvising upon Marx's analysis of the fantastic transmutations involved in commodity fetishism, Johnson exposes the logic of a racial economy in which discriminatory social hierarchies are reified in the black body, taken as a living representative of social inferiority."³⁰ She suggests how Johnson's texts posit that "under the spell of commodity fetishism, *all* social relations tend to take on the form of material relations."³¹ Rushdy argues similarly.³² While undertaking reforms that create the proper social/relational aspects is important to Johnson as a Buddhist, Marxism's ultimate prescription relies on a conception of the proletariat as somehow distinctly different from (and better than) their bourgeois oppressors – an identity politics that Johnson flatly rejects.

²⁷ William R. Nash, "A Conversation With Charles Johnson," p. 219.

²⁸ Jonathan Little, "An Interview With Charles Johnson," p. 106.

²⁹ Michael Boccia, p. 201.

³⁰ Linda Selzer, "Charles Johnson's 'Exchange Value': Signifyin(g) on Marx," p. 264.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

³² Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, p. 377.

And as for Afrocentrism, Johnson has called that “the new name for black cultural nationalism.”³³ Molefi Kete Asante explains Afrocentrism as an interrogation of western values that masquerade as universal values. Afrocentrism instead seeks to place “African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior.”³⁴ Asante adds: “Without the Afrocentric perspective, the imposition of the European line as universal hinders cultural understanding and demeans humanity.”³⁵ While Asante admits to the charge of essentialism, he asserts that Afrocentrism seeks to establish a cultural nationalism in the ways that dominant hegemonies do, and presents the hypocrisy inherent in the request that subalterns refrain from doing what the culturally powerful do.³⁶ Asante even goes as far as saying that contemporary literary thought – “phenomenology, hermeneutics, and structuralism, example – cannot be applied, whole cloth, to African themes and subjects.”³⁷ Yet Johnson’s work attempts just such an application of phenomenology and even Buddhism to the experiences of African-Americans.

Johnson has received flak, especially from a certain segment of the Left, for his refusal to participate in the activity of solidifying a specifically black identity, for instance in the projects of the Black Arts Movement. For such views Johnson has been called a conservative, and several public disagreements on the role of the black artist with Henry Louis Gates and Toni Morrison have “aroused suspicion of Johnson on the Left,” according to Whalen-Bridge.³⁸ For critics such as Timothy Parrish, Morrison invokes an

³³ S.X. Goudie, p. 119.

³⁴ Molefi Kete Asante, p. 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

³⁸ John Whalen-Bridge, “‘Whole Sight’ in Review: Reflections on Charles Johnson,” p. 248.

African-American identity that is a part of and yet separate from “white American experience,” whereas Johnson envisions an African-American identity that is a hybrid of other American identities and thus irretrievably and “happily” mixed.³⁹ S.X. Goudie also notes the icy critical reception that Johnson's novel *Middle Passage* garnered in the five years following the National Book Award in 1990 -- just a single article, (other than reviews and short features related to the award),⁴⁰ despite the fact that Johnson was the first African-American man since Ralph Ellison to win the award.⁴¹ Jonathan Little even suggests that maybe Gates has excluded Johnson from lists of important black writers based on Johnson's denial of racial difference.⁴² Johnson has even faced ostracism from colleagues and friends following the publication of his book *Turning the Wheel*.⁴³

But Johnson is not pursuing some type of reactionary paradigm, in which slavery is forgotten or disremembered. Hussen suggests rather that Johnson does see some value in a politicized black identity, but that he rejects “formulations of Self built *solely* upon the fixed historical given of oppression.”⁴⁴ Jonathan Little agrees, stating that Johnson is all too well aware of white racism.⁴⁵ But by focusing exclusively on

³⁹ Timothy L. Parrish, p. 82.

⁴⁰ S.X. Goudie, p. 110. Goudie adds: “By not ‘marking’ Johnson's novel, by not assessing or responding to it, some within the critical community appear to favor banishing the work – and perhaps Johnson himself – to ‘forced residence’ in a textual no man's land.” Goudie also notes several comments from the award's book reviewers, including that from John Haynes, who suggested that “the protagonist's ‘romantic racism’ perhaps demonstrates ‘the extent of his incapacity to get in touch with his own history.’”

⁴¹ William R. Nash, *Charles Johnson's Fiction* p. 130.

⁴² Jonathan Little, *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination* p. 15.

⁴³ John Whalen-Bridge, “Shoulder to the Wheel,” p. 301. Johnson states, “Truth to tell, *Turning the Wheel* may have cost me a few old friends in the book world. Since receiving their copies, other writers (I'll name no names), some black and some white academic and literary colleagues, haven't said as much as ‘boo’ to me about it in two months. I think the book may be alienating to them; I think they are, in fact, as deeply afraid of Buddhism as my old teacher Gardner once was. I think as well that their perception, ideas, or beliefs about me -- who I am, what I think, what I stand for -- have been roughed up a little. Or more than a little. And I think that's good.”

⁴⁴ Aida Ahmed Hussen, p. 245.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Little, *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination* p. 8. Little writes, “[Johnson] does not espouse the cherished eighties Reaganist belief in a color-blind society that refuses to acknowledge the impact of race and the legacy of racial prejudice in the United States.”

oppression and the struggle of blacks against whites, these types of stories “lose touch with a high, spiritual, universal reality” and that the reification of racial identity can “poison” readers, in the words of James W. Coleman.⁴⁶ And Johnson has been no less adamant about abdicating his role as a voice for his race:

I was not put here on this earth to spend my time educating white people. I was put here to create art. If it educates people, great. But that is *not* the role I can inhabit in this society. I can't, because it's a funny kind of service you're doing and it's still subservient to whites in a particular way. I just can't do that. That's why I said at the national book award: 'No, I'm not a racial spokesman. You have millions of black people. Go ask them what they think.'⁴⁷

Elsewhere, Johnson has noted how being identified specifically as an author on racial subjects tends to marginalize writers.⁴⁸ As Lorraine Ouimet argues, Johnson's use of the slave narrative acts as resistance against the master's historiography as well as the (ex)slave's revision.⁴⁹ Johnson refuses to be caught on the twin barbs of the debate over racial identity.

Even if too much has been made of Johnson's differences, he still participates in some of the broad trends, such as reclaiming community, that have characterized African-American novels in the last 40 years. Phillip Page explains that during this era, such novels “document the spiritual and psychic disintegration that accompanies the loss of community and cultural heritage as well as the redemptive possibilities of reaffirming such ties.”⁵⁰ Johnson also participates in what Page calls “the tradition of

⁴⁶ James W. Coleman, “Charles Johnson's Quest,” p. 634. Coleman reads Johnson's novel *Oxherding Tale* as an antithesis to such narratives.

⁴⁷ John Whalen-Bridge, “A Conversation with Charles Johnson and Maxine Hong Kingston,” pp. 82 – 83.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81. Johnson states, “How about being labeled Asian American or African American? I had long talks with August Wilson, and some of them were very illuminating. August keeps *promising* that he's going to boycott certain bookstores in which you find his plays and they're over in the black literature section. You look for Edward Albee, and he's in the general section for plays. August can't stand that. It's segregation, apartheid, in book stores!”

⁴⁹ Lorraine Ouimet, p. 33.

⁵⁰ Phillip Page, p. 5.

black theology” as a means to realize "a longed-for future."⁵¹ For Johnson, this theology largely takes the form of Buddhism. Even through a non-Christian orientation, Johnson participates in a trend delineated by Page as emphasizing "a future that will redress the tribulations of the past and the injustices of the present."⁵²

While much emphasis has been placed on Johnson’s integrationist perspective, comparatively little has been said about how his vision might obscure feminist concerns. William R. Nash notes how Johnson’s book of literary criticism, *Being and Race*, “equates artistic ambition and accomplishment with gender,” and suggests how that position contradicts Johnson’s integrationist aesthetic.⁵³ A few other critics such as Byrd note the heavy preponderance of male characters in Johnson’s novels and how men become competitors and allies as well as the “vehicle for *moksha* or release, liberation, and enlightenment” in the style of Hesse’s *Siddhartha*.⁵⁴ Lorraine Ouimet too notes that *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage* locate freedom, salvation, and wisdom “in a heterosexual conception of fatherhood.”⁵⁵ Taking a cue from Elizabeth Muther, who notes how Johnson uses the lead female character in *Middle Passage* as comic capital,⁵⁶ I’ll briefly examine some structural issues that contribute to the erasure of feminine subjectivity.

Buddhism as Protest

Whereas the status of blacks as outside the Cold War consensus seemed to establish them as protesting and therefore as cool, at least according to the Beats, the Civil Rights movement attempted to establish economic enfranchisement for African-

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵³ William R. Nash, *Charles Johnson’s Fiction* p. 49.

⁵⁴ Rudolph P. Byrd, p. 312.

⁵⁵ Lorraine Ouimet, p. 47.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Muther, p. 649.

Americans. Johnson considers the Civil Rights movement as profoundly spiritual in nature and tries to offer an alternative to capitalist America, by turning to Buddhism, which he thinks presents another, spiritual orientation to African-Americans. Johnson seeks to extend the goals of the Civil Rights movement from a necessary, but more vulgar, concern with economic matters to a focus on ultimate freedom that would be presented in Buddhism. By challenging the ontological/metaphysical effects of American capitalism with Buddhism, Johnson aims to provide another potential selfless identity to black America and America as a whole. Unlike Kerouac and Ginsberg who often deploy the religion as a marker of cool, Johnson emphasizes the value of Buddhist practice as a means of achieving ultimate freedom. Through his practice that seeks to undo the binary formations of black cultural nationalism, Johnson shows and explains the value of Buddhism in undermining some of the bases of capitalism, for example, in *Turning the Wheel*, in which he explains the basis of Buddhist practice. Nevertheless, at times he seems close to deploying the trope of the protestant ethnic along the lines sketched out by Chow. Johnson's insistence in *Turning the Wheel* that black Americans should eschew the easy materialism of America suggests how blacks are, in some ways, still being positioned as resistant to commodification and therefore cool.

Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism

Turning the Wheel (2003) offers a mélange of essays in two sections that range across Johnson's interests in social justice, Buddhism, capitalism, and racial identity, but that usually dissect the experience of African-Americans in reference to these topics. Whereas the second section deals only very desultorily with Buddhism, the first section explicitly takes up that perspective to discuss questions of social justice, a distinct change from a long tradition of African-Americans using Christianity to

interrogate such issues. In the first section, titled “On Buddhism,” Johnson explains in various essays the value of Buddhist practice, and how it can impact the politics, economics, and social geography of the nation. In these essays, he points out how Buddhism can be used to undergird a system of equal civil and economic rights for African-Americans. At the same time, he argues how Buddhism can be used to combat some of the most destructive aspects of capitalism.

In the second section, titled “On Writing,” the author expands upon literature and theories of narrative, in particular, how the experiences of African-Americans have been detailed in American *belles lettres*. The title of the book refers to the phrase, common in Buddhism, “turning the wheel of Dharma.” Given the somewhat ambiguous term *dharma*, the phrase has multiple valences. The title has a historical referent – the Buddha’s first great disseminations of his doctrines. In this sense, Dharma means the ultimate teachings of Buddhism and the truths to which they refer. The title also makes a metaphorical comment on what Johnson is attempting to do in his book, namely, show the value of Buddhist practice for contemporary America. Thus, Johnson is turning the wheel, or fulfilling his role or duty, by writing the book for his audience. Such a move is oriented toward *bodhisattva* action, or action with the intent to lead others to enlightenment. By fulfilling his Dharma, Johnson believes he is undertaking *bodhisattva* action.

That Johnson is tremendously invested in Buddhism is made clear by the title, but throughout the book Buddhism does not operate merely as a convenient rhetorical device. In fact, Johnson views his practice of Buddhism as one of the tools that has allowed him to survive and be creative as a black American in a Eurocentric society. In

the “Preface” Johnson writes, “Were it not for the Buddhadharma, I’m convinced that, as a black American and an artist, I would not have been able to successfully negotiate my last half century of life in this country. Or at least not with a high level of creative productivity, working in a spirit of *metta* toward all sentient beings, and selfless service to others.”⁵⁷ Johnson argues convincingly that Buddhism has had a practical benefit for him after years of study, and that the religion is not simply a means to be cool. He writes, “Buddhism has always been a refuge, as it was intended to be: a place to continually refresh my spirit, stay centered and at peace.”⁵⁸ He notes how he “embrac[ed] the Buddhist Dharma as the most revolutionary and civilized of possible human choices, as the logical extension of King’s dream of the ‘beloved community,’ and Du Bois’s ‘vision of what the world could be if it was really a beautiful world.’”⁵⁹ For Johnson, the practice of Buddhism is a means to radical freedom, but not just for the sake of being radical or indulging individual will à la the Beats. He values this “civilized” practice because it leads to a community that esteems its members and that offers them freedom.

In the “Preface” Johnson positions himself rhetorically as the spiritual successor to the great leaders of the African-American civil rights movements. In particular, he focuses on their efforts and achievements as means to an end, that of political and spiritual freedom, rather than emphasizing some vision of the American dream as libertine consumption of material goods. He writes that as a young man his “sense of black life... was that our unique destiny as a people, our duty to our predecessors who sacrificed so much and for so long, and our dreams of a life of dignity and happiness for

⁵⁷ Charles Johnson, *Turning the Wheel* p. xvi.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

our children were tied inextricably to a profound and lifelong meditation on what it means to be free. Truly free.”⁶⁰ Johnson’s meaning here is ambiguous: what exactly does he mean by the word *free*?

He tackles this ambiguity immediately, by referencing the speech “Criteria of Negro Art” by W.E.B. Du Bois, who asks, “What do we want? What is this thing we are after?”⁶¹ Johnson then goes on to explain how Du Bois cautioned his audience of NAACP members against “let[ting] their ennobling journey to greater freedom degenerate into a selfish, vulgar hedonism, or a desire for the ephemeral baubles.”⁶² Freedom for African-Americans, argues Johnson, cannot be simply libertine consumption and the acceptance of blacks as worthy consumers. Or, as Johnson later states, “The Dharma is, if nothing else, a call for us to live in a state of radical freedom.”⁶³ Or, still later: “Through the Dharma, the black American quest for ‘freedom’ realizes its profoundest, truest, and most revolutionary meeting.”⁶⁴ Yet Du Bois focused greatly on economic enfranchisement for African-Americans, for instance, through his emphasis on black-owned cooperatives as a means to realize fiscal power without succumbing to the corruptions of capitalism.⁶⁵ In making his point, Johnson seems to *almost* erase the economic dimensions of his predecessors’ struggles.

In a similar vein, Johnson turns to Martin Luther King Jr. and his sermon “Rediscovering Lost Values,” from 1954. Interestingly, Johnson reads King from a Buddhist framework, which he does later in several essays, even as King reads from

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.. xiii-xiv.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. xv.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁶⁵ Lizabeth Cohen, p. 49.

the Bible. King lambastes the American cultural attitude of “survival of the slickest” and reminds his listeners of the biblical proverb that one reaps what one sows. Johnson reads this latter statement in Buddhist terms, as “that universally recognized formula for karma.”⁶⁶ Johnson pushes on King’s work further, arguing that political and economic enfranchisement is not enough. Like King, Johnson critiques American materialism, and even goes so far as to reference parenthetically the shenanigans of Wall Street in 2002, ostensibly the massive corruption and greed that led to the downfall of Enron. In this way, Johnson responds to Du Bois and King by situating the practice of Buddhism as a potential alternative orientation for black America. For Johnson, Buddhism offers a counter to the materialism promoted by capitalism, and, as importantly, a different orientation on the notion of freedom. Therefore, to secure the promise set forth by the great civil rights leaders, African-Americans must continue to push toward ultimate freedom, which is promised by Buddhism. To concretize this point, Johnson notes various black Americans (such as Alice Walker, Tina Turner, and bell hooks) who are currently practicing Buddhists.

Buddhism Battles Capitalism, or Meditation Instead of Mediation

While Johnson does provide Buddhism as an alternative orientation for African-Americans, he also sets up the religion as countering capitalist destruction of individual potentialities, especially of black Americans. In two essays from *Turning the Wheel*, “The Elusive Art of ‘Mindfulness’” and “Reading the Eightfold Path,” Johnson critiques what he calls the “carnival culture” of America and how Buddhist practice would counter it. The former essay deals with the valuable yet difficult training of meditation, and how it affects the process of reading and writing. In the latter essay, the author explains in

⁶⁶ Charles Johnson, *Turning the Wheel* p. xvi.

expert detail the meaning and value of the Eightfold Path, a Buddhist map of eight practices that point the way to enlightenment.

In "The Elusive Art of 'Mindfulness'" Johnson discusses how meditation can lead to a state of mindfulness in which the individual "is wholly and selflessly aware of every nuance in [an] activity and immersed in it."⁶⁷ Such mindfulness is at odds with commercial interests intent on mining attention-energy for profit. Johnson writes,

Sadly, for most Americans, that kind of concentration and nonattachment... is elusive, particularly in a TV-oriented and movie-drenched carnival culture that produces a short attention span in a population relentlessly bombarded by trivial distractions and weighted down by ego baggage -- elusive, that is, until one learns to carefully observe the behavior of the mind and make it one's servant.⁶⁸

Johnson postulates meditation as a counter to the media's funneling of attention-energy into the maintenance of globalizing corporate networks. This media apparatus seems directly implicated in the production of "trivial distractions" and "ego baggage." For Johnson, meditation would lead to an experience of nonattachment, in which the individual no longer feels the pull of material goods. But he implies further benefits as the individual practitioner develops: the dedicated practice of meditation would lead to a decrease, if not an outright cessation, of media viewing, thereby limiting the attention-energy being siphoned to support corporate networks.

This critique of media continues in "Reading the Eightfold Path," in which Johnson enumerates and explains the eight orientations of the path. Among these orientations is what Johnson terms *Perfect Speech*. Under this injunction, the Buddha instructs his followers to use language to help end suffering and illusion, rather than perpetuate them. After explaining the meaning by quoting the Buddha, Johnson links

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

this caution to media: "Consider Shakyamuni's admonition *Waste not the time with empty words* in light of how in America, and elsewhere in the world, we daily abuse the power of language, diminish and trivialize it and use talk as merely another form of entertainment, or a way to amuse ourselves and others: to pass the time or simply fill the silence that envelops us."⁶⁹ While Johnson is also gesturing toward other abuses of language, he clearly points at the media as well, especially electronic media, which are often viewed as nothing more than entertainment, amusement, or companionship for idle hours. Here, words operate as a detriment to Buddhist mindfulness, and the inducement to continually speak and/or listen mines attention-energy that can be sold by media corporations, propping up a globalized corporate world. If words and entertainment detract from mindfulness, individuals have no opportunity to examine their interdependent nature, the realization of which, for Johnson, would limit attachment to material goods. For Johnson, this abuse of language debilitates the efforts of those using words to bring enlightenment, those "pointing to the moon." Johnson also implicates capitalist media in the propagation of violence, especially as it relates to African-Americans, as entertainment and recreation, since profit motivates the production of such "talk."

If we were to practice *Perfect Speech*, Johnson contends, it would be a step toward his vision of a society that fostered the development of every individual. He writes, "All my life I've wondered what it would be like to live in a society where, instead of men and women insulting and tearing each other down, people in their social relations, and even in the smallest ways, held the highest intellectual, moral, creative,

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

and spiritual expectations for one another.”⁷⁰ Johnson's vision, then, seems predicated on the elimination of the capitalist media apparatus, since it is one of the most pervasive purveyors of destructive talk and of violence. Johnson demonstrates that Buddhism offers some direct traction on the propagation of capitalism.

Reading Black Experience as Buddhist

One of the more interesting – and problematic – rhetorical moves that Johnson makes is to re-read black experience through a Buddhist filter. In several essays in *Turning the Wheel*, Johnson positions the realizations of African-American figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, and Martin Luther King, Jr. as Buddhist insights. At best, such a move has the ability to position Buddhism as *the* fundamental insight into human nature, since a Buddhist, Johnson argues, underlies the suffering and experiences of such figures. At worst, such a move threatens to destabilize and trivialize the meaning of Buddhism, since the specific insights of these figures are decontextualized from their (often Christian) roots. The verbal expression of interdependence, for example, is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for establishing that something is Buddhist. For instance, modern biology and quantum physics (and many other disciplines) recognize interdependence as a key *modus operandi*, but they are clearly not Buddhist. For these reasons, Johnson's rhetorical move proves problematic.

In “Reading the Eightfold Path” Johnson specifically links a Buddhist understanding of interdependence to the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. He begins the paragraph with a quote on Buddhist ontology from Thich Nhat Hanh, a well-known Vietnamese Buddhist monk whom King recommended for the Nobel Peace Prize. Thich

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

notes that Buddhism stresses the lack of an abiding self, that “there is no such thing as an individual.”⁷¹ In Buddhism, this aspect is tied directly to Emptiness and is its corollary; all phenomena are relational in nature and therefore empty, or vice versa.

Consider how Johnson connects King to this Buddhist understanding:

All beings are relational and appear, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. put it during the Birmingham campaign in 1963, ‘caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.’ Knowing that ‘all life is interrelated,’ this Civil Rights leader, who was surely an American Gandhi, said, ‘We are everlasting debtors to known and unknown men and women.... When we arise in the morning, we go into the bathroom where we reach for a sponge provided for us by a Pacific Islander. We reach for soap that is created for us by a Frenchman. The towel is provided by a Turk. Than at the table we drink coffee, which is provided for us by a South American, or tea by a Chinese, or cocoa by a West African. Before we leave for our jobs, we are beholden to more than half the world.’⁷²

Johnson directly binds King’s understanding to the Buddhist worldview by using a phrase (“caught in an inescapable network of mutuality”) to explain the Buddhist position that Johnson had just presented. In effect, King explains the Buddhist worldview offered by Thich, except that he doesn’t.⁷³ King explains the process of interdependence stylistically and powerfully, but, as suggested before, interdependence is recognized in many disciplines as a fundamental systemic working. Buddhism has no monopoly on the notion of interdependence. Using Johnson’s logic, it would be just as correct to say that King supports modern ideas of quantum physics, since such science relies heavily, even fundamentally, on notions of interdependence.

Johnson’s use of King’s speech is quite interesting and ironic on other grounds as well. As powerful as King’s oratory is, it seems bound by economic diction –

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁷³ Johnson makes a similar move at the start of the next paragraph, where he states, “Thich Nhat Hanh and Dr. King understand ‘Right View’ as, first and foremost, a perception of reality as a *We*-relation” (10). Only through the imputation of Johnson does King understand “Right View.”

including words such as “debtors” and “beholden” as well as the variety of commodities that are imported from across the world. For those who provide us their products, we are indebted; King develops a plainly economic metaphor. King’s word choice plays explicitly and almost exclusively on *economic* interdependence, stressing the value to everyone of integrating blacks into the broader economic world, since everyone is benefited or short-changed by their inclusion or exclusion, respectively. In short, through his explanation, King gestures toward economic globalization or interdependence – not spiritual interdependence – as the goal for African-Americans. At best, King only implies the spiritual element through the complete interdependence of all things, at least in this passage. Yet, to further solidify his spiritual interpretation amid all this economic rhetoric, Johnson compares King to “an American Gandhi.” As Singh argues, “Civil rights, King argued, were just the beginning of a struggle that revolved around housing, employment, and economic justice, the root struggles of the long civil rights era.”⁷⁴ In his bid to connect King to Buddhism (oddly through Gandhi), Johnson decontextualizes King’s speech to such an extent that it loses its historical significance as an argument for the inclusion of African-Americans in the broader economy.

This re-positioning and re-interpretation of King are at least somewhat ironic and also ironically appropriate, given Johnson’s insistence on moving the orientation of black experience from “vulgar” materialism to the spiritual freedom of Buddhism, and more so, given the persistent economic marginalization of blacks. Johnson has to walk a tight line here. Whalen-Bridge notes Johnson’s displeasure with the black cultural nationalism that took over following King’s assassination, and shows that Johnson blames America as a whole for losing King’s vision, an act that allowed “beloved

⁷⁴ Nikhil Pal Singh, p. 13.

community” to be replaced by “identity politics.” Whalen-Bridge also notes the curse of canonization for King, and that despite the ubiquity of images of King, the nonviolence and integration that he promoted have been largely ignored.⁷⁵ Yet a political identity is what may allow African-Americans to gain some measure of economic equality, even as it expands the penetration of the capitalism. That Johnson recommends spiritual succor in a non-politicized identity when earthly delights are not possible smacks uneasily of the use of Christianity as a means to subjugate or internally discipline slaves and former slaves.

Johnson makes a similar rhetorical move later on, although he positions King less egregiously and ties him into the Buddhist understanding less directly. As Johnson argues that committed Buddhists eventually see the necessity of social action for the relief of suffering, he links King to the “followers of Buddhadharma.”⁷⁶ Such practitioners “will, [Johnson] believe[s], share the dreams stated by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1964 when he said, ‘Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts....Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time....The foundation of such a method is love.’”⁷⁷ Unlike in the previous passage, here Johnson attenuates the connection between King and Buddhism, linking them together because they share the common values of love and nonviolence. Johnson does not try to use either Buddhism or King as an underpinning for the other. Instead, the second passage stresses the complementarity of the two worldviews, a move that seems more Buddhist in its insistence on harmony and mutual

⁷⁵ John Whalen-Bridge, “Waking Cain,” p. 517.

⁷⁶ Charles Johnson, *Turning the Wheel* p. 26.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

contribution. This latter positioning avoids the awkwardness of the previous passage and its virtual declaration of King as Buddhist.

Johnson reads the suffering induced by the slave experience as leading to the specific insights of 20th-century black-American life and the movement toward political freedom and subsequently Buddhism. In "A Sangha by Another Name" Johnson summarizes the slave experience, from coming to the New World to the actual life in the United States. Then, despite the laws propounded by the Emancipation Proclamation, Johnson states, well into the 20th century, black life consisted of Jim Crow laws, "disenfranchisement, anger, racial dualism, second-class citizenship" and, citing W.E.B. Du Bois, "double-consciousness."⁷⁸ Johnson uses this synopsis as a way to frame black experience as suffering, and to show how all black Americans were primed for the specific relief of suffering offered by Buddhism. Amid such suffering, the author posits, black Americans turned to Christianity, or had it foisted upon them by white Americans in order to make them docile. Yet, Johnson argues that African-Americans greatly expanded upon the Christian Church and used it as a means to realize social aims and freedom, even if in the afterlife. Johnson then characterizes the Christian Church as dualistic and thoroughly Western, in order to position Buddhism as the next step in the process of black liberation. He details the Christian church's "metaphysically dualistic" moral vision, which "partitions the world into good and evil, heaven and hell."⁷⁹ Such a formulation is based upon "an immortal soul that no worldly suffering can harm" and "the agapic love of a merciful Father."⁸⁰ For Johnson, as a Buddhist, such a dualistic cosmology is necessarily incomplete. Johnson concludes: "Christianity, in part, made

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

black Americans a genuinely Western people, on the whole identical in their strivings and sense of how the world works with Northern Europeans in the Judeo-Christian tradition."⁸¹ Johnson uses this characterization of the similarity of ontological/metaphysical beliefs as an indication that black Americans have been too closely assimilated into the white Judeo-Christian tradition and its attendant problems, especially its over-concern with material objects.

To counter this over-concern and posit a distinct and distinctly spiritual direction for black America, Johnson turns to the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, namely his speech "Criteria of Negro Art." In the lecture, Du Bois suggests to his audience of NAACP members that what they really desire is not the "tawdry and flamboyant" but rather "a beautiful world" in which "men know, ... men create, ... realize themselves and... enjoy life."⁸² To emphasize the spiritual dimension of Du Bois, Johnson recites his predecessor: "What do we want?"⁸³ Here, Johnson shifts the dialogue of black rights from the demands for economic equality and opportunity to those for spiritual transcendence. Johnson writes:

Du Bois urged them not to let their ennobling journey to greater freedom degenerate into a selfish, vulgar hedonism, or a desire for the ephemeral baubles that the least enlightened member of WASP America so jealously guarded. No, I do not believe he saw freedom's fulfillment taking the form of shopping at Saks Fifth Avenue, or Andy Warhol's 15 minutes of fame, or in the egoistic pursuit of things cheap, banal, and self-centered.⁸⁴

With this shift, Johnson, and Du Bois before him, re-align the Civil Rights movement – and black identity – as profoundly spiritual/existential in nature. In effect, the goal of equal rights becomes an opportunity to redress fundamental spiritual wrongs of the

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

(white) Western world and bring to the table a distinctly harmonious worldview that recognizes the sanctity of everyone.

This re-alignment is of particular importance to Johnson's reading of Buddhism as the invocation of Civil Rights principles and ideals, especially the idea that people should not be viewed as things. That position seems to mesh with Singh's reading of Du Bois as an advocate of neither assimilationist nor segregationist tendencies. Singh argues that Du Bois blended the civilizationist rhetoric of 19th century black nationalism with the hybridized culture of America in order to ask "that the nation and the world recognize the freed slave as a 'co-worker in the kingdom of culture.'"⁸⁵ For Singh as well as for Cynthia A. Young, Du Bois linked the struggles of African-Americans with the oppressed in other countries, connecting the practice of anti-imperialism with anti-racism.⁸⁶ Such a move resounds well with Johnson's previous comments on avoiding the commodification incumbent in capitalist systems of production and consumption, which threaten to reduce the individual – and the racialized individuals – into a commodity.

In the same essay, Johnson continues to establish the Civil Rights movement as fundamentally (alternatively) spiritual in nature. Yet, here, despite his earlier insistence on Buddhism as the spiritual direction for black Americans, Johnson seems to engage in equivocation: any alternative spirituality seems to play an acceptable role in the spiritual liberation of African-Americans. In response to Du Bois's question "What do we want?", Johnson answers and shows how African-American intellectuals at least since the early 20th century have turned to Eastern spiritualities. He writes, "As early as the

⁸⁵ Nikhil Pal Singh, pp. 212 – 213.

⁸⁶ Cynthia A. Young, p. 2.

1920s, some black Americans were quietly investigating Far Eastern philosophies such as Hinduism and the Theravada and Mahayana traditions of Buddhism after experiencing Du Bois's 'flashes of clairvoyance.' Preeminent among the spiritual seekers was Jean Toomer.⁸⁷ Johnson goes on to note that Toomer studied and taught the philosophy of George Gurdjieff for several summers in Europe. As Johnson notes, Gurdjieff offers "an original restatement of esoteric wisdom influenced by Tibetan and Sufi teachings," which was called the Fourth Way.⁸⁸ Unexplainably, seemingly any type of Eastern spirituality becomes an alternative for black Americans to explore their identity, a move that appears to replicate Chow's concerns about the ethnic being used a means to protest.

Johnson further ties Toomer to a Buddhist understanding by reading some of the aphorisms in Toomer's work *Essentials*. Although Johnson has just shown how Toomer studied a derivative of Sufi and Tibetan teachings, he now connects him explicitly to Buddhism. Johnson writes,

He observed that 'I is a word, but the worm is real,' letting us know that the self was in part a product of language, which can conceal as much as it reveals about the world. He understood, as the earliest Buddhists did, that 'the assumption of existence rests upon an uninterrupted series of pictures' and, more important, that 'whatever is, is sacred.' And he knew that all things are interdependent and transitory. He was no stranger to the renunciation of an illusory, empirical ego.⁸⁹

Johnson's reading of Toomer as Buddhist is, at best, half-supported. Some of Toomer's phrases might also seem equally representative of a postmodern or poststructural view, for example, the aphorism "I is a word, but the worm is real." In fact, Johnson does not support well those assertions about Toomer's character or literary accomplishments that

⁸⁷ Charles Johnson, *Turning the Wheel* p. 50.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

seem most distinctly Buddhist – interdependence and the illusory ego – although he does later cite the aphorism “the realization of nothingness is the first act of being.”⁹⁰ That Johnson briefly slips into an equivocation in which any alternative Eastern religion is acceptable for African-Americans suggests the extent to which he earnestly desires to re-read the Civil Rights movement as profoundly interested in spiritual matters over material ones. Such a desire is further borne out in his novels *Middle Passage* and *Dreamer*.

Middle Passage as the Middle Way

In at least one essay, Johnson comes quite close to repeating Asante’s vision of Afrocentrism that he had previously rejected. That Johnson envisions blacks as having deeper spiritual roots than white culture is evidenced in his essay “A Sangha by Another Name” in *Turning The Wheel*. He writes, “Can anyone doubt that if there is an essence – an *eidos* – to black American life, it has for three centuries been *craving*, and a quest for identity and liberty, which, pushed to its social extremes, propelled this pursuit beyond the relative, conceptual realities of race and culture to a deeper investigation of the meaning of freedom?”⁹¹ Such a positioning seems close to both traditional stereotypical depictions of blacks as inherently more spiritual than white America and Chow’s thesis that the ethnic comes to stand for protest against mainstream (white) America.

In the same essay, Johnson seems to reinforce this point when he talks of his award-winning novel, *Middle Passage*. In describing the African tribe called the Allmuseri, who form the central cargo aboard an America-bound ship, Johnson admits

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* p. 47.

that they are "a rather Buddhist African tribe."⁹² In the novel, the Allmuseri rebel and overthrow the captain, ultimately taking charge of the ship, and try to return it to their homeland. This representation seems to position Buddhism and Africans as forces that threaten the symbolically named American ship *Republic*, the slaving vessel on which the novel's action occurs. At the same time, Buddhism seems to be a force that civilizes the impulse for rebellion. For example, a type of Buddhist understanding comes to the narrator and protagonist Rutherford Calhoun and allows him to return to what he had previously seen as an overly domestic America and even marry his former lover, from whom he had initially run. Johnson uses the novel to highlight slavery not just as a historical physical condition but also as a mental condition that can affect all humans, regardless of whether they are physically enslaved. That position is echoed by many critics, including Elizabeth Muther and Barbara Thaden.⁹³ Retman also notes how Johnson challenges the classic slave narrative's reliance on a fixed identity.⁹⁴

Johnson incorporates Buddhism into the text in a variety of different ways. Perhaps most interesting is his use of doubling to highlight how class roles and physical characteristics such as skin color are illusory phenomena that mask an interdependent reality. The theme of interdependence is further deepened by Johnson's extensive use of intertextuality, a hallmark of his style. Critics Marc Steinberg and Helen Lock note

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁹³ Elizabeth Muther, p. 655. Muther writes, "And yet [Calhoun's] lust for experience, unmediated and unanswerable, makes him the stepchild of the *Republic*, freed from slavery only to find himself without any positive conception of what his freedom is good for, of what it could be."

Barbara Z. Thaden, p. 757. Thaden tries to contextualize Johnson's position: "Some readers may find in poor taste Johnson's using the plot structure of a slave narrative to support the theme that slavery is a *state of mind*. Yet Johnson is only taking Douglass's themes to their ultimate logical conclusion for today's American reading audience, who are not and never have been slaves."

⁹⁴ Sonnet Retman, p. 429. Retman refers specifically to Johnson's use in *Oxherding Tale*, but Johnson's position follows on to *Middle Passage*.

Johnson's reliance on Herman Melville's novella *Benito Cereno*.⁹⁵ Steinberg and Tuire Valkeakari points out that Johnson goes so far as to use Melville's characters from that story as Allmuseri ship mutineers.⁹⁶ Valkeakari too notes the connection with the Melville tale, and has argued that both authors advocate “destabilizing fixed, stagnant views on alleged Others and envisioning novel ways of seeing.”⁹⁷

Although mentioned by only a few critics, the novel's title does double duty as well, with middle passage having resonance not only as a historical event/practice of slavery but also as in its invocation of the Buddhist middle way. Brian Fagel notes the multiple ways in which Calhoun's identity as African-American is placed in the middle of the rest of the crew (white and black, captain and crew, slave and free). Fagel writes: “As with every instance of Calhoun's middleness, his confinement is a combination of externally imposed exclusion and internally realized difference. This mode of subject construction ... opposes any totalizing version of the self.”⁹⁸ Ultimately, each group rejects the African-American freedman. That isolation in the middle leads to the narrator's ultimate realization that slavery can be a mental as well as physical phenomenon. As a result, the existential condition that Calhoun faces on board the ship comes to represent not just the fate of one man but rather of all mankind. Such a universalizing process, however, has a tendency to erase the particularities of any given individuals, and it should be noted that the ship – both crew and cargo -- was dominated exclusively by men. I'll return to this point in the analysis of the novel's conclusion.

⁹⁵ Marc Steinberg, p. 376.

Helen Lock, p. 54.

⁹⁶ Marc Steinberg, p. 378.

Tuire Valkeakari, p. 229.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 248. The connection with Melville is particularly fascinating inasmuch as Melville becomes interested in Buddhism late in his life, although Valkeakari does not mention this point.

⁹⁸ Brian Fagel, p. 626.

Johnson introduces Calhoun as an individual who longs for the exotic experience and shies away from domestic society. As the narrator, Calhoun reveals that he lives in New Orleans, “a city tailored to [... his] taste for the excessive, exotic fringes of life.”⁹⁹ Just a moment later, he admits that he is “hooked on sensation ... a lecher for perception and the nerve-knocking thrill, like a shot of opium, of new ‘experiences.’”¹⁰⁰ As Calhoun is concluding that “the wage of the family man was coronary thrombosis,” a female admirer, Isadora, tries to win him. He is turned off by her conventional attitudes: “Don't be common. Comb your hair. Be a credit to the Race. Strive, like the Creoles, for respectability. Class.”¹⁰¹ Calhoun balks at these middle-class values; instead, he prefers a life of thievery and adventure amid the demimonde of the Crescent city. He insists on not becoming what his brother had become – “shackled to subservience ... ‘a gentleman of color.’”¹⁰² When he is blackmailed into marrying Isadora, he refuses and turns to the sea, inadvertently stowing aboard a slave-trading vessel bound for Africa. Yet, as Muther points out, Calhoun’s “bondage to his own desiring...makes his own adventuring a parody of escape.”¹⁰³ Calhoun eventually must resolve this conflict between the selfishness of his own desires and the social demands of a larger community.

Aboard the vessel, Calhoun comes to learn that adventure takes on imperialist and capitalist overtones. Calhoun soon meets the epitome of adventuring – Captain Ebenezer Falcon of the *Republic*, whose vessel stands for America and its republican, imperialist, and capitalist ideals. Even the name *Ebenezer*, as in Scrooge, seems to

⁹⁹ Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Elizabeth Muther, p. 652.

suggest the character's cupidity. Falcon functions as a Faust-like and imperialist character, having vast stores of knowledge and treasures from across the world. The narrator notes that the captain was reputed to know seven African languages and had the ability to learn any new language in just two weeks. He adds,

He'd proven it with Hottentot, and lived among their tribe for a month, plundering their most sacred religious shrines. He'd gone hunting for the source of the Nile.... He'd translated the *Bardo Thodol* -- this, after stealing the only scroll from a remote temple in Tibet -- and if the papers can be believed, he was a patriot whose burning passion was the manifest destiny of the United States to Americanize the entire planet.¹⁰⁴

In his search for the root of the Nile and theft of the Tibetan scroll, Falcon embodies exactly the ideal of Western penetration of the East that Žižek critiques. Moreover, the narrator later reveals that Falcon is hoarding, in his cabin, a vast storehouse of similar treasures from across the world. These artifacts included "Etruscan vases, Persian silk prayer carpets, and portfolios of Japanese paintings and rice papers. Temple scrolls... precious tablets, and works so exotic... that Falcon's crew of fortune hunters could have taken them only by midnight raids and murder."¹⁰⁵ The narrator explains unambiguously the processes propelling the captain's rapine: "He had a standing order from his financiers, powerful families in New Orleans who underwrote the *Republic*, to stock Yankee museums and their homes with whatever of value was not nailed down in the nations he visited. To bring back slaves, yes, but to salvage the best of their war shocked cultures too."¹⁰⁶ Significantly, Johnson connects such adventuring with imperialism, and Falcon's personal practice of subsuming the Other, whether physically or intellectually, reflects the larger national practice of manifest destiny. Therefore,

¹⁰⁴ Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* p. 30.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 48 – 49.

Falcon embodies the traditional imperialist ideals of American civilization and its emphasis on the expansion and arrogation of the self.

Johnson expands on and critiques the psychology of such an individual bent on subsuming the Other. To portray these insights into Falcon's character, Johnson has Calhoun sneak into the captain's cabin to read his journal. The narrator describes how Falcon became a pirate and slave trader amid a capitalist climate that financially rewarded such behavior. He writes, "In a dangerous world, a realm of disasters, a place of grief and pain, a sensible man made *himself* dangerous, more frightening than all the social and political 'accidents' that might befall him.... A magister ludi of the Hard Life."¹⁰⁷ In this passage, Johnson sets up the world as a place full of suffering, a fundamental Buddhist understanding, in order to later contrast his portrayal of Falcon. Using the words *sensible* and *accidents* ironically, Johnson suggests that Falcon's actions are not at all sensible, at least in light of Johnson's Buddhism; indeed, Johnson seems to critique the Nietzschean vision of strength as subsuming the world by becoming more clever or diabolical. Moreover, the quotation of *accidents* suggests that Falcon brings misfortune upon himself through his self-serving actions.

Johnson continues the critique in the following paragraph, intimating that Falcon is a vision of Emerson. Through such a comparison, Johnson criticizes one of the key strands of American psychology – rational individualism. From the captain's journal entries, the narrator concludes that Falcon

possessed a few of the solitary virtues and the entire twisted will of Puritanism: a desire to achieve perfection; the loneliness, self-punishment, and bouts of suicide this brings; and a profound disdain for anyone who failed to meet his nearly superhuman standards. He attributed his knack for survival in uncertain times to a series of exercises he developed, written in Latin, French, and Greek -- for he

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

thought simultaneously in all three languages -- under the heading "Self-Reliance."¹⁰⁸

Although he does not mention Emerson by name, Johnson's suggestion is clear with the mention of Puritanism and "Self-Reliance" – the latter of which is perhaps Emerson's best known essay. For Johnson, the rational individualism proposed by Emerson, if taken to its logical conclusion, leads to psychological desolation and corruption, with the concomitant desire to subsume everything into oneself.

By mentioning three great philosophical languages, Johnson even implicates much of the Western philosophical lineage in the privileging of the rational individual as sacrosanct, and even again suggests a critique of Nietzsche with the use of the word *superhuman*. In fact, out of context the passage could almost pass as a description of Nietzsche. Later, the narrator describes how Falcon inures himself to hardship by toiling while other sailors slept, training himself to endure extreme heat and cold, and performing calisthenics to improve his eyesight. The narrator concludes, "Culture, in his view, came from an Icarian, *causa sui* impulse I found difficult to decipher. Not surprisingly, he saw himself as profoundly misunderstood."¹⁰⁹ Again, Johnson points out the individualist underpinnings of Falcon's conduct, which obliquely evoke Nietzsche's insistence on strength and Emerson's aphorism on being misunderstood from his essay *Self-Reliance*. Therefore, through his portrayal of Falcon as the culmination of American ideals of individualism and rationalism combined with capitalism, Johnson sets up America – and thus the *Republic* – as ripe for a revolution, especially a Buddhist one. Johnson underscores the infeasibility of the Western

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

conception of the self through the death of Falcon at the hands of the Buddhist Allmuseri tribe.

To contrast and contend with the overly individual focus of Falcon, Johnson portrays the Allmuseri tribe, whom Falcon has bought for a pittance of commercial goods, as emblems of some Buddhist understanding, which is, however, never specified as Buddhist. For example, Johnson shows the tendency of the Allmuseri to see events or people in irreducibly particularist terms and as elements of flux, a typically Buddhist understanding and experience of the world. This practice is explained by using the tribe's language. The narrator says, "Nouns or static substances hardly existed in their vocabulary at all. A 'bed' was called a 'resting,' a 'robe' a 'warming.'"¹¹⁰ Such "verbals" recapitulate the technique that Gary Snyder uses to elide the perceiving subject, as I discussed in the previous chapter, to make it seem as if events simply happen. Moments later, the narrator adds, "When Ngonyama [an Allmuseri tribesman] talked to his tribesmen it was as if the objects and others he referred to flowed together like water, taking different forms, as the sea could now be fluid, now solid ice, now steam swirling around the mizzenpole."¹¹¹ Through such descriptions, Johnson suggests that the Allmuseri have the ability to experience reality not as reified accretion of individualized objects, but as the actual temporary manifestations of flux. Johnson's reference to water here also connects the tribe to Buddhist imagery, since water is a traditional symbol of impermanence and flux in Asian Buddhist cultures.

Johnson further highlights the contrast between the Allmuseri and Falcon through other differences in their languages that characterize their various ontological

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

perspectives. When Calhoun seeks to learn about the Allmuseri language and finally does witness the pictograms that comprise the language, he says that he is able only to “relax.”¹¹² Calhoun explains further, “You had to look at the characters, ...grasping the meaning – and relation to other characters – in a single intuitive snap.”¹¹³ Here, in an attempt to provide a Buddhist flavor, Johnson suggests the completely relational nature of the language, especially how it resists any type of piecemeal understanding; in short, meaning can only be grasped intuitively as a whole. This position is further clarified as Calhoun continues: “It was not, I gathered, a good language for doing analytic work, or deconstructing things into discrete parts, which probably explained why the Allmuseri had no empirical science to speak of, at least not as we understood that term. To Falcon that made them savages.”¹¹⁴ In order to counterpoint the views of Falcon as a representative American who holds analytic rational knowledge above all, Johnson describes the Allmuseri in terms that showcase their unity, through their language, science, and overall worldview. More to the point, these elements are shaded with a Buddhist color in order to highlight the foibles of the American intellectual tradition.

The Allmuseri are used as a double for American culture even further through their heritage, which seems to be an amalgam of various cultures across the world. Such a multi-cultural positioning challenges the traditional Cold War consensus of America as a nation of white, male Protestants. It also suggests, as Chow argues, how ethnicity is being used to shape a protest against the white consensus. Calhoun explains the origin story of the Allmuseri thus:

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 77 – 78.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Once they had been a seafaring people...and deposited their mariners in that portion of India later called Harappa, where they blended with its inhabitants, the Dravidians....Between 1000 B.C. and 500 B.C. they sailed to Central America ... from the west coast of Africa...bringing their skills in agriculture and metallurgy to the Olmec....Specifically, their martial-art techniques resembled Brazilian *capoeira*. Over time these elegant moves ... had become elements in their ceremonial dance.¹¹⁵

The description of their genealogy begins with India, almost as if that region were the origin of the Allmuseri; only later is it made clear that they came from the west coast of Africa. This representation plays off the stereotypical representations of India as the land of mysticism and, of course, as the birthplace of Buddhism. Much more interesting is the conflation of ethnicities that marks the Allmuseri, almost as if they come to represent all non-white races in their protest. Also noted is their use of *capoeira*, which is explained in aesthetic terms, a rhetorical move that evokes Weber's critique of rationalization. This positioning of the Allmuseri as a kind of Ur-ethnic resonates with their key action in the novel – the overthrow of the *Republic's* leaders and the assumption of control. Here, their position as ethnics, and especially as Buddhists, seems to validate their desire to be free from oppression.

The Allmuseri's rebellion also allows Johnson to suggest how violence is propagated by the formation of racialized identities. Johnson takes great pains to stress the unified vision of the Allmuseri, because this characterization is essential if the author wants to argue that the slave trade has objectified the tribe into a racialized Other. Johnson states, "I wanted to create a tribe culturally that was counterpoised to the materialism of the West. I wanted this to be the most spiritual tribe imaginable. I wanted it to be a whole tribe of Mother Teresas and Gandhis."¹¹⁶ Elsewhere, Johnson has

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 76 – 77.

¹¹⁶ Marian Blue, p. 135.

stated, "Imagine Shangri-la as a people."¹¹⁷ As Scott argues, Johnson needs to keep this dualism "in play in order to erect a set of alternative responses and possibilities."¹¹⁸ Through an economic process that denies the possibility of agency and interiority to this racial Other, this formation of identity creates the ontological basis for the Allmuseri's subsequent ability to do violence to the white crew. As Selzer argues, "As embodied subject, Johnson suggests, the Other is capable of his own objectifications – of transgressing the boundaries of self and of remaking the world according to his own needs, aims, and desires."¹¹⁹

Johnson suggests that the divide created by such racialized identity is maintained not simply by whites but also by blacks and by a cycle of violence that continues to perpetuate the myth of a distinct identity based on race. For example, the author stresses the fact that not only white investors had engaged in funding the slave trade on board the *Republic*, but also at least one black investor, namely Papa Zeringue, whose involvement is exposed at the end of the novel. Helen Lock also notes how the reversal of roles of slave and slave trader recapitulates the theme of doubling that flows throughout the novel, suggesting that these individuals are actually each other.¹²⁰ Nash and Little presciently note how the Allmuseri undertake a purging of white culture on the ship and that these actions represent an extreme form of black cultural nationalism.¹²¹ Through this structure Johnson suggests that racial identity is

¹¹⁷ William R. Nash, "A Conversation With Charles Johnson," p. 227.

¹¹⁸ Daniel M. Scott III, p. 647.

¹¹⁹ Linda Selzer, p. 113.

¹²⁰ Helen Lock, p. 56.

¹²¹ William R. Nash, *Charles Johnson's Fiction* p.144.

Jonathan Little, *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination* p. 148.

yet another mask of illusion and that the exploitation of racial identity can result in power and profit for a select few individuals who choose to do so.

While it may seem that Johnson acts as an apologist for the Allmuseri's violence, his position is more nuanced. Johnson suggests symbolically that ongoing racial violence threatens to scuttle the American republic, an action that is represented by the sinking of the *Republic* following the Allmuseri's mutiny. While such physical violence aboard ship may be expected, given the psychic violence (and later physical) created by racialized identities, it nevertheless is unjustified for Johnson. Instead, Johnson suggests through the experiences of one of the few survivors, Rutherford Calhoun, that the path out of the quagmire of racial identity requires a practice and acceptance of non-identity, a position that would allow the racial divide to heal. Virginia Smith agrees and notes how Johnson dramatically re-figures the Afrocentric work of John A. Williams in order to stress the importance and integration of both African and American heritage in healing black Americans.¹²² Moreover, Johnson's opening setting of New Orleans also suggests the racial hybridity that he valorizes.

Although Johnson suggests how Buddhism might be used as a basis for revolution as in the case of the Allmuseri, he also implies that Buddhism is a force that can ultimately civilize or tame the savage. Narrator Rutherford Calhoun serves as the best example of this dynamic, with Johnson casting his experience on board the *Republic* in terms that are reminiscent of Buddhist enlightenment. Calhoun's journey was freighted with personal suffering. In addition to witnessing the mistreatment and deaths of many Allmuseri, Calhoun lost his hair as well as his teeth. During the course of just over two months aboard the ship, Calhoun has adopted a seemingly Buddhist

¹²² Virginia Smith, pp. 669, 672.

ethos. He says, "During each crisis, every action had to be aimed at helping your fellow crewmen. You could not afford to tire.... You must devote yourself to the welfare of everyone."¹²³ These words echo the traditional Buddhist vows to show compassion and loving-kindness, through which the welfare of all is protected.¹²⁴ Calhoun continues: "Looking back at the asceticism of the Middle Passage, I saw how the frame of mind I had adopted left me unattached, like slaves who...put a high premium on living from moment to moment, and this, I realized, was why they did not commit suicide."¹²⁵ Calhoun echoes Buddhist diction here such as "unattached" and "living from moment to moment." Moreover, with the mention of suicide, Calhoun seems to gesture back to Falcon, who faced similar suicidal impulses. Calhoun's comment, therefore, serves as an indirect criticism of Falcon's rational individualist approach to life and its attendant effects.

But is Johnson arguing for simply a replacement of Calhoun's earlier behavior with an Allmuseri mentality? Page cautions against such a view because it has the possibility of becoming a "limiting monologism," and argues instead that the narrator must adopt the Allmuseri position as one of many worldviews.¹²⁶ Lock argues that Johnson never resolves the paradox of dualism and that each side must continually strive to destroy each other and that "the novel offers no... solutions to these problematic issues."¹²⁷ Barbara Thaden suggests that Johnson shows how "to be neither the victim nor the oppressor."¹²⁸ Appropriately, then, Calhoun continues to

¹²³ Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* pp. 186 – 187.

¹²⁴ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* p. 104.

¹²⁵ Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* p. 187.

¹²⁶ Philip Page, p. 131.

¹²⁷ Helen Lock, p. 64.

¹²⁸ Barbara Z. Thaden, p. 764.

describe his new understanding in seemingly Buddhist terms, a reading that Little supports.¹²⁹ He writes, “The voyage had irreversibly changed my seeing, made of me a cultural mongrel, and transformed the world into a fleeting shadow play I felt no need to possess or dominate, only appreciate in the ever extended present. Colors had been more vivid at sea, water *wetter*, ice *colder*.”¹³⁰ Calhoun describes his experience as one in which he transformed into a hybrid (“a cultural mongrel”), since he developed such an appreciation for the Allmuseri and took on some of their understanding but must also contend with his (white) American heritage. This hybridity is exemplified further when Calhoun uses capoeira to take down one of the capitalist slave traders.

Calhoun’s further statements seem to evoke a Buddhist understanding even more; he is able to relinquish the desire to “possess” and “dominate,” indicating that he has developed non-attachment, which is complemented by his ability to appreciate his situation. As the typical practitioner of meditation experiences, his perceptions become much more intense and focused. His experience on board the ship, which is characterized in terms that recall Buddhism, frames his subsequent return to America, and his final comments on his experience show how this erstwhile thief can now be tamed or domesticated so that he can live in America. Hussen notes a similar trend in Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*, which has a radical racial position balanced against “social conventionality” – marriage, property ownership, and a patriarchal nuclear family.¹³¹

When Calhoun does return to America, he is able to integrate into the larger society, by marrying. After the *Republic* is taken over by the Allmuseri, the boat roves around the Atlantic Ocean. When it capsizes, Calhoun is set adrift and is finally fished

¹²⁹ Jonathan Little, *Charles Johnson’s Spiritual Imagination* p. 138.

¹³⁰ Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* p. 187.

¹³¹ Aida Ahmed Hussen, p. 241.

from the ocean by one of the capitalist backers of the original voyage, the black Papa Zeringue. Papa is set to wed Isadora, whom Calhoun had previously refused to marry. By threatening to expose Papa's subterfuge in the concealment of his slave-trading, Calhoun is able to free Isadora and then marry her -- a doubling that recapitulates Isadora's opening blackmail attempt. When they're finally alone, Isadora becomes the sexual aggressor that Calhoun had previously stated that he wanted -- yet another doubling of Calhoun's sexual aggressiveness early on. However, Calhoun is now put off by her forward manner. He explains, "My memories of the Middle Passage kept coming back, reducing the velocity of my desire, its violence, and in place of my longing for feverish love-making left only a vast stillness that felt remarkably full."¹³² Calhoun's new Buddhist understanding has replaced his previous grasping for experience of any type; now he feels full with whatever appears and is seemingly able to appreciate it, without trying to force it to change to his desires. Whalen-Bridge notes how Johnson's story hews closely to the archetypal Buddhist story of leaving home in order to find enlightenment and how Calhoun's sexual abstemiousness is "almost heretical" for a late 20th-century American writer.¹³³ Calhoun's position on sex is all the more heretical given the overemphasis on sex in black masculine identity formations of that era.

He recognizes that his desire for a certain order does violence to the world, even invoking diction ("velocity") that suggests the increasing pace of life under capitalism. Calhoun adds, "Desire was too much of a wound, a rip of insufficiency and incompleteness that kept us, despite our proximity, constantly apart."¹³⁴ As Calhoun's experience has given him some Buddhist understanding of suffering, so has it also

¹³² Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* p. 208.

¹³³ John Whalen-Bridge, "'Whole Sight' in Review: Reflections on Charles Johnson," p. 254.

¹³⁴ Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* p. 208.

reduced those elements in him that attempt to resist typical middle-class ideals of respectability. As evidenced by his marriage and apparent abdication from thievery, Calhoun has been tamed by his new Buddhist understanding and is seemingly able to integrate into the broader social order.

Johnson resolves the central economic aspect of materialism (in the form of capitalism and slavery) that stands at the heart of the novel by transforming it into a social issue. This resolution of the economic through the social has some consonance with Buddhist practice, as I suggested in the previous chapter with Snyder's attempts to establish a proper relationship and even intimacy with the wild as a means to combat capitalism. But are these economic tensions truly resolved in the novel through the social? If the protagonist seems content to return to and integrate into the social order, how that might actually be accomplished, either socially or economically, by an African-American in pre-Civil War America remains unclear. The novel ends with a vision of social harmony as only a negatively represented possibility; that is, the actual integration of Calhoun into society – and not just his marriage to his erstwhile lover – cannot be represented. In the bedroom scene that closes the novel, even their relationship is shown outside the bounds that social and economic constraints would thrust upon African-Americans of the period. Muther suggests that this open ending allows Johnson to avoid the too-easy middle-class marriage plot (suggested also by Isadora's weight loss that stands as "her full commodification as marriage-marketable capital") in favor of valorizing an always-revisable non-materialistic meaning of their relationship.¹³⁵ But this idyllic scene of social intimacy that seems to shut out the rest of the world, ironically, comes to represent Calhoun's broader integration into that world

¹³⁵ Elizabeth Muther, p. 656.

and also represents the resolution of materialist tensions. Oddly, such seclusion seems to support one of the most common charges against Buddhism, namely, its non-involvement in worldly affairs. But, again, are these materialist tensions truly resolved through the social?

Whereas Johnson suggests an affirmative answer to that question, the treatment of Isadora at the conclusion belies another position, one in which economic tensions are defused only for men. Steinberg argues that the idea of home invoked at the novel's end demonstrates multiplicity and decenteredness, and Fagel posits that the colonialist notion of home loses its luster of nostalgia for Calhoun.¹³⁶ Tuire Valkeakari reads the ending scene in Buddhist terms and adds that the ending "reveals their mutual commitment to the kind of partnership and interbeing that neither of them has experienced before."¹³⁷ Little too suggests that Calhoun has overcome his sexism.¹³⁸ But a closer reading that takes gender into account shows something that is ultimately at odds with these positions and corroborates the gender essentialism that Retman sees in *Oxherding Tale*.¹³⁹ While Isadora lies quietly against Calhoun, the narrator explains, "Her warm fingers... were quiet on my chest. Mine, on her hair as the events of the last half year overtook us. Isadora drifted toward rest, nestled snugly beside me."¹⁴⁰ As suggested here and in previous passages, intimacy and completeness seem to be present in the final scene of the novel, at least for the male narrator. For Isadora, who becomes an object of exchange between Papa and Calhoun through the act of

¹³⁶ Marc Steinberg, p. 377.

Brian Fagel, p. 627.

¹³⁷ Tuire Valkeakari, p. 248.

¹³⁸ Jonathan Little, *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination* p. 153.

¹³⁹ Sonnet Retman, p. 432. Retman argues that Johnson engages in an essentializing of women, especially through their ability to bear children, in *Oxherding Tale*.

¹⁴⁰ Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* p. 209.

Calhoun's blackmail, this possibility seems remote. Where she had been the bride-to-be for Papa, she now becomes the bride-to-be for Calhoun. Interestingly, the nomenclature (Papa) suggests the economic transfer of women from father to son-in-law that feminists have long highlighted. In fact, at the end of the novel Calhoun seems to continue to direct Isadora's actions, by rejecting and then redirecting her sexual desire. That representation recapitulates Hussen's argument of *Oxherding Tale*, that "(white) women's sexuality [becomes] the premise for (black) men's political and philosophical agency."¹⁴¹ That gendered resolution does appear to continue from the former novel to the latter.

Calhoun reads Isadora as a reflection of his own Buddhist experience, and her sexual passion from just moments ago becomes sublimated into some deep spiritual understanding. According to the narrator, "What she and I wanted most after so many adventures was the incandescence, very chaste, of an embrace that would outlast the Atlantic's bone-chilling cold."¹⁴² Rather than transcending desire categorically, Calhoun finds yet another new desire, and further projects his own experience and "many adventures" onto Isadora, such that she becomes merely a reflection of his own new desire. Appropriately, then, in this passage Calhoun literally speaks for Isadora, expressing her wants. The economic transaction of Isadora from man to man becomes the means through which Calhoun attains his putative social resolution. Muther writes of the "gendered sacrifice of women to the violence of male denial of the feminine in themselves"¹⁴³ that through Calhoun's desire to be free launches the book. Yet at the novel's end it seems that Calhoun is still not fully capable of recognizing this feminine

¹⁴¹ Aida Ahmed Hussen, p. 249.

¹⁴² Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* p. 209.

¹⁴³ Elizabeth Muther, p. 650.

element. Such a representation is consistent with Muther's claim that "Johnson creates [Isadora] under a consistent mask of misogyny."¹⁴⁴ Ironically, the economic and psychological conundrum of slavery is merely displaced from men onto the woman, constituting the "resolution" for Calhoun.

Cool as a State of Mind

Given Johnson's advocacy of a Buddhist position on capitalism and race issues that undercuts the presuppositions of both political sides, it's rather surprising that he has achieved a measure of renown. Or perhaps not, if the strategy of protesting both sides leads to even more capital. Johnson has provided a new reading on these issues that supports both sides even as it criticizes each. Like the protagonist of *Middle Passage*, Johnson occupies a middle ground that is not simply the revocation of either side, but rather is a profound reorientation based on the Buddhist notion of non-identity. While Johnson's attack on slavery functions as a "soft sell" to both sides of an America enthralled by a capitalist vision of freedom – connoted by the ability to do whatever you want whenever you want – Johnson's more nuanced message that existential freedom requires duty, humility, and the renouncement of self-identity has been largely ignored by an American audience that reads itself as the protectors of the Good, the Beautiful, and the True. For an audience that increasingly derives meaning and defines its identity through the manipulation and consumption of signs, Johnson's vision that slavery is partly a state of mind sounds refreshing and is easy to subscribe to (and surprisingly similar to *The Matrix*.) Cool embodies a state of mind that they can acquire. It's just that this pursuit of cool, for Johnson, is still part of the identity politics that is slavery.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 6 COOL PROJECTIONS: THE ART OF FILMING BUDDHISM

On the eve of debuts by two Tibet-inspired films, a 1997 *Entertainment Weekly* article asked “Can Hollywood Save Tibet?” The article enumerates the many American media celebrities who have worked for the cause:

Richard Gere, who first embraced the Tibetan cause almost 20 years ago, is hopeful. Gere, Harrison Ford, and Ford's wife, *Kundun* screenwriter Melissa Mathison, have been working on behalf of Tibet longer than most in Hollywood, but now they have company: everyone from Oliver Stone, Paul Simon, George Lucas, Ethan Hawke, Uma Thurman, Bernardo Bertolucci, Lisa Henson, and Goldie Hawn to musicians like the Beastie Boys' Adam Yauch, Philip Glass, Natalie Merchant, Michael Stipe, and Bjork. And many in the Tibet movement, including U.S.-based Tibetan refugees, American activists, and Tibet House founder Robert Thurman, say there is little downside to the wave of Tibet chic.¹

Hollywood has come out en masse to support the beleaguered Asian nation. As Tibetan photographer Sonam Zoksang put it: “Six million people in Tibet have had no voice. Now Hollywood is giving them a voice.”²

But, as the article's title suggests, this voice is not Tibet's voice, but rather Hollywood's attempt to play hero, except here in a real-life role. The framing of the question sets up a theme that endures through much of the recent mainstream cinematic accounts of Tibet: if Hollywood is saving Tibet, what is it saving Tibet from? Indeed, this framing opens a host of other questions as well, such as: How will Hollywood save Tibet? And at least as important, why? In fact, wouldn't a more apt title for the article be “Will Tibet Save Hollywood?”? Indeed, as Richard Turner notes, around 1997 Hollywood was out of favor with Wall Street and needed revenue growth

¹ Dana Kennedy, p. 42

² *Ibid.*

more than ever.³ Even Martin Scorsese referred to the movie industry as “feeding off [its] own entrails” due to its lack of story ideas and forms.⁴

Recently Hollywood and the media generally have shown great interest in Tibet as a subject worthy of attention, spawning a wave of what’s been called “Tibetan chic,” which has been documented extensively by Orville Schell and others.⁵ While news reports have trumpeted China’s harsh treatment of the region, the American movie industry has produced films such as *Kundun* and *Seven Years in Tibet* that deal explicitly with the China-Tibet confrontation and others that deal more obliquely with the conflict, such as *Little Buddha*. Ostensibly, such coverage often highlights the human-rights abuses that China has perpetrated and is perpetrating on the homeland of the Dalai Lama. Such abuses include the destruction of Tibet’s native Buddhist culture as well as the violation of fundamental human rights. Yet, why – more than 40 years after China’s initial brutal invasion in 1951 – did Tibet begin to gain attention from American film studios and audiences?

Certainly, the Dalai Lama’s reception of the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize stirred international attention, which David van Biema highlights as the emergence of American interest in Tibet. More significantly, with the end of the Cold War, China has emerged as a serious power that may contest the global economic hegemony of the United States.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Amy Taubin, p. 264.

⁵ Orville Schell

David Van Biema, p. 72. Van Biema defines “Tibet chic” as the popularization of Tibetan issues by the glitterati, and highlights such celebrities as Richard Gere and Adam Yauch, the latter who helped organize two Tibetan Freedom Concerts in the late 1990s.

Philip P. Pan, p. A17. Pan notes how even Chinese see Tibet as a land of cool: “Especially among young, college-educated Chinese in the prosperous cities in the east, Tibet is the cool place to visit, and all things Tibetan are hip.... In many ways these Chinese are interested in Tibet for the same reasons so many Americans and Europeans are: They see this isolated region of snowcapped mountains as a simpler, untainted alternative to the pressures of modern life.”

Dibyesh Anand notes the political history behind much of the noninterest in Tibet, which included the European powers' interest in maintaining their own colonies, the United States' unwillingness to upset China in an era of tense global relations, and the general support of China from other communist nations.⁶ Anand specifically highlights the end of the Cold War as the turning point at which the United States began to engage China on the issue of Tibet.⁷

American anxiety over the growing economic might of the Chinese is mitigated by strategic representation in a dual move – by purifying Tibet and demonizing China. Dibyesh Anand writes: “Representation, especially the Western representation of the non-West, is ...a crucial dynamic of world politics, often supporting the dominant truth regimes and structures of power.”⁸ In their various productions, studios invested tens of millions of dollars to tell tales about Tibet. Perhaps the most interesting and consistent motif among the films is the innocence and purity of the ravaged Tibetans, especially those Buddhists who want nothing more than peace, or so the story goes.⁹ With a well-known ability to re-position images as fashionable and cool, the films cast the tiny Asian nation as one that, through its innocence and purity, can redeem cynical capitalist America.¹⁰ At the same time, these texts represent China as an unmitigated “bad guy,” to put it in Hollywood terms.¹¹ Such films reflect the dilemma of East-West representations, with Tibet and its cultural practices seeming to offer salvation to America, reflecting a dualism of captivity/freedom that Rey Chow and Dibyesh Anand

⁶ Dibyesh Anand, pp. 82-83.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁹ Donald Lopez, “Kundun,” p 228.

¹⁰ Donald Lopez, “New Age Orientalism,” p. 38.

¹¹ Orville Schell, p. 206. Schell also notes America's penchant for underdogs as playing significantly into this tendency.

critique.¹² Finally, such representations of the China-Tibet conflict mitigate an American identity crisis over its global role after the defeat of the communist Soviet Union. As reflected in these films and elsewhere, America's new global role is to save the innocents of the world.¹³

To establish American hegemony, recent films have used Buddhism as a means to underwrite western individualism, but more specifically through the western technological lineage of control. Although specifically Tibet-focused films show the emergence of American-style technology in the Asian nation, the forms are relatively unsophisticated and old enough that such technology appears nonthreatening. Following in the earlier footsteps of Emerson and others, films such as *The Matrix* position the religion as a fundamentally individualistic practice that reveals to the individual the nature of reality – allegedly beyond the capitalist quotidian. These films represent Buddhism as endorsing technologies of control and especially of violence, and they show individuals using these technologies to control every aspect of their existence exactly as they desire it. In the process, Buddhism becomes conflated with ultimate control over one's environment, and portrays such control as a transcendental revelation – as the final insight into reality. This ultimate control – doing that which is beyond the quotidian – is valorized as cool. Because it purports to reveal ultimate reality (and is so represented) and thus provides this omnipotence, Buddhism comes to stand as the *ne plus ultra* of cool. Reality is represented as the escape from capitalism – and thus cool – even as it tethers such activity to capitalism.

¹² Rey Chow, p. 39
Dibyesh Anand, p 49.

¹³ Eve L. Mullen. Mullen also argues that “the Westerners featured in our popular stories are inevitably depicted as authority figures, heroically rescuing the doomed culture of Tibet.”

Representing the China-Tibet Conflict

The key element that allows Tibet to take on this otherworldly cachet is its intimate association with Buddhism, which, if you believe the films and previous representations, seems to have structured every interaction in the nation. While David van Biema claims that recent Tibetan-inspired films are more political than religious, Tibet is represented as a land of alterity, and Buddhism that provides that alterity.¹⁴ Dibyesh Anand notes the representational history of Tibet as a “sanctuary from the materialism and violence of modern times, a sanctuary of those disaffected with modernity and seeking peace and wisdom.”¹⁵ Anand further argues, “Exotica Tibet [that is, the representational schema surrounding Tibet], especially in the second half of the twentieth century, has disproportionately emphasized Tibetan religiosity.”¹⁶ The representations of the innocent and peace-loving Tibetans against the Chinese make the tragedy more profound, since the religion and the Dalai Lama promote nonviolence even in the face of extreme violence, an ethos that inspired director Martin Scorsese in his production of *Kundun*.¹⁷ Donald Lopez adds, “The invasion of Tibet ... was represented (and in many cases, continues to be represented) as an undifferentiated mass of godless communists overwhelming a peaceful land devoted to ethereal pursuits, the victims ... including ... the ... Buddhist dharma.”¹⁸ This representational structure is key to the creation of an American self-identity after the Cold War, but this structure is of rather recent extraction.

For many years the Buddhism of Tibet was seen as an inferior form, especially

¹⁴ David Van Biema, p. 72.

¹⁵ Dibyesh Anand, p. 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁷ Jim Sangster, p. 259. Scorsese says: “The Dalai Lama is an example.... And he says, ‘Dalai Lama doesn’t believe in war.’ And I think that’s what we have to think about.”

¹⁸ Donald Lopez, “Kundun,” p. 228.

among the Victorian British who searched for an original, pure Buddhism. Over time the representation of Tibetan Buddhism has shifted, being “portrayed sometimes as the most corrupt deviation from the Buddha’s true dharma, sometimes as its most direct descendant,” according to Donald Lopez.¹⁹ That representation shifted following the Chinese invasion. Lopez writes: “Young scholars [of the 1960s and 1970s] came to exalt Tibet, just at the moment of its invasion and annexation of China, as a pristine preserve of authentic Buddhist doctrine and practice. Unlike the Buddhisms of China, Japan, and Southeast Asia, Tibetan Buddhism was now seen as uncorrupted because it had not been tainted by Western domination.”²⁰ That change in the perception of Buddhism is reflected in contemporary representations of Tibet, as explained by Mark Abramson: “[T]he position Tibet holds in the western imagination today ... [is] as a place and people whose chief attribute is their perpetuation of a premodern, preindustrial, preconsumer, and nonviolent ethos and way of life.”²¹ These representations position Tibet as resistant and yet subject to the commodification of capitalism. In fact, the Dalai Lama has been inclined to encourage this perception of Tibet as uniquely peaceful and spiritual in order to further the independence movement of the diaspora as well as himself.²² China’s thrusting of Tibet into the industrial world threatens the too-easy narrative of American dependence on Tibet, even as it enables the United States to envision itself as a savior to Tibet.

China’s takeover of Tibet has been well documented, with much of China’s destruction occurring from 1949 and throughout the 1950s. Rodney Gilbert and Mikel

¹⁹ Donald Lopez, “New Age Orientalism,” p. 39.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²¹ Mark Abramson, p. 12.

²² Dibyesh Anand, p. 101.

Dunham demonstrate the rather brutal occupation of the mountain country. According to Dunham, after the takeover China incorporated the most populous areas of ethnic Tibet. Following a failed uprising in the mid- to late-1950s and his expulsion in 1959, the Dalai Lama moved his administration to Dharamsala, India, where the Tibetan government in exile remains to this day. In such historical accounts, the suppression of Tibet's religious culture has been particularly salient. Since it took the reins of Tibet, China is reputed to have committed all kinds of atrocities against the Tibetans and their culture. In addition to a wholesale redistribution of land from estate owners to farmworkers, one of the most extensive depredations of Tibetan culture were the extended attacks on the Buddhist monasteries and the monastic system. According to Dunham, the Chinese condemned a monastery if even just one monk was known as a resistance collaborator. This censure resulted in monks beating other monks, and the arrest of high lamas and other monastery authorities and their subsequent deportation to labor camps. The Chinese seized or destroyed monastic estates. Just one year after the Chinese had expelled the Dalai Lama, they had closed or destroyed nearly 95% of some 6,000 monasteries in Tibet prior to 1959. While China's treatment of Tibet has been violent, much of the offenses took place well before Hollywood took an interest in the conflict.

Today, with all military resistance crushed, much of the China-Tibet conflict surrounds the cultural genocide that many say the Chinese are perpetrating on the region in a variety of ways. China's government is making a concerted effort to denature Tibetan culture by providing economic incentives for ethnic Chinese to move to the region. Now, ethnic Tibetans make up only a minority in their own homeland.²³ The Chinese government is using economic development as a means to more fully integrate

²³ Mikel Dunham, p. 405.

Tibet into China, and consequently destroying what untrammled native culture remains. Indeed, the Chinese are even promoting Tibet as a kind of theme park for western tourists as well as their own citizens. Pan notes that over 720,000 Chinese visited Tibet in 2002 – up 30% from 2001 – compared to just 140,000 foreigners.²⁴

According to Dunham, the central attraction of such tourism is Tibet's well-known monasteries, many of which have been modestly rebuilt by the Tibetans under the watchful eye of the Chinese. "This provides the Chinese with an excellent propaganda tool for Westerners.... Bringing tourists into Tibet – a major economic consideration for the Central Government – means creating showcases of religious tolerance."²⁵

Dunham notes, however, that everything is very well controlled and the number of monks in any monastery is quite small. Whenever a monastery gains a following, the Chinese administration shuts it down and expels its residents. China has turned the Tibetan monasteries to effective economic use: the Jokhang monastery attracts many Westerners who pay admission and even more if they want to snap photos inside the sacred compound. Atop the monastery is a vending machine offering Coca-Cola to those enjoying the skyline of Lhasa – a city that offers "a modern, typically ugly Chinese concrete sprawl replete with smog, karaoke bars, and brothels."²⁶ Seemingly, Tibet has become a tourist destination.

China seems able to turn Tibet and the interest in the region as a spiritual destination to its own profit. The Chinese government is encouraging tourism to the area with a recently constructed railway line from Beijing to Lhasa, Tibet's capital. According to an AP report, in 2006 the train conducted some 2.5 million tourists to the

²⁴ Philip P. Pan, p. A17.

²⁵ Mikel Dunham, p. 405.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 405-406.

southwestern province, a gain of 36% over the prior year. A recent Tibetan-produced report lamented that China's Han majority will ruin its Buddhist culture, and stated, "Such a drastic increase in tourism will surely overwhelm this destination, which is considered to be a place of spiritual power, mental purification and transformation."²⁷ The railroad also proves valuable in mining, with China transporting out such key commodities as iron, copper, and zinc, to stoke its red-hot domestic industries.²⁸ This increasing industrialization threatens the representational schema. Lopez writes, "There is something apocalyptic about it, as if the Tibetans, long conservators of a timeless wisdom in a timeless realm, have been brutally thrust from their snowy sanctuary into history, where time is coming to an end and with it, their wisdom."²⁹ Even by exploiting its exploitation of the region, China has been able to profit, in effect, recirculating its gains in the country.

Cool and the Representation of Tibet

The threats of growing Chinese dominance are defused or mitigated for the broader American public by filmic representations of Buddhism. Film is establishing Buddhism as a marker of "cool," as the religion slowly enters the mainstream. Like quite a few advertisers, many filmmakers have warmed up to using Buddhist images since the Cold War. Such imagery provides the products with a sense of the exotic, with "cool," but it also obscures the economic processes concomitant with their production – the movement of investment to Asia, the sweatshop labor, and the hollowing-out of American manufacturing.

²⁷ Matthew Rosenberg

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Donald Lopez. "New Age Orientalism: The Case of Tibet," p. 42.

The move of consumers to acquire cool typifies the process of penetration that characterizes the West's treatment of the East, and suggests the underlying interests in the East. The films here represent the people of the East (especially Tibetans) as innocent, pure, naïve, trusting, uncorrupted, and even uncivilized, in the positive sense of that word. Such a representation undertakes what Renato Rosaldo calls "imperialist nostalgia" and fits well with the goals of the expansionary economic and political system of the United States. In the post-Cold War era and without a clear international superpower against which to identify, America has been portraying itself and its businesses as benevolent to Asia, a nascent area of globalization. Yet, when ideologically necessary, China becomes the antagonist, especially in regard to Tibet and economic issues. By positioning Asia, and especially Tibet, as innocent and in need of rescue, the United States can create a narrative structure that represents itself as a savior, in contrast to the new "evil empire" – China. The imperialist-nostalgic representation re-creates an identity in which the United States has a clear *raison d'être*.

Žižek's point about the dual representation of Asia fits well within Chow's argument of the dual image of the ethnic as both victimized and transcendent. Žižek examines the "fantasmatic" hold that Tibet has on the United States, suggesting that the Asian nation acts as foundation for Western fantasies.³⁰ Donald Lopez agrees, noting that "the European powers' failure to dominate [Tibet] politically only increased European longing and added to the fantasy about life in the land."³¹ This point echoes Žižek's analysis of the binary nature of typical representations, with Tibetans

³⁰ Slavoj Žižek, p. 64.

³¹ Donald Lopez, "Kundun," p. 228.

represented as both liberated from craving and deeply desirous.³² Either way, as a representation Tibet can be used to justify economic expansionism; America can rationalize westernizing the Tibetans with its products if they're "filthy," since we and by extension our products will save them, or if they're "liberated," America can consume their simplicity.

The binary status of representations of Tibet provides consumers the opportunity to manipulate their own image depending on whether they want to feel like a protector or an innocent. As it makes its way through the mass media, Tibet, and Asia generally, increasingly becomes a commodified spectacle with a dual position of both purity and in need of saving by America and its technology. Films displaying Buddhist images imply that Americans are – or at least can become – cool, because we can consume the others of the world.

Kundun and Seven Years in Tibet: Americana in Shangri-La

For American moviegoers interested in the decades-old China-Tibet conflict, the watershed year was 1997, which Richard Seager calls "the annus mirabilis for Tibetan issues."³³ A conflict of such longevity rarely gets much press, let alone big-budget Hollywood films. Yet that year saw the October release of *Seven Years in Tibet*, which starred Brad Pitt as Austrian mountain climber Heinrich Harrer. Directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud, the film chronicles Harrer's expedition and subsequent stay in Tibet as well as his friendship with the young Dalai Lama during the turbulent era of the early 1950s. The same period is also explored in a well-received December release, *Kundun*, directed by Martin Scorsese, which details the Chinese takeover of Tibet.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³³ Richard Seager, p. 117.

Scorsese's opus was nominated for four Oscars, and featured a score by Philip Glass. The appearance of such similar films within a short time frame underscores how capital-intensive films sought to take advantage of American and even western interest in the conflict, and how they helped shape and produce knowledge of China and Tibet through the use of Buddhism.³⁴ Dibyesh Anand writes that *Seven Years in Tibet* "along with... *Kundun* played a crucial role in highlighting Tibet in the Western popular imagination. It brought to the attention of consumers of Hollywood that there is/was a place called Tibet."³⁵

Both films purport to authentically re-create the story of Tibet in the conflict. To accentuate the realism of their works, Scorsese and Annaud took great pains to use Tibetan actors whenever possible; the castlists detail many performers whose only screen credit is their respective film. By registering the film in such a realist mode, the directors have already attempted to elicit the credibility necessary to narrate the conflict and thus their trustworthiness. In fact, Scorsese claims that he edited the picture "purely on an emotional level, almost like a documentary."³⁶ Such a gesture toward realism allows the films to more persuasively convince their audiences and shape broader nationwide perceptions of the conflict, even if realism, as Scorsese admits, is less a question of factual authenticity than a representation that consciously allows emotion to shape the film's events.

To underscore the suggestive power of realism, it should be noted that members of the *Kundun* production, including Scorsese, were banned from Tibet by the Chinese

³⁴ Orville Schell, p. 32. Following the theme of Americans assisting the downtrodden, Schell mentions the film *Dixie Cups*, allegedly produced by Steven Seagal, about a CIA intervention in Tibet in the 1950s and 1960s.

³⁵ Dibyesh Anand, p. 64.

³⁶ Gavin Smith. p. 239.

government. In fact, the Chinese threatened the film's backer, Disney, with economic excommunication from the nascent world power, and then subsequently carried out the threats.³⁷ Despite Disney's public protestations about China's demands, it decided privately to limit the film's distribution.³⁸ The Chinese ban blesses Scorsese as well as the film with an implicit endorsement of their "authenticity." Annaud faced similar problems in his filming of *Seven Years*, with the Chinese government opposing his efforts to shoot in Himalayan nations abutting Tibet. When he moved the production to Argentina, the Chinese tried to pressure the Argentine government. In the end, Annaud was designated persona non grata in China.³⁹ Well aware of the potential dangers of backing its picture, Sony Pictures took care to promote the film as an adventure flick and even cut back its marketing effort.⁴⁰ By providing such cachet to the films through its threats, the Chinese government has helped strengthen the films' arguments that the new place of America in the world order is as the defender of the innocent. Yet, despite their supposed authenticity, as Abramson argues, the films perpetuate much of the traditional stereotypes of Tibet.⁴¹

³⁷ Richard Turner, p. 42.

Jeffrey Ressler, p. 60. In regard to major media moves vis a vis China, Jeffrey Ressler notes in 1996, "Two years ago, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. dropped the BBC's World Service Television news broadcast to China from its Asian satellite to placate Beijing. And sources told TIME that last year Universal Pictures – and reportedly other studios – turned down the chance to distribute Kundun for fear of upsetting the Chinese." Ressler also writes, "Disney has become a major beneficiary of China's market liberalization. The Lion King brought in \$3.6 million in China last year, and the soundtrack sold 1.4 million copies. There are three Disney boutiques called Mi Qi Miao Shijie (Mickey's fascinating world) and hopes for increased film distribution and possibly even a Disneyland China."

Joyce Barnathan, p. 51. Barnathan notes in 1997 that China banned new Disney projects in the nation. She writes, "The propaganda Department of the Communist Party's Central Committee is so angry that Disney's main projects in China are 'frozen,' says an industry analyst. The company has a few ventures up and running but Disney wants greater access for the Disney Channel through cable TV: China's fledgling TV market is already generating \$4 billion a year in advertising revenues."

³⁸ Donald Lopez, "Kundun," p. 227.

³⁹ Richard Corliss, p. 82.

⁴⁰ Thom Geier, p. 57. Geier also notes: "The studio denied requests that it hold benefit screenings for human rights groups and even omitted the film from its Web site" (57).

⁴¹ Mark Abramson, pp 8-12, p. 9.

The films also shape American perception of the conflict through their casting of the Dalai Lama. Their casting choices create a similar representation of Tibet but the choices also suggest varying levels of innocence for the Buddhist Tibetans. For instance, *Seven Years in Tibet* uses just one actor, Jamyang Jamtsho Wangchuk, a fresh-faced adolescent Tibetan, in the role of the Dalai Lama for most of the film. His intended age in the film is 14 years old. In contrast, *Kundun* uses four different Tibetan actors, all with substantial time in the film, although the role of the young-adult (18-year-old) Dalai Lama does occupy most of the screen time. By focusing on such a narrow and earlier time in the conflict, the former film imputes a greater innocence to Tibet, since it uses the relatively young Jamyang. The character is made palatable to American ideals of beauty by the use of an actor with a winning smile full of perfectly straight teeth. Through such casting the film suggests that in its invasion China is really attacking a nation full of innocent Buddhist children, and it will be the West, through Heinrich Harrer, that will guide and potentially save them.

In contrast, *Kundun* shows the conflict occur primarily with the Dalai Lama as a young adult, which reduces the overemphasis on China attacking a defenseless nation led by a child. Rather, the film shifts the portrayal to one where the Chinese attack the peace-loving and innocent Buddhists of Tibet – as emphasized in the opening title sequence, which is discussed below. The film suggests that America's new place in a post-communist world is to protect the innocents of the world, whose status is connoted by Buddhism. This conclusion seems even more apt given that the marketer of the ideology of innocence par excellence – Disney – bankrolled the project. In fact, in describing Scorsese's interest in the project, Jim Sangster writes, "What appealed to

him about the project was its sense of simplicity with everything told from the child's point of view."⁴² Donald Lopez also notes that the politics of the film are those of the Free Tibet movement.⁴³

Kundun appeared amid a wave of interest in the China-Tibet conflict, even as it produced knowledge of the clash. Although Scorsese claims that he did not want to make Tibet into a perfect Shangri-La and seems well aware of the fraught internal politics of Tibet,⁴⁴ the film must be examined, as Lopez posits, "as a recent moment in the long history of the European and American romance of Tibet"⁴⁵ – a position with which Mark Abramson agrees.⁴⁶ Much of Scorsese's context for the nonviolence of Buddhist Tibet is capitalist America, and notes the proliferation of emotional and psychological problems in America, "particularly after the breakdown of the two superpowers."⁴⁷ In fact, the director points to the irony and hypocrisy of the United States accusing China of human rights abuses when America had recently waged the first Gulf War – a battle for oil and "an extra few flights to LA."⁴⁸ Appropriately enough, *Kundun* immediately followed Scorsese's depiction of money-hungry Las Vegas in *Casino*, and Scorsese says that "there was no doubt that I wanted to get as far away from that as possible."⁴⁹ Ultimately, he has said that inspiration for the film was Buddhism's "purer, clearer approach to living" and his desire to "find a place in this

⁴² Jim Sangster, p. 225.

⁴³ Donald Lopez, "Kundun," p 227.

⁴⁴ Amy Taubin, p 259.

Gavin Smith, p. 239. Scorsese states: "I wasn't interested in the romantic, emotional view of Tibet, crystallized over the years in *Lost Horizon*....I need to show that it wasn't Shangri-La, that there were political problems, that monks had guns, there were dungeons and an army."

⁴⁵ Donald Lopez, "Kundun," pp 227-230.

⁴⁶ Mark Abramson, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Amy Taubin, p. 257.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁴⁹ Gavin Smith, p. 245.

world where one can live that way, through tolerance and compassion.”⁵⁰ While the director seems well aware of the contradictions of making a moralizing gesture, he nevertheless posits Tibet as a potential fulcrum around which American identity can be shifted.

From the start, the film lays out a dualistic representation of Asia along the lines that Chow describes – either pure or depraved. In the opening titles, Scorsese presents the character of the competitors, already suggesting the good-versus-evil nature of the conflict. The opening titles state, "In a wartorn Asia, Tibetans have practiced non-violence for over a thousand years. The Dalai Lama is their ruler. He is the human manifestation of the Buddha of Compassion." These opening lines stress the singular purity and innocence of Tibet amid the brutality of medieval Asia. The Tibetans are characterized as nonviolent, even extremely so. While the titles do not mention China by name, they suggest to Asia a savage quality, which distinguishes the rest of the continent from the uniquely peaceful Tibetans. Indeed, it is the ferocious who have anointed the Dalai Lama, as the titles make clear: "The sons of Genghis Khan gave the Dalai Lama his name. It means 'Ocean of Wisdom.'" In a somewhat subtle analogy, the titles compare the empire-building and ferocity of Genghis's sons with the communist Chinese of the mid-century, but to the communists' discredit. They do not even have enough good sense to recognize the Dalai Lama's wisdom. Here the film seems to emphasize that even some of the most brutal warriors in history were able to recognize the wisdom of the Tibetan approach to life.

Early on, the film uses some scenes that seem almost to replicate scenes in American households in order to relate to a capitalist American audience that likely has

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

no or very little knowledge of Tibet. For instance, some early scenes depict the egotism of the young child who will grow up to become the next Dalai Lama. At a meal that suspiciously resembles a traditional sit-down dinner in an American nuclear family, the boy begins to demand a seat at the head of the table, shouting at the father: "Me, me, me!" After the mother coaxes the father to trade chairs with the young boy, an older brother, who is a Buddhist monk, states, "He will grow up all wrong." The dramatic irony of this statement and scene suggests how an American audience is likely to view the boy's demands, given how consumer capitalism reinforces the sense of self. At once, he appears as the spoiled brat, but this display of egotism showcases the boy as special, one of the chosen, who can order whatever he wants and get it. This behavior mimics the consumerist ethos of the most privileged Americans, who can purchase whatever they want whenever they want it. In effect, egotism becomes a sign of divine favor.

The boy's egotism continues as he makes further demands that seem to emphasize that he is pure and clean. When the father exchanges seats with the boy, he laments to his wife, "Only you can touch his food. Too clean. Everything just so." She replies, "So what's the problem?" Another brother responds, "He thinks he's clean." Then the boy demands of the family to tell his story, to which they all groan. The young boy yells, "Again. Me." Then he makes an animal's roar at the family. His sister obliges and tells the story of his birth and how he didn't cry at all. This characterization of the boy as pure and yet bestial, and by proxy the Tibetans too, re-emphasizes Žižek's point that such stereotypical representations are flawed, since the characterization really represents the needs of the American audience. Besides the

American-style family dinner, such American needs are shown in the physical features of the film's characters. Their visages are very photogenic, with soft features, light and clear complexions, and no wrinkles -- a sharp contrast to stereotypical photos of Tibet (e.g., those from *National Geographic*) that show intensely wrinkled and weather-worn individuals. The American desire for purity and cleanliness is brought to the fore early.

The film melds the idea of property rights with a Buddhist ritual to determine whether the young boy is, in fact, the reincarnated Dalai Lama. When a Buddhist lama visits the family home in search of the next Dalai Lama, he stumbles upon the boy. As soon as the boy sees the prayer beads hanging from the lama's neck, he shouts, "This is mine." After answering a question right, the boy is given the beads. Again he yells, "Mine," and begins to play with them. The mother spies what is happening and returns the beads to the lama along with an apology.

The film mimics what could well be a typical American scene, with the young boy asserting his rights to property. But the melding of property rights and Buddhist ritual continues in a subsequent scene that tests the boy to further determine whether he is the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. A group of lamas has returned to the house late one night with the selection of material goods. The boy is tasked with selecting the things that are his -- that is, the things that belonged to him in his life as the previous Dalai Lama. The lama praises him each time he selects something that belonged to him. When he finally picks up a carved stick and before he receives praise, the boy yells, "This is mine. Mine, mine, mine, mine." For the first time, the head lama reverently calls him *Kundun*. As the father walks in on the scene and looks disapprovingly at the mother, the boy points the stick at him and says more calmly,

"This is mine!" Reproved by her husband, the mother promises the boy that she will get him a better stick.

This scene mixes in the American capitalist experience of consumerism by having the boy reiterate his stance of possession over the various material goods. He determines which belong to his previous identity and which are merely copies of his previous articles. When the boy does stake his claim to the stick, the mother promises something better to assuage his demands for things, in a typically consumerist vein. Their similar desire to claim possession over things allies capitalist America with this Tibetan boy, and therefore Tibet as a whole.

The film also uses special shots to play to the American desire to be a special individual, a desire which has been heightened by capitalist media. After the lamas determine that the boy is the next incarnation of the Dalai Lama, they present him to the public. The shots of this introduction initially occur from the first-person perspective of the young boy. The audience experiences the immense adoring crowd staring back from all sides. Only after a few moments does the film take a new shot that shows the wonder of the boy to the crowds, but soon again it returns to the first-person perspective. Similar first-person shots appear throughout the film whenever the Dalai Lama appears before crowds. In these first-person shots the film makes it appear that the Tibetans are worshipping the American audience. These shots help ally the American audience to the besieged Tibetans, and suggest more subtly how Tibet reveres America.

Such first-person shots also help an American audience overcome the different religious perspective of the Tibetans, making reincarnation less controversial. Whether

the religion is acceptable is less important than the overall representation of Tibetans as an innocent people. In such scenes this ethos is reinforced by showing the throngs worshipping the young boy, a situation not wholly unlike that of the young Jesus in Christianity. This portrayal of Tibetans as worshipping a young child shows them as devout but also quite simple, and even confused, to many viewers. This representations marks the Tibetans as a people that have somehow eluded the depraving grasp of capitalism due to their (exotic) Buddhist beliefs.

After it has taken great pains to establish their representation as fundamentally pure, the film also shows the depravity of the Tibetans in brief glances, especially as “sexually promiscuous primitives,” in Žižek’s words. The film structures glances into the inner workings of the Tibetan monastic system as if the procedures were shameful secrets. For example, after the boy is officially named the next Dalai Lama and taken into a monastery, he overhears a discussion among the monastery’s lamas over issues of money. The film sets this scene up as an accidental discovery by the boy. As he is running through the monastery’s halls with his older brother, he stumbles past the meeting room, where a group of lamas are debating how much money and land the boy’s family will receive for having reared him. He scans the proceedings seemingly unaware of what’s going on, and for the moment no lamas see him. The film cuts away from the boy to the brief but intense debate over the question of reimbursement. In the process, one lama criticizes another absent lama who, he implies, has retreated to be with his many concubines. Then, the film cuts to another shot of a friendly lama discovering the unintentionally prying boy and shooing him away quietly, lest he be discovered by the debaters. In contrast to previous representations of the Tibetans as

pure and simple. this scene represents their dealing in wealth matters in such a way that it appears not as something natural and necessary, but as something shameful and in need of hiding. Moreover, the scene allies this impression with a comment on sexual licentiousness, which intensifies the general sense of the depravity of the monastic system. Although Lopez applauds the film's refusal to uniformly beatify Tibet,⁵¹ the film's representations of Tibet, nevertheless, fit within the dualistic schemas posited by Chow and Žižek.

The Dalai Lama and Western Technology

One of the big shifts in the representation of Buddhism in America has been from its use as anti-capitalist critique to pitchman for capitalism. Particularly salient has been the alliance of representations of Buddhism with technology, the product of capitalist innovation. This trend is perpetuated in *Kundun* and *Seven Years in Tibet*, which portray the 14th Dalai Lama as entranced by western technology, a positioning that is not entirely at odds with the Dalai Lama's stated interests in such things. Both films show the youth exhibiting a great interest in telescopes, cars, and film. Such interests intersect with the boy's greater interest in the West and lack of knowledge about the non-Tibetan world. In each film the West is represented as a place of vast knowledge and technological goods, while Tibet is demonstrated to be a place of innocence, if not outright ignorance. This dual representation places the American audience of such films in a position of being envied for its knowledge and material possessions.

Since the films are primarily set in the period of the Dalai Lama's youth, the late 1940s and early 1950s, they permit a 1990s audience to laugh at the inexperience of Tibetans with technological goods and machine culture. Such a setting reinforces the

⁵¹ Donald Lopez, "Kundun," p 230.

American audience's sense of technological superiority and progress, while it augments the sense of Tibet's simplicity. The setting of the films pushes the idea of Tibetans as innocent, in a trope that Renato Rosaldo calls "imperialist nostalgia." Rosaldo defines imperialist nostalgia as the colonialists' yearning for "the very forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed."⁵² He continues: "In this ideologically constructed world of ongoing progressive change, putatively static savage societies become a stable reference point for defining (the felicitous progress of) civilized identity."^{53 54} Abramson concurs, noting a similar waypoint for Tibet as a stable referent.⁵⁵ Also, Dibyesh Anand highlights how the historical Harrer viewed Tibet in nostalgic terms,⁵⁶ and the critic also suggests how such "chronopolitics" "[render] nondominant groups out of the present and legitimized control in the name of modernity."⁵⁷ This sense of superiority is further enhanced by the level of technology that the Tibetans use, a level that is a function of the setting. Since the Tibetans have trouble using even the simplest technologies from decades past, they are risible and in need of American guidance, especially due to the threat from their hostile neighbor to the north. At the same time, the film allows the audience to nostalgically see its own innocence in a previous era and relate that to the Tibetans, who will learn, with the spread of capitalism, to become like

⁵² Renato Rosaldo, p. 69.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* Rosaldo continues: "'We' (who believe in progress) valorize innovation, and then yearn for more stable worlds, whether these reside in our own past, in other cultures, or in the conflation of the two. Such forms of longing thus appear closely related to secular notions of progress. When the so-called civilizing process destabilizes forms of life, the agents of change experience transformations of other cultures as if they were personal losses.... Indeed, much of imperialist nostalgia's force resides in its association with (indeed, its disguise as) more genuinely innocent tender recollections of what is at once an earlier epoch and a previous phase of life."

⁵⁵ Mark Abramson, p. 11. Abramson notes some of the perpetuation of images of Tibet vis a vis British colonialism: "Once Tibet was properly subservient to British interests, however, and became increasingly isolated and non-threatening, its image as an alpine haven of nonviolence and spirituality became increasingly fixed until it was 'fossilized' by James Hilton's novel *The Lost Horizon*."

⁵⁶ Dibyesh Anand, p. 64.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31

“sophisticated” American consumers.

The simplicity and innocence of the Tibetan Buddhists are revealed most pointedly through the Dalai Lama’s interest in and amusement by western technologies. *Kundun* reveals these interests in a bald-faced way through a short collection of related scenes. One of the first scenes shows the boy driving an old-fashioned car, outdated even for the era represented in the film. The brief shot ends in an off-screen crash indicated by the crunch of metal. A similar representation occurs in *Seven Years in Tibet* as the Dalai Lama climbs in an old-fashioned car, and pretends to drive, while Harrer provides the noise of shifting gears. Such scenes indicate America’s technological progress as they position Tibet as simple and even backward, since the Dalai Lama – the country’s leader – cannot even drive a simple automobile, let alone the complex and commonplace contraptions found in late-20th-century America. As suggested before, the nature of the setting plays to representations that invoke the simplicity of the foreign country which demands the protection of America.

In *Kundun*, technology comes in other more basic forms, which in any case seem to aid the Tibetans. One evening while he is attempting to read a Buddhist scripture, the Dalai Lama is brought a gift, an electric flashlight. Instantly he clicks it on and off, examining how it works. Then he uses the flashlight to illuminate the scripture that he's reading: "Then at the time of midnight the bodhisattva saw clear light. Then he saw in a single instant the three states of existence – the past, the present and the future – purified by the clear light. Then sitting at the tree of enlightenment he conquered all the devils." Using the resonance of several words connected to light, the film implicates western technology in the process of Buddhist enlightenment, invoking quite literally the

idea of scriptures being illuminated. It's as if western technology has enlightened the Buddhist practitioner. Indeed, it seems as if western technology will bring an end to the "devils," which is understood at this point in the film to mean the Chinese invaders.

Another scene shows the Dalai Lama digging into a darkened room full of technological goods. There the boy discovers a projector (another iteration of the flashlight), a telescope as well as a plethora of other undisclosed things – “gifts from the West,” in the words of one of his advisors. Soon, the boy – seemingly ensconced in his palace in Lhasa – uses the telescope to peer over his subjects’ activities and any activities that he is normally not allowed to participate in. The boy’s excitement over the film projector re-affirms his interest in outside affairs is re-affirmed by his excitement over the film projector, which is set up immediately after it arrives. Soon the boy watches pictures from western mass media. The boy stares agape at the events occurring in the world beyond Tibet, namely those events that comprise the most significant events of western history. For instance, a few minutes later the Dalai Lama watches film of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan. The boy’s horror at the specter characterizes him as innocent. Here the film obliquely connects the widespread belief in the necessity of American atomic weapons to defeat a past Asian aggressor (Japan) with the nation’s potential to do so with a future aggressor (China). Such representations paint the Dalai Lama as one who is deeply interested in outside affairs but needs the knowledge of the world, especially of the West. It is American technology that provides the means to such knowledge for the simple world leader. Even a pocket watch sent as a gift from President Franklin Roosevelt suggests the play of technology.

This portrayal of the Dalai Lama is reinforced and elaborated in *Seven Years in*

Tibet. When Heinrich Harrer first meets the Dalai Lama, the boy asks him if he likes movies and then expresses his desire to build a movie house. He then commissions Harrer to build the cinema, since the Austrian knows how a film projector works and how to power it. Harrer's knowledge of technology as well as the wider world is very alluring to the Dalai Lama, who expresses his desire to understand a variety of western things that seem exotic. For instance, he says with great zeal that he wants to know about Paris, France; Molotov cocktails, and Jack the Ripper. While such subjects would be found prosaic by an American audience, the boy leader finds them exotic. The boy's response serves to re-ignite the pride of a jaded American audience for knowing about subjects that are found novel by others. Moreover, such subjects seem to position America, and the West generally, as places of great violence and depravity and in need of the wisdom of the East. Even Paris, which seems the most innocuous of the three subjects, has a history of libertinism that might make it seem sinful.

The conflict between western technology and Tibetan culture becomes expressed in the actual construction of the movie house, and suggests the utter simplicity of the Tibetans. As Harrer begins to dig the foundation of the movie house, the Tibetan workmen who assist stop digging, because they are harming earthworms – a stereotype that Tibetan audiences find “ridiculous.”⁵⁸ One worker says, “Please. Please no more hurting worms.... In a past life this innocent worm could have been your mother. Please no more hurting.” This stance is re-emphasized by a short shot of another worker shaking his head. Harrer pulls down his hat in disbelief and disgust.

⁵⁸ Mark Abramson, p 11.

Barbara Stewart. Stewart discusses the Tibetans' negative perceptions of American films such as *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun*, as well as their mocking of the former for its flawed and slavish devotion to Tibetan Buddhists.

The film uses a hard cut to a laughing Dalai Lama, a technique which indicates Harrer's ignorance of Buddhist customs. When the Austrian petitions to the Dalai Lama, the boy explains to him the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation and why the Tibetans earnestly believe that the worms should not be harmed.

Dalai Lama: But, you see, Tibetans believe all living creatures were their mothers in a past life. So we must show them respect and repay their kindness, and never, never harm anything that lives. You can't ask a devout people to disregard a precious teaching.

Harrer: Yes, but, your Holiness [laughter] ... with due respect..um, we can't possibly [laughter] I'm sorry. But we can't possibly rescue all the worms if you want the theater finished in this lifetime.

Dalai Lama: You have a clever mind. Think of a solution. And in the meantime, you can explain to me what is an elevator.

When he hears the explanation, Harrer cannot even control his laughter at the seeming inanity of the religion's proposition of reincarnation. While he openly but uncontrollably mocks the religion in his laughter, his diction mocks the Tibetan Buddhist belief in reincarnation, and all the worms cannot be saved if the theater is to be completed "in this lifetime." The Dalai Lama seems to take no notice of Harrer's indiscretion and even insult, but the improper syntax of his second reply indicates his subordinate position to the Austrian, who speaks proper English even though it isn't his first language.

In the end, the stalemate between western technology and Tibetan culture is seemingly resolved when Harrer decides to have Buddhist lamas sort the worms from the unearthed dirt. The lamas carefully transport the worms via bowls to another area of ground where they are again buried. The film makes careful note to use a close-up to detail the extreme care, even tenderness, with which the monks re-bury and water the worms. From the close-up of a monk burying a worm, the camera pans up to a

medium close-up shot of a serious lama making a prayer gesture. Once they overcome this complication, they soon complete the cinema house. This interaction between western technology and the Buddhist Tibetan culture invites the Western audience to laugh along at the overwhelming simplicity of Buddhism, which marks the Tibetans as uniquely innocent.

This theme is elaborated when the Tibetans enter the cinema house during its trial run. After Harrer generates power by using an old-fashioned car, he can run the movie projector in the cinema house. In the projector's booth Harrer clicks on the projector, casting light on to the blank screen in a godlike act. When the Tibetans see the light they begin dancing wildly around the room and seem as if they're trying to capture the rays. While this scene again positions the Tibetans as simple and primitive, it also represents the West as a "light bringer," in a literal and metaphorical sense. More interestingly, the film projects a stereotypical image of the Tibetans while its putatively advanced and sophisticated western audience finds the projection of light on a screen just as amusing, and has even paid for the privilege of watching this film. The film, therefore, also mocks the western audience even as it interpellates them as powerful. However, the film does not explicitly play up this irony.

The West as Protector of the Innocent East

Seven Years In Tibet structures its narrative to represent the West is looking to guide and protect the East in a paternalistic gesture, even as the West will be humanized by the East. By using a series of long cross-cut scenes at the start of the film, director Jean-Jacques Annaud implies that Harrer is looking for the young Dalai Lama before he has ever heard of the boy. Whereas the start of the film shows Harrer leaving his pregnant wife in order to climb the Himalayas, the film later shows Harrer's

wife filing for divorce and his son rejecting him.

Harrer hikes through the mountains in what first seems like an aimless quest, but the film suggests, through crosscutting, that his journey is fated to end with a meeting of the boy Dalai Lama. For instance, in one scene in the mountains as Harrer speaks of his son to his traveling companion Aufschnaiter, the scene cuts to the young leader, who seems to be merely waiting for the Austrian's coming. Intercut with such scenes are extremely long shots of the snowy mountain landscape and other similarly beautiful scenes, a format that de-emphasizes the human and stresses the incommensurable and spiritual aspect of Tibet. Harrer virtually disappears in the landscape. These shooting and editing techniques demonstrate how Harrer is on a spiritual journey for a son, and that son seems to be the holy boy of Tibet, paralleling the search for a religious savior that Christian America could understand. Such crosscutting repeats throughout the early stages of the film in order to emphasize the element of fate, but it also suggests how the strong West will find the weak East and guide it, a mission that Harrer spends much of the rest of the film undertaking. As suggested through the various events of the film, the Dalai Lama, and by extension Tibet, come to fill the spiritual gap in the Westerner's psyche. Or, rather they exist out there to fill that gap.⁵⁹

The westerner's strength affords such protection of the weak East, evidenced by the imposing corporeality of the adventurer who demands to be free from all constraints at all costs. Harrer's journey starts off as one of the most masculine pursuits – climbing

⁵⁹ Eve L. Mullen. Mullen notes: "Harrer's inner scars, exposed by the boy regent, begin to be healed. Here, Tibet becomes the exalted, valuable culture in contrast to the murderous, demonic China. The Westerner who has played his part in the defense of pristine Tibet is cured of his emotional ills by Tibet's wisdom and can now return a whole man to his own life in Europe. And we, the audience, have experienced one Westerner's rescue of Tibetan culture, now immortally archived in written text and Technicolor."

a mountain that has fascinated the Austrians. The various examples of his ruggedness during the climb reinforce his masculinity, especially during a scene where his own crampon has caught him in the leg and yet he has pushed on. Soon, an avalanche and brutal snowstorm force the party of climbers to give up their quest, and not long after they are found by the British and taken prisoner as a result of World War 2. The film further shows Harrer's masculinity by the austerity of his POW camp and the generally military atmosphere that images of it connote. Harrer's western desire for freedom is evinced repeatedly here, as he attempts numerous reckless escapes, even throwing himself again and again on a barbed-wire fence in protest of his captivity. Such scenes represent the Austrian as fearlessly masculine, embodying a western ideal.

Harrer's subsequent travels demonstrate his masculine adventurousness, while the crosscuts continue to suggest his impending fate as he moves ever closer to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. After Harrer escapes from the POW camp, he travels around the mountains and plateaus of India and Tibet with his erstwhile POW companion and mountaineer, Aufschnaiter. The film displays landscape scenes of great untouched beauty, with crystal-clear rainbows and waterfalls. In a monologue Harrer describes his travels among the mountains as a pilgrimage that purifies the wanderer. He states, "The greater the journey, the deeper the purification." Harrer slowly loses the damn-it-all roguishness that characterized his earlier self. Literally the land of Tibet has provided the purification. It's almost as if he must be purified before he enters the sacred city of the Dalai Lama. As the editing indicates that he approaches ever closer his destination of Lhasa, the language takes on greater spiritual connotations. For instance, Harrer's comments position Tibet dualistically as a paradox that he, as adventurer, has come to

understand. In his monologue he declares, “In this place where time stands still, it seems like everything is moving.” This re-fashioning of the experience of time in capitalist societies marks him as transcending the situation of the harried and time-strapped bourgeoisie of the West. He has entered a land where time is (seemingly) no longer money, where the essence of existence is no longer boiled down to a commodity. As such, his purification consists of shedding some of the mindsets of capitalism.

Yet, when Harrer enters Lhasa, he exemplifies the logic of (market) penetration proposed by Žižek. In a monologue he states that, since Lhasa was closed to foreigners, it was more attractive to enter – “much better than Mecca,” which had been entered by westerners many times before. His words indicate that he really attempts to penetrate the spiritual core of the Buddhist civilization in order to bring back “the secret *agalma*, the spiritual treasure,” to use Žižek’s words. Therefore, this masculine man demands a (nearly) virgin people to fulfill his desires. Speaking of Lhasa, he continues, “Only a few foreigners had penetrated its mysteries.” His desire to visit Lhasa seems grounded in the explorer’s (rather than the tourist’s) desire to do only what other westerners have not done. Indeed, that was the logic behind his original mountain-climbing expedition. The novelty of visiting Tibet’s holy city of Buddhism seems to drive his behavior, much as novelty drives mature capitalist economies, even as he wants to fill a key spiritual void.

The film also shows Buddhist Tibet as a place of novel and exotic women, who will civilize and humanize the male explorer. During the early days of their stay in Lhasa, Aufschnaiter and Harrer become smitten with a seamstress. The woman has

the men strip to be measured for new suits, an act which exposes the typically western masculinity of actor Brad Pitt as he stretches out for measurement. His abs ripple in the cross-light, and the film suggests subtly that the woman is measuring his masculinity. She also measures his less conventionally attractive companion, who receives no such screen time for his less-than-stereotypical masculine physique. While typical Hollywood films emphasize that typically western masculine traits win the woman, here the convention is flipped on its head only to prove the reverse – Buddhist Tibet humanizes the western masculine explorer. Whereas she snubs the overly aggressive and conventionally masculine Harrer, the seamstress falls for the explorer who has exhibited unassuming humanity throughout the film. This characterization of Tibet as human occurs due to the Buddhist outlook of Tibet. After Aufschnaiter marries the seamstress, Harrer visits them in their new house, a Tibetan facsimile of American middle-class ideals, completely secluded for the couple's "privacy," as the seamstress explains. On the visit Harrer cannot take pleasure in his friend's happy life, and still feels the sting of being rejected for the less masculine Aufschnaiter. The seamstress rebukes him for his feelings by using a typical Buddhist-inspired theme: "A friend's good fortune is a blessing, Henry. I'm sorry you resent ours. You must be very lonely and sad." Buddhism humanizes the aggressive and soulless westerner.

Yet as the aggressive Harrer is increasingly inculcated into Tibetan ways, so does Tibet seem to take on stereotypical characteristics of middle-class America. In addition to the typical middle-class house with a sizable plot of land, *Seven Years* shows Aufschnaiter's wife wearing a wedding ring when Harrer visits their two-story abode. Meanwhile, the pair of newlyweds listens to music on the radio, and at

Christmas they invite all the Tibetans over for a special celebration of western-style dancing and the requisite Christmas hymns, such as *Silent Night*. Such easy cultural exchange and consumption belies the much more difficult reality. The Tibetans' putatively trouble-free acceptance of American culture indicates how such culture subtly penetrates into Tibet, and how the Tibetans willingly accept it, valorizing American production. This move suggests how the film seeks to mitigate American tensions with the Tibetan other and ally the audience to a nation beleaguered by its Chinese neighbors. In this context, the Buddhist principle of non-resistance comes to stand for the Tibetans' seeming acceptance of American cultural expansion.

Another scene in *Seven Years* elaborates on how American spectatorship instantiates itself into the film, altering the representation of Tibetans that is more consistent with materialist attachments. The following scene takes advantage of growing western familiarity with the highly decorated sand mandala, the sometimes weeks-long creation of Buddhist monks. Mandalas are typically made from colored sand, and in their circularity represent the totality of existence. When completed, they are displayed briefly and then washed away with water by the monks, to symbolize the impermanence of all things – a key Buddhist tenet. In the film, the Tibetan Buddhists are preparing a mandala in the expectation of the arrival of three Chinese generals, who are visiting the Dalai Lama in order to state their demands for Tibet's pre-emptive surrender. As they walk through the large hall, they deliberately traipse through the mandala, scuffling their boots as they pass and ruining potentially weeks of work. At its destruction, a collective gasp goes up from the body of monks who are there to witness the generals' arrival and conference. Yet, this response is paradoxical, since the

mandala is a symbol of impermanence, and the monks – most of all – would see this action as just another example of that principle, even if the action was disrespectful. This representation, therefore, indicates American spectatorship and indeed outrage at China's symbolic actions against Tibet, rather than the monks' indignation. The film gives American viewers an outlet to vent their feelings at the Chinese disparagement of the simple and innocent Buddhist culture.

Kundun also indicates how the West will protect Tibet from the depredations of the Chinese. In a move to outrage a hetero-normative America and even ally it with Tibet, the film characterizes the aggressive China as effete and homosexual, and even pedophilic, which Mullen also argues.⁶⁰ This move reinforces stereotypical representations of Asian men, as suggested by Sheridan Prasso and Elaine Kim.⁶¹ When the Dalai Lama goes to Beijing to meet with Mao Zedong, he is taken in a modern automobile with power windows, which he moves up and down repeatedly. Soon, he enters Mao's personal conference room and joins the Chinese leader on a red couch for what initially appears to be a personal summit. At first, they both sit at either end of the couch, and Mao begins telling the Dalai Lama in a roundabout way how Tibet must surrender and join the Chinese republic. The film represents Mao speaking in English, which offers a convenient excuse to give him an effeminate and stilted voice. Moreover, his dilatory manner of speaking makes him appear stupid. Various shots focus on Mao's well-shined shoes, tailored and pressed trousers, and his immaculately detailed

⁶⁰ Eve L. Mullen. Mullen writes: "Scorsese shows us a faceless China, her waves of soldiers led by a Mao played with a creepy villainy bordering on pedophilia toward the young Dalai Lama and his innocent nation. Protagonists and antagonists, good guys and villains, are firmly established. He depicts the Dalai Lama as a perfect being, echoing the orientalist's projection of the superhuman, that is, perfect citizens under a perfect leader.

⁶¹ Sheridan Prasso.
Elaine Kim.

nails. While Mao declares to the young leader that religion is the opiate of the masses, he coughs and wheezes as he daintily puffs on a cigarette. Then he edges closer on the sofa to the Dalai Lama, in a move reminiscent of typical representations of dating behavior. Throughout the scene, Glass's score paints an aura of utter creepiness around the meeting. Finally, the scene ends with Mao escorting the Dalai Lama out to his waiting car, where the audience might reasonably expect a goodnight kiss. Although Scorsese says that he based his depiction of Mao on the Dalai Lama's description of him,⁶² the stereotypical transposition of Asia still occurs.

In this scene, Scorsese portrays China as achieving modernity in an almost exactly inverse way to that of America, in regard to economic system and sexual behavior. For example, take the representation of the Chinese as modern. The Chinese car with its power amenities, the almost-American dating behavior, and Mao's polyester and leather suggest the growing modernism of China. Even here the growing, resource-hungry Chinese are materialistic.⁶³ The Chinese are seemingly threats to the capitalist modernism of the United States. Therefore, the film helps structure China as an enemy to not just Tibet, but capitalist America, since China rejects basic American freedoms because of its communist doctrines but yet appears to compete with America after a capitalist fashion.

The representation of Mao in homosexual, and even pedophilic, terms marks him as repugnant for a hetero-normative America, and would allow the audience to relate ever more closely with the beleaguered Dalai Lama and Tibet. This portrayal fits well within traditional American representations of Asians, as Prasso writes, as being

⁶² Amy Taubin, p. 260.

⁶³ Donald Lopez, "Kundun," p 229

“small, sneaky, and threatening -- or spineless, emasculated wimps, or incompetents.”⁶⁴

Prasso continues: "This lightness of being portrayed can be seen historically in the descriptions of Asian male leaders such as Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong and now even of Kim Jong-Il. It seeks to minimize the Asian male as a threat."⁶⁵ Such popular filmic representations of effeminate Asians also included that of Charlie Chan, as Kim notes.⁶⁶ Against this Chinese threat, the film portrays America as the rough and ready savior to the beleaguered Dalai Lama. The film indicates that Americans are always just on the verge of coming to assist Tibet, but they never arrive.

Moreover, Mao's pronouncement in the film that religion is the opiate of the masses, a repetition of Marx, resounds poorly as communist ideology in America, as Protestant-based denominations insist on their own prerogatives and many Americans see freedom to practice religion as one of the paramount human rights. As Lopez argues, in 1949, after the Chinese Civil War the image of the "oriental despot" is simply moved from the Japanese to Chairman Mao and the communists.⁶⁷ In Lopez's formulation, the logic becomes: "Tibetans are superhuman, Chinese are subhuman."⁶⁸ "This is the view that Scorsese, one of the most astute chroniclers of the debased and benighted, adopts, almost as if redemption is to be found in preserving for the world a portrait of a perfect society, now lost," writes Lopez, in an echo of the notion of imperialist nostalgia.⁶⁹ The antagonism over religion between the Chinese and Tibetans becomes yet another reason to assist the peace-loving Tibetans.

⁶⁴ Sheridan Prasso, p. 103.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.

⁶⁶ Elaine Kim, p. 36.

⁶⁷ Donald Lopez, "Kundun," p. 228.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

The West as Producer of Knowledge

Edward Said argued that Orientalism produced knowledge about the East as a means to dominate and control it. Perhaps the central representation of the West's protection of the East occurs through education, according to the film. In *Seven Years in Tibet* the West comes to stand for unlimited worldly knowledge, whereas the East, in the guise of the Dalai Lama, comes to represent the ignorant aspirant to such fundamental knowledge. The film presents only one means for the Dalai Lama to learn anything of the outside world – Heinrich Harrer. For example, in order to teach geography to the world leader, Harrer draws a map of the world in chalk on the boy's bedroom floor. Then he has the young monk name the land masses and countries. In one scene, Harrer praises the boy for correctly naming Antarctica, and the boy beams with the praise. However, next he mis-names Iceland as England, and receives a mocking "tsk, tsk" from Harrer.

In another scene, set along the bank of a running river, the foreigner explains, using a globe, how time zones function, in response to the boy's question. The film seems to suggest that the Dalai Lama's only means to get the necessary tools to be a successful world leader is to develop a connection to the West, since his own Tibetan leaders seemingly can't teach him even the fundamental geography. This pattern repeats throughout the film, with Harrer providing the young Dalai Lama with knowledge that would be considered commonplace among the citizenry in the West, let alone the leaders. These representations of Tibet suggest not only its simplicity, but the absolute necessity for it to rely on the West for education and guidance in the international arena.

The film represents the West as a storehouse of vast knowledge, which Tibet seemingly does not have. Since his first meeting with Harrer, the Dalai Lama has

bombarded him with questions on what Westerners would consider the most mundane and hackneyed subjects. After a geography lesson by the river, the Dalai Lama grasps Harrer's hand with both of his and begs: "Tell me more." Harrer laughs, almost derisively, and responds quite seriously, "What else do you want to know?" The response seems to imply that the Westerner knows all, and merely parcels out that knowledge for the Dalai Lama, and the East. The film reinforced this conclusion by cutting immediately to the next scene, in which Harrer is setting up a radio for the boy, and exclaims, "In a few moments you will be entering the world of mass media." The Dalai Lama sounds thrilled to be able to get news "from all over the planet." Again, it is technology that provides the means to such knowledge for the simple leader.

The cable generation of the 1990s would likely shrug at the primitive technology of radio, which so fascinates the Tibetan. In a close-up shot, the Dalai Lama's firm and pleading grasp of Harrer's hand represents Tibet as needing the West's knowledge. Such a representation situates the West in a position of power over the Orient, since its knowledge is both necessary to and intensely desired by the East. Here, the desire of Tibet acts as a reciprocation and inversion of our very own desire, a representation that seems to justify America's market penetration.

The film seems to invoke the simplicity of the Tibetans in yet another scene, but doubles this representation to show the dual nature of Tibet as both ignorant and mystically knowledgeable. As the tension with China is building and before the invasion, the Tibetans spot a comet passing overhead one evening. They shout that it's an "evil omen." In a similarly themed scene before the invasion, the Dalai Lama awakens from a nightmare in which the Chinese brutally ravage his country. Using

dramatic irony, these representations act dualistically to position the Tibetans as both simple and ignorant and, at the same time, mystically knowledgeable. On one hand, the Tibetans seem foolish because they rely on superstitious techniques to predict the future, such as dreams or the observance of natural events, methods which have been discounted by western scientific rationalism. On the other, for all their supposed simplicity and ignorance, the Tibetans make an accurate forecast of the future; China is indeed about to invade and destroy the nation. Their ancient wisdom seems capable of magical feats of prophecy, in contrast to the cynical rationalism of the West.

Keanu Reeves: the Buddha from Zen to Now

Another pair of films in the 1990s helps illustrate the transmigration of Buddhism from its Asian context to a technologically driven capitalist America. While very different in budget, subject and popular reception, the films are similar in that they use actor Keanu Reeves as a savior figure to show how Buddhism will save an America hollowed out by capitalism. May 1994 saw the American release of *Little Buddha*, with “the pure kitsch” Reeves playing the religion’s founder.⁷⁰ Produced by French industrialist Francis Bouygues and directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, the film details not only the enlightenment of the Buddha but also the selection of the next high lama of Tibet from among the world’s children, including American children. Bertolucci selected Reeves, as he explains, because ““I read somewhere that Keanu Reeves is half Western, half Chinese and Hawaiian, so I met him and decided in three minutes. How? He emanates such innocence! It shines on his face....”⁷¹

⁷⁰ Martha Sherrill, p. G1.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* Bertolucci comments on his selection of Reeves: “How can I do a movie on Buddha with Keanu Reeves? The English reviews are the worst I’ve ever had! In France and Italy, they like it, but the British, they’re thinking, ‘This cost \$30 million? Buddha? Keanu Reeves? OH MY GOD!’” He later explains, “I

Whereas *Little Buddha* cost from \$30-35 million to make and earned back some \$5 million, *The Matrix* dominated the box office for some time – scoring an estimated \$460 million worldwide on a budget of \$63 million.⁷² Directed by brothers Larry and Andy Wachowski, *The Matrix* deals with the escape of Neo (né Thomas Anderson) from the titular threat that mimics capitalist America at the end of the 20th century. Using a pseudo-Buddhist enlightenment, Neo blasts and thinks his way out of the existential dilemma posed by the Matrix, even as the film itself advances an ethos of control-oriented technology and mass media that underwrite the fictional world. In both movies Buddhism offers American audiences a novel subject that seems to represent a critique of capitalism and a new way to exist, allowing the films to re-coup the religion as cool. Moreover, the continuity of Reeves as a major Buddhist character (the Buddha and Neo) in each film demonstrates the (oddly) fluid transition of Buddhism – enabled by a sprinkling of Hollywood stardust and editing magic – from its “primitive” Asian context into a technologically advanced capitalist America.⁷³

America Protects the Little Buddha, or the Conrads Go into the Heart of Darkness

A box-office bomb by anyone’s standards, *Little Buddha* tells the story of the Conrad family of Seattle, whose son Jesse has been selected by Tibetan Buddhist monks as a possible reincarnation of their teacher Lama Dorje. The film offers a dual

read somewhere that Keanu Reeves is half Western, half Chinese and Hawaiian, so I met him and decided in three minutes. How? He emanates such innocence! It shines on his face.... Also, Indian illustrations and Indian epic movies, pop art, the things you see on the walls of the tobacconist of Vishnu and Krishna – they are all like Keanu! He has a beauty that’s not Eastern or Western. You’re not sure what it is, except pure kitsch.”

⁷² *Box Office Mojo*.

⁷³ Just as interesting, Brad Pitt – star of *Seven Years in Tibet* – was originally offered the role of Neo. Surfer-cool (and seemingly vacuous) Reeves fits better the stereotypical image of Buddha-like cool than the redhot Pitt. Nevertheless, such a dilemma makes evident the Wachowski brothers’ intention to get a known Hollywood actor with a “Buddhist” resume. Also interesting is Reeves’ subsequent appearance (along with actor Richard Gere) in a DVD series called *Discovering Buddhism*, which discusses the fundamentals of Tibetan Buddhism.

plot – (1) the discovery of Jesse and his subsequent visit to Bhutan to determine if he is the reincarnation and (2) the life of the Buddha, which is intercut into the modern-day narrative by the intra-diegetic means of a child’s storybook that is read at various moments during the film. Such a dual structure contrasts the America of today with the legendary India of the past, presenting as literal fact the various exotic myths of the Buddha’s life and in the process exoticizing the lands of Asia as well – an oversimplification of complex metaphysical ideals, which Claretta Tonetti also posits.⁷⁴

In the contemporary time of the plot, modern Asia is shown exclusively in similar terms: technologically and economically primitive and rooted in time-tested and simple Buddhist traditions. In the film, Buddhism acts as a cure for a spiritually bereft America, suggesting how the religion will heal the scars and identity crisis of post-Cold War capitalist America. Indeed, Martha Sherrill and Bertolucci himself suggest that much of his motivation for the film is a sublimation of his desire for a socialist utopia.⁷⁵ Moreover, the film seeks to ease American anxiety over Asia, a region that is nebulized by the variety of exotic references to its various countries. Yet, in a film where the American boy ultimately returns to America as rejected aspirant, Tibet must always be kept at a distance, as Eve Mullen argues, lest it threaten to overwhelm an anxious capitalist America.⁷⁶ That distance releases the tension built into a story in which Asian Buddhists seek to convert an American boy.

Much as the two previously analyzed films do, *Little Buddha* invokes realism as a

⁷⁴ Claretta Tonetti, p. 249.

⁷⁵ Martha Sherrill, p. G1. Bertolucci states: “I found there was no contradiction between this religion [Buddhism] and what I already believed in.’ ... ‘It gives me another way to be allowed to have dreams. The dreams you are no longer allowed to have with socialism. Maybe ... I need a utopia.”

⁷⁶ Eve L. Mullen. Mullen argues: “Tibet as a distant, fantasy utopia is only a place in which to escape for a short time, and it is a place which must be kept distant for the fantasy to perpetuate.... It is nice to visit a nonmaterialist culture of selflessness, but it is nicer to return home to our comfortable luxuries and familiar individualism.”

means of establishing its credibility to an American audience. The film opens with a black screen and the following words: “This film is inspired by the true life stories of several children and their extraordinary voyage of discovery.” While the words seek to ground the story in actual fact, and thus legitimate the story for an American audience, the words also secularize the “voyage of discovery,” putting Buddhist enlightenment and reincarnation in terms that could be accepted by Christian Americans. These words set up the incredible events that take place in the first few minutes of the film, during which a lama visits first the playground and then the home of Jesse Conrad, a ten-year-old whom Lama Norbu believes is the reincarnation of his master, Lama Dorje. Clad in his conspicuous Tibetan Buddhist robes, Norbu first approaches the mother who watches her son playing ball. Strangely, he introduces himself as a Tibetan “astrologer,” which portrays him as the equivalent of a shyster. A few days later, he and a few colleagues pay an unannounced visit to the home of the blond and well-to-do Conrads, to reveal to the boy that they think he is the reincarnation of their master and to try to convince him to travel to Bhutan to determine whether he is the reincarnation. These various scenes suggest the unorthodox and almost cultish method of the lamas in approaching an American family to let their son become Buddhist. The opening words help assuage some of the anxiety of such an unusual and unnerving situation by grounding it in the real.

Various dialogues also treat American anxiety over Buddhism, by stressing the basic sameness of the Tibetan monks and Americans, but also the elevated status of Americans. When the lamas first visit the Conrad house, they make a prayer gesture to the white women – Lisa Conrad and her housekeeper – as they enter and state that it is

“very exciting” to be there. Lisa seats the monks, and then her husband comes home. She tells him that she has “a little distraction” for him, suggesting how an ideal bourgeois family of Americans copes with the quotidian by not paying attention to it. When they are all seated, Lama Norbu explains: “We are looking for his reincarnation.” In the background, a boy flits through but out of focus, making just a little noise that draws the mother’s attention. The mother says, “Jesse, is that you?” The ambiguous intent of her response suggests her ambivalence and anxiety at the lamas’ visit. When Jesse does approach the monks he’s wearing a self-created mask of a red rat, which his mother tells him to remove. Norbu, however, asks about the mask and tells him that “we love masks.” This rhetorical move allies Buddhism with a child-like simplicity and improvisation while it emphasizes the Tibetan Buddhists’ fundamental similarity to Americans as well as their harmlessness.

The film further plays up aestheticism as a means to engage the Asian other through its subsequent focus on sand mandalas and other elaborate and colorful Tibetan Buddhist artifacts. Such artifacts include the lamas’ Seattle dharma center, whose exterior Jesse pointedly describes as “[looking] like a church,” which it obviously does not. The wording helps downplay dissimilarity between American religious practice and Tibetan Buddhism as it explains the basic function of the building. While the white Americans clearly admire the colorful paintings on the center’s interior, the paintings become nothing but a newly admired style.

The film evinces further similarities between Americans and Tibetan Buddhists to assuage American anxiety. For example, a medium long shot shows a lama wearing jeans and a denim jacket, a symbol of American style. Another instance occurs when

the lamas depart from the house and leave a “storybook” of the Buddha’s life for Jesse, a book that functions much like a Christian Bible. Though the diction suggests the book is innocuous, it provides an example of the cultures’ apparent similarity even as it threatens to proselytize the young boy. These conservative fears are realized in a later scene, when, after reading from the book, the boy takes a meditation pose. Nevertheless, the storybook provides an apparently innocent and child-like framework, what the defensive father Dean Conrad calls “a beautiful myth,” with an emphasis on the last word. This framework can allow the American audience to interact with the religion without threat, on the basic level of narrative. This move to experience the foreign as simple aestheticism further suggests Weber’s point. As important for an American audience that is likely as poorly versed in Buddhism as Jesse, the storybook acts as an intra-diegetic means to narrate the story of the Buddha’s life. It allows exotic representations of ancient India access into modern America.

While the film shows Jesse reading the book and consuming the life of the Buddha, it delivers the legend of the Buddha’s life in exactly literal terms. Although the film later shows that the Buddha took an arduous journey to achieve enlightenment, here it plays up the exotic nature of his origins using special effects. Tonetti comments: “The simplification ... is indirectly proportional to the technology” and notes the apparent paradox between the “explosion of special effects in Bertolucci’s cinema” and “a philosophy that is antithetical to Western technology.”⁷⁷ The extended scene shows the Buddha’s mother returning to her homeland to give birth, with an entourage of richly ornamented elephants and many beautiful servants. At various times the film portrays a

⁷⁷ Claretta Tonetti, p. 250 – 251. Bertolucci states: “What if the spiritual-sublime moment of the Buddhist illumination were really a great special effect?” Tonetti interprets this comment as joking, but it seems prescient, and indicates the conflation of technology and the mystical, magical, cool experience.

tree bending down to shade her and a baby elephant hugging her. Then she painlessly gives birth to the Buddha, who appears fully conscious and strong enough to stand on his own legs. He speaks his mantra of saving all beings from suffering, and as he walks, lotus blossoms spring from the ground. Moreover, in a move to assuage American anxiety, the narrator notes the Buddha's similarity to Jesus, although he was born much before. Tonetti exculpates such images as "beautiful illustrations, nothing more than illustrations."⁷⁸ But this literal depiction of the Buddha's birth exoticizes Buddhism as something fantastical and beyond the ordinary logic of the rationalized late-capitalist era.

Slumming with the Buddhists

Little Buddha shows the Conrads' experience of Buddhism and trip to Asia as "slumming," in which their high wealth and technological American background contrast with the relatively poor Asians. The editing of the film helps magnify this contrast. For example, when Lama Norbu tells Jesse about how the Buddha's father tried to keep him from suffering by retaining him inside his palace, the scene reverts to contemporary time, in which Jesse's father is attempting to prevent Lama Norbu from taking Jesse to Bhutan. Only after the father hears about the death of his brother does he decide to allow Jesse to go with the lamas. Here, the life of the Conrad family mimics the life of the Buddha, a recapitulation that establishes the spiritual primacy of Buddhism. The film reiterates this connection when Jesse and his father actually go to Kathmandu. In this depiction the film posits a binary vision of Asia as both intensely wealthy and destitutely poor. When Jesse shares his Nintendo Game Boy with a local boy, Raju,

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

Raju's brother steals the video-game system and runs away. Raju runs after his brother. As Jesse chases them and inadvertently gets lost in the city, he comes across almost the exact shot of endless toil that the young Buddha did, with merely a few changes. Jesse wanders through the streets and sees the "real" Nepal, and he becomes disoriented and bewildered. Only when Raju returns the Game Boy does the frightening experience for Jesse come to an end. After the theft of the video game the virtue of the Nepalese is called into question, but the spiritual virtue of Raju is restored when he returns the system.

Such slumming re-affirms America's status as technologically advanced, especially since the films show Asians as intensely desiring and craving "our" material goods, (despite the fact that Nintendo is based in Japan). In its depiction of Jesse sharing his Game Boy with Raju, the film represents America as beneficent and friendly to Asian others, in spite of their possibly destructive desire to be like us. By setting up the Conrad family in a position similar to the Buddha's experience, the film universalizes and therefore exculpates American desire from predatory intent. In effect, America begins to occupy the representational space and position of such "pure" Buddhists, a switch that echoes Liu's point. While such scenes iterate the similarities of America to Asia, they also establish the marked differences that make America superior.

The Matrix: "Buddhist" Critique as Cool

The power of capitalist representation to feed on protest, as Chow argues, is no more evident than in the *The Matrix* (1999). The Wachowski brothers' film took in \$50 million its first weekend of release, and its phenomenal post-cinema distribution is credited with helping the fledgling DVD industry overcome consumer malaise at yet-another new entertainment medium to buy. Less than six years after the original film,

two sequels were spawned and the series had become a cult and mainstream classic. What made the supposedly rebellious film so popular not just with the movie-going public but also critics and scholars?

Popular with younger audiences for the groundbreaking visual effects, the film showcases Neo's bullet-dodging sequences and the wall-scaling martial-arts fighting scenes. Another factor must be its handling of intellectual ideas, a treatment that has provided much grist for the mill of academia. Indeed, this combination of intellect and action was a guiding motif in the film's construction. "We're tired of assembly-line action movies that are devoid of any intellectual content," says Larry Wachowski, "We were determined to put as many ideas into the movie as we could."⁷⁹ Such ideas include a strong critique of contemporary capitalist America and its vapidness, using an eclectic mix of philosophy and religion, including Buddhism, with Neo as the savior of the Zion rebels. Rachel Wagner and Frances Flannery-Dailey elaborate the formalistic parallels between the religion and the film.⁸⁰ These ideas sustain the film beyond the fleeting experience of a standard action film, and resonate with the zeitgeist of contemporary America.

While such ideas may explain the popularity of the film, they only begin to suggest what makes the movie so compelling to its disciples. The appeal of this jeremiad to America lay in its ability to re-work the notion that individual resistance is not only *not* futile but beatific and cool. The film amply demonstrates this representation of cool by the styles of filming and acting. Using massive amounts of capital and high-tech filming techniques, the film paradoxically represents technological culture as the enemy

⁷⁹ Christopher Probst, p. 32.

⁸⁰ Rachel Wagner and Frances Flannery-Dailey, p. 259.

even as it shows the putative resistance movement using such technologies. By re-fashioning technology as resistant to capitalism and therefore cool, the film propagates some of the same ideologies that it purports to critique. The discourse of cool neatly sublimates those protesting energies of its spectatorship into higher box-office figures, greater DVD sales, and more sequels. It's little wonder that a film showing the alienation and transcendence of its characters in a cynical future that resembles today has achieved spectacular success.

As with the *Star Wars* trilogy before it, *The Matrix* presents a band of human rebels in conflict with a distinct evil. Whereas Lucas' story begins in the adventure land of outer space, in the latter film rebellion begins in the strangling embrace and domesticated "inner" space of the corporation. Neo, in his persona as Thomas Anderson, must break free of a world where being an hour late for work could cost you your job. It's in this well-parceled and rationalized office of cubicles that America sees itself reflected. The film presents few other spaces of the Matrix's public world, and ones that are no more inviting and no less insipid. For instance, the nightclub scene shows the kind of bland existence led inside the Matrix. As the music of Rob Zombie blasts on the speakers, Anderson's pals pose zombie-like at the bar, while Anderson himself acts as a wallflower until the assertive Trinity comes along to speak with him. As paradigms of (post)modern culture, the depictions of these spaces resonate well with an audience jaded by their shallowness.

So, in Neo's escape from the Matrix, the film presents and promises another "real" world full of depth and meaning, a world that is represented by a kind of vulgar Buddhism. Ultimately, it's this promise of the utility of rebellion that makes *The Matrix*

compelling. This other, real and immanent world is precisely what's promised by the inclusion of Buddhism in the film, in distinction to the Christian narrative that is seen by many critics, such as Colin McGinn or the entwined religious traditions seen by Rachel Wagner and Frances Flannery-Dailey.⁸¹ A few critics, such as Hubert L. Dreyfus and Stephen D. Dreyfus, argue against any religious underpinning to the film at all.⁸² James L. Ford explains much of the work in terms of its formal similarity to Buddhism and notes various aspects of the story that can easily fit into such a savior narrative.⁸³ Similarly, Paul Fontana presents the obvious formal parallels with Judeo-Christian mythology and cites the warm reception that certain Christian viewers have given the film.⁸⁴ Fontana and Ford note the limitations of their formalist readings.⁸⁵

In its promise of the efficacy of rebellion the film posits two worlds – one is illusion, while the other is real and substantial. As Andrew Gordon argues, the film presents a worldview that dates back at least to the nineteenth-century Romantic version of this conflict between appearance and reality.⁸⁶ Rational arguments aside, the film still *feels* compelling not in spite of but because of this worldview. The film's emotional resonance and its undisputed popularity suggest the extent to which Americans feel alienated from the world and have set their sights on another seemingly more-real world, echoing Žižek's argument that the East is represented as to be penetrated. By appealing to the fascination for rebellion or transcendence, the film itself acts as a way for capitalism to create cool and so to re-instantiate itself.

⁸¹ Colin McGinn, p. 63.

Rachel Wagner and Frances Flannery-Dailey, p. 259.

⁸² Hubert L. Dreyfus and Stephen D. Dreyfus, p. 84.

⁸³ James L. Ford

⁸⁴ Paul Fontana, p. 160.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

James L. Ford, p. 140.

⁸⁶ Andrew Gordon, p. 87.

The elements of rebellion and transcendence, then, form a compelling base for the work. Among these elements is a kind of “vulgar” or “pop” reading of eastern mysticism. Unlike Christianity, whose main figure Jesus is mentioned by name in the film as an epithet for Neo, eastern mysticism has a much more shadowy presence. And yet although the film does not explicitly mention Buddhism, quasi-mystical elements, including suggestive language, strongly suggest the religion. In part these quasi-mystical elements are the inheritance of kung-fu movies that have made their way west into a new breed of action film. Surely a movie that shows the savior figure loaded with high-tech weaponry blasting his way into a government building is hardly a Buddhist narrative, a contradiction that Wagner and Flannery-Dailey note.⁸⁷ While the movie may wear the cloak of Buddhist mythology, it presents the religion as supporting the ethos of violence and control-oriented technological culture that are valorized as cool.

Numerous aspects of the film suggest a Buddhist interpretation. The film introduces Neo by name and tells the audience that he will be the savior of this world before Neo actually appears on camera. The first glimpse of this putative hero occurs as he slumps over his desk asleep, listening to music and surrounded by the trappings of consumer electronic culture. News of Morpheus, the leader of the rebel forces, flickers across a computer screen and onto the hero’s head, almost as if it’s absorbed directly into the sleeper. The words *Wake up, Neo* flash onto a blank computer screen and the character awakens as if controlled by a higher force. Anderson quite literally experiences enlightenment and awakening here, suggestive of the Buddhist epiphany to a new identity. Although later the film indicates that Anderson has been trying to understand the Matrix, at this point he begins to take it seriously and accompanies a

⁸⁷ Rachel Wagner and Frances Flannery-Dailey, p. 100.

few acquaintances to a nightclub after seeing a white rabbit tattoo and a previous allusion to it on the computer screen. With ideas such as the white rabbit, the film takes up pagan mysticism (and a Lewis Carroll allusion) early in the film, and often throughout the narrative pagan mysticism intertwines with a more explicit Buddhist mythos.

Through the *mise-en-scene* the film presents a universe of suffering in bland capitalist America that has to be overcome. Of the few scenes in public locations in the Matrix world, Neo's corporate office occupies a significant portion of film time. Here Neo toils in the corporate America of cubicle offices alongside colleagues who point him out to Agent Smith, the prime antagonist and leader of the Matrix's counter-insurgency forces. When on the same morning the hero oversleeps and arrives approximately one hour late to work, Neo's boss chews him out and gives him a fascist speech on the importance of the Metacortex company above employee interests. The film emphasizes the nature of the corporate space with the almost-nauseous green tone that permeates these scenes as well as the ominous dark lighting. The green filter suggests not only the greed of the corporation and, of course, money, but as well Anderson's nausea at working there.

The use of shots in this scene also sets up Neo as a prisoner of the corporate world. As the agents approach Neo in his cubicle (a symbol of the style-less and uniform corporate world), a high angle shot captures completely in the frame the full body of the protagonist hunching down to escape notice, reinforcing the notion of the corporate world as imprisonment. With this framing, Neo's cubicle becomes his cell. A series of slightly low angle, medium shots of the approaching agents suggests their relative powerfulness, but the angles are just below level, more subtly indicating their

power. As Neo scampers surreptitiously past the agents, a series of shots at waist level, positions the character much like a rat wending its way through the maze of cubicles, until he bursts into his boss's office, where he then escapes through the window. Here the film comments less on some future world than on the contemporary corporate world with its impersonal treatment of employees. That Anderson is initially enmeshed in this soul-less world and then transcends it resonates with an audience enthralled by the mundane stupidities and inequities of the same capitalist system.

Much of the seemingly everyday dialog has mystical overtones that resound with Buddhist thought. After Anderson arranges to meet Morpheus, his assistant Trinity picks him up and the car pulls out. When she attempts to scan him for a bug, Anderson vehemently disagrees, and her fellow conspirator Switch asks him to leave the car. He opens the door to head out into the rain and Trinity responds, "You've been down there, Neo. You know that road and you know exactly where it ends." Words like *road*, *path* or *way* are all suggestive of a mystical outlook. Indeed, the ancient Chinese word *tao* is often translated in any of these three ways. The film visually puns on the word *road*, by having Neo open the car door to look out into a soul-less urban or industrial cross street that runs to nowhere and is drenched in rain. This wordplay suggestive of eastern religion continues in Neo's initial encounters with Morpheus.

When Neo and Morpheus first meet, their conversation strongly suggests a despairing seeker who is looking for a way out of the suffering world. Morpheus approaches Neo from a frame of reference to the Matrix that Neo cannot yet comprehend because he has not experienced the real world firsthand. To Neo it seems Morpheus speaks in riddles, like representations of mysterious Asia, and somehow

knows why he has come to him. In fact, Morpheus informs him exactly why.

Morpheus: You have the look of a man who's accepted what he sees because he's expecting to wake up. Ironically, this is not far from the truth. Do you believe in fate, Neo?

Neo: No.

M: Why not?

N: Because I don't like the idea that I'm not in control of my life.

M: Let me tell you why you're here. You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life, that there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to me. Do you know what I'm talking about?

N: The Matrix?

The language here is pointedly suggestive of a mystical experience. Morpheus seems to be the well-versed Zen teacher who is able to see instantly what ails Neo, while Neo is the suffering aspirant (neophyte?) to the sect who's "expecting to wake up." Indeed, the reference to a splinter suggests those people who are compelled to practice Buddhism. When practitioners are on the verge of enlightenment, such a metaphor is often used to describe the desperate feeling that pushes them further, until they experience awakening. Matt Lawrence also argues that this immediate experience of the real world characterizes the film as Buddhist.⁸⁸

Although it does exhibit diction that correlates to a Buddhist experience, Morpheus' phrasing really smacks of New Age spirituality or of a psychic gazing into a crystal ball. The wording is open and suggestive rather than concrete and pointed. Viewers can easily fill in the blanks with their own experiences and feel that they are being directly addressed by the film. Vague compulsions and feelings and searching out a higher power are redolent of a faux spirituality, which real-life shysters often exploit for commercial gain. An intertwining of tawdry mystical experience with

⁸⁸ Matt Lawrence, p. 128.

elements evocative of Buddhism again occurs in this scene. Morpheus verbally seduces Neo to his side with his pseudo-mystical language and his understanding when Neo expresses his feelings about not being in control of his life: “I know *exactly* what you mean.” Here, the other world that Morpheus promises is represented as Buddhist in nature and comes to stand for finally being in control of one’s life.

Other explanations of the Matrix sound as if they situate the filmic world in Buddhist terms, but they reiterate American preoccupations with freedom and control. The Matrix is described much like *samsara* – the endless cycle of re-births and suffering that the unenlightened must undergo – by Morpheus just before Neo enters the real world:

Morpheus: The Matrix is everywhere; it’s all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out your window or on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, or go to church or when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

Neo: What truth?

M: That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, born inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste, or touch. A prison for your mind.

In this first formulation of the Matrix, dual worlds emerge – the Matrix world of never-ending illusion and the real world of truth. Morpheus’s choice of the phrase “prison for your mind” seems to reflect a Buddhist belief in mind as the ultimate battleground for enlightenment. His diction mirrors the viewer’s dissatisfaction with those elements that have a social component that shape identity – “when you go to work, or go to church or when you pay your taxes.” These social demands all place restraints on the behavior of the individual; amidst a social backdrop, individuals are constantly reminded that they are not simply free to do whatever they feel like doing. These restraints clash with the ideology of individualism promoted by control-oriented technology, indeed, by the

general experience of life in the late-20th century, where there is a greater push for freedom and control. Therefore, for an audience in the thrall of an insidious consumer capitalism this description might sound like a fair diagnosis of their spiritual dilemma – Morpheus refers to Neo as a slave. He uses the term *bondage*, which echoes not only slavery but the use of debt financing and credit cards as a means of affording the luxuries of late capitalism. As is well documented, Americans are increasingly bound by their spending with usurious credit cards. Since it allows rebellion against such a restrictive lifestyle, Buddhism sounds like it promises a realm where everyone can do whatever they feel like doing – the asymptotic vision of capitalist freedom.

The film presents the daily life of the rebels as semi-Buddhist in nature, a point that Wagner and Flannery-Dailey also make.⁸⁹ After Neo arrives in the real world and his startling revelation on the nature of reality, he joins Morpheus and his crew aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*. On board the ship they lead a monastic life and live according to some traditional Buddhist rules. Their organization resembles something of the *sangha*, the collection of practitioners that first gathered around the Buddha, and which today is any organized group of both lay and ordained Buddhists. The inner circle who have escaped the Matrix sport shaven heads, while the women wear close-cropped hair – both are traditional hair styling in a Buddhist monastery. The rebels lead a spartan lifestyle with the suggestion that they are vegetarians, consuming only a fortified processed food. With the exception of Cypher, they don't consume alcohol, and even he must do so on the sly – one of the first hints that he doesn't belong among the rebels.

One other sequence in particular reveals how the film intertwines Buddhism and the Western ideology of control. As a critical segue into the final section of the film, Neo

⁸⁹ Rachel Wagner and Frances Flannery-Dailey, p. 281.

visits the Oracle to try to receive confirmation that he is the promised savior – the One – whom Morpheus has been seeking. Neo is taken into the Oracle’s waiting room, where he sees several other “potentials,” as these young children are called. Two little girls are making a trio of alphabet blocks hover in the air, while a boy plays at bending spoons by concentrating on them. The boy sits in what appears to be the lotus position, traditionally used in meditation, and sports a shaved head and robe suggestive of eastern religion. Before him lie tangled and twisted spoons. As the boy focuses, the head of the spoon revolves 360 degrees, reflecting Neo as it moves. The intra-diegetic music of wind chimes suggests the mystical and revelatory nature of this act, and the boy hands the spoon to Neo, who examines it carefully. Before he is called to the Oracle, Neo asks how the boy bent the spoon. The child explains, “Do not try to bend the spoon. That’s impossible. Instead only try to realize the truth....There is no spoon.... Then you’ll see that it is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself [or your self].” As Neo begins to bend the spoon, the chimes kick in again, suggesting that these individuals are living in a mystical realm.

Here the film presents a strange conflation of Buddhism, control, and one of the most well-known hoaxes of the 20th century. While the spoon-bending boy is attired in a Buddhist robe, he performs a trick made famous by conman Uri Geller in the 1970s.⁹⁰ Second, the whole setup of visiting the Oracle in her apartment in what appears to be the ghetto suggests a cheap, fly-by-night psychic of today. This scene is reminiscent of a scene in *Little Buddha*, where Lama Norbu speaks with the Buddhist Oracle to determine who is the actual reincarnation of a former lama. Finally, the boy’s words to

⁹⁰ Cecil Adams. Geller managed to convince millions of people that he had some special psychic ability to bend spoons or other forms of metal merely by concentrating on them

Neo suggest a Buddhist mysticism, particularly to an audience not particularly well versed in it. The boy's attire is clearly meant to lend credence to his pronouncement. His words echo a well-known Zen *koan*, as Glenn Yeffeth and Lawrence note.⁹¹ Lawrence further adds that the boy's statement indicates the Buddhist notion of mind as ultimate reality. However, the boy's use of the word *self* is contradictory to a total Buddhist reading, because Buddhists see the independently existing self as yet another illusion.

The final showdown between Neo and the agents of the Matrix represents Buddhism as a doctrine that embodies ultimate control. On the run from Agent Smith, Neo ducks into a room only to be confronted by his nemesis, who blasts him in the chest and then follows him out into the hall to finish the job. With the help of Trinity, who has already warped back to the real world, Neo fully realizes the illusory nature of the Matrix and revives himself to finish the agents. In order to detail this mystical experience the filmmakers effectively use the *mise-en-scene* to show Neo's enlightenment. After Neo has died, the film shows Trinity chastely kissing Neo and in the background sparks fly during her short monologue that he must be the One. Indeed, sparks fly right on her words *I love you*. Neo resumes breathing, and a monitor symbolically shows his heart beating again. From the real world Trinity commands him to get up and yet he responds from the Matrix, suggesting that, for him at least, the border between the two worlds is bridged. Beatific music plays throughout, as Neo

⁹¹ Glen Yeffeth, p. 253. Yeffeth cites the *koan* as follows: Two monks were arguing about the temple flag waving in the wind. One said "the flag moves." The other said "the wind moves." They argued back and forth and could not agree. Hui-neng, the sixth Patriarch, said: "Gentlemen! It is not the flag that moves. It is not the wind that moves. It is your mind that moves." The two monks were struck with awe. Matt Lawrence, p. 129.

arises and the agents try to gun him down.

After realizing the nature of the Matrix, he has new powers. The film literally shows the whorls as Neo slows the bullets fired at him from the agents and then stops the bullets as if they were frozen in time. Then the film presents what the Matrix looks like from Neo's eyes – streams of flowing data in the shape of the visible Matrix world. Neo is amazed by his new abilities, and responds to the physical attacks of Agent Smith effortlessly, while time seems to slow for him. As he kicks his enemy down the hall, his leg remains nearly frozen in space. Then Neo literally runs through Agent Smith, who explodes. When the camera returns to Neo he is flexing his body and the Matrix flexes with him, suggesting his oneness inside the computer construct. He breathes deeply and with equanimity, and rests his hands in a seemingly Buddhist pose. Lawrence describes the situation thus: "Neo was able to *manipulate them effortlessly*" [emphasis mine].⁹²

The powers that Neo obtains are not unlike those that a Buddha is reputed to obtain after breaking the bonds of karma. Such a being becomes omniscient, omnipresent, and able to respond to all situations virtuously and effortlessly. Lawrence similarly describes this scene in Buddhist terms, as the embodiment of the ideal of *wu-wei* – action through non-action.⁹³ In fact, the enlightened being develops a new relationship to time. Likewise, a Buddha can see the world in terms of its flux, its unceasing impermanence, much as Neo experiences the Matrix. The final shot in this scene, a close-up of Neo's breathing, directly suggests the method through which enlightenment is experienced – careful observation of the breath with meditation. After

⁹² Matt Lawrence, p. 189.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

his enlightenment Neo is perfectly calm and his previous worries have been vanquished.

Buddhism as Ultimate Control

As suggested before, *The Matrix* was created in the context of a well-capitalized Hollywood system that is itself ensconced in consumer capitalism within a western, control-oriented society. These contexts manifest themselves in the portrayal of Buddhism, but the film hardly presents something that might be called “authentic” Buddhism. Ford rightly argues that one central aspect that gives this movie a Buddhist flavor is that the main character must rid himself of ignorance about the true nature of reality.⁹⁴ However, the film leaves out major elements of the Buddhist worldview, as Ford is somewhat at pains to note: “We do not find explicit discussions of impermanence, interdependence, or emptiness in the dialogue of *The Matrix*.”⁹⁵ Rather, Buddhism comes to be represented as a means of ultimate control over the world.

As shown in the film, the mystical experience gives us some power to control our environment or defeat our enemies directly. Lawrence notes that technological overdevelopment forms the apocalyptic setting for the film and suggests how the over-aggressiveness of technology has led to the destruction of nature.⁹⁶ While such a bias may come from the kung-fu heritage which the Wachowskis used for elements of their film, more likely it comes from the expectations of an American audience already intent on seeing an action film or an audience predisposed to control-oriented methods of dealing with the world. For example, the scene where Neo and Trinity storm the

⁹⁴ James L. Ford, p. 137.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁹⁶ Matt Lawrence, p. 176.

government building packed with high-tech firepower suggests that the film relies on generic expectations and not really on a Buddhist ethic of non-violence or non-action. That is, the film may make the Buddhist forms but it doesn't produce a Buddhist spirit, suggesting Liu's point that these forms are for sale.

Rather, the scene showcases the desire of an American audience for control in any way that might express its "indisputable" and unrepentant individuality, much as intercut shots show Morpheus somehow withstanding a chemical that should make him putty in the hands of his torturers. The shot contrasts how a typical audience member is de-individualized by modern security measures and how a cool person would deal with the situation. As Neo enters the building through a revolving door, a low shot in slow motion focuses exclusively on his black boots and his steps move in time to an industrial sound much like a sledgehammer. Before him stand the nondescript but threatening guards who will scan his bag, but he nonchalantly places the bag on the conveyor belt -- a move that marks him as rebelliously cool, since the audience is unable to make such a gesture.

Only after he passes through the scanning device, which sounds off, does the shot reveal his face, which is clad in cool black sunglasses. Then in the standard protocol a guard approaches him and asks him to remove all metallic objects from his person. Neo flashes open both sides of his duster to display the whole panoply of his black weaponry. The guard swears, and Neo leaps into action with a kung fu thrust to his chest. Then in slow motion he begins a choreographed ballet in which he slaughters the guards with his machine guns. After he annihilates all but one of the guards, Trinity enters and guns down the last one. She also sports black sunglasses and is dressed in

black leather or latex. She tosses the spent weapon aside in an insouciant gesture, as if to say that she is so cool that she doesn't need that symbol of power anymore. They have plenty of other guns.

In the following shot, the camera backs away from the pair who stand defiantly with weapons drawn waiting for the backup guards, who race toward the lobby. The guards are dressed as if they are Marines and fan out into the room settling behind pillars. They draw their heavy machine guns and shotguns, and point them toward the camera. One yells, "Freeze." Neo and Trinity calmly turn to one another as if debating the issue, and then dodge. Machine guns blast at them. As Neo dodges, he pulls two handguns. In a slow-motion shot, he returns fire while moving behind a pillar. The slow-motion shot characterizes him as nonchalant, the epitome of cool under fire. A techno score accentuates the bullets streaming from their weapons, suggesting their control of the situation. The walls of the building crack under the relentless gunfire, yet Neo proceeds to blast the guards in a calm and cool choreograph. Meanwhile, Trinity is dodging bullets on the other side of the lobby. She makes a gravity-defying run up the side of a wall, while bullets tear up the wall behind her. She then flips over in midair to the safety of a pillar. With the techno score behind them and in slow motion to accentuate their nonchalance, Neo and Trinity continue to make such maneuvers until they dispatch all the guards. The scene ends with the pedestrian sound of an elevator ding and the almost-comic crash of a pillar's faceplate onto the destroyed lobby floor, a series of actions that highlights how powerful the duo are.

This sequence highlights not only genre expectations for an action film but also the American audience's desire for control-oriented solutions, solutions that are

represented as cool since they defy the quotidian experience. On the one hand, the sequence showcases the immense technological firepower of the rebels and their unapologetic use of such weapons for their individual goals. On the other hand, the sequence also shows how in control of their bodies that they are -- enough to perform acrobatics as they're being shot at. Moreover, their acrobatics defy fundamental laws of physics, positioning them as cool. In any case, as they enter the lobby to be vetted by the guards, their actions contrast starkly with the standard approach that everyone must take in such a situation. Rather than submit to the de-individualizing process of security, Neo expresses his individuality through control, by blowing away the guard. In the process he becomes cool through control, which has been allied with Buddhism throughout the film.

Indeed, the film posits a world where control resides as the central guiding value, a position that reflects the Western lineage of technological control. The film seems to conceive of the Buddhist principle of the ignorance of the nature of reality in specifically dualistic terms. So, for instance, Morpheus explains the nature of the Matrix computer construct and Neo picks up on it very quickly, almost as if the experiential reality were a fact that had been memorized and could now be cited as knowledge rather than ignorance of the subject. This commodification of knowledge reflects the growing necessity of information in late-stage capitalist economies and the subsequent fetishization of information.

Ignorance in the Buddhist sense is not just a factual lack but a whole series of sedimented processes and behaviors – karma – that usually must be worked through rigorously and methodically with meditation. Instead, the film generally presents the

western notion of factual ignorance, underscoring it by Neo's martial-arts training. While Ford argues that "the very process of Neo's training is a techno-cyber version of meditation,"⁹⁷ that formulation obscures the commodification of knowledge. Historically the eastern martial arts have had significant ties with Buddhism, and both demand extensive concentration and dedication. However, instead of a demanding practice built up over years, the film presents the kind of quick-fix and consumerist mentality prevalent today – "you can own this training with little effort." If Neo's martial-arts training is a version of meditation, then these skills and enlightenment can simply be downloaded into a person wholesale. Instead of years of wholehearted devotion to the practice, the film manifests a western, control-oriented view on enlightenment that colors Buddhism in every shade of its capitalist heritage.

Attention-Energy as Fuel for the Matrix / *The Matrix*

In its critique of modern society, *The Matrix* presents a vision of human enslavement that relies on the willing attention of its victims. While Morpheus explains that the machines are using humans for bio-electricity, a process that, Peter B. Lloyd says, violates fundamental physical laws.⁹⁸ The world of the Matrix actually relies on the attention-energy of humans to anchor them inside the media construct that is the Matrix, which the film already conceives as a pernicious, always-on virtual reality. As such, the film presents a critique of media culture, even though the film is a tremendously successful part of that culture. Yet this critique is always already reworked into the circuits of representation that also render it a protest that can be re-sold. Such a media protest always routes the attention of spectators into the global circuits of mass media

⁹⁷ James L. Ford, p. 138.

⁹⁸ Peter B. Lloyd, p. 104.

and global capitalism, transform that attention into profits.

The absolute necessity of attention-energy for the continuance of global capitalism can be thrown into relief by a Buddhist critique. Buddhism scholar Peter Hershock calls the diversion of attention-energy from local environments and toward the maintenance of mass media and the corporate structure “the colonization of consciousness.”⁹⁹ Hershock argues that such a critique begins with the notion of human attention as fundamental to life and well-being. Only when attention-energy is focused on a problem can it be effectively solved. By bestowing attention-energy in what Buddhism calls “skillful” ways, suffering can be overcome. Needless to say, if mass media siphons that attention from the immediate environment, it cannot be put to work in that local area, let alone in skillful ways. Corporations “mine” attention-energy, to use Hershock’s metaphor, much like a natural resource. Then they peddle solutions to problems that were created by the consumer’s attention to the media and consequent inattentiveness to him/herself. Mass media leads to, among other things, the export of attention from the local to the global in support of a growing global consumer culture. By focusing attention on media, the discourse of cool allows this process to act more efficiently.

In order to enunciate its protest and therefore capture more attention-energy, the film analogizes the machines as the corporations of today, and science fiction does nothing if not talk about the problems of today in the guise of the future. The similarity of Anderson’s boss, Rhineheart, and Agent Smith underscores this analogy. Rhineheart styles his hair conspicuously like Agent Smith, and they are both “men in the

⁹⁹ Peter Hershock, *Reinventing the Wheel* p. 6.

grey flannel suit” – wearing the traditional business attire. The connection of the fascist Rhineheart with the central antagonist allies corporate capitalism with evil. The Wachowskis also make their protest by transforming the original colors of the iconic Warner Brothers logo to green in the film’s opening credits, a move that suggests the greed of the corporation. They deliberately foreground their complicity in the circuits of power even as they give a resounding gesture of disgust – a very public one that most people can’t make.

So *The Matrix* is compelling because it supposedly promises rebellion or transcendence from a state where corporate interests dominate. Yet one must partake in the mass medium, either film in the cinema or DVD/VHS at home, in order to receive the “rebellious” message. That the Wachowskis “flick off” the corporate world just allows the mass medium to attract a fuller spectrum of attention-energy more effectively. Rather than constituting a destabilizing critique of capitalism, such a protest increases its reach. Simply look at the hype and success surrounding *The Matrix* sequels. In sum, the asymptotic condition of our current consumption of mass media exists in the Matrix.¹⁰⁰ As Morpheus says, “The Matrix is a computer-generated dream world built to keep us under control.” It does not function repressively, but rather by our own volition and desire. Humans colonize themselves and commodify their consciousness; the machine is us, in a quite literal way in *The Matrix*.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Kevin Warwick, p. 203. Warwick suggests that The Matrix world may be a vision of our future.

¹⁰¹ As suggested by karma, such a process of colonization will continue until we are able to skillfully use our attention-energy and use it within a (local) system where the positive effects of attention come back to us and are not siphoned into global networks where that energy is used to maintain the autocracy of the corporation. As the products and means of such global networks, mass-media technology predisposes us to use attention in promoting values inherent in that technology. And to the extent that any technology uses as its foundation computers – which are based on binary code, an obvious duality – we can expect the propagation of that duality, and the consequent ignorance and suffering based on the conceit that the

The promise of transcendence from capitalism instantiated by *The Matrix* belies its actual production of a capitalistic worldview. For example, take the fashion industry spawned in the wake of the first film: black sunglasses a la Neo sprouted everywhere, while the black dusters of the band of rebels became a cool item. While the film proclaimed a message of revolution, it sparked remarkable sales. As the co-option of Buddhism as part of this media onslaught suggests, capitalist representation re-works images into benign consumables. Specifically, Buddhism is re-figured as an ideology of control, in distinct contrast to the practices promoted by the religion. Indeed, such representations begin to reflect Arthur C. Clarke's famous dictum: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

This trend of portraying Buddhism as the ultimate form of control, and thus magical, continues in more recent films. For example, *The Last Mimzy* (2007) relates the story of two children who were contacted by humans of the future. By returning a rabbit-shaped, high-tech Mimzy to the past, the future humans seek to have their ancestors turn away from the ecological damage that has torn their world apart. When the two children find the rabbit, they begin to develop supernatural abilities. "Before you know it, the movie about innocent children receiving a message from the future... has become a 'Little Buddha' for the new millennium, with pushy Tibetans-loving teachers," says Roger Moore.¹⁰² With abilities such as teleportation, telepathy, and levitation, the children are soon suspected of being *tulkus*, Buddhist adepts, by their school teacher, who has recently returned from Nepal. Through the final scene, the film continues

self is fundamentally different from others. This belief is the root of ignorance, according to Buddhism, and it is literally built into digital culture.

¹⁰² Roger Moore, p. C5.

displaying their supernatural abilities as what allows them to save the future. Like the practices of control that it seeks to critique, the film uses Buddhism to provide an ethos of control that simply tries to re-orient the direction of control, rather than critiquing the ideology of control. By continuing to turn Buddhism into a religion that promotes control, such cinematic representations revoke the notion of anything inherently problematic in the practice of control, and therefore the technological lineage of America and the West derived from such a practice. Instead, technology becomes the ultimate form of cool.

Conclusion

In the period immediately following the Cold War, the United States turned to filmic representations of Buddhism as a means to evoke its self-identity as a protector of (capitalist) freedom vis-à-vis the growing economic power of China. In order to portray itself this way, America has used representations focusing on the putative innocence and purity of a Buddhist Tibet that has been ravaged by an aggressive China. Films such as *Kundun* and *Seven Years in Tibet* display this innocence and aggressiveness very overtly, clearly allying the United States with these “innocent Buddhists” who are just learning about technology. *The Little Buddha* operates in a similar fashion, suggesting how the United States will save a tiny Buddhist Asian nation (here, Bhutan) while that nation revives the spiritual roots of America. The most recent of the films – *The Matrix* – most explicitly details the connection between Buddhism and the growing technological culture of America. Here, more than in any of the other films, a vulgar reading of Buddhism comes to undergird the production of American cool, which discourse intends to promote consumption and so strengthen the United States. Much as in the Cold War period itself, the representational response to an eminent national threat is to encourage the spread of capitalism, especially an American-dominated

capitalism. A similar, but still more overt, process occurs in advertisements using Buddhism, which is discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7 ADVERTISING BUDDHISM: CONSUMING THE EXOTIC AT HOME

In the article "Zen in the Balance: Can It Survive America?" Helen Tworokv delineates some of the major trends in the postwar adaptation of Zen Buddhism in America, highlighting one in particular. Tworokv says: "The most compelling question today is whether the Americanization of Zen now under way is a necessary process of cultural adaptation or whether what we have confidently called 'Americanization' has become a justification for the co-optation of Zen by secular materialists."¹ In the 1980s, she declares, "The Middle Way became solidly middle class."² As I argued in the previous chapter, the recent explosion of Buddhism into domestic mass media has much to do with American preoccupations with China, especially Chinese economic expansionism, even as it re-affirms U.S. economic development in the post-Cold War world. But in the last few years, this trend has become even more explicit, with images of Buddhism being represented as a source of perceived value – that is, cool -- in mainstream advertisements.³ Buddhism's move from film, a medium sought out actively by willing theatergoers, to advertisement, which often has a wide and unspecific reach, suggests how preponderant and deep the tension involving China – and Asia generally – really runs. The proliferation of advertisements invoking Buddhism suggests how "solidly middle class" that the marketing of Buddhism as cool has become.

Whereas the use of Buddhism as a pitchman for capitalism is relatively recent, Buddhism was often popularized in the U.S. as an anti-capitalist critique from the

¹ Helen Tworokv, p. 56.

² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³ One example of this explosion: Don Lattin explores the proliferation of "Buddhist stuff," and notes ironically: "DharmaCrafts is proud to announce its new DharmaKids Collection, all the stuff Buddhist parents need to send their little ones down the Eight Fold Path" (53). Don Lattin.

fringes, back to Beat writers such as Kerouac and Ginsberg, and even as early as the first serious American reader of Buddhist texts, Ralph Waldo Emerson. The change reveals a key characteristic of capitalism – its ability to re-work seemingly competitive and anti-consumerist discourses into economically productive representations. If cool has become a way to restructure and transform the threat/opportunity that China presents to the United States, when did this discourse take Buddhism as a means to this end?

The use of Buddhism for capitalist ends has shifted since the end of the Cold War. With the demise in 1990 of the Soviet Union, the "evil empire," to use President Reagan's phrase, the United States lost a clear foil for itself. America no longer had a communist menace; in fact, that which the nation had defined as good and a bulwark against communism – capitalism – was proliferating across the globe. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War the expansion of capitalism around the globe to heretofore closed economies created a situation in which the capitalist paradigm had little perceived threat. Now it is precisely those newly developing capitalist nations that pose a threat to the dominance of American capital.

While jobs are often outsourced to a variety of Asian nations, China has come to be the pre-eminent example of a rising Asian economic power. China's rapid economic climb, which has occurred in approximately the last 30 years, threatens the United States' dominant position, both economically and politically. Somewhat ironically, the threat to the United States has been the overwhelming growth of China as a quasi-capitalist power. On the one hand, American investors and others have recently made fistfuls of dollars by investing in the Asian nation, and stand to make substantially more

in the coming decades. Yet, on the other, blue-collar labor has been particularly threatened by the low prices of Chinese labor, but white-collar classes are increasingly challenged by China too. Tales of outsourcing jobs to Asia have proliferated in America, whose jobs are perhaps most threatened by the practice. This dual challenge that China presents – immense economic opportunity for an investor class and seemingly grave existential threat to the unmonied classes – must be managed by strategic representation, along the Orientalist lines that Edward Said laid out. Said writes, "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony."⁴

But with China seriously challenging American hegemony, how might the ideological formation of Orientalism or some new variant maintain the perception of American dominance? As American jobs and investment are increasingly outsourced to China, and Asia generally, the process of capitalist representation comes to highlight the economic opportunity for American investors and mitigate the material threat for American labor. Within this context Buddhism as a generic marker of Asia, especially China, is deployed in the most ubiquitous medium with the largest reach to the common American – advertisement.

This global capitalist competition presents a serious threat to United States economic dominance. For example, at the end of World War II the United States produced around 50% of the world's economic output.⁵ Some predictions indicate that the U.S. and Canada share of world output will fall from 30% today to 19% in 2050. Meanwhile, economic growth in developing economies is staggering, with China leading

⁴ Edward Said, p. 5.

⁵ John Kunkel, p. 33.

the pack at official estimates of 10% per year.

China's share of global GDP will grow from 5% to around 17%, and "China will come a close second to the U.S. in terms of economic power by 2050."⁶ From approximately 1991 China began to receive significant increases in foreign direct investment.⁷ Such increases are positively correlated with increased economic activity, which included the many manufacturing jobs that had been outsourced from America. Increases in FDI in China occurred just as the Cold War ended.

From this period on, Buddhism has increasingly emerged in America in highly visible, large-scale and capital-intensive projects. Such projects have included the numerous big-budget films sponsored by major studios and directors that came out in the 1990s, as I highlighted in the previous chapter. These projects also include the much more penetrating tentacles of advertising, especially in the last 10 years. Admittedly, in the ads that I analyze below, there is no specific mention of Buddhism. After all, the ads are hawking products, not religion per se. Rather, the ads deploy meditating figures who could be from other Asian religions that feature meditation as a primary component, such as Hinduism or Jainism. Most important to my reading is that the meditating figure stands in for Asia. Indeed, the conflation of religious traditions can work even better for the purposes of demonstrating the opportunity/threat paradigm for Asia as whole. In fact, this conflation corroborates Liu's claim that the form or style of an ad is what's actually for sale. But Buddhism is the only pan-Asian religion of significance; it is the only religion that can come to represent, as a whole, the Asian

⁶ *Alliance Trust*

⁷ *Chinability.com*

threat/opportunity, including China, India, Indonesia, and others.

So this sudden emergence of meditating figures into American mass culture over approximately the same time frame as China's massive economic development suggests that Buddhism is being deployed as a symbol of Asia generally, but especially China. Unarguably, China has a more diverse religious background than simply Buddhism (Taoism and Confucianism among others), but representations appearing in America to motivate consumption or defuse anxiety need neither acknowledge this diversity nor portray it. Given the well-known ascendancy of China that has been promulgated in the mass media, the sight of meditating figures in ads most clearly references this fastest-growing Asian nation.

In the 21st century, as China's economic reach grows, advertisers have begun to more widely adopt Buddhism as a marker of cool to ease American middle-class anxiety over the specter of China, even as they promote sales from China and thus its economic development. Moreover, recent ads conflate Buddhism with control-oriented technology, aligning the religion with the Western technological lineage and the spread of capitalism generally -- a theme that I highlighted in films in the previous chapter. This promise of control also helps mitigate such middle-class anxiety. Finally, the ads often employ a gender component to mitigate this anxiety, namely, displaying primarily female figures engaged in meditation. This feminization of the religion makes it less threatening and therefore more consumable, in a process that has thematic antecedents in Orientalist representations.

China and the Post-Cold War World

Since its "discovery" by the West, China has appeared as a place of fantastic wealth. Europe seemed ready to exploit the Asian nation in any way possible. Now,

through western investment, China is poised to be a serious threat to America in economic terms. One of the most enduring representations of China has been as an economic market that seemed to offer countless riches. Well into the 20th century, the colonial powers, especially Britain, worked to open Chinese markets, often under the threat of military force. The Opium Wars of the mid-19th century saw Britain (and France in the Second Opium War) face down China and subsequently impose its will, forcing China to pass opium through its borders. These conflicts led to others, such as the 1899-1901 Boxer Rebellion, that shared the common theme of market exploitation.⁸ The United States also saw China as a trading partner, beginning economic relations in the 1780s.⁹

With his 1972 trip to China, President Richard Nixon began to normalize diplomatic relations with the Asian nation, a move that opened trade with the U.S. Nixon had long taken a hard line on communism, and his diplomacy helped America gain some influence in the region. With Mao's death in 1976, China took a decidedly capitalist turn under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. Soon after his ascension, the nation began to eliminate collectivized agriculture, allow fluctuating prices, develop stock markets, open itself to foreign investment, and generally pursue typical capitalist economic policies. Since 1978 the Chinese GDP has increased tenfold. Sporting blistering growth rates of nine to 11% annually, China ranks approximately third among the biggest economies of the world. However, in terms of purchasing power parity, which is a normalized accounting of what goods and services a country can afford,

⁸ One of the most notable 19th-century American displays of force in Asia was, of course, Admiral Matthew Perry's opening of Japan to broader Western trade in 1853. The Japanese were terrified of the superior military technology anchored off Tokyo (then Edo). Perry also proposed occupying Taiwan (then Formosa) for reasons of military and natural resources.

⁹ Christina Klein, p. 24.

China ranks a clear second, surpassing even Japan by a two-to-one margin.¹⁰ The disparity highlights the fact that China has not allowed the renminbi to fluctuate freely on the open market, instead opting for a relatively fixed currency pegged to the dollar that tilts foreign investment in its favor.

In the last 15 years or so, China has really begun to emerge as an economic powerhouse. The “workshop to the world” has earned the trust of worldwide investors, who now shower the country with foreign direct investment (FDI). In fact, since opening to FDI in 1980, China has taken an increasingly large share of foreign direct investment, and even displaced the U.S. as the top recipient in 2002.¹¹ Recent gains have come on the heels of China’s admission into the World Trade Organization in December 2001. A clear surge in FDI began around 1991, following Deng Xiaoping’s tour of Guangdong and Shanghai.¹² In 2006, China garnered over \$69 billion in FDI and maybe as much as \$72 billion.¹³ Yet the broader public and press have erroneously chided China and India for “‘trying to take over’ prized assets” of the United States, despite rapid American and European investment into developing markets, rather than vice versa.¹⁴ Indeed, many other nations have invested substantially more in the U.S., as an OECD report makes plain.¹⁵

Yet now, as currency from trade flows ever more unequally its way, China is presented as a threatening specter to the U.S. Consider the economic case: as of November 2007, the Chinese Central Bank held some 1.4 trillion U.S. dollars in

¹⁰ *Pocket World in Figures* p. 26.

¹¹ *Bizasia.com*

¹² *Chinability.com*

¹³ *International Herald Tribune*

Chinability.com

¹⁴ Hans Christiansen, Andrea Goldstein, and Ayse Bertrand

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

currency reserves.¹⁶ Such a horde of dollars gives the Chinese significant leverage over U.S. economic policy. Some economists have argued that the recent home-buying boom in the United States could only occur due to the fact that the Chinese were willing to keep accepting dollars, as exorbitant trade deficits with China widened. The American trade deficit has proved to be a thorny issue between Beijing and Washington, with the Bush administration having asked for the renminbi to float freely on currency markets, in order to mitigate the deficit. China has refused to concede. In fact, when U.S. policymakers made a threat of sanctions for the refusal, it was rumored that China had intimated using a “nuclear option” – selling its dollar-denominated assets in order to devalue the dollar.¹⁷ Such a policy would be self-defeating, as David Harvey notes, since it would undermine those American consumers that China relies on to buy its exports.¹⁸ Nevertheless, with the value of the greenback continuing to plummet on world markets, the Chinese are inclined to slow their intake of dollars, instead opting for more stable currencies such as the euro.¹⁹

The political reality of America’s decline and the subsequent American response of military action in the post-Cold War era have been reflected in self-representations of America. Increasingly, representations of the other have been integrated into a multicultural narrative of America as hybridity. As John Carlos Rowe argues, “US imperialism since Vietnam has worked steadily to import the world and to render global differences aspects of the US nation – in short, to internalize and hypernationalize

¹⁶ P. Parameswaran

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ David Harvey, p. 72.

¹⁹ Irwin M. Stelzer

transnational issues.”²⁰ In Rowe’s model, this multiculturalism posits a strategy of understanding the other as an alternative to outright militarism or Americanization.²¹

While such a strategy may seem to propose a liberalist ideology of acceptance, in effect it provides a means for military aggression to continue. Rowe argues: “A dialectical relationship between cultural or free-trade imperialism and military imperialism mediated by way of a culture of fear ... helps market late-capitalist products and encourages, rather than diminishes, military conflicts in the places of international diplomacy.”²²

Popular representation comes to paper over this military conflict as an expression and recapitulation of the myths of American nationhood, myths that include the inherent goodness of America as well as manifest destiny, but on a transnational scale.

In this context, as a symbol of China and Asia generally, Buddhism offers an ideal cover for American expansionist policies, whether they be military or economic. The deployment of Buddhist images at once seems to argue for the growing multiculturalism and peace-loving nature of the U.S. with respect to Asia, defusing popular concerns that the U.S. might have a religiously sponsored motivation for its expansionism. At the same time, though, these images also often showcase Asia’s putative need for America, and they portray an America that is willing to accept an identity that contains elements of the Asian other.²³ Buddhism has a reputation as the “good” and compliant religion of the Oriental other, in distinction to Islam, since the former has been promoted as a religion of peace and simplicity and has often been associated with women in American mass media. By using such acceptably tame

²⁰ John Carlos Rowe, p. 39.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p 51.

²² *Ibid.*, p 44.

²³ Contrast that with the explosiveness of the rhetoric regarding America’s supposed anti-Islam motivation in its active involvement in the Middle East, a region which is conceived of as uniformly Muslim.

images of the Asian other, namely Buddhism, these representations take part in what Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan label “racist love” – a term that connotes the deployment of racial stereotypes such that white culture is always in a position of control over other races.²⁴ The enduring non-violence of Buddhism is often highlighted as one of the religion’s most redeeming values, suggesting how the U.S. can proceed on a course of hegemony.

Advertisement as Opiate

Advertising offers a natural complement to the work that film is doing to establish Buddhism as a marker of “cool.” Without the imperative to maintain the consensus identity of the Cold War (white, middle-class Christian), these cultural producers have begun to associate Buddhist imagery with western products, especially high-tech products, or technoluxe. Such imagery provides the products with a sense of the exotic, with “cool,” but it also obscures the economic processes concomitant with their production – the movement of investment to Asia, the sweatshop labor, and the hollowing-out of American manufacturing. While film provides Buddhist imagery to those who want to see it, ads distribute the imagery to almost all, suggesting that ads are the final stage in the representational deployment of Buddhism to America, since marketers feel that the religion is palatable enough for a broader audience.

Ads from the middle part of this decade have been deploying Buddhist-inspired iconography and circulating it among images of women, luxury, and wellness. Such a move suggests that Buddhism can now be associated with mainstream consumption, in distinction to its postwar development, among the rhetoric of the Beats, for example,

²⁴ Frank Chin and Jeffery P. Chan, pp. 65-79.

who represented the religion as a bastion against capitalism. In general, the Buddhist imagery connotes a range of stereotypical associations with the East. Consistent with Rey Chow's argument that the ethnic comes to stand for protest, the luxury and abundance of the East are up for sale, and can be recovered by consuming what's cool. Many of the following ads are in keeping with luxury advertising in general, which often presents a minimalist aesthetic to bolster the perceived association of Buddhism as a religion based on simplicity, abstemiousness, and self-abnegation. This minimalism also functions as a way to stress the ethereal nature of the product – the sense of completeness that the luxury product always promises the consumer – and emphasizes the extreme closeness and accessibility of the product to the consumer.

Marketing the Commodity as Ethnic

The most penetrating and ubiquitous of media pestilences, ads function well as a means of establishing and distributing possible new subjectivities or styles. They associate images with products in a social context. They mark the emergence of new cultural phenomena into the full-blown mainstream. And they are everywhere -- the usual figure is that people are exposed to some 3,000 ads per day. They show people how to consume and produce meaning from their consumption, in the words of James Twitchell.²⁵ As such, ads present us with the range of new identities that are up for sale. In a media-saturated world that is starved for new and different images, the exotic or ethnic is the course *du jour*, since those characteristics can be portrayed as novelty. And if, as many cultural theorists argue, identity formation occurs oppositionally, the consumption of a foreign religion can function as an effective means of marking oneself as different, as cool.

²⁵ James B. Twitchell, p. 68.

While ads that feature Buddhist imagery may not explicitly highlight China, many implicitly deal with American middle-class anxiety over the Asian nation's influence and also more subtly highlight the opportunity for the investor class. Since the audience of mass-media magazines consists of an American middle class that knows, often from first-hand experience, the economic perils that China presents, the ads need not explicitly mention China. Its specter is already heavily felt among the audience. Rather, the ads seem to focus universally and explicitly on the positive representations -- the cool products that China produces or how the ethnic others are not significantly different from Americans, for example. Similarly, Buddhism can act as a marker of China as well as of brotherliness, imputing the quality to the nation and consequently soothe anxieties. For a capitalist class that has the disposable income to invest in such quickly developing economies, such ads implicitly highlight China as a place to be exploited and developed. Despite China's seeming absence from the ads, its influence can be felt symbolically through the representation of meditating (female) bodies.

Ads deploying Buddhism in popular magazines have used the forms of women almost exclusively to flog their goods. Such a representational tactic dovetails with the imperatives to make Buddhism less threatening and therefore more consumable, and to bolster, through such consumption of the exotic, American self-identity. This feminization of the "exotic East" has many antecedents in Orientalist discourse, and continues in a similar vein in these advertisements. Allying women with modern representations of Buddhism continues an Orientalist tradition of linking the East with a gender that has been traditionally maligned in the West as inferior, subordinate, and non-threatening. At the same time, the display of women's bodies in the ads parlays

the long history of objectification into the notion of a product for sale. These bodies are often young, toned, and tanned, and display stereotypical markers of available sexuality such as long hair. Moreover, they are approachable and unthreatening since they appear only singly and alone. Even when these ads display silhouetted meditating forms, they make clear that the form is feminine by accentuating breasts, hips, and hair. This reduction of an individual woman to a mere form reinforces the idea of Buddhism as a position for sale, echoing Liu's idea of form for sale.

The display of women in such ads also meshes well with the types of products being hawked, namely, luxury goods. By juxtaposing women and luxury, these ads play on the stereotypical representation of women as consumers in general, but especially of such products. The consumption of luxury has traditionally had associations with effete and otherwise impotent culture, as has been the case with many Orientalist representations of Asian culture. The Orientalist discourse of excess portrayed the East as a location so brimming with opulence that every need and desire could be met, in a fit of debilitating consumption. This representation is consonant in particular with the Ritz-Carlton advertisement featured later. In short, by using women, these ads invoke a spectator who can negotiate the anxiety produced by China through the process of consuming the Asian other, namely, via Buddhism.

“New Luxury” and the Luxe Life

Like Polo's tales of fabulous riches in the East, modern luxury advertising that focuses on Asia shows its lush qualities. As Edward Said argues in *Orientalism*, such representations of "the Orient" position the region in terms that are advantageous for the West. For example, the mythification of Asia as a place of great wealth serves as an ideological bolster for America's rabid investment in the region. This history

dovetails well with the ad industry's use of Buddhism, which is most frequently associated with the luxury segment. At first blush, the connection seems absurd – a marriage between Buddhism, a religion that expresses an ethos of non-attachment to material objects, and marketing, which seems to apotheosize such attachment. The synthesis lies in the nature of luxury marketing and how it appeals to its audience, as well as in broader demographic trends within the U.S. marketplace.

Recently luxury companies have become hot commodities. Appealing to upmarket consumers, they churn out profits year after year, and are remarkably immune, though not completely, to wider economic downturns. In fact, so effective is the strategy that many companies are re-working their marketing and business plans. So-called “New Luxury” companies are battling for a share of the 15% growth in luxury-goods spending – some \$400 billion of a total \$1.9 trillion consumer spending – in the U.S. Compare that to the measly 2% growth rate of overall consumer outlays.²⁶ New Luxury, a term coined by BCG consultants Michael J. Silverstein and Neil Fiske, is used to describe those “products and services that possess higher levels of quality, taste, and aspiration than other goods...but are not so expensive as to be out of reach.”²⁷ Luxury, then, includes such traditional products as travel, clothes, and jewelry, but also includes *technoluxe* – those products that have a strong technological component. But the ultimate extravagance in this postmodern age is time to relax, a position that Twitchell echoes when he claims that time is the fourth major category of luxury, behind food, homes, and clothes.²⁸

²⁶ Mike Angell, p. B3.

²⁷ Michael J. Silverstein and Neil Fiske, p. 7.

²⁸ James B. Twitchell, p. 59.

According to the researchers, the target of New Luxury companies is the growing class of middle-market consumers, those who make between \$50,000 and \$200,000 per year. To have a successful product in this space, they argue, a good must engage the customer emotionally. Emotion – this is the foundation of the new luxe, say Silverstein and Fiske. As such, this vision provides a strategic model for companies to thrive, and provides a business case for why advertisers of the technoluxe or opuluxe life might turn to an eastern religion that promises transcendence of mundane existence. And here is where advertising comes to the fore to make its appeal with Buddhism, suggesting a luxe life with the rigors or spiritual dimension of religion. Indeed, luxury functions as the *non plus ultra* of the mundane world.

The success of the New Luxury paradigm illustrates how the discourse of cool is deployed and how it reinforces marketing at this stratified level. Normally, purchasing behavior consists of obtaining the most “stuff” for the cheapest price. Luxury marketing reverses this paradigm, asking higher prices for a product that is sometimes materially less than what a consumer would ordinarily acquire. Part of what explains this exchange is the Veblen effect, in which the demand for a product increases *because* it has a higher rather than a lower price. Part of New Luxury also, no doubt, relies on the snob effect, in which consumers buy a product simply to be exclusive. In such a paradigm, price becomes the value of the product. In either case, this inversion of the quotidian logic of purchasing lends itself to the discourse of cool, which re-fashions economic practices that would be untenable for the vast majority of consumption.

The association of Buddhism with this category is not as counterintuitive as it might first appear. The strategies for advertising luxury reside at a singular position in the marketplace, due to the extreme nature of the product itself. The desire for luxury is a yearning for fixity, for completeness. Purchasing that top-of-the-range deluxe good means there is nothing beyond. The journey (for transcendence) is over. No other destination remains, and it's time to sit back and enjoy the land of milk, honey, and ostrich-skin handbags. Completeness and fixity are feelings traditionally associated with religion, so with the arrival of the life *non plus ultra* comes this wealth of connotations with the Great Beyond, the sacred. Like luxury, Buddhism promises to realize a state of complete fulfillment. After reaching the point of top-end consumption, the material beyond has ceased. Not just keeping a product before the public eye, luxury advertising functions at this mythic level.

For many people consumption has become a vehicle for experiencing the sacred. So argue Russell W. Belk, Melanie Wallendorf, and John F. Sherry, the authors of *The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behavior*. That luxury ads often highlight the ability to control one's self and destiny has much to do with fastening onto this mythic component. The otherworldly experience of the sacred is the exact spiritual analog to the material experience of cool as extra-capitalist, experiences that intersect representationally through Buddhism. Often that experience is travel. "While the religious pilgrimage is a traditional form of sacred travel, a part of any touring involves a seeking of the sacred," the authors argue. "An important part of the tourist's quest is to bring back a part of the sacred experience, place, and time. The objectified result is

frequently a photograph or souvenir.”²⁹ For luxury goods associated with Buddhism, the quest is to bring back, in commodified form, that experience which is liminal and transcendent – the good that confirms the consumer’s cool or distinction.

Marketing luxury, then, revolves around sacralizing the object to be sold (already built-in with the use of Buddhism), in a move that seems to reflect Marx’s idea of commodity fetishism. Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry note a list of the properties of sacredness, which play themselves out in luxury spots. In particular, three elements – sacrifice, contamination, and kratophany – pertain to luxury products. Sacrifice entails an act of abnegation in order to purify oneself for the sacred object, for instance, the exorbitant prices of luxury goods.^{30 31} As a religion often assumed to be self-abnegating, Buddhism functions well here to imbue an ad with the idea of sacrifice. Contamination, the authors define as the ability to transfer sacredness and profanity through contact with the revered good, such that possessing it confers its benefits on the owner.³² Last, kratophany is the powerful but ambivalent feeling created from both the strong attractive and avoidance tendencies of the sacred.³³ This observation suggests phenomena such as affluent Americans denying their status as luxury consumers, even as they increasingly consume pricy organic and health foods. Also, Buddhism can act here as a symbol of atonement, as the consumer is attracted to the product but needs a symbolic blessing or affirmation on his/her consumption.

The prevalence of luxury advertisements in the medium of print is undergirded

²⁹ Russell W. Belk, Melanie Wallendorf, and John F. Sherry Jr., p. 12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³¹ This element is clearly related to the Veblen effect, where the demand for a product increases because it has a higher rather than a lower price. Increase the sacrifice and you increase the object’s sacredness.

³² Russell W. Belk, Melanie Wallendorf, and John F. Sherry Jr., p. 6.

³³ *Ibid.*

by the representational constraints of such products and the ideological demands of their consumers. The static nature of print corroborates the promises and consumers' requirements of the luxury product – status. Locked in a seemingly eternal position of sumptuousness and high status, the subjects of print advertisements display the fixity of position that characterizes the archetypal luxury ad. Often, such ads depict a model posed in oddly constrictive positions that literally seem to lock the subject into place. Indeed, this point is reinforced in advertisements featuring a meditating figure, where the subject appears locked in a sitting pose. Moreover, print – in contrast to a more dynamic medium, such as television – functions well to illustrate how the product seems to “untether” the consumer from mundane existence.

While such ads frequently depict a lone model enjoying the high status connoted by the product, this status can only be enjoyed in a social context, giving the lie to the idea that the product “untethers” its consumer. Since luxury products provide status – an intangible good – as the primary ware, a static medium is more able to capture the nuances of this social good than a dynamic medium, which would function better for products that have grosser advantages, for example, movement. Because the appeal of truly upscale luxury (as opposed to middle-market upscale) relies on NOT flaunting the brand or expense, print provides the sufficiently “educated” consumer the ability to recognize the finer details that define such products and their social (or at least financial) betters. Such ads also educate middle-class consumers on how to recognize the luxe brands. Therefore, the medium of print lends itself effectively to the advertisement of luxury products.

Since the discourse of cool is based on a logic of alterity – that is, the advertised

product does something new and different from the mainstream product that it promises to supersede – it meshes well with technology goods, which promise a “revolution” in how we do our work, write our papers, watch our films, and listen to our music. Such technoluxe is often marketed by using Buddhism to suggest the new product’s coolness, the idea that the innovation operates according to a new logic. In fact, the technology product reiterates the same techno-logic of its milieu, just to a higher degree, and merely increases the user’s control over his/her experience, rather than escaping the quotidian. Therefore, such “cool” technologies merely create a higher standard of control that themselves come to be seen as quotidian as they proliferate. Because the discourse of cool relies on the representation of alterity and that the fact that alterity can rapidly diminish as the product succeeds, cool begins to produce the conditions of its own propagation. That is, the discourse of cool becomes a self-reinforcing process once it has reached some critical threshold, whereby people buy another product because the one they currently have has lost its cool – marketing’s version of planned obsolescence.

Buddhism Made Me Cool

Within this framework, this chapter analyzes ads that showcase the amazing plasticity of capitalism in reworking economic threats through representation. Such ads deploy Buddhist-inspired images in the nexus of luxury, technology, and leisure, and often use exclusively women for the reasons previously mentioned. A typical advertisement in this style would feature a woman meditating in the lotus position with arms resting on her thighs, and facing away from the camera, for example, the American Express ad shown earlier. Often she looks out on a blue sky, a mild seashore, or something similarly serene, as a luxury product is subtly insinuated into the picture.

The remarkable continuity among advertisements underscores the advertisers' standardized thematic approach -- individualized transcendence -- to the religion that is intended to bleed value to the product. Several other ad types have also been included.

A mailed-out advertisement for the American Express Hilton HHonors platinum card portrays a similar theme of consuming a peaceful and simple Asia. The card promises not just unlimited consumption, but also that highest of luxuries, time. The stereotypical elements are present: the meditating woman facing primarily away from the camera staring out onto a serene beach with placid water. The sky is neither too bright nor too cloudy, and the skyline seems to merge subtly and tranquilly with the similarly colored waterline. Note also that the woman is alone, which aims to suggest that she is unhurried and "untethered" from the wider capitalist world. The ad directly invokes Asia in a number of ways. First, it shows a series of pavilions that line the coast. The thatched roofs of the pavilions and the palm trees suggest Southeast Asia, and this impression is reinforced by the flowing draperies that are tied to the pavilion legs as well as the bamboo curtains that hang from the east of the pavilions. Indeed, the side of the advertisement confirms the impression that this is Asia with the words "Beach Bale · Conrad Bali Resort & Spa."

This ad indicates that America and Americans are benevolent to an innocent and luxurious Asia, represented here by the island of Bali, which is known for its Hindu and Buddhist heritage. This mark of the Asian other sharply contrasts with the (unmistakably western) blonde hair of the sitting woman, who rests her right arm on her right knee in the unmistakable pose of meditation. Her white workout uniform, which subtly implies her sexuality even as it suggests the rigor of her exercise, represents her

innocent nature. This color scheme also links her to the white race, stressing it as one that is superior and leisured. Her involvement in the scene and that she is at a "resort and spa" suggest that she (and by extension America) has no other goal than to peacefully enjoy the abundant luxuries that Asia has to offer. These luxuries include suspiciously American-style markers of leisure. The fairway-like grass, palm trees, beach, and unhurried relaxation all suggest the pursuits and leisure-time activities of the American moneyed class. Moreover, luxury is further indicated by the credit level of the card – platinum. The pleasure produced by such consumption is subtly insinuated by the rounded border between the picture and the taglines below. This border suggests a smile, which is a frequently represented characteristic of Buddhist monks. Like other advertisements in this vein, this spot for a credit card creates a style that the audience can inhabit, if only briefly.

This advertisement in a print format serves to create time for the consumer by severing her consumption and time from the general flow of time, which is precisely regulated in capitalist economies. The representation creates a timeless atmosphere, in which the woman seems untethered from economic activity, a central element of Liu's idea of cool. Indeed, no one else appears in the advertisement at all, suggesting that economic activity is not occurring at all. Yet, paradoxically, it's the American Express card that makes possible such "buying on time." The credit card promises the dream of being untethered, but only by forestalling the day of reckoning. Also interesting is the card's name, American Express, which suggests the consumption habits of its users and the speed of their demands. The name contrasts sharply with the representation of Asia as slow and outside capitalist time. In some quite limited sense, the credit card

functions as a time machine, seemingly creating time for its users. In this ad, the benefit of the card is represented in quite literal terms.

The credit card offers an entrée into how advertisers' exhortations to consume use a pseudo-Buddhist mantra to further their own ends. Ads and media generally suggest that to “live life to the fullest” – the adman’s glib cliché -- one must consume as much as possible right now. The media representations of Buddhism support such a view in that they show the wisdom of Buddhist practice with the mantra “be here now” as a motivation to shift consumption to the present. This proverb is deployed as analogous to buying on credit. Like other representations of Buddhism in the mass media, this mantra becomes a hollow echo of the Buddhist ethos of appreciation, invoking Asia as a region of the “always-past” in order to highlight American modernity and promote American consumption now. The relatively sophisticated device of credit predominates in highly developed markets where growth in consumption has slowed, and is used to stoke current consumption at the expense of future purchases. Used to an extreme, credit can function like a black hole, "singularizing" the past, the present, and the future, suggesting the all-consuming process of Empire proposed by Hardt and Negri. Even time is brought to bend under the mandate of profit when capitalist expansion into geographic space no longer offers a sufficient exteriority for monetary gain.

Meditating for Profit

Another spot also plays upon American anxiety about wealth. An ad for Prudential financial services touts the company’s retirement services. The bit appeared in the November 2007 *Gourmet* magazine, which describes itself as “a magazine of good living.” The ad’s appeal lies in its relative simplicity, which contrasts with the

complex financial world that it seeks to steer the audience through. Much like other ads featuring Buddhism, this one shows a meditating woman whose identity is obscured, in this case as a uniform white silhouette with stereotypically flowing hair. The color suggests the meditating subject's – and therefore the audience's -- innocence and naiveté about the financial world. It also suggests the race of the likely audience for the magazine. She sits upon a black mat that lists the company's website. Words seem to come from the woman's mouth, also in white: "I'm getting anxious about retiring." Those words are answered by words in black that seem to come from off the page, as indicated by the black leading line, as if the woman were experiencing some epiphany or enlightenment that came from nowhere or from some unseen authority. The words read "Time to find your inner peace." The background is cherry red, and along with the strong white, suggests iconic American colors. The ad's more detailed pitch follows in the words below these images.

This ad shows bourgeois dis-ease with the financial/economic world, which seems ever more complex as globalization occurs. The ad highlights women, in particular, since they're the likely audience of the magazine, but the representation also fits with empirical evidence that demonstrates that women feel more uncomfortable than men with financial matters. As a global financial services company, Prudential suggests that it understands the marketplace, especially the global marketplace, and can navigate Americans safely through it. While the color scheme invokes the company's patriotism and loyalty to its American customers, the ethnic element is suggested by meditation, which is also associated with calmness, as indicated by the black words. The short dialog stresses the theme of the product, and it also conflates Buddhism and

capitalism in a neat pun. The off-screen voice tells the meditating woman that it's time to find her *inner peace*, which could also be read as her *inner piece*. This pun illustrates the central use of Buddhism in the ad – as justification and means to obtain goods – “to get yours.”

Luxury Leisure

While later ads associate Buddhism with high-priced high-tech, this next ad, from *Elle*, connects Buddhism with the high-priced luxury of the Ritz-Carlton Spa. A meditating woman faces away from the camera – the typical positioning and gender of those who meditate in luxury ads – in the middle of a cavernous but empty room. The woman's arms seem to suggest that she's commanding something to be done. This impression is reinforced by trick photography that suggests an approaching waiter actually carries the woman on a silver platter, a visual pun on the spa's brand as a company that serves the consumer. The tagline reads, "The sudden disappearance of worldly cares. It's our pleasure." The religious theme continues below the picture: "Therapy for your soul not only comes from the hands of the masseuse, it comes from the world-renowned service of the Ritz-Carlton. Treat yourself to a soothing mixture of relaxation and rejuvenation." The design of the ad reflects the minimalism and neutral color scheme typically associated with the brand, but also suggests the non-materialist and affective moderation of Buddhism.

This ad mitigates American tensions with Asia by stressing how the (Asian) luxury of leisure time via meditation will become a part of middle-class American life. Ads of this type play on the idea that the ultimate luxury for the harried bourgeoisie nowadays is time to relax. This ad functions well as a stereotypical example of a luxury ad that uses Buddhism, since the religion is often deployed in wellness and spa ads.

Often such ads use a female subject meditating, while facing away from the camera – as if to de-emphasize the humanity and instead stress the position of the subject, and her status. Such a design, as Liu argues, emphasizes the position as for sale.³⁴ By re-working Buddhism into representation, the ad makes the religion complement the spa’s message: Buddhism offers respite from the demands and cares of the world, as the spa’s patron seems to be untethered from the globalizing economic system that is putting so much pressure on American workers. Yet the woman is no more untethered than Buddhism is a patron of consumption. Again, the static nature of print advertisement helps accentuate the feeling of detachment for the viewer of the ad, and in the process defuses American tensions with Asia.

The theme of “economically unproductive” leisure continues in an ad for Puerto Rico, which touts meditation on a hotel ledge as reason to visit the island. This plug appeared in *Shape*, and generally fits the luxury category as delineated in the previous ad, with a few minor differences. Like the stereotypical luxury ad using Buddhism, a woman sits alone, in the quite difficult full-lotus posture – a position that should indicate her advanced practice, but instead merely imputes her value as unique and exotic. In the background are the requisite natural features that promote peace – nearly pristine flora and the ocean extending to the horizon. That the woman faces the camera marks this ad as unusual for luxury spots. The text anchors this ad in the luxury category:

Legend has it, in 1508 Ponce de León came to Puerto Rico in search of the Fountain of Youth. Five centuries later, millions of women follow his lead. With its luxurious world-class spas, fine restaurants, casinos, and three-hundred miles of tropical beaches, who can blame them?

As in the Ritz-Carlton advert, seemingly economically non-productive leisure activities

³⁴ Alan Liu, p. 103.

are encouraged and represented – spas, sunbathing, and meditation – in the variety of pictures.

This ad is permeated by a capitalist vision of individualism that re-works the abnegation and rigor of Buddhism into consumption. This individualism is at the heart of cool, but it is represented neatly within the bounds of acceptable codes, like the range of safe "adventure" activities portrayed at the bottom of the ad. The style of this ad comes to attract an alternative audience seeking cool, as Hebdige might argue. For instance, the woman appears to wear no bra, and her hair is pulled fully behind her head and not showcased, unlike in other ads. Moreover, her location is unclear. She seems as if she's perched atop a hotel roof, but in any case she meditates in an atypical locale. Like her quite odd full-lotus posture, this woman comes to represent an individual spirit, which is accentuated by the ad's exhortation to "explore beyond the shore." Physically, she differs from the many typical tanned supermodels who frolic in other ads, with their big breasts and made-up faces, although she is also tan. Not that she is intended to be unattractive – rather the contrary – but her attractiveness is supposed to lie in her cool individualism and putative lack of vanity. Such characteristics decide that she should sport wrist- and ankle-bands of seemingly native manufacture, while she actually goes outside without make-up. Meanwhile, her veined arms intend to show her decidedly un-feminine demeanor. Such a style of protest-ant individualism marks the associated luxury product as exotic and cool.

As in the last ad, the representation of meditation here functions as a way to show how the beleaguered middle-class American will successfully incorporate the rising Asian economic influence. Again, this ad's design emphasizes the position of the

female subject as for sale, as Liu might argue. Through an image of a woman alone on a hotel roof (?), the representation of meditation proposes how the audience can escape – from the globalizing economic system, paradoxically with a purchase that has a relatively large economic impact. Even as the ad touts Puerto Rico as a vacation destination, it hints at the increasing power of Asia via the representation of Buddhism. A vacation is an opportunity to “get away from it all,” specifically from the increasing competitive pressures that have come to dominate middle-class life, in part from the ongoing economic pressure from China. Meditation functions here as exactly the opportunity to relax from that anxiety in a location unassociated with that anxiety, as does the massage featured in one of the inset pictures. Somewhat ironically, taking the position of the Asian other through meditation becomes a means to assuage the anxiety produced by that other. But the woman undertakes this position in a locale that poses no economic threat to the United States, and one that is indeed beyond the dichotomy of developed America and developing China. Furthermore, the static nature of print advertisement complements the sense of detachment and fixity that this luxury product is supposed to produce, helping defuse the American viewer's anxiety over greater competition from Asia.

Protecting Asia's Others

The other side of the representational coin appears in images of Asia as primitive and in need of American technology. Here, the real-life tensions between the United States and Asia are mitigated by an ad that implies that many Asians want what is cool about America, and that America will provide its freedoms to these Asians. Featured in *Fortune*, this spot for Cisco shows a group of Buddhist monks, primarily young monks, along with their teacher, crowding around a laptop computer on the steps of a

monastery entrance. A caption in the upper left explains, “Penalty Kick.’ Ladakh, India. Image courtesy of the human network.” While the ad is supposed to take place in India, the monks are dressed like the outcast Tibetans who flash upon TV screens across the world and are representatives of Buddhism par excellence on the media stage. Indeed, one young acolyte sports glasses comparable to the Dalai Lama’s. As I suggested in the previous chapter, images of Tibet are used as a fulcrum to differentiate the oppressive Chinese from the freedom-loving Americans. To emphasize that the (Tibetan) consumer is now free and in control of events, and sets the style, the text reads, “On the human network, the team you follow now follows you.” Here, cool is watching whatever and whenever you want to watch “in the palm of your hand.”

In the post-Cold War era and without a clear international superpower against which to identify, America and its businesses are portrayed as benevolent to Asia, a nascent area of globalization. Appropriately appearing in a business magazine, this ad stresses that the good Asians (i.e., Buddhist, “peace-loving” Tibetans) do accept American cultural and technological hegemony and the penetration of its media technologies – even down to the stereotypically reclusive monks. In a typical move, the ad conflates Buddhism with expansionist capitalist ideals. The diction of the text indicates Chow’s point that “what is proclaimed to be human must also increasingly take on the significance of a commodity, a commodified spectacle.” While the phrase “the human network” might be charitably seen as expressing some Buddhist concept of interconnectedness, in the ad the phrase doesn’t refer to humans at all, but rather to the vast system of wires and chips that commodify what is human, via spectacle. Indeed, the ad puns on the word *goal*: “Where a goal is as close as the nearest screen.” The ad

states quite clearly that the expansionism of its media apparatus is its goal -- "anywhere." By invoking the universality of the world's most popular sport, the ad reduces the monks' alterity to outward differences of dress, while they are "safely" tethered to the economic system via the global media apparatus. Yet, ironically, the ad is showcasing wireless internet technology, which is being deployed to untether its users from the wires that used to bind the computer to a location. This "liberation" is analogized to the liberating practice of Buddhism, and in the process the consumer is geographically unbound.

Here, in the depiction of Asia, we can see that Žižek's point about the dual representation of Asia fits well within Chow's argument of the binary image of the ethnic as both victimized and transcendent. Žižek examines the "fantasmatic" hold that Tibet has on the United States, suggesting, like Said, that the Asian nation has become a screen for Western fantasies.³⁵ In a bid to spread Cisco technology, the ad depicts America as being envied by the world's others. The theme of youth culture dominates, reinforcing that culture's association with high tech and cool. This representation mimics the situation in the United States, where young people drive the adoption of consumer electronics, in order to develop their own cool as a counter to psychological anxieties. Indeed, the young Buddhist monks seem to want earnestly to be involved in the consumption of media products. They are being inducted into the brotherhood of consumption by the United States, which is educating Asia about its technology. The American viewer of the ad would be most analogous to the rhetorical position of the teacher who is indoctrinating his young pupils into how to use the medium. He holds the laptop computer didactically, and the boys crowd around him. This positioning

³⁵ Slavoj Žižek, p. 64.

marks the American audience as part of the innocence of Asia, and strives to renew the wonder with which now-cynical and media-saturated Americans first experienced the media.

This situation suggests what Renato Rosaldo terms “imperialist nostalgia,” a process in which “savage societies” act as a foil point for the ongoing technological development of developed nations.³⁶ The mysticism associated with the East seems to offer a pure and undefiled experience to the product, but instead the same western logic of (market) penetration occurs. In the words of Slavoj Žižek, such representations reflect the psychological demands of “OUR OWN civilization.”³⁷ Donald Lopez agrees, noting, “These fantasies of Tibet ... [show that] the Orient is not debased but exalted as surrogate self endowed with all that the West lacks.”³⁸ Orville Schell and Dibyesh Anand echo that position.³⁹ By positioning Asia, and especially Tibet, as innocent and in need of rescue, the United States can create a post-Cold War narrative structure that represents itself as savior and justifies the nation’s economic expansion across the globe. This ad implies that we as Americans are cool, because our products are consumed – nay, demanded – by the others of the world.

In this ad, innocence seems to be the value on sale, but the sense of cultural

³⁶ Renato Rosaldo, p. 70. Rosaldo explains: “In this ideologically constructed world of ongoing progressive change, putatively static savage societies become a stable reference point for defining (the felicitous progress of) civilized identity.”

³⁷ Slavoj Žižek, p. 68.

³⁸ Donald Lopez, “New Age Orientalism: The Case of Tibet,” p. 37.

³⁹ Orville Schell, p. 309. Schell writes: “The paradox is that even as it has become more physically accessible, Tibet has grown ever more virtual, while the many virtual environments of our modern world – the increasingly elaborate and bizarre holodecks on which we find ourselves – have gained a greater purchase on our time and real lives.”

Dibyesh Anand, p. 60. Anand writes: “An integral theme of Exotica Tibet has been the imagination of Tibet as a land of mysticism and fantasy where most events are romantic, extraordinary, and absolutely different from anything in the West.”

superiority, technological advantage, and civilization are also for purchase. In the West's transaction of the East this dual nature – both sides of the representation – is being auctioned. As it makes its way through the mass media, Tibet increasingly becomes a commodified and virtual spectacle – like the soccer match that the monks are watching -- with a double position of both purity and in need of saving by America and its technology. Americans are – or at least can become – cool, because they can consume the others of the world, in a process of hybrid identity formation.

In the next ad, for the Creative Labs Zen media player, Buddhism in the form of the word Zen functions as a marker of the exotic or ethnic in order to generate cool. This spot from *Cosmopolitan* highlights the word Zen as central, with a wheel of hands grasping the company's varied products and circling the tagline. The tagline reads "Find Your Zen," suggesting in layout and diction the sense that purchasing this product is like the completeness of being enlightened. Indeed, the circle represents fulfillment or wholeness, even suggesting the mandala form. As in the American Express ad above, the border between two sections of the ad curl upwards, as if in a smile, the common feature of Buddhas. The positioning of the viewer as gazing heavenward alludes to the ethereal and divine nature of the player. In a possible conflation of Asian religions, the six hands might also belong to the Hindu god Shiva. Meanwhile, another marker of China – the panda bear – appears on one of the devices. Note that the hands could be perceived as ethnically and gender diverse.

The connection between Zen and a music or video device is particularly apt, given Alan Liu's insistence that style or technique is how subculture reworks technology to its own individual (and unproductive) uses. We often consider our preferences in

music and film to be a direct reflection of who we are, especially among the youth culture to whom this product is marketed. Liu argues that style "must be understood to fuse consumer fashion with producer sensibility that in every instance – in the way one dresses, walks, talks, or drives – there is an exact adjustment to be made between technology and technique."⁴⁰ To that list should be added the way one listens and views. Liu's idea of style is invoked in the ad by the use of the word "your," which stresses the underlying idea of individuality so central to cool and consumerism. If mass-produced technology, such as the Zen player, routinizes our experience, then one way to invoke technique is by controlling what we hear and see – and how we control our experience of seeing and hearing by plugging in the accompanying earbuds.

The ad confronts the American viewer with the option to consume the cool MP3 player as a means of appropriating the Asian other. The ad plays on (potentially) Asian ethnicity by displaying hands of varying skin colors, but the faces of such others are simply cropped from the page. As mentioned above, the ad displays another marker that uniquely connotes China, the panda bear, which has a popular, and false, reputation as a gentle and innocuous creature. Such an image serves to portray China as similarly inclined. In addition, the mandala form provides another marker of Asia that the viewer can visually consume. By offering consumption of the other as an option, these images defuse the tensions of a middle-class American audience that sees China as threatening its standard of living. It's almost as if the threat of Asian production must immediately be transformed into coolness in order for the product to be consumed. Yet, in a different sense, it's as if the product's coolness is inherent to its production in Asia, and that bringing back that piece of Asia solidifies one's position as transcendent, as

⁴⁰ Alan Liu, p. 102.

Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry might argue.

A similar process occurs in a Sony ad that also attempts to bleed value from Buddhism, and in the process implicates the religion in the proliferation of controlled-oriented goods. This print spot from *Rolling Stone* features teenage golf phenom Michelle Wie sitting in a meditative posture. One hand holds a golf ball, while the other, using a Buddha-like palm-upward gesture, insinuatingly presents the Sony Cybershot digital camera to the audience. The background accentuates Wie almost as if she were an awakening Buddha: the golf clubs form leading lines to her, and two circular forms highlight her in two planes, mandala-like. Unlike many ads that deploy meditating women, this spot showcases Wie's face, using it in concert with the Buddhist images to impute further cool to the product. Like the Creative Labs ad, this one stresses the individuality of the mass-produced high-tech good, again suggesting Liu's idea that style must come in to moderate technology. In the upper right, the punctuated words "like.no.other" give the lie to such mass production. The theme of individualism is further heightened through the text, which harps on the phenomenal success of the 18-year-old golfer.

As in the ad for the Zen MP3 player, this ad highlights ethnicity as a means to defuse American tensions with Asia. The spot shows Michelle Wie's face, in distinction to many ads showing a meditating woman facing away from the camera, and traditional American femininity is emphasized by the pony tail draped over her right shoulder. The text claims the golfer (and by extension, the user) can "[get] the shot she wants." Here, the singularity of Wie's mastery of golf comes to represent and align with the protesting and demanding youth culture, and consumer culture generally, which aims to do

whatever it wants, whenever it wants. By playing on the idea of Wie's ethnicity as aligned with American ideologies of individualism and control-oriented technology via consumer electronics, the ad stresses the similarities of the ethnic and American while suggesting the difference of the ethnic. Wie is a natural-born American of Korean descent, and that heritage is visually evident in Wie's visage. Yet the advertiser specifically plays upon her Asian background by placing her in a meditating pose – a move that seems to disregard Wie's American citizenship and reiterates the notion of the ethnic as a perpetual foreigner, a by-product of the America-as-hybridity narrative. The use of her ethnicity shows a predisposition on the part of visual technologies for overemphasizing what is visual in nature.

Luxury Soul Food

As one of the major categories of luxury, food has a special position reserved in the luxe pantheon. As such, the right kind of food can represent one's own superior taste and serve as a marker of high class. One recent way to use food as a marker of high class has been the consumption of organic foods. This trend plays into the following ad for Nature's Path Organic Optimum Zen cereal, which appeared in the Spring 2007 edition of *Yoga Life*. The ad's appeal is fairly simple, and features Jyoti Stephens, who is the sustainability and stewardship manager for Nature's Path Organic Foods, according to the ad. Stephens sits on a meditation mat in the full-lotus position, feet over thighs, and with hands balanced on her knees. The box of cereal is positioned exactly where her legs cross, covering her groin, suggesting her sexuality even as it obscures it and conflating the consumption of the product with consumption of her. The position of the box, right in the center of her body, implies the balance that awaits those who consume the cereal, their own "Zen moment." Above her floats the line "Enjoy a

Zen Moment Every Day." The font of the word *Zen* seems to have an exotic Asian character.

The interplay between the foreground and the background helps highlight for the audience how the cereal will indeed allow one to "enjoy a Zen moment," by playing on the ethnicity and gender of the subject. The background consists of a montage of a flower and two indistinct men in a meditating pose, suggesting that Stephens is participating in a group meditation, that she is "blissed out," and that she has spiritually "left" the room, due to the cereal. This impression is reinforced by the folds of the flower, which act as leading lines, drawing attention to the woman's head. By using typical Western iconography for depicting a saint, the ad suggests that she is enlightened. Indeed, her first name means *light* in Hindi. Most importantly, the leading lines call attention to her possibly Indian descent, although it may well be Caucasian or even Hispanic, or perhaps one of a range of other ethnicities. This rhetorical move of ambiguity is intended to attract the likely audience of white women who want to distinguish themselves. This ambiguity is reinforced by her closed eyes, so that the audience cannot see their color. Furthermore, ambiguity is also created by the woman's name, which is prominently displayed above the cereal. It consists of a Hindi first name combined with an Anglo last name. Her ambiguous ethnic status can make her more appealing to the audience, suggesting the cereal can distinguish them but not so much that they are forced to take on the characteristics of the other. As suggested earlier, ethnic difference is positioned as a multicultural narrative of hybridity. This balance between "protest" and mainstream acceptance also plays out in the ad's depiction of her femininity.

The ad clearly places her femininity on show, but not to an extent that it detracts from the primary message to buy the cereal. Yet in an attempt to reach the audience, the ad, again, balances the portrayal between overt femininity and what is called the "natural" look. The woman's stereotypical natural and unadorned look seems to fit the theme of Buddhism, in contrast to mainstream depictions of the feminine that emphasize physical characteristics. The ad still does display markers of the stereotypical American feminine. For instance, the woman's dark brown hair lies in a typically American hairstyle. The photograph, taken from the front, almost suggests the woman has closely cropped hair, which may be too extreme for many women that fall among this youngish audience. Therefore, the ad makes it clear that this woman is still feminine, with the ponytail obviously pitched forward over one shoulder to suggest her continuing femininity after using the product. Similarly, she apparently wears no makeup, but nevertheless is quite attractive and physically fit. The light brown of her skin could well be its natural tone or may be a healthy tan, a fashion trend that has been consistently popular over the last few decades. In sum, this ad takes great pains to attract an audience with a style that seems to protest but that is also safely within the bounds of mainstream style. Like the luxury product that it promotes, this ad promises to mark you as upper-class, not least of all because it is organic, as is prominently displayed.

Cool Hybridity

Appearing in *Oprah*, the following ad publicizes a Jeep Compass with a pastiche meditating figure perched on top. The figure is composed of urban infrastructure, such as an apartment complex, a stop sign, and a phone, among others. Perfectly aligned left to right, the foreground image reflects the Buddhist ethos of being centered. Here, the

creators imply that like the supposed individuality of the Jeep, whose characteristic grill is the recognizable and idiosyncratic mark of the brand, the figure can experience the city with style and individuality. The text supports this interpretation: it tells the audience that “It’s time to start having fun with the city.” To enunciate individuality, the colorful figure – a visual representation of urban, industrial culture – contrasts with the faux, gray cityscape behind it. Yet the figure is composed of the same urban stuff. This ad implies that the Jeep will give the consumer the style and individuality that is key to cool. The ad promises a subject position that is like the Jeep in the ad – set upon a stage, where postmodern media culture has suggested that reality seems more real.

This spot manages the global conflict with Asia through the concoction of the figure. The image suggests alterity in a quite literal way, through the humanoid figure that is composed of non-human things, such as a newspaper dispenser, while recapitulating the idea of the multicultural narrative of hybridity. Its component pieces are, upon closer inspection, quite familiar pieces of an American city, with a few exceptions. The figure’s right knee features what appears to be some type of Asian script. Also, around the neck hangs a medallion with a Chinese symbol that means *om*, a sacred symbol in both Hinduism and Buddhism. The left knee even has a sign in French for a cleaner. This mixture suggests the globalized market that comes to constitute our self-created consumerist identities. As a meditating figure, this “person” invokes Asia, where American carmakers, and even global carmakers, are rapidly shipping parts production for their automobiles. But the car is well known as an American brand. Quite literally, the car is neither exclusively American nor Asian, although American vehicles are increasingly composed of parts that have this mixed

identity. Through a figure showing a colorful composition of alterity that seems to embody the idea of having fun in the city, the ad shows consumers how managing the globalized marketplace, especially with an Asian powerhouse such as China, can end in fun and profit.

Buddhism as Control

As I suggested for films in the previous chapter, current representations of Buddhism in mainstream ads ally the religion with the practical value of control and transcendence. As a strategy, control seems to offer a means to combat what one finds objectionable. The final ad associates control as an element of Buddhist practice, in distinction to the religion's critique of this value. Appearing in *Cosmopolitan*, this ad publicizes a product that allows women to be in command of their menstruation using birth control. While the ad gives few details on the product other than that it allows control, it insinuates Buddhist practice somewhat subtly. Beneath the clear blue sky, a woman sits barefoot in a meditation-like posture on a mat atop strewn rocks, in a natural setting – all typical elements in an ad that invokes Buddhism. The rocks even suggest a Zen-influenced Japanese garden. Like the subject in the ad for Puerto Rico, this woman supports a tank top and hair that is pulled behind her head. Strangely, while out in this pure natural setting – its purity along with Buddhism are used to invoke the pure feeling created by the product – the woman has her laptop computer. Presumably she is using the internet, but from what access point is unclear. In any case, she models what the ad tells the audience to do – go to the company's website to find more information.

This ad depicts control as an unquestioned strategy in dealing with what one finds distasteful or unpleasant. While the ad shows the strategy at the individual level, it

also implies its use at the national level in dealing with the objectionable. This advert portrays a typical way that Americans view Buddhism, as bolstering the nation's technological lineage of control. Indeed, the headline emphasizes America's view of control as a guiding value, by stating "Fewer periods/ more answers." Control is an unquestioned "answer." By permitting the user to manipulate experience as she sees fit, control allows what Liu calls the "exact adjustment to be made between technology and technique." The text emphasizes how the control afforded by the product makes the rest of life better: "There's a lot in life that's just plain nicer without your period. Like romance. Or travel. Or all those hot, sticky summer months you tolerate each year." Here, the ad literally invokes control as cool, as that which helps you get through the summer. Through products that inculcate the value of control, no longer must the audience put up with something they find repugnant, whether that be menstruation or increasing competition from Asia. As the Zen MP3 player would allow, experience can simply be changed to what one finds pleasant, however transitory. On the metaphorical level, control is cool because it allows consumers to do what they want when they want. At the same time, for individuals the practice of control seems to offer a means to combat the Asian other. However illusory and ineffective this strategy in practice, at the level of representation it provides a means of reducing American anxiety, and follows in the tradition of the Western technological lineage.

The End(s) of Cool Buddhism

The use of Buddhism in marketing may still continue for some time. Since cool relies on alterity, it seems as if Buddhism will eventually lose its ability to represent cool as it becomes increasingly mainstream. Despite its increasing presence in American media, as of now Buddhism still has a perceived oppositional or ethnic character

attached to it, and because capitalism thrives on protest, the religion can still provide effective representations to motivate consumption. Perhaps the religion's distrust of speech foresees such problems with representation.

America's recent marketing campaigns present a strange contradiction in the ends to which Buddhism is put and its actual practice. By mining the value of Buddhism for the purposes of consumption and control-oriented technology, advertising undermines the religion's implicit critique of consumer capitalism. "Buddhist practice does not lead to the extraction of value but its restoration," writes Buddhism scholar Peter Hershock.⁴¹ Since technology incorporates an ideology of control over our lived environment, "such technical processes rely not only on better leveraging our physical or mental powers, but on marshaling or gaining useable access to previously unavailable or contrary forces."⁴² Such an ideology contrasts with a Buddhist ethos of appreciation and cooperation that come directly out of meditative practice. Hershock notes, "Buddhism offers us a viable ethics of resistance to the societal dictates of control-biased technology."⁴³ While the religion emphasizes appreciation of our circumstances as a means to combat craving for material goods, its representation as the incarnation of the values of technoluxe completely inverts this stance. "In short," writes Hershock, "we condemn ourselves to entirely fashionable lives."⁴⁴ Cool?

⁴¹ Peter Hershock, *Reinventing the Wheel* p. 132.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Abramson, Mark. "Mountains, Monks, and Mandalas: 'Kundun' and 'Seven Years in Tibet,'" *Cineaste* 23.3 (Summer 1998): pp. 8-12.
- Adams, Cecil. "How did Uri Geller bend spoons?" *The Straight Dope*. Accessed: December 11, 2004. <www.straightdope.com>
- Adherents.com*, "Largest Religious Groups in the United States of America." Accessed: March 7, 2006. http://www.adherents.com/rel_USA.html#religions
- Allen, Gay Wilson. *Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981)
- Alliance Trust*, "G8 Set to Decline As Its Share of World Output Will Be Almost Halved By 2050," July 10, 2006. Accessed: December 17, 2007. <http://www.alliancetrusts.com/press_releases/g8_future.pdf>
- Amburn, Ellis. *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998)
- Anand, Dibyesh. *Geopolitical Exotica: Tibet in Western Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007)
- Angell, Mike. "Consumers Enjoy Lap of Luxury," *Investor's Business Daily* (October 27, 2003): p. B3.
- Annaud, Jean-Jacques et al. (Producer) and Annaud, Jean-Jacques (Director) *Seven Years in Tibet* (United States: Mandalay Entertainment, 1997)
- Asante, Molefi Kete, *The Afrocentric Idea*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998)
- Ashworth, Suzanne. "Reading on Walden Pond and Transfiguring American Manhood," *ESQ* 46.3 (2000): pp. 177 – 211.
- Ball, Gordon. "A One-Man Generation," in Holly George-Warren, ed., *The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats: The Beat Generation and American Culture* (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1999)
- Barnathan, Joyce. "Has Disney Become the Forbidden Studio?" *Business Week* 35.38 (August 4, 1997): p. 51.
- Barnhill, David. "An Interwoven World: Gary Snyder's Cultural Ecosystem," *Worldviews* 6.2: pp. 111 – 144.
- Belk, Russell W., Wallendorf, Melanie, and Sherry, John F. Jr, "The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behavior: Theodicy on the Odyssey," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 16.1 (1989): pp. 1 – 38.

- Berman, Bruce et al. (Producer) and Wachowski, Andy and Wachowski, Larry (Directors) *The Matrix* (United States: Warner Brothers, 1999)
- Berry, Wendell. "Interim Thoughts about Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*," *Sewanee Review* 106.1 (Winter 1998): pp. 148 – 153.
- Bizasia.com*, "China Reports Record Direct Foreign Investment," January 15, 2003. Accessed: November 29, 2007. <http://www.bizasia.com/investment_/f932c/china_reports_record_direct.htm>.
- Blanchard, Bob. "A Voice in the Wilderness," *Progressive* 59.11 (November 1995): pp. 28 – 31.
- Blue, Marian. "An Interview With Charles Johnson," in Jim McWilliams, ed., *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), pp. 123 – 141.
- Boccia, Michael. "An Interview With Charles Johnson," in Jim McWilliams, ed., *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), pp. 192 – 205.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984)
- Box Office Mojo*, "The Matrix," Accessed: December 28, 2007. <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=matrix.htm>>
- Brown, Samuel J. et al. (Producer) and Shaye, Robert (Director) *The Last Mimzy* (United States: New Line Cinema, 2007)
- Buell, Lawrence. *Emerson* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2004)
- Byrd, Rudolph P. "Oxherding Tale and Siddhartha: Philosophy, Fiction, and the Emergence of a Hidden Tradition," in Rudolph P. Byrd, ed., *I Call Myself an Artist* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 305 – 317.
- Caveney, Graham. *Screaming With Joy: The Life of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999)
- Charters, Ann. *Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994)
- Charting the Economy*, "U.S. Household Debt as a % of Disposable Income Has Doubled Since the Early 1980's," Weblog posting. June 4, 2009. Accessed: September 1, 2009. <<http://chartingtheeconomy.com/?cat=27>>

- Chin, Frank and Chan, Jeffery P. "Racist Love," in Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Seeing Through Shuck* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972) pp. 65-79.
- Chinability.com*, "FDI Inflows in US\$ Billion, 1984-2005," Accessed: November 29, 2007. <<http://www.chinability.com/FDI.htm>>
- Chow, Rey. *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)
- Christiansen, Hans; Goldstein, Andrea; and Bertrand, Ayse. "Trends and Recent Developments in Foreign Direct Investment," *Organization for International Investment Perspectives: Freedom of Investment in a Changing World. OECD* 2007. Accessed: November 29, 2007. <<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/62/43/38818788.pdf>>
- Christy, Arthur. *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932)
- Clark, Suzanne. *Cold Warriors* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000)
- Clark, Tom. *Jack Kerouac* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984)
- Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumer's Republic* (New York: Vintage, 2003)
- Coleman, James W. "Charles Johnson's Quest for Black Freedom in *Oxherding Tale*," *African American Review* 29.4 (Winter 1995): pp. 631 – 644.
- Coleman, James W. *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Asian Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)
- Corber, Robert J. *Homosexuality in Cold War America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997)
- Corliss, Richard. "Zen and the Art of Moviemaking," *TIME*. 150.15 (October 13, 1997): pp. 82 – 83.
- Cuordileone, Kyle A. *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York, Routledge, 2005)
- Dean, Tim. *Gary Snyder and the American Unconscious* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991)
- Dean, Tim. "The Other's Voice: Cultural Imperialism and Poetic Impersonality in Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*," *Contemporary Literature* 41.3 (Autumn 2000): pp. 462 – 494.

- De Fina, Barbara et al. (Producer) and Scorsese, Martin (Director) *Kundun* (United States: Touchstone Pictures, 1997)
- Dreyfus, Hubert L. and Dreyfus, Stephen D. "Existential Phenomenology and the Brave New World of the Matrix," in Christopher Grau, ed., *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 71 – 97.
- Dunham, Mikel. *Buddha's Warriors*. (New York: Penguin, 2004)
- Ehrenreich, Barbara. *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor Books, 1983)
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The American Scholar," in Alfred R. Ferguson, ed., *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume I, Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 49 – 70.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Emerson in His Journals*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1982)
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Emerson's Complete Works Volume 8*. (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1892)
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Experience," in Joel Porte, ed., *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), pp. 469 – 492.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson Volume 9* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971)
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Nature," in Alfred R. Ferguson, ed., *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume I, Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 8 – 46.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The Young American," in Alfred R. Ferguson, ed., *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume I, Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 217 – 246.
- Fagel, Brian. "Passages From the Middle: Coloniality and Postcoloniality in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*," *African American Review* 30.4 (Winter 1996): pp. 625 – 632.
- Fontana, Paul. "Finding God in *The Matrix*," in Glenn Yeffeth, ed., *Taking the Red Pill* (Dallas: Benbella, 2003), pp. 159 – 184.
- Ford, James L. "Buddhism, Mythology, and *The Matrix*," in Glenn Yeffeth, ed., *Taking the Red Pill* (Dallas: Benbella, 2003), pp. 125 – 144.

- Foucault, Michel. "The Means of Correct Training," in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 188 – 205.
- Foucault, Michel. "Truth and Power," in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 51 – 75.
- Fumio, Tamamuro. "On The Suppression of Buddhism," in Helen Hardacre, ed., *New Directions in The Study of Meiji Japan* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 499 – 505.
- Geier, Thom. "The Dalai Lama on the Silver Screen," *U.S. News & World Report* 123.14 (October 13, 1997): p. 57.
- Gewirtz, Isaac. *Beatific Soul: Jack Kerouac on the Road* (London: Scala Publishers, 2007)
- Gilbert, Rodney. *Genocide in Tibet* (New York: American-Asian Educational Exchange, 1959)
- Ginsberg, Allen. "Howl," In *Collected Poems 1947 – 1980* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 126 – 133.
- Ginsberg, Allen. "Kral Majales," In *Collected Poems 1947 – 1980* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 353 – 355.
- Ginsberg, Allen. "Sunflower Sutra," In *Collected Poems 1947 – 1980* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 138 – 139.
- Ginsberg, Allen. "A Supermarket in California." In *Collected Poems 1947 – 1980* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 136.
- Goodyear, Dana. "Zen Master," *The New Yorker* 84.33 (October 20, 2008): pp. 66 – 75.
- Gordon, Andrew. "The Matrix: Paradigm of Postmodernism or Intellectual Poseur? Part II," in Glenn Yeffeth, ed., *Taking the Red Pill* (Dallas: Benbella, 2003), pp. 85 – 102.
- Goudie, S.X. "'Leavin' a Mark on the Wor(l)d': Marksmen and Marked Men in *Middle Passage*," *African American Review* 29.1 (Spring 1995): pp. 109 – 122.
- Grace, Nancy M. *Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)
- Gray, Timothy. "Semiotic Shepherds: Gary Snyder, Frank O'Hara, and the Embodiment of an Urban Pastoral," *Contemporary Literature* 39.4 (Winter 1998): pp. 523 – 559.

- Greenberg, Amy S. *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005)
- Hardt, Michael, and Negri, Antonio. *Empire* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000)
- Harvey, David. *The New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003)
- Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)
- Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- Heath, Joseph and Potter, Andrew. *A Nation of Rebels* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2004)
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1988)
- Hennessy, Rosemary. *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000)
- Hershock, Peter. *Buddhism in the Public Sphere* (New York: Routledge, 2006)
- Hershock, Peter. *Liberating Intimacy: Enlightenment and Social Virtuosity in Ch'an Buddhism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996)
- Hershock, Peter. *Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999)
- Hill, Barry. "From Hiroshima to the Twin Towers," *Meanjin* 65.4 (2006): pp. 117 – 126.
- Hipkiss, Robert A. *Jack Kerouac: Prophet of the New Romanticism* (Lawrence, KS: The Regents Press of Kansas: 1976)
- Hishmeh, Richard E. "Marketing Genius: The Friendship of Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan," *The Journal of American Culture* 29.4 (December 2006): pp. 395 – 405.
- House, Freeman. "On Behalf of the Wild" A Conversation with Gary Snyder," *Ecological Restoration* 19.4 (2001): pp. 227 – 234.
- Hrebeniak, Michael. *Action Writing: Jack Kerouac's Wild Form* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006)

- Hunt, Anthony. "Singing the Dyads: The Chinese Landscape Scroll and Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 23.1 (Fall 1999): pp. 7 – 34.
- Hurth, Elisabeth. "'The High Priest of Pessimism': Emerson and Schopenhauer," *ESQ* 47. 3 (2001): pp. 212 – 240.
- Hussen, Aida Ahmed. "'Manumission and Marriage?': Freedom, Family, and Identity in Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*," *African American Review* 42.2 (Summer 2008): pp. 239 – 253.
- International Herald Tribune*, "Foreign Investment in China Rebounds," January 15, 2007. Accessed: November 29, 2007. <<http://www.ihf.com/articles/2007/01/15/business/yuan.php>>
- Johnson, Charles. *Dreamer* (New York: Scribner, 1998)
- Johnson, Charles. *Middle Passage* (New York: Atheneum, 1990)
- Johnson, Charles. "The Dharma and The Artist's Eye," *International Review of African American Art* 21.3 (2007): pp. 3 – 6.
- Johnson, Charles. *Turning the Wheel* (New York: Scribner, 2003)
- Johnston, Allan. "Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economies and Utopian Visions in the Writings of the Beat Generation," *College Literature* 32.2 (Spring 2005): pp. 103 – 126.
- Jones, Ken. *The New Social Face of Buddhism* (Boston, Wisdom Publications, 2003)
- Kalter, Susan. "The Path to 'Endless': Gary Snyder in the mid-1990s," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 41.1 (Spring 1999): pp. 16 – 46.
- Kealing, Bob. *Kerouac in Florida* (Orlando: Arbiter Press, 2004)
- Kennedy, Dana. "Can Hollywood save Tibet?" *Entertainment Weekly* 399 (October 3, 1997): p. 42.
- Kern, Robert. "Mountains and Rivers Are Us: Gary Snyder and the Nature of the Nature of Nature," *College Literature* 27.1 (Winter 2000): pp. 119 – 138.
- Kern, Robert T. *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996)
- Kerouac, Jack. *Desolation Angels* (London: Flamingo, 2001)

- Kerouac, Jack. *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin, 1976)
- Kerouac, Jack. *Old Angel Midnight* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1993)
- Kerouac, Jack. *Satori in Paris & Pic* (New York: Grove Press, 1988)
- Ketelaar, James Edward. "Hokkaido Buddhism and The Early Meiji State," in Helen Hardacre, ed., *New Directions in The Study of Meiji Japan* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 531 – 548.
- Kim, Elaine. *Asian American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984)
- Klein, Christina. *Cold War Orientalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003)
- Kunkel, John. *America's Trade Policy Towards Japan: Demanding Results* (New York: Routledge, 2003)
- Lattin, Don. *Following Our Bliss*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2003)
- Lawrence, Matt. *Like a Splinter in Your Mind*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004)
- Leed, Jacob. "Gary Snyder, Han Shan, and Jack Kerouac," *Journal of Modern Literature* 11.1 (1984): pp. 185 – 193.
- Little, Jonathan. "An Interview With Charles Johnson," in Jim McWilliams, ed., *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), pp. 97 – 122.
- Little, Jonathan. *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination* (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1997)
- Liu, Alan. *The Laws of Cool* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004)
- Lloyd, Peter B. "Glitches in the Matrix...and How to Fix Them," in Glen Yeffeth, ed., *Taking the Red Pill* (Dallas: Benbella, 2003), pp. 103 – 124.
- Lock, Helen. "The Paradox of Slave Mutiny in Herman Melville, Charles Johnson, and Frederick Douglass," *College Literature* 30.4 (Fall 2003): pp. 54 – 70.
- Lopez, Donald. "Kundun," *Rethinking History*. 13.2 (July 1999): pp. 227 – 230.
- Lopez, Donald. "New Age Orientalism: The Case of Tibet," *Tricycle* 3.3 (Spring 1994): pp. 37 – 43.
- Maher, Paul Jr. *Kerouac: The Definitive Biography* (Lanham: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004)

- Martinez, Manuel Luis. *Countering the Counterculture: Reading Postwar American Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomás Rivera* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003)
- McAleer, John. *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Days of Encounter* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984)
- McGinn, Colin. "The Matrix of Dreams," in Christopher Grau, ed., *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 62 – 70.
- Merish, Lori. *Sentimental Materialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000)
- Merrill, Thomas F. *Allen Ginsberg* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969)
- Miles, Barry. *Jack Kerouac: King of the Beats* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998)
- Moore, Roger. "The Last Mimzy," *Orlando Sentinel*. (March 19, 2007): p. C5.
- Mullen, Eve L. "Orientalist Commercializations: Tibetan Buddhism in American Popular Film," *Journal of Religion and Film*. 2.2 (October 1998). Accessed: January 3, 2008. <<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/OrientalMullen.htm>>
- Muther, Elizabeth. "Isadora at Sea: Misogyny as Comic Capital in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*," *African American Review* 30.4 (Winter 1996): pp. 649 – 658.
- Morgan, Bill. *I Celebrate Myself* (New York: Viking, 2006)
- Murphy, Patrick D. *A Place for Wayfaring* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2000)
- Nash, William R. "A Conversation With Charles Johnson," in Jim McWilliams, ed., *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), pp. 214 – 235.
- Nash, William R. *Charles Johnson's Fiction* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003)
- Nicosia, Gerald. *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983)
- Norton, Jody. "The Importance of Nothing: Absence and Its Origins in the Poetry of Gary Snyder," *Contemporary Literature* 28.1 (Spring 1987): pp. 41 – 66.
- Osgerby, Bill. *Playboys in Paradise* (Oxford: Berg, 2001)

- Ouimet, Lorraine. "Freedom Through Contamination," Collapsed Boundaries in Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 30.1 (2000): pp. 33 – 51.
- Page, Philip. *Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African-American Fiction* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999)
- Pan, Philip P. "China's Hippies Find Their Berkeley," *Washington Post*. (September 22, 2003): p. A17.
- Paparazzo, Barbara. "Walking on Walking: Impermanence and Landscape in Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*," *Great River Review* 44.1 (Spring/Summer 2006): pp. 103 – 118.
- Parameswaran, P. "U.S. Sees No Rapid Shift in China's Currency Reserves," *Yahoo.com*. November 11, 2007. Accessed: November 23, 2007. <http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20071111/pl_afp/uschinabankingforex_071111170346>
- Parrish, Timothy L. "Imagining Slavery: Toni Morrison and Charles Johnson," *Studies in American Fiction* 25.1 (Spring 1997): pp. 81 – 100.
- Perry, Mark J. *Carpe Diem*. Weblog posting. January 8, 2009. Accessed: September 1, 2009. <http://mjerry.blogspot.com/2009/01/debt-financed-consumer-spending-spree.html>>
- Peterson, R. A., and R. M. Kern. "Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore," *American Sociological Review* 61 (1996): pp. 900 – 907.
- Pocket World in Figures* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2006)
- Portugés, Paul. *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson Publishers, 1978)
- Prasso, Sheridan. *The Asian Mystique* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005)
- Probst, Christopher. "Welcome to the Machine," *American Cinematographer* 80.4 (April 1999): pp. 32 – 36.
- Prothero, Stephen. "Introduction," in Carole Tonkinson, ed., *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), pp. 1 – 20.
- Pugh, David G. *Sons of Liberty* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983)
- Raskin, Jonah. *American Scream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004)
- Ressner, Jeffrey. "Disney's China Policy," *TIME* 148.26 (December 9, 1996): p. 60.

- Retman, Sonnet. "‘Nothing Was Lost in the Masquerade’: The Protean Performance of Genre and Identity in Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*," *African American Review* 33.3 (Fall 1999): pp. 417 – 437.
- Riepe, Dale. *The Philosophy of India and Its Impact on American Thought* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1970)
- Rivard, David. "A Leap of Words to Things," *American Poetry Review* 38.4 (July/August 2009): pp. 5 – 9.
- Robinson, David M. "Emerson’s ‘American Civilization’: Emancipation and the National Destiny," in T. Gregory Garvey, ed., *The Emerson Dilemma* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), pp. 221 – 233.
- Rosaldo, Renato. *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989)
- Rosenberg, Matthew. "Report: Development Harming Tibet." *Yahoo.com*. December 10, 2007. Accessed: December 11, 2007. http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20071211/ap_on_re_as/India_china_tibet>
- Rowe, John Carlos. "Culture, US Imperialism, and Globalization," in Ashley Dawson and Malini Johar Schueller, eds., *Exceptional State: Contemporary US Culture and the New Imperialism*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007): pp. 37 – 59.
- Rudy, John G. *Emerson and Zen Buddhism* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001)
- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. "The Phenomenology of the Allmuseri: Charles Johnson and the Subject of the Narrative of Slavery," in Rudolph P. Byrd, ed., *I Call Myself an Artist* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 369 – 396.
- Rydell, Robert W. *All the World’s a Fair* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984)
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage, 1994)
- Samuels, Robert. "Emerson, Lacan, and Zen: Transcendental and Postmodern Conceptions of the Eastern Subject," in Yoshinobu Hakutani, ed., *Postmodernity and Cross-Culturalism* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), pp. 157 – 167.
- Sangster, Jim. *Scorsese* (London: Virgin Books, 2002)
- Schell, Orville. *Virtual Tibet* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000)

- Schork, R.J. "Echoes of Eliot in Snyder's 'A Stone Garden,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 17.1 (Summer 1990): pp. 172 – 176.
- Schueller, Malini. *U.S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature 1790-1890* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001)
- Scott III, Daniel M. "Appropriation and Transformation in *Middle Passage*," *African American Review* 29.4 (Winter 1995): pp. 645 – 655.
- Seager, Richard. *Buddhism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999)
- Selby, Nick. "'Created Space': Mapping America as Poem in Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End* and Susan Howe's *Secret History of the Dividing Line*," *Journal of American Studies* 39.1 (2005): pp. 41 – 64.
- Selzer, Linda. "Charles Johnson's 'Exchange Value': Signifyin(g) on Marx," In *The Massachusetts Review* 42.2 (Summer 2001): pp. 253 – 268.
- Selzer, Linda. "Master-Slave Dialectics in Charles Johnson's 'The Education Mingo,'" *African American Review* 37.1 (Spring 2003): pp. 105 – 114.
- Sherrill, Martha. "Little Buddha, Big Ego," *The Washington Post*. (May 22, 1994): p. G1.
- Silverstein, Michael J. and Fiske, Neil. *Trading Up: The New American Luxury*. (New York: Portfolio, 2003)
- Singh, Nikhil Pal. *Black is a Country*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004)
- Smith, Gavin. "The Art of Vision: Martin Scorsese's *Kundun*," in Peter Brunette, ed., *Martin Scorsese Interviews* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), pp. 236 – 256.
- Smith, Virginia. "Sorcery, Double-Consciousness, and Warring Souls: An Intertextual Reading Of *Middle Passage* and Captain Blackman," *African American Review* 30.4 (Winter 1996): pp. 659 – 674.
- Snodgrass, Judith. *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003)
- Snyder, Gary. *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes & Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries* (New York: New Directions, 1969)
- Snyder, Gary. *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1996)
- Snyder, Gary. *The Old Ways* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1977)

- Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990)
- Snyder, Gary. *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990)
- Stearns, Peter N. *American Cool* (New York: New York University Press, 1994)
- Steinberg, Marc. "Charles Johnson's Middle Passage: Fictionalizing History and Historicizing Fiction," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 45.4 (Winter 2003): pp. 375 – 390.
- Stelzer, Irwin M. "China and Unocal," *Weekly Standard*. June 27, 2005. Accessed: November 29, 2007. <<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/005/778mipgn.asp>>
- Sterritt, David. *Mad to Be Saved* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998)
- Sterritt, David. *Screening the Beats: Media Culture and the Beat Sensibility* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004)
- Stewart, Barbara. "Tibet (Hold the Shangri-La)," *The New York Times*. March 19, 2000. Accessed: January 3, 2008. <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E01EEDE113BF93AA25750C0A9669C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1>>
- Stiles, Bradley J. *Emerson's Contemporaries and Kerouac's Crowd* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson Press, 2003)
- Storhoff, Gary. "The Artist as Universal Mind: Berkeley's Influence on Charles Johnson," *African American Review* 30.4 (Winter 1996): pp. 539 – 548.
- Suzuki, D.T. *The Zen Doctrine of No Mind: The Significance of the Sutra of Hui-Neng*, Christmas Humphreys, ed., (York Beach, ME: Weiser Books, 1993)
- Swartz, Omar. *The View from On the Road: The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999)
- Takahashi, Ayako. "The Shaping the Gary Snyder's Ecological Consciousness," *Comparative Literature Studies* 39.4 (2002): pp. 314 – 325.
- Taubin, Amy. "Everything is Form," in Peter Brunette, ed., *Martin Scorsese Interviews* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), pp. 257 – 266.
- Taylor, Bron. "Earthen Spirituality or Cultural Genocide? Radical Environmentalism's Appropriation of Native American Spirituality," *Religion* 27 (1997): pp. 183 – 215.

- Templeton, David. "Dharma & Greed: Popular Buddhism Meets the American Dream," *Metroactive.com*. Accessed: March 7, 2006. <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/sonoma/10.12.00/buddhism-0041.html>>
- Thaden, Barbara Z. "Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* as Historiographic Metafiction," *College English* 59.7 (November 1997): pp. 753 – 766.
- Thomas, Jeremy (Producer) and Bertolucci, Bernardo (Director) *Little Buddha* (France: CiBy 2000, 1993)
- Tonetti, Claretta. *Bernardo Bertolucci: the Cinema of Ambiguity* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995)
- Trigilio, Tony. *Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist Poetics* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007)
- Turner, Richard. "Now, Mickey Mao," *Newsweek* 128.24 (December 9, 1996): p. 42.
- Turner, Steve. *Angelheaded Hipster: A Life of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Viking, 1996)
- Tweed, Thomas. *The American Encounter With Buddhism 1844-1912* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992)
- Twitchell, James B. *Living it Up* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)
- Twoikov, Helen. "Zen in the Balance: Can It Survive America?," *Tricycle* 3.3 (Spring 1994): pp. 51 – 57.
- Tytell, John. *Naked Angels: Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1976)
- Tytell, John. "The Beat Generation and the Continuing American Revolution," in Holly George-Warren, ed., *The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats: The Beat Generation and American Culture* (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1999), pp. 55 – 68.
- Valkeakari, Tuire. "The Politics of Perception in Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*," *Studies in American Fiction* 33.2 (Fall 2005): pp. 229 – 250.
- Van Biema, David. "Buddhism in America," *TIME*. 150.15 (October 13, 1997): p. 72.
- Wagner, Rachel and Flannery-Dailey, Frances. "Wake Up! Worlds of Illusion in Gnosticism, Buddhism and the Matrix Project," in Christopher Grau, ed., *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 258 – 287.

- Warwick, Kevin. "The Matrix – Our Future?" in Christopher Grau, ed., *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 198 – 207.
- Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946)
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1958)
- Weinreich, Regina. *The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987)
- Whalen-Bridge, John. "A Conversation with Charles Johnson and Maxine Hong Kingston," *MELUS* 31.2 (Summer 2006): pp. 69 – 93.
- Whalen-Bridge, John. "Shoulder to the Wheel: An Interview with Charles Johnson," in Jim McWilliams, ed., *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), pp. 300 – 315.
- Whalen-Bridge, John. "Waking Cain: The Poetics of Integration in Charles Johnson's *Dreamer*," *Callaloo* 26.2 (Spring 2003): pp. 504 – 521.
- Whalen-Bridge, John. "'Whole Sight' in Review: Reflections on Charles Johnson," *MELUS* 31.1 (Spring 2006): pp. 244 – 267.
- Wheatley, Jonathan. "Brazil and China Eye Plan to Axe the Dollar," *Financial Times*. May 18, 2009. Accessed: May 18, 2009. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/996b1af8-43ce-11de-a9be-00144feabdc0.html?nclick_check=1>
- Yeffeth, Glenn. "The Matrix Glossary," in Glenn Yeffeth, ed., *Taking the Red Pill* (Dallas: Benbella, 2003), pp. 243 – 256.
- Young, Cynthia A. *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006)
- Žižek, Slavoj. *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001)

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

James F. Royal completed this dissertation as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Florida, a degree that he completed in 2009. Previous to that, he worked in Germany for Ford Motor Company for three years. He earned a Master of Arts in English at the University of Florida in 2000. Prior to that, he completed a Bachelor of Science in management at the University of Florida. He now works for The Motley Fool as a financial editor and analyst.