

Buddhist Worldmaking in the American Midcentury

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Abstract: In the American midcentury, European American cultural producers saw the cultural materials of Zen Buddhism as useful for innovations in poetics and counterculture. Japanese Americans also ‘used’ Buddhism toward specific ends: to argue for their communities’ Americanness and to stake a future for themselves and their children in American society. Because Euro Americans valued Buddhism for its aesthetic and countercultural kineticism, they mistook the seemingly more conservative, hybridised religious expressions of Japanese American Buddhists as reflective of a ‘Protestantized’ and ‘inauthentic’ Buddhism. This article examines this idea that the cultural materials of ‘Buddhism’ are useful to differing communities, who variously use ‘Buddhism’ to ‘make worlds’—operationalising religious cultural materials toward the changes they wanted to see in American society. The article contends that understanding the religious hybridisations of Japanese American Buddhists as worldmaking actions is a key to contextualising and challenging the erasure of Asian American Buddhists: by underscoring these hybridisations, we can expand our understanding of this pivotal moment of Buddhist worldmaking beyond the work of Euro American cultural producers.

Keywords: Buddhism, Asian American, Beat literature, worldmaking, twentieth century

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Introduction: To whom is Buddhism useful—and to what ends?

In this essay, I want to draw attention to the ways in which Buddhisms in the American midcentury were utilised or operationalised in (at least) two differing communities of Buddhist practitioners. Though this emphasis on ‘two differing communities’ might suggest I am ascribing to the idea that there are two diverging ‘convert’ and ‘immigrant’ Buddhisms in the U.S.—a flawed binary that others have rightly challenged—in fact, I would instead like to draw attention to a historical moment that might be seen as causal or contributive to that constructed dichotomy (there are, of course, many more than just ‘two Buddhisms’ in the U.S.). Indeed, I am interested in the differing ways that value is ascribed to Buddhism in this period and how that valuing is communicated in and by both Beat countercultural communities and Japanese American Shin Buddhist communities.

In these communities, Buddhism was instrumentalised—a point I explain further below—but the telos that Euro Americans ascribed to Buddhism in this period (over other forms of valuation that we shall see in Japanese American communities) scaled from the San Francisco Bay area outward and from the Beat writers onward, travelling from its depictions in American literature into the American mainstream. Indeed, ‘the versions of Buddhism that are valorised in North America, and that American literature both descends from and proselytises for, are interpretations of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism that emphasise individual meditation, solo retreats, individual vision, ecstatic states, and artistic expression’.¹ These ‘emphases’ reflect the Euro American telos that I expand upon below, a valuing of Buddhism’s ‘techné’, its catalytical means toward some desired end—whether an ecstatic state, an artistic expression like a poem, or an ‘individual vision’ that allowed one to detach from the consumer culture that many of the Beats reviled.² I will outline some of these

¹ Najarian, ‘The “Problem” of Buddhism’, 313.

² As Chenxing Han’s *Be the Refuge* suggests, these emphases in mainstream American society have also caused many contemporary Asian American Bud-

Beat countercultural ‘ends’—where Buddhism is useful to poets interested in experimenting with language; and where Buddhism’s seemingly anti-Establishment trappings are useful to the counterculture—below. Meanwhile, the outward forms of religious expression seen in pre- and postwar Japanese American Buddhist communities suggest a different valuing of Buddhism. Japanese American communities hybridised their Buddhist practices and religious expressions toward different ends, at least one of which was survival and protection from the broadly xenophobic American society in which they lived and survived after internment.

We might therefore ask: to whom is ‘Buddhism’ useful? And to what end(s)? The term ‘Buddhist worldmaking’ in my title suggests Buddhism’s *usefulness*, the idea that it holds cultural materials that help ‘make’ worlds. In using the term ‘worldmaking’, I am interested in the following questions: How do Buddhisms become a part of differing cultural producers’ visions for society, and how is Buddhism construed as useful in attempts to achieve desired changes within societies and communities? Whose worlds are being made, and how are Buddhist practices and ideas part of that worldmaking? What does Buddhism ‘look like’ and how is it rhetorically deployed in these worldmaking endeavours—or, perhaps, how is ‘Buddhism’ transformed and ‘translated’ in these endeavours? In what ways are cultural producers’ ‘needs’ answered in and through Buddhisms? There are other political, cosmological, and Dharmalogical dimensions that scholars may consider in light of this term ‘worldmaking’—this may

dhists to view their Buddhist religious identities and practices uneasily, making them wary of calling themselves ‘Buddhist’ because dominant cultural representations of Buddhism are so ‘white’ but masquerade as cultureless. *Be the Refuge* counters the erasure of Asian American Buddhists by displaying the complexity and nuance of contemporary Asian American Buddhists’ stories and experiences. The book also, quite simply, reveals how difficult it has been for many Asian/Americans to understand their religiosity, given that ‘Buddhism in America’ is so incredibly white in its manifestations, whether in the makeup of Buddhist religious communities or in the images and articles in popular magazines like *Tricycle*.

remain an area for future study, though Duncan Ryuken Williams' *American Sutra* addresses these dimensions masterfully—below, I outline worldmaking actions related to social space and religious identity.

I will start by reviewing earlier Euro American interests in East Asian culture and delineating what kinds of Buddhisms Euro Americans had access to during this period. Next, the paper illustrates how Buddhism becomes 'useful' to the American poet Philip Whalen's new American Buddhist poetics. Then, I explain how Zen Buddhism (specifically, the practice of seated meditation or *zazen* 坐禪) was seen as a fundamental tool of the countercultural 'revolution' in my analysis of a 1967 issue of the *San Francisco Oracle*, a countercultural magazine based out of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district. In this magazine issue, I show how the countercultural vision of Euro American cultural producers (Alan Watts, Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Allen Cohen) directly contrasts with and criticises the worldmaking actions of Japanese Americans, in a sense 'disqualifying' Japanese American Buddhisms because they were *not* useful for the building of counterculture. I then turn to the 'uses' that Japanese Americans ascribed to Buddhism, valorising their remarkable Buddhist hybridisations to suggest that their worldmaking actions were a transformation of the *saṅgha*, rather than an 'inauthentic' Buddhism, as was argued by Alan Watts.

Buddhist Modernism and 'Zennist' Beat figures³

Western 'uses' for and interests in East Asian culture of course abound in the late nineteenth century and in the Modernist period, not just in the midcentury period that is the focus of this article. Many of these earlier cultural producers are described in Rick Fields' narrative history of Buddhism's adaptations to American culture.⁴ The interest in and 'availability' of Buddhism in the midcentury

³ 'Zennist' is Jonathan Stalling's term to 'distinguish practitioners or advocates of Zen, rather than the family of discourses and traditions that make up Zen per se.' Stalling, *Poetics of Emptiness*, 27.

was made possible because of decades of cross-cultural interest; the earlier work of Modernist figures like Arthur Waley and Ernest Fenollosa; translations of Zen Buddhist texts and ideas as in the work of D. T. Suzuki; missionary work; the fact that East Asian visual art was newly-accessible to the American public; and Meiji-era strategic essentialisms.⁵ Before the midcentury period that is the focus of this article, therefore, many Westerners had interacted with East Asian, South Asian, and Southeast Asian Buddhist ideas, religious texts, and sūtras, and had drawn from them for various intellectual projects. Beyond Modernist figures like Arthur Waley and Ernest Fenollosa, it was also the occultist and medium Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society, as well as earlier American Transcendentalist figures, who had been interested in the ‘wisdoms of the East’.⁶ These figures’ work with Asian cultural materials in no small part brought East Asian art to the American public: for example, Fenollosa’s ‘connoisseurship’ in his ‘passionate advocacy of East Asian art’ not only made him a ‘celebrity in Japan’, but also brought Chinese and Japanese visual art to Chicago, Cleveland, Kansas City, and St.

⁴ Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*.

⁵ For more on Meiji-era strategic essentialisms, or what James Brown calls ‘an Occidental, Japanese-centered criticism of American materialism’, see Brown, ‘The Zen of Anarchy’, 207; and also Sharf, ‘The Zen of Japanese Nationalism’. Stalling has also provided an explication of Fenollosa’s work with the New Buddhists, who would frame Zen Buddhism for American audiences in remarkably influential ways. See Stalling, ‘Emptiness in Flux’ and *Poetics of Emptiness*.

⁶ Josephine Nock-Hee Park has outlined western literary engagements with broadly Asian cultural materials, which were often brought into western texts, museums, and social communities via an Orientalist framing. See Park, *Apparitions of Asia*.

For more on Blavatsky, see Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, chapter six, ‘The White Buddhists: Colonel Olcott, Madame Blavatsky, and the Theosophical Society’; Washington, *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon*; Caldwell, *The Esoteric World of Madame Blavatsky*; and Lachman, *Madame Blavatsky*. For more on the Theosophical Society, see Reenberg Sand and Rudbøg, *Imagining the East*; and Oates, ‘Imperial Occulture’.

Louis, as well as Boston, New York, and Washington.⁷ ‘It is astonishing’, Josephine Nock-Hee Park writes, ‘to consider how quickly superb East Asian art penetrated museums in the heart of America’ in the nineteenth century.⁸

The mid-twentieth century Euro American cultural producers who are a focus of this article are therefore heirs to the earlier cross-cultural interests, and sometime appropriations, of others. These ‘Beat-era’ figures are part of a larger interest in Asian history and culture in the mid-twentieth century and in the Modernist era. This broad interest is visible not just in the literary ‘translations’ of East Asianness in Beat literature, but also in the realm of fine arts; the avant-garde artists John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, for example, drew from Buddhic-Daoist texts and traditions in their work.⁹

In the 1940s and 1950s, ‘Buddhism’ was more available and more accessible than ever before to interested Euro Americans. In a 2001 interview, poet Joanne Kyger (1934–2017) noted that it was ‘meditation—Zen’—that ‘caught the fancy of Americans in the fifties’, since ‘it directed you to be aware of what goes on in the mind’.¹⁰ Yet what

⁷ Park, *Apparitions*, 9; Cohen, *East Asian Art and American Culture*, 27. Chapters one and two of Stalling’s *Poetics of Emptiness* explore Ernest Fenollosa’s ‘The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry’ as an expression of Fenollosa’s distinctly Buddhist poetics, which was informed by a two-decade-long encounter with a culturally hybrid form of Buddhism known as Shin Bukkyo (‘New Buddhism’, [the ‘hybrid Hegelian Tendai Buddhism...which Fenollosa himself had a role in founding’]). Stalling, *Poetics*, 26. Chapter two of *Poetics of Emptiness* explores the classical Chinese poetics that undergirds the lost half of Fenollosa’s essay—lost, in large part, due to Ezra Pound’s distaste for Buddhism, which resulted in harsh edits of Fenollosa’s essay ‘The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry’, thus giving us Pound’s own infamous version of his essay by the same title. See Park’s chapter ‘Cathay to Confucius’ in *Apparitions* for her discussion of the ‘Whitman-Fenollosa-Pound lineage’. Park, *Apparitions*, 33.

⁸ Park, *Apparitions*, 10.

⁹ See Stalling, “Listen and Relate”.

¹⁰ Meltzer, ed., *San Francisco Beat*, 126.

specific kind(s) of Buddhism did midcentury Euro American cultural producers have access to? These cultural producers were engaging with what scholars alternately call a ‘hybrid Buddhism’, ‘neo-Buddhism’, Buddhist Modernism, and Buddhist Romanticism.¹¹ These ‘Buddhisms’ were a result of decades of hybridisation and many accretions of interpretation and translation. Prior to the nineteenth century, what Ann Gleig and David McMahan call ‘Buddhist modernism’ had evolved. This term refers to ‘a historically new and distinct form of Buddhism that resulted from the encounter between traditional Asian Buddhism and Western modernity under the conditions of colonialism’.¹² Buddhist modernism evolved over decades in colonial contexts, as when the Theravada meditation revival began ‘as a form of resistance to colonialism’ in Myanmar:¹³

simultaneously demonstrating accommodation and resistance to colonialism, the vision of Buddhism that emerged from these reforms selectively privileged aspects of Buddhism that were compatible with modern Western discourses, particularly science, and discarded elements that were incompatible.¹⁴

¹¹ See McMahan, *The Making*; Faure, *Unmasking Buddhism*; and Thanissaro Bhikku, ‘The Roots of Buddhist Romanticism’.

¹² Gleig, ‘Undoing Whiteness’, 23. Gleig notes that scholars George Bond, Donald Swearer, Donald S. Lopez, and David McMahan ‘examined the modern reformation of Buddhism across South-East Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’ (Gleig, ‘Undoing Whiteness’, 23). Bond, *The Buddhist Revival*; Swearer, *The Buddhist World*; Lopez Jr., *A Modern Buddhist Bible*; and McMahan, *The Making*.

¹³ Gleig, ‘Undoing Whiteness’, 24; see Braun, *The Birth of Insight*.

¹⁴ Gleig, ‘Undoing Whiteness’, 23. Other common characteristics include ‘a rejection of the traditional Theravadan separation of the mundane and supermundane levels and a blurring of the roles of the layperson and the monk; 4) a revival of meditation practice and a claim that Nibbana is an attainable goal in this lifetime for not only monastics but also the laity; and 5) an interest in social reform issues such as gender equality.’ Gleig, ‘Undoing Whiteness’, 23.

Common characteristics of the vision of Buddhism that emerged from years of reforms, many of them anti-colonial in nature, included ‘a claim to return to the “original,” “pure,” and “authentic” teachings of the Buddha that have been distorted by cultural and institutional overlays; [and] a framing of Buddhism as a rational and empirical religion aligned with science’.¹⁵ Gleig shows how Buddhist modernism interacts with the cultural particularities of the American midcentury; her chapter, ‘Undoing Whiteness in American Buddhist Modernism: Critical, Collective, and Contextual Turns’, considers ‘the ways in which whiteness functioned in the construction of Buddhist modernism in Asia and has become amplified in its North American iterations’.¹⁶

The midcentury interest in meditation was therefore made possible by what McMahan describes as ‘a hybrid’ Buddhism composed ‘of a number of Buddhist traditions that have cross-fertilized with the dominant discourses of Western modernity, especially those rooted in Enlightenment rationalism, Romanticism, and Protestant Christianity’.¹⁷ Despite Euro Americans’ claims (which I examine below)

¹⁵ Gleig, ‘Undoing Whiteness’, 23. For example, McMahan shows that Asian Buddhists played a key role in fashioning Buddhist modernism (this is part of James Brown’s arguments as well: see Brown, ‘The Zen of Anarchy’). Gleig, ‘Undoing Whiteness’, 24; McMahan, *The Making*, 4–5. As another example, Braun has shown that the Theravada meditation revival began ‘as a form of resistance to colonialism’ in Myanmar/Burma. Gleig, ‘Undoing Whiteness’, 24; Braun, *The Birth of Insight*. And as Natalie Quli has cautioned, ‘scholarly critiques of the inauthenticity of Buddhist modernism too often fetishize Asians as the carriers of the “traditional” and Westerners as the carriers of the “modern,” thereby merely reinforcing and reproducing stereotypes of the passive Asian and the active Westerner.’ Gleig, ‘Undoing Whiteness’, 24; Natalie Quli, ‘Western Self’, 18. ‘Given the colonial heritage and underpinnings of Buddhist modernism,’ Gleig writes, ‘it is tempting to dismiss it as an inherently white project’—indeed, there has been much scholarly disagreement on the subject of Buddhist modernism ‘because of its colonial origins and departure from traditional forms of Asian Buddhism’. Gleig, ‘Undoing Whiteness’, 23.

¹⁶ Gleig, ‘Undoing Whiteness’, 22.

that their ideas and interpretations brought Buddhism ‘back to’ its ‘authentic, original’ nature, the ‘Buddhism’ with which they engaged should be seen both as a European construction (European philologists from the eighteenth century onward constructed ‘Buddhism’ as a universalist, ‘world’ religion, as Tomoko Masuzawa shows), and also as:

an actual new form of Buddhism that is the result of a process of modernization, westernization, reinterpretation, image-making, revitalization, and reform that has been taking place not only in the West but also in Asian countries for over a century.¹⁸

In another pointed effort to demonstrate the historical situatedness of the ‘Buddhism’ that many contemporary Westerners see as ‘authentic’ or ‘original’, Thanissaro Bhikku, a monk in the Theravadan tradition, ‘has taken on what he calls “Romantic Buddhism,” [which is] big on individualism and small on renunciation, a practice that even goes so far as to partially quote or misquote sections of the Buddhist scriptures in its own image’.¹⁹ For Thanissaro Bhikkhu, the ways in which Buddhism has been translated, understood, and packaged in Western texts simply re-confirms Romanticism, particularly German Romanticism and its emphasis on ‘peak emotional experiences, reuniting the broken self, and personal integration’; whereas, a Buddhism without these Romantic characteristics may tend to ‘emphasize ethics, mind training, and the recognition that the root of suffering is attachment, especially to selfhood’.²⁰ For Thanissaro Bhikkhu, then, Romanticism can be seen as a major framing and translative influence on what these midcentury Euro Americans perceived, simply, as ‘Zen Buddhism’.²¹

¹⁷ McMahan, *The Making*, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹ Najarian, ‘The “Problem” of Buddhism’, 312.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ See also Rudy, *Emerson and Zen Buddhism* and *Wordsworth and the Zen Mind*; Lussier, *Romantic Dharma*; and McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*.

Yet it was not just Western enthusiasts, but also modernizing Asian Buddhists who had been deeply interested and invested in the idea that ‘Buddhism’ held ‘responses to the dominant problems and questions of modernity’.²² Indeed, ‘the Japanese teachers who visited American shores with the 1893 Parliament of World Religions were in part inspired by their own “New Buddhism”’, which was ‘a response to the forcible repression of Buddhism by the Meiji authorities in favor of State Shinto’.²³ These Japanese teachers ‘presented Buddhism in ways that would especially appeal to Westerners disaffected by their own religions’.²⁴ Soen Shaku, known for his *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot* (also titled *Zen for Americans*)—published in 1904 and still in print—‘minimalized Zen rituals to offer ethical guidelines surrounded by a gentle Buddhist theism that nonetheless did not use the term “God”’.²⁵ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, a translator of Soen Shaku’s work, also contributed to this ‘actual new form of Buddhism’, contributing ‘in his many works both to the popular conception that Zen “is not a religion at all” but “pure experience”’ (note the Romantic resonances of this framing) and that Zen is ‘the “unmediated experience of life itself untainted by cultural accretions ... the ultimate source of all religious teaching, both Eastern and Western”’.²⁶ For Robert Sharf, this is a ‘woeful misreading ... altogether controverted by the lived contingencies of Zen monastic practice’.²⁷ As these many scholars together have shown, it was

²² McMahan, *The Making*, 5.

²³ Najarian, ‘The “Problem” of Buddhism’, 312. The World’s Parliament of Religions has been discussed considerably. Ketelaar, ‘Strategic Occidentalism’.

²⁴ Ketelaar, ‘Strategic Occidentalism’.

²⁵ *Ibid.* See Falk, ‘The Transmission of Zen’.

²⁶ McMahan, *The Making*, 5; Najarian, ‘The “Problem” of Buddhism’, 312; Sharf, ‘The Zen’.

²⁷ Sharf, ‘The Zen’, 107. Najarian describes a ‘magic trick’ performed by Suzuki: in making Zen ‘universal, natural, and superior, but also particularly Japanese,’ that ‘universalizing’ of Zen Buddhism ends up ‘strongly favor[ing]’ Japanese nationalism (Najarian, ‘The “Problem” of Buddhism’, 311). In the end, this Zen is ‘a way of enlarging Japanese cultural hegemony’ (Najarian, ‘The

this version (or *versions*) of ‘Zen Buddhism’ that was introduced to North Americans in the midcentury. Because the cultural producers discussed in this article engage in Zen Buddhist meditative practices and are reading translations of Zen Buddhism, and because the ‘Buddhism’ they encountered was so remarkably hybrid, we can call their approach and interaction with Buddhism ‘Zennist’; there are, after all, Zen clerical and religious lineages that came into North America in completely different processes of transpacific crossing, and this article does not claim to tell those stories.

As Najarian states, ‘these skeptical treatments of Western Buddhism have not yet really trickled down into literary criticism or literary culture in the West’.²⁸ The above scholars’ work to explain Buddhism’s hybridity has not been brought into literary studies. As a field, literary studies *not only* has generally neglected to bring these skepticisms into its analysis of the collection of texts called ‘Beat literature’, but also, scholars of Beat literature have not adequately engaged with the major influence that Asians in America had on Euro American conceptions of Buddhism and East Asian culture more broadly. This article attempts to begin to address the erasure of Asian Americans and Asians in America from the literary scholarship on this period’s Beat literature. In so doing, the article may be of interest to Buddhist Studies scholars, since in focusing on the relationships between literary figures and Asian Americans, we can better understand this pivotal moment in the ‘translations’ of Buddhism into American society.

“Problem” of Buddhism’, 311). There is therefore a contradiction in presenting a ‘universal truth that is essentially Japanese’ (311). Sharf notes that when Suzuki represents Zen Buddhism as ‘a unique, creative path’, as in his book *Zen and Japanese Culture* (1938), he makes another ‘slyly nationalistic’ move: as Najarian summarizes, ‘labeling artistic traditions as “Zen” happily obscures their Chinese sources’ (Sharf, ‘The Zen’, 134, Najarian, ‘The “Problem” of Buddhism’, 311).

²⁸ Najarian, ‘The “Problem” of Buddhism’, 312.

²⁹ Taking its name from John Crowe Ransom’s 1941 book *The New Criticism*, New Criticism was a literary movement emphasising formalism and modes of close reading (of poetry in particular) that treated the text as a self-contained,

'Buddhism' as catalyst in American poetics

I have suggested that Buddhism is useful to cultural producers in this period—that this religion holds materials helpful for the building of 'worlds.' Below, I outline a few examples that support this contention. In the poet Philip Whalen's (1923–2002) experience, working with the materials of Zen Buddhism allowed him to fashion a new American poetics that did not owe its construction or theory to the Modernists or New Critics.²⁹ The 'New Critical version of [T. S.] Eliot's tradition' was the then-reigning literary orthodoxy; the literary gatekeepers of the period made it such that 'any attempt to cut the Gordian knot of form and content by anything less than a sonnet in blank verse was considered bad form'.³⁰ Whalen explained the difficulty of writing in the stranglehold of New Criticism and in the shadow of the Modernist giants T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound:

it was hard to get around Eliot and Pound, to say there really is something else to write...they've got it written down, it's all beautiful and perfect, and there it sits; and alas, I can hardly write home for money.³¹

What allowed Whalen to 'come to grips with Mr. Eliot' was to write 'a long poem that was a combination of Christian theology and Buddhist philosophy and argumentations of all kinds'.³² In his well-known poem, 'If you're so smart why ain't you rich?', Whalen explained, he 'could suddenly see that [the poem] could be what I was going to be or what it was going to be itself'; he saw it was 'possible for a poem to be its own shape and size'.³³ After a year or so, he says, 'I knew where Eliot was at and I was able to get rid of him; he was no longer hiding in the closet everytime I opened it,

self-referential object of study whose author and contexts were not part of the inquiry.

³⁰ Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance*, 126, 80, 93.

³¹ Allen and Whalen, *Off the Wall*, 72.

³² *Ibid.*

telling me that “April is the cruelest month”³⁴. In Whalen’s telling, therefore, Buddhist philosophy provided tools with which to ‘get past’ the great Modernists. ‘Buddhism’ was a crucial catalyst for his innovations in American poetry, and in bringing Buddhist philosophy into his poetry, he classes himself and his colleagues as figures who marshal these generally East Asian cultural materials toward a *specific use*: to create not only new *poems*, but also a new *poetics* combining Christian theology with Buddhist philosophy. This is not to say that Whalen conceived of his writing process in this way *at the time of writing*, but rather, in the 1978 interview excerpted above, it is clear that with time, Whalen sees Buddhism as a catalyst for his poetic career. Interviews like these tell the ‘story’ of Beat literature; they tend to determine how students and scholars alike understand the collection of texts known as ‘Beat literature’. Many have therefore come to understand ‘Buddhism’ as a major tool of the then-new generation of poets—the heirs of Modernism—now termed ‘the Beats’.

Buddhism in Beat countercultural visions: The 1967 *San Francisco Oracle* and Gary Snyder’s ‘Buddhism and the Coming Revolution’

Beyond Buddhism’s utility for experimental poetry, a number of primary texts reveal how Beat figures saw the practice of seated meditation as a technology for producing (in their view) positive changes within American society. Much of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Beat poet Gary Snyder’s (1930–) prose writing theorises about how the counterculture could change American society for the better. His essay ‘Buddhism and the Coming Revolution’ is no exception.³⁵ As

³³ Allen and Whalen, *Off the Wall*, 23.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

³⁵ This essay first appeared under the title ‘Buddhist Anarchism’ in 1961 and then was revised for inclusion in Snyder’s book *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes & Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries* (1969). The essay was also published in the 1995 anthology *Big Sky Mind*: I draw from that copy of the essay.

the title suggests, the essay is about Buddhism as ‘a positive force’ for change in American society. Snyder theorises a kind of synthesis between ‘East’ and ‘West’ that can bring about that revolution; and ‘Buddhism’—which is marked in the language of ‘insight into the basic self/void’—is a major part of that synthesis:

The mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both. They are both contained in the traditional three aspects of the Dharma path: wisdom (*prajna*), meditation (*Dhyana*), and morality (*sila*). Wisdom is intuitive knowledge of the mind of love and clarity that lies beneath one’s ego-driven anxieties and aggressions. Meditation is going into the mind to see this for yourself—over and over again, until it becomes the mind you live in. Morality is bringing it back out in the way you live, through personal example and responsible action, ultimately toward the true community (*sangha*) of all beings. This last aspect means, for me, supporting any cultural and economic revolution that moves clearly toward a free, international, classless world. It means using such means as civil disobedience, outspoken criticism, protest, pacifism, voluntary poverty, and even gentle violence if it comes to a matter of restraining some impetuous redneck.³⁶

Here, Snyder outlines ‘three aspects of the Dharma path’ which each produce some desired *end*, both for oneself and for society. Together, these three aspects lead one into a revolutionary politics of some kind. The telos of the first element ‘wisdom’ here is achieving the ‘clarity that lies beneath one’s ego-driven anxieties and aggressions’: clarity is the goal. Second, meditation’s telos is that it necessarily forms one’s mind into one ‘of love’; meditation in Snyder’s words helps you ‘see this for yourself...until it becomes the mind you live in’. The goal here is to reshape mind-phenomena. Finally, morality brings these insights ‘back out in the way you live’, notably *toward* the ‘true community (*saṅgha*) of all beings’—bringing personal

³⁶ Snyder, ‘Buddhism and the Coming Revolution’, 179.

revelations into society, to be put to use. After all, these ideas and materials of Buddhism ('the Dharma path' and 'meditation') are for Snyder the means of 'supporting...cultural and economic revolution' that 'moves toward' a new world not marked by the 'behavior and custom long banned by the Judaeo[sic]-Capitalist-Christian-Marxist West'.³⁷ This is to say that some 'Buddhist' ideas and practices have a *telos*, according to Snyder; this is a religion that in his view holds cultural material that is useful for some desired end. In this case, the end goal of these three traditional aspects of the Dharma path is a major cultural shift, a 'revolution'.

For Snyder, this 'revolution' is truly a possibility, for, in his words, 'there is nothing in human nature or the requirements of human social organization which intrinsically requires that a culture be contradictory, repressive and productive of violence and frustrated personalities'.³⁸ To put this another way, nothing about American society's then-current ideologies and modes of social organisation are a given; none are predetermined; all are capable of revision and change—and meditation is one of the catalysts for that change. Crucially, 'one can prove [this point] for himself by taking a good look at his own nature through meditation'.³⁹ Indeed, Snyder writes that 'once one has this much faith and insight', derived from the practice of meditation, 'he must be led to a deep concern with the need for radical social change through a variety of hopefully non-violent means'.⁴⁰ This is to say that meditation has a *telos*; here, I wish to demonstrate for readers the teleological nature of Snyder's theorisations.

Snyder is *not* saying that Buddhism or meditation makes one better at parenting, eating, or working (these are *other* modes of operationalising Buddhism that we might see in mainstream 'mindfulness' discourse today): instead, he is saying that meditation has the capability (the *utility*) of removing us from the trappings of a capitalist society:

³⁷ Snyder, 'Buddhism and the Coming Revolution', 179, my emphasis.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

the joyous and voluntary poverty of Buddhism becomes a positive force. The traditional harmlessness and refusal to take life in any form has nation-shaking implications. The practice of meditation, for which one needs only ‘the ground beneath one’s feet,’ wipes out mountains of junk being pumped into the mind by the mass media and supermarket universities. The belief in a serene and generous fulfillment of natural loving desires destroys ideologies which blind, maim and repress.⁴¹

In this first line above, note how the *anti*-teleological aspects that many hail as radical within Buddhism—the ‘voluntary poverty’ of Buddhism, for example—is transformed into a telos: it ‘becomes a positive force’ for Snyder. The soteriology here is not just individual; it is a soteriological force for society as a whole. In Snyder’s writing, meditation is apparently capable of doing away with (‘wiping out’) the ‘mountains of junk’ produced by a consumer capitalist culture. That is quite a telos for something so seemingly ‘useless’ as seated meditation, which many see as a practice revealing the nondual and anti-teleological trappings of phenomenological experience. We shall see this telos highlighted again in the 1967 *San Francisco Oracle* below. In addition, the individuality of this practice, its seemingly anti-institutional trappings—‘need[ing] only the ground beneath one’s feet’—is part of its appeal: how could something embedded in American institutions like organised religion assist one in ‘wip[ing] out mountains of junk being pumped into the mind by the mass media and supermarket universities’? Within Snyder’s revolutionary vision for the uses of Buddhist cultural materials, the Buddhist practices of Japanese Americans in his own time could be easily misread as ‘useless’.

The cultural innovation Snyder describes and theorises in the above prose is enacted and performed, in a self-aware aesthetic, in much of his poetry. Julia Martin demonstrates how ‘Snyder’s writing has over the years experimented with various ways of articulating the insight into “not two” that Zen practice discovers’.⁴² Indeed, much of

⁴¹ Snyder, ‘Buddhism and the Coming Revolution’, 178.

his poetry ‘negotiates a path around (or outside or beyond) the dualisms that structure habitual thought’—and Snyder’s poetic ‘paths’ (around, outside, or beyond dualisms) mirror the theorisations of his prose, in which Buddhism’s anti-duality is the positive force or the material conducive to ‘revolution’.⁴³

In contrast, cultural innovation inside a Japanese American Buddhist community in this period was unlikely to occur in a self-proclaimed, aesthetic way (in the ways that innovation in poetry is marked, for example: recall Whalen’s poetic innovation through Buddhism—an innovation that announces itself *as such*). Cultural innovations and hybridisations *were occurring*, of course, in these Japanese American Buddhist communities, who had to hybridise within a culture that was dangerously xenophobic toward persons of Japanese descent. The Japanese American hybridisations I describe in a later section are equally culturally innovative, worldmaking actions—it is just that these innovations are not calling attention to themselves in the way that an artistic artefact like a poem or novel does. Though their worldmaking hybridisations are not perhaps self-referential, and though they did not appear as poetry, we *can* characterize them as *poesis*, where something came into the world that was not there before. It is just that these hybridisations do not draw attention to themselves as an aesthetic. The difference, then, between Euro American Buddhisms and Japanese American Buddhisms in this period is not ‘cultural’, but is rather the difference between an aesthetic that proclaims itself as such to American society, and one that does not.

I explore this difference—between a *poesis* that self-consciously announces itself and one that does not—in the contrasts between the 1967 *San Francisco Oracle* and the hybridised Buddhist practices of Japanese Americans. In a meeting called the ‘Houseboat Summit’, the contents of which were later transcribed and printed in the *San Francisco Oracle* of the same year, Euro American cultural producers figure ‘Buddhist’ meditative practices as a tool or technique by which

⁴² Martin, ‘Mountains, Waters, Walking’.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 184.

young countercultural devotees will transform American society. In turn, they exhibit a distaste for the Buddhist practices and expressions of Japanese Americans. I argue that the Euro American telos for Buddhism was so dominant in their social communities, and perhaps also in their literary texts, that they were unable to understand the worldmaking actions of Japanese American Buddhists (i.e., Japanese Americans' *own* uses for Buddhism).

The 'Houseboat Summit' of 1967 reveals the self-conscious nature of the Euro Americans' approach to the building of counterculture (a 'building', I am suggesting, that relies on the operationalisation of Buddhist cultural materials). This 'Summit' was a meeting between some of the larger-than-life countercultural figures of the period—the writer and populariser of Buddhism Alan Watts, the psychologist and advocate of psychedelics Timothy Leary, the Beat poet Gary Snyder, the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, and the small magazine printer Allen Cohen. They discussed the growth of countercultural America and provided additional advice for young 'drop-outs' then arriving in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, California.

Their conversation centers around what it means to 'drop out'—part of the famous line 'turn on, tune in, drop out', as popularised by Timothy Leary earlier in the '60s. They speak as sages of the counterculture who are reporting to young people about how to live a life outside of the American Establishment—and crucially, they hone in on the idea of learning the proper 'tools and techniques' of dropping out: in their view, individuals cannot 'completely detach [themselves] from anything inside the plastic, robot Establishment' until they learn the practical tools and techniques of doing so.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The recording of this 'Summit' can be found on *YouTube*, see Watts et al., 'A Message from the Hippie-Elders'. Page numbers below are taken from the transcript of the Houseboat Summit: Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, Gary Snyder, and Alan Watts, 'Changes' (Houseboat Summit transcript). *San Francisco Oracle* 7 (February 1967): 3–34.

The discussion has also been memorialized in Cohen, *The San Francisco Oracle*. See also Cohen, 'The San Francisco Oracle: A Brief History'.

Watts asks Snyder to explain how he ‘dropped out’ back in the mid-fifties because ‘you, to me’, Watts says, ‘are one of the most fantastically capable drop-out people I have ever met’.⁴⁵ Snyder responds by noting that things have changed for dropouts: ‘ten or fifteen years ago when we dropped out, there wasn’t a community. There wasn’t anybody who was going to take care of you at all. You were really completely on your own’.⁴⁶ He then explains the specific techniques for surviving as a dropout: obtaining sustenance in unconventional ways and not ‘being fussy about how you work or what you do for a living’.⁴⁷ But again, as Snyder had noted, there was now (in 1967) a network of support for dropping out: there were places to go, coffee shops to meet up in and talk; crucially, there were now meditation centers.

The men suggest that dropping out does *not* just mean going to Haight-Ashbury and doing nothing. Indeed, though Leary describes Haight-Ashbury as a place where ‘they will find spiritual teachers, there they will find friends, lovers, wives’, it ‘must be seen clearly as a way station’.⁴⁸ Snyder agrees, crucially cutting in to turn the conversation toward what one *builds* as a dropout:

SNYDER: Now look...Your drop-out line is fine for all those other people out there, you know, that’s what you’ve got to say to them.

But, I want to hear what you’re building. What are you making?

LEARY: What are we building?

SNYDER: Yeah, what are you building? I want to hear your views on that. Like it’s agreed we are dropping out and there are techniques to do it; now, what next? Where are we going now?⁴⁹

In these lines—crucially, ‘where are we *going* now?’—one might hear echoes of Snyder’s teleological theory of countercultural revolution seen in the 1961 essay described above. In the view of those at

⁴⁵ Ginsberg et al., ‘Changes’, 7.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

the ‘Summit’, it is not enough to simply drop out and hang out in Haight-Ashbury: later in the interview, Leary says, ‘I think we’re all concerned about the increasing number of people who are dropping out and wondering where to go from there’.⁵⁰ It appears that people do not know what to *do* after dropping out, and this is Snyder’s corrective: one must drop out, and then gather tools and techniques to *build* something:

SNYDER: What is very important here is that people learn the *techniques* [vocal emphasis] which have been forgotten—that they learn new structures and new techniques. Like, you can’t just go out and grow vegetables; you’ve got to *learn* to do it. We’ve got learn to do the things we’ve forgotten to do.⁵¹

Leary pushes the conversation toward practical suggestions: ‘let’s come up with some practical suggestions, which we might hope could unfold in the next few months and years’.⁵² Watts then lays out some specific tools—‘through psychedelics, through meditation, through what have you’—and shows how those tools will help in ‘getting back to being able to trust our original intelligence’.⁵³ To be quite clear, the Houseboat Summit, as Watts states, is ‘suggesting an entirely new course for the development of civilization’ that will be produced when people ‘relearn’ the tools and techniques capable of changing society. And one of these major ‘tools’ is *meditation*.

My point here is that the Buddhist practice of seated meditation (however distant this 1967-era ‘meditation’ might be from the ways it had been practiced in monastic communities) is here figured as one tool among the ‘whole new order of technology that’s required for’ their countercultural vision for American society. Indeed, bringing the conversation away from the practical (i.e., techniques for growing one’s food) and toward a broader picture of the cultural shift that

⁵⁰ Watts et al., ‘A Message from the Hippie-Elders’.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

they see occurring, Snyder explains:

SNYDER: People will voluntarily choose to consume less if their interests are turned in another direction, if what is exciting to them is no longer *things* but states of mind. Now, what is happening now is that people are becoming interested in states of mind. That's the cultural shift. We've turned a corner. It's a bigger corner than the [Protestant] Reformation, probably. It's a corner on the order of change between the Paleolithic and Neolithic...it's like one of the three or four major turns in the history of man. Not just culture, but man.⁵⁴

Within their broader discussion of what they see as a major cultural shift, they are also remarking that meditation is one of the major tools that has begun to *bring about* this 'major turn'—and, if young people can continue to practice meditation, among other technologies, that 'major turn' will proceed beyond that first 'big corner' and into the great cultural shift Snyder predicted in 'Buddhism and the Coming Revolution'. In other words, *zazen* has been operationalised as a tool for what they see as a major, anti-Establishment, countercultural shift.

In contrast with these enormous needs they have for Buddhist cultural materials like meditation, a moment late in their conversation illustrates, instead, how uninteresting and 'useless' they find Japanese American Buddhisms to be for their countercultural projects. It is the Englishman Alan Watts (1915–1973) who articulates this notion that Japanese American Buddhisms are uninteresting. Watts was a major midcentury proselytiser for and populariser of Buddhism. Having left the Episcopal church and instead taken up a position teaching at the American Academy of Asian Studies, Watts arrived in San Francisco in 1951 and introduced Buddhist ideas not just to the literary and countercultural figures of the 'Beat' era, but to a much larger audience through his radio show that discussed Eastern religion, contemporary philosophy, psychoanalysis, fundamentals of

⁵⁴ Watts et al., 'A Message from the Hippie-Elders'.

Eastern philosophy, and fundamentals of Buddhism, among other related topics.⁵⁵ By the height of the ‘Beat revolution,’ his radio show ‘attract[ed] a good deal of notice’, but it is his book *The Way of Zen* that had the greatest impact.⁵⁶ Other than D. T. Suzuki’s work, it was one of the first best-selling books on Zen in English. Snyder noted in an interview that Watts was ‘the bridge between D. T. Suzuki and, so to speak, the Beats’.⁵⁷

For Watts, Zen was to be praised precisely because it was antithetical to the institutionalised sense of hierarchy that he had experienced in his Christian upbringing and that he attributed to organised religion.⁵⁸ Christianity, in this view, is connected to the broader problems with the Establishment and with mainstream American society.⁵⁹ Instead, *zazen* and the reading of Zen texts are for Watts the key ways to ‘unravel’ oneself from conventional Western thought. Watts dismissed ‘many of the “modern” developments in Buddhism’, including the religious expressions of Japanese American Shin Buddhists, which he saw as ‘distortions of the original teachings’

⁵⁵ The Berkeley-based KPFA radio show, a ‘Sunday sermon’, was broadcast back-to-back with Rexroth’s show under the banner ‘Pacifica Views’, and ran from 1953–1962. From 1959–1973, Watts also appeared numerous times on television, whether through his own KQED show *Eastern Wisdom & Modern Life* or in interviews and films. His success as Buddhist proselytiser was partly due to the overt framing of his work as popularisations of the more scholarly work by Suzuki, R. H. Blyth, and Ernest Fenollosa. Watts spoke and wrote ‘in a relaxed, nonpedantic tone’, thus taking Buddhism out of academia and ‘put[ting] its “delights” into the hands of novices’. Gray, *Gary Snyder*, 26.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Meltzer, ed., *San Francisco Beat*, 291.

⁵⁸ Masatsugu, “Beyond this World”, 438. See, for example, Watts, *The Spirit of Zen*, 25–30.

⁵⁹ Many converts disliked the structure and form of Jodo Shinshu practice and teaching, ‘which were deemed too similar to Western religion’. Masatsugu, “Beyond this World”, 446. A major perceived difference between the Zen Buddhist tradition embraced by converts and the Jodo Shinshu doctrine was an ‘emphasis on *tariki* rather than *jiriki*’:

(this argument of ‘distortions’ is an instance of what Faure calls ‘neo-Buddhism’).⁶⁰ Watts viewed Jodo Shinshu temples as having the exact same hierarchies as the Christian churches he viewed as part of ‘the Establishment’, and for him, this meant that Japanese American Buddhism would be ‘useless’ to the needs of the counterculture that is envisioned in the *Oracle* issue. For Watts, anything that smacks of

Jodo Shinshu founder Shinran had emphasized *tariki*, or an acknowledgment of the ‘Other Power’ of the Amida Buddha’s compassion as the only necessary precondition to attaining enlightenment. This stood in stark contrast to Zen Buddhist tradition, which emphasized *jiriki*, or ‘Self-Power,’ generated through persistent and rigorous practice of zazen sitting meditation, something that many convert Buddhists found appealing. The emphasis in *tariki*, expressed through ‘faith’ or gratitude to the Amida Buddha through the practice of devotional recitation, was often criticized for its similarity to the Christian concepts of faith and redemption by the Christian God (Masatsugu, “Beyond this World”, 446).

See Carl Becker’s 1990 article for a more sustained engagement on ‘several areas of Buddhist transition and transformation’ that have appeared ‘Christian’ to many, ‘namely language and logic, rituals and ceremony, history, mythology, and conceptions of the sacred.’ Becker, ‘Japanese Pure Land’, 144. Though *tariki*’s emphasis on ‘Other Power’ is hardly the same as a Christian faith, for the converts, especially combined with the outward markers that to them ‘read’ as Christian, this was too similar to the Establishment and the American mainstream from which they were trying to ‘drop out’ and detach themselves. Aside from the perceived ‘doctrinal similarities to Western religion’, converts also disliked the ways in which Jodo Shinshu communities organised their meetings into weekly temple services which, since the 1910s, had taken place on Sundays. Masatsugu, “Beyond this World”, 431, 446. White Buddhists also disagreed with many of the Jodo Shinshu modifications to Buddhist practices described above, like Sunday school programmes; Buddhist choirs; Young Buddhist Associations with basketball and baseball leagues that resembled YMCA and YWCA programmes; and Buddhist Boy Scout troops. *Ibid.*, 448. See Becker also for numerous other ways that Buddhist churches in many areas of the country, serving adherents of many cultural and Buddhist backgrounds, have hybridised similarly.

⁶⁰ Faure, *Unmasking Buddhism*.

Christianity (for example, the temple pews and pipe organs that Japanese Americans introduced into their congregations in the 1910s)⁶¹ would not be enough to produce ‘the liberation of mind from conventional thought’ so crucial to being part of the counterculture (note the telos embedded in that ‘liberation’, as well).⁶²

Toward the end of the ‘Houseboat Summit’ conversation, the group’s discussion turns toward the question of why so many of their contemporaries are embracing East Asian religions.⁶³ Watts steps in: ‘I’ll tell you why’. He explains that because Christianity and Buddhism have such entrenched associations within their ‘home’

⁶¹ Masatsugu reveals that in the early twentieth century, Shin Buddhists modified services by adding temple pews, pipe organ, and Buddhist gāthās (religious songs) performed by choirs—elements of a ‘church’ service that might be read as ‘Protestant’, but which Yoo sees as the emergence of ‘a distinctively Japanese American Buddhism’ (Masatsugu, “Beyond this World”, 431, Yoo, ‘Enlightened Identities’, 290). Yoo points to the following visual details as an example of this ‘distinctive’ Buddhism:

‘Upon entering the church on a Sunday morning, for instance, one might stumble upon pairs and pairs of shoes outside the sanctuary. Not only would one find shoeless worshippers inside, but also pews pushed against the walls with people sitting on the floor’ (290).

⁶² Watts, ‘Beat Zen, square Zen, and Zen’, 6:

‘The Westerner who is attracted by Zen and who would understand it deeply’, Watts wrote, ‘must have one indispensable qualification: he must understand his own culture so thoroughly that he is no longer swayed by its premises unconsciously. He must really have come to terms with the Lord God Jehovah and with his Hebrew-Christian conscience so that he can take it or leave it without fear or rebellion. He must be free of the itch to justify himself. Lacking this, his Zen will be either “beat” or “square,” either a revolt from the culture and social order or a new form of stuffiness and respectability. For Zen is above all the liberation of the mind from conventional thought, and this is something utterly different from rebellion against convention, on the one hand, or adopting foreign conventions, on the other.’

⁶³ *Ibid.*

cultures, they both end up being attractive to those who have not grown up with the ‘horrible associations attached to them’.⁶⁴ Crucially, Watts argues, Buddhism can ‘do something for us that it can’t do in Japan’:

When somebody comes in from the Orient, with a new religion, which hasn’t got ANY of these associations in our minds, all the words are new, all the rites are new. And yet somehow it has feeling in it. And we can get with that, you see? And we can *dig* that. And it can *do* something for us that it can’t do in Japan.⁶⁵

Watts suggests that ‘we’ can put Buddhism to good use (note the argument for its *telos*) because for Euro Americans, it holds ‘new’ technologies without those ‘horrible associations’. For Watts, the same unfortunate associations are also present in Japan, where ‘when young people hear the Buddhist sutra chanted, they think “ughhh. yech.” Because they associate all that with fogeyism’.⁶⁶ While Buddhism may indeed have seemed old and tired to young people in Japan at this time, Watts makes a flawed lateral comparison—that Nisei Buddhists living in the U.S. also dislike sūtras and instead have embraced Christianity because of its exoticism, newness, and its seeming lack of bad associations:

Here in the Buddhist churches, the Niseis, they can’t *stand* it when the priest chants the sutras in Sino-Japanese language for the oldsters. They want to hear, [singing] ‘Buddha loves me this I know, for the sutra tells me so’—[*raucous laughter from all present*—as much as they can, like Protestants, because that’s exotic to them, you see?⁶⁷

Interestingly, the way Watts welded together a Christian tune with the words ‘Buddha’ and ‘sutra’ does illustrate the modifications

⁶⁴ Watts, ‘Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen’.

⁶⁵ Ibid. Vocal emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid. Vocal emphasis in original.

that Japanese American religious communities were deploying as strategies for survival in a dangerously xenophobic society. They did indeed take on ostensibly ‘Christian’ markers and hybridize Buddhism in this way, and scholars have traced the use of the ‘Buddha loves me’ tune, a riff on the Christian ‘Jesus loves me’ song, in some Japanese American Buddhist churches.⁶⁸

Yet herein lies Watts’ misunderstanding of how Japanese Americans hybridised their religious practices and expressions: for the Euro Americans, Buddhism was a fundamental tool or technology for revolutionising American society. This meant that when Watts ‘sees’ Japanese American religious practices, he sees the outward characteristics of ‘Protestant’ churches, traces of the Establishment. But Watts’s explanation is *not* why Bussei (Nisei Buddhists) took on these ‘Protestant’ markers. Japanese Americans modified their Buddhist practices to appear more Western *not* because Christianity lacked ‘horrible associations’, nor because they found Protestantism ‘exotic’, but because such modifications, or *worldmaking actions*, were strategies of survival (I outline more of these hybridisations below).⁶⁹ Watts interprets this the wrong way, makes light of these choices, and moves on with the building of counterculture, disallowing Japanese Americans from helping to build it (note that no Japanese Americans have a seat at the table in the ‘Houseboat Summit’). Meanwhile, Watts very clearly advocates for the Euro Americans’ version of Zen because it will *work* better in building that counterculture: ‘we can

⁶⁸ Ann Blankenship notes the many changes that were made to Japanese Buddhism during and after the incarceration: ‘attendants listened to sermons, joined choirs, and supplemented traditional gāthās with new hymns like “Onward Buddhist Soldiers” and “Buddha Loves Me this I Know”.’ Blankenship, ‘Religion and the Japanese American Incarceration’, 322. Carl Becker has shown that even in the 1990s, some Buddhist churches continued to use ‘Buddha Loves Me’ in their Sunday services. Becker, ‘Japanese Pure Land’, 149. See also Yoo, *Growing Up Nisei*; and Williams, ‘From Pearl Harbor to 9/11’.

⁶⁹ Implied in his above excerpt is the Orientalist idea that in fact, these white cultural producers are better guardians and disseminators of Zen knowledge and practices *because* they do not have those ‘horrible associations’ with it.

dig that. And it can *do* something for us that it can't do in Japan'.⁷⁰ There is a usefulness/uselessness that he is pointing out here, and indeed, it would have been quite challenging to build something like a counterculture with what appeared to be 'Christian' materials, which is how Watts and other Euro Americans perceived Japanese American Buddhist religious expression at the time.

Is it possible that Watts's distaste for Japanese American Buddhist practices and expressions arose from a valid disagreement about doctrine and religious practice? It is true that there are doctrinal differences between different sects of Zen—and between Zen and the more general Pure Land orientation of the majority of Buddhists around the world. This is important to acknowledge because these differences exist and of course are present in the U.S. as well. In Japanese Zen Buddhist circles, there is much disagreement, partly due to the differences of interpretation within clerical lineages. These differences of interpretation occur within Zen and are passed down; Zen Buddhism often takes its lineages as orthodoxy, with the passing of the lamp from one teacher to another. But what occurs with Alan Watts and others is that he casts his own version of 'authentic' Buddhism as something that travelled from 'the East' into the hands of Euro Americans—thereby erasing Asians in America from this process of Buddhist transpacific travel and adaptation. And Snyder tends to enable this erasure, as well: to give just one example, he noted in an interview that Watts was 'the bridge between D.T. Suzuki and, so to speak, the Beats'.⁷¹ This idea of Watts-as-bridge between Suzuki and the Beats erases the great influence that Asian/Americans had on many Beat figures' engagements with Buddhism and other East Asian cultural materials. This 'story' of Buddhism as something that travelled directly from 'the East' into Euro American social communities is present in 'Beat literature' more broadly, whether implicitly, as in the interviews with Beat figures I have cited, or explicitly in narrative form, as in the broad narrative arc of Jack Kerouac's novel *The Dharma Bums*.

⁷⁰ Watts et al., 'A Message from the Hippie-Elders'.

⁷¹ Meltzer, *San Francisco Beat*, 291.

‘It is very understandable’, Watts stated elsewhere, ‘that Americans of Japanese origin want to adapt themselves to American life, and to fit in with the social patterns which they find in this country. But this copying of Christian church organization is most unfortunate’.⁷² Watts’s censure is fundamentally a misreading (as we shall see, these Buddhist churches revised many of their modes of church governance and had in fact dislodged many of the hierarchies of Japanese Zen).⁷³ Over time, Watts’s censure would coalesce and even add to the model minority stereotype, and late twentieth-century scholarship in a number of fields continued to rely on the seeming divide between either convert or ethnic Buddhism, which exacerbates the Asian American erasure I have described.⁷⁴ Indeed, I want to

⁷² Watts, ‘A Program for Buddhism’, 21, quoted in Masatsugu, “‘Beyond this World’”, 447–48.

⁷³ This misunderstanding of the hierarchies of Buddhist religious communities is just one of many of Watts’s ‘misreadings’, though I want to suggest, also, that Watts’ reactions to the modified practices of Japanese American communities was perhaps to be expected: many of the modifications to and rhetorical framing of Japanese American Buddhist communities were deployed for survival in the first place. Watts’s reactions might be seen as precisely the desired effect, except for the fact that as a student of Zen (as David Iwamoto pointed out), he should be able to see how various (equally legitimate) Buddhist sects in fact arise out of the ‘diversity of provisions in Shakyamuni Buddha’s teaching’. Iwamoto, ‘The Shin Sect’ Doctrine’; quoted in Masatsugu, “‘Beyond this World’”, 449. As Yoo has shown, in 1901, when laypersons incorporated the Sacramento Buddhist Church in Sacramento, ‘they vested power in a board of trustees comprised of elected lay members, significantly reducing the power of the priest and the hierarchical form of institutional governance.’ Masatsugu, “‘Beyond this World’”, 432; Yoo, ‘Enlightened’, 288. One of their major translations of Buddhism, therefore, is to decrease the power of monks and priests, presumably because they know, better than most, how political Buddhism can in fact be. Hence their translation of Buddhism into a ‘pattern of incorporation and governance by elected lay leadership’. Masatsugu, ‘Beyond this World’, 432. Yoo, ‘Enlightened Identities’, 288; Spencer, ‘Social Structure of a Contemporary Japanese-American Church’, 282.

⁷⁴ Studies of convert Buddhism, Masatsugu shows, ‘have often been framed

suggest that scholars into the late 1990s and early 2000s continued to replicate Watts' misreading: many articles from both religious studies and literary studies begin with a discussion of 'the two Buddhisms'—'convert' and 'ethnic'. Scholars tend to qualify that the binary does not work, needs updating, and that it perhaps obscures, rather than illuminates, the nature of American Buddhisms. Yet after this brief qualification, scholars move on with their projects, seemingly more excited to describe the growth of convert Buddhism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries than to engage with 'ethnic' Buddhisms. This appears to be part of the legacy of what Watts and others at midcentury began: a confusion about what Asian/American Buddhists are doing; a shrug; and then a move to continue forward with the excitement surrounding the late-twentieth-century explosion of convert Buddhisms.⁷⁵

The 1967 setting of the 'Houseboat Summit' suggests that the conversation about Buddhism in the U.S. was one held solely between white cultural producers, when in fact, the Summit conversation began in (indeed, would not have been possible without) the cross-cultural exchanges that occurred both in physical settings and in Buddhist publications at midcentury.⁷⁶ The significance of this

around a narrative of the transmission of Buddhism from Asian texts, monks, and teachers to convert practitioners in the United States'. In addition, 'separate studies reinforce the notion that Asian American religious practice operated in an ethnic vacuum. This approach supports the portrayal of Asian Americans as a "model minority"—passive, silent, insular, and largely disengaged from Cold War politics'. Masatsugu, "Beyond this World", 427.

⁷⁵ However, Chenxing Han's *Be the Refuge* provides exciting new insight on the immense complexity of contemporary Asian American Buddhisms and Buddhist religious expression and identity in the U.S.

⁷⁶ This is a crucial emphasis in Masatsugu's work: that there was a discussion and debate *between* Japanese Americans and white cultural producers about the future of Buddhism in America, a struggle over which Buddhism(s) were the 'authentic' ones: 'proponents of each vision critiqued their counterparts in public presentations, study groups, and publications, asserting that their own version was more authentic. While couched in the language of Buddhist authenticity,

cross-cultural exchange is that Asian American persons were actively involved in this pivotal moment of transpacific translation. Not only were Asian Americans teaching Euro Americans about Buddhist practice and befriending them as fellow practitioners, but they theorised alongside the converts about what the future of Buddhism in the U.S. would look like. The fact that they were part of ‘the conversation’ in this period makes their erasure from this story—which is a story embedded in American literary history, not just in the history of Buddhism in America—all the more troubling. My point in this section has been that because of the telos applied to Buddhism by Euro Americans, they were unable to understand Japanese Americans’ own uses for Buddhism, which I will now outline.

Japanese American diasporic Buddhist hybridisations and ‘translations’, 1898–1945

Here, I want to correct Watts’s ‘misreading’ of Japanese American Buddhism in the 1950s and 1960s by reviewing not only the religious modifications made by Japanese American Buddhists, but also the specific conditions in which they made these modifications—within a society that racially targeted Japanese Americans from (at least) the 1890s through the postwar moment. Many of the modifications Japanese Americans made to Buddhist temples and practices were the result of the violence of wartime forced removal and incarceration. Yet even before forced removal, Issei (the generation of Japanese immigrants to the U.S. who were born in Japan) and Nisei (the first-generation Japanese American children of the Issei) were sharply attuned to the ways in which they might revise their religion within American contexts. In fact, many major modifications were made before 1910. The modifications beginning in the 1890s suggest that, long before the mass incarceration of Japanese American persons,

supporting arguments for each vision centered on the conflicting prerogatives of constructing Buddhism and Buddhist identities in relation to U.S. national culture.’ Masatsugu, “Beyond this World”, 425.

anti-Asian sentiment and other pressures upon Japanese Americans were very difficult to navigate and required careful modifications to religious expression and community organisation.

Following David K. Yoo, I want to emphasise that while we can certainly see the below discussion as one of *modifications*—a word that may imply a certain inertia and preservative force—we should also see these modifications as *worldmaking actions*. ‘Worldmaking’ is not a term that Yoo himself uses but is rather implicit in his writing and research on the choices that Bussei made in the midcentury. It may be visible, for example, in his discussion of ‘how Buddhism formed an important part of the world the Nisei created to counter the prejudice that pervaded their lives’—an argument that not only emphasises the ‘*making*’ part of their choices (which were not just modifications or assimilations), but also reveals that Japanese Americans, too, turned to Buddhism with specific needs and uses.⁷⁷ Yoo explains that ‘what makes the case of Bussei especially interesting...is how they used a distinctively Asian religious tradition, well outside the pale of American religiosity, to argue for their “Americanness”’.⁷⁸ The formation of Buddhist leagues for young men and women, for example, is a crucial part of religious identity that went *beyond* just religious identity; these leagues and their annual conferences were crucial to staking a life in the U.S. that was not simply circumscribed by the anti-Japanese mainstream.

Major modifications were made before the world wars. By 1910, church leaders had reorganised church governance, vesting power in lay members rather than in a priest or a hierarchical form of institutional governance.⁷⁹ A Young Men’s Buddhist Association was organised in 1898 (followed closely by the Young Women’s Buddhist Association).⁸⁰ Weekly religious discussions and sūtra study classes

⁷⁷ Yoo, ‘Enlightened’, 282.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁷⁹ Masatsugu, “‘Beyond this World’”, 432; Yoo, ‘Enlightened’, 288.

⁸⁰ The ‘History and Constitution of the North American Federation of the YWBA Leagues’, a document held in the Institute for Buddhist Studies Archives in Berkeley, CA, shows that fifty-two representatives from the northern, coast,

also developed in the late 1890s, and an official head institution for Buddhism in North America was established in 1899.⁸¹ Also by 1910 (just under twenty years after Pure Land Buddhism arrived in California), public religious ceremonies were held on Sundays, rather than being organised around a lunar calendar as they had been in Japan.⁸²

A major 'modification' to Japanese American Shin Buddhism was the formation of leagues for young women and men. This formation 'started a tradition of conferences that became significant gathering places for Nisei Buddhists'.⁸³ Such conferences were both regional and statewide, and for those residing in rural areas, the meetings at these conferences provided 'a rare opportunity to visit large cities like San Francisco or Los Angeles'.⁸⁴ Hundreds of Nisei from different parts of California participated, built friendships, found romance, and discussed not only their religious faith, but 'a host of other issues'.⁸⁵ Some fashioned 'programs and activities that provided relief from the routine of school and work'.⁸⁶ These were

central, and southern regions met during the summer of 1927 as quoted in Yoo, 'Enlightened', 292–93:

The Young Women's Buddhist Association began the following year [1927] in July at a conference at White's Point in San Pedro, California. ... Bussei women had already created informal networks as teachers, lay leaders, and volunteers; they were the backbone of temple schooling and education. Local meetings among teachers expanded in 1924, when women and priests throughout the state met at the church in Watsonville. The success of that event prompted more meetings in which leaders met to exchange ideas about educational programming and religious life. Eventually, the North American Federation of the YWBA League formalized the annual gatherings.

⁸¹ Masatsugu, "Beyond this World", 429–30; Buddhist Church of San Francisco, *Buddhist Church*, 16–17, quoted in Masatsugu, "Beyond this World", 430.

⁸² Masatsugu, "Beyond this World", 431.

⁸³ Yoo, 'Enlightened', 293.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 293.

major social networking events with over 1,000 people one's own age in a friendly, exciting atmosphere with fellow Nisei from many class backgrounds.⁸⁷ By the end of 1941, 'paid membership surpassed four thousand'.⁸⁸ I emphasise these leagues because they are one of the major continuities from the prewar to postwar years; indeed, they appear to be the arena into which Euro American producers were invited. It is striking that, just seven years after the concentration camps, Japanese American Buddhists were still so institutionally powerful that they could extend an invitation to interested Euro American 'Zennists' to come alongside them as allies in determining the future of Buddhism in the U.S.

Anti-Japanese activity had a long history and did not begin either with the Johnson-Reed 1924 exclusion act (which, in preventing immigration from Asia, 'left Buddhists especially wary of public perceptions and misconceptions') nor with the concentration camps.⁸⁹ As Tomás Almaguer has shown, the process of racialisation in California followed precedents set by the racialization of Native Americans.⁹⁰ There was therefore a long history of racial hostility and discrimination even before World War II. Many of the hostilities toward Japanese people were based in Christian ideas and communities, and though they were 'rooted in economic competition and xenophobia', were 'fortified by the portrayal by nativist exclusionists and Protestant ministers of Japanese people as a "yellow peril," a threat to an implicitly white, Christian nation'.⁹¹ Protestant missionaries shared this nativist, exclusionist view while also 'endors[ing] Japanese assimilation, contingent upon their conversion to Christianity'.⁹²

If 'the racialization of Japanese American Buddhists as "Others" depended in part on their demarcation as non-Christians outside

⁸⁶ Masatsugu, "Beyond this World", 294.

⁸⁷ Yoo, 'Enlightened', 294.

⁸⁸ Ibid..

⁸⁹ Ibid., 289.

⁹⁰ Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*.

⁹¹ Masatsugu, "Beyond this World", 430.

⁹² Ibid.

the fold of civilization', this made it all the more dangerous and difficult to be Buddhist, particularly after the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. Indeed, in the period before Japanese American incarceration, 'denominational ties to white American Protestants represented a kind of cultural capital in which Christians had access to power and patronage not afforded to Buddhists'; this cultural capital also transferred into the camps, where 'Japanese American Christians benefited by virtue of their religious affiliation'.⁹³ Anne Blankenship suggests that those who were Buddhist had a particularly hard time in the camps and were profiled and discriminated against even more egregiously precisely because Buddhism read as 'Japanese'.⁹⁴ Blankenship's work suggests Buddhists of Japanese heritage were palpably aware, or at least felt, that Japanese American Christians were less targeted and seen as less-foreign. What this further means is that the seemingly 'Christian' modifications that Japanese Americans implemented from the 1890s into the 1950s were both a protective measure *and* a way to retain their cultural identities without converting to Christianity, which many Japanese Americans opted to do.

Therefore, even before incarceration, Japanese American Buddhists were faced with dangerous, 'two-fronted opposition from nativists and assimilationists', and were aware that these pressures were greater for them *because* they were Buddhist.⁹⁵ They therefore 'blended external aspects of Buddhist spaces, symbols, and practices with Euro-Protestant Christian markers and U.S. national social customs', crafting what Masatsugu, drawing from Lon Kurashige's work, calls

⁹³ Yoo, 'Enlightened Identities,' 284–85.

⁹⁴ Blankenship shows that 'a sociological study conducted decades after the war...determined that Buddhists felt less bitter about their incarceration than Christians. The authors speculated that Christians, being more assimilated before the war, felt more betrayed by the nation.' Blankenship, 'Religion', 322. Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy* introduces the Japanese American incarceration, while Kurashige, 'Unexpected Views of the Internment' provides an insightful overview of trends in scholarship about the incarceration.

⁹⁵ Masatsugu, "Beyond this World", 430.

a ‘bicultural vision of Buddhism as an American ethnic religion’.⁹⁶ I see this ‘bicultural’ blending as the hybridised *poesis* I mentioned earlier: it is a coming-into-being of new forms of Buddhism that arose from the needs of Japanese Americans, who operationalised Buddhism alongside these broadly ‘Christian’ and American markers as a kind of camouflage.

Though I have emphasised modifications to church hierarchies and new community activities like the Young Buddhist leagues and sūtra study classes, many other external modifications were made in terminology, architectural design of temples, and religious practice. Temple exteriors, inner sanctuaries of temples, and music were modified, and by the 1920s, religious songs were performed by choirs and accompanied by organs.⁹⁷ These shifts occurred, again, in the early twentieth century. Social organisations one might expect to see in Meiji-era Japan ‘gave way to Nisei baseball and basketball leagues beginning in the 1920s; Boy Scout troops were organized in the 1930s’.⁹⁸ Many such worldmaking actions have been documented by scholars.⁹⁹

In contrast to the larger American society in which they lived, which did not offer community involvement nor, quite often, work opportunities, temple life provided ‘social opportunities’, identity, and

⁹⁶ Masatsugu, “Beyond this World”, 430. On biculturalism, see Kurashige, ‘The Problem of Biculturalism’; and Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict*.

⁹⁷ Masatsugu, “Beyond this World”, 431. Temple exteriors, Masatsugu explains, ranged in style from ‘the modest and plainly decorated buildings of smaller congregations to the elaborate, three-story brick building with a Roman façade that was built in 1914 to house the Bukkyo Seinenkai and the Hongwan-ji Shutcho-jo in San Francisco’ (431). Inner sanctuaries of temples placed the ‘*butsudan* (altar) at the front of the *bondo* (main hall) displaying an image of the Amida Buddha’ (431). Laypersons didn’t sit on mats, but on temple pews, though they continued to leave their shoes by the door (431). See Yoo, *Growing Up Nisei*, 44.

⁹⁸ Masatsugu, “Beyond this World”, 432.

⁹⁹ Hunter, *Buddhism in Hawaii*; Yoo, *Growing Up Nisei*; Becker, ‘Japanese Pure Land’; Masatsugu, “Beyond this World”.

a place to discuss the unique hardships of life in the US. As Yoo writes,

because avenues for community involvement had been severely restricted by the decision to migrate to the US, immigrants looked to temple life to fulfill social opportunities that would have been more plentiful in their homeland.¹⁰⁰

The Issei ‘found themselves living in a society in which Protestants wielded both religious and cultural power’; meanwhile, missionaries viewed ‘followers of Buddha as heathens in need of conversion’.¹⁰¹ Indeed, it was religion itself that ‘had been used against Nikkei [people of Japanese ancestry living in the U.S.] as a sign of their incompatibility with US society’, making Japanese American Buddhists in particular all the more susceptible to violence.¹⁰²

The fact that Buddhists ‘re-coded much of their terminology and outward practices to mirror Protestant Christianity’ comes, therefore, as no surprise.¹⁰³ Yet these ‘changes’ or ‘modifications’ are strategies for survival *as well as* worldmaking strategies, and provided a scaffold for later growth after the concentration camps threatened Japanese American Buddhist identity at large. Indeed, Masatsugu rightly notes:

These modifications were not merely external symbols designed to allay discrimination. They also reflected an acculturated and transformed understanding of the *sangha* and of the internal governance of Buddhist institutions.¹⁰⁴

Following Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, various branches of the U.S. government targeted Buddhist priests and lay leaders for arrest and surveillance; meanwhile, ‘Japanese Buddhists were misrepresented in national newspaper coverage and in U.S. popular culture as ultra-

¹⁰⁰ Yoo, ‘Enlightened’, 289.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Masatsugu, “Beyond this World”, 432.

nationalist terrorists and part of a hidden “fifth column” waiting to strike at the United States’.¹⁰⁵ Demonisation of Buddhism bolstered yellow peril narratives, including the idea of persons of Japanese ancestry as part of an ‘enemy race’.¹⁰⁶ Williams notes that ‘unlike Japanese-American *Christian* priests and ministers, U.S. government officials closely associated *Buddhists* with Japan and thus with potentially subversive activity’.¹⁰⁷

Buddhism was therefore seen as another outwardly Japanese marker ‘once considered inferior and insignificant’, but now ‘considered by the government as anti-American, potentially subversive and somehow threatening to American security’.¹⁰⁸ Buddhism was one other ‘peculiarity’, alongside ‘Eastern languages, religions, customs, and physical appearance’, that ‘had always separated the Japanese from the mainstream of American society’ but was now far more dangerous than just an ethnic distinction.¹⁰⁹ The public at large, the FBI and Wartime Relocation Authority (WRA), and some members of the Japanese American community held the perception that Buddhists (in contrast to Christians) were ‘more Japanese’ than ‘American’—and Buddhist priests, who were among the first people arrested by government officials in December 1941, were seen as the ‘most potentially dangerous of Japanese aliens’.¹¹⁰ To be Buddhist was to have yet another heavy marker of Japaneseness within a society that largely held the racially motivated perception that ‘Japanese Americans were likely to be disloyal and unassimilable because of their Japaneseness, especially their being Buddhist’.¹¹¹

Japanese American Buddhists responded to these mounting dangers in a number of ways. Japanese American leaders of Pure Land

¹⁰⁵ Masatusugu, “Beyond this World”, 433. See Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial*, 45.

¹⁰⁶ Masatusugu, “Beyond this World”, 433.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, ‘Camp Dharma’, 191, my emphasis.

¹⁰⁸ Kumamoto, ‘The Search for Spies’, 58.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Williams, ‘Camp Dharma’, 191–92.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

Buddhist communities formally transferred leadership and institutional property from Issei, who had been systematically excluded from citizenship, to Nisei in the hopes that the Nisei, who were U.S. citizens, might be able to hold on to Japanese Americans' property.¹¹² Some Buddhists converted to Christianity, while others destroyed Japanese markers for survival's sake, 'burn[ing] Japanese-language books and other Japanese cultural artifacts' in a literal and symbolic destruction of their Japaneseness and an attempt to demonstrate their Americanness.¹¹³ In their efforts to survive this period, there was a negotiation between what was read as 'too Japanese' and religious and ethnic identities. (Strangely, these 'too Japanese' markers were valuable to Euro American countercultural figures precisely because they *did not* appear 'American'.) Buddhist religious communities' gestures of American national identification involved 'an official English-language policy' and the creation of 'a loyalty oath for its membership'.¹¹⁴ These 'emergency measures' did not prevent the forcible removal and imprisonment of some 120,000 people of Japanese descent, including Buddhist community members.¹¹⁵

In the camps, what Williams calls the 'assimilation process' was accelerated, though I also see this as a worldmaking process and a careful scaffolding for later growth. After all, the quickest assimilative choice would be to resign from Buddhism altogether and convert to Christianity.¹¹⁶ But a number of camouflaging measures were implemented that deftly maintained Buddhist religious identity and community while protecting its members from the harm incurred by appearing even more overtly 'Japanese'. These measures included the shift (by 1944) from the title of Buddhist Mission of North America (BMNA) to Buddhist Churches of America (BCA)—a choice that changed both the internal structure and outward appearance of the organisation. Also, English was more frequently used in Buddhist

¹¹² Masatsugu, "Beyond this World", 433.

¹¹³ Williams, 'Camp Dharma', 194.

¹¹⁴ Masatsugu, "Beyond this World", 433.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Williams, 'Camp Dharma', 197.

barracks churches (indeed, leaders ‘changed the [BCA’s] official language to English’).¹¹⁷ New ‘hymnals’ were prepared that ‘gave [a] more Christian (and thus ‘American’) feel to Buddhist services’.¹¹⁸ Buddhists thus sang *gāthās* (songs or verses) as hymns, ‘including Dorothy Hunt’s “Onward Buddhist Soldiers”’.¹¹⁹ Young Buddhists ‘studied a “Junior Catechism,” showing how Buddhists used structural elements of Christianity to strengthen their own tradition’.¹²⁰ And again, Nisei were formally called upon to become the new leaders of the BCA: this was a calling that not only protected Japanese American property, but also one that made the whole organisation American, as it was now led by American citizens. These worldmaking measures, as Williams notes, ‘Americanized’ Buddhism; they preserved Japanese American Buddhist religion during the dangerous conditions of wartime America; and also, as I am arguing, they might be seen as a form of *poiesis*—a coming-into-being of a new, hybridised, American Buddhism.

Conclusion

After the war and into the 1960s, having recoded many of their religious practices and outward markers of Japaneseness, Japanese American Buddhists fashioned many rhetorical appeals to ‘racial and religious tolerance’ in an attempt to counter the demonised representations of Buddhism.¹²¹ In addition, they ‘renew[ed] efforts to present Buddhism as an American ethnic religion’.¹²² Priests, lay leaders, and students from the Japanese American Buddhist Churches of America encouraged cross-cultural dialogue between ethnic and convert Buddhists ‘as part of an attempt to develop interest and support

¹¹⁷ Blankenship, ‘Religion’, 322.

¹¹⁸ Williams, ‘Camp Dharma’, 197.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Blankenship, ‘Religion’, 322; Williams, ‘From Pearl Harbor to 9/11’.

¹²¹ Masatsugu, “Beyond this World”, 433.

¹²² Ibid.

among the general public'.¹²³ Unfortunately, despite their invitation to Euro American Zennists to help construct Buddhism's future in the U.S., 'the modified practices of Japanese American Buddhists remained marginal', misunderstood, and 'largely ignored beyond Japanese American communities' from the late 1950s onward. Due to Watts's misunderstanding of the incredible hybridity of Buddhism in Japanese American communities, it was the version of Buddhism that these midcentury 'Zennists' saw as most authentic that dominated popular American discourse for most of the twentieth century. As Masatsugu notes, 'only in the 1980s, when discussions of race relations prompted by Asian American Buddhists appeared in scholarly journals and convert Buddhist lay publications, did the presence and concerns of Asian American Buddhists surface again'.¹²⁴

This article's discussion of the useful 'translations' of the Japanese American diaspora alongside the Euro Americans' telos for Buddhism reveal a prehistory to that ostensible divide between 'two Buddhisms' in the U.S. The midcentury cross-cultural exchanges between these so-called 'two Buddhisms' adds complexity to the Zennists' narrative of Buddhism's transmission into American society. This narrative is one that many Beat cultural producers, some mindfulness purveyors, and, at times, popular American magazines like *Tricycle* often re-tell; e.g., that Euro American men travel to Asia and return with the 'original' wisdom of the East to pass it on to others. The cultural 'translations' and sometime appropriations of the Euro Americans—whether in poetry or in social communities—depend on such a fiction; and, moreover, depend on the telos they ascribed to Buddhist cultural materials. This article suggests that in classifying these communities' operationalisations of Buddhism as *poesis*—a coming-into-being of new Buddhisms in poetry and religious expression—we might expand our understanding of this pivotal moment of Buddhist worldmaking beyond the work of Euro American cultural producers.

¹²³ Masatsugu, "Beyond this World", 442.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 451.

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