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Unsettling the Harmony Stereotype in Buddhist American Poetry

David Arnold

As Western ecocriticism has diversified over the last two decades, taking material, postcolonial and affective turns, amongst others, spirituality has been relatively neglected as a source or context for progressive representations of nature.¹ For example, there is no place for spirituality in the “major areas and crucial themes” identified in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (Westling 2). First published in 2004, Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism* remains one of the most influential introductions to the field. Garrard’s caution that much of Gary Snyder’s poetry “is marred by earnest ecopieties and hectoring propaganda” illustrates well the skepticism with which spirituality can be viewed by ecocritics, particularly those keen to establish the credentials of this expansive field in Humanities disciplines where critical theory has long presided (82).² In the case of ecocritical approaches to American literature, such skepticism is linked to the perceived collusion between a lexicon of spiritual aspiration and goals that are altogether more worldly. In this context, the significance of Buddhism for American environmental writing is often framed negatively – and briefly – in terms of its complicity with what Timothy Clark calls “New world romanticism,” a tradition which is itself implicated in the exploitation and destruction of many different kinds of nature (Clark 25ff).

One of the key issues in this perceived complicity is the mutual constitution of the exceptional American individual and the iconic American landscape. The *locus classicus* for this encounter is, of course, the wilderness. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, Clark describes this engagement in terms of “the affirmation of wild nature as a scene of instruction or of the recovery or creation of a supposedly deeper, truer or more authentic identity, whether understood in spiritual, political or often nationalist terms” (25).

Clark's interrogation of this American scene illustrates why so many contemporary ecocritics are suspicious of it. Not only has it served the interests of a generally waspish and masculine literary nationalism founded on the Western myth of the Frontier, but its emphasis on the "regenerative" powers of "untamed nature" also helped to clear the way ideologically for "cultural genocide" and "animal holocaust" (26).

Even more is at stake, according to Clark and others, since the roots of American environmentalism also lie in "this broadly romantic tradition" (Clark 25). In her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, Louise Westling warns readers to be aware that romanticism's engagement with the natural world is "double-edged;" Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Nature" is indisputably "foundational" to American traditions of environmental writing but the renewed union it offers between man, nature and spirit comes at the cost of patriarchal dominion over feminized nature (4). For ecocritics wary of the social and political privileges that helped to shape romanticism, any common ground it appears to share with Eastern spiritual traditions should be viewed carefully and with some suspicion.

On the face of it, "New world romanticism," American environmentalism, and Buddhism come together in their pursuit of harmony with nature. Clark cites Jane Bennett's view that the strongest tie between American environmentalism and a broad romanticism exists as "the attempt to regain, restore, or recover our original relationship with nature understood as a 'harmony' of interests and needs" (30). Compare this claim with one made by scholar of religion, Malcolm David Eckel, at the start of his essay "Is There a Buddhist Philosophy of Nature?," that "[o]ne of the most common and enduring stereotypes in environmental literature is the idea that Eastern religions promote a sense of harmony between human beings and nature" (Eckel 327). Of particular concern to me in this essay is the hold this harmony stereotype has over critiques of American poets who have engaged with nature in Buddhist contexts. To some extent, this precedence is justified, reflecting as it does some of the salient

discursive formations through which Buddhist philosophy was received and transformed in North America. Nonetheless, my primary thesis is that the harmony stereotype does not exhaustively or exclusively account for the range of ways in which “nature” and Buddhism interact in the work of American poets, even in topographical and textual locations where we might expect its influence to be most forceful.³

The harmony stereotype has been challenged in the fields of Religious Studies and Environmental Ethics, particularly in relation to the key Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination. The implications of this scholarship, by Eckel, David E. Cooper, and Simon P. James, have, however, yet to filter through fully to ecocritics, who tend to assume its orthodoxy, for better or (usually) worse. I will begin by briefly reviewing and critiquing two very different ecocritical scenarios in which the harmony stereotype features. In the first, Ursula K. Heise’s critique of the “ethic of proximity,” Buddhist spirituality, amongst others, is represented intermittently and somewhat cursorily as a resource for writers whose relationship to place ought to be more critically informed and politically aware than it is (33). In the second, David Hinton’s introduction to *The Wilds of Poetry: Adventures in Mind and Landscape*, communion with nature is viewed as an admirable priority in a philosophical and spiritual endeavor that unites “innovative poetry in twentieth-century America” with the romantic science of Alexander von Humboldt and the Taoist and Buddhist traditions of classical China and Japan (13).⁴ Following this review, I will offer an account for the precedence of the harmony stereotype, in relation to the development of what might be described as Romantic Buddhism, rehearsing the challenges made to the harmony stereotype in relation to the doctrine of dependent origination, before exploring some of their implications for actual Buddhist American poems.

To illustrate the limitations of the harmony stereotype, and to make a case for broadening the discussion of the interaction between Buddhism and American poetry, I will

discuss the work of Philip Whalen (1923–2002). As a poet, Whalen is associated with both the Beat movement and the San Francisco Renaissance, but he also lived as a Zen monk and teacher between 1972 and 1984, receiving dharma transmission in 1987.⁵ Of all the poets who might qualify as Buddhist, I have chosen Whalen for two reasons. Firstly, his life as a Zen monk and teacher, along with the fact that he acceded – admittedly, late in life and somewhat grudgingly – to the publication of a selection of his “Buddhist Poems,” means that it would be hard to deny that Whalen lived as both a poet and a Buddhist.⁶ Secondly, Whalen was about as *close* to and as *far* from the harmony stereotype as it was possible to be. On the one hand, not only was he the lifelong friend and correspondent of Gary Snyder, whose work has repeatedly been the touchstone for both negative and positive appraisals of the harmony stereotype, but he also spent a considerable amount of time training and teaching in the wilderness location of Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. On the other hand, the “tutelary role of the wilderness,” as Leo Mellor describes it, holds no special privilege in Whalen’s work (Mellor 105); to the Zen student training in openness to whatever is, all environments have something to teach. As Whalen writes in the preface to *Enough Said: Poems 1974–1979* (1980), “[i]deal conditions prevail in the city and in the country” (Rothenberg 845).⁷ Furthermore, the environments with which Whalen’s poetry engages, and which he might also be said to create, are as much temporal as they are spatial. Whalen was a very learned man, whose extensive reading and excellent recall of sources gave his writing access to broad, nuanced, and often recondite historical contexts. As Leslie Scalapino’s reading of Whalen’s work demonstrates, Whalen’s idiosyncratic form of “transient, relative history” disrupts and deflects the promise of wilderness encounters to restore the individual’s original relationship with nature (Rothenberg xxxv).

The harmony stereotype features intermittently but powerfully in one of the most influential ecocritical works of recent years: Ursula Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*:

The Environmental Imagination of the Global (2008). In preparing her case for eco-cosmopolitanism, Heise notes the special importance of the local for American environmentalist thinking, in which it has so often provided “the ground for individual and communal identity,” as well as “the site of connections to nature that modern society is perceived to have undone” (9). In an argument with which many readers will be familiar, Heise proposes that such “investment in the local” is insufficient to address “the increasing connectedness of societies around the globe” (10). In her view, ecologically responsible stances toward globalization require a new kind of expanded spatial identification, or “eco-cosmopolitanism,” which will in turn enable “the emergence of new forms of culture that are no longer anchored in place, in a process that many theorists have referred to as ‘deterritorialization’” (10).

The “rhetoric of place” is so embedded in American environmentalist thought that it has taken many forms, according to Heise, generating “[p]lace-oriented discourses” based on key concepts such as “dwelling,” “(re)inhabitation,” “land ethic,” “bioregionalism,” and “land erotic” (29). Her critique is further justified by the claim that the ethic of proximity also shaped the early phases of ecocriticism in the United States of America, in the mid-1990s, leading to “innumerable studies of place in the works of a wide variety of authors from Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Willa Cather to Mary Austin, Edward Abbey, Gary Snyder, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, and many others” (42). Heise is particularly sensitive to the ways in which the various “localisms” produced by the rhetoric of place are exclusive rather than inclusive:

White male environmentalist writers between the 1950s and the 1970s often put the emphasis on the (usually male) individual’s encounter with and physical immersion in the landscape, typically envisioned as wild rather than rural or

urban. In its more literary versions, this vision leads to individuals' epiphanic fusions with their natural surroundings (29).

A number of important privileges combine to limit the accessibility of this version of localism not only to a certain kind of person but also to a specific kind of place: the wilderness. To those aspiring to the ideal of eco-cosmopolitanism, this retreat to a version of place that is so removed from modernity, so insulated from cultural differences, appears as one of the most rearguard localisms still in play.

The ethic of proximity may be outmoded in Heise's view, but it remains current in accounts of American environmental literature. For example, David Hinton's *The Wilds of Poetry: Adventures in Mind and Landscape* coheres around the belief that direct engagement with the wild forms of external nature provides the ground for a tradition of twentieth-century American poetry that is both "innovative" and "ecopoetic" (Hinton 2, 13). Hinton situates the beginning of this tradition in Thoreau's account of his complete disorientation at the end of his expedition to Mount Katahdin in 1846, which unseated his usual relations with the world around him, bringing him into "contact" with "the inexplicable thusness of things, this immediate reality, unknowable and unsayable, reality that is pure question, pure mystery" (Hinton 1).⁸ The poetic lineage Hinton has in mind combines European and American developments in Romantic and Deist thought, with the ancient Chinese traditions of Taoism and Ch'an Buddhism.⁹ In their respective historical and cultural contexts, the two strands of this lineage both enabled a massive shift in culture, described as "the transformation from a spiritualist to an empiricist worldview, which entailed a rediscovery of consciousness in its original nature as woven into the tissue of existence" (Hinton 6).

These strands are not just parallel but historically intertwined, with the earlier Asian tradition serving as resource for the later American one. In Asia, the recovery of primal consciousness was enabled by the fact that the Shang and Chou dynasties (1766 B.C.E.–223

B.C.E.) did not completely occlude the lifeways of earlier “proto-Chinese” peoples, such that “high Chinese civilization, for all its complexity and sophistication, never forgot its origins in the primitive” (Hinton 7). In the West, however, the primitive was completely denigrated, as Greek and Judeo-Christian philosophy separated off the divine realms of spirit from the mundane world of matter. As a consequence, Hinton suggests, the transformation from a spiritualist worldview to an empiricist one was that much harder, requiring the heroic efforts of Alexander von Humboldt to unleash the human from its transcendental status as soul, so that it, too, could draw “*breath*” from nature, becoming animated not by “divine agency” but by “a single unifying life-force inherent to the material Cosmos” (4). In the context of this complex lineage, Thoreau’s sudden and disorienting experience of direct “contact” with “thusness” is both personal and emblematic of the failure of Western culture to remember its origins in the primitive. Thoreau, we are told, “didn’t have the tools to understand what happened to him, what he was seeing, so it was all question and wonder” (Hinton 11). The ancient Chinese did, however, and it falls to “the modern American avant-garde” to recover and break open the toolbox:

Because they did not inherit a deep-ecological system of thought, innovative American poets needed to borrow and conjure new ideas as they reinvented poetic language and thought outside of cultural / poetic norms. Their richest borrowing came from ancient China, and it led to exciting new ways of making poetry. (Hinton 14)

The poetic tradition of ancient China provides, then, the template for twentieth-century American ecopoets keen to complete the transition in the West, from “otherworldly monotheism to secular spirituality” (Hinton 11).

As presented in Hinton’s anthology, the recuperative energies of American ecopoetry emerge in the “*Procreant Wilds*” of Walt Whitman and are subsequently propelled through a

range of variously qualified wilds, expressed in the work of fourteen modernist and late modernist poets (Hinton 15). These poets, gifted with innovation and charged with the mission to rediscover the “experience of existential *contact*,” were all men, providing a good example of the gender bias identified by Heise in the ethic of proximity (Hinton 1; italics in original). The tradition outlined in this anthology is also questionable from another perspective, that of cultural appropriation. Hinton’s understanding and respect for the cultural traditions he represents is everywhere evident in the nuance and rigor of his writing but, nonetheless, the redemptive character of the relationship between modern America and ancient China might, in the eyes of some critics, resemble American Orientalism. In *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics*, Josephine Nock-Hee Park traces a line in modern American poetry that runs parallel to Hinton’s, including the same key players. For Park, however, this tradition is defined not in terms of a project to complete the shift from otherworldly monotheism to secular spirituality but as a form of cultural politics: “[t]he Whitman-Fenollosa-Pound-Snyder genealogy I trace is marked by a repeated desire to reinvigorate an epic sense of America through contact with the Orient.” The result of this desire is that the kinds of “transpacific alliances” promoted by these poets are “plagued by fantasy” (Park 16).

A different kind of “contact,” then, is at stake in this model of literary relations between East and West. Indeed, the ways in which Park and Hinton construe contact are starkly at odds. Both critics foreground the material realm; whereas Hinton celebrates America’s eco-poetic innovators for restoring not only contact with the external forms of nature but also the place of primal consciousness within those forms, Park takes the same poets to task, precisely for *obscuring* material relations:

transpacific alliances are subject to constant aesthetic mystification; the hard facts of East-West relations seem to invite transcendent ideals, and the major

poetic instigators of American Orientalism construct phantom bridges over the material connections that bind East Asia to the United States. (16)

From this perspective, *The Wilds of Poetry* looks like an extension of this “phantom bridge” over-spanning “the hard facts of East-West relations” with the ideal of a shared spiritual mission. Whereas Park engages with “the Whitman-Fenollosa-Pound-Snyder genealogy” in order to demystify the nationalist imaginary of American Orientalism, Hinton’s introduction to “the wilds of poetry” runs the risk of extending this imaginary into a new century, closing as it does with a turn towards “mystification” rather than away from it.

I will now sketch out a few key trends in the translation of Buddhism in America, with particular attention to the forms and traditions of Zen that so influenced Snyder and other counter-cultural poets at mid-century. In their introduction to *Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature into the Twenty-first Century*, John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff borrow the term “indigenization” from anthropology, to describe the “...transformations that occur within an imported cultural system, changes that enable it to better fit local customs” (3). One such transformation was the shift towards the prevalent individualism of this “modern,” materialistic nation. Active in this transformation were two men whose works served as introductions to Buddhism for both Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen. The first of these, the Japanese, D.T. Suzuki, has been described as “the most influential Buddhist moderniser,” indicating the degree to which the “indigenization” of Buddhism in the United States was also bound up with a cultural politics that circulated around the Pacific Rim (Normand and Winch 4). A lay student of Soto Zen teacher, Shaku Soyen, Suzuki mediated between Buddhism and its new American context in a number of ways and over an extended period of time.¹⁰ Undoubtedly, part of his success in the “Zen boom” of the 1950s were the different ways in which he addressed the American public, first as a translator of Buddhist texts, then as a lecturer on Buddhism at Columbia University, as a minor celebrity

in *Vogue* and *Time* magazine, and as the author of a range of texts presenting Zen to American readers, including Snyder and Whalen.¹¹

In “Radical Occidentalism: The Zen Anarchism of Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen,” James Patrick Brown suggests that the particular appeal of Suzuki’s version of Zen to these two young men, who were also mixing in the anarchist milieu around the older poet Kenneth Rexroth, lay in its aspect as “an anti-Western critique of rationalism and authoritarianism that Snyder and Whalen merged with their radical politics” (90). As an alternative to the delusory constraints of rationality and authoritarianism, Suzuki offered an indigenized version of Zen that emphasised “personal liberation and individual effort” (Brown 91). To be free, the individual must experience a radical transformation of subjectivity, in which the “dualistic” self is replaced by a “true self”; this true self does not arise from mental reflection but “from the co-arising of everything that is” (Brown 92).

Also bound up with the translation of Zen into the USA was a turn to nature. This strand of indigenization, which resonated with counter-cultural enthusiasms for unfettered individualism – “radical self-reliance in the Thoreauvian vein” (Brown 95) – was developed and promoted in the work of Alan Watts. A student of D.T. Suzuki, Watts became a powerful advocate of Eastern spirituality as a redemptive force for a modern America that had lost its way.¹² He addressed explicitly the relationship between Zen and American countercultural writing, finding in “Beat Zen” both a superficial appropriation of Zen’s playfulness and a deeper engagement with it as “a very forceful social criticism and ‘digging of the universe’ such as one may find in the poetry of Ginsberg, Whalen and Snyder” (Watts 9). As an alternative to the authoritarianism of Western politics, Watts himself proposed “[g]overnance attuned to nature,” a realignment of both the personal and the social self to “nature’s ‘self governing state’ and ‘self organizing pattern’” (Brown 97). Important for my discussion is the

recognition that what results from the realignment of the individual with the conditions of his / her existence is harmony:

Harmony between the individual, society and nature was at once a reaffirmation of the individual in the sense that one's real nature was realized as identical to that of the cosmos, and a freeing of the individual from the delusion of the isolated ego. Thus freed, one could more cooperatively engage the world without the need for government. (Brown 97)

More than half a century has passed since the "Zen boom" of the 1950s, long enough for the indigenization of American Buddhism to have developed retrospective and reflective strands.¹³ One such strand is offered by Thanissaro Bhikku. An American Buddhist monk, ordained in the Forest Tradition of Thailand, Thanissaro Bhikku has reflected at length on the relationship between Buddhism and Romanticism. In "Romancing the Buddha," he identifies nineteenth-century Romanticism and modern, humanistic psychology as key (and potentially distorting) factors in the indigenization of Buddhism in the West. In a positive sense, Thanissaro argues, Romanticism presented itself as a "dharma gate" to the Buddha's teachings, on the grounds of its critique of the dehumanization fostered by modern forms of specialized labour and the "bureaucratic state." He extends his analysis into the twentieth century by suggesting that many Romantic ideas were integrated into psychology and psychotherapy and "broadcast . . . to the culture at large." It was in this milieu that Asian teachers found the dharma gate, for which many of them were prepared by their own exposure to Romanticism "through Westernized education" (Thanissaro Bhikku).

This account clearly has features in common with Brown's reading of Beat Zen. This is to be expected, perhaps, given the significance of Romantic precedents for the Beats. More specifically, the ideas that Thanissaro has in mind are part and parcel of the harmony stereotype: "integration of the personality, self-fulfillment, and interconnectedness, together

with the healing powers of wholeness, spontaneity, playfulness, and fluidity” (Thanissaro Bhikku). These ideas reveal the dharma gate in their translation of the key doctrines of dependent origination and the not-self:

Western students discovered that they could relate to the doctrine of dependent co-arising when it was interpreted as a variation on interconnectedness; and they could embrace the doctrine of not-self as a denial of the separate self in favor of a larger, more encompassing identity with the entire cosmos. (Thanissaro Bhikku)

The indigenization of the doctrine of dependent origination, as a version of interconnectedness is an important factor in the ecocritical reception of Buddhism, as it paves the way for what David E. Cooper and Simon P. James describe as “a certain unreflective and rather ‘New Age-ish’ variety of Buddhist environmentalism,” perpetrated by “ecological holists” (107, 110). Cooper and James begin their critique of this phenomenon with a clear summary of the doctrine itself:

all life is subject to the process of conditioned arising (or dependent origination). Nothing grows, dies, or changes except as a result of other events and states. Second, these events and states are not those of ‘substances’ – of ‘selves’ in the wide sense of entities deemed to have ‘own-being’.... Living beings, therefore, are not to be distinguished from the ephemeral events and states that, as it were, constitute their existence. (Cooper and James 109-10)

In construing dependent origination as interconnectedness, ecological holists overlook two related teachings: firstly, that the realm of conditioned arising is characterized by *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness); secondly, that the goal of Buddhist practice is to be *liberated* from this conditioned realm, to escape the cycle of death and rebirth to which it binds us. From this perspective, to celebrate “the ‘inseparability’ of human existence from nature,” as ecological

holists do, looks naïve at best (Cooper and James 113). As a corrective to “unreflective” Buddhist environmentalism, Cooper and James’s critique helps to pave the way for a more nuanced reading of the relationship between American poetry and Buddhist attitudes to nature, one that does not lapse into the “vaguely defined spirituality” dismissed by Heise for its “mixture of Thoreau, New Age, and Judeo-Buddhist mysticism” (Heise 40, 41). To illustrate some of the possibilities offered by such a reading, I will now turn to the poetry of Philip Whalen.

Like Gary Snyder, Whalen grew up in the Pacific Northwest, in what his biographer David Schneider describes as a “massive country” of “huge sloping hills, wide plains, big rivers, dark forests, and snow-covered mountains” (59, 58). Whalen and Snyder met in 1949, as students at Reed College. Whalen was seven years older than Snyder – studying on the GI Bill – but they developed a lifelong friendship, crucial to which were a shared openness to Eastern spirituality and an enduring commitment to experiencing the great outdoors. As Schneider writes, “the wild, the trail, the mountains, and the big country were in their bones.” (59) He suggests that many of the breaks Whalen received as both a poet and scholar of Zen came about through his friend’s initiative. These opportunities included his exposure to the writings of D.T. Suzuki and his two trips to Japan in 1965 and 1969.

A number of poems relating to Whalen’s experience at Tassajara are gathered in *Canoeing Up Cabarga Creek: Buddhist Poems 1955–1986*. Situated in a remote mountain valley, literally at the end of the road, Tassajara would appear to be a prime site for the realization of harmony between human beings and nature. Schneider samples Whalen’s “early impressions of Tassajara,” as recorded in his journal in 1972, the year that Whalen attended his first ninety-day Practice Period at the monastery. (233)¹⁴ None of the entries cited suggest that he is achieving oneness with his natural environment, but imply that he is struggling with the emotional and social demands of living in this kind of community:

Boredom, anguish, hysteria {deeply contained} & aggressiveness {"ill temper"
"crotchety" &c.} Too much like the Boy Scout camp I never went to because
my family was poor? Too many rich kids here? (Schneider 234)

The form, as well as the content, of this fragment tells us something about the ways in which Whalen engaged as a writer with his first long period of practice: the use of quotation marks and parentheses creates a distance between specific affective states and the subject recording them, an exercise that aligns with the Buddhist goal of "non-attachment."

Whalen's journal was an aid to spiritual practice, its spontaneous mode assisting in the recognition of hindrances to progress. Significantly, the focus of attention is not outwards and towards communion with external nature but inwards and towards a realisation of the mind's activity. In her introductory essay to his *Collected Poems*, "Language as Transient Act, The Poetry of Philip Whalen," Leslie Scalapino finds a similar reflexivity in his works, which she likens to a Buddhist notion of "free-fall":

The text is allowed possibly to 'fall' as in movement, as if a waterfall. The poem may risk even inertia, or may be attentive staying at a line, by virtue of its own workings. His works were thus a mind experiment of reality equivalent to the Buddhist concept of free-fall, which recognizes all supposition, perception, and phenomena as having no actual order of occurrence except that imposed by the mind as its own context. All perception as events are temporary states
(Rothenberg xxxvii-xxxix)

One such text is a poem begun during Whalen's first long Practice Period and named after the Zen Mountain Center itself. The timing of this poem is significant in two ways. Firstly, it is written as Whalen was deepening, albeit tentatively and quirkily, his commitment to the formal discipline of Zen spiritual practice. Following this first retreat at Tassajara in Fall 1972, he sought and received ordination the following year. Secondly, the poem seems to have been

composed over an extended period, reaching beyond the ninety days that Whalen spent at Tassajara. Here is the poem in full:

Tassajara

What I hear is not only water but stones

No, no, it is only compressed air flapping my eardrums

My brains gushing brown between green rocks all

That I hear is me and silence

The air transparent golden light (by Vermeer of Delft)

Sun shines on the mountain peak which pokes

The sun also ablaze &c.

Willard Gibbs, Hans Bethe, what's the answer

A lost mass (Paris gone)

Shine red in young swallow's mouth

Takagamine Road

The water suffers

Broken on rocks worn down by water

Wreck of THE DIVINE MIND on the reef called Norman's Woe

"Suddenly ignorance," the *Shastra* says.

Moon arises in my big round head

Shines out of my small blue eyes

Tony Patchell hollers "Get it! Get it!"

All my treasure buried under Goodwin Sands

20:VII-25:XI:72 (Whalen 42)

“Tassajara” falls, as in the movement of water, but not easily.¹⁵ The poem’s voice seems unpremeditated and “crotchety,” abruptly cancelling its opening disclosure in only the second line. This dramatic switch in perspective illustrates well the “conversational exchange” that Scalapino discerns in Whalen’s writing. (Rothenberg xxxv) That this opening exchange takes the form of such a firm negation adds a further nuance to the concept of free fall, admitting, despite a potentially lyric context, the absence of a *fixed* self. As a “mind experiment of reality,” the poem enacts the process of what Scalapino describes as “active mind phenomena”¹⁶ (xxxv). This enactment explains the preference for parataxis over hypotaxis, and the use of line breaks to combine and blur perceptions which might, logically, be expected to remain discrete. For example, in the third and fourth lines, hypotaxis would seem to require some kind of punctuation between “rocks” and “all”; the lack thereof articulates the “free-fall” of the mind as it shapes and shifts between phenomena. In this instance, the phenomena arise both externally and internally, including a self-reflexive commentary on the experience as it is taking place. Paradoxically, the view of this commentary – “all that I hear is me and silence” – has already been construed in the poetic image upon which it reflects: only imaginatively does the speaker witness his “brains gushing.”

Who is to say, however, that the interpenetration of external and internal landscape in the poem does not express a quirky version of the interconnectedness that characterizes the harmony stereotype itself, and that “the mind as its own context” is not a phenomenologically inclined reformulation of Romantic Buddhism’s “deeper self”? Whalen’s poetry and motivations have certainly been read in terms that appear to echo Romantic Buddhism. Surveying the different phases of his engagement with Buddhism, Jane Falk concludes that

despite shifts in his poetry from early to late, his basic concerns remain constant over time. These can be understood as an interest in using Buddhist, especially

Zen, philosophy, psychology, and aesthetics, as the basis for his poetics and his poems and a way to access the “Real self.” (117)

To support this conclusion, Falk cites from a conversation with Whalen included by Scalapino in “How Phenomena Appear to Unfold.”¹⁷ The passage cited is germane as it focuses on the relationship in his poems between the “inside” and the “outside,” with Whalen noting a connection to “Buddhist psychology,” according to which “...you eventually find out the outside is really inside ... You can’t say there’s something out there. It’s all inside” (Scalapino 109) While it is clear how such a finding challenges Cartesian construction of the self, it is not so obvious how it grants access to the “Real self.” Certainly, in Scalapino’s essay, the focus is much more on writing than identity formation, and Whalen’s reference to Buddhist psychology is part of his response to a question about Gertrude Stein’s essay “Narration,” which he himself had introduced to discuss the nature of “inside” and “outside.”¹⁸ Indeed, at the end of the passage from which Falk cites, Whalen questions whether “...I really got into that so much in any of my work” (Scalapino 109).

Furthermore, the terms in which Whalen briefly sketches this aspect of Buddhist psychology are drawn from the doctrine of dependent origination. In his introduction to this core teaching of the Buddha, Bhikku Bodhi makes clear that this doctrine not only explains how things come to be the way they are but thereby also points the way to *liberation*:

The ultimate purpose of the teaching on dependent origination is to reveal the conditions that sustain the round of rebirths and thereby to show what must be done to gain release from the round. To win deliverance is a matter of unraveling the causal pattern that underlies our bondage, and this process begins with understanding the causal pattern itself. It is dependent origination that defines this causal pattern. (Bhikkhu Bodhi 312) ¹⁹

The doctrine is usually presented as a sequence, or chain, of twelve factors, each one of which causes the next to arise or, if removed, leads to its cessation. Most relevant to the discussion of “inside” and “outside” are the fifth and sixth factors: the six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*) and contact (*phassa*). The sense bases, which include “the five physical sense faculties and the mind as organ of cognition,” enable contact to occur between consciousness and its objects (Bhikkhu Bodhi 313). In this instance, and as befits his interest in sound as a form of patterning in writing, Whalen singles out hearing:

How you’re making the world you’re making things; that your sense is hooked
up to your perception, sense of hearing is connected to your ears and your ears
are connected to sounds and it’s all totally mixed up. (Scalapino 109)²⁰

Despite the fact that he appears to shrug off this kind of approach, it chimes well with the beginning of “Tassajara,” as I read it, providing also an alternative understanding of “contact” from the one offered by Hinton in his reading of America’s ecopoetic tradition. For Hinton, the “experience of existential *contact*” (1) is the privileged state in which American ecopoets can rediscover the primal consciousness modelled for them by Classical Chinese poet-philosophers; by contrast, contact has no special place in the doctrine of dependent origination but is part of the explanation of human bondage to the conditions of existence.

The factor that follows contact in the sequence of dependent origination does, however, occupy a pivotal position. The twelve factors are sometimes divided up into three lives, broadly corresponding to past, present, and future. Contact is the penultimate factor in what can be described as the “resultant phase of the present,” when human being is experiencing the consequences of past ignorance and actions (Bhikku Bodhi 314). The last factor in this phase is feeling (*vedanā*), which arises from contact with a world perceived to be distinct and separate from the human subject. What gives feeling its special place in this construction of the doctrine is that it is here that the subject may or may not begin to create the conditions for suffering *in*

the future, by either experiencing or refraining from craving, the eighth factor. Important for my reading of Whalen's work are the ways in which his writing frustrates the conditions in which emotional reactions might arise. Realizing that there is no division between inside and outside is a good way to start but broader questions of method are at stake, and ones that have implications for the authority of the harmony stereotype in Buddhist American Poetry.

The concept of "free-fall" helps to explain the ways in which "Tassajara" refrains from feeling, as it breaks with the convention of representing the speaker as a subject with a sensibility, to emphasize the kinds of activity that are taking place; as Scalapino puts it: "Whalen's poems being imitation of mind phenomena akin to one speaking to others." She makes clear in both essays that the character of mind phenomena is diverse, including "memory, fantasy, and sound of speaking in conversation" (Rothenberg xxxvii, xxxv). As befits the ontological equivalence between such phenomena, they tend to appear paratactically. For Scalapino, Whalen's practice as a writer is as much an intervention in the way we understand and create *history* as it is an exercise in the mapping of consciousness.

Put simply then, feeling is frequently renounced in Whalen's poetry by a turn to history; not narrative history, however, in which the storyline made possible by "connections" risks enabling and reinforcing delusory forms of attachment and feeling – to Nation or Creed, for example or, indeed, to Nature – but what Scalapino describes as "transient, relative history." This contingent version of history demonstrates well the ways in which phenomenology and the doctrine of dependent origination overlap: to the extent that "transient, relative history" is "itself *only* 'taking place' as being apprehended in the process of the readers' minds making relations..." the poem is conditioning, partially at least, its own and its readers' futures, rather than simply representing the scene of communion with nature (Rothenberg xxxv italics in original).

Furthermore, a turn towards temporality is a turn away from spatiality, at least the geographical kind demanded by the “ethics of proximity,” as criticized by Heise. The future reader, for one, is not necessarily going to be apprehending transient relative history in the pristine wilderness. Nor were Whalen’s Buddhist poems exclusively composed there. “Tassajara,” as mentioned above, is recorded as being composed between July and November 1972. This period is consistent with the method of composition described in “How Phenomena Appear to Unfold,” where we learn that Whalen’s writing process was heuristic. After writing directly into notebooks, he would subsequently review the material, sometimes months after it was written, before selecting fragments to be typed up on separate pieces of paper and laid on the floor (Scalapino 107). Whalen does not give criteria for the selection that informs any actual poem, except that he finds his “own pattern,” discerning in the materials “interweaving of different strands of ideas or notes, sounds that come around and about and all make a strange harmony” (109). Strange, indeed, from the perspective of the harmony stereotype, when seeing “locationally and spatially” happens, as Scalapino explains, “within a *written* work,” as “actively ordering reality” (105 italics in original).

Scalapino gives examples of this kind of “seeing” which, although not easy to distinguish from each other, may help readers to find their way around “Tassajara”:

How things appear may be seen from the person actually, that is, ‘realistically’ being inside locations commenting on the surroundings; or, thoughts or fantasies may occur springing up that will be realms or scenes taking place in themselves; or, ostensibly ‘realistic’ events may be supposedly (possibly ‘actually’) seen by the reader or speaker but seen to be ‘outside’ and really therefore called up thus seemingly created. (Scalapino 105)

The first line creates the impression of a person being inside a physical location commenting on the surroundings but the distinction between inside and outside is soon called into question

by the speaker. Surroundings are both seen and seen through in the fifth line, as “air transparent” is juxtaposed with “golden light.” This image could be viewed as the occurrence of a fantasy of epiphanic fusion with the cosmos, but the scene of potential revelation is displaced in the same line when the creation of this environment is apparently handed over to the visual artist Vermeer of Delft. As this transient, relative history further unfolds, “Tassajara” appears – to this reader at least – to deflect repeatedly the temptation to see it as a place “to regain, restore, or recover our original relationship with nature.” For, this place is soon occupied by some “ostensibly ‘realistic’ events” from the history of nuclear fission. The German-American nuclear physicist, Hans Bethe, participated in the Los Alamos nuclear tests, playing an important role in the calculation of the critical “mass” of the A bomb, as well as campaigning subsequently (along with Albert Einstein) against nuclear proliferation. With the appearance of Bethe, the poem’s compressed history draws close to the time of its own composition; Bethe helped to persuade the American administration to sign the Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty. The treaty was signed at the Moscow Summit, on May 26 1972 (two months before the poem was begun) and ratified by the US Senate on August 3.

The reference to Bethe reorders retrospectively the unsettling circularity and incompleteness of the previous two lines, in which an indefinite sun shines on a definite mountain peak, which pokes at a definite sun, which is “also ablaze” ... as well as what? Occurring here is the image of the historical reordering of reality that takes place when the blinding flare of the first atomic explosions mimic and eclipse the shining of the natural sun. This doubling provides one kind of pattern for the poem, as five further pairings might be arrayed: the precedence of the sun in the first stanza is balanced by the significance given to the moon in the second; the Dutch artist Vermeer can be twinned with the Japanese artist Eichi Kotuzuka (creator of a woodprint of Takagamine Road); Willard Gibbs and Hans Bethe were

both scientists; Norman's Woe and Goodwin Sands are both natural landscapes dangerous to humans, and Tony Patchell appears to call out his fellow Zen practitioner, the speaker.²¹

Scalapino writes about Whalen's work in a very "present" way, drawing on those aspects of grammar and syntax that enable the activity of her writing process to participate in his. She warns implicitly against the risks of interpretation, that in our desire to "Get it! Get it!" we will insert connections between mind phenomena, rendering the transient act of language fixed and final. In this sense, to "get it" is also to allow the poem to solidify "outside," as an object *of* interpretation, rather than conceiving of writing and reading together "like a motion picture camera which sends out images and also sees them" (Scalapino 113). While there are more patterns to be observed in the ordering of these different pairings (particularly in relation to resemblance and contingency), I hope this reading has shown how a poem called "Tassajara" can be both Buddhist and American, without conforming to a stereotype of spiritual progress achieved through communion with the wilderness. As both poem and physical location, Tassajara is a place where the mind might meet itself and watch itself in action. If the retreat center's wilderness surroundings have been "tutelary," the lesson seems closer to the view of nature taken by Buddhism's Forest Tradition than it does to "New Age-ish" ecological holism. As a participant in the Los Alamos nuclear tests, Bethe's appearance in the poem testifies in a most vivid way to the fact that "'Nature' encompasses the things that change and pass away" (Eckel 337).

Other poems in the *Cabarga Creek* collection are recorded as having been written at Tassajara. In general, these poems locate themselves more conventionally in relation to the physical surroundings of the mountain retreat, with much less historical "compression" than is evident in "Tassajara." Often, as in the journal entries cited earlier, there is a focus on the dynamics of the retreat community. For example, "Welcome Back to the Monastery" (1979) breaks with the conventional representation of wilderness retreat as a location for solitude and

peacefulness, by greeting the reader with “A wildly crowded noisy breakfast / Sixty people sounding like 7500 in the highschool / gymnasium” (Whalen 50). “Back to Normalcy” (1977) is an interesting poem to read alongside “Tassajara.” It, too, begins with an experience of hearing; while the site of this experience seems to be specific, the short opening stanza plays with questions of scale, subverting distinctions between “near” and “far”:

“Back to Normalcy”

My ear stretches out across limitless space and time
To meet the fly’s feet coming to walk on it
The cat opens an eye and shuts it
That much meaning, use or significance

(Whalen 46)

The second stanza stays more conventionally local, as it moves through a spare and paratactic array of particulars, several of which are specific to the aftermath of the Marble Cone wildfire which reached and affected Tassajara in 1977:

Wind chime, hawk’s cry
Pounding metal generator
Bell and board rehearsing bluejays
Dana, phoning, shouts “You mean fiberglass?”
Telephone grapeleaves shake together
Dull blond sycamore sunshine
Dana says, “All you guys bliss out

Behind the carrot and raisin salad?"

Brown dumb leaves fall on bright ferns

New and thick since the fire.

Tassajara, 8-11: XI:77

(Whalen 46)

Staying local, however, does not entail spiritual immersion in the natural world. This stanza compresses and combines cultural and natural forms, picturing a practical community benefiting from technology rather than being alienated by it, connected with the mundane world, rather than being secluded from it in the pristine wilderness. Spiritual transcendence is debunked, as “bliss” becomes vernacular and social, a source of gentle teasing rather than austere striving. Of course, this poem also combines with “Tassajara” in the elemental and unpredictable pattern of fire.²² Informed as it is by the recent history of the Zen Mountain Center, “Back to Normalcy” registers more directly an understanding of nature as the “locus and an example of the impermanence and unsatisfactoriness of death and rebirth” (Eckel 337).

Initiatives in both Buddhist Studies and Literary Studies have, in recent years, been opening up new ways of thinking about place and space in the work of Buddhist American Literature. The SUNY series in Buddhism and American Culture, for example, have created space for scholars to begin to think through the relatively unexamined relationship between writing and spiritual practice. As Marcus Boon points out in “John Giorno: Buddhism, Poetry, Transgression,” such a shift in perspective not only leads us to reconsider “what we mean by Orientalism” but also dislodges the conceptual frame through which so many critics, including ecocritics, have approached the relationship between Buddhism and American writing only in *discursive* terms (Boon 66). In my view, the phenomenological mode adopted by Scalapino in

reading Whalen's writing provides a model for exploring the kinds of activity that might be shared by spiritual and writing practices, without turning either into a fixed object of interpretation. The participatory space which unfolds in this reciprocal practice may look and sound strange to critics and celebrants of the harmony stereotype alike but it is, I think, tutelary indeed.

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¹ For examples of important theoretical turns in ecocriticism in the last decade, see Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman, *Material Ecocriticism* (2014), Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2015), and Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino, *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment* (2018).

² The relationship between ecocriticism and critical theory has been a vexed one, and remains contested. For a brief but incisive overview, see Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby, *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches* (2011), 1-2.

³ Under the heading of 'work', I am including spiritual effort and intention, as well as textual production.

⁴ David Hinton is a poet, scholar and translator of Classical Chinese poetry. This anthology is published by Shambhala, which from its foundation in 1969 has been associated with the Buddhist institution of higher education, Naropa University.

⁵ Chronology is taken from the first full biography of Whalen: *Crowded by Beauty: The Life and Zen of Poet Philip Whalen*, by David Schneider. Dharma transmission confirms the recipient's place in a specific Buddhist lineage, in this case the Soto Zen lineage founded in the thirteenth century CE by Japanese monk, Dogen, and adapted into a twentieth-century American context by Shunryu Suzuki.

⁶ The full title for this collection is *Canoeing Up Cabarga Creek: Buddhist Poems, 1955-1986*. The Introduction was written by Whalen's Zen teacher, Richard Baker, while the Foreword was written by one of his close poet friends, Allen Ginsberg. As the dates make clear, in this context, what makes a poem 'Buddhist' is defined by more than the poet's self-identification.

⁷ In *Canoeing Up Cabarga Creek* (60f), this preface is attributed to *Heavy Breathing*, one of the four previous books of poetry gathered together in *Enough Said*.

⁸ Thoreau narrates this expedition in the "Ktaadn" section of *The Maine Woods*; he failed twice to reach the peak due to poor visibility.

⁹ Hinton places the leading philosopher of Taoism, Lao Tzu, in or around the fifth or sixth centuries B.C.E. Ch'an (Zen in Japanese) Buddhism is described as taking shape around 400 C.E. (8).

¹⁰ For a brief summary of this career, see Seager 40. For a more extended account of Suzuki's significance for the indigenization of Zen in America, see Carl T. Jackson, "D.T. Suzuki, 'Suzuki Zen,' and the American Reception of Zen Buddhism," in Storhoff and Whalen-Bridge, 39-56.

¹¹ For the protean library owned by Snyder and discussed by the two poets in the early 1950s, see Schneider, 60f. This collection included a copy of Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (volumes 1 and 2).

¹² In 1949, Watts gave a series of lectures on San Francisco's public TV station, KQED, at the start of which he expressed the view that "[o]ur whole culture, our whole civilization...is nuts..." (qtd. in Normand and Winch 96). As a member of faculty at the American Academy of Asian Studies in Berkeley, he gave talks from 1950 onwards, some of which were attended by Snyder and Whalen.

¹³ In his essay on 'Suzuki Zen', Carl Jackson points out that Suzuki's teachings were first placed under scrutiny by some critics in the 1960s; R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and Ernst Benz led the way in upbraiding Suzuki, for "diluting and psychologizing Zen's teachings, encouraging a widespread misunderstanding among Westerners" (51).

¹⁴ Called *Ango* in Japanese, "[t]his period is meant to reproduce the rainy-season retreats from the Buddha's time." (Schneider 308 n.25)

¹⁵ In his Introduction to *Canoeing Up Cabarga Creek*, Zentatsu Richard Baker-rōshi spends some time considering the eponymous watercourse. Cabarga Creek lies above the Tassajara River but only runs with water during "the spring runoff." At the time when Whalen was writing this poem, the creek was nameless: "unrecognized, unnegotiable, usually dry, small" (Whalen xxii) For more details on the relationship between Whalen and Baker, see Schneider 231f.

¹⁶ "Enacts" rather than "records" because Scalapino is keen to register the active role of readers in Whalen's writing, whose minds, in 'apprehending' mind phenomena, are "making relations in reading and speaking as the writing" (Rothenberg xxxv).

¹⁷ This essay is the published version of a talk given by Scalapino at the Naropa Institute, July 1989, in a session on "New Forms." See Leslie Scalapino, *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* (1989), 103-119. Scalapino also discusses the work of Meredith Monk and Steve Benson.

¹⁸ At the beginning of the section in which she writes about Whalen's work, Scalapino makes clear her intention to blur the division between "her" work ("inside"?) and "his" ("outside"): "I intend the form of the following to be a revelation of his method—by him, as the form of what his work is doing. It is a 'talk' within a talk" (Scalapino 105).

¹⁹ Ignorance, cited in the second stanza, is the first factor in dependent origination.

²⁰ That 'it's all totally mixed up' does not contradict the doctrine of dependent origination, as the twelve factors are not experienced in a linear way. As Steve Hagan, puts it, "if you pick up any one of these links, you have the whole chain—not in a temporal sequence, but all at once" (Hagan 154).

²¹ Willard Gibbs was an American scientist whose work on thermodynamics significantly influenced the development of industrial chemistry. Norman's Woe is a notorious rocky reef on Cape Ann near Gloucester, Massachusetts (which is, of course, a place central to Olson's *Maximus* poems). Tony Patchell entered the San Francisco Zen Center in 1970, and lived and worked at Tassajara. Goodwin Sands is a ten-mile sandbank in the English Channel; like Norman's Woe, it is known for the danger it poses to marine vessels.

²² For a fascinating account of Tassajara community's physical, spiritual and historical engagements with fire, see Colleen Morton Busch, *Fire Monks: Zen Mind Meets Wildfire* (2011).