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Transpacific Transcendence: The Buddhist Poetics of Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen



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Abstract

"Transpacific Transcendence: The Buddhist Poetics of Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen" examines the influence of East Asian literature and philosophy on post-World War II American poetry. Kerouac's "Desolation Blues," Snyder's "On Vulture Peak," and Whalen's "The Slop Barrel" were all written one year after the famous Six Gallery reading in San Francisco where Allen Ginsberg shocked the literary establishment with Howl, and one year before the belated publication of Kerouac's *On the Road*, both of which changed the face of postwar American literature. These authors, along with other experimental writers on both coasts, were searching for a larger geographic and temporal connection to help them break through tightening social, artistic, and spiritual strictures of postwar America. The East-West cross-fermentation which developed after the war provided these poets with an inroad for post-Modernist textual and philosophical experimentation set against a backdrop of Cold War anxieties, urban sprawl, gray flannel suits, and ultra-conservative poetics. All three poets grappled with some of the key texts of Mahâyâna Buddhism, such as the Lankâvatâra, Heart and Vimalakîrti sûtras, The Gateless Gate, as well as incorporated Chinese shih and Japanese haiku forms. In "On Vulture Peak," Snyder creates a unique poetic sûtra form by incorporating shih and his own brand of Japanese Rinzai kôan interviews, taking on the role of Zen master to Kerouac's questioning Dharma Bum to explore issues of impermanence, interconnectedness, and emptiness. Likewise, in Whalen's "The Slop Barrel," the poet struggles with these concepts, particularly the idea that we mistake the aggregates of attachment that collectively make up our personality (the Five Skandhas) for the notion of a unique, permanent ego-self. And in "Desolation Blues," Kerouac comes face-to-face with the four perverted views (the Viparyasas) one thinks into existence as a way of establishing the reality of the mundane world. Kerouac's spiritual quest was doomed from the outset, though, because so much of his project as a writer centered on trying to totalize his life, something much of his fiction and poetry argues against: selfhood. In working towards a unique postwar transpacific ontology centered around notions of interconnectedness and (no)self, these poets radically changed the face of American literature and culture under the specter of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, influencing poets, musicians, and artists for generations to come.

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"Transpacific Transcendence: The Buddhist Poetics of Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen" examines the influence of East Asian literature and philosophy on post-World War II American poetry. In working towards a unique postwar transpacific ontology centered around notions of interconnectedness and (no)self, these poets radically changed the face of American literature and culture under the specter of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, influencing poets, musicians, and artists for generations to come. Essay, Research Paper Buddhism and the Poetry of Jack Kerouac For we all go back where we came from, God s Lit Brain, his Transcendent Eye of Wisdom And there s your bloody circle. Much of this poetry deals specifically with Buddhism. Kerouac was a devoted student of the Buddhist way and would often impress his peers with his knowledge of the Sutras and other Buddhist texts and ideas. This is particularly interesting when it is considered that these peers were other students of Buddhism such as Gary Snyder or even Philip Whalen, who is an ordained Zen monk. This article analyses Jack Kerouac's religious and literary "apostasy" from the forms of organized religion and the established norms of prose writing, in an attempt to prove that his turn to Mahayana Buddhism and "spontaneous prose" were the immediate expression of both his struggle to transcend the mundane and (re)create reality through art. He was ready to embrace everything but unwilling to give up anything, and thus he embarked on the Buddhist vehicle(s) to enlightenment, which allowed him to pursue his art and aspire to spiritual awakening. He was ready to embrace everything but unwilling to give up anything, and thus he embarked on the Buddhist. Zen Anarchism of Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen." Encountering Buddhism in Twentieth-Century.