

# BEYOND GARY SNYDER: BUDDHISM'S INFLUENCE ON U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

Although Gary Snyder's poetry and prose has been internationally celebrated as examples of Buddhism's influence on U.S. environmental literature, other writers have taken Buddhist ideas in directions somewhat different from Snyder's. This essay explores the influence of Buddhism on feminist environmental writers such as Joanna Macy, Stephanie Kaza, Barbara Gates, Jeanne DuPrau, Melody Chavis, Ruth Ozeki, bell hooks, and Alice Walker. In their ecological creative nonfiction, novels, and environmental essays, these women writers address social justice themes of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ecology in ways that go beyond Gary Snyder's deep ecological vision, offering an ecological feminist dimension to socially-engaged Buddhist literature in the United States.

KEY WORDS: Buddhism, ecological feminism, feminist ecocriticism, environmental literature.

## RESUMEN

A pesar de que la poesía y prosa de Gary Snyder han sido reconocidas internacionalmente como ejemplos de la influencia que el budismo ha tenido para la literatura medioambiental de los Estados Unidos, otros autores han retomado las ideas budistas siguiendo trayectorias algo distintas de las de Snyder. Este ensayo indaga en la influencia del budismo en escritoras feministas medioambientales, tales como Joanna Macy, Stephanie Kaza, Barbara Gates, Jeanne DuPrau, Melody Chavis, Ruth Ozeki, bell hooks, y Alice Walker. A través de sus escritos creativos ecológicos, sus novelas, reportajes y ensayos sobre medioambiente, dichas mujeres se enfrentan a una temática de búsqueda de justicia social, de clase, de género, sexual y ecológica, de una manera que trasciende la profunda visión ecológica de Gary Snyder, pero que nos ofrece una dimensión feminista ecológica de la literatura budista de corte social en los Estados Unidos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: budismo, feminismo ecologista, ecocrítica feminista, literatura medioambiental.



In the United States, the nature writing canon—like other canons—has been shaped and inflected by the characteristics of writers from the dominant class. Heterosexual, middle-class, Euro-American men from Henry David Thoreau to John Muir, Edward Abbey, and Barry Lopez have written eloquent defenses of wilderness and wild nature, and their work has formed the initial foundation of the nature writing canon. When the canon was first examined for these biases in the 1990s, prominent Euro-American women such as Mary Austin, Rachel Carson, Annie Dillard, Barbara Kingsolver, and Gretel Ehrlich were included. Further critiques reshaped the canon to include environmental writers of color—Louise Erdrich, David Mas Masumoto, Linda Hogan, Leslie Marmon Silko, William Least Heat Moon, Rudolph Anaya, Ray Gonzalez—and to a lesser degree, working class writers and writers of diverse sexualities—Janisse Ray, Jan Zita Grover. These inclusions have augmented the canon's initial, Eurocentric focus on "wilderness," renaming the field from "nature writing" to "environmental literature," and allowing for diverse constructions of environment, place, identity, and genre. But within the intersectional canon, or "sub-field," of Buddhism and U.S. environmental writing, one figure of the dominant class—Gary Snyder—has shaped and continues to hold the terrain.

Gary Snyder's eloquent poetry and prose exploring issues of wilderness and spirituality are an undeniable monument in the nature writing canon. From his first volume of poetry, *Riprap* (1959), through *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1965), *Cold Mountain Poems* (1965), *The Back Country* (1968), *Earth House Hold* (1969), and on to *Turtle Island* (1974), *The Real Work* (1980), and *Axe Handles* (1983), Snyder's work has articulated his own experiences in wilderness as a logger, fire lookout, and spiritual sojourner, a student and practitioner of Zen Buddhism. His work is linked with the Beat poets, with the environmental philosophy of Deep Ecology, and with bioregionalism. His work is also unavoidably inflected by his gender socialization, his race, culture, and sexuality—and this nexus of identity and environmental philosophy is the same one that has dominated the U.S. nature writing canon, and the initial formations of ecocriticism in the U.S. A person of true magnanimity and spiritual depth, Gary Snyder would be the first to encourage a broader exploration of environmental literature and Buddhist philosophy, and thus my aim here is to initiate one branch of that exploration by looking at the contributions of U.S. Buddhist women environmental writers.

## TWO ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

In this exploration, I invoke at least two ways of seeing the unfolding of environmental literature, two ecocritical perspectives that represent the dominant view in ecocriticism from Lawrence Buell, and a feminist theory of canon transformation developed by Peggy McIntosh. According to Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), the canon of environmental literature has been transformed through three coordinating waves of ecocriticism. While the first wave concerned itself with conventional nature writing and conservation-oriented environmentalism,

the second wave has redefined the environment in terms of the seventeen Principles of Environmental Justice and concerns itself with issues of environmental welfare and equity (Buell, 17-27). Affirming and building on Buell's model, Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic (2009) believe we are now in "a new third wave of ecocriticism, which recognizes ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries... explor[ing] all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint" (6-7).

But Buell's taxonomy of ecocriticism and environmental literature—even when augmented with Adamson and Slovic's "new third wave"—still omits the foundational influence of feminist literary criticism and ecofeminism within ecocriticism, both at the outset and throughout ecocriticism's development. To explore these omissions, Peggy McIntosh's five "Stages of Curricular Revision" (1983) offers a feminist heuristic for assessing the current status of canon transformation across the disciplines. McIntosh uses the field of History to illustrate the progression from stage 1, "womanless history," to stage 2, "woman in history" (with only the exceptional women included, often as little as three women to a hundred or more men); stage 3, "woman as problem" moves quickly to stage 4, "woman AS history," wherein special courses are devoted to the exclusive study of women as shaping a particular discipline. Women's Studies as a field has long been halted in this fourth stage, with separate courses offered on Women's Literature, Women's History, Biology of Women, Feminist Economics, and so on, thereby allowing the mainstream canon to persist without too much disruption. Stage 5 is what we're after—"history revisioned to include us all"—the authentic canon transformation that is multiple, diverse and inclusive, ongoing and dialogical. In "New Directions for Ecofeminism" (Gaard 2010), I explored the narratives of ecocritical history through these two different lenses of canon transformation, Buell and McIntosh, arguing for renewed awareness of feminist contributions and suggesting future directions in environmental literature and criticism. Here, I expand on the foundations provided by that earlier essay, examining the environmental literature produced by U.S. Buddhist women in light of these two narratives of canon transformation.

From the first stories about the Buddha's hesitance at establishing an order of nuns at the request of his aunt, Maha Pajapati, to his relenting after the persistent prodding of his chief disciple, Ananda, who reminded the Buddha that Pajapati had raised him from seven days of age (when his mother died) to adulthood, women in Buddhism have held second-class status. Typifying the wave of countercultural seekers who traveled to Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, ordained as renunciants, and returned to found the two centers of Theravadan Buddhism in the U.S.—the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts, and Spirit Rock in Marin County, California—the profile of U.S. Buddhism has been predominantly middle class, with Euro-American male teachers and Euro-American practitioners; women tend to predominate in Vipassana circles, and men in Zen communities. Directed by Japanese-Americans, the Nichiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai Society, formally introduced into the U.S. in 1960, is the only Buddhist sect where African-Americans predominate.

According to Sandy Boucher's *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism* (1993), the handful of women teachers, women-led centers



and women-only retreats has provided a haven from sexual abuse by male teachers. Sex scandals at the San Francisco Zen Center and at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, are mirrored by violations of spiritual leadership in smaller centers such as Clouds in Water Zen Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, the Rochester Zen Center in New York, and the Los Angeles Zen Center. Women in Buddhism face the legacy of a heteropatriarchal, class-based, and racially divided spiritual tradition, despite its emphasis on “no self” (Dresser; Findly; Gross; Moon); thus, the environmental literature of U.S. Buddhist women has tended to be more politically aware of social inequities as well as environmental and spiritual concerns. Of course, with this legacy of sexism there has been a strong counter-movement of women in Buddhism, from Vipassana teacher Ruth Denison, Tibetan nun Pema Chodron, and feminist philosopher Rita Gross, whose work in *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (1993) examines not just the structure of sangha (spiritual community) but also the structure of the dharma for gender inequities and eco-political relevance today. Other Buddhist practitioners in the U.S. are also seeking to join the professed commitment to democracy in the U.S. with more democratic practices in the sangha: although racial or gender equity has yet to be achieved in the leadership for any branch of U.S. Buddhism, there are many women teachers and priests in both Vipassana and Zen traditions today, and the influence of feminist perspectives is seen in the annual family retreats at Spirit Rock, the annual People of Color retreat, the annual Lesbians and Gay Men retreat.

Admittedly, there are also philosophical and material problems for feminists who are drawn to Buddhism: in addition to the elevation of men over women as spiritual seekers, and the promotion of a monastic lifestyle over the relational care of elders, infants, and family that has long been part of women’s gender role, Buddhism defines anger as one of the three poisons (kilesas) that keep the mind from fully attending to the present moment. In feminist activism, anger has often been used as a fuel for self-defense, self-empowerment, and political critique. Another tangle is the notion of “no self” which many women encountering Buddhism say they have mastered through their gender role, and laughingly recommend the practice of “no-self” as an insight practice for the male Buddhists on the path to liberation. In *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, Rita Gross addresses these and other gendered issues with care. An ecological, feminist, and engaged Buddhism will need to be attentive to the uses of compassion (metta) as fuel for social action, as well as the importance of preserving and valuing formerly oppressed and devalued self-identities in balance with an inter-identity of relationships connecting all beings.

Given this context of gender, race, sexuality, and class hierarchies, U.S. women Buddhists writing about the environment have often made visible the barriers to participation in wild nature and spiritual practice alike, barriers that were less visible to Gary Snyder.



BUDDHIST WOMEN'S DEEP ECOLOGICAL LITERATURE:  
JOANNA MACY, STEPHANIE KAZA, BARBARA GATES

A prominent figure in the field of Deep Ecology and socially-engaged Buddhism (particularly anti-nuclear activism), Joanna Macy is best known for her books linking Buddhism and environmentalism, *World as Lover, World as Self* (Parallax, 1991), *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Life, Our World* (with Molly Young Brown; New Society, 1998), and *Thinking Like a Mountain: Toward a Council of All Beings*, with Australian deep ecologist John Seed (New Society, 1988). Because Macy's work articulates the intersection of Buddhism and environmental philosophy known as deep ecology, it is useful in exploring the strengths and limitations of this intersection.

From a feminist perspective, there are several appealing aspects to Macy's work. Her emphasis on the First Noble Truth of suffering as an awareness of social and ecological crises, and anguish for the world, articulates a spiritual engagement with social and environmental justice that feminism shares. Instead of turning away from difficult feelings, Buddhism and Macy's articulation thereof emphasize turning toward pain, despair, grief, rage, guilt, greed, and other difficult feelings, and noticing what arises. As Macy explains, unreserved attention to the capacity to suffer leads to caring, and an awareness of the interconnections with all life forms. From this "interbeing" (in the words of Thich Nhat Hanh), comes the power to act. According to Macy, the relationship between enlightenment and action is reciprocal (xii), and thus the spiritual practitioner need not choose meditation at the expense of activism. While other religions view the material world as a trap, expressing contempt for the material realm and placing spirit above nature, advocating spiritual detachment, Buddhism emphasizes the present moment and awareness of bodily sensations, mental formations, and our own tendencies toward grasping, aversion, and delusion as the path to spiritual awakening. From a Buddhist perspective, this idea of the separate self is what is destroying the world. In these and other tenets, Macy's articulation of Buddhism offers a four-fold congruence with feminism's reclamation and revaluation of feelings, activism, the body, and a relational self-identity.

In other aspects, however, Macy's Buddhism (like Deep Ecology itself) has been criticized for its erasure of a different other, and its presumption of the capacity of speaking for others. Macy's despair and empowerment work includes the deep ecological practice of a Council of All Beings, wherein the participants wait for an animal or plant species to "claim" them, and then speak to the representative human as if they were speaking for that other species. Ecofeminists and other environmental philosophers have criticized the implicit arrogance in the presumption that we can speak for a different other (Plumwood), and pointed to the impossibility of adjudicating competing claims from those who variously claim to represent that other: i.e., one person may claim to speak on behalf of Deer, who willingly give their lives to hunters, while another person may also claim to speak for Deer, who fear human hunters and ask to live in peace. Deep ecology's slippery boundary between self and other has been multiply criticized by ecofeminists who note that the deep ecological self usually involves absorption of the feminized other, and an arrogance



of representing the other as well. Indeed, Macy's title, *World as Lover, World as Self*, suggests a self-identity incapable of loving a truly different other, and in fact goes against the very articulation of Buddhism's "no self" and theory of dependent co-arising that emphasizes the "jeweled net of Indra" (190) a metaphor that combines separateness with interconnection. The Euro-Western preoccupation with the "ego self" cannot be replaced with the "eco-self" through Deep Ecology, as many feminists and ecofeminists would argue.

Stephanie Kaza's volume of creative nonfiction essays, *The Attentive Heart: Conversations with Trees* (1996) addresses a gap in nature writing by bringing a Buddhist perspective on dependent origination to bear in illuminating human-tree relationships. Centered primarily on the forests of northern California, from Monterey to Marin and Humboldt, Kaza's arboreal relations extend south to the Santa Monica mountains, and north to forests near Portland and Seattle. She divides the volume into five sections, describing in the Introduction her intention to follow the organization of the Mountains and Rivers Sutra of Zen master Dogen of 13th-century Japan. Accordingly, the essays begin by bringing the reader through the stages of contact and connection, learning the histories of various individual trees, then fully into the "tangle of human-tree relationships" and the truth of suffering, the "unending waves of despair, greed, and helplessness," and the "long history of habits that distance and kill the Other" (12-13). From this abyss, the fourth set of essays emerge through a consideration of "ways to respond [to suffering] that are heartfelt," and in this section Kaza emphasizes the value of "cultivating a stable and attentive mind" (13). In the fifth and final section, Kaza strives to "act from a context of mutual causality," seeking "ways to restore spiritual as well as biological relationships with trees" (13).

Kaza's goals for the volume are multiple: her "primary motivation is the desire for genuine contact at a core level" (9), an "I-Thou" relationship with trees that involves dialogue, listening as well as speaking. Writing allows her "to listen for a call from the trees" (5), though she is careful to assert, "I do not claim to speak for any others except myself" (11). Another goal for her writing is to assist readers in shifting from a state of denial and paralyzed inaction, incurred from being overwhelmed by the problems of environmental decline, to experiencing "profound moments of awakening to global interdependence" in which they recognize that "the environment is everything. ...not just where we live...[but] the very reason we are alive" (7). Despite Kaza's activist commitments in her other scholarly work (Kaza and Kraft; *Hooked!*), her expressed goal of "awakening to global interdependence" in *The Attentive Heart* is undermined by the limitations of deep ecology.

"Acknowledgement of and participation in relationships with trees, coyotes, mountains, and rivers is central to the philosophy of deep ecology," Kaza writes in her Introduction, explaining that her book expresses "one person's experience of the truth of this philosophy" (10). Throughout her volume, Kaza narrates her sense of connection with trees, and the many benefits she receives from that relationship; she grieves for trees that are cut down, and plants seedling trees as an act of good stewardship. But her meditations on dependent origination, interbeing, impermanence, and present-moment attentiveness are devoid of political action leading to a reconfigured human-tree relationship that would respect the trees' own *telos*, their



intrinsic value, rather than their utility for humans. The “global interdependence” Kaza seeks requires attention to the ecopolitical contexts that propel diverse human communities to treat forests as resources for humans, rather than living communities in their own right.

The volume’s title essay, “The Attentive Heart” describes a meditation retreat in northern California where Kaza practiced being attentive to the sounds and sensations arising as nearby redwood trees are clearcut. There, Kaza “struggle[s] with this slow walking [meditation], torn between acting and not acting” (162). Acknowledging that “it seems like an indulgence to take the time to cultivate mindfulness when so much is being lost,” Kaza determinedly seeks “a considered way of acting not based on reaction” (162). At the end of the day, “the logging trucks still roll by with disturbing regularity,” but her “reactivity and emotional responses” have “slow[ed]”, a change Kaza celebrates (164). She writes, “It takes time to see the deeply encoded patterns of destruction and transgression against trees and other nonhuman beings. It takes time to cultivate a relational sensitivity that is compassionate and not pathological. It takes time to embrace wholeheartedly the complexity of living with trees” (164). If the chainsaws had been turned on children rather than trees, Kaza’s “attentive heart” might be more visibly in question. The attention she cultivates here leads to an activist disengagement, a contemplative disaster for the redwoods she professes to love. Her sense of self appropriates tree identity—“some part of me is tree” (67) she writes, and “I had allowed myself to become dismembered” (125)—using the tree as metaphor for her own experience rather than building a truly reciprocal relationship, one that would use mindfulness as a doorway to the bodhisattva path she describes in some of her other writings. Here, Kaza explores the questions, “what is my relationship with wood?” and “what is my relationship with trees?” in the same breath as Zen koans. Placing her “hands on the chain saw,” Kaza wonders only whether she can “stay conscious and aware of what [she] is doing”—not whether she could do something else, something truly reciprocal. Her act of reciprocity, her “request for relationship” with the tree offers gratitude in exchange for energy and warmth.

As with the eating of animals, the “willing sacrifice” of the other is projected by the human eager to utilize the other as resource; the intentions of the dismembered tree, like the “food” or hunted animal, are not made clear. More appalling and pornographic references conclude the essay, when Kaza reports she is “engaged completely in this relationship... meeting the tree with total presence. The chain saw brings us to the point of intimacy... [ and she ] become[s] part of the woodpile. The tree is in my body,” she exults, offering a perplexing heterosexualization of her dismemberment, “we have met through the passionate medium of the chain saw” (172). Instead of a feminist engagement with a respected Other, Kaza’s work fails to recognize the shortcomings of Deep Ecology: its incorporation of the Other as resource, its failure to attend to ecopolitical contexts, political inequities, and human diversity, all of which are interdependent with the forest. These social and political limitations of thought also limit the Buddhist potential of Kaza’s perspective.

Barbara Gates’ memoir, *Already Home: A Topography of Spirit and Place* (2003), offers a series of essays reflecting on the inter-identity of place and selfhood, a quest for “home” by which Gates means a capacity to be fully present to “things as



they are,” without judging experience, grasping it, or pushing it away. A longtime editor of *Inquiring Mind*, the semiannual journal of the west coast Buddhist communities, Gates is well positioned to explore lived experiences of suffering (*dukkha*) and impermanence (*anicca*) through a Buddhist lens.

After being diagnosed with breast cancer, Gates’ awareness of impermanence in her own life prompts her to pay closer attention to her environment, and to learn more about the history of place. Through her neighborhood walks and interviews of local history archivists, she discovers the toxic industries by the Bay that produce carcinogenic chemicals: “I remembered that the Bay Area has a high incidence of cancer and particularly of breast cancer,” she writes (105), placing at the center of her narrative the realization that environmental toxins have indeed affected her self-identity. Throughout her peregrinations, Gates realizes her own role in breathing transforms her environment, making her physical body a part of place:

As I’m breathing in the oxygenated air from the remaining plants and trees and the chemical fumes of industry, I am breathing in the history of a neighborhood: the forty-five hundred years of native shellmound habitation, the hundred and fifty years of the European settlement [sic], the accumulated karma of the last century of ‘progress.’ But I am not just breathing in. I am also breathing out. As I pass the history through the forge of my cells, I breathe it out changed. As I exhale carbon dioxide for the creekside horsetail and willows, I am part of the street’s future moving through the millenia. ... Through ongoing giving and receiving, I inhabit what is beginning to feel more like home. (120)

She learns the geologic history of the land, traces the flow of a local creek driven underground by paved-over garbage and manhole covers, and visits the garbage dump. Her quest for rootedness reveals to her the fundamental interdependence of all life, the commonality of suffering and the inescapability of impermanence, the indivisibility of land despite the subterfuge of “property” and fences.

In her quest to understand home and the history of place, Gates visits Ohlone shellmounds to learn about earlier, indigenous inhabitants. She searches the City Records Office, requesting death certificates from families who have inhabited the houses in her neighborhood, the Ocean View section of West Berkeley, and her house’s first inhabitants, the Offe family. From these, she learns the Finnish father, Frederick Offe, was the carpenter who built many homes on her block; his German wife, Annie, died of exhaustion; their son, William, committed suicide at age 32, after his fiancé broke their engagement. As a pilgrimage to their memory, and a parallel to her studies of the shellmounds, she visits the cemetery and learns the Offe family is buried in an unmarked, mass gravesite. She reflects that “for centuries, Buddhist monks (the Homeless Ones) have trained themselves to let go of their conventional identities, have trained their minds to be steady—through whatever pain or loss—by doing meditations in charnel grounds. This feels similar, on a path toward what is beginning to feel like a kind of homeless home” (201). The uncovering of past residents, the Ohlone and the Offes, restores the history of cultural inhabitants that bioregionalism would applaud; the pilgrimage to shellmounds (which are also burial sites) and cemetery engages Buddhist perspectives on impermanence.





But this spiritual environmentalism takes on a different meaning when viewed from the perspective of postcolonial feminist ecocriticism: embedded in Gates' reverie on the Ohlone shellmound is another unproblematic memory of "three ancient Pueblo Indian skeletons" Gates had unearthed, remarking that she had "cleaned off each bone, the vertebrae of the spine, the ribcage" (188), touching the interior of someone's sweetheart, someone's child. At no time does Gates consider digging up the Offe family's remains and dusting off their bones, or consider the possible reasons for the succession of the Offe after the Ohlone. Moreover, the Ohlone seem irrevocably past, even though Gates attends a shellmound conference led by a native archaeologist, Kent Lightfoot, who recommends "a way to sense what's below the surface of the ground without digging, removing what's found, or destroying it" (192). In her references to people, animals, and plants, Gates' spiritual standpoint overlooks the legacy of colonialism, and thus seems inadequate for providing a direction for enacting the goals of an ecological feminism. To Gates, mindfulness is "a way to look without interfering" (192), but to feminist practitioners of socially-engaged buddhism, mindfulness is more than a "look."

Though they demonstrate an awareness of social and ecological crises as an appropriate focus of Buddhist practice (Macy), noting the ecological dimensions of interbeing and dependent origination (Kaza), locating connections between environmental health and human health as part of a cultivated attentiveness to place (Gates), these texts articulate an ecological Buddhist spirituality in the absence of an economic analysis, a commitment to interspecies justice, or an awareness of gender beyond the essentialisms of cultural feminism. Collectively these limitations characterize the perspective of Deep Ecology. In the progression of Buddhist environmental literature, then, these texts do not yet articulate an awareness of environmental justice—the necessary interconnections between social justice inclusive of race, class, gender, and sexuality, as being inextricable from environmental concerns—and thus belong in Buell's first wave of environmental literature. In Peggy McIntosh's taxonomy of feminist canon transformation, these texts are second-stage examples of women writers whose work does not challenge or transform the identity and philosophy of an otherwise dominant-class canon. To find those canon-transformative texts, we must turn to women authors with more culturally diverse and non-dominant perspectives.

#### BUDDHIST WOMEN'S ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE LITERATURE: JEANNE DUPRAU, MELODY CHAVIS, RUTH OZEKI

"Sylvia and I were partners in our exploration of Zen Buddhism, as we had been in other ways for a long time," the narrator of Jeanne DuPrau's *The Earth House* (1992) explains. The couple had known each other since their teens, and were leading a comfortable life, living in "Sylvia's suburban house" with "an adequate amount of money and a satisfying number of friends and activities. We were as happy as anyone else," the narrator insists (9). But Sylvia's brush with mortality through melanoma had prompted her to ask the question, "How shall I live?" (11), and when the two women found a female Zen teacher, the answer began to emerge. The couple's



meditation practice grew along with the new Center, and when the teacher proposed buying land in the mountains as a place to practice, their community responded, and bought 320 forested acres in California's Sierra Nevada mountains. After working in community to build the kitchen and meditation hall, the teacher suggested that each person who planned to spend time there could build a hermitage, and the narrator buys 40 acres where she and Sylvia proceed to build their house.

Through the numerous decisions involved with building the house—from clearing the ground to devising the architectural plan, choosing the building materials, planning the roof and the windows—the narrator encounters multiple opportunities for Zen practice, exploring different ways of relating to the judging, self-constructing chatter of the mind, the continual push of aversion and pull of grasping. The building material they finally choose is rammed earth, the product of excavated dirt mixed with concrete, allowing them to construct a house that feels alive. They consult with Gary Snyder, whose Ring of Bone Zen Center is only an hour away, and learn “a swarm of technical information” about using photovoltaics in order to illuminate their home with the energy of the sun (116).

Nominated for an American Library Association (ALA) Stonewall Book Award (1993) and a Lambda Literary Award (1992), *The Earth House* is surprisingly understated in its lesbian content: there are no sex scenes, no overt romance. Instead, there is the intimacy of daily life, the pink placemats on which the women draw floor plans for their hermitage, or share their dismay at the “wreckage of trees ... shoved over by the bulldozer” to clear space for their building (92). But five-and-a-half years after her first cancer diagnosis, Sylvia realizes, “I’ll never live to see this house,” (123) and their plans take an unexpected turn when Sylvia finds a lump in the lymph node beneath her arm. A week later, a surgeon confirms the cancer has returned. From April through August, the women balance house-building with trips to the doctor, radiation treatments, and work. By the end of September, Sylvia’s x-rays show spots of cancer in her lungs.

After Sylvia’s death, the narrator has to work through her grief and pain into acceptance, and it takes two years before she is able to spend a night in the house they had built together. The following morning she encounters a ringtail outside the house, and conjectures that the bird came from Sylvia, then that it was Sylvia, then that it was a coincidence. But she is able to let go of these explanations to recognize that “nothing is unconnected, that in each of the ten thousand things of the world, all ten thousand are present” (172). Not surprisingly, her healing comes about by revisiting a recurrent dream she had in childhood: “I am underwater, holding my breath, coming to the point where my lungs are bursting, and then I remember something I’ve known for a thousand lifetimes and forgotten—that I can breathe underwater. ...the trick is only in remembering, and in taking that first breath, which feels like dying. I open my mouth, and the water flows in and fills all the space inside me, so that inside and outside is one substance, no difference. I am a shell that the water streams through” (180). Du Prau’s narrator likens this acceptance of water’s pervasiveness to quieting the mind: “if I stop struggling and turn my back on all the clamor, though this feels like inviting catastrophe, I realize that what I had thought was the whole world is just a small room encompassed by a vast space ... [and] the

room has no walls” (180). Healing from grief, in this narrative, involves a simultaneous acceptance of impermanence, suffering, and no-self.

*The Earth House* offers an environmental justice approach to Buddhism through its implicit acceptance and valuation of ecology, embodiment, and the inevitability of aging, sickness, and death (often called “the three messengers of the dharma”). Lesbian relationships, women’s bodies, as well as the bodies of trees, animals, and insects are held up as worthy of awareness, time and effort. Mindful and sustainable living are presented as interconnected and reinforcing: Sylvia’s efforts to heal her physical body are interdependent with her efforts to live sustainably, and to live mindfully, as part of a spiritual community. It is significant that the Zen teacher the women follow is a woman who has confronted her own inner suffering, and that the women’s status as life partners is presented as a fact and foundation for the narrative, rather than a problem to be investigated.

Along with sexual and gender justice, another aspect of environmental justice addresses justice in the inner cities, which involves building strong and sustainable urban communities as well as combatting the toxics (both cultural and material) of environmental racism and classism. Exemplifying the practice of bringing mindful awareness to activism for social and environmental justice, Melody Chavis’ *Altars in the Street* (1997) describes her life in a low-income area of Berkeley, struggling to build community and safety for children in the midst of street crime, shootings, drug wars, alcoholism, homelessness, and gang violence. Chavis writes about organizing Strong Roots, a community gardening project for high risk youth, and visiting prisoners on San Quentin’s death row. With each assault on her community, Chavis responds in ways that support her community in grieving, voicing the truth about their lives to police and politicians, and coming together to develop strategies for solving problems and strengthening community ties. Deeply concerned about racism, classism, sexism, and ageism, Chavis sees her neighborhood as an environment that is simultaneously ecological, social, and economic—and a place for spiritual practice. She writes:

According to my mail, ‘Nature’ is the wilderness, which I’m supposed to save. And I want to. But right here and now, if I go outside to pick up trash, I might have to fish a used syringe out of my hedge. That’s saving nature too. The hard task is loving the earth, all of it. (84-85)

When a man is shot and dies beneath her bedroom window, Chavis narrates actions that articulate wisdom and compassion simultaneously: she and her husband phone the police; they grieve; and then she finds the “chalk outline of the young man’s body ...on the sidewalk... [with] a large amount of blood coagulated where his head had been” (89). The next morning, her response is to bring out a roll of bright blue butcher paper and “put it outside next to the chalk outline and the bloodstain, with a jar of pens, incense, and pots of flowers” inviting her neighbors to write prayers and comments (89). She learns the young man’s name—Ian Freedman, age 27, father of an eight-year-old son—and is grateful she has made these efforts when the murdered man’s mother and sisters arrived to visit his death



site that afternoon to grieve. Later, Chavis concludes, “As a Buddhist student, I was learning that whenever I found myself thinking dualistically, as if there were only two opposite choices, I was probably wrong. I wanted to see a Middle Way” (105-6). Through her compassion practice, Chavis transforms tension with a neighborhood gang member, who has begun sexually harassing her for reporting his violence against his mother. When the mother shows Chavis the man’s new baby, Chavis goes home to gather baby clothes outgrown by her grandson, and brings them back to the mother; the next time Wilber sees Chavis, he nods. In this case, compassion transforms anger.

It doesn’t always work that way. Chavis details the murder of a young mother and crack addict, eight months pregnant, whose mutilated body was found stuffed under an abandoned house. Again, Chavis organizes her community in response, planning a Mother’s Day celebration and block party to proclaim peace in the neighborhood. With each incident of violence, Chavis renews her commitment to the neighborhood, to answering the perpetual question “Why do you live there?” with her commitment to place and to meditation practice, following her Zen teacher’s advice, “Wherever you are, be there completely” (96). As Chavis explained in an interview with Susan Moon (2000), “Buddhism calmed me down ... remind[ed] me to take a longer view, and not be so attached to results... Any struggle for justice is long; it’s going to last your whole life, or longer” (263-64).

To renew her spirit, Chavis sits at the Berkeley Zen Center, and hikes in the Sierra Nevada mountains. She writes:

One evening last summer I lay flat out in a hot spring in the broad valley on the east side of the Sierra. I imagined one of the little street gingkos growing upright from my left palm. Out of my right palm, an ancient bristlecone pine of the White Mountains. This is how the trees live on the earth, as out of one body. They are not separate. The roots of the city tree and the summit tree pass through my heart and tangle. (149)

Chavis’ commitment to practicing interbeing comes from her own embodied knowledge of connection: although perceived as a white woman, she is mixed-race, with “African-American ancestors on [her] father’s side, and Cherokee ancestors on [her] mother’s side” (Moon, 265). Her working class roots and her experiences growing up with family violence, alcoholism, leaving home at seventeen and giving birth to her daughter at twenty, all combine to give her compassion and commitment to practicing engaged Buddhism through environmental change.

A final example of Buddhist environmental justice writing, Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* (1999) and *All Over Creation* (2004) both address issues of interspecies justice and sustainability, respectively, through topics of food production. While *My Year of Meats* addresses industrialized animal food production, and the related effects on human health and fertility, animal lives, environmental contamination and world hunger, Ozeki deftly interweaves themes of redefining “family” (blended, adopted, GLBTQ, multi-racial), class, and nation into her book. Similarly, *All Over Creation* offers two levels of narrative, the foremost addressing problems of small potato farm-



ers becoming economically enslaved and driven to bankruptcy by large corporations, while underlying levels of narrative contrast the hazards of bioengineering with the idealism of organic food production, and a theme of intergenerational relations, youth and aging, figure prominently as well. Clearly ecological and feminist in content and approach, what makes these environmental justice novels Buddhist as well?

Although Ozeki was “quite new to Buddhism” in 1997, when she “was writing *Meats*,” on 25 June 2010, the intervening years of writing and exploring Buddhism culminated in Ozeki’s ordination as a Zen priest. As Ozeki (2010) describes it, “Interbeing ... is the underlying theme of *My Year of Meats*, and certainly influences *Creation* as well. (We are what we eat, etc.) But I think it was more that I discovered the dharma through writing, rather than using writing to explicate the Buddhist principles...” In *Meats*, Ozeki’s determination to link themes of animal food production with human health and environmental sustainability, gender justice with media democracy, and in *Creation*, to contrast biotechnology with race and hybridity, articulates Buddhist principles of dependent origination, as well as the suffering caused by grasping/greed, aversion, and delusion (ignorance of the way things are, which in these texts, would be the way multinational corporations, technology, and capitalist economics function to produce dis-ease for animals, small farmers, workers, consumers, and the environment). Particularly in *All Over Creation*, Ozeki (“Conversation”) identifies her main character Yumi as embodying interbeing (“You. Me.”) and addresses impermanence through the dying elder farmers, Lloyd and Momoko Fuller, parental figures whose aging and death draws on Ozeki’s decade spent caring for her elderly mother (“Art”).

These texts by Jeanne DuPrau, Melody Chavis, and Ruth Ozeki place women’s Buddhist environmental literature at Buell’s “second wave,” defining the environment in the terms of environmental justice, as a place “where we live, work, play, and pray.” Accepting Buell’s wave metaphor, Adamson & Slovic’s (2009) definition of a third wave that “transcends ethnic and national boundaries” aptly describes Ozeki’s work as well. In terms of feminist canon transformation, moreover, these authors and texts stand at stage 4, “woman AS history,” in DuPrau’s focus foregrounding women, and stage 5 transformation—“history revisioned to include us all”—for Chavis and Ozeki. Notably, all three authors reference Gary Snyder’s writings, or his Ring of Bone Zendo, as supporting their own development as Buddhists, as environmentalists, or as writers—and, their texts develop both Buddhism and environmental literature more inclusively.

## BLACK WOMEN WRITING ON DHARMA & ENVIRONMENT

As Anthony Lioi argues, “we cannot fully understand the American environmental essay without coming to grips with Alice Walker” (12), a feminist activist, writer, and spiritual teacher whose most openly-Buddhist collection of essays is *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness* (2006). Here, Walker describes her entry into Buddhism, from her college days at Sarah Lawrence reading Basho and Buson and Issa, through her discovery of meditation, and on to



her practice of Tonglen, a Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice. Walker calls *The Color Purple* her “Buddha novel without Buddhism” (99). For those interested in feminist, antiracist, and interspecies justice, Walker’s essays “Am I Blue?” and “Why Did the Balinese Chicken Cross the Road?”, both from *Living by the Word*, have been especially valuable for her articulations of the connections between the enslavement of African-Americans, the sexual uses of women’s bodies in slavery, and the human enslavement of other animal species as free labor, unpaid reproduction, and food. All forms of enslavement deny the intrinsic value of the disowned other, the anguish and alienation caused by domination, experienced differently by dominator and oppressed: in these and other essays, Walker articulates the Buddhist understanding of interbeing, and dependent origination.

In her dharma talk for the African American Buddhist Conference and Retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, titled “This Was Not an Area of Large Plantations: Suffering Too Insignificant For the Majority to See,” Walker (*We*) retells the story of George Slaughter, son of a black slave woman raped by the white farmer who “owned” her: “Ambushed by white men, including his own father, he was shot while riding his horse because the saddle horse was ‘too fine’” (88). To abuses such as these, Walker asks, “What do we do with the shock? What do we do with the anger? The rage? What do we do with the pain?” (90).

Her answer is mindfulness practice, and the clear seeing that in Buddhism is called the dharma: “Underneath what is sometimes glibly labeled racism or sexism or caste-ism, there lurk covetousness, envy and greed” (103)—the three poisons (*kilesas*) of greed, hatred, and delusion. Walker sees this basic similarity as “good news” since “all these human states can, through practice, be worked with and transformed” (103). Everyone has these qualities, but the good news for the oppressed is that “we can turn our attention away from our oppressors—unless they are directly endangering us to our faces—and work on the issue of our suffering without attaching them to it” (103). To clarify her view, Walker uses the example of being shot by an arrow, asking whether it would be more strategic to “spend your time screaming at the archer,” or trying to pull the arrow out of your body. “White racism” which Walker equates with “envy, covetousness and greed (incredible sloth and laziness in the case of enslaving others to work for you) is the arrow that has pierced our collective heart” (103). For too long, blacks have tried to get whites to notice the oppression, apologize, or make reparations. These responses to suffering are “a sure way to remain attached to your suffering rather than easing or eliminating it,” Walker argues. A better way is to free oneself from the pain, through meditation.

To exemplify her theory Walker leads the group in a silent meditation, followed by an intense *metta* (compassion) practice, following the traditional directions of offering metta to oneself, to a beneficiary, a loved friend, a neutral person, and then a difficult person. Walker begins by reciting the metta statements for George Slaughter, then George’s mother, then George’s father, then those who rode with him, and finally, the horse George was riding when he was shot.

In this essay and throughout her volume, Walker emphasizes repeatedly that only love will bring about the healing needed for ending wars, stopping environmental destruction, saving animal lives, ending rape and torture, feeding children, providing



reliable health care. Her volume ends with the story of a Code Pink feminist direct action to end the war on Iraq, an action where Walker marched with Susan Griffin, Maxine Hong Kingston, Rachel Bagby, Terry Tempest Williams, Medea Benjamin, Nina Utne, and thousands of children and women dressed in pink. The “sea of pink” symbolized women and children who loved: “loving ourselves as humans meant loving ourselves as all humans. We understood that whatever we did to stop war, we did it not for the ‘other’ but for a collective us” (251). Again, Walker’s feminist sense of self-identity addresses human and environmental relationships, acknowledges difference and connection simultaneously, and moves the practitioner closer to the “no self” of Buddhism.

Like Walker, bell hooks frequently writes about the transformative power of metta practice: “the practice of love begins with acceptance—the recognition that wherever we are is the appropriate place to practice, that the present moment is the appropriate time” (2009). For hooks, the social justice implications of Buddhist practice are clear: “Dominator thinking and practice relies for its maintenance on the constant production of a feeling of lack, of the need to grasp. Giving love offers us a way to end this suffering—loving ourselves, extending that love to everything beyond the self, we experience wholeness” (2009). First known to the feminist community through her book, *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), bell hooks is a regular contributor to *Shambhala Sun*, where, like Walker, she emphasizes the practices of lovingkindness and attention to suffering—both in the context of white racism. hooks comments, “I have been fascinated in general... [by the fact] that white folks have shown themselves willing to follow men of color from Tibet and other places—who barely speak English—but I don’t think that white people in America have shown themselves willing to follow *any* black guru” (Cooper).

hooks’ open discussions of Buddhism for Buddhist journals underlie but do not intrude directly into her creative writing. Instead, she links personal identity with place in her environmental memoir, *Belonging* (2008), where she describes the self-reliant communities of black Appalachians and their nurturing connection to the land. As hooks parallels the environmental crime of mountaintop-removal coal mining with the injustices poor people face, she retrieves the lost stories of black farmers and ponders the psychological consequences of the great migration to the industrialized, urban North, and the degradation of tobacco from a sacred plant to a deadly product. hooks reminds readers that 90% of all black people lived in the agrarian South before mass migration to northern cities in the early 1900s. She describes black farmers, past and present, as committed to local food production, to being organic, and to finding solace in nature. Reflecting on the racism that continues to find expression in the world of real estate, she writes about segregation in housing and economic racialized zoning. As Delores Williams argues “the assault upon the natural environment today is but an extension of the assault upon black women’s bodies in the nineteenth century” when “slave-owner consciousness” prevailed, and “black women (and black men) were ‘viewed as beasts, as cattle, as articles for sale’” (24-25). In *Belonging*, hooks subtly explores the Buddhist inter-being of black farmers, the Kentucky soil, and the environmental racism that has exploited both together.



## CONCLUSION: WOMEN'S BUDDHIST ENVIRONMENTAL LITERATURE & FEMINIST ECOCRITICISM

Women drawn to Buddhism today are grappling with Buddhism's patriarchal history and present functioning, as various institutions and sanghas confront cultural practices of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and ageism. Their literary narratives reflect these women writers' race, class, and sexualities, producing Buddhist environmental literature distributed across Buell's three waves of environmental literature, and all five of McIntosh's stages of canon transformation.

On the leading edge of Buddhist environmental justice writing, Buddhist women of color are using not just the high canonical genres of poetry and fiction, but also the less prestigious and more widely accessible genres of the essay, creative nonfiction, and eco-memoir, or shifting to the social media of the "downloadable" dharma talk and hip-hop. In California's Bay Area, Mushim Ikeda-Nash and Angel Kyodo Williams are two Zen meditation teachers exemplifying this shift. Ikeda-Nash is a regular contributor to both *Shambhala Sun* and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship's *Turning Wheel*, and Williams' *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living With Fearlessness and Grace* (2001) was quickly accompanied by a hip-hop CD from Spun Records, with work by well-known hip-hop artists such as Blackalicious, Will.i.am of Black-Eyed Peas, Jazzy Jeff, Jurassic 5 and King Britt. By including feminist women and women of color in the Buddhist environmental literary canon, the measure of "canonical" itself is transformed.

"When speaking of the history of Western Buddhism in general—and its presence in the United States, in particular—it is imperative that the point of origin not be located in a white, European American context," writes Hilda Gutiérrez Baldoquín; in fact, "the story of how the Dharma reached the shores of the United States is embedded in the history of immigrants of color" (17-18). Centuries before the countercultural spiritual seekers of the 1960s, "the Chinese were actually the first Buddhists to reach America," arriving as monks with Hui Shan in the 4<sup>th</sup> century c.e. or with the immigrants of the 1860s (Baldoquín 18). At the root of Buddhist environmental literature in the U.S. lies a diversity of gender, race, class, and nation. With more feminist women bringing Buddhist principles to bear in creating new environmental narratives, these diverse roots are springing forth fresh perspectives, fresh *flora*.

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