

# The Zen of Anarchy: Japanese Exceptionalism and the Anarchist Roots of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance

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In this article, I will describe Zen anarchism, a strain of American political and religious thought that developed among Beat poets of the San Francisco renaissance. Specifically, I will explore and attempt to explain the particular historical formation called Beat Zen anarchism, an aesthetic and political ideal that emerged from the Beat generation's dialogue with Japanese Buddhism. I will show how Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Alan Watts, in particular, transmuted a Japanese exceptionalist critique of American rationality and materialism explicit in the work of Japanese Zen writers, especially D. T. Suzuki, into a radical, anarchistic critique of American cold war culture. In the process of presenting Zen anarchism as an American religious phenomenon, I call into question two important narratives about American religious and political life in the twentieth century. First, I suggest ways in which the emergence of Beat Zen anarchism in the 1950s reconfigures common narratives of the American left that tend to focus on Marxist-inspired literature and dissent. Second, and more centrally, I hope to show how Beat Zen emerged not primarily from an Orientalist appropriation of "the East," as one might argue,<sup>1</sup> but rather from an Occidental, Japanese-centered criticism of American materialism that followed from the complex legacy of the World's Parliament of Religions at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition.

The San Francisco poetry renaissance includes a number of poets, such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, and Lew Welch, among others, not discussed in the scope of this essay. As Michael Davidson has suggested, the San Francisco poetry renaissance appears as much a myth—what he calls an "enabling fiction"—as a historical reality since many of the poets and writers associated with it had roots and artistic outlets outside of San Francisco. Indeed,

the two poets at the center of this essay—Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder—were “absent from the scene in many of its crucial years,” studying Zen both at home and abroad.<sup>2</sup> For Davidson, what holds the idea of a San Francisco poetry renaissance together are a mythologized sense of place—Big Sur, City Lights Bookstore, the open road, North Beach coffee shops—along with a communitarian aesthetic of direct and emotionally heightened spontaneous address, sexual freedom and libidinous experimentation, an urban, cosmopolitan outlook, a rebellious individualism with roots in nineteenth-century American literature, a broadly anarchopacifist politics, and the pivotal event of the famous Six Gallery reading in 1955. To this, I would add the broadly inter-religious sensibility and engagement with Buddhism fostered, in part, by San Francisco’s geographic location as a destination city for Pacific Rim immigration. Of the poets who participated in the San Francisco poetry renaissance, Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen pushed this general interest in Buddhism to its most literal extent, both of them studying Zen in Japan under Japanese masters, with Whalen becoming a priest at the San Francisco Zen Center under Suzuki Roshi. For this reason, their engagements with Zen Buddhism are the focus of this essay’s consideration of Zen, anarchism, and Beat poetry.

The Beat sense of the sacred was fostered, in San Francisco, in a self-consciously anarchist milieu where openness to and dialogue with both cultural and individual others were encouraged. This milieu, centered in its early years around the poet and anarchist activist Kenneth Rexroth, who founded the San Francisco Anarchist Circle in the late 1940s, drew inspiration from European and American anarchist thought and from an influx of Asian, especially Japanese, immigrants and philosophers. Orphaned in 1918, Rexroth spent his teens traveling the United States, meeting and befriending various radicals of that decade, including Emma Goldman, Ben Reitman, Alexander Berkman, and better-known progressives. His San Francisco Anarchist Circle began as a postwar project to revitalize the old, European-American anarchist tradition of holding communal, dance hall gatherings for political education and entertainment. Hosting both first-generation anarchists and a new, more mystical group of young poets and dissenters like Snyder and Whalen,<sup>3</sup> the Anarchist Circle met in a hall in the Fillmore “to refound the radical movement after its destruction by the Bolsheviks” over the course of the previous two decades of Popular Front radicalism. The circle helped to solidify the political perspectives and personal relationships of the poets of the San Francisco renaissance and also gave birth to the independent, left libertarian radio station KPFA, which would provide an outlet for

the West Coast anarchists, poets, and Buddhist convert-dissenters of the 1950s. As Rexroth recalls, through the relationships forged in the Anarchist Circle and its offshoot, the Libertarian Circle, "the ideological foundations of the San Francisco Renaissance had been laid—poetry of direct speech of I to Thou, personalism, [and] anarchism."<sup>4</sup>

On the West Coast, in Rexroth's telling, a libertarian tradition strongly influenced by the cultural memory of the Industrial Workers of the World remained operative throughout the Popular Front decades of the 1930s and 1940s into the 1950s. Due to continuous, anarchist propaganda emanating from the West Coast through two decades of the Popular Front's reign, by the mid-1950s, "It was no longer necessary to educate somebody to make an anarchist poet out of him. He had a milieu in which he could naturally become such a thing."<sup>5</sup> Much of this milieu, in fact, was of Rexroth's making. In 1931, Rexroth organized the San Francisco chapter of the communist front John Reed Club, staging radical skits and poetry readings from flatbed trucks. Ultimately, however, Rexroth broke from Communist party lines due to what Michael Denning has called his "attachment to the Wobblies"<sup>6</sup> and to his conviction that the communist Popular Front was disconnected both from the working class and from the art and tradition of poetry itself. In addition to hosting the San Francisco Anarchist Circle, where many of the poets of San Francisco found a congenial home for their brand of dissent, Rexroth was the driving force behind the pivotal Six Gallery reading, which exposed the West Coast scene to Allen Ginsberg, Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen.

Rexroth's left libertarian or anarchist<sup>7</sup> approach to cultural and interpersonal exchange—an approach that he held was passed on to the Beats though the anarchist and libertarian circles in San Francisco—derived partially from his encounter with Martin Buber's *I and Thou*. Although contemporary religionists often overlook Buber's contribution to American interreligious thought, he was among the most influential thinkers of the 1950s, directly shaping the core ideas of the celebrity theologian Paul Tillich and the civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. According to Buber's *I and Thou*, translated into English in 1937 and republished with a postscript in 1957, an individual's attitude toward the world is marked either by an objectifying orientation that Buber called I-It or a genuinely dialogical orientation called I-Thou. This latter orientation, for Buber as for Rexroth, was both personal and political. Personally, the I-Thou orientation enabled one to cut through the day-to-day world and create a space for genuine meeting between individuals. I-Thou was

objectification's opposite and required a space outside socially conditioned hatreds and stereotypes. Politically, the I-Thou orientation, for Buber, suggested the potential for a stateless society. In Buber's words, genuine I-Thou dialogue, practiced on a broad social scale, rendered government unnecessary since it enabled those living in community to "substitute society for State to the greatest degree possible, moreover a society that is 'genuine' and not a State in disguise."<sup>8</sup> In a community of genuine dialogue, which Buber admitted would be a utopia, it would be possible to live without government because individuals would mediate social relations directly, comprehending others in their whole humanness. Insofar as the San Francisco poetry movement treated poetry dialogically and communally "as communication, statement from one person to another," Rexroth held, its poetry "has become an actual social force"<sup>9</sup> shaped by the Bay Area's "intensely libertarian character."<sup>10</sup> Buber's emphasis on unmediated speech between person and person guided Rexroth's vision of the Anarchist Circle while it defied state-sanctioned habits of objectification.

"I look back on the first reading of *I and Thou* as a tremendous, shaking experience," Rexroth recalled in his *Autobiographical Novel*, an experience that provided "a foundation of both the ethical and contemplative life."<sup>11</sup> Ethically, Rexroth held, Buber's philosophy cut to the core of social life, since it presented a direct challenge to the state of humanity under government while defying the dichotomy between individual and society at the heart of liberal political theory. "Against individualism and collectivism," Rexroth wrote, "Buber advocates communism" of the kind that "can be paralleled with dozens of 'communitarian' writers" from those dismissed by Marx and Engels as "Utopian," such as Bakunin and Kropotkin, to "the Russian Socialist-Revolutionaries, [Alexander] Berkman," and others.<sup>12</sup> For Rexroth, religious mysticism, such as Buber's, and anarchist politics joined to produce a poetics of religious dissent. "In a religious age," according to Rexroth, the contemplative poetry of the Beat movement "would be called religious poetry," but "[t]oday we have to call it Anarchism" while understanding that "[a] fellow over in Africa" might just call it "reverence for life."<sup>13</sup>

This reverence for life, in Rexroth's poetry as well as in that of the San Francisco poets who adopted Zen and anarchism as they absorbed and shared Rexroth's dialogical poetics and politics, stood in stark contrast to the gross materialism of postwar society.<sup>14</sup> Rexroth's 1953 poem "Thou Shalt Not Kill"—dedicated to the recently deceased Dylan Thomas—expresses Rexroth's personal disgust with the cold war liberal consensus, a disgust he shared with the

poets who gathered around his circle. "Thou Shalt Not Kill" opens with a blunt accusation:

They are murdering the young men.  
For half a century now, every day,  
They have hunted them down and killed them.  
They are killing them now.  
At this minute, all over the world,  
They are killing the young men.

The poem, a favorite among the Beats and one that Rexroth read often, moves quickly to the accusative voice:

You,  
The hyena with polished face and bow tie,  
In the office of a billion dollar  
Corporation devoted to service;  
The vulture dripping with carrion,  
Carefully and carelessly robed in imported tweeds,  
Lecturing on the Age of Abundance;  
The jackal in double-breasted gabardine. . . .

Summoning blood-soaked imagery reminiscent of the age of anarchist direct action ("I want to pour gasoline down your chimneys./I want to blow up your galleries./I want to burn down your editorial offices"), Rexroth's poem rails against the "double-breasted" organization man, whose cold war liberalism both betrays his earlier spirit of dissent and destroys the spirit of poetry personified by Dylan Thomas, "the little drunken cherub." "You killed him!" the poem concludes as Rexroth's voice, in one reading, quavers in rage, "You killed him! In your God damned Brooks Brothers suit,/You son of a bitch."<sup>15</sup>

The most influential Buddhism in Snyder's and Whalen's early contact with Japanese Zen—that of D. T. Suzuki—offered a critique of Western rationalism that paralleled the generalized mistrust of the cold war consensus shared among the poets who began to congregate in Rexroth's anarchist circle and in North Beach coffee shops in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Those poets who adopted Zen did so in large part because the critique of Western culture it offered confirmed their anti-authoritarianism and provided an alternative to what they saw as the deadening effects of rationalism on the human spirit, evident in postwar U.S. culture's technocracy and alienation. The Zen critique of Western and American culture that reached them, meanwhile, was informed by the history and demands of the Japanese state in Japan's imperial contact with the rest of Asia and its defensive stance against Western imperialism. As Robert Sharf has

argued, “Zen was introduced to Western scholarship not through the efforts of Western orientalists, but rather through the activities of an elite circle of internationally minded Japanese intellectuals and globe-trotting Zen priests, whose missionary zeal was often second only to their vexed fascination with Western culture.”<sup>16</sup> Beat Zen, in other words, began not with a Western appropriation of an Oriental “Other” but in a historical context in which Zen missionaries, beginning in the nineteenth century, offered to the West what they called a New Buddhism (*Shin Bukkyō*) that developed from the nationalistic needs of Meiji-era Japan.

Born of the threat that Japanese nationalism posed to Zen, which Meiji nationalists considered a foreign religion, Meiji-era New Buddhists sought to naturalize Zen as both inherently Japanese and as the highest achievement of Asian and world civilization, one comparable to Western philosophical and religious achievements in many respects and superior to it in others. Americans first encountered this Occidental Zen Buddhism when D. T. Suzuki’s teacher, Soyen Shaku Roshi, presented to Westerners at the World’s Parliament of Religions at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair a vision of Zen as a universal, timeless religion. At once exemplifying an Anglo-centric American celebratory discourse and opening Americans to a progressive interreligious dialogue and interfaith conversion only imagined by early nineteenth-century writers like Emerson and Thoreau, the World’s Parliament of Religions incidentally offered to Asian representatives a platform from which to deploy what James E. Ketelaar has called “Strategic Occidentalism.” For Ketelaar, as for, more recently, Judith Snodgrass and Richard Seager, Asian representatives presenting at the Parliament deployed Occidentalism—a critical “othering” of the West and defense of Asian religion and culture—in reaction to the constraining Christo-centric plan of the Parliament, in which Christianity and faith in a Christian God stood at the top of an evolutionary hierarchy of belief. Framed within a nineteenth-century pseudo-Darwinian anthropology, “The Parliament,” Ketelaar notes, “became for non-Occidental religionists in general and the Japanese Buddhists in particular an arena within which Christianity as a global force could be, in fact needed to be, checked.”<sup>17</sup>

In order to “check” Christianity, however, Asian representatives like the Rinzai teacher Soyen Shaku used the very language of science and modernity that rationalized the World’s Fair and the Parliament while also helping Zen better to serve the modernizing Meiji state.<sup>18</sup> Seeking to defend Zen both to the West and to Japanese authorities, Soyen, like other New Buddhist clerics and philosophers

in Japan, sought to relate Zen to terms available in European and American liberalism. At the World's Parliament of Religions, for instance, Soyen adopted rationalist anticlerical critiques of religion to criticize Christianity, related Zen to concepts in European Romanticism, and sought parallels between Zen and Western empiricism (such that, for example, meditation was offered as an entirely empirical and experiential practice rather than a mystical one). He criticized Western materialism while offering Zen as its more advanced spiritual cure. Absorbing and transmuting the evolutionary scheme of the World's Fair, Soyen also explained the historical development of Buddhism by employing a neo-Darwinian narrative that served to valorize the Japanese nation as a protectorate of the most advanced evolution of Buddhist philosophy. Indeed, by the time it reconstituted its relationship to the Meiji state and to the West at the Parliament with the aid of the New Buddhists, Zen was presented to Westerners as "not a religion in an institutional sense at all" but rather an "uncompromisingly empirical, rational, and scientific mode of inquiry into the nature of things" that also affirmed "Japanese spiritual and moral authority"<sup>19</sup> in both Asia and the West.

The affirmation of this rhetorical authority at the Parliament was matched by Japanese Mahayana missionary efforts outside the Parliament proper. The first of such Buddhist missionary efforts in the United States by Buddhists included the distribution of "tens of thousands of pamphlets" on Mahayana Buddhism throughout Chicago and unofficial meetings in bars, cafés, and churches and was so successful that one Japanese writer claimed, "We have pacified the barbarian heart of the white race."<sup>20</sup> Generally pacified or not, the hearts of enough Westerners accepted the missionary message of Mahayana Parliamentarians like Soyen that the Parliament marks a decisive shift in American religion and spirituality away from the Christo-centric point of view that until then had almost exclusively informed it. Shortly after Soyen Shaku spoke at the Parliament, the Hindu representative Swami Vivekananda and the Indian Buddhist representative Dharmapala, among others, gave their talks, and Charles Strauss, a Jewish New York banker, became "the first person to be admitted to the Buddhist fold on American soil."<sup>21</sup> Another convert to Buddhism to emerge from the Parliament was Dyer Lum, a political anarchist and uncle of the anarchist Voltarine De Cleyre who held that the law of Karma implied the anarchist possibility of "the moral government of the world, without a personal governor."<sup>22</sup> Lum, who admired Paul Carus's pivotal *The Light of Asia*, would become the first Zen anarchist in the United States and "probably the first American of European descent to proclaim publicly allegiance to Buddhism."<sup>23</sup>



While providing a context for such liberal and radical interpretations of Zen in the United States as Lum's, the ideological manufacture of Zen's spiritual and moral authority by New Buddhists like Soyen, as Brian Victoria has detailed, also underwrote Japanese aggression from the Sino-Japanese war to the two world wars that followed. At the same time, it informed the language of Zen's foremost philosopher to the West, D. T. Suzuki, whose writings introduced Gary Snyder to Zen, who influenced Philip Whalen's poetic/meditative practice, and who had an immeasurable influence on the counterculture's understanding of Buddhism, especially as related by Alan Watts. Shortly after the Parliament, Soyen sent Suzuki, then his student, to work with Paul Carus on translations of the *Tao Te Ching* and *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*. In this period of intense New Buddhist Japanese exceptionalism on the part of his teacher, Suzuki began his first major work in English, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*.<sup>24</sup> According to Victoria, Suzuki's early writings on Zen continued the exceptionalist work of Soyen by bolstering the way of the warrior and sanctioning war as an act of compassion that would liberate the Japanese people and help spread the dharma. In Victoria's words, "By the end of the 1920s," with the aid of Suzuki and others, "institutional Buddhism," including Zen, "had firmly locked itself into ideological support for Japan's ongoing military efforts, wherever and whenever they might occur."<sup>25</sup>

As Kirita Kiyohide has shown, however, many of Suzuki's writings were deeply suspicious of the Japanese state's appropriation of Zen for war aims, especially during the Second World War, and of the state itself as an entity. If one strain of Suzuki's writings—that emerging from the World's Parliament and his early immersion in New Buddhism—celebrated the uniqueness of Zen and Japanese culture, another strain, at odds with the demands of the state, emphasized what Suzuki saw as the centrality in Zen of individual liberation. Whereas "Zen is concerned with the absolute individual self," the government, he wrote in 1948, "should cast such a pale shadow that one begins to wonder whether it even exists at all." Toward the end of his life, in 1952, Suzuki took this strain of thinking to its furthest extent, remarking at a symposium that "I think anarchism is best."<sup>26</sup> What Suzuki brought to the table as he lectured in the United States both early in the century and upon his return in post-war years was a sensibility about Zen informed both by New Buddhist Japanese exceptionalism and New Buddhist cosmopolitanism. The former saw Zen as an exceptional gift of the Japanese people to the world and the West as overly determined by its rationalistic materialism. The latter used Enlightenment individualistic



language to propagate Zen as a universal, missionary religion whose spiritually revolutionary aim was to liberate the individual both from the cycle of birth and death and from his or her own cultural prejudices and allegiance to any state.

In explicating Zen to Western audiences, Suzuki chose to focus attention away from the outward forms of Zen practice and to emphasize, instead, the unique, transcultural experience of Buddhist awakening in language that his American audiences could understand. In one track of his thought, Suzuki deemphasized the nationalistic aspects of Zen for the specific purpose of bringing Zen to the West, though he insisted that Westerners must practice sitting *zazen* to the point of *satori* to have a genuine Zen experience. Zen must be practiced as Zen, not, he insisted, as psychotherapy, as hallucinogenic reverie, as parapsychology, or as any number of Western “alternatives” to Zen. Paradoxically, while Zen was exceptionally Japanese, it was infinitely exportable since the direct experience of *satori* transcended culture. What was exceptional about Zen was both its innate Japanese-ness and its brilliant, transhistoric relevance. The explicit critique of Western materialism in Suzuki’s Zen and Japanese exceptionalism and its emphasis on transcultural individual liberation confirmed the individualist, left libertarian premises of Beat dissent against cold war culture while giving Beat poets a contemplative practice from which to criticize the West’s failure to present life as it really was.

Suzuki’s emphasis on the immediate, individual experience of *satori*, or awakening, derived from his association with a second wave of Japanese-centric philosophers, the Kyoto school. Founded, at first informally, by Suzuki’s long-time friend Nishida Kitarō, the Kyoto school was intently interested in Western philosophy. The Kyoto school philosophers’ interest in the West, like that of their New Buddhist predecessors and teachers, tended to valorize the spirit of Zen, and their comparisons between East and the West favored the former and criticized the latter. In a letter to Suzuki written in 1911, for instance, Nishida wrote that Westerners “are completely unaware of what is closest to them, the very ground under their own feet. They can analyze and explain all the ingredients in bread and all the elements in water but they can’t describe the taste of such bread and water.”<sup>27</sup> To this “fakeness” or “artificiality” of modern Western ways of knowing—which the Beats would also posit—Nishida attributed the Enlightenment split between ego and self implicit in the Cartesian dualism. To become completely aware of “the very ground under their feet,” Westerners could not go by the artificial way of dualistic logic and reason. Rather, they must, if they wished to break free of the

ego delusion, go by way of *zazen* and *satori*, immediately experiencing the awaking at the heart of Zen practice.

In the practice of a third wave of Zen teachers in America, the view that Westerners had more philosophical hang-ups to overcome than Japanese Buddhists led to a strict adherence to Japanese forms. This outlook was exemplified by Suzuki Roshi, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center, who increased the number of bows Americans take after *zazen* from three to nine and who insisted that the ego delusions of Americans were so entrenched that it might benefit American Buddhists to follow more precepts than their Japanese counterparts.<sup>28</sup> For his part, however, D. T. Suzuki translated Zen into terms easily assimilated to Western perspectives, emphasizing the naturalness of Zen in an American context. In his 1934 *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, reprinted in 1959 with a foreword by Carl Jung, for instance, he assured his readers that

Zen aims at preserving your vitality, your native freedom, and above all the completeness of your being. In other words, Zen wants to live from within. Not to be bound by rules, but to be creating one's own rules—this is the kind of life which Zen is trying to have us live.

The real restriction on human freedom and vitality was not formal Zen but formal logic, which “has so pervasively entered into life as to make us conclude that logic is life and without it life has no significance.” Summoning a martial metaphor, Suzuki claimed that “Zen wishes to storm this citadel” of rationalist “topsy-turveydom and to show that we live psychologically or biologically and not logically.”<sup>29</sup>

In offering Zen as a liberation from the dominance of rationality in the West, then, Suzuki affirmed some of the core values that his students and readers in the Beat generation also affirmed: vitality, freedom, biological connectedness, and psychological wholeness. Simultaneously, he underscored Zen's emotionality, as distinct from rationality, which, he argued, found its most natural expression in literature: “Zen naturally finds its readiest expression in poetry rather than philosophy because it has more affinity with feeling than with intellect.”<sup>30</sup> If Zen would “storm the citadel” of Western ways of knowing, it would do so from the heart and pen, not the rational mind. Suzuki was careful to distinguish his sense of emotionality and expressiveness from mere libertinism—in his words, “The libertines actually have no freedom of will” since “they are bound hands and feet” by craving and desire “before which they are utterly helpless.”<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, a poet looking for a spiritual and philosophical sanction

for an emotive, personally freeing, libertarian, and poetic assault on the cold war's regime of military-industrial expertise could easily find such sanction in Suzuki's work. Such a poet could also find a path to universal compassion that would, if embraced by enough dissenters, change the world.

Suzuki's vision of Zen as salvational for the West was echoed by a convert to Buddhism, Dwight Goddard, who compiled a 1932 collection of Buddhist canonical texts in *A Buddhist Bible*. In his introduction to *A Buddhist Bible*, a book that prompted Jack Kerouac's interest in Buddhism after he found it in a library in San Jose, California,<sup>32</sup> Goddard made clear that Buddhism generally offered teachings of "highest promise" to the West. "In these days when Western civilization and culture is buffeted as never before by foreboding waves of materialism and selfish aggrandizement both individual and national," Goddard wrote in his editor's preface,

Buddhism seems to hold out teachings of highest promise. . . . It may well be the salvation of Western civilization. Its rationality, its discipline, its emphasis on simplicity and sincerity, its thoughtfulness, its cheerful industry not for profit but for service, its love for all animate life, its restraint of desire in all its subtle forms, its actual foretastes of enlightenment and blissful peace, its patient acceptance of karma and rebirth, all mark it out as being competent to meet the problems of this excitement loving, materialistic, acquisitive and thoughtless age.<sup>33</sup>

For Goddard, who had "converted" to Buddhism while a Congregational missionary in China in 1897, the Buddha was "the greatest teacher of mankind," and the gift of the Buddha's Dharma was "the greatest of all gifts."<sup>34</sup> In Goddard's view, Buddhism's alternative "rationality," a rationality of compassionate and loving fellow service, prefigured a utopian end to American materialism.

Of Goddard's compilation of Buddhist texts, Robert Aitken notes that it began "a creative process of Americanizing Buddhism" that manifested in Kerouac, Snyder, Philip Whalen, and others and that created the conditions that "helped to establish a culture in which the Zen Center of San Francisco could develop and flourish."<sup>35</sup> Goddard himself, who financially supported several of the monks who helped to translate the texts in his collection, sought to start a monastic community—the "Followers of Buddha"—in Santa Barbara National Forest. Aitken finds in Goddard's efforts to bring Buddhism to the West not an orientalist mindset but "a talented Yankee gentleman fired with *bodhicitta*—the aspiration for Buddhahood—who bewildered his conventional family and friends and worked a very lonely

row quite single-mindedly."<sup>36</sup> Goddard, who typed D. T. Suzuki's 1932 translation of the Mahayanist *Lankavatara Sutra*, clearly shared with Suzuki a strong sense of Buddhism's particular competence to save the West.

This competence, in Suzuki's view, emerged both from Buddhism's perfection in Japan and its ability to evolve over time and space. The doctrine of *upaya*, or skillful means, which enabled the Buddha to enlighten his listeners by engaging them at exactly their individual levels of understanding, applied to cultures as well as to Buddha's interlocutors in the sutras. Illustrating the *upaya* of Buddhism in its historic development, Suzuki, throughout *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* (1949), Suzuki's text primarily responsible for inspiring the Beat Generation of Zen Buddhists,<sup>37</sup> argued for the universality of the enlightenment experience, unencumbered by cultural particulars, at the core of Buddhist practice. The purpose of Zen, which "transmitted the essence of Buddhism," "shorn of its Indian garb," was "to bring about a revolutionary experience, more or less noetic, in the minds of the students."<sup>38</sup> This revolution in knowing would "exterminate all turmoils arising from ignorance and confusion" and would appear "directly poured out from the inner region undimmed by the intellect or the imagination."<sup>39</sup> Zen practice would liberate practitioners from the "intellectual nonsense" that veils the reality of our genuinely enlightened natures and the "passional rubbish" that leads to craving. Such "accumulations" of intellectualization and blind passion make us "groan under the feeling of bondage."<sup>40</sup> Once we "personally experience it through our own efforts," however, Zen, by "directly appealing to facts of personal experience and not to book knowledge," promises to return us to "our original state of freedom."<sup>41</sup> Since this immediate apprehension of freedom from within knows no cultural bounds, Suzuki wrote, "Our religious experience transcends the limitations of time, and its ever-expanding content requires a more vital form which will grow without doing violence to itself."<sup>42</sup>

In his narrative unfolding of Buddhism's movement from India to Japan and its absorption of Chinese Taoism along the way—a narrative that had a palpable effect on Alan Watts's work—Suzuki demonstrated what he held to be Buddhism's transcultural accessibility. "Bodhidharma," who is said to have first brought Buddhism to the Chinese, "taught his disciples to look directly into the essence of the teaching of the Buddha, discarding the outward manners of presentation" while rejecting "the conceptual and analytical interpretation of the doctrine of Enlightenment." In fact, Buddhists, for Suzuki, who adhered too closely to culturally bound forms of Buddhist doctrine—those

“literary adherents of the Sutras”—were actually enemies of Buddhism who “did all they could to prevent the growth and teaching of the Dharma.” As Indian Buddhism migrated, Suzuki argued, “there was no other way left for Buddhism but to be transformed.” Further, such transformation from one cultural context to another was imperative so that Buddhism “could be thoroughly acclimatized and grow as a native plant.” Indeed, it was “in the inherent nature of Buddhism” that such grafting and acclimation “should take place.”<sup>43</sup>

Republished in 1961 by Evergreen Press, the press that cut the first commercial recordings of Beat poets and introduced the Beats to the literary world in its 1957 “San Francisco Scene” issue of *Evergreen Review*, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* demonstrates Suzuki’s own *upaya* or skillful means. This *upaya* manifested itself in Suzuki’s strong appeal to the tradition of American individualism and self-reliance. Culture-bound intellectualism and rationalism, in Zen, were displaced through personal effort unbound by the restraints of language, time, and place. Though Zen was to be practiced with a Bodhisattva’s concern for the benefit of all beings, the Bodhisattva’s vow to refuse Nirvana until all beings could attain Nirvana must begin, Suzuki held, with individual will and effort. “The reason why the Buddha so frequently refused to answer metaphysical problems was partly due to his conviction that the ultimate truth was to be realized in oneself and through one’s own effort,” Suzuki wrote, “rather than through philosophical abstraction.”<sup>44</sup>

Suzuki’s concept of “own effort” involved a conscious rejection of one’s cultural practices and prejudices. One comes to apprehend truth not through “an ordinary intellectual process of reasoning, but [through] a power that will grasp something most fundamental in an instant and in the directest way,” a power which we all “have after all within ourselves.” To accomplish this grasping of truth “immediately without any conceptual medium . . . the sole authority in” the Zen practitioner’s “spiritual life will have to be found within himself; traditionalism or institutionalism will naturally lose its binding force.” It was, Suzuki believed, “this spirit of freedom” that was constantly “impelling Buddhism to break through its monastic shell,” and in this affirmation of freedom Buddhism found itself again and again “bringing forward the idea of Enlightenment ever vigorously before the masses.”<sup>45</sup> In the act of bringing Zen before the masses, Suzuki translated Zen into an American idiom that hit some of the keynotes of American left libertarianism: a rejection of cultural conditioning, institutionalism, and traditionalism; an affirmation of individualism and radical self-reliance in the Thoreauvian vein; and a language of revolutionary aspiration.

The writing and talks of Alan Watts, the most accessible and popular interpreter of Zen to the Beat generation, echo the individualistic themes in Suzuki's work. Watts, an ex-Anglican who studied Suzuki prodigiously in his teens and twenties in his native England and who was also familiar with Goddard's volume,<sup>46</sup> gave talks at the American Academy of Asian Studies in Berkeley along with Suzuki to audiences that included Snyder and Whalen. Watts and many of the Beats, including Whalen and Snyder, also attended Buddhist discussion groups in Berkeley sponsored by the Pure Land Buddhist Churches of America, at one of which Snyder and Watts first met.<sup>47</sup> Watts's reach and popularity resulted largely from the left libertarian KPFA, which broadcast Watts's weekly show, "Way Beyond the West," adjacent to Rexroth's broadcasts on the same station. Lecturing in this anarchist context, Watts assumed Suzuki's basic critiques and uses of Western thought and extended them to an explicitly radical, left libertarian critique of postwar American culture. Like Suzuki, Watts understood Zen as resulting from the contact between Indian Buddhism and Chinese Taoism.<sup>48</sup> Emphasizing the Tao at the heart of Zen, Watts related Zen Buddhism directly to individual liberation from what he treated as the tyrannical and authoritarian nature of Western theology. Unlike the Western God, "Tao," Watts argued, "does not act as a boss. In the Chinese idea of nature," in fact, "nature has no boss. There is no principle that forces things to behave the way they do. It [Tao] is a completely democratic theory of nature."<sup>49</sup> If Christianity offered a system of social relations reflected in the modern, antidemocratic workplace, Zen Buddhism, with the Tao at its core, offered true democracy. This democracy, in turn, was parallel to nature itself, which Watts called "a system of orderly anarchy."<sup>50</sup>

In Watts' political cosmology, the Taoist heart of Buddhism was "high philosophical anarchy," since it implied that nature, including human nature, should be trusted fully.<sup>51</sup> Nature—the Tao—"doesn't have a boss because a boss is a system of mistrust."<sup>52</sup> The system of mistrust that upheld the "boss" system inherent in Western culture and theology, Watts argued, leads to a "totalitarian state." Combining elements reminiscent of Orwell's description of an authoritarian Communist England and of David Riesman's criticism of psychotherapeutic cold war conformism, Watts argued that in the "boss" system of Western thought

everybody is his brother's policeman. Everybody is watching everybody else to report him to the authorities. You have to have a psychoanalyst in charge of you all the time to be sure that you don't think dangerous thoughts or peculiar thoughts and you report all your peculiar thoughts to your

analyst and your analyst keeps a record of them and reports them to the government, and everybody is busy keeping records of everything.<sup>53</sup>

As a result of our ways of knowing in the West, Watts stated in the opening minutes of a 1949 series of lectures for San Francisco's public TV station, KQED, "Our whole culture, our whole civilization . . . is nuts. It's not all here. We are not awake. We are not completely alive now." Postwar American culture was not alive primarily because we were "using science and technology, the powers of electricity and steel, to carry on a fight with our external world and to beat our surroundings into submission with bulldozers." Our "religio-philosophical tradition," meanwhile, "has taught us to . . . mistrust ourselves." This mistrust of nature and the natural self Watts attributed to our faith in original sin and our hyperactive reliance on reason and individual will: original sin "has taught us as reasoning and willing beings to distrust our animal and instinctual nature."<sup>54</sup> A turn to the East could revitalize this deadened animal instinct, returning us to the ground of nature.

Like his teacher Suzuki, Watts believed that it was "characteristic of Eastern philosophy to be based on experience rather than ideas" and guided by "feeling" instead of rationality. The conception of the East as "feeling" and the West as "thinking," by all appearances Orientalist, actually favored the East, both for Suzuki and for Watts. To privilege rationality was to mar the natural world, to alienate oneself from nature, and to create a society conceived in strictly authoritarian terms. Rationalism, in other words, offered a delusional and innately inferior way of experiencing the universe. To posit that the East experiences the world more directly and emotionally is not to posit the view, Watts argued, "that there are people in the backward worlds of Asia who think that the universe is ultimately nothing at all." Instead, the liberating awareness that the world was a direct experience empty of those ideas that Westerners impose on it "represents complete spiritual freedom. Or you might say if you don't like the world spiritual, complete psychological freedom." This freedom, which Watts equated with *satori* or Zen awakening, "is the objective of human life." Without this freedom, Westerners would continue to have "a fundamentally hostile cutting up attitude to life," an "attitude of the knife" that "gives us dead knowledge instead of living knowledge" and that "kills things."<sup>55</sup>

Governance attuned to nature, Watts explained during his KQED broadcast, would restore life to Western men and women. As part of this restoration, the West—or at least those in the West who awakened to their true, uninhibited natures—would adopt a self-organizing



form of governance in which the individual person and the social person naturally aligned. "These forms of Asian philosophy" such as Taoism and Zen "want us as individuals to feel that we participate in this great democracy of nature no longer as isolated individuals trying to push it around, command it like monarchs or bosses." Taoism and Zen instead wants us to realign ourselves to nature's "self governing state" and "self organizing pattern" in which "each one of us is that entire pattern."<sup>56</sup> 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 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 political governance.

Such voluntary cooperation between awakened, emancipated individuals in a nonauthoritarian society echoes the individualist socialist aspirations of anarchist and left libertarian thinkers and revolutionaries whose legacy Rexroth celebrated. Watts argued, however, that Zen served no such revolutionary function in Chinese or Japanese culture. In his 1957 *The Way of Zen*, Watts suggested that Zen served primarily as medicine in cultures where social convention was integral to the consciousness of the practitioner. In societies dominated by the principles of Confucianism, Zen merely eased "the conditioning of the individual by the group." Social conventions themselves, though, were taken for granted in these societies, as reflected, for example, in the formal strictness of the Japanese tea ceremony. However, in contexts "where convention is weak" or "there is a spirit of open revolt against convention," Zen might serve less palliative, more outright "destructive purposes."<sup>57</sup> For his part, Watts emphasized the need for destruction not of society itself but of the authoritarian mechanism of the ego at the center of the West's psychic life. The proposal that the ego required decentering, as Watts's critique of rationalism suggests, struck the very root of Western civic life. Through meditation and awakening to the Tao, a society based on the authoritarian principle of the paranoid ego terrified of losing social control would make way for a society based "in the mutual agreement of human beings."<sup>58</sup>

Although Alan Watts was critical of "lifestyle" Beats with shallow interests in Eastern philosophy,<sup>59</sup> his Sinocentric criticism of Western life, along with Suzuki's sharp criticism of Western rationalism, shaped the counterculture in ways that Watts tentatively accepted. For Snyder and Whalen, who pushed Suzuki's and Watts's challenge to Western philosophy the farthest in actual, meditative practice, Zen offered an alternative way of seeing and being in the

world that could be productively enfolded with their left libertarian thought. Of the six poets who read at the Rexroth-emceed Six Gallery reading in 1955, two—Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder—thoroughly embraced Zen Buddhism. Whalen, who practiced Buddhism in the United States before traveling to Japan with Snyder in 1966, wrote both Zen and anti-authoritarianism into his poems and eventually became a Soto priest at the San Francisco Zen Center. Gary Snyder, meanwhile, lived in Japan for twelve years between 1956 and 1968, studying Zen in temples around the country and seeking the company of Japanese Dharma revolutionaries. For Whalen and Snyder, contact with Zen constituted more than an alternative lifestyle or an Orientalist appropriation of the East. It provided, instead, a stabilizing spiritual practice that grounded their anti-authoritarian critiques both of American ways of knowing and of U.S. hegemony.

For Snyder, reading D. T. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* was a transformative experience, one that both converted him to Zen practice and changed the direction of his life when he found a copy of it in a bookshop while wandering around San Francisco with Philip Whalen in 1951.<sup>60</sup> Like Watts, what Gary Snyder found most compelling in Suzuki's writings was the way in which Suzuki related Zen to Taoism.<sup>61</sup> Zen's sedimented Taoism opened the way for Westerners, alienated from nature, to tap a prerationalist connection to the natural. In a 1977 *East West Journal* interview, Snyder described his early immersion in Chinese Buddhist ways of knowing in the Chinese room at a Seattle museum. "The Chinese," he said, "had an eye for the world that I saw as real." The Western eye, by contrast, failed to capture Snyder's imagination: "In the next room were the English and European landscapes, and they meant nothing." In college, Snyder adopted Marxism. However, after shifting his focus to American Indian studies while an anthropology graduate student for one semester at Indiana University, he came to discover "that maybe it was all of Western culture that was off the track and not just capitalism—that there were certain self-destructive tendencies in our cultural tradition."<sup>62</sup> These self-destructive tendencies resulted in Western humanity's alienation from the very places they lived, from, in Nishida's words, the ground beneath their feet. Zen Buddhism, for Snyder, offered a vehicle by which to re-tap the primitive sense of place on which the very survival of the earth as we know it depended.

Realizing that Zen offered an invitation to a spiritual practice more open to Westerners than he was likely to receive from the "Paiute or Shoshone Indians in eastern Oregon," Snyder left Indiana University, where he began a degree track in anthropology, to study Oriental languages at Berkeley in 1952 in preparation to study in

Japan, a decision promoted by his pivotal encounter with *Essays in Zen Buddhism*.<sup>63</sup> While in Japan, he discovered the very freedom in Zen that Suzuki had promised: “when you go into the sanzen room, you have absolute freedom.” This freedom, for Snyder, resulted from the immediate awakening to the value of the present time and place offered in *zazen*. Further, this freedom was connected, in Snyder’s thought, to American republican traditions of individualism and self-reliance, values that carried over from the republican tradition to left libertarianism. “Americans have a supermarket of adulterated ideas available to them, thinned out and sweetened, just like their food. They don’t have the apparatus for critical discernment either,” Snyder held. “The primary quality of that truth” that American thinking is adulterated by “supermarket” consumerism is Americans’ “lack of self-reliance, personal hardiness—self-sufficiency.” Though one could misread Snyder’s revalorization of the spirit of self-reliance also found in Emerson and Thoreau as a conservative reaction to postwar America’s managed economy, for Snyder, lack of self-reliance was akin to Marxian alienation. “This lack [of self-reliance],” in his words, “can also be described as the alienation people experience in life and work.”<sup>64</sup> In Snyder’s view, late capitalism’s consumerist alienation could be corrected with a new commitment to conscious work. Drawing on the Zen axiom that the meaning of awakening is “chop wood, carry water,” or just doing the labor at hand, Snyder argued that “we damn well better learn that our meditation” in the West “is primarily going to be our work with our hands.”<sup>65</sup>

In Snyder’s political cosmology, the disalienation of labor from the means of production aided by the contemplative awareness offered in Zen practice would not only reawaken the West, but would begin to solve the burgeoning environmental crisis created by consumerism. Ecology was at the heart of Snyder’s Zen anarchism. The cold war technocratic state, from Snyder’s perspective, was directly responsible for the planetary ecological crisis, and that state should, Snyder believed, be overthrown by an anarchistic order. “There are two kinds of earth consciousness: one which is called global, the other we call planetary,” he held. “Global consciousness” is “world-engineering-technocratic-utopian-centralization men in business suits who play world games in systems theory” while “planetary thinking is decentralist, seeks biological rather technological solutions,” and learns from traditional sources as well as “the libraries of the high Occidental civilizations.” The latter, planetary consciousness “is old-ways internationalism which recognizes the possibility of one earth with all its diversity.” In contrast, “global consciousness” as enforced by the burgeoning global capitalist order “would ultimately

impose a not-so-benevolent technocracy on everything via a centralized system."<sup>66</sup> The concept upholding this technocratic dystopia, Snyder told the *Berkeley Bard*, was "the idea of a 'nation' or 'country' [that] is so solidly established in most people's consciousness now that there's no intelligent questioning of it. It's taken for granted as some kind of necessity." In contrast to nationalism, Snyder valorized the "tribal social structure" as "one of the ways of breaking out of that nation-state bag."<sup>67</sup>

In other words, forwarding an anarchist conception of political cooperation, Snyder proposed that the solution to the problem of ecological crisis was less, not more, centralization. The ideal organization of society—local, spiritual, regional—would be driven by an ecological consciousness that Snyder equated with "a political anarchist position: that the boundaries drawn by national states and so forth don't represent any real entity." Instead of clinging to this fiction, "people have to learn a sense of region," surrendering the illusion that "promiscuous distribution of goods and long-range transportation is always going to be possible."<sup>68</sup> Zen Buddhism's ability to root the one meditating in the immediate place and present moment would ground this turn from internationalism to localism inspired by planetary concern in a renewed focus on community. Zen meditation could underwrite this renewal because it could make one aware of the intimate co-arising of self and other, of the unity of organism and environment. "What we need to do," Snyder believed, "is to take the great intellectual achievement of the Mahayana Buddhists and bring it back to a community style of life which is not necessarily monastic."<sup>69</sup> Broken free of the monastery, Zen would become what Suzuki claimed it was inherently: "a birthright of everybody."<sup>70</sup> Theoretically, this birthright, once embraced by the West, would help to revitalize ways of knowing lost in the globalized consumerist model of humanity with its attendant alienated and displaced labor. This sense of respect for locally oriented labor informed by Buddhist contemplation Snyder captures in his 1957 collection, *The Back Country*, which moves the reader from the Pacific Northwest to Japan, India, and back again. He draws attention along the way to truck drivers, hitchhikers making their way "to the wobbly hall," "dead men naked/tumbled on beaches" in newsreels from the war, and the cyclical, daily labor of Zen monks and of prostitutes alike. Alluding to the anarchist influence behind his poetry of the 1950s collected in this volume, Snyder dedicated *The Back Country* to Ken Rexroth.<sup>71</sup>

True to this anarchist legacy, Snyder ultimately rejected Marxism, which in his view was part of the "the whole Western tradition" of millennial Protestantism. In place of what he viewed as

Marxism's essentially Christian utopianism, he emphasized the need for immediate, inner revolution aided by Buddhist practice directed toward anarchist models of social behavior. Shortly after his undergraduate rejection of Marxism, he "found in the Buddha-Dharma a practical method for clearing one's mind of the trivia, prejudices, and false values that our conditioning had laid on us," beneath which lay "the deepest non-self Self."<sup>72</sup> The insight that Buddhism offered into the nondual nature of self and other—this deepest non-self Self—would complement and complete Western utopian traditions. As Snyder argued in "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution," published in 1961 under the title "Buddhist Anarchism," "The mercy of the West has been social revolution" while "the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both" in order to affect "any cultural and economic revolution that moves toward a free, international, classless world."<sup>73</sup> Meditation—the Eastern key to opening this world—affects social revolution insofar as it attunes one to "wisdom," or "the intuitive knowledge of the mind of love and clarity that lies beneath one's ego-driven anxieties and aggressions." This mind of love and charity expresses itself socially both in the Buddhist notion of *sangha*—the interdependent community of all beings—and in the theories of "the Anarcho-Syndicalists" who "showed a sense for experimental social reorganization" and who, Snyder reminds us, influenced the "San Francisco poets and gurus" like himself who "were attending the meetings of the 'Anarchist Circle'" with Rexroth.<sup>74</sup>

Among those influenced by Buddhism and anarchism alike was Philip Whalen, Snyder's friend from Reed College in Oregon who was exposed to Eastern philosophy through Vedanta first before discovering Zen at about the same time that Snyder had. According to Whalen, Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* "converted me" to Zen Buddhism, and D. T. Suzuki himself "practically invented [Zen] for the West."<sup>75</sup> The aim of Whalen's poetry in the years of the San Francisco Renaissance was specifically, in his words, to protest "against the government," which "conducts iniquitous wars all over the world" while laying down restrictive laws proscribing morality and "talking about peace and saving people from communism." Asked in a 1972 interview about the roots of this spirit of antigovernment resistance in his poetry, Whalen pointed, like Rexroth, to the pre-Stalinist, left libertarian generation of the twenties who "were already revolting against puritanism and against prohibition." The cold war version of this anarchist criticism was directed against "those people in the Pentagon who are able to push buttons and make catastrophic things happen" while "all we are able to push [as poets]

is words."<sup>76</sup> In language shot through with Zen metaphors, Whalen's *Memoirs of an Interglacial Age* (1960) and *Scenes of Life at the Capital* (1970) show Whalen "pushing words" as weapons against the institutions of psychological constraint on the one hand and against U.S. military hegemony on the other.

In *Memoirs of an Interglacial Age*, Whalen explores the limitations of human consciousness, institutions, and language from a perspective shaped by Zen meditation. An early poem in the book's cycle, "Hymnus Ad Patrem Sinensis" ("A Hymn to the Chinese Fathers"), playfully remarks on the Taoist spirit of Zen exactly as it had been underscored by both Suzuki and Watts:

I praise those ancient Chinamen  
 Who left me with a few words,  
 Usually a pointless joke or a silly question  
 A line of poetry drunkenly scrawled on the margin of a  
 quick

splashed picture—bug, leaf  
 caricature of Teacher  
 on paper held together now by little more than ink  
 & their own strength brushed momentarily over it

Their world & several others since  
 Gone to hell in a handbasket, they know it—  
 Cheered as it whizzed by—  
 & conked out among the busted spring rain cherryblossom  
 winejars  
 Happy to have saved us all.<sup>77</sup>

This individual freedom and naturalness of the Chinese Taoist patriarchs whose spirit Whalen, like Suzuki and Watts, saw as forming the heart of Zen practice, is juxtaposed, in "A Reflection on My Own Time," with the dominance of social conditioning and the "lobotomy knife" of cold war American life:

WHAT ideas? Not a brain in my head, only  
 "Education" & a few "idées reçues" (read  
 "conditioned reflexes")

But necessary to open my small  
 yap  
 maybe just to say "ouch"  
 as the lobotomy knife slides  
 ("painlessly", they say)  
 IN<sup>78</sup>

In contrast to Zen's Taoist-inflected naturalness, the "painless" lobotomy of conformity to the psychotherapeutic cold war state recalls Watts's criticism of the West's "attitude of the knife" that "gives us dead knowledge instead of living knowledge" and that "kills things" while it enforces institutionalism and conformism.

The unyielding conditioning of culture and conformity chases the speaker of Whalen's poems even into his most private reflections, as when, in "Self Portrait Sad," he finds his revelry of "unspeakable vices" haunted by the sense that the ego is an illusion enforced by education:

Another damned lie, my name is I  
Which is a habit of dreaming & carelessness  
    No nearer the real truth of any matter  
In any direction myself bound & divided by notions  
    ACT!                   MOVE!                   SPEAK!  
                    Huge—I'm a *preta*, starving ghost  
                    Self-devoured<sup>79</sup>

The hungry ghost, in Buddhist cosmology, has collected Karma so corrupted that he is consigned to a realm in which he lives in perpetual hunger with a bloated belly and a mouth the size of a pinhole. Here, the poet becomes a *preta* because of habits and notions that, we quickly discover, are informed by institutions of rationality. The speaker, tired of "walking from one end of a teeter-board to the other" trying to answer the question of who the "I" really is, resolves to "go sit under a chestnut tree & contemplate the schoolhouse" in the center of an open field. Sitting there, he recalls that

Mama said: "You don't HAVE to believe EVERYTHING  
they tell you in school—think for yourself a little bit!"<sup>80</sup>

The very record of the development of Western rationality held in the library the speaker observes and in the schoolhouse next to it are seen as constraints on the freedom the poet strives for while meditating under a chestnut tree. Contemplating the schoolhouse library, he notes, "The library: A house of correction." The posture of meditation, meanwhile, enables the poet to see through the ego-centrism of Western knowledge and begin to "think for himself" from the position of his true, awakened self.

Throughout Whalen's work, the act and posture of meditation sits as the real subject of the poetry. Of *Memoirs of an Interglacial Age*, he wrote, "This poetry is a picture or graph of a mind moving"<sup>81</sup> in Zen meditation, which "created a habit of hearing and seeing that is the basis of poetry or is actually poetry" itself.<sup>82</sup> In his attempts to



overcome the illusory Cartesian ego, with its associated post-Cartesian disciplines—lobotomous psychotherapy and mass education—the poet takes refuge in Zen mediation.

At Snyder's urging, Whalen lived and studied Zen in Kyoto. In *Scenes of Life at the Capital*, Whalen offers from his perspective in Kyoto a more direct indictment of Western hegemony, one only suggested in his earlier *Memoirs*. *Scenes of Life at the Capital* opens with the poet sitting in the Zen posture:

Having returned at least and being carefully seated  
On the floor—somebody else's floor, as usual—  
Far away across the ocean . . .<sup>83</sup>

From this transnational perspective—"Far away across the ocean"—Western culture appears not merely coercive and ego-enforcing, as it had in *Memoirs*, but utterly uncivilized:

The longer I think about it  
The more I doubt there is such a thing as  
Western Civilization. A puritan commercial culture  
Was transplanted from Europe to U.S.A. in the 17th Century  
American Indians were a civilized people<sup>84</sup>

"Our main difficulty" in the West, the poem continues, is our "fear and distrust of freedom," and the various

Difficulties compounded by idea of "consent"  
And theory of "delegated powers."  
Hire specialists to run everything.  
But the powers they derive from us  
Relieve these governors of all responsibility  
Somehow become vast personal wealth—  
Fortunes which must be protected from "license" and "the  
violence of the mob"

In Whalen's view from his adopted Japanese capital, we in the West, having delegated our responsibility to government, "find our freedom diminished" and live "where now are only fraudulent states, paint-factories/Lies and stinks and wars."

America's wars themselves, from the position of Whalen's meditative posture taken up across the Pacific, were fought solely for capital:

Fifty years fighting the Bolsheviki  
To maintain a 500% profit on every waffle-iron and locomotive  
At 499% times are growing difficult, we must try to retrench  
At 487½% lay off some of the newer employees the market  
looks

"Bearish" and 496%. SELL OUT while there's still a change.  
 In order to boost profits back to 498%  
 A "presence" appears in Cambodia.<sup>85</sup>

While such a critique would not have sounded unusual in 1971, Whalen's criticism of American hegemony stands out because it takes place in a poem that presents itself as an extended session of meditation. His outlook emerges from—or is presented as emerging from—a spiritual ground that lends it the power of direct insight into the nature of reality itself.

Sitting in *zazen* across the ocean, Whalen's speaker comes to the conclusion that the brutality of the "fraudulent state" infiltrates the mentality of every American:

Almost all Americans aged 4 to 100  
 Have the spiritual natures of Chicago policemen.  
 Scratch an American and find a cop. There is no  
 Generation gap.<sup>86</sup>

Whalen's "Western Civilization rigid and tyrannical" which "teaches necessity for objective examination" offers no revolutionary alternative to this state of affairs since it dominates the consciousness of every Westerner. Even "Mr. Karl Marx wrote a book/All by his lonesome in the British Museum. (Shhh!),"<sup>87</sup> becoming the very image of the isolated Western ego. More powerful than such "objective examination," limited by its cloistered intellectualism, is the idea of freedom itself, which appears not from the West in 1970 but in the East.

A few inches of adhesive tape seals the mouth  
 But it is hard to get rid of the idea of liberty  
 After forty years of war Asia still exists,  
 Not to mention the Viet Cong  
 And quite different from the plans of Washington  
 Or Moscow or the Vatican. . . .<sup>88</sup>

*Scenes of Life at the Capital* closes with an affirmation of Japanese ways of knowing that disposes with the West entirely:

Japan is a civilization based upon  
 An inarticulate response to cherry blossoms.  
 So much for Western Civilization.<sup>89</sup>

Japanese feeling and sensitivity to beauty, long emphasized as salvational for the West in works of Japanese exceptionalism, when transmuted by Whalen's antistatist meditation becomes a recipe for a revolution in thought and perspective so total, Whalen hoped, that it could end the basis of Western civilization entirely: its strangulating rationality.

One might sensibly question the real political implications of ideas such as those contained in the works of Whalen and Snyder, just as one can imagine arguments that could be arrayed against anarchism in general. Can relevant political change result from internal, psychic revolutions occurring first at the level of the individual, for instance? Did the critique of Western rationality the Beat Zen anarchists adopted from Japanese exceptionalist work affect a cultural transformation on any kind of scale that mattered in the lives of, say, workers? Can an “inarticulate response” make change, or might sentiments of social justice be better, more fruitfully expressed through an organ with a voice and the power to administer this justice, such as a state? These questions deserve further elaboration in relation to the Beat movement, which, in many ways, as others have noted, prefigured the New Left, but which also, as many of their critics at the time noted—including Watts—merely instituted a fashion and a lifestyle. Just as compelling as these questions of power, voice, and reception, however, is the question of what kind of lifestyle Watts, Snyder, and Whalen advocated. After all, “the American way of life” during the cold war was a lifestyle in itself, one that, as the Beat anarchists pointed out, demanded imperialism and a terrifying level of material consumption. As propagandists for an alternative, Whalen and Snyder saw temporary success in the student unrest of the 1960s, which was coupled with an explosion of alternative spiritualities that may be read as either escapist or politically empowering. To this extent, they did—or perhaps even outdid—the work of the Old Left and Popular Front, circulating a popular literature that fomented resistance against cold war consumerist capitalism.

According to the accounts of Popular Front historians Michael Denning and Alan Wald, Popular Front radicalism emerged in the 1930s when leftist intellectuals adopted various forms of Marxism and looked to Soviet Russia as the vanguard of political reform. This radicalism began to wane with the left’s disillusionment with Stalinism in the 1940s, which led in turn to the “liberal consensus” in the 1950s, with some old leftist values sedimented in popular culture until a resurgence of Marxist radicalisms in the 1960s.<sup>90</sup> In Michael Denning’s view, the “defeat of the Popular Front social movement in the Cold War years” of the 1950s meant “the defeat of U.S. social democracy” itself.<sup>91</sup> However, as Stephen Prothero has argued, the Beats were “spiritual protesters” whose radical critiques of American culture defied the 1950s consensus and linked the radicalism of the Old Left decades with that of the new. Further, Prothero argues, Beat spiritual protest involved not just a negative rejection of Western civilization but also a positive sense of “the sacralization of

everyday life and the sacramentalization of human relationships" that caused Zen Beats to demand social justice by reaffirming the Buddhist concept of *pratitya-samutpada*, or interdependent origination, which recognizes the mutual dependence of all beings upon one another.<sup>92</sup>

According to Rexroth—whose immersion in the pre-Stalinist, libertarian left of the 1910s and 1920s remained a keynote of his public career as a poet and cultural critic—the Stalinist leftists of the 1930s and 1940s were, by comparison to the country's anarchists, elitist cultural producers whose attempts to produce art as Communist propaganda were belied by their very *bourgeois* identities in the nation's urban centers. The Beat generation, in Rexroth's view, emerged only after twenty years of nonauthoritarian, antistatist resistance to the statist and thus ultimately conservative Popular Front. The pro-Stalinist reds and their apologists "were all chairborne on a gravy train of human blood," Rexroth held. "American radicals" on both the Old and New Left have been placed time and again "in the ridiculous position" of "representing other people's foreign offices"—whether Moscow's in the 1930s or Beijing's in the 1960s—even as another "dominant tendency in America," the one with which Rexroth identified, has been "anarchist-pacifist . . . and religious in various ways."<sup>93</sup> This tradition of anarchist pacifist religious sensibility Rexroth saw as embodied in the Beat poets, whose broadly anarchist and libertarian politics outlasted the communist-inflected Popular Front decades of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>94</sup>

Rexroth's account of the emergence of the Beat movement and its spiritual sensibility confirms Prothero's analysis. It also calls into question Marxist-centric accounts such as those offered by Popular Front historians who tend either to overlook or dismiss the literary radicalism of the 1950s. This radicalism, in many respects, was a fulfillment of the Popular Front that far outpaced in popularity that generation's search for an accessible radical literature. If one goal of the Popular Front was to reach the populace with its message, the Beat moment in American literature and life suggests that Americans, as readers at least, are far more amenable to libertarian and anarchist visions of radicalism than Marxist ones.

As a cultural phenomenon and social movement, the Beat Zen anarchist formation meets at one intersection between American religious and political history. Its outcome was a popular literature that deployed Japanese exceptionalist criticisms of Western ways of knowing as an anarchist critique of cold war culture. The basis of this critique—the idea that the Western emphasis on rationality was socially and environmentally destructive—was informed for the Beat

poets Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder by philosophers like D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts, both of whom contrasted a holistic vision of Zen awakening to Western rationalism. While the explanations and interpolations of Zen by such writers as Watts, Snyder, and Whalen might appear, on the surface, as orientalist appropriations of “the East,” they were actually direct adoptions of Japanese criticisms of the West. In staking their claims to Zen, in other words, Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder—the Beat writers on whom this essay focuses—along with Alan Watts, expressed the zeal not of cultural imperialists, as one might suppose, but of converts to what they regarded as a superior way of life.<sup>95</sup> In *Orientalism*, Edward Said suggested a future direction for his research that deserves more attention than it receives. “Perhaps the most important task of all” to emerge from his work, Said stated, would be “to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective.”<sup>96</sup> The Zen-influenced anarchism that formed within the Beat movement suggests one example of just such a libertarian alternative.

## Notes

1. Offering a criticism of Beat Zen as Orientalist, in a recent discussion of tensions in the 1950s between Beat Zen Buddhists and Issei and Nisei Jodo Shinshu Buddhists, Michael Masatsugu, for instance, has argued that “Beat Zen Buddhists, dissatisfied with Cold War U.S. society and culture, viewed Buddhism as an alternative American religious practice—an exotic Orientalist religious practice defined as outside and often opposed to U.S. national culture” (425). This Orientalist appropriation offered Beats a way of responding to “tensions in bourgeois society between authority and individual autonomy” (435). In the process of adopting Zen, Masatsugu contends, “The Beats extracted Buddhism from its long history and transformed it into a timeless essence that harked back to the solitary, monastic practice of ancient sages” (440). “While potentially producing greater appreciation of Japanese American Buddhist religious practices and traditions,” Masatsugu continues, “the interest in Buddhism among nonethnics also served to conflate Buddhism and Buddhists with Asia” itself (451). See Michael K. Masatsugu, “Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence: Japanese Americans, Dharma Bums, and the Making of American Buddhism during the Early Cold War Years,” *Pacific Historical Review* 77 (August 2008): 423–51.

This essay argues, by contrast, that Beat understandings of Buddhism as a timeless, universal monastic religion equated with Asia

itself and offering a liberation of the individual from the pitfalls of cold war consumerism and rationalism were adopted directly from Japanese missionary Zen emergent from Meiji Zen's Occidentalistic criticism of American and Western culture. In other words, the Beats who took Zen seriously were, foremost, Occidentalistic critics of cold war culture.

2. Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Poetry Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.

3. *Ibid.*, 28. See also page 26.

4. The San Francisco Anarchist and Libertarian Circles and their relationship to the emergent San Francisco Renaissance are described in Rexroth's *An Autobiographical Novel*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York: New Directions, 1991), 508–21.

5. *Ibid.*, 235.

6. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997), 208.

7. By "anarchism," in this essay, I refer to the theory that just, personal relationships between individuals and groups are only possible without government or other forms of coercive authority. The term "libertarian," which anarchists used to describe themselves early in the twentieth century, has historically referred to this broad philosophy, though more recently it has become associated with theories of limited government more amenable to American conservatives.

8. Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 80.

9. Kenneth Rexroth, *World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth*, ed. Bradford Morrow (New York: New Directions, 1987), 54.

10. *Ibid.*, 60. In a personal e-mail, Snyder recalled reading Buber back in the 1950s but did not connect Buber with anarchist politics. In his words, "I did read Buber back then, mid 50s, and recall that Kenneth admired his work, but I never thought of it in connection with Anarchism nor heard Kenneth say so." Gary Snyder, "Re: Martin Buber and Anarchists and Poets?" December 3, 2008, personal e-mail. In his written accounts and interviews, however, Rexroth makes an explicit connection between genuine dialogue and anarchist politics that might not have been discussed directly in the course of Rexroth's friendship with Snyder but that, Rexroth recalls, profoundly influenced his conception of the Anarchist and Libertarian Circles and of poetry as direct address.

11. Rexroth, *Autobiographical Novel*, 511.

12. Rexroth, *World Outside the Window*, 94.

13. *Ibid.*, 64.

14. For a further discussion of Rexroth's poetic technique and themes, along with an analysis of the shortcomings of his political anarchism and use of Buber, see Ken Knabb, *The Relevance of Rexroth* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1990), 88.

15. Kenneth Rexroth, "Thou Shalt Not Kill," from *Howls, Raps, and Roars: Recordings from the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance*, Fantasy B0000000XBW, compact disc set, 1993.

16. Robert H. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," *History of Religions* 33 (August 1993): 3.

17. James E. Ketelaar, "Strategic Occidentalism: Meiji Buddhists at the World's Parliament of Religions," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 11 (1991): 44.

18. According to Snodgrass, Japanese and other Asian representatives at the Parliament were so circumscribed within Western limits of discourse that their need to have "recourse to a Western authority—even a dubious one—to validate things Japanese" meant that their Buddhism was finally "not the religion of any Asian practice but the reified product of Western discourse." See Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 274, 85. This analysis overlooks the Japanese context in which New Buddhists had already begun, at home, to present Zen as a modern religion capable of meeting the needs of a modern Japanese state. The modern, rational Zen Buddhism that Soyen presented at the Parliament was as much a product of Japanese imperialism and cultural assertiveness in Asia as it was of the Christian biases of the Parliament. Further, as Ketelaar notes, the exotic "other" at the Parliament "was by no means merely a passive object of the Parliament's construction but was itself engaged in the select imaging of the Parliamentary proceedings and their subsequent interpretation." See James Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 157. In other words, Japanese Buddhism and Zen at the Parliament were actively constructed products of Japanese discourse in which Japanese individuals with agency outside of the West's sanction explained their own religion in terms Westerners could understand in the Parliament's context. Snodgrass's analysis of the Parliament, it seems, promises to give agency to Asian Parliamentarians by emphasizing their Occidentalism, but then



removes this agency by noting that their religion was, finally, just another Western construct.

19. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," 5.

20. Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs*, 163.

21. For a description of the long-term effect of the Parliament on Buddhism in America, see Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, 3rd ed., rev. and updated (Boston: Shambhala, 1992), 119–29.

22. Quoted in Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 65. For Tweed, Lum's deployment of Buddhism accorded with what Tweed calls the "rational" type of Buddhist convert. Nineteenth-century rationalist Western Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism, for Tweed, often share a progressive "inclination to emphasize the spiritual significance of vigorous moral action in the world" and a "concern to uplift individuals, reform societies, and participate energetically in the political and economic spheres" (136). In two poems—"Nirvana" and "The Modern Nirvana" written for Benjamin Tucker's short-lived periodical the *Radical Review* (August 1877)—Lum linked Nirvana with an impassive forgetting of the self that would clear the way for an embrace of all humanity, with the practitioner of meditation "forgetting self that man alone may gain" (261).

For a celebratory portrait of Lum's life and philosophy, see Voltarine de Cleyre, "Dyer D. Lum," in *Selected Works of Voltarine de Cleyre: Pioneer of Women's Liberation*, ed. Alexander Berkman (New York: Revisionist Press, 1972), 284–97.

23. Thomas A. Tweed, "'The Seeming Anomaly of Buddhist Negation': American Encounters with Buddhist Distinctiveness, 1858–1877," *The Harvard Theological Review* 83 (January 1990): 90–91. I have found no evidence that the Beats were aware of Lum. As Ketelaar has noted, there were precedents in early Meiji Japan, when Buddhism was outlawed by the state, for an anarchist and anti-authoritarian interpretation of the dharma. Before the New Buddhists rationalized Buddhism to the state, Ketelaar argued, the practice of Buddhism itself was "carnivalized," disobedient, and potentially subversive in the eyes of the state such that one nativist critic of Buddhism could argue that the priestly class itself, producing nothing and representing a spirit of lawless playfulness, created an "environment conducive to anarchy." See Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs*, 39, 50–52.

24. Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 159.

25. Brian Victoria, *Zen at War* (New York: Weatherhill, 1997), 63. For a detailed discussion of Suzuki's deployment of the way of the warrior, see 97–113. For Suzuki's postwar apologetics, see 147–52.

26. Kirita Kiyohide, "D. T. Suzuki on Society and the State," in *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism*, ed. James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), 65–66.

27. Letter quoted in William R. LaFleur, "Between America and Japan," in *Zen in American Life and Letters*, ed. Robert S. Ellwood (Malibu, Calif.: Undena, 1987), 73. Ellwood discusses Suzuki's interest in William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, which Suzuki believed offered Westerners the hope of sloughing off their cultural trappings in order to experience directly the heart of Zen practice.

28. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 230–31.

29. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 63–64.

30. *Ibid.*, 117.

31. *Ibid.*, 86.

32. Robert Aitken, "Foreword," in *A Buddhist Bible*, ed. Dwight Goddard (New York: Beacon, 1994), vii.

33. Goddard, *A Buddhist Bible*, xxxii.

34. *Ibid.*, 6, 9.

35. Aitken, "Foreword," viii.

36. *Ibid.*, xvii.

37. Houston Smith and Phillip Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). Novak and Smith call *Essays in Zen Buddhism* "the fountainhead of what was to be a prodigious outpouring of Zen" in the United States (152).

38. D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 37.

39. *Ibid.*, 32.

40. *Ibid.*, 28.

41. Ibid., 18, 24.

42. Ibid., 48.

43. Ibid., 111–15.

44. Ibid., 61.

45. Ibid., 72–75.

46. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 186–87.

47. Smith and Novak, *Buddhism*, 153. Michael K. Masatsugu discusses the Beat presence at BCC meetings in “Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence,” writing that, “In the fall of 1955, Beat poets and writers, including Ginsberg, Whalen, and Kerouac, began to participate in the group after Snyder, who had joined months earlier, brought them to meetings” (443).

48. As Watts wrote in his autobiography, “I had learned from D. T. Suzuki” and others “that Zen is basically Taoism—the water-course way of life. . . .” Alan Watts, *In My Own Way* (Navato, Calif.: New World Library, 2001), 251.

49. Alan Watts, “Identical Differences,” 1964 lecture by author, on *Alan Watts Live*, Shambhala SLE 15, tape recording, 1991.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. *4 × 4 by Watts: Eastern Wisdom and Modern Life*, Seattle: Unapix/Miramar, Inner Dimension, 1995, videocassette.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon, 1957), 142–53.

58. Ibid., 147.

59. See Alan Watts, *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959).

60. Smith and Novak, *Buddhism*, 153.

61. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 213.

62. Gary Snyder and William Scott McLean, *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks, 1964–1979* (New York: New Directions), 94.

63. “In the middle of Nevada, on old Interstate 40,” Snyder related in a 2002 interview for the public radio show *Commonwealth Club*, “there was a period of about five hours where nobody would give me a ride. As I stood there in the middle of the sagebrush flats, I was reading through a chapter of Suzuki’s *Essays in Zen Buddhism, First Series*, and I hit on some phrases that turned my mind totally around. I knew that I wouldn’t last at [graduate school in] Indiana, and that I would soon be heading in the other direction back toward Asia, but I had to complete my short-term karma. So I did finish out that semester and then went back to the West Coast.” *commonwealthclub.org*, “Gary Snyder & John Suiter, In Conversation—May 15, 2002,” <http://www.commonwealthclub.org/archive/02/02-05snyder-suiter-speech.html> (accessed January 8, 2009).

64. Snyder and McLean, *The Real Work*, 10.

65. *Ibid.*, 96.

66. *Ibid.*, 126.

67. *Ibid.*, 10.

68. *Ibid.*, 25.

69. *Ibid.*, 16.

70. *Ibid.*, 17.

71. See Gary Snyder, *The Back Country* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 128.

72. Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold; Technical Notes and Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 114.

73. *Ibid.*, 92.

74. *Ibid.*, 106.

75. David Meltzer, ed., *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001) 343.

76. Philip Whalen, *Off the Wall: Interviews with Philip Whalen* (Bolinas, Calif.: Four Seasons Foundation, 1978), 57–61.

77. Philip Whalen, *Memoirs of an Interglacial Age: Poems* (San Francisco: Auerhahn Press, 1960), 49.

78. *Ibid.*, 22.

79. *Ibid.*, 33.

80. *Ibid.*, 35.

81. *Ibid.*, 49.

82. Philip Whalen, *Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder: Two Modern San Francisco Poets Discuss and Read from Their Works* (Hollywood: Center for Cassette Studies, 1970–1979?), 10154, tape recording.

83. Philip Whalen, *Scenes of Life at the Capital* (San Francisco: David Meltzer and Jack Shoemaker, 1970), 1.

84. *Ibid.*, 16.

85. *Ibid.*, 26.

86. *Ibid.*, 34.

87. *Ibid.*, 37.

88. *Ibid.*, 41.

89. *Ibid.*, 73.

90. Strong representatives of this consensus narrative, by now generally assumed, include Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), whose 1961 account of Roosevelt-era Communism and the consensus that followed generated enough interest in radicalism at the height of the “consensus” era to call into doubt the very hypothesis the book was proposing; Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), who codified the cold war consensus hypothesis for future historians from a highly presentist perspective in 1976, when the proposed consensus seemed to be crumbling; and Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985). Alan Wald’s and Michael Denning’s corrective accounts, which extend the definition of the left to Popular Front sympathizers and, thus, suggest a continuity of radical leftist thought into the consensus era, still take a Communist/Marxist-centric perspective, mentioning anarchism in passing but focusing on the age of the Soviet sympathy and Rooseveltian statism as definitive for leftist history. We gain an even more complete picture of the twentieth-century left by adding anarchist thinkers to the rolls of social dissidents to whom these latter authors rightly called attention. See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, and Alan Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

91. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 11.

92. Stephen Prothero, "On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest," *The Harvard Theological Review* 84 (April 1991): 214.

93. David Meltzer, "Kenneth Rexroth (1969), Interview," in *San Francisco Beat*, ed. Meltzer, 235.

94. For a brief, conversational account of Rexroth's confrontation with the state-authoritarian Communist movement during the Popular Front decades, see his interview with David Meltzer in *San Francisco Beat*, ed. Meltzer, 364.

95. In his overview of literature on Buddhism in America, Peter Gregory distinguishes between Buddhist "sympathizers" and "convert" Buddhists. The distinction between sympathizer Buddhists and practicing converts is complex, however, as Gregory notes. D. T. Suzuki spent years studying and practicing temple Zen but was primarily interested in a philosophical practice. This essay does not address who among Suzuki, Snyder, Whalen, or Watts better qualifies as a sympathizer or "convert." By such a standard, Philip Whalen, who adopted a full-time practice at the San Francisco Zen Center, becomes a convert, and Suzuki, though an "immigrant Buddhist," appears more like a sympathizer. Part of this essay's underlying argument is that deploying national and racial categories to define "legitimate" religious practice is unfruitful and ultimately unproductive to religious and cultural dialogue. If, as Gregory notes, "for Americanists and Buddhologists alike," the study of Buddhism in America "raises questions of what it means to be a 'Buddhist' and what it means to be an 'American'" (233), for an Americanist looking globally it raises the question of what it means to be a cosmopolitan (in the old, anti-nationalist sense of the term) within the limiting constraints of nationalist ideologies. See Peter N. Gregory, "Describing the Elephant: Buddhism in America," *Religion and American Culture* 11 (Summer 2001): 233–63.

96. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 368.

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**ABSTRACT** This essay explores the political origins and implications of Beat Zen anarchism, a cultural phenomenon located in the intersection between American anarchist traditions and Zen Buddhism in the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance. Focusing on the writings of D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen, it shows how Beat Zen emerged not primarily from an Orientalist appropriation of "the East" but rather from an Occidentalist, Japanese-centered criticism of American materialism that followed from the complex legacy of the World's Parliament of Religions at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. In

staking their claims to Zen, in other words, Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder—the Beat poets on whom this essay focuses—along with Alan Watts expressed the views not of cultural imperialists, as one might suppose, but of converts to what they regarded as a superior way of life.

The Beat adoption of Zen intersected with a broadly libertarian and specifically anarchist social milieu in San Francisco that congregated around Kenneth Rexroth's Libertarian Club and Anarchist Circle. The individualist, anti-statist, and anarchist political outlooks of Beat Zen anarchists were directly confirmed by the writings of D. T. Suzuki, who presented Zen as a practice of personal liberation from cultural conditioning. Suzuki's rhetorical approach—which treated Japanese Zen as both a pinnacle of Asian civilization and a key to the liberation of Western humanity from its stifling and destructive rationalism—was informed by Meiji-era Japanese nationalism and exceptionalism and by the universalism that Buddhist missionaries brought to their explanations of Zen to Westerners. Arguing that Beat Zen poets, in adopting Buddhism as it was presented to them, were foremost Occidentalists rather than Orientalists in outlook, this essay concludes that the Beat Zen anarchist cultural formation suggests a libertarian alternative to Orientalism and also reconfigures common conceptions of American radical literary history as primarily Marxist-inflected.



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