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for “Tradition” in Buddhist Studies

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Western Self, Asian Other: Modernity, Authenticity, and Nostalgia for “Tradition” in Buddhist Studies

Natalie E. Quli *

Introduction

There has been considerable rancor and finger-pointing in recent years concerning the intersection of the West and Buddhism. A new wave of research has focused on Orientalism and the ways in which Western ideas about Buddhism, and even Western criticisms of Buddhism, have been appropriated and turned on their heads to produce a variety of hybrid traditions most often called Buddhist modernism and Protestant Buddhism. Western scholars and early adopters of Buddhism, as well as contemporary Western Buddhist sympathizers and converts, are regularly labeled Orientalists;¹ Asian Buddhists like Anagārika Dharmapāla and D. T. Suzuki are routinely dismissed for appropriating Western ideas and cloaking them with the veil of tradition, sometimes for nationalistic ends, and producing “Buddhist modernism.”

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With the not always friendly tone that has accompanied many of these indictments of Westernization and Orientalism, it is no wonder that many researchers have grown tired of the discussion. However, as taxing as it may be, it benefits our work to recognize the biases and theoretical missteps that may confuse our understandings and risk producing stereotyped caricatures of the people we study. While some may like to say that becoming “all worked up” over categories of representation is fruitless and instead suggest that we move on to the task of description, I would argue that for those of us who are on the receiving end of these categories, or have family and friends affected by the continued cultivation of Orientalism and related modes of Othering in Western scholarship and popular culture, we do not have the privilege to set aside the discussion for a later time. I would suggest that it is, in fact, our desire to avoid the painful recognition of our complicity in the matter coupled with the privilege of not having to confront such stereotypes in our personal, daily lives that drives us to set the issue aside as if it were mere quibbling. I have no such luxury, and I make no apologies for caring deeply about the sometimes demeaning, though usually well-intentioned, representations of Asian American and Western convert Buddhists in the Buddhist Studies literature that continues unabated. I would stress that there are times when an interrogation of theoretical concerns is necessary to producing more accurate and useful descriptive work. This is one of those times.

This paper seeks to address some of the more rancorous strands of the discussion, noting that the fuel for claims of Orientalism and the related idea of a Westernized Buddhist modernism can more often than not be traced to a concern for the preservation of a “tradition” that scholars fear is being lost to the ravages of modernity. While I do not wish to contribute more hostility and finger-pointing to the field, I think it is important to recognize that these accusations have contributed to an attitude of dismissal toward a significant and growing population of

Buddhists, who, though certainly worthy of study, appear to be marginal to the main project of Buddhist Studies, which is overtly concerned with a non-Western Other. The discourse concerning Buddhist modernism has carried with it a subtle claim that so-called “modern” Buddhists—who would not necessarily label themselves as such—are not “really” Buddhist at all; they are tainted by Western culture, philosophy, and religion, and as such are peripheral to the study of the “authentic” Buddhism that resides in a more “traditional” Asia. When mapped onto an essentialized Self/Other or West/East complex, Western Buddhists (of both the convert and so-called “ethnic” varieties), as well as Asian Buddhists of all stripes, are reduced to stereotypes of “traditional” and “modern” that fail to capture the multifaceted nature of their religious traditions, beliefs, and practices. It further produces “good savages” and “bad savages,” condemning those who fail to live up to the standard of a non-Westernized “traditional Buddhism” that we have created as a mirror to the modern West. At its core, the issue is one of representation and identity.

Buddhist Studies has made ample use of the concept of “identity” in Buddhist Asia in recent years. For example, scholars have demonstrated that Japanese nativism in the 1900s produced certain Buddhist identities that were in line with nationalistic aims. Researchers working in Sri Lanka studies have noted a similar rise of “fundamentalist” Sinhala Buddhist identities that also play into Sinhala nationalism. The scholarly works that use Buddhist identity as a tool for understanding have indeed offered valuable insights into the ways people mark the boundaries of social groups. But such identities can be either/both self-consciously assumed or ascribed by an outsider, roughly corresponding to emic and etic perspectives. The dominant framework of “Buddhist modernism” makes use of an etic perspective to describe Buddhists in ways that they would likely not describe themselves, and furthermore

employs distortional dualities that muddy our understanding of Buddhism and Buddhists in the contemporary period.

What I would like to call attention to in this paper is the issue of an *etic*, ascribed identity—"Buddhist modernism"—and its relationship to a discourse dominated by tropes of decay and decline. Western Buddhist Studies scholars appear to be experiencing a certain amount of guilt over our field's complicity in the colonial project, leaving us with a profound sense of loss at what our forefathers and -mothers destroyed and altered through colonial practices and even critical Buddhist Studies scholarship. This sense of guilt is what Renato Rosaldo has described as an "imperialist nostalgia," a profound sense of longing for pre-Western traditional culture that the colonial agent herself destroyed. In Western Buddhist Studies, we recognize that it was our own Western predecessors who "infected," dismantled, or destroyed traditional cultures. We appear to be in the midst of coming to terms with this unsavory past.

It is no surprise, then, that the current climate of Buddhist Studies in relation to contemporary Buddhism would be tinged with a certain amount of disdain for what this history of Western colonialism and imperialism has produced. We may seek to correct, or at least distance ourselves from, the West's interference with and transformation of Buddhism, particularly Buddhist nationalisms and Western-influenced forms like so-called Protestant Buddhism. But nostalgia can never correct the past, and as displeased as we might be over the transformation of Buddhism through its interaction with the West, these forms are here to stay. More importantly, these forms are seen by Buddhists themselves as authentic, even "traditional," and unless we wish to continue to force our own subjective readings of the past onto the subjects of our study in a quite colonial fashion, we would do well to incorporate a more *emic*, less dismissive perspective.

This essay seeks to recognize how Buddhist Studies continues at times to employ Orientalizing strategies even as it seeks to distance itself from them, notably in the attempt to discount convert Buddhists, Asian American and other “ethnic” Western Buddhists, and certain forms of Asian Buddhism as “modernist,” that is, not traditionally Asian and therefore not authentic. This nostalgia, with its characteristic trope of decay and distortion, goes hand-in-hand with the tendency to discount hybrid identities. Indeed, this tendency to reject the hybrid as inauthentic is an extension of the colonial search for pure races and pure cultures, and as such is part and parcel of what anthropology identifies as “salvage studies,” described more fully below.

This paper is explicitly focused on developing more robust theory in the field of Buddhist Studies. I suggest that Buddhist Studies scholars would benefit from dismantling those dualistic notions of culture and place that prevent us from recognizing the value of studies of Buddhists in non-Asian locales. I suggest that, by beginning with an essentialized Asian Buddhist “tradition,” many scholars have become preoccupied with protecting authentic, “traditional” Asian Buddhism from the contamination of Western-influenced “Buddhist modernism.” This simplistic model of Asian versus Western, traditional versus modernist, repeats the stereotype of a passive Asian and an active Westerner, perpetuating the researcher’s inclination to “save” Asian (and by extension, Asian American) Buddhism from the West. Others have used this dichotomy of the passive Asian/modernist Westerner to promote a new, supposedly “culture-free” form of Buddhism in the West that is unlike the traditional, conservative Asian Buddhism against which they paint it.

To more deeply understand Buddhists in the global ecumene, we must abandon nostalgic notions of “pure” cultures and traditions and recognize the presence of multiple and hybrid identities—such as *both*

Asian *and* American, or Asian *and* Western. Many Buddhist scholars have relied on an unarticulated Western Self/Asian Other dichotomy, manifesting in a “hierarchy of field sites” that discourages studies of Western Buddhism, including both Asian Americans and non-Asian American converts, continuing to cultivate those old colonial fantasies of pure cultures and pure traditions. It is my hope that this essay will contribute to theoretical developments in Buddhist Studies and a more serious recognition of emic perspectives and the impact of representation in scholarship.

Salvage Studies

The academic study of Buddhism in Western countries is still a relatively young field. The inauguration of a new consultation on Buddhism in the West at the American Academy of Religion in 2007 marked an important turning point in the visibility of such studies, but unfortunately research on Western Buddhism seems to continue to hold a position of “not *really* Buddhist Studies,” preventing full participation in the field as well as depriving Buddhist Studies of the sort of theoretical insights that come from studying groups at the margins. Part of the reluctance of the field to fully embrace studies of Western Buddhism may well be the result of what Numrich has called academic “snobbery” (*North American* 4), but I would like to suggest that there are deeper, more systemic problems in the dominant theoretical approach in Buddhist Studies that both presents obstacles to taking seriously the study of Buddhists living in Western countries and distorts the way we view cross-cultural contact in Asian countries. In this paper I would like to suggest that dualistic and nostalgic models of tradition and modernity, as well as place and culture—based in ideas of passive/active, pure/corrupted, Asian/Western, self/other—prevent us from asking and answering important questions regarding the adaptation of Buddhism to lived realities in an increasing-

ly connected world. A theoretical approach that subtly or explicitly privileges as more authentic those Buddhisms predating Western contact can distort the way we characterize Buddhists, as changes tend to be framed in terms of decline and loss rather than adaptation or creativity. I would like to begin untangling some of these assumptions and unarticulated nostalgias that prevent not only a serious consideration of Buddhist Westerners, but also a more generally ethical engagement with Buddhists all over the world. To develop a methodology capable of deep listening, I suggest we begin to dismantle those theoretical foundations that interpret change as pollution. A prime example of such a framework in need of our attention is the current separation in Buddhist Studies of traditional, pure Buddhists from modernist, corrupted ones.

I'd like to begin with a consideration of how we theorize "tradition" in Buddhist Studies and attempt to glean some of the insights available from a sister field that has paid much attention to this issue in recent years. The field of anthropology has much to offer Buddhist Studies in the current debate over Buddhist modernism. Anthropology began to approach systematically several decades ago a theoretical problem that was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore: the transhistorical, homogenous, and authentically "traditional" cultures (versus Western ones) considered to be the heart of anthropology's project were found to be largely fictional. A reevaluation of the field's focus on "pure" and distinct cultures—which mirrored the now defunct notion of "pure" and distinct races—began with such works as *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Clifford and Marcus) and *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Clifford). In the twenty or so years since these works were first published, the issue of conducting fieldwork among cultures affected by colonialism and modernity has also been rigorously theorized. Among the issues that have been addressed is the notion of "pure" cultures or traditions untouched by modern Western influence. Curiously, although Buddhist Studies has

adopted a number of anthropological constructs in its methodologies, there seems to be very little understanding or interest in the theoretical issues underpinning either the anthropological concept of “culture” or its fieldwork methodology.

Ethnographic fieldwork was originally developed as a method for studying small cultures and societies, which were seen as existing “outside the flow of historical change” that had occurred in industrialized societies (Wolf 310). As framed by social evolutionary theory, small societies were seen as representing early human history and, by extension, our “own” (Western) past. The modern/traditional binary between civilized (modern) and natural (traditional) societies both valorized and condemned modernity; modern peoples were seen as more intelligent and liberated but also less authentic. In this manner, “the concept of tradition has served as a mirror for the anxiety that ‘arises from the fear that modern life is by its nature inauthentic—even counterfeit or spurious’” (AlSayyad 10; quoting Upton 299). Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Taussig (231) notes that at the same time that the concept of modernity became central to the West’s self-understanding, the primitivist movement began to gain widespread attention by offering the promise of capturing the “authentic” human experience missing from contemporary life. This fueled the work of so-called salvage anthropologists who sought to defend traditional, natural societies against the onslaught of modernity and the specter of artificiality by conducting fieldwork in what they deemed to be vanishing societies (Rosaldo 68-87).

The term “fieldwork” derives, in fact, from early naturalists who sought to catalogue animal and plant species in their natural environments (Gupta & Ferguson Discipline 6). Early anthropologists seeking to describe “primitive” human species in undisturbed surroundings adopted the naturalist model of fieldwork as their primary methodology. Gupta and Ferguson argue that this attitude meant that those who lived

outside of their so-called “natural” states, such as American Indians living in Western cities, “came to be considered less suitable anthropological objects because they were outside ‘the field,’ just as zoological studies of animals in captivity came to be considered inferior to those conducted on animals in the wild” (Discipline 7).

After anthropology became a self-aware discipline in the late nineteenth century, fieldworkers began to recognize, quite to their distress, that the natives they studied were not living in pristine or “natural” conditions. It is out of this anxiety that salvage anthropology—“a self-conscious attempt to reconstruct such a state [of naturalness] from the observation and questioning of natives living under the patently ‘unnatural’ conditions of a postconquest colonial world”—was developed (Gupta & Ferguson Discipline 6). We can see this anxiety expressed in the work of early anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), who fretted over collecting data in places “less likely contaminated by the natives’ previous contact with white people like himself” (Tomas 95-96; quoted in Gupta & Ferguson Discipline 6-7). This attitude paved the way for salvage anthropology, the model of research that aims to rescue the third-world native and her traditional culture from the modern West. As such, concerns about “Buddhist modernism”—those non-traditional, hybrid forms of Buddhism that threaten the preservation of so-called “traditional” Buddhism in places like Sri Lanka—are deeply rooted in salvage anthropology and its separation of authentic, natural natives from inauthentic, corrupted ones. This is evident when scholars identify contemporary Buddhisms as being “distortions” of Asian transhistorical essences now contaminated by Western ideas.²

The trope of tradition and modernity is a dualism that has served anthropology in that it defined proper subjects of study: *traditional* subjects. As Asad (19) argues, “the major ideas [anthropology] uses to grasp

its subjects (nonmodern, local, traditional) are often dependent on its [sic] contrastive sense with the modern.” In fact, it is the idealized primitive, representative of timeless tradition, which has served as the “[foil] against which to judge modern industrial society” (Rosaldo 82). The utility of the traditional/modern binary is its ability to identify that which is lacking in modernity. In this sense, modernity requires tradition in order to define itself.

The root of the tradition/modern trope lies in its assessment of the passage of time. Religious and other cultural “traditions” are labeled as such because they are seen as having roots in the past from which they have emerged partially or fully intact; they are faithful continuations of an original artifact. The construction of tradition is thus centrally concerned with preservation over the passage of time. However, in our nostalgia for origins, we neglect to recognize that traditions—whether those of indigenous or “modern” peoples—are constantly invented and negotiated, all the while maintaining the stamp of authoritative tradition.³ We repeat what we take to be original or authentic and dream of a line of unbroken continuity extending into the past. But such a vision neglects to account for human invention and the roles of culture and circumstance in our interpretations of tradition, leading us to believe that we continue faithfully in the legacy of those who came before us. When Lyotard describes “a situation of continuous embedding, which makes it impossible to find a first utterer,” he acknowledges that social forms are indeed inherited, but continually undergo change as people reconstruct and re-imagine the past (34; quoted in Bhabha 57). It is therefore problematic to consider indigenous peoples as representing some frozen stage of human history, some authentic preservation of tradition that has been lost in the modern era. As an invention of the present projecting itself onto the past, tradition is always in movement, being contested, forgotten, remembered, reinvented, augmented, abandoned, revived, and above all, *lived*.

If we take seriously the constant invention of tradition, we must conclude that there is no “authentic” original; every manifestation of a tradition is based on a previous one, which is in turn based on an earlier one—“there are hybrid turtles all the way down,” as Kapchan (241) observes (see also Queen xvii). Based on this conclusion, AlSayyad argues that the entire modern/traditional binary and its attendant value judgments of purity and authenticity should be discarded because they are based on a false dichotomy. More specifically, he suggests that “the end of tradition does not entail the death of tradition itself, only an end to our conception of it—and the emergence of a need to reevaluate its utility as a repository of authentic (and hence valuable) ideas to be handed down or preserved” (11-12).

Buddhist Modernism and the Paradigm of Salvage Research

Buddhist modernists are described in the Buddhist Studies literature as possessing an orientation that encompasses a number of often interrelated features said to derive from the influence of the West. These include: the extolling of reason and rationality; a rejection of ritual, “superstition,” and cosmology; an understanding of doctrine and text as more authentically Buddhist than practices such as relic veneration or Buddha-name recitation; laicization and democratization; a valorization of meditation and an optimistic view of nirvana, culminating in the hitherto unprecedented widespread practice of meditation among the laity; an ecumenical attitude toward other Buddhist sects; increased status of women; interest in social engagement; the tendency to define Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion; a return to the “original” teachings of the Buddha, particularly as ascribed to the Pāli canon; a focus on text; and rejection of “spirit” or “folk” religion (Spiro’s “little tradition”) as mere cultural accretions (introduced through the process of decay) to be separated from the rational core of Buddhism. Although this

is a simplification of Buddhist modernism, these trends are some of those most often cited as resulting from Asian Buddhist interaction with Western ideas.⁴

Scholars such as Jørn Borup have pointed out that in the nineteenth century, encounters with Western Orientalists, missionaries, and colonists and their representations of Buddhism led Asian Buddhists to produce counter-interpretations using the rhetoric of “inverse Orientalism.” Such a rhetoric allowed the Western Orientalist categories used to denigrate the Eastern Other to be appropriated and turned on their axes. For example, the Western characterization of Buddhism as superstitious could be countered by the inverse Orientalist argument that it is actually rational and scientific. Bechert first called such Western-influenced reinterpretations of Buddhism in Asia, including both inverse Orientalism and the direct appropriation of Western concepts, “Buddhist modernism,” which he located and described in various Asian cultures. Gombrich and Obeyesekere also described similar changes in Sri Lankan Theravāda using the term “Protestant Buddhism.”

In a move quite consonant with the aims of salvage anthropology, Gombrich, in his *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, locates “traditional” Sinhalese society in village life, while urban centers represent modern or “Protestant” Buddhism.⁵ He traces a relatively stable Sinhalese tradition confronting the modern, Christian West. Following Bechert, in his periodization scheme he divides Buddhist history in Sri Lanka into three: the period of the Buddha and several centuries following his death, the pre-Western period (lasting roughly two thousand years), and the post-contact period. He notes, “The first unavoidable confrontation with Christianity occurred only in the nineteenth century.... A synoptic view of the history of Buddhism in Ceylon must therefore be very uneven in its chronological coverage” (Gombrich 17). But this periodization relies heavily on a mod-

ern/traditional model in which the West represents the urban modern and the East—in this case, rural Sri Lanka—represents tradition. Such a model is evident when he asserts that

The confrontation with Christianity is the one great and sudden break in Sinhalese Buddhist history, far more significant than the vicissitudes which affected the fortunes of the Sangha during the previous two thousand years.... [B]oth British colonial rule and great worldwide changes which have followed it in recent years have set profound changes in motion in the culture of Sri Lanka. After the riots of 1983, one has to conclude by asking whether Sinhalese civilization can survive those changes. (Gombrich 17)

This attitude displays the salvage paradigm in ample quantity—to “record the precious culture before it disappears forever” (Rosaldo 81)—in Gombrich’s narrative of a stable Sinhalese tradition ruptured or broken through its encounter with the modern West (the “great and sudden break in Sinhalese Buddhist history”) and Gombrich’s concomitant fear that authentic Sinhalese civilization may be lost (whether or not “Sinhalese civilization can survive”). In relying on a relatively static conception of “tradition”—it has, after all, lasted two thousand years with only minor changes in his model—Gombrich’s periodization, as well as subsequent works that build on this notion of a “traditional” Buddhism in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, obscure “the rich history of Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia between the 5th and 19th centuries” (Blackburn *Colonialism and Modernism* 12; see also Blackburn *Locations of Buddhism*).

In the modern/traditional binary of salvage studies, as well as in Said’s notion of Orientalism and the soft and overt forms of Traditionalism (Sedgwick), the West represents the modern and the East represents tradition. For this reason, Sri Lanka’s encounter with Western colonialism is of utmost consequence in Gombrich’s interpretation of history. Playing on the notion of Western culture as the locus of “progress” and

dynamism (regardless of whether that progress is regarded as positive or negative), this attitude places the West in a position of ultimate power as the agent of change and harbinger of modernity. Bond reiterates this claim when he describes Sri Lankan Buddhist reformism and neotraditionalism as resulting from nineteenth-century contact with the West. This monocausal explanation of change, as Blackburn has called it, describes Western influence as the sole stimulant for changes in the “traditional” Buddhism of Sri Lanka, which is characterized by Gombrich and others as having been relatively stable and conservative prior to Western contact.

This example points toward a deep concern with purity and authenticity, which stems from the tendency to hypostatize cultures and religious traditions (Cho *Imagining*), a tendency that is repeated in the binary of traditional/modernist Buddhism. If we persist in seeing tradition as a transhistorical essence to be protected from modernity, emergent traditions will continue to be described as “not authentic enough” (Jacobs 32). As Cho (*Imagining* 191) notes in her response to the academic condemnation of popular Buddhism in the West, the current atmosphere in academia

encourages us to draw a line of demarcation between “real” and “false” Buddhism. But we have been ensnared by this trap before. As Buddhist studies completes its movement from the embrace of doctrinal texts to the valorization of popular practices as artifacts of “real Buddhism,” it is useful to guard against making the same journey through other vitiating dualisms.

Similarly, Gellner (59) argues that although

defining the boundary between what counts as Buddhism and what is not Buddhism has necessarily been a concern for Buddhist monks throughout history...[i]t is also true, however, that the

anthropology of Buddhism will have attained maturity only when it can focus equally on other questions and only when it can analyze and compare Buddhism in different contexts without immediately becoming embroiled in issues of identity and authenticity.

Although issues of “real” Buddhism and “counterfeit” Buddhism may be reasonable and important for Buddhists themselves, it is not our job as *scholars* to make such determinations. Our role is to describe and understand Buddhists—of whatever persuasion (Tweed). To do otherwise is to attempt to silence the native, the old colonialist strategy of controlling the native through controlling her history, ensuring that only elite, academic experts have the knowledge necessary to “speak” for Buddhism.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the emerging field of Buddhism in the West. Bringing together the dualities of the modern West/traditional East, the nostalgia of salvage anthropology for unblemished tradition, the rejection of natives who are “out of place” as inappropriate objects of study, and the assumption of an impermeable boundary between a Buddhist Asian Other and a non-Buddhist Western Self, both convert Western Buddhists and ethnically Asian Western Buddhists have remained an eccentric if not inappropriate area of research in the larger field of Buddhist Studies. It is to this understudied area that I now turn.

Western Self, Asian Other: Authenticity and Place in Buddhist Studies

Anyone interested in the study of American Buddhism is likely familiar with the statement in 1991 by Helen Tworkov, former editor of the American Buddhist magazine *Tricycle*, that Asian Americans have “so far ... not figured prominently in the development of something called American Buddhism” (4). Though many scholars and Asian American Buddhists alike have criticized this position at length, I believe it is still a

dominant attitude among many Buddhist scholars of Asian Buddhism and what I'll call here "convert Buddhists," the first generation of American converts from predominantly non-Asian backgrounds.

How is it that with all the changes undergone in Asian American forms of Buddhism Tworikov could make such a claim? The key to understanding her statement lies in her definition of "American" and is connected to categorizations of American Buddhism based on ethnic or cultural categories. What Tworikov is saying, essentially, is that these Buddhists are not really American because they are too "cultural"—they are too Asian, too ethnic to be "American." As Rosaldo (198) notes, "In 'our' own eyes, 'we' appear to be 'people without culture.' By courtesy, 'we' extend noncultural status to people who ('we' think) resemble 'us.'" For Tworikov, a truly American Buddhism is free of culture—as are real Americans. Asian Americans, by contrast, are cultural. But do we really believe that Euro American whites are culture-free? Or is it that white American culture is simply transparent to those on the inside? We need to consider the implications of such an attitude. Rosaldo asks: "What are the analytical consequences of making 'our' cultural selves invisible? What cultural politics erase the 'self' only to highlight the 'other'? What ideological conflicts inform the play of cultural visibility and invisibility?" (Rosaldo 198) When Tworikov says Asian Americans are not contributors to an "American" Buddhism, she is saying that they have not contributed much to the development of her *white American cultural interpretation* of Buddhism (elite/import/convert Buddhism). That particular interpretation is no more free of culture than an Asian American version; the only difference is that being a white American gives Tworikov the privilege of speaking from nowhere in particular because her culture is deemed transparent.⁶ This is not to say that Tworikov has nothing valuable to offer on her scholarship on convert Buddhism in America, only that it suffers from a major flaw.

The “two Buddhisms” model for understanding American Buddhism developed by Prebish in his *American Buddhism* likewise divides American Buddhists into two camps: cultural or ethnic Buddhists (that is, Asian Americans) and meditation-oriented Buddhists (largely non-Asian Americans). I wish to call to the reader’s attention that in fact *both* groups are cultural: because the meditation-oriented convert Buddhists are largely white and elite, their culture becomes transparent by means of its prevalence, but it is no less existent. What I’m *not* saying is that, based on this fact, the two Buddhisms model should be utterly abandoned or deemed valueless. As Numrich rightly observes (*Two Buddhisms* 194), Prebish’s original formulation of the two Buddhisms model highlights not ethnicity but the function that Buddhist organizations play in the lives of adherents (a point applied quite successfully by Numrich; see his *Old Wisdom*). However, when the two Buddhisms model is mapped onto the Orientalist notion of a modern and progressive West versus a traditional and passive East, issues of race and ethnicity become increasingly problematic.

Take, for example, James Coleman’s recent essay, “The Emergence of a New Buddhism: Continuity and Change,” an otherwise insightful and compelling account of convert Buddhism in America. Initially, Coleman distinguishes between two types of Buddhism in the United States: the “new” Western Buddhism that focuses on meditation, and the ethnic Buddhism of Asian immigrants (185). Several pages later he presents another categorization: “the new Western Buddhism, the ethnic Buddhism of the migrant enclaves, [and] traditional Asian Buddhism” (188). It is against the backdrop of “ethnic” and “traditional Asian” Buddhism that Coleman can draw a picture of the exciting new Western Buddhism (i.e., convert/elite Buddhism) that is both “fresh, innovative, diverse” (186) and more consonant with original Buddhism than “traditional” Asian forms:

In both the newest and the oldest Buddhism, the highest goal is not faith and belief, proper behavior, or ritual devotion, but the direct experience of enlightenment. Both attach great importance to the practice of meditation, and both feel that liberation must spring from each individual's own life and practice, not the intercession of supernormal beings.... (187)

While the (non-Asian) "Western" Buddhist is a progressive and innovative individual seeking liberation, the Asian and Asian American is weighed down by Asian "collectivism" and "cultural baggage" (193). And although Coleman initially acknowledges the existence of Asian American Buddhists in the West, he soon lapses into describing only elite convert Buddhists as "Western" Buddhists, seemingly unaware that Asian Americans are also Westerners. Coleman has simply replaced Tworkov's terminology of "American" Buddhists with "Western" ones, preserving the same notion that Asian Americans are conservative, collectivistic, and traditional.

According to individuals like Tworkov and Coleman, Asian Americans are not so much "American" as they are "Asian." Americans are culture-free individuals; Asian Americans still carry Asian baggage and have not achieved the full status as "real" Americans or Westerners. In characterizing Asian American Buddhism as traditional, developments that have occurred in Asian American Buddhist communities over the past two hundred years are either ignored or never considered at all. A highly static identity is posited, such that Asian American Buddhists are described variously as traditional, patriarchal, or more interested in the "cultural" (Asian) aspects of Buddhism (see, for example, Coleman).⁷ The data, however, does not bear out this characterization; Asian American Buddhist communities have changed over time, sometimes significantly so.⁸ But their utility as the foil against which to posit a progressive and modern Westerner against a conservative and traditional Asian remains.⁹

I would suggest in light of these difficulties that we as scholars need to more carefully consider our characterizations of “modern” and “traditional” Buddhism, particularly when this categorization is plotted against a geographic background of West versus East, and especially given our discipline’s history of Orientalism and complicity with colonialism. While the individuals cited above may consider Asian Americans not “really” American enough to warrant our attention, we face another troubling bias against not only Asian American Buddhists but Western Buddhists in general. A number of scholars within our ranks maintain that *real* Buddhism exists only in Asia—not in the West. This attitude is due in part to an outdated Area Studies mentality, one that identifies its subject of study as being the Asian Other. As a result, many academics in Buddhist Studies are not inclined to take seriously studies of Buddhists who are not *in situ*, that is, located in “proper” Buddhist cultural environments (i.e., Buddhist Asia). Buddhists in Western contexts are apt to be seen by academics in ways akin to what Mary Douglas classifies as “dirt”—that messy stuff that both transgresses and reinforces boundaries.

As is becoming increasingly clear, the global interconnectedness that now permeates contemporary societies has rendered the idea of bounded, discrete cultures obsolete. The distinct and stable identities (“Chinese” Buddhism, “Burmese” Buddhism) once assumed in Buddhist Studies research are no longer so stable. Perhaps more important to this paper’s topic, the identity of something called “the West” can no longer be understood as the foundation upon which to create anthropological Others or mimetic alters (Taussig 236; Gupta and Ferguson Discipline 15). More to the point, Westerners are complex hybrids, and some Westerners are also *Asian American*. This goes to the heart of the Western Self/Asian Other dualism, one that both excludes Asian Americans as outsiders in Tworkov and Coleman’s analyses, and one that excludes them as not Asian enough to study in Buddhist Studies departments. We

are left with the need to develop more careful theoretical models to account for the hybrid identities developing in our increasingly transnational world, recognizing that Buddhism is being transmitted through various channels of power—including the academy.

To begin developing a theoretical foundation appropriate to the conditions of movements of people, ideas, materials, and so forth, we need to examine a number of underlying assumptions in the field of Buddhist Studies regarding proper sites of study. Imperative to this process of reflection is the recognition that Buddhist Studies rests upon what has been called a “hierarchy of field sites” or a “hierarchy of purity” that privileges those places viewed as most Other to academicians—that is, most exotic or strange to a middle-class, Euro-American Self (Gupta and Ferguson *Discipline* 17; Des Chene 70). In so doing, we must be mindful of how we define ourselves and our objects of study; who do we label as Other, and what are the ethical implications of this decision? As McLaren (213) notes, we should ask ourselves honestly, “Who has the power to exercise meaning, to create the grid from which Otherness is defined, to create the identifications that invite closures on meanings, on interpretations and traditions?”

If Buddhist Studies considers itself a discipline that at its core studies the “exotic” or the “Other”—that is, if we deem our mission as one of introducing to students and fellow scholars worlds unlike “our” own as an exercise in diversity—we are more likely to dismiss Western forms of Buddhism as too familiar. As the subject of study moves closer to the implicit self in the academy, these sites of study are labeled less pure and, in the case of ethnographic studies conducted at sites in the United States, granted low status and even stigmatized (Gupta & Ferguson *Discipline* 14). But such an uncritical understanding of Otherness fails to recognize that the United States is in fact a non-homogenous so-

ciety with a variety of sites of “difference.” Gupta and Ferguson urge us to remember that

Practicing decolonized anthropology in a deterritorialized world means ... doing away with ... exoticization of the conventional anthropological “field,” and foregrounding the ways in which we anthropologists are historically and socially (not just biographically) linked with the areas we study.... It also means taking away lingering evolutionist and colonialist ideas of “natives in their natural state,” and denying the anthropological hierarchy of field sites that devalues work in so many intellectually and politically crucial areas....(*Discipline* 38)

In the anthropological study of Buddhism, specifically fieldwork in Buddhist communities with Asian American members, changing our conceptualization of “natives in their natural state” entails recognizing that the hard boundary between Asia and the West can no longer be maintained. We must reconsider the Self/Other distinction upon which our field is based and rebuild the foundation of our studies, which Passaro (153) suggests can be achieved by considering Otherness not as a “geographical given but a theoretical stance.” When we have accomplished this theoretical reorientation, we will succeed in rediscovering sites of significant Otherness and difference within the cultures of the West (Clifford *Partial Truths* 23).

Charles Prebish’s *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* offers significant insight for the present discussion. One chapter of his study focuses on Buddhist Studies scholars themselves as his subjects, from whom he elicits responses to the issue of the study of Buddhism in the West. One of his respondents notes (*Luminous* 75),

I would strongly encourage students to work in this area if they felt so inclined. This is a radical change since 1990, when I strong-

ly discouraged students from exploring Western Buddhism, on the grounds that specializing in such an area would marginalize them in the academic world and limit their opportunities for academic employment.

It appears, at least, that this scholar sees a shift in the hierarchy of field sites. However, another scholar notes: “I specifically forbid my students from writing research papers on Western Buddhism. Since my experience is that American undergraduates are extremely *self-absorbed*, I simply use the course as an example of a *non-Western* religious and cultural form” (emphasis mine; Prebish *Luminous* 75).¹⁰ When Buddhist Studies academicians suggest that “we” need to focus our attention on the Other rather than our self, that is, avoid being “*self-absorbed*,” we should address the question of who is meant by this collective self/we:

If the answer is, as we fear, “the West,” then we must ask precisely who is to be included and who excluded from this club.... For ethnographers as for other natives, the postcolonial world is an interconnected social space; for many anthropologists—and perhaps especially for displaced Third World scholars—the identity of “one’s own society” is an open question. (Gupta & Ferguson *Beyond* 43)

Prebish (*Luminous* 75) also notes the attitude of one particularly well-known Buddhist Studies professor, who “suggested that no resources whatsoever ought to be committed to the study of Western Buddhism, because such a gesture subtracts valuable, needed resources from ‘real Buddhist Studies.’” Once again, the issue of authenticity looms large: “real” Buddhists (Buddhist Others) live in Asia. This is precisely the attitude we must guard against, particularly in its silencing of voices on the boundaries, like those of Asian American Buddhists.

Place, Salvage Studies, and the “Bad Savage”: Asian American Buddhisms

Malkki and others have argued that the relationship between culture and geographical location or “place” is regularly conceived in terms of plant metaphors that valorize the native or indigenous. Because natives are seen as “rooted” in place, immigrants have therefore been “uprooted.” It is upon this conceptualization—“the fantasy of origin and identity” (Bhabha 57)—that the old model of Area Studies relies. When we define culture or community in such a narrow way, we create the illusion that individuals belong to one—and only one—discrete, homogenous culture (Rosaldo 182). Immigrants, refugees, transnationals, and diaspora communities become an “aberration of categories” (Malkki 65). The cross-cultural identities that result from global translocation are, as Bhabha suggests, *blasphemous*. Those at the margins of our categories of East and West, Asian and American, disrupt the fiction of singular, object-like cultures in that there is no “natural” place that they belong.

The salvage paradigm is built on a firm foundation of nostalgia. It tells the story of human history as that of humankind’s original authenticity and subsequent decline, analogous to Eden and the fall from grace, from tradition to modernity. It has had a profound effect on the ways in which natives of any culture are theorized, particularly in the manner through which it separates “authentic” natives (those *in situ*) from fallen ones. It argues that “the good savage is representative of unsullied Origin, a sort of Eden before the Fall when harmony prevailed, while the bad savage is the sign of the permanent wound inflicted by history, the sign of waste, degeneracy, and thwarted narrative” (Taussig 142). This is the foundation of anthropological salvage studies of Otherness, repeated uncritically in Buddhist Studies to this day, where the “good Buddhists” have not been affected by Westerners, and the “bad Buddhists”—Buddhist modernists, sometimes equated uncritically with Orientalists—

are those whose Buddhisms reflect interaction with Western sources. Asian American Buddhists are thus unsuitable anthropological objects because not only do they reside in “unnatural” places, they have appropriated some Western ideas, rendering their Buddhisms (and themselves) inauthentic “distortions.”

To be sure, Buddhist Studies is moving away from the more overt forms of Orientalism that manifested as a preference for ancient, classical texts over modern, vernacular practices in the quest for an original (“pure”) Buddhism. Most of us are familiar with Said’s critique of Orientalism, which noted that the Orientalist trope of decay justified colonialism, as “Orientals” were seen as incapable of self-governing, and justified the Orientalist production of knowledge, as “Orientals” were seen as incapable of representing their own histories. With books like *Curators of the Buddha: Buddhism Under Colonialism* (Lopez, ed.), we might expect that such patronizing attitudes would have vanished. But part of the salvage studies *raison d’être* is to protect the feminine, passive third world from the modern, masculine West—and unfortunately this is an attitude that has not been curtailed in the discipline of Buddhist Studies.

As I mentioned previously, recently researchers in Buddhist Studies have lamented that nineteenth century Orientalists such as the Theosophists, by imposing their Western values onto their area of study and spreading this “distortion” among Asian Buddhists, produced a decidedly modern (that is, non-traditional) form of Buddhism that has been variously identified as “Buddhist modernism” or “Protestant Buddhism.” Unfortunately, many critics are rather unreflectively employing the same traditional/modern trope, or the “passive East/modern West” concept, that inspired the salvage studies of the Orientalists to begin with. For example, Henry Steel Olcott, an American who sought to protect the “ignorant” Sinhalese Buddhists from Western missionaries, states in his 1887 book *The Golden Rules of Buddhism*,

The too prevalent ignorance among even adult Sinhalese Buddhists of the ethical code of their religion leads me to issue this little compilation. Similar moral precepts exist by hundreds in the Buddhist Scriptures; where, also, all the present quotations will be found in the places indicated. They should be committed to memory and practised by parents and taught to their children, especially when the latter are being educated under anti-Buddhistic influences. (n.p.)

Olcott sought to protect “authentic” Buddhism from the West (i.e., “anti-Buddhistic influences”), while at the same time arguing that he, and not the Sinhalese, had the authority to speak for “real” Buddhism. Borup (454) notes that among Orientalists like Olcott,

Perhaps the most important quality of Buddhism was its status as “dead”: actual living Buddhism was looked upon as a false folk-religion, degenerated from pure [or] “real” textual Buddhism. Living Buddhists were not true Buddhists. They did not understand their own religion.

We now condemn the arrogance of nineteenth century Orientalists like Olcott for characterizing the Sinhalese as ignorant of their religion and for extolling a Westernized, textual-based interpretation of Buddhism as more authentic. However, the new salvage genre of Buddhist Studies, based on a rejection of Buddhist modernism as inauthentic, now claims that we must reject the voices of certain contemporary Buddhists as tainted by Western ideas and ignorant of Western influence on Buddhism. If Orientalists like Olcott identified authentic Buddhist tradition in a deep past locatable only through the aid of text, the new generation of salvage studies locates authenticity in pre-Western, “traditional” Buddhism. But if we condemn Western Orientalists for their characterization of Asian Buddhists as ignorant of “real” Buddhism and all-too-willing to embrace superstition, how are we then to justify our current academic

characterizations of Buddhist modernists—whether we identify them in contemporary Burmese Vipassanā, Japanese Zen, American Jōdo Shinshū, or in a Sri Lankan American Buddhist temple in California—as equally ignorant of their traditions and eager to adopt the “distortions” of modernism? This is simply neo-Orientalism.

For example, arguing that Western-influenced, modernist Buddhism is false Buddhism, B. Allan Wallace traces the influences of Western, extra-Buddhist ideas. Note the importance of the “purity of tradition” and its presumed changeless continuity in the following excerpts from his article “The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice in the West” (47-48; emphasis mine):

Such assertions [regarding the transformation of consciousness] are the “currency” of the faith of traditional Buddhists, who have been encouraged to accept the validity of these claims on the basis of the gold standard of experiences of generation upon generation of accomplished Buddhist contemplatives and saints.... A process of *declension* and laicization has obviously been taking place within the past two generations, during which time there has been a *rapid dilution* of Buddhist views and practices.... If the way one views the world is out of accord with *traditional* Buddhist worldviews, there is no way that one’s meditation and lifestyle can be Buddhist in any manner that accords with *traditional Asian* forms of Buddhism. Certainly some Western Buddhists, following the lead of their Asian teachers, are committed to maintaining the “purity” of their own traditions, without influence either from [other] Buddhist schools or from any non-Buddhist elements.

Here and elsewhere in the article we are led to identify changes (that is, “declension” and “dilution”) in Buddhism in the West as being propelled by Westerners and not Asian (or perhaps even Asian Ameri-

can) Buddhists—who are seen as passive preservers of “traditional” Buddhism. His allusion to the “gold standard” calls on the metaphor of counterfeit currency, and by extension, counterfeit Buddhism, made so by the introduction of “non-Buddhist elements.” These assertions regarding the primacy of authentic Buddhism over counterfeit forms rejects in one fell swoop not only a significant population of contemporary “modernist” Asian Buddhists, but Asian American Buddhists as well, as they have introduced “non-Buddhist” concepts into Western Buddhism that destroy the purity of tradition.

More clearly representing the aim of salvage studies, Baumann (61) argues for the importance of studying “traditionalist” immigrant Buddhist temples in the West in terms of “their strength and potential to withstand and oppose demythologization and modernization.” This not only relies on a static conception of tradition, it also identifies Asian American Buddhists with the “bad savages” of salvage studies. If, for example, we consider the American Jōdo Shinshū use of Buddhist hymnals modeled on Christian ones, using Wallace’s understanding of counterfeit Buddhism we must discount American Jōdo Shinshū as inauthentic, and using Baumann’s understanding of “traditionalist” immigrant Buddhism we must recognize it as the result of *not trying hard enough* (or, more disturbingly, being too “weak”) to “withstand” Western influences. Likewise, in my fieldwork I’ve spoken with a number of Sri Lankan American Buddhists who admire (and sometimes even practice) American forms of Vipassanā and consider Colonel Olcott a hero for Sinhalese Buddhists. Are we to then reject Sri Lankan American Buddhists as false Buddhists because they are too “Western” and not “Asian” enough?

Unfortunately, a number of recent studies on Buddhism in Western societies have continued to do so by employing a traditional/modernist distinction, but without careful consideration of the underlying imperialist nostalgia that fuels such claims. Particularly

troubling to me is the recent assertion by Baumann (59-60) that we replace the academic categories of “immigrant Buddhism” and “white Buddhism” in the United States (which are, to be sure, less than perfect categories) with the categories “traditional” and “modernist.” This understanding of Asian Americans as “traditional” and white Americans as “modern” simply reiterates the outdated Orientalist notion that the West is active and the East passive, or that Asian Americans are “conservative” while white Americans are “innovative.” The results of such an attitude are clear when we consider Tworokov or Coleman’s sentiment that Asian Americans have done little or nothing to contribute to “American” or “Western” Buddhism.

It seems to me that studies of Western Buddhists—of both convert and “ethnic” varieties—can contribute a great deal to creating a new theoretical framework for the larger field of Buddhist Studies, one that reevaluates the utility of linking authenticity to place, one that recognizes hybridity, and one that challenges the notion of a passive East and an active West. My sense is that deeply-seated notions of Western Self/Asian Other continue to dominate the field. The time is ripe for Buddhist Studies to learn from disciplines such as Asian American Studies and anthropology by developing new notions of “legitimate” subjects of study and recognizing that Western Buddhists (including Asian Americans) are no less “authentic” or worthy of study than those living in Asia.

When, in attempting to understand the relationship between the discipline of Buddhist Studies and Orientalist constructs, Lopez (*Curators* 11) argues, “The question is not one of the ethics of scholarship, but of the logics of representation,” he avoids acknowledging the ethical importance of representation. As D. Soyini Madison (4) notes, “representation has consequences: How people are represented is how they are treated.” The myth of detachment can provide a shield of innocence to

those of us in Buddhist Studies who want to distance ourselves from the academic legacy of colonialism, to point the finger at the field's founding Orientalists without taking responsibility for our own constructions of Otherness and authenticity. This is what I consider to be the Buddhist Studies version of Rosaldo's "imperialist nostalgia." Rosaldo notes (70): "the relatively benign character of most nostalgia facilitates imperialist nostalgia's capacity to transform the responsible colonial agent into an innocent bystander," thus absolving the Buddhist scholar from any responsibility in the ongoing neocolonialist production of knowledge. This complicity in perpetuating unequal power relationships through our representations of "authentic" and "inauthentic" Buddhism must be addressed. Buddhism itself can offer much to us as we strive for better, more ethical modes of representation, to develop a sense of responsibility that offers "a compelling sense of duty and commitment based on moral principles of human freedom and well-being, and hence a compassion for the suffering of living beings" (Madison 10). As I take this call for increased ethics quite seriously, I assume the responsibility in my own studies for developing a research model in Buddhist communities that can seriously consider, learn from, and provide a printed space for those voices that disrupt my own pat descriptions.

Notes

¹ Bartholomeusz is a bit vitriolic in her "Spiritual Wealth and Neo-Orientalism," in which she forcefully criticizes Western interest in Buddhism as mere Orientalism. Yarnall has likewise (and somewhat painfully) noted the continued presence of Orientalism in both convert Buddhist discourse and Buddhist studies scholarship on engaged Buddhism.

2 Two works that clearly articulate this rhetoric of decline and corruption include Robert Sharf's "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience" and Martin Southwold's *Buddhism in Life: The Study of Religion and the Sinhalese Practice of Buddhism*, both of which describe Buddhist modernism as a "distortion." For a helpful critique of this narrative, see Francisca Cho, "Imagining Nothing and Imagining Otherness in Buddhist Film" and "Religious Identity and the Study of Buddhism."

3 See, for example, Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

4 For an excellent overview of the concept of Buddhist modernism, see Donald S. Lopez Jr.'s introduction to *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West*. See also David McMahan's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*.

5 James Ferguson has argued convincingly in his "The Country and the City on the Copper Belt" that the village/city binary is just one manifestation of the larger dualistic narrative in academia that distinguishes between savage/civilized, traditional/modern, third world/West—part and parcel of the salvage paradigm.

6 Numrich covers the reaction to Tworokov's comments, as well as more generally the development of the "two Buddhisms" model, in his "Two Buddhisms Further Considered." See also Lori Pierce, "Diversity as Practice: Thinking about Race and 'American' Buddhism."

7 Although the same Buddhists no doubt would be described as modernists were they living in Asia, they suddenly become "traditional" when pitted against "modern" white Americans (that is, real Americans).

⁸ For two fine expositions on changes in Japanese American Buddhist traditions, see David Yoo, *Growing up Nisei: Race, Generation, and Culture*

among Japanese Americans of California, chapter 2; and Duncan Ryūken Williams, “Camp Dharma: Japanese-American Buddhist Identity and the Internment Experience of World War II.”

⁹ Queen similarly notes in his introduction to *American Buddhism* that, regarding Asian Americans, there are “popular perceptions of their passivity and marginality” (xix) that do not correspond to the often activist-oriented Asian American Buddhist groups described in later chapters of the book.

¹⁰ Where do Asian American Buddhists fit into such a narrow definition of “real” Buddhism? Are we to assume they are actually non-Western (despite, perhaps, being born and raised in the United States), or should we surmise that they are actually not really Buddhist?

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