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The Sexual Politics of Divine Femininity: Tārā in Transition in Gary Snyder's Poetry

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Of all the images that I see so often, the one that touches me most — partly, perhaps, because of the Eternal Feminine — is that of the incarnation that is called Kuwanon, when shown absorbed in the meditations of Nirvana.

John La Farge (175), *An Artist's Letters from Japan*¹

*Have you seen my companion
With her moon-like forehead*

Has she passed this way?

Gary Snyder, "An Offering for Tārā" (1996: 106)²

When the American poet Gary Snyder writes in an afterword to his 1996 long poem *Mountains and Rivers Without End* that the work may be regarded as "a sort of sūtra — an extended poetic, philosophic, and mythic narrative of the female Buddha Tārā," readers may wonder who Tārā is or why Snyder has written a "sūtra." The poetic alignment of divine

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¹La Farge extends the relation between divine femininity and compassion a few pages later: "And here, again, the intense silence, broken by the rush of the waterfall, recalled the pictures of K'wan-on, whose meaning and whose images bring back to me the Buddhistic idea of compassion. The deity, or goddess, seated in abstraction by the falling waters of life, represents, I suppose, more especially an ideal of contemplation, as the original Indian name indicated, I think; but her name to-day is that of the Compassionate One" (La Farge 180). Rick Fields (53–54) incorrectly attributed this quotation to Henry Adams (who was La Farge's companion on the trip to Japan). The letters, written during the 1886 trip to Japan, were first published in *Century Magazine* between 1890 and 1893.

²"An Offering for Tārā" is a seven-page poem appearing in the third section of Snyder's four-section *Mountains and Rivers Without End*.

compassion with femininity belongs to a tradition reaching back several centuries, and, as the epigraph from nineteenth-century artist and writer John La Farge shows, the *American* acknowledgement of specifically Asian traditions celebrating the divine feminine can be traced back more than a hundred years. However, several questions are raised by Snyder's afterword for contemporary readers. Why does an American writer refer to an Asian tradition that may be unfamiliar to many readers in America? What happens to a religious tradition such as the Buddhist worship of Tārā when it is transported from a Tibetan temple to a poem that was first published in 1995 in the *Yale Review*? In the 100 years between La Farge's *Letters* and the publication of Snyder's poem, the image of Tārā has made a remarkable transition. The female Buddha of compassion was utterly exotic when La Farge and his companion Henry Adams made their trip to Japan, but it appears in hundreds of books published each year in contemporary America.

Snyder's "An Offering for Tārā" is one of the thirty-nine poems that form *Mountains and Rivers Without End*; several of them feature a divine or mythic feminine presence. The poem can be read within the context of a lifelong struggle with the problem of how to celebrate in poetry a culturally constructed entity — the notion of the divine feminine — without succumbing to what might be considered that construct's worst habits. In order to show what is at issue when a male writer praises magical and divine femininity, this essay will consider the sexual politics of divine femininity as a problem that arose out of the interpretive struggles of the Women's Movement and then explore some of the ways in which Snyder's poem about Tārā has reinterpreted Tantric strategies for transforming afflictive desire so as to devise forms of poetic appreciation (if not worship) that do not fall into traps created by historical patterns of sexual or colonial exploitation.

I. The Goddess Problem, 1970–1971

Before looking at Snyder's mature phase, it will be useful to contextualize him by seeing his work alongside that of a writer who, because his work incited feminist criticism, has been important for our understanding of the phrase "sexual politics." Norman Mailer was famously attacked by Kate Millett in her book *Sexual Politics* (1970) for being one of the twentieth century's three most significant *counter*-revolutionaries of the so-called sexual revolution. Mailer famously struck back in his 1971 work *The Prisoner of Sex*. These two titles encapsulate our subject.

Millett's account can make one think that no self-respecting feminist

would ever have lunch with Norman Mailer, but, as Mailer recounts, he and Gloria Steinem did just that at the Algonquin Hotel. Mailer had just rejected Steinem's suggestion that he run for mayor of New York City when she said to him, "Well, at least I won't have to explain you to my friends at Women's Lib" (Mailer 19). When Mailer asked what Women's Liberation activists could possibly have against him, Steinem responded: "You might try reading your books some day." The rest of this conversation is a wonderfully concise summary of the "Woman as Goddess" problem:

In an interview he had once said, "Women, at their worst, are low sloppy beasts." He made reference to this now, and added, "I thought the next question would be, 'What are women at their best?' but the question never came." Enormously fond of his stratagems, he gave a Presidential smile to Gloria Steinem and added, "I would have replied that women at their best are goddesses." (Mailer 19)

Steinem, as though with a silver bullet, responded by saying: "That's exactly what's wrong with your attitude." The Manichean division of Women into "low sloppy beasts" and/or "goddesses," into positive and negative qualities that are somehow at war with one another, is what Steinem and other feminists have found wrong with Mailer and his society's attitudes to women.³ Steinem is, in the conversation reported by Mailer, entirely suspicious about the pedestal upon which the goddess is presented. Today many readers will suspect that the deification of a few women occurs to cover up the hatred of other "low sloppy beasts."

Like Mailer, Snyder has been attacked in this manner as a writer who defends and upholds patriarchal values. Feminist critics have called attention to gender iniquities in society by desublimating mythic or otherwise idealized presentations of the woman to expose the ideologies of masculine entitlement that the pedestal beneath the goddess also upholds. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar criticize "For a Far-out Friend," a confessional poem from Snyder's first collection *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (1965). This poem, which yokes memories of personal brutality with perceptions of feminine divinity, drew ire by its treat-

³ Mailer takes advantage of his own notoriety and sets the reader up: we tend to think of "his" view as opposed to Steinem's, forgetting that, as author of the book in which the anecdote appears, Mailer the author offers us dialogically delicious tidbits which Mailer the character seems to spill all over himself. At the very least, the reader has a choice between thinking of the text as a brief on Mailer's own behalf (and he accuses Millett of being a literary lawyer), or, on the other hand, of understanding the text as a dialogic struggle between voices that have been artfully arranged by the author.

ment of domestic abuse. Gilbert and Gubar's *No Man's Land* (1988), a feminist revisionary history of literary modernism, has sections glossing what might be called the toxic masculinity of the American 1950s, and Snyder's poem is linked with literary misogyny in this connection. In a discussion of Beat poets and other macho rebels of postwar America, Gilbert and Gubar indict American culture as a whole for encouraging macho brutality akin to that espoused by Tennessee Williams' character Stanley Kowalski: "if anything, a Kowalskiesque impulse to use the penis and other implements as battering rams with which to assault or destroy women intensified in the 1950s and 1960s" (52).

In partial evidence of their argument that 1950s America was a sexual war zone, the authors quote from Snyder's "For a Far-out Friend" where the speaker admits to having beaten a woman at some point in the past and then later he is pleased to have received her forgiveness. While brutal behavior is certainly reprehensible, Gilbert and Gubar contextualize this poem within their panorama of toxic maleness in ways that are fundamentally misleading: "many of Ginsberg's contemporaries, as he himself notes, were as committed as Stanley Kowalski — or Henry Miller — to the worship of the 'granite cock' and the 'marvelously impersonal' receptive cunt" (52). Readers are free to reject a confessional plea for forgiveness, but Gilbert and Gubar go to great lengths to demolish this pedestal-poem. There is more than a little injustice in their birds-of-a-feather indictment of Snyder. Note how the considerable difference between word and deed, between writing a poem and committing a crime, is elided in the following sentence: "As if literalizing Snyder's story, moreover, the Beat hero William Burroughs actually did shoot and kill his wife in 1951 while aiming at a champagne glass on her head" (52). It is true that William Burroughs attempted to shoot a glass off his wife's head at a party and killed her, but it is procrustean to suggest that Burroughs' killing of his wife Jane was a literalization of "Snyder's story" or was causally linked to it. Gilbert and Gubar choose one poem from Snyder's first book to characterize him and fit him into their landscape of sexual warfare. In the twenty-five years since that book's publication, he had written many other poems: the impression created about Snyder and his work in *No Man's Land* is quite misleading. One would not guess from Gilbert and Gubar's characterization of him that Snyder was actually admired by a number of prominent prestigious feminist authors, such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Ursula le Guin.

II. Imagination: Transformation or Alibi?

In struggling against specifically Western forms of patriarchy, writers like Snyder have sometimes invoked versions of the divine woman that were intended to be empowered or empowering but which seem, in retrospect, to be little more than the reincarnation of male fantasy at its most reductive. Snyder poetically celebrates the divine feminine quite beautifully in his later work, but this trope, in his corpus, is nevertheless one “with a past.”

Before turning to Snyder's evocation of the divine feminine in the complete 1996 version of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, this essay will briefly consider a poetic avatar of the mature poem, a celebration of a San Francisco "goddess" that was included in *Six Sections of Mountains and Rivers Plus One* but was cut from the 1996 version. "Hymn to the Goddess San Francisco in Paradise" praises the energies and freedoms that would soon be released in the sexual revolution. Snyder certainly meant to represent women's sexuality as a font of sacred energy, but the bohemian romance with the dirty/exciting city expressed in these lines has not aged well:

up under the bell skirt
caving over the soil
white legs flashing
— amazed to see under their clothes they are
naked
this makes them sacred
& more than they are in their own shape
free. (Snyder 1970: 24)

So far so good: these lines anticipate “Walking the New York Bedrock,” verses in the complete 1996 version that come to terms with the urban environment by joyfully accepting the hypersexuality of city life. However, the poem takes a shocking turn at this point:

the wildest cock-blowing
gang-fucking foul-tongued
head chick
thus the most so — (Snyder 1970: 24)

This is one of the very few sections of the poem that Snyder scrapped rather than include in his final published version. It would seem that *Mountains and Rivers Without End* outgrew this summer-of-love vision

of what a goddess might be.⁴ Snyder's valorization of the "head chick" is not so much spiritually generous as condescending and, if one assumes that the male poetic speaker is not celibate, it can be seen as a most self-serving kind of male fantasy. The promiscuous woman who requires no attachment is sacred — but we really learn nothing about this person. The (supposedly sacred) person in the poem exists so that we know the poetic speaker is a heroically anti-bourgeois apostle of sexual freedom. Even a cursory glance at "Hymn" underscores the "goddess problem" in Snyder's work.

Does the existence of a "goddess problem" mean that male writers must never work with the divine feminine, or can the writings be understood as steps toward more adequate metaphors and patterns? Assuming that the latter is a viable option, it will be useful to compare Snyder's poem "For a Far-Out Friend" with one written in the same cultural milieu by Joanne Kyger, a Beat poet who was Snyder's second wife and lived with him in Japan in the early 1960s. These two poets were struggling (with one another) to define their own sexual roles just as they were attempting to redefine the sexual politics attached to literary images and mythopoetic patterns. Kyger details their relationship for better and for worse in her very rich *Japan and India Journals, 1960 — 1964* (1981). Both wrote poems about domestic assault, but Kyger's "Tapestry" represents a physically abused woman within a mythic context in ways markedly different from Snyder's poem.⁵ Whereas "For a Far-out Friend" deifies a woman who forgives a man for having hit her, "Tapestry" retells the Penelope story to reveal physical abuse as a sordid reality beneath the mythical presentation of womanly patience. Kyger's use of myth underscores the epic scale of male entitlement, whereas Snyder emphasizes the transcendent possibilities of forgiveness.

"For a Far-out Friend" begins by describing an incident that is certainly an embarrassment to the male voice of the poem:

Because I once beat you up
Drunk, stung with weeks of torment

⁴Snyder writes that "Hymn to the Goddess San Francisco" was not included in *Mountains and Rivers Without End* as he wanted to further revise the poem. He will include it in a future volume containing new poems as well as several other longer poems that he set aside from the *Mountains and Rivers* project. E-mail communication from Gary Snyder, 9 December 2006.

⁵There are three poems entitled "Tapestry" in Kyger's (1965) first book of poems, *The Tapestry and the Web*. The poems are on pages 14, 28, and 40, and I am discussing the third.

And saw you no more,
 And you had calm talk for me today
 I now suppose
 I was less sane than you,
 You hung on dago red,
 me hooked on books. (Snyder 1965: 11)

He has conceded that bookishness is no proof of sanity and that his prior judgments against her (less sane? flaky lush?) do not hold up very well.

But then, describing the woman in mythical/religious terms as she runs toward him on the beach, the speaker intellectually or psychologically transforms the female friend into a goddess:

I saw you as a Hindu Deva-girl
 Light legs dancing in the waves,
 Breasts like dream-breasts
 Of sea, and child, and astral
 Venus-spurting milk.
 And traded our salt lips. (11)

Since the speaker shifts from seeing the “far-out friend” as a drunken woman to seeing her as a “Deva-girl,” a kind of goddess, it can be fairly said that he “worships” the woman because of her generosity in forgiving him. The mythopoetic expansion expresses the poetic speaker’s gratitude for having been forgiven. He thinks of her again later — in a trance in a dentist’s chair — and finds her again in “Zimmer’s book of Indian Art.” In this expression of Orientalist enthusiasm, marked historically by the reference to one of Heinrich Zimmer’s volumes on Indian art and philosophy, Snyder is able to combine anti-bourgeois sentiment, bohemian sexuality, and psychedelic adventure with a lyrical celebration of divine femininity:

— more grace and love
 In that wild Deva life where you belong
 Than in this dress-and-girdle life
 You’ll ever give
 Or get. (1965: 12)

Snyder’s moralistic commentary in this early poem succumbs to the sort of dualistic ethics he so rigorously and regularly criticizes in later poems and essays. We might say that the poem offers a fallacy-of-false-alternative in which the primary reductive binary choice is Bourgeois/Bohemian. The “dress-and-girdle life” is a self-congratulatory reduction of bourgeois experience. The speaker’s recognition of this woman’s moral

superiority lifts both poet and woman above the everyday realm, “this dress-and-girdle life,” where harsh judgments about character confine people within tight-fitting categories. The speaker in “For a Far-out Friend” employs mythology not to escape personal responsibility *entirely* but rather to separate himself from that repressive context and to symbolically transfer culpability from what some readers might term bohemian excess (drink, drugs, promiscuity?) to the middle-class life which is presented as the genuine problem. Timothy Gray writes, “Snyder’s sexual politics during the Beat and hippie eras relied on certain chauvinistic conceptualizations (the equation of uncharted terrain with available female bodies, for instance)” (42). The speaker uses mythological reorientation to negotiate what might be called a “lighter penalty” for himself. Myth is the vehicle that transports the poet beyond the fallen world.

“For a Far-Out Friend” is shot through with dichotomous oppositions, and it is useful to list some of them briefly to show how the reversals work:

bohemian	bourgeois
male	female
divine/visionary	ordinary/quotidian
poetry	prose

The items in the two columns have both vertical and horizontal relations. The terms are opposite, at least according to convention, when considered horizontally. Male is the opposite of female, bohemian the opposite of bourgeois. The social tensions animating a culture can be defined through such abstract oppositions. Vertically considered, the groups are bound together into imagistic clusters that position the reader vis-à-vis opposed interest groups. That is, a phrase like “dress-and-girdle life” is a contemptuous way to bundle together various elements of bourgeois existence. Such a life is, by the conventions delineated through such oppositions, feminine-and-weak, ordinary, and prosaic.

Significantly, almost all of the pairs undergo reversal in this poem. The macho poet succumbs to a salvific female characterized by “grace” and “love” rather than tough-talk, drugs, and violence. The division between the sacred and the quotidian is upset in a dentist’s chair when the speaker, perhaps under the influence of nitrous oxide, has a (re)visionary experience of the “far-out friend.” The bohemian/bourgeois division is the bedrock of the poetic speaker’s attempt to purify himself of violence and insanity, and this division seems utterly stable, at least until we con-

sider what might be called the poem's scholarly apparatus. The personal-confessional level of the poem exists alongside the scholarly-historical overview of Indian mythology intimated in the allusion to Zimmer, and this juxtaposition of anxious involvement and scholarly detachment feeds directly into the poetic vision of the "Deva-girl," as this image is at once a visionary moment and an aesthetic-intellectual construct. Were only the visionary level available to readers, one could accuse the poem of "bohemian fundamentalism." The mixture of bohemian and scholarly markers can be interpreted variously, but one element of a full understanding will be that the scholarly perception of the event rescues the poet from the charge that he is merely rationalizing poor behavior.

Readers such as Patrick Murphy have responded with ambivalence to the critical representations of gender politics in Snyder's early work. It may be that the poetic speaker in "For a Far-out Friend" forgives himself too quickly for having beaten up a woman. Even though the poetic speaker does not consciously wish to perpetuate any kind of patriarchal regime but wishes, rather, to find an alternative to the present one, the Orientalist form of the representation betrays habitual modes of thought that the poet, Murphy believes, had not yet understood to an adequate degree (49–50). Murphy argues that it is unclear how much the speaker in the poem is aware of his own complicity within "the male chauvinism of American patriarchal culture" and that the "poem presents a recognition of the dangers of idealization at the same time that the speaker engages in idealizing a woman by identifying her with images of a Hindu goddess" (49).⁶

The poem marks a transitional point in the dharma bum's progress: the speaker is criticizing a hegemonic order from which he wishes to stand apart, but to do so he works with tools (images, motifs, poetic styles) that are associated with the sexism that the poet wishes to reject. In its struggle with moral confusion, the poem comes to a draw, of sorts. The poetic speaker confesses his own reprehensible actions, but he also seeks to shift blame to the social order. The poet does not deny his own violence, but the negative behavior of the speaker and the woman he once beat up are reframed in social terms: both the man and the woman are potential victims of bourgeois life, and it would even be possible to argue that bad conduct at an individual level stems from the tensions wrought by the dress-and-girdle life, which pressures individuals to conform. As

⁶Murphy cites Charlene Spretnak's claim that women are presented in Snyder's early work as "slightly alien creatures who are perceived to be in an adversarial relationship . . . to the poet" (50).

it involves sexual freedom, heterodox imagination, and hallucinogenic states, the bohemian way of life puts one well beyond the bourgeoisie.

In Snyder's poem the speaker escapes the details of this inglorious world through a religious vision, but in Kyger's "Tapestry" the literary topos of mystical experience is demythologized: idealized feminine models are presented as wreckage in the wake of an abusive man. Snyder's mythopoetic elevation is met by Kyger's representation of an earthly, fallen woman rather than a sky-walking deva: "Puffeyes and the broken turned nose." High-mindedness gives way to a mess, as the poet/observer is left to deal with the details:

Dealing with the detail
on the fragment of the fifth
Tapestry the maid whose head
is turned sideways her eyes
shifted upwards in what
seems
coquettish towards
the sound of the
hunter's horn the
capture
then of the
unicorn. Her hair is uncombed.
and hand
raised up in a lackadaisical gesture
meaning all's well.

You can tell.
Puffeyes and the broken turned nose.
Searching
for bigger & better things. (Kyger 1965: 40)

The lines lose ground and fall to the right of the page, until one gets to "Puffeyes." The mythological scene being depicted is the hunting of the unicorn, and medieval tapestries on this theme make explicit the relationship between the unicorn and the woman.⁷ The speaker of Kyger's poem describes the conventional trappings of this scene: the coquettish maid (don't they always ask for it?), the hunter, the woman's

⁷Kyger refers to the medieval tapestries on display at the Cloisters Museum in New York, in particular with the "fragment of the fifth" tapestry: the fifth of the seven tapestries is only a fragment of the whole. It presents the coquettish maiden who helps the hunter capture and tame the unicorn. The images are available online: www.unicornlady.net/tapestry.html (December 7, 2006).

acceptance, the puffeyes, and the broken nose. The mythologization of violence against women implied by these conventions is juxtaposed to a stunningly simple detail of a hurt woman who, in a moment of stoical sadness, knows she will have to move on, effecting a demythologization, a reversal.

“Searching / for bigger & better things,” however, can only be the agenda of women *outside* the mythological tapestry, and thus the poem unweaves the mythic strands (as Penelope unweaves her own tapestry) so as to remove images obscuring our view of women trapped in abusive relationships. Read this way, the poem juxtaposes signs of male violence with details such as the white dress to expose domestic partnership as an insidious illusion. The line “meaning all’s well” captures the irony of this situation: to avoid social stigma the woman must “keep up a good front” even with a broken nose. The mythological elevation of the feminine is revealed to be no more than an ideologically effective rationalization for exploitative regimes — hence Steinem’s barbed response to Mailer and Gilbert and Gubar’s hostile response to “For a Far-out Friend.”

“Searching / for bigger & better things” also brings us to the problem of the woman-as-artist within a predominantly masculine tradition. Signs conspire within this tradition to bind the woman: *she is portrayed* as “coquettish towards / the sound of the / huntsman’s horn,” just as her “lackadaisical gesture” deceptively signifies that “all’s well.” Rather than use mythology to transcend harsh conditions, which would add to the mystification assembled by masculine art, Kyger’s poem meditates upon a woman who is ordinary rather than divine: the woman in her poem is trapped rather than empowered by mythopoetic expansion.

III. Tārā Visits America

Myths and stories are made out of intentions or larger communal needs, but they are also made from what might be called raw materials: an image is composed by carving materials, pigments, words, and so forth. Before we return to shifts in individual intentions or communal mores, it will be useful to linger on some of these raw materials.

Buddhism has been one of several important influences on Snyder’s life and art, and in this section I shall map the pathways by which Buddhism came to America, with reference especially to the female deity of compassion whose qualities express, for many Americans, the meaning and purpose of Buddhist beliefs and practices. This goddess goes by many names, Tārā, Kwan Yin, and Kannon being the most famous. Often

Tārā takes the form of a mother, but she can appear in any number of shapes. One of the longer sections of Snyder's book-length poem is titled "An Offering for Tārā," and it begins like this:

*Have you seen my companion
With her moon-like forehead
Has she passed this way?* (Snyder 1996: 106)

The "companion" may appear to us as a beckoning lover as well as a mother. Who is this versatile being, and how did she get into American literature?

Three streams converge: Buddhism, feminism, and American culture. The Buddhist personification of feminine compassion has made a half-dozen or so appearances in postwar American literature, and they raise interesting questions. How have American feminists responded to Buddhism's patriarchal history? Has Western feminism altered the practice of Buddhism in any way? Why have American writers such as Jack Kerouac, Peter Matthiessen, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Gary Snyder become interested in Tārā and Kwan Yin?

The names "Tārā" and "Kwan Yin" are sometimes interchangeable, and in fact there are many more names for the Buddhist personification of compassion: Tārā, Kwan Yin, Guan Yin, Kannon, Kanzeon, Amitabha, and Avalokiteshvara. It is only *gradually* that compassion became associated with femininity in Buddhist practice and doctrine.

Amitabha, or "Amida Buddha" in Japanese, "Pure Land Buddhism," is one of the earliest forms of a specific deity for compassion. The word "Amitabha" is Sanskrit for "Boundless Light," and this figure, virtually unknown in the iconography of original Buddhism, is generally regarded as a Mahayana development (Fischer-Schreiber et al. 5). Early representations of Amitabha were often accompanied by Avalokiteshvara (Sanskrit for "Lord who looks down"), who is called "Chenresig" in Tibetan. Avalokiteshvara is one of the most important bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism and is regarded as "the power of the buddha Amitabha manifested as a bodhisattva" (ibid., 14).

Are these figures regarded as literal beings who might show up in this world to aid us, or are they mythopoetic ways of referring to aspects of our own minds? A great lore has developed around figures such as Avalokiteshvara/Chenresig, Kwan Yin, and Tārā as saviors of sentient beings and removers of obstacles.⁸ But Tārā and Chenresig are, in the

⁸ As Anthony Hunt points out in his wonderfully erudite *Genesis, Structure, and Meaning in Gary Snyder's Mountains and Rivers Without End*, Stephen V. Beyer's (1973) *The Cult of Tara:*

Tibetan tradition, known as yidams, and the Tibetan puja (prayer ritual) for Tārā and other yidams suggests that we are to regard these deities as aspects of our own mind. In the Tārā and Chenresig practices, one makes offerings to the deity but then imagines *oneself* as the deity: one practices in order to awake the “Tārā within.” So, it is possible to regard the compassion deity both as external to oneself and as an aspect of one’s own mind. The former view is more commonly found in folk tales, the latter in doctrinal expositions and in prayer texts.⁹

Amitabha starts out as a male figure and gradually acquires feminine characteristics. As Buddhism marches from India through China to Japan, the compassion deity undergoes a complete gender change: “In China Kuan-yin was depicted up until the time of the early Sung Dynasty as a man, and in the grotto paintings of Tun-huang is even shown with a mustache. From approximately the 10th century on, the figure of Kuan-yin in a white robe . . . with feminine facial traits is predominant” (Fischer-Schreiber et al. 120).

In Tibet Avalokiteshvara (as Chenresig) and Tārā coexist and are both extremely popular. One is male, the other female. Tārā was miraculously born from a tear in Chenresig’s eye, and she has vowed to live in a woman’s body until all beings attain enlightenment. To those outside of Buddhist practice, there may not seem to be much difference between Chenresig and Tārā. In addition to being a personification of compassion, Chenresig also symbolizes Tibet and is the nation’s mythical founder. The current Dalai Lama, who is the spiritual and political leader of the Government of Tibet in Exile, is said to be a manifestation of Chenresig. On the other hand, Tārā the Savioress is specifically female and has been the greater influence on Buddhist literature in the West.

Magic and Ritual in Tibet is an important source for this poem. For Hunt, Snyder’s divine feminine figure Tārā is an avatar of a general set of divine or archetypal figures: “Snyder’s poetry is filled with the feminine: the Magna Mater, Lady of the Animals, the Bear Mother, Mother *Bos*, Kuan-Yin, Māyā, Pārvāti, Kali, Tārā, Yamamba, the Moon, Gaia, Mother Earth, and so many others,” and yet “Snyder often depicts the feminine in a conflicted manner” (2–3): “ecstasy of the erotic, whether sacred or secular, is frequent in Snyder’s life and writing, and the oppositional energy of the feminine is easily traced in the record of his marriages and liaisons” (3).

⁹Lama Sonam Wangchen Rinpoche of Alhambra, California, a Tibetan teacher in the Karma Kagyu lineage, explained to me that he did not expect to “see” Tārā when he was doing this practice. Perhaps he said this because he thought I would be more comfortable with a mundane approach to the ritual, or perhaps he did not expect to see a goddess in his living room.

Within Buddhism Kwan Yin and Tārā are both divine figures who are said to enter the world as women. On a more sophisticated level, they are understood to personify pure qualities of mind that in themselves have no gender, and yet we know that they both reflect and shape attitudes toward women in their cultures. America is a predominantly Protestant country with far less interest in images of a divine mother or female savior than in other Christian countries, so one may wonder why so many Asiaphiles in the United States would care about Kwan Yin or Tārā. Why were these pigments and fabrics imported?

The full story of how Buddhism came to America is told in Fields's narrative history *How the Swans Came to the Lake*. The transmission of Buddhism to the West and to the United States is indebted to European colonial practices in several ways. The great translator Sir William Jones (1746–1794) was posted in India as a judge in the British colonial administration, learned Sanskrit, founded the “Asiatick Society of Bengal,” and began to edit and publish the findings of the society in his *Asiatick Researches* volumes. Though he actually knew very little about Buddhism, Jones introduced Buddhist, Hindu, and other specifically “Asiatick” worldviews to the West. He is in many ways the “founding father” of literary Orientalism and has been attacked and defended variously because of this role.¹⁰ Due to Jones, works unknown in the Anglophone world, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, first became available in English. Jones and his fellow translators were certainly moved to learn about local customs in order to better administer the British empire, but this polyglot — he had learned 28 languages — was not motivated by a colonial will to power alone.¹¹ He was perhaps the most accomplished linguist in Europe

¹⁰ For the main attack, see Said. For an attack on Said's attack, see Irwin.

¹¹ Fields quotes Jones's contemporary Nathaniel Halhead on the administrative advantages of cross-cultural inquiry. Halhead writes in the introduction to his *Gentoo Laws*: “The importance of the commerce of India and the advantages of territorial establishment in Bengal have at length awakened the attention of the British legislature to every circumstance that may conciliate the affections of the natives or ensure stability to the acquisition. Nothing can so favourably conduce to these two points as a well-timed toleration in matters of religion and adaptation of such original institutes of the country, as do not immediately clash with the laws of the conquerors” (Fields 43). Fields also notes that the idea that the Indians ought to be governed by “the original institutes of the country” was controversial at the time, and that Jones made this issue the subject of his first charge to the court. Orientalist scholarship benefited from the forms of economic exploitation we call “imperialism,” and it also worked, quite often, to further the ends of imperialism. Jones was politically quite progressive and was several times denied the post in India because of his statements against waging war on the American colonies.

of his time, and, whatever he did to serve the interests of the British Empire, he is remembered today for having opened up what he referred to as “the Sanskrit mine” (Fields 44). Regardless of his intentions, however, the dust of colonial domination alights on the metaphor Jones used. A “mine” supplies raw materials that must be refined elsewhere.

Jones was a friend of Benjamin Franklin, but his karmic relation with the Americas was to continue after his death: without Jones and his Asiatic Society, the Orientalism of the American Transcendentalists would have been unthinkable. It was in the library of Ralph Waldo Emerson that young Henry David Thoreau came across Jones’ *Laws of Manu* [1794], which, Thoreau wrote, “comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had been swept unobstructed over the plans of Hindustan” (quoted in Fields 59).

In 1843 when the first copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* arrived in Concord, Emerson referred to it in a letter to Elizabeth Hoar as “the much renowned book of Buddhism” (quoted in Fields 59), and he also frequently disparaged the Buddhist philosophy of annihilation — the most common misunderstanding of Buddhism in the West. He did not only disparage, though. Upon receiving a paperbound first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Emerson wrote to a friend that it was “extraordinary for its oriental largeness of generalization, an American Buddh. . .” (quoted in Fields 65). Thoreau upon several occasions referred to Buddha in honorific terms. Thoreau is sometimes credited with the first translation of a Buddhist text in America, though Thomas A. Tweed argues that this attribution is a mistake. A fragment of the Lotus Sutra translated into French by Eugene Burouf was re-translated into English and appeared in the Transcendentalist Quarterly *The Dial* in 1844 (Fields 61). According to Tweed, America’s transnational encounter with Buddhism began “in 1844, when Transcendentalist writer Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804–1894) translated an excerpt from a French edition of a Buddhist sacred text” (2004: xi). While the Buddhism of Emerson, Thoreau, and their fellow Transcendentalists was sketchy at best, it gave intellectual credibility to a strand of American Orientalist discourse that would increase dramatically over the next hundred and fifty years.

The first hundred years of American interest in Buddhism, from the 1844 *Dial* publication to America’s war with Japan, saw many influential writers and texts, but some images of Kwan Yin also came to America with Chinese and Japanese immigrants. After gold was discovered in California in 1848, the number of Chinese there rose dramatically. The first Chinese temple in San Francisco was erected in 1853, but there were

over 400 temples on the West Coast by the end of the nineteenth century. The most popular deity represented in these temples was Kuan Yin (Fields 70–75). The Buddhism of Chinese workers was certainly not welcomed by Anglo-America. Fields reminds us that “the joss houses were, as temples have always been, convenient targets for terror, and a number of anti-Chinese vigilante groups, such as the Order of Caucasians, thought nothing of burning the local Chinese temples to the ground” (76). Few of these temples, which were made of wood, have survived.

The Boston Brahmins, so-called because they were the *de facto* top caste of America’s supposedly casteless society, faced no such persecution.¹² Edwin Arnold’s *Light of Asia* was published in an American edition in 1879, and less than ten years later the first Buddhist journal in America, *The Buddhist Ray*, began publication in Santa Cruz, California.¹³ In 1878 Ernest Fenallosa, whose writings would influence Ezra Pound profoundly, traveled to Japan to teach political economy and philosophy, and there he took the Tendai sect’s precepts in 1885. The following year Henry Adams traveled to Japan to escape reminders of his wife Clover’s suicide. Adams and his traveling companion John La Farge toured places like “Tokio” and “Kioto,” seeing temples, Nōh plays, geishas, tea rooms, and other modes of art and life. Though Adams sometimes wrote as an ironical tourist, La Farge reports in his letters that, of all the images, the one that touches him most – “partly, perhaps, because of the Eternal Feminine — is that of the incarnation that is called Kuwanon, when shown absorbed in the meditations of Nirvana” (175). Upon returning to the United States, Adams commissioned the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens to create a memorial to his dead wife based on photographs of Chinese Buddhist figures that Adams had brought back with him. The figure created by Saint-Gaudens — seated, robed, androgynous — is widely understood to be a version of Kwan Yin.

¹² On the “Victorian” phase of American Buddhism, see Tweed 1992.

¹³ Just because elite proponents of Buddhism were not persecuted in the way immigrants were does not mean that they were not subject to criticism. In 1884, shortly before Adams and La Farge made their trip to Japan, where they would meet with Bigelow and Fenollosa, Wm. Cleaver Wilkinson attacked *Light of Asia* on both poetic and religious grounds. Wilkinson pronounces it unwise to take delight in Arnold’s poem (11), and notes that the “popular curiosity and interest in ethnic religions, especially concerning Buddhism” (v), has disposed the conscience of Christians “to wear more lightly its own yoke of exclusive loyalty to Jesus” (vi). Wilkinson concludes that *Light of Asia* deserves a kind of death sentence: whether regarded “as literature . . . or as exposition of Buddhist doctrine and life, ‘Light of Asia’ must be pronounced unworthy to survive” (177).

Tārā began her travels to America in the late nineteenth century, but we have to keep two levels of traffic in mind when we consider these migrations: while imagery and fine arts were immigrating to America in the wake of Admiral Perry's tall ships, the United States was also passing laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) to prevent Chinese laborers from coming to America. As members of America's most élite groups were gathering interest in Buddhism, doors were being closed on native-born Buddhists.

World War Two and the historical disruptions of the Cold War accelerated the transmission of Buddhism to the United States. Robert Aitken first came into contact with Zen Buddhism when he was interned in a Japanese prison camp along with Zen/haiku enthusiast R. H. Blyth. Aitken would become the senior Zen roshi in America and publish many books on Zen for American students. In addition to teachers such as Aitken and Kapleau, many Asian teachers such as Chögyam Trungpa and Thich Nhat Hahn were forced out of their own countries by the upheavals of the Cold War, and many of them found their way to America as well.

There are now Buddhist groups and practice centers in every metropolitan area in the U.S., and one would be hard-pressed to think of a major city in which one could not find all three of the main types of Buddhism (Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana) represented. Buddhism has come to America, and its growth there is not just the mirror-show of a few Hollywood films. Buddhism in America can now boast several quarterly publications, highly successful publishing houses such as Shambhala and Snow Lion, and even a first fully-accredited university, the Naropa Institute. Most sects within Tibetan Buddhism practice the Tārā Puja, and I have seen this practice carried out in half a dozen American cities.

The specifically feminine vision of compassion and fearlessness, known variously as Kwan Yin, Kannon, and Tārā, is certainly not as familiar to Americans as her Christian counterpart, the Virgin Mary, but we are beginning to see serious works of art that take on the task of transplanting Buddhism's feminine qualities to America and developing them. There have been dozens of poems or prose passages dedicated to this theme in the postwar period, of which the most fully developed and artistically ambitious work so far is Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. Snyder has described his poem, which has been forty years in the making, as "a sort of sūtra — an extended poetic, philosophic, and mythic narrative of the female Buddha Tārā" (1996: 158).

In the Buddhist tradition, a "sutta" (Pali) or "sūtra" (Sanskrit) is a sacred text reporting the actual speech of the historical Buddha. The Ma-

hayana Buddhist tradition includes sutras written several centuries after the Pali texts, and Dōgen, the Medieval Japanese monk who founded the Sōtō Zen lineage, insisted poetically that all sentient beings preach the dharma all the time. In his mystifying prose-poem “The Mountains and Waters Sutra,” Dōgen insists that mountains and rivers are also Buddhas, and so the notion of the Buddha’s speech undergoes a dramatic metaphorical expansion. If glacial water can be described as “[t]he long wide tongue of the Buddha,” as it is in Snyder’s “Offering for Tārā” (1996: 107), then phenomena themselves become a metaphorical kind of “sūtra.”¹⁴ The processes of the world can be understood as a system tending toward compassion, since living beings are actually interdependent, whether they acknowledge this interdependence or not. By this logic, Tārā’s transit from Tibet’s mountains to American poetry is far less exotic a phenomenon than might have been supposed.

IV. Snyder Visits Tārā

We have learned to be wary of ideas that essentialize gender attributes, and when we understand the scale through which Snyder is approaching terms such as “mind” and “sūtra,” we quickly realize that it would be a mistake to suppose that he is making any such division between male and female qualities. He develops this point in “The Making of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*,” an essay following his long poem, in which he refers to the time he spent in Kyoto studying Zen Buddhism:

In my small spare time I read geology and geomorphology. I came to see the yogic implications of “mountains” and “rivers” as the play between the tough spirit of willed self-discipline and the generous and loving spirit of concern for all beings: a dyad presented in Buddhist iconography as the wisdom-sword-wielding Manjushri, embodying transcendent insight, and his partner, Tārā, the embodiment of compassion, holding a lotus or a vase. I could imagine this dyad as paralleled in the dynamics of mountain uplift, subduction, erosion, and the planetary water cycle. (1996: 155)

Tantric Buddhism is the path that shapes and ritualizes human desire for the sake of purification and ultimate enlightenment, and its metaphors are often explicitly sexual. When Snyder refers to a partnership between Manjushri (the personification of insight) and Tārā (the personification

¹⁴ See the essays (or prose poems ... or “fascicles”) of Dōgen Eihei from *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen* (1985). Also see Whalen-Bridge (1998–1999), for a discussion of Snyder’s references to Dōgen.

of compassion) that has “yogic implications,” he is referring to the artistic representations in which insight and compassion hold one another in a posture of sexual bliss. The metaphor is not, despite its history of misinterpretation, an emblem of lust and promiscuity but rather an expression of the intimacy that exists between these two distinct qualities.¹⁵

Buddhism is widely recognized as a religion that presents sexual desire as an affliction that obstructs one on the path to enlightenment; Snyder never emphasizes this aspect. While the traditional Buddhist justification for the tantric incorporation of desire into Buddhist practice is that tantric practice skillfully uses the energies of desire to overcome attachment, Snyder draws on folklore surrounding the cult of Tārā in order to affirm desire, specifically masculine desire for feminine sexual beauty. In the small parenthetical subsection entitled “*Tārā’s love magic*,” Snyder writes:

From the Boy’s heart a red beam of light goes through his right ear, enters the nock of his arrow, comes out the arrowhead, and shines straight into his loved one’s vagina — menstrual blood trickles down, he enters her mind, she becomes full of desire. (1996: 111).

Snyder does not refer to Beyer’s *The Cult of Tārā: Magic and Ritual in Tibet* (1973) as a source, but Beyer may, in fact, be the direct source of the quotation. Because Snyder has apparently revised Beyer’s “lust” to “desire,” Hunt argues that the sexual act is not one of subjugation (as Beyer calls it) but is rather “the establishment of reciprocity” (209). To return to the notion of divine myth as “alibi,” we can see that Snyder (and perhaps many Tibetan men) employs the Tārā story in a way that allows him to bring sexual desire back into the field of Buddhist positive values. Yet the differences between such an agenda and the one in “For a Far-out Friend” and “Hymn to the Goddess San Francisco in Paradise” are striking: the sexual relation figured in the “*Tārā’s love magic*” section, whatever it means in the context of Tibetan monastic practice or householder life, is one of playful mutuality. Snyder also describes, intriguingly, “intestines tangling, men and women dancing screwing” (1996: 111), which may either refer to imagery from the prayer text or to actual visual representations Snyder witnessed in the Himalayas. He refuses to purify the scene. This exuberant tangle of energy and meat can be understood

¹⁵ “The polarity-oriented thought of the Tantras finds its strongest expression in a many-layered sexual symbology. Transcendence of the duality of the masculine principle . . . and the feminine principle . . . through the union of the two is given as a key characteristic of the supreme yoga Tantra” (Fischer-Shreiber et al. 217).

as a poetic nod to the Mahayana ideal of nonduality, in which apparently opposite qualities (such as mind and body, *samsara* and *nirvana*, or perhaps even male and female) exist — for an enlightened being — interdependently.¹⁶ The idea is sometimes expressed through an image: without mud, there cannot be a lotus.¹⁷ Without “dancing and screwing,” there can be no escape from the claws of desire.

At several points in his long poem, but especially in “An Offering for Tārā,” Snyder expresses this yogic intimacy as something that occurs not only between human beings: the yogic exchange is not, Snyder insists, *limited* to humanity. Mountains, in this poem, are a love offering to the moon itself. As noted above, the poem begins by asking “*Have you seen my companion / With her moon-like forehead?*” (1996: 106). Earth romances the moon, and this mapping of eroticism, poetry, and the attraction between heavenly bodies reinforces the sacralization of desire that runs through Snyder’s work.

The next stanzas, which also present the confluence of the natural and the sacred, likewise evoke vast spaces:

Senge Chhu, the Indus River.
Some land from Gondwana,

crossed the Tethys Sea
and fetched up against Eurasia,
ranges warping out –

¹⁶ *Samsara*, Sanskrit for “journeying,” refers to the cycles of rebirth that a being suffers before achieving *nirvana*. *Nirvana*, from the Sanskrit for “extinction,” refers to the cessation of recurrent suffering (Fischer-Schreiber 184, 159). According to the *Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*, Mahayana Buddhism regards *nirvana* as the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path but insists on putting the enlightenment of others before the enlightenment of self, and so one promises to delay enlightenment until all other sentient beings have achieved the state. In Mahayana Buddhism, which has had a much greater impact on environmentalist/progressive writers such as Snyder, *nirvana* “is conceived as oneness with the absolute, the unity of *samsara* and transcendence” (159). Roughly translated, the nonduality of *nirvana* and *samsara* refers to the *ultimate* sameness of heaven and hell. Because of afflictive desires, one recognizes phenomena as hell. The desire for some qualities and the aversion for others develops from the self’s hunger to perpetuate itself, which in turn puts the self into an antagonistic relation to the systems and flows of the world.

¹⁷ Hunt purifies this scene slightly when he suggests that the “only beings who appear to be out of place on this ‘lofty mountain’ slope are the members of the ‘Indo-Tibetan army unit’ whose ‘jeeps clatter up the hill toward Leh’” (210). The poem does not suggest that the jeeps and soldiers are out of place, and one can just as easily suppose that jeeps and religious ceremonies are all part of a utopian continuum in Snyder’s highly positive rendition of Himalayan life.

Indus, Sutlej, rivers even from before
 sat their seats
 as mountains rose around them million-yearred. (1996: 106)

The rivers of India and Tibet, we are told here, date back to the time before the present division of continents existed, for the Himalayas came into being when the supercontinent “Gondwana” divided into Eurasia, Antarctica, Africa, and so forth. These mountains, Snyder tells us, were meditating during these periods of change, since they “sat their seats.”

When Snyder refers to mountains and rivers making love, he is paying homage to the generosity of nature itself, and this generous vision erases the divisions between the high and the low or the positive and the negative that Mahayana Buddhism suspects of erroneous “dualism.” One could also say that Snyder’s vision of the yogic intermingling of mountains and rivers is about the generosity of the Earth complete with dirt turning into soil: “glacier-flour and outwash gravel fan down from the hills, / built up to be fields for the barley, / all crisscrossed with ditches—” (1996: 106). Without dirt, no agriculture.

Rocks and gravel also make houses possible. Several times in *Mountains and Rivers*, Snyder refers to the Tibetan saint Milarepa, who was forced by his teacher Marpa to rebuild a stone house many times, only to have to tear it down every time it was complete. “Walls built within walls, terrace stepped above terrace — mixing mud, drying brick, moving rock” (1996: 107). Milarepa came to Marpa because he had used black magic to commit murder and so had a terrible karmic burden. By making him work impossibly hard, his teacher was able to save him. Snyder draws a parallel between Milarepa as a kind of laborer and the farms he sees working in such an inhospitable climate. The work, the dirt, and the poem itself are all, according to the spirit of Vajrayana teachings as presented in Snyder’s poem, “empty” of any particular meaning, but this “emptiness” must be understood within the Buddhist philosophical framework familiar to many Snyder readers. To call something empty is to assert that it is empty of meanings that transcend contexts and conditions. To many people “dirt” means that which is unpleasant, spoiled, unclean, and so forth, but to a soil conservation expert or perhaps a farmer, the word and the thing will mean something very different. The lack of inherent, non-contingent significance reduces suffering in at least two ways. First, it is a release from the pain of craving to understand that the sources of our craving, e.g. the hungers of the self, are not permanent but are rather effects produced by the temporary combination of vari-

ous elements. Second, emptiness, in this special sense, is the basis for existential freedom, since the fundamental factors that cause our lives to have certain shapes lose their power to determine the course of life once we understand that meanings are provisional.

It is often said that Milarepa purifies himself of bad karma by building the stone house again and again, but it could also be said that he releases himself from the power of karma by getting dirty — by coming to understand, through his labor, that self and other, filth and purity, and other apparent opposites are actually interdependent. For this reason, Snyder opens *Mountains and Rivers Without End* with the epigraph from Milarepa: “The notion of Emptiness engenders Compassion” (1996: xvii). Milarepa can be saved precisely because the dirt, like his own being, is empty of any permanent meaning. To work with earth itself and to learn firsthand that it is not merely “dirty” is a lesson in Buddhist philosophical emptiness, and thus this meditative practice can be seen as a gift from earth to man: generosity begets generosity, as the man sings in gratitude of the earth’s generosity.

The most artistically resonant transformation of dirt in this poem is the description of the Tibetan monks creating a sand mandala. Tārā is not mentioned directly in this stanza, nor in many of the other parts of “An Offering for Tārā,” yet the lines are about abundant dirt, beautifully arrayed:

Tabletop mandalas made
by the monks over weeks —
screek screek, goes the rasp as the sand tube
is played like a brush — sand colors,
fine-ground minerals from
cut-banks and outcroppings,
pulverized rocks from the canyons,
monk-artists making vision palaces,
maps of stages of the soul and all its pathways,
out of mountain dust. For the
puja, the ritual, the offering, the meal (1996: 107–108)

The Tārā puja is practiced by those who wish to overcome obstacles or fears, but Snyder’s approach focuses not on any supernatural effects but rather on the craft and social praxis associated with the ritual. Farmers cut shelves into the hillside on which to grow crops; monks form imaginary “vision palaces,” meaning mandalas formed out of colored sand; and the people performing the puja are also artists of a sort. The earth that rises up to form the Himalayas is an artist, and the people who live

in the mountains are pigments in the “vision palace” in which Snyder finds himself. The making of sand-paintings is a metaphor for the mind’s activity in forming a carefully designed world.

Everything in this poem is built up from a foundation of dirt, and the poem connects man to earth through specifically gendered mythopoetic images. The poem moves from an appraisal of dirt itself to a description of the Tārā puja, including further homage to the geological and biological generosity of the Indus Valley, some Tibetan lore about Tārā’s “love magic,” and more valorizing imagery involving the interrelations of dirt and desire. One section is especially close to the poetic evocations of Tārā within Tibetan pujas, the parts that describe Tārā’s incredible powers as she is imagined in her transcendent glory, destroying demons and helping people:

In the temple built above the Indus
demons trample,
intestines tangling, men and women dancing screwing
head of a horse, a bull, all
painted on shadowy walls in the
Buddha hall in the sky. (1996: 111)

Snyder’s poetic rendition is not a translation of the puja itself but is rather his own re-arrangement of the images one will find in one of the many versions of the sutra. By addressing the interdependence of dirt, human labor, and art, Snyder’s theme expands until all of human culture can be seen as an immense historical performance of the puja. This passage, yoking the generous lowliness of dirt with the exacting skills of the artist, is central to the vision of Snyder’s long poem, which may itself be thought of as a vast poetic mandala: it is a symbolic expression of the divine order governing all things in the universe, and thus it is a picture of “Mind” at its largest. The mind-picture made of dirt and monk-labor is one of the dozens of offerings for Tārā presented in this mandala-poem.

“An Offering for Tārā” revises the mythopoetic structure of the divine feminine in crucial ways. The trope of the divine feminine shapes the images in “For a Far-out Friend” in ways that make the male more sympathetic precisely because he eroticizes the woman whom he has abused, but in “An Offering for Tārā” the interdependence of apparent opposites is much more searching. The earthiest of human desires are confluent with the desires of earth itself. Baby Krishna (the mountain) desires his mother (the earth), and because of this desire earth flows through coursing rivulets. Like a Buddhist prayer text, the poem is a guided medita-

tion. The images, references, and place names have their own history, their own fields of meaning; interpreters are bound to consider the new occasions and angles of approach alongside the history of such imagery. Both the early and late representations of the divine feminine in Snyder's work offer a female embodiment of Eros that morphs between generative fecundity and generosity.

To understand the difference between the poems, we must note the shading and coloration the poet has carefully worked in, just as a monk making a sand-painted mandala will delicately scratch in new colors:

Tārā, cross-legged, head tilted smiling,
hands shaping "the giving"
red body, gold body, green (1996: 111)

Why, we are asked, does the figure have a red body, a gold body, and/or a green one? Snyder has not invented the idea that this divine figure appears in different colors depending on the various qualities she will manifest. The prayer texts used by practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism invoke Tārā in multiple colors, though "Green Tārā" is by far the most common. Red body, gold body, green: these unreal, non-human colors remind us that the object of our meditation is socially constructed, even if the values that are represented are not. The world as we perceive it is composed of pigments and shades that can be analytically divided into groups. Along these lines, the oddly colored deities enable a kind of "alienation effect" (Brecht 121) that will allow us to see that we are not looking at *people* so much as at pigments and brush-strokes of various sorts. Still, it is essential to add that this kind of analytical deconstruction of human life into inanimate pigments is at all times presented, in the poem's guided meditation, as the path toward greater compassion rather than toward the selfish disavowal of the world and its demands. The poem does not say that mountains, rivers, deities, and desires are *merely* fragmentary elements analogous to pigments (although many Buddhist discourses would use "emptiness" in just this way). In Snyder's poem and in the Buddhist texts from which he draws the most sustenance, the awareness that all landscapes, people, and so forth are empty of inherent meaning and are constructed out of transitional qualities is what gives beings the interpretive and constructive freedom to live compassionately. Only with an artist's awareness of the ways in which all phenomena are paintings can one understand that the self-painting is constructed out of many non-self materials, and it is this imaginative bridge between self and other that makes compassion possible.

V. "Maps of stages of the soul and all its pathways . . ."

In his study of Snyder's early writings, *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim: Creating Counter-Cultural Community* (2006), Gray notes the sexist content of Snyder's use of Orientalist mythology, but he also acknowledges that "Snyder's stance on gender issues is more complex than is commonly thought" (42) and that Snyder's career as a whole must be considered when we look to the sexual politics of even the early poetry.¹⁸ By considering two poems from the Sixties alongside one from the mid-Nineties, we can see the developments within Snyder's own myths and texts, but we also see how the images and ideas woven into discourses such as "Orientalism" or "the divine feminine" can undergo dramatic changes within the career of a single writer. "For a Far-out Friend," "Hymn to the Goddess San Francisco in Paradise," and "An Offering for Tārā" each offers its own version of the feminine divine. Kyger's poem of unweaving is really a reweaving of the same threads into a new pattern, and we can only speculate about the degree to which her poem may have shifted Snyder's thinking. Snyder has excluded "Hymn to the Goddess" from the final version of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* and from selected editions of his poems, but such poems are very much part of the "mandala" of his work if Buddhist mandala paintings are indeed — as Snyder puts it in "An Offering for Tārā" — "maps of stages of the soul and all its pathways" (1996: 108). We must follow the pathways carefully if the map is to make any sense at all. The "tabletop mandalas" (107) described in "An Offering for Tārā" are made of "mountain dust" to remind us that our finest representations and moral sentiments are constructed out of the "dirt" of human desires.

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¹⁸ Gray acknowledges another critic's observations in a very useful note: "Murphy has reminded me several times in the past few years about Snyder's decision not to reprint overtly sexist material in his two volumes of selected work, *No Nature* (1992) and *The Gary Snyder Reader* (1999), and about his exposure to feminist influences during his teaching career at UC-Davis" (204).

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