

Article

“Mountains, Rivers, and the Whole Earth”: Koan Interpretations of Female Zen Practitioners

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Abstract: Though recent years have seen a critical reappraisal of Buddhist texts from the angle of performance and gender studies, examinations of Zen Buddhist encounter dialogues (better known under their edited form as “koan”) within this framework are rare. In this article, I first use Rebecca Schneider’s notion of “reenactment” to characterize interpretative strategies developed by contemporary female Zen practitioners to contest the androcentrism found in koan commentary. Drawing on *The Hidden Lamp* (2013), I suggest that there are two ways of reading encounter dialogues. One of these, the “grasping way,” tends to be confrontational and full of masculine and martial imagery. The other, the “granting way,” foregrounds the (female) body and the family as sites of transmission, stressing connection instead of opposition. I then argue that these “granting” readings of encounter dialogues gesture towards a Zen lineage that is universal, extended to everyone, even to the non-human.

Keywords: performance; gender; encounter dialogue; koan; Zen Buddhism

1. Introduction

Buddhist writers have not always been kind to women. The canonized texts of this religion contain a host of prejudices against the female gender, perhaps the most well-known among which is that women can never become enlightened without first transforming into men. It should be no surprise that these attitudes have been the object of much critical scholarship, drawing upon foundational insights in gender studies (Kabilsingh 1991; Gross 1993; Campbell 1996; Wilson 1996; Arai 1999; Levering 2006; Salgado 2013). Such studies have drawn attention to women who have by their words and actions resisted the censure of male Buddhists.

A prominent example of such a woman is Wuzhuo Miaozong (無著妙宗; 1096–1170 CE), a disciple of the famous Chinese Zen master¹ Dahui Zonggao (大慧宗杲; 1089–1163 CE). Miaozong lived during the Song dynasty and was one of the first nuns to be included in an imperially sanctioned Zen lineage history, *The Outline of the Linked Flames* (lianteng huiyao 聯燈會要). Published in 1183, the Outline collected the exemplary lives of the school’s patriarchs (*zushi* 祖師). As Miriam Levering points out, “There are no ‘matriarchs’ in Ch’an’s [Zen] highly mythologized history from its origins in India down to the Sixth Patriarch in the beginning of the eighth century in China. [. . .] Thus, at the beginning of

¹ In this article, I use the (originally Japanese) term “Zen” to refer to (1) the variety of East-Asian groups that have identified their practices or doctrines by the Chinese character 禪 and (2) the contemporary American traditions that self-identify as “Zen” and largely were established by Japanese masters or people who studied in Japan. This does not mean that I consider these diverse traditions identical in any way, doctrinally or otherwise. However, since the focus of this article is on how encounter dialogues are read in a contemporary context, and moreover since all testimonies from *The Hidden Lamp* use “Zen” to talk about these dialogues (whether these dialogues originate in China, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, or the United States), I have also used “Zen” throughout.

the Northern Sung (960–1127), Ch’an represented itself as an almost exclusively masculine preserve” (Levering 1999, pp. 188–89). In view of this “masculine preserve,” it should be no wonder that, when Dahui decided to give Miaozong sleeping quarters next to his own, this caused some of his male followers, including a monk named Wanan, to protest. Dahui responds to Wanan’s criticism by pointing out that Miaozong has “outstanding merits” best experienced in a Dharma interview. Wanan thus reluctantly agrees to take the role of student in an interview with Miaozong:

When Wanan entered he saw Miaozong lying naked on her back on the bed. He pointed at her genitals, saying, “What is this place?”

Miaozong replied, “All the Buddhas of the three worlds, the six patriarchs, and all the great monks everywhere come out of this place.”

Wanan said, “And may I enter?”

Miaozong replied, “Horses may cross, asses may not.”

Wanan was unable to reply. Miaozong declared: “I have met you, Senior Monk. The interview is over.” She turned her back to him.

Wanan left, ashamed.

Later Dahui said to him, “The old dragon has some wisdom, doesn’t she?” (Caplow and Moon 2013, p. 107).

The dialogue above constitutes a remarkable example of the most famous genre of Zen literature, encounter dialogue.² Better known under their form as koan, these typically short dialogues portray verbal and physical confrontations between legendary Zen Buddhist masters and students, often concluding with one participant proving his superior spiritual prowess over the other, a victory sometimes accompanied by sudden spiritual insight. I called the dialogue featuring Miaozong remarkable because, as Levering’s comment already implies, women rarely appear in encounter dialogues, let alone a proud laywoman who uses the marks of her sexuality to act as a fully-fledged Zen master. Despite the unorthodoxy of this dialogue, Miaozong’s humiliation of Wanan seems to participate in the verbal and physical conflict that haunts many encounter dialogues, where the goal of awakening apparently justifies the usage of any means necessary, from verbally castigating the other party to cutting off their fingers, hands and heads. Such a reading, which one often finds in the commentarial tradition, can be profoundly alienating to some Zen practitioners.

However, obvious as it may seem, it is not necessary to interpret this encounter dialogue as portraying conflict. In *The Hidden Lamp*, a modern collection of koan featuring commentaries by accomplished female practitioners, Hoka Chris Fortin describes her performance of this piece during a women-only retreat:

We performed a skit of this koan [“Miaozong’s Dharma Interview”] on the opening evening [of the retreat], and I volunteered to be Miaozong. I wore a flesh-colored full-body stocking, and I was deeply moved and even jolted by the experience of entering into Miaozong’s skin and enacting her fearless and compassionate activity. Here was direct body-to-body, heart-to-heart transmission, across time and space, from a full-blooded woman who had no shame about her body, and who was a deeply realized practitioner, to me, now, a woman practitioner more than a thousand years later.

Zen teachings have been traditionally conveyed through a predominantly male lineage, a lineage that I have entered and that I honor. But prior to entering Miaozong’s skin, I had

² The English is John McRae’s translation of the Chinese *jiyuan wenda* (機緣問答), a term that was first used in Yanagida Seizan’s Japanese-language analyses of Chinese Zen literature. As McRae clarifies, the word *jiyuan* denotes “the teacher’s activity of responding to the needs (*yuan*, ‘conditions’) of the student [. . .] or more simply the perfect meeting of teacher and student” (McRae 1992, pp. 340–41).

never before been consciously aware of how some part of me was subtly and perpetually changing from a woman's body into a man's body in order to fully engage with the teachings. As I lay on my back on the floor, my knees apart, calling out, "All beings everywhere come out of this place!" I became aware that this womb that bled rich red blood every month in my youth, and that had given birth to a son, was timeless, the womb of every woman. Miaozong's unbounded confidence in the pure Dharma body of practice, and her embodied faith in the sacredness of a woman's body, resonated through me like a dragon's roar (Caplow and Moon 2013, p. 108).

"Deeply moved and even jolted," Fortin is transported to the past and feels a bodily connection to Miaozong, and beyond that, to every woman who has ever existed. For Fortin, "entering Miaozong's skin" is clearly more than theater, as it leads to an awakening profoundly tied to her own female body. This awakening not only affords Fortin a vision of the past, but also allows her to interpret Miaozong's actions as those of a "compassionate" teacher. At the same time, she becomes aware that, in her Zen practice, she has unconsciously performed a male version of herself ("some part of me was subtly and perpetually changing from a woman's body into a man's body in order to fully engage with the teachings"). Within the Zen tradition, what Fortin experienced could be classified as a type of *kensho* or *satori*. But this explanation, useful as it may be to practitioners, gives us little further information about what, exactly, has occurred during Fortin's performance of Miaozong.

In this paper, I will explain Fortin's performance as "reenactment," a term that I understand through the work of Rebecca Schneider to mean "re-playing or re-doing a precedent event, artwork, or act" (Schneider 2011, p. 2). I argue that reenactment of encounter dialogues not only summons the past, but also offers new interpretative possibilities, shifting opposition to connection, or from a "grasping" to a "granting" hermeneutic. I then examine this hermeneutic shift from "granting" to "grasping" in a number of other testimonies collected in *The Hidden Lamp* (2013), a modern collection of koan featuring women. Like "Miaozong's Dharma Interview," each koan in *The Hidden Lamp* is accompanied by commentary from a contemporary female Buddhist practitioner. I show how the hermeneutic shift found in some of these commentaries happens through a corresponding shift in imagery: whereas "grasping" readings stress combat and martiality, "granting" readings stress the body and family. My examination of these interpretative strategies allows us to understand how the homosocial rhetoric of patrilineage that remains central to Zen Buddhist authority structures can be subverted and appropriated by those denied access to it.

2. Reenacting the Past

To understand what happened to Fortin, I draw on two theories of (ritual) performance. The first is articulated in the work of the aforementioned Rebecca Schneider. In *Performing Remains*, Schneider observed Civil War reenactments across the United States. In part basing herself on this experience, she argues against any model that would consider such performances "secondary" or "theatrical." Much like Jacques Derrida's views on the supplement, Schneider reacts against notions of originality and authenticity. Instead, Schneider proposes a theoretical framework that values creatively re-doing something as equal to the original performance (an original that, in Schneider's view, does not exist, as it is always already caught within a web of repetition).

Schneider does not limit herself to revaluing reenactment but claims that this type of performance conjures the past:

At various and random moments, amidst the myriad strangeness of anachronism at play, it can occasionally feel "as if" the halfway dead came halfway to meet the halfway living, halfway. That is, despite or perhaps because of the error-ridden mayhem of trying to touch the past, something other than the discrete "now" of everyday life can be said to occasionally occur—or recur (Schneider 2011, p. 14).

Despite a manifold of anachronisms that haunt Civil War reenactments, such as the presence of spectators, jetplanes in the sky, or someone's wristwatch beeping an alarm, sometimes participants during these performances feel like they are experiencing the real thing: they are no longer portraying the American Civil War, but they are *in* that war. "Despite or perhaps because of" the differences between the past and present, reenactment makes the past visible in the present.

The idea that performances can make the past visible has also been proposed by Robert Sharf, who states that ritual efficacy depends on the ability of priests to let an imagined past speak through them. When priests perform a ritual, their purpose is to make it seem like they are erasing their temporal and spatially defined identity to let a "hoary tradition" take over, and it is their ability to speak for this tradition that lends them authority (Sharf 2005, p. 248). In the Christian ritual of the Eucharist, for example, priests do not claim it is their own power that transforms a wafer into the flesh of Christ. Instead, a seemingly unaltered and divinely inspired tradition flows through them to transform wafer into flesh. Priests become authority figures to the extent that they disfigure themselves, letting something else, another time and place, speak through them.

After establishing this paradigm, Sharf then turns to the Chinese Zen tradition during the Song dynasty, arguing that, despite the tradition's purported rejection of ritual, the authority of Zen masters was established and reinforced through ritual performances that can be compared to the Eucharist. Interactions between Zen masters and their students, for example, were scripted by the encounter dialogues that were in wide circulation, dialogues that described the actions of the Zen patriarchs who lived during a mythical past. During the Song, the "enlightenment" of Zen masters (not to mention their status as a "living Buddha") depended not on some invisible internal attainment or insight, but on how well they knew and performed this scriptural canon, on how well their behavior resembled that of the patriarchs. Thus, Zen masters during the Song, like Catholic Priests, performatively disfigured themselves to let a mythical past speak through them.

Although Sharf and Schneider deal with very different historical moments, their analyses show the possibility of performances to make the past visible in the present. It should be noted that, in both cases (Chinese Zen Buddhists and modern Civil War reenactors), this past is idealized. For the Civil War Reenactors, the past reenacted is a "traditional" America where the others of white men, emphatically African-Americans and women, "knew their place," whereas for Song Zen Buddhists, the past is one when Zen practice was purportedly free from social and institutional constraints.

3. Granting and Grasping

If reenactment always summons an imagined rather than a historical past, then it can also summon a counterhegemonic past. I will now show that this is exactly what happens in Fortin's experience: instead of reinforcing the idea that awakening is something to be conquered individually, she experiences a deep communal connection to female practitioners across time. To describe this switch in interpretative models, I draw on Norman Fischer's preface to *The Hidden Lamp*. There, Fischer addresses the question of whether koan featuring women are different from koan that do not, and, if so, how. Fischer points out that the Zen tradition acknowledges two different teaching styles, the "grasping way" and the "granting way." In the "grasping way," attaining enlightenment is a struggle with the master, a verbal and sometimes physical combat between two bodies. Fischer characterizes it as "the way of the solitary hero" (Caplow and Moon 2013, p. xi). In the "granting way," antagonism is replaced by cooperation and compassion, and awakening happens when one realizes one's deep connection to others (Caplow and Moon 2013, p. xii). This difference does not need to be essentialized into two categories of koan: rather, any koan can be read from both perspectives. It seems to be in the union of commentary and koan that the teaching style can be identified.³ The complexity of this distinction disables any facile mapping of gender onto it: a koan with only men might be integrated in

³ Norman Fischer, 2014, e-mail message to author, December 17.

a granting framework, whereas a koan with female characters and commentary might belong to the grasping mode.

Since the distinction between grasping and granting styles will be important in the pages to come, its roots deserve our attention. In an e-mail, Fischer confirmed that his distinction is a loose translation from the Chinese paired terms *fuqi* (扶起; literally “raising up”) and *fangdao* (放倒; “dashing down”). Though the pair does not occur in the canon very often, it plays an important part in *Wumen Huikai’s* (無門慧開 Japanese: Mumon Ekai, 1183–1260 CE) comments on Case 11 of the *wumenguan* (Japanese: *mumonkan*) koan collection. That case is as follows:

Jōshū [趙州 Chinese: Zhaozhou] went to a hermit’s cottage and asked, “Is the master in? Is the master in?”

The hermit raised his fist. Jōshū said, “The water is too shallow to anchor here,” and he went away.

Coming to another hermit’s cottage, he asked again, “Is the master in? Is the master in?”

This hermit, too, raised his fist. Jōshū said, “Free to give, free to take, free to kill, free to save,” and he made a deep bow (Sekida and Grimstone 2005, p. 51).

Two seemingly identical responses provoke two very different answers, leading *Wumen* to comment that

you will realize that Jōshū’s tongue has no bone in it, now helping others up [*fuqi*; 扶起], now knocking them down [*fangdao*; 放倒], with perfect freedom. However, I must remind you: the two hermits could also see through Jōshū. If you say there is anything to choose between the two hermits, you have no eye of realization. If you say there is no choice between the two, you have no eye of realization (Sekida and Grimstone 2005, p. 51).

This is as cryptic as it gets in Zen verbiage, yet with the help of Thomas Cleary (Cleary 1993, pp. 56–58), we might be able to extract some meaning from it. Cleary sees the two encounters as representing two different perspectives on reality that match the grasping–granting distinction Fischer describes. From one perspective, reality is ineffable. Because reality cannot be accessed or described via conventional means (such as language), attaining a vision of it implies a struggle to overcome one’s own limitations—hence Zhaozhou’s dismissive answer to the first hermit. This dismissal is a challenge to test the solidity of the hermit’s insight. From another perspective, accessing reality is as easy as opening our eyes. Zhaozhou’s praise of the second hermit represents this perspective: instead of challenging the hermit, Zhaozhou bows to him in recognition of the fact that reality is always accessible and manifest. Note that the two perspectives are analyses of the same thing, a gesture of lifting up one’s fist. But the imagery of *Wumen’s* analysis is vastly different: one bow is interpreted as “helping others up,” whereas the other bow is “knocking them down.” Imagery is key to this shift from grasping to granting perspectives, as I will clarify further below.

4. Mu as a Lover: Sunya Kjolhede

That the “grasping” and “granting” ways are two equally valid approaches does not mean that both ways are equally represented in traditional commentaries. On the contrary, Fischer claims that the “grasping way” is overrepresented, stating that *The Hidden Lamp* gives us insight into a neglected teaching style (Caplow and Moon 2013, p. xii). This neglect explains why some female practitioners in *The Hidden Lamp* feel alienated by what they describe as masculine imagery in koan and their commentaries. Sunya Kjolhede’s description of her “turning point” in working with the famous “Mu” koan provides a good example of this. I will first cite the koan and the commentary that accompanies it in the *wumenguan* collection and then move to Kjolhede’s testimony.

[The koan] A monk asked Jōshū, “Has a dog the Buddha Nature?” Jōshū answered, “Mu (no).” MUMON’S COMMENT: In order to master Zen, you must pass the barrier of the

patriarchs. To attain this subtle realization, you must completely cut off the way of thinking. If you do not pass the barrier, and do not cut off the way of thinking, then you will be like a ghost clinging to the bushes and weeds. Now, I want to ask you, what is the barrier of the patriarchs? Why, it is this single word “Mu.” That is the front gate to Zen. Therefore it is called the “Mumonkan of Zen.” If you pass through it, you will not only see Jōshū face to face, but you will also go hand in hand with the successive patriarchs, entangling your eyebrows with theirs, seeing with the same eyes, hearing with the same ears.

Isn't that a delightful prospect? Wouldn't you like to pass this barrier? Arouse your entire body with its three hundred and sixty bones and joints and its eighty-four thousand pores of the skin; summon up a spirit of great doubt and concentrate on this word “Mu.” Carry it continuously day and night. Do not form a nihilistic conception of vacancy, or a relative conception of “has” or “has not.” It will be just as if you swallow a red-hot iron ball, which you cannot spit out even if you try. All the illusory ideas and delusive thoughts accumulated up to the present will be exterminated, and when the time comes, internal and external will be spontaneously united. You will know this, but for yourself only, like a dumb man who has had a dream. Then all of a sudden an explosive conversion will occur, and you will astonish the heavens and shake the earth. It will be as if you snatch away the great sword of the valiant general Kan'u and hold it in your hand. When you meet the Buddha, you kill him; when you meet the patriarchs, you kill them. On the brink of life and death, you command perfect freedom; among the sixfold worlds and four modes of existence, you enjoy a merry and playful samadhi.

Now, I want to ask you again, “How will you carry it out?” Employ every ounce of your energy to work on this “Mu.” If you hold on without interruption, behold: a single spark, and the holy candle is lit!

MUMON'S VERSE:

The dog, the Buddha Nature,
The pronouncement, perfect and final.
Before you say it has or has not,
You are a dead man on the spot.

(Sekida and Grimstone 2005, pp. 27–28)

I have cited the full entry in the *wumenguan* to allow the reader a sense of the violent and martial imagery Wumen uses to describe the process of understanding the koan. It is like “snatching away a sword,” or “swallowing a red-hot iron ball.” The reader is urged to kill Buddha and patriarchs (citing Linji Yixuan's [臨濟義玄 Japanese: Rinzai Gigen] famous dictum) and if he doubts even for just a moment, he is “a dead man on the spot.”⁴ Awakening here is won by conquest, by “solitary heroes” (to use Fischer's phrase) who “arouse [their] entire body” to achieve “an explosive conversion.”

Sunya Kjolhede, a Zen priest describing her experience in *The Hidden Lamp*, does not find the imagery of martial conquest in commentaries like Wumen's useful:

“Nourishing the spiritual embryo,” a phrase adopted from Taoist teachings, has long been used in Zen to refer to deepening and maturing practice. However others may have used it, for many women an image like this can be a lot more accessible than the traditional advice to “bore through Mu like an iron drill,” or the purported words of the Buddha, “It is like a strong man pushing down a weaker one.”

⁴ It should be mentioned that in the original Chinese, the final line of Wumen's verse is not gendered. The masculine gender (a “dead man on the spot” for 喪身失命) is Sekida's insertion. For those reading this text in translation then, Sekida's translation could reinforce the sense that understanding koan requires masculine behavior.

I remember the turning point, in another seven-day sesshin [retreat], when it hit me that none of these very male images was working for me—when I finally had the confidence to toss it all aside and find my own way. Working with Mu, I realized, was like surrendering to and merging with a lover! Letting Mu walk, letting Mu eat, letting Mu do it all . . . suddenly practice opened up, shifting into something alive and juicy and intensely close (Caplow and Moon 2013, p. 55).

Kjølhedde here points to both the gendered nature of koan metaphor and commentary (penetration, repression), and how these are “not working” for her. When she imaginatively transforms “Mu” into a lover though, her entire practice changes. Though the Mu koan itself does not dramatize conflict (there does not seem to be any direct indication of someone winning or losing), Kjølhedde’s testimony shows to what extent the commentarial tradition has reinforced the idea that it is about conflict, about “boring through” it or “pushing down” a weaker man. It also shows that these ideas can be changed, that there is a way to read grasping koan in a granting, loving way. Key in this shift is a change in imagery: instead of interpreting awakening using the violent and aggressive metaphors of the traditional commentaries, Kjølhedde refigures her relationship to the koan as a gentle, sexual one. She then extends this shift in imagery by likening awakening to giving birth: “As I experienced later when giving birth to my children, you have to simply get out of what way and let the great mystery roll right through. In a sense, we’re all pregnant with this wondrous Buddha nature. And yet, paradoxically, until we’ve allowed it to fully come through us, it remains only an embryo, only a potential” (Caplow and Moon 2013, p. 56). Note that the imagery Kjølhedde uses to reimagine her relationship to the koan refers, like Fortin’s, to the female reproductive body: instead of imagining herself “pushing down a weaker man,” she sees herself “nourishing the spiritual embryo.”

5. The Zen Family

Kjølhedde’s testimony calls our attention to something that appears in Fortin’s testimony as well: the manner in which Zen transmission is being rethought together with Zen awakening, as practices associated with the female body but available to all. Returning to Fortin, the insight that “this womb that bled rich red blood every month in my youth, and that had given birth to a son, was timeless, the womb of every woman” (ibid.) draws attention to the female body as a reproductive body shared by women practitioners throughout the ages. This connection of female bodies across time and space leads directly to the end of her testimony, where she calls on us to “remember the ancient lineage of women, a lineage that asks us not to turn from suffering” (Caplow and Moon 2013, p. 109).

This new lineage of women is different from a classic Zen lineage. Instead of reserving transmission to a select few (who often turn out to be men), lineage is here extended to every woman who has ever existed. This seems a return to the universal Buddhahood of the big Mahāyāna sutras, and a departure from the patriarchal authority structure of Zen proper. Drawing upon some more examples from *The Hidden Lamp*, I will now explore what such a transmission disconnected from the narrow confines of patriarchy and even the Zen monastic institution might mean.

Angie Boissevain’s commentary on the koan “Ganji’s family” provides a good example of this expansive version of transmission. The koan describes a double encounter. First, a monk enlightens a layman named Ganji by simply pricking him with a needle. When his happens, Ganji laughs loudly, causing his family members to inquire what’s wrong with him:

Ganji said, “Don’t ask.”

His wife said, “If it’s something good, everyone should know”

So Ganji told them what had happened and his wife was instantly enlightened. She said, “After thirty years, every time I drink water it will fill my throat.”

Their daughter, hearing all this, was also instantly enlightened.

(Caplow and Moon 2013, p. 59)

Several things deserve our attention here. Transmission takes place via bodily sensation in a lay, familial context. Boissevain, who was called a “transmitted housewife” by her teacher, comments that “a prick like this can travel through many generations, so that wife, daughter, and even you and I are included, right here, right now” (Caplow and Moon 2013, p. 61). Instead of being transmitted from master to student, enlightenment is transmitted first between the members of a family (including men), and then to everyone else.

In *The Hidden Lamp*, non-traditional transmission often follows the pattern I have just described. Commenting on a koan where Zhaozhou gives an enlightening squeeze to an unnamed nun who asks about the “deeply secret mind,” Ikushin Dana Velden remembers the times her father held her hand while walking in the woods, or the final squeeze when he died (Caplow and Moon 2013, pp. 104–5). I compare it to my mother squeezing me on her deathbed, when I felt myself break under her overwhelming love that could not be spoken anymore, but never needed to be. “The plain and courageous intimacy of one human life intersecting with another, beyond words, beyond comprehension, and yet fully and completely received,” Velden calls it, with words better than mine (Caplow and Moon 2013, p. 105). This intersection of two lives, this encounter, is thoroughly embodied; words, even the self-contradictory phrases that so typify koan, are no longer necessary. At the same time, monastic lineage has been reconfigured into familial lineage. The transmission is no longer a matter of legitimacy, of transferring the title of living Buddha, of certifying enlightenment, but is one of a non-verbal understanding established not through conflict, but through love.

Although in the cases I have just considered lineage is being rethought via bodily and familial metaphors, it is not limited to the body or the family. But how can we understand kinship beyond blood, lineage beyond authorization? In *Antigone’s Claim*, Judith Butler suggests answers to these questions. Instead of understanding kinship as a naturally given essence (for example, my identification as a son because of my genetic descent from my father and mother), she argues that kinship is better understood as a performative act. In Sophocles’ eponymous play, Antigone assumes every familial role imaginable. Thus, Butler avers, Antigone cannot be understood within a classical model of the family:

Antigone is caught in a web of relations that produce no coherent position within kinship. She is not, strictly speaking, outside kinship or, indeed, unintelligible. Her situation can be understood, but only with a certain amount of horror. Kinship is not simply a situation she is in but a set of practices that she also performs, relations that are reinstated in time precisely through the practice of their repetition. When she buries her brother, it is not simply that she acts from kinship, as if kinship furnishes a principle for action, but that her action is the action of kinship, the performative repetition that reinstates kinship as a public scandal. Kinship is what she repeats through her action; to redeploy a formulation from David Schneider, it is not a form of being but a form of doing (Butler 2000, pp. 57–58).

What Butler describes here sounds much like reenactment: Schneider’s Civil War reenactors, after all, also reestablish (historical) relationships by repeating them. If kinship is indeed a “form of doing,” this would explain why Fortin, Boissevain, and so many others can feel a deep bodily connection to women and men throughout history. It would explain how a “grasping” hermeneutic, where one fights for enlightenment, for the recognition within a patriarchal lineage, can be replaced by a “granting” hermeneutic where awakening and kinship are available to all.

6. Kinship beyond the Human

In *The Hidden Lamp*, connection through kinship even extends to inanimate beings. Florence Caplow, a woman without a family who lives alone, comments on a koan where a monk questions a nameless woman who also lives alone. In the koan, the monk asks a question that is deceptively innocent: “Do you have any relatives?” (Caplow and Moon 2013, p. 173). The implication, Caplow explains, is that the monk simply cannot understand this woman living by herself, that to him such a situation is impossible, and that there must be male relatives nearby who help her. The old woman

answers briefly: “The mountains, rivers, and the whole earth, the plants and trees, are all my relatives” (Caplow and Moon 2013, p. 173). Caplow, sitting by the wild and dark Pacific Ocean writing her commentary, proposes asking the old woman for additional explanation, a “soul shivering dharma question” through time and space:

“How distant are these relatives of yours?”

She says, “Come closer.”

I lean forward. “Even closer.” And we are face to face.

In that moment of meeting I understand that relatives are not just “out there,” they are through and through—mountains and rivers and faces and eyebrows and guts and the very subtlest stirrings of mind.

But you must understand that it is the *asking* that matters, not the answer. Because every real asking, every real meeting comes from the place where the Buddha glimmers in the depths. In the asking is the answerer; in the answer is the asker. And in the meeting of the two, there are mountains, rivers, and the whole earth.” (Caplow and Moon 2013, p. 175).

If we encounter each other by asking penetrating questions, Caplow seems to suggest, we can realize our kinship. Encounter dialogue or koan do not have to be read as a grasping genre where there are winners and losers. Rather, we can reenact the exchanges of Zen masters with their students as a way to encounter ourselves and another beyond words and explanations, calling forth that place where distinctions cease. Doing so reaffirms the performative dimension of Zen so stressed by Sharf, a dimension that Joan Sutherland claims was the school’s most important contribution: the understanding that enlightenment takes place in “relationship, in encounters and conversations” (Caplow and Moon 2013, p. 293).

7. Conclusions

In *The Hidden Lamp*, female Zen practitioners read koan from a perspective that rethinks Zen patrilineage and enlightenment as familial kinship and reenactment. In doing so, they show us that there is a hermeneutical strain, one that Norman Fischer has called “grasping,” in Zen koan commentaries that stresses confrontation and struggle. By proposing a so-called “granting” hermeneutic, they also demonstrate that a very different perspective on koan is possible. In times when “Western Buddhism” has been exposed as a construction dominated by white male ideology (Cheah 2011; Williams et al. 2016), one could hazard (although this is beyond the scope of this article) that there is a connection between “granting” values and those racially, sexually, and socially excluded from full participation in contemporary Zen. To alter the way we read koan then is to do more than engage in empty literary acrobatics. It is to open the door towards a more inclusive modern Zen Buddhism.

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