# “Whiteness is a Sankhara”: Racial Justice as Buddhist Practice

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**Abstract:** While confronting whiteness is often seen as the work of progressive social justice, Buddhist practice and philosophy offers a rich framework for, and imperative to do, such work. Methodologically combining ethnographic and philosophical approaches, this paper aims to show both what contemporary Buddhists have done to alleviate the suffering caused by whiteness and what resources the tradition offers for extending such work. It begins by situating Buddhist approaches to “waking up from whiteness” within the larger movement for racial justice within American Buddhism. Next, it shows how the Yogācāra school of Buddhist philosophy provides helpful tools for practitioners in recognizing and being liberated from whiteness, which from the perspective of Yogācāra is a historically conditioned, socially embedded identity structure that has the power to shape our worlds of experience and that can and should be made an object of inquiry, understanding, and relinquishment. Finally, we reflect on the responsibility of Buddhist scholars in Buddhist racial justice work.

**Keywords:** American Buddhism, Racial Justice, Whiteness, Yogācāra, Method and Theory in Buddhist Studies, Engaged Buddhism

“FREE THE DHARMA: Race, Power and White Privilege in American Buddhism,” declared the front cover of *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner’s Quarterly* summer 2016 issue in bold red font. Equally striking was the cover image of a Buddha statue wrapped, constrained, and blurred by cellophane. Inside the pages, leading teachers and figures from the wide American Buddhist racial justice network unpacked the ways in which racism and white supremacy operated in and distorted their practice and communities. Zen-trained Rev. angel Kyodo williams, for instance, suggested that to uphold the integrity of the Dharma, white Buddhists must confront structural racism

inside and outside of their communities, and Insight teacher Tara Brach shared how recognizing her own white privilege had transformed her as a Buddhist teacher.[1]

*Buddhadharma*'s 2016 issue symbolizes the increasing embrace of racial justice as a Buddhist practice by many American Buddhist convert practitioners and teachers. Attempts to address racism and white privilege in majority white convert lineages are over three decades long and include numerous initiatives ranging from the formation of People of Colour (PoC) affinity sitting groups and retreats to institutions implementing diversity, inclusivity, and equity training for teachers and staff.[2] Such initiatives have been amplified and extended due to the wider cultural impact of the Black Lives Matter movement, which began in 2012. In 2015, at the first White House-US Buddhist Leadership event, a delegation of one hundred twenty-five Buddhists presented a statement on Buddhists for Racial Justice, which acknowledged the "courage and leadership of the people of Ferguson" as its inspiration.[3] After the murder of African American George Floyd in 2020, many American Buddhist organizations across convert and heritage lineages issued public statements that set overcoming structural racism as a Buddhist imperative.[4]

Within this broader field of racial justice in American Buddhism, Buddhists of Colour have called on white practitioners to confront their white conditioning as part of the movement towards ending white supremacy. African American Buddhist and author, Charles Johnson, noted that racism was often invisible to white practitioners and called on them to awaken to their white racialized identities. As he concluded, "James Baldwin explained this well when he said, 'It's not the Negro problem, it's the white problem. I'm only black because you think you're white'."[5] La Sarmiento, the founder of a PoC Affinity group at Insight Meditation Community of Washington, rendered it clearly, "Trying to have conversations with white people is pretty painful and

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1 williams, "Free the Dharma: Race, Power, and White Privilege in American Buddhism"; Brach, "Facing My White Privilege."

2 Gleig, "Undoing Whiteness in American Buddhist Modernism."

3 Kornfield, "Statement on Racism from Buddhist Teachers and Leaders in the United States."

4 Gleig, "Buddhist and Racial Justice: A History."

5 Lion's Roar Staff, "Why Is American Buddhism So White?"

exhausting. That's why white folks need to start doing their own work and not rely on people of colour to educate them."[6]

As two white Buddhist scholar-practitioners researching and practicing Buddhism in the US, we consider it an ethical imperative to respond to such calls. One way we have done so is through co-developing and co-delivering a workshop on undoing whiteness as a Buddhist practice for a majority white convert sangha[7] at Zen Mountain Monastery, in upstate New York.[8] Another is through independently publishing accessible scholarship on racial justice and Buddhism for mainstream Buddhist presses.[9] This article is a further intervention directed particularly at the academic field of Buddhist Studies. We combine our respective ethnographic and philosophical methodologies to focus specifically on what white American Buddhists have done to identify and alleviate the *dukkha* or suffering caused by whiteness and to offer resources from the tradition to deepen and extend such work.

We begin by summarizing insights on the construction and operations of whiteness from the academic subfield of Critical Whiteness Studies. We trace American convert Buddhist approaches to "waking up from whiteness"—exploring these through literature and affinity groups—and situate them within the larger movement for racial justice in these communities. Next, we show how the Yogācāra school of Buddhist philosophy provides helpful tools for practitioners in recognizing and being liberated from whiteness, which from the perspective of Yogācāra is an historically conditioned, socially embedded identity structure that has the power to shape our worlds of experience and that can and should be made an object of inquiry, understanding, and relinquishment. Finally, we reflect more explicitly on the responsibility of Buddhist scholars, particularly white scholars, in Buddhist racial justice work.

In this article we depart from the supposed "objectivity" of Buddhist Studies scholarship and embrace a normative aim, namely to encourage other Buddhist Studies scholars to engage in anti-racist scholarship as an antidote both to the

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6 La Sarmiento quoted in Gleig, *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity*, 151.

7 In keeping with the topic of this article, we have chosen to write "sangha" without the diacritic mark rather than "saṃgha," since the former is commonly used by the (mostly American) anglophone contemporary Buddhist communities who are under discussion in this article.

8 Gleig and Brennan, "Collective Liberation: Theory and Practice."

9 See, for example, Brennan, "Deconstructing Whiteness."

ongoing crisis of racial violence and to the Orientalist legacy of the field. Such a move resonates with currents in the wider field of religious studies. Anthropologists of religion, Rachel Schneider and Sophie Bjork-James, for instance, have recently argued that increased scholarship on race, religion, and whiteness has the potential to support the work of dismantling white supremacy. As they state, "By giving attention to the contingencies of history, the realities of shifting power relations, and ongoing struggles to create different forms of life rooted in racial equality and justice, scholars may offer insights into the limits and possibilities of constructing forms of religion or spirituality beyond white supremacy."[10]

## What is Whiteness? Insights from Critical Whiteness Studies

Much of the current work on whiteness comes from the interdisciplinary academic fields of critical race theory and Critical Whiteness Studies, which emerged successively in the 1980s and 1990s. It is important to acknowledge, however, that before Critical Whiteness Studies existed as a distinct subfield, African American historians and literary figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois (1968–1963), James Baldwin (1924–1987), and Toni Morrison (1931–2019) were naming whiteness and its impacts.[11] As Gregory S. Jay notes, "Whiteness Studies traces the economic and political history behind the invention of 'whiteness,' challenges the privileges given to so called 'whites,' and analyses the cultural practices (in art, music, literature, and popular media) that perpetuate the fiction of 'whiteness'."[12]

One of the field's main contributions has been the systematic tracing of the historic production of whiteness and the cultural values and practices that have sustained the construction of whiteness. For instance, in his book, *The Invention of the White Race*, historian Theodore Allen shows that the term "white race" first appears in colonial documents in Virginia in the 1660s. He demonstrates

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10 Schneider and Bjork-James, "Whither Whiteness and Religion? Implications for Theology and the Study of Religion."

11 See, for example, Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*; Baldwin, "On Being White and Other Lies"; and Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.

12 Jay and Jones, "Whiteness Studies and the Multicultural Literature Classroom," 100.

that the elite landowning class used this category as a tool to divide poor white and black indentured servants. Poor "white" servants were offered freedom and land, for instance, if they worked as white slave patrols against Black rebellions.[13] Other scholars have demonstrated how different groups of European immigrants were successively assimilated into whiteness by virtue of their participation in white supremacy. Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White*, for example, examines how Irish immigrants were initially not considered white but gained the status of whiteness through engaging in anti-Black racism.[14]

While the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s saw many gains in overcoming legal racial segregation, studies show how whiteness reconfigured itself through a variety of subtler cultural policies and practices. Focusing on the mass incarceration of Black males, Michelle Alexander, for instance, shows how concepts such as "color-blindness" and "post-racial" America function to deflect attention away from ongoing practices of structural racism.[15] Individual Black success, exemplified by the 2008 election of President Obama, has been used to justify the dismantling of civil rights defending against structural discrimination. In 2013, for example, key parts of the Voting Act Rights were overturned by the Supreme Court.

The normative aim of Critical Whiteness Studies is to undo whiteness as a form of social, cultural, political, and existential dominance. Scholars distinguish between whiteness as a social practice and white-skinned people. While white-skinned people are conditioned in whiteness and benefit from it at the expense of people of colour, they are not reducible to it. As Tammie M. Kennedy, Joyce Irene Middleton, and Krista Ratcliffe explain, "To eradicate whiteness is not to eradicate those who claim identities as whites but rather their position of dominance in the world and the prescription of their ways of being and knowing as normal, civilized, moral—in short, human."[16]

Working to end white dominance, scholars within the subfield of Critical

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13 Allen, *The Invention of the White Race, Volume 1: Racial Oppression and Social Control*; *idem*, *The Invention of the White Race, Volume 2: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*.

14 Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*.

15 Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.

16 Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe, *Rhetorics of Whiteness: Postracial Hauntings in Popular Culture, Social Media, and Education*, xvi.

Whiteness Studies in education have developed pedagogies that identify and challenge how whiteness shapes daily experience. Peggy MacIntosh's foundational article, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," provides a list of twenty-six unearned daily privileges that whiteness confers on her. She calls on white people to become aware of the ways in which white privilege is naturalized and "give up the myth of meritocracy."[17] Robin DiAngelo discusses how racial hierarchies protect white people from racial discomfort and highlights the phenomenon of "white fragility," a psychosocial defensiveness that white people display when confronted with the realities of racial inequities. White people's lack of "racial stamina" functions as a major barrier to overcoming structural racism.[18]

Summing up, some of the key analytic insights of Critical Whiteness Studies are the recognition that (i) the Jim Crow era of white supremacy has been replaced by a subtler legitimation of structural dominance; (ii) white identity is constructed as normative and universal; (iii) white dominance is naturalized and presented as ahistorical; (iv) individualism is central to whiteness; and (v) whiteness is a source of ongoing harm to the health and wellbeing of People of Colour.[19]

## Racial Justice Work in American Buddhism

Recent years have seen an increase of primary literature and secondary scholarship documenting and contextualizing the racial justice efforts of American Buddhists of Colour across heritage and convert communities. One major area has illuminated the exclusion of Asian American Buddhist heritage communities from mainstream narratives of Buddhism in America. Joseph Cheah argues that white supremacy has played a foundational role in the construction of Buddhist modernism from Orientalist scholarship that distinguished between "essential" and "cultural" Buddhism to the racial hierarchies reproduced by the two Buddhism typology that distinguished between "ethnic"

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17 MacIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack."

18 DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard For White People To Talk About Racism*.

19 These draw on and expand Eric Tranby and Douglas Hartman's summary in Tranby and Hartman, "Critical Whiteness Theories and the Evangelical 'Race Problem': Extending Emerson and Smith's Divided by Faith," 346–47.

and "convert Buddhism."[20] Scholar-practitioner Funie Hsu traces how Asian American Buddhists have been marginalized in American Buddhism and calls on white Americans to confront racism as an integral part of their Buddhist practice;[21] while Chenxing Han explodes Orientalist stereotypes and recovers erased communities by presenting a rich array of young Asian American Buddhist voices.[22]

Another area has been to trace how Buddhists of Colour in white majority sanghas have attempted to make their communities more inclusive. Larry Yang, who has been at the forefront of efforts in the Insight community, has provided an invaluable first-person account of the movement towards creating "multicultural sanghas" in the Insight community.[23] Craig Hase, James Meadows, and Stephanie Budge adopt sociologist Elijah Anderson's concept of "the white space" to better understand how white experience and values become established as the norm in majority white sanghas. They identify how practitioners of colour experience and negotiate the white sangha space and offer specific structural recommendations for meditation centres to counter whiteness.[24] And Rima Vesely-Flad offers a rich ethnographic portrait of how Black American Buddhists draw from Buddhist doctrine and practice to heal racialized trauma, build community, and forge new soteriological visions of collective liberation.[25]

## "White Folk Need to Start Doing Their Own Work"

Within this broader field of racial justice in American Buddhism, Buddhists of Colour have increasingly called on white practitioners to confront their white conditioning. This is articulated both as a pragmatic necessity for building

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20 Cheah, *Race and Religion in American Buddhism: White Supremacy and Immigrant Adaptation*.

21 Hsu, "We've Been Here All Along."

22 Han, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists*.

23 Yang, *Awakening Together: The Spiritual Practice of Inclusivity and Community*.

24 Hase, Meadows, and Budge, "Inclusion and Exclusion in the White Space: An Investigation of the Experiences of People of Color in a Primarily White American Meditation Community."

25 Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition: The Practice of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation*.

inclusive community and a soteriological necessity for self-liberation. In discussing the nearly two decades-long process of diversity, inclusion, and equity in Insight Meditation Community of Washington (IMCW), for instance, La Sarmiento, the founder of IMCW's PoC Affinity group, put it bluntly, "Trying to have conversations with white people is pretty painful and exhausting. That's why white folks need to start doing their own work and not rely on folks of color to educate them."[26] On a soteriological level, Black Buddhist Rev. angel Kyodo williams emphasizes that white practitioners should understand such work as an essential component of their own liberation.[27]

While white allies have been a part of racial justice efforts in American Buddhism from its early stages, such as by developing multicultural curricula or co-teaching with Buddhists of Colour, here we want to focus specifically on how white Buddhists are working with their own whiteness directly. By no means comprehensive, the following highlights two avenues—"Waking Up from Whiteness literature" and "Waking Up from Whiteness affinity work"—where white awareness work is being articulated as a Buddhist community and soteriological practice. For purposes of brevity, we will focus on Insight and Zen traditions where efforts have been particularly concentrated.

## Waking Up from Whiteness Literature

A number of pieces by white American Buddhists that interweave data on structural racism with Buddhist teachings have appeared in primary literature such as community documents, the mainstream Buddhist press, or Buddhist blogs. These narratives name whiteness as a form of conditioning that is a barrier to Buddhist practice, community, and awakening. An early example is Rick Field's 1994 *Tricycle* article "Confessions of a White Buddhist." After describing overt racism in the US, Fields added that "A deeper and perhaps equally powerful aspect of racism, however, is the power to define, always the paramount power in a racist society."[28] This power of naming was evident in white Buddhists who declared their meditation focused approach as "real" Buddhism and dis-

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26 Gleig, *American Dharma*, 51.

27 williams, "Liberation: It's All or Nothing."

28 Fields, "Confessions of a White Buddhist: Dharma, Diversity and Race."

missed the devotional Buddhism of Pure Land, which Chinese and Japanese immigrants had brought to the US over a hundred years before their convert communities had begun. In claiming to pioneer "American Buddhism," such white practitioners were unconsciously equating "American" with "white." From a Buddhist perspective, Fields sees racism as a "ubiquitous component of our national ego," which "in itself is neither more nor less than a reflection of the old Buddhist problem of self."[29] Placed in "the penetrating insight born of meditative awareness," such self-grasping could be deconstructed and white Buddhists could see reality as it is, "a manycolored, multi-cultured, pluralistic Pure Land with room enough for all."[30]

The 2000 landmark collection, *Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in our Buddhist Communities*, documents the reproduction of racism and white privilege in Buddhist sanghas. It includes a number of first-person narratives from white allies articulating racial justice as a Buddhist practice. Vipassana practitioner Anna Barnard, for instance, recognizes the intense suffering caused by "our national illusions about race and ethnicity" and affirms that "becoming aware of illusions and the suffering we cause through them" is "intrinsic" to Buddhist practice.[31] Echoing this, Zen teacher, Sandy Boucher, insists, "'Diversity work' is not a luxury, a side-issue, something to tackle next year or maybe sometime. It is a way of opening our hearts right now, of practicing metta on the ground where it's not always easy."[32]

In large part due to the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been an increase of white awareness literature in the mainstream Buddhist press. In her 2016 article, "Facing My White Privilege," Tara Brach describes how deeply she was impacted by a vigil for African American mothers whose children had been lost to racial violence. She calls on white practitioners to recognize their "shared privilege" and to take responsibility for their "collective conditioning," suggesting this is best done in white awareness groups before all sangha members can come together safely in "mixed racial space." Like williams, Brach stresses this is for the benefit of white people as

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29 Fields, "Confessions of a White Buddhist: Dharma, Diversity and Race."

30 Ibid.

31 Barnard, "Anna Barnard," Section One: Personal Statements.

32 Adams et al., comps., "Making the Invisible Visible Healing: Racism in Our Buddhist Communities."

much as practitioners of colour. As she explained: "We need to get on their team—not in order to help out 'the other' but because it frees us all."[33]

In August 2020, Tenku Ruff, the then-President of the Soto Zen Buddhist Association, published "No-One Wakes Up Until We All Wake Up" in *Lions' Roar*. She began by naming the murder of George Floyd and recognizing the disproportionate number of Black people who had died in the Covid pandemic. She identifies whiteness as a self-protecting bubble which insulates white practitioners from Black suffering and separates them from the fundamental Buddhist reality of interdependence. Such whiteness, she continues, must be pierced, as part of the bodhisattva vow.[34]

## Waking Up from Whiteness Affinity Work

The last few years have seen the emergence of white awareness Buddhist groups in and across American Insight and Zen communities. These have their roots in three distinct but interconnected sites: (1) The Community Dharma Leader (CDL) program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center; (2) The East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC) in Oakland; and (3) White Awake, a training developed by Eleanor Hancock, which has roots in the Insight Meditation Community of Washington.[35] Three participants of the CDL 2 training—Larry Yang, Spring Washam, and David Foecke—were co-founders of the East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC), which began in 2006 with a mission of serving a multicultural Buddhist community. In 2008, EBMC member Kitsy Schoen co-developed "Interconnected: Being Mindful and White in a Multicultural World" for white community members. Reflecting on its origins, she explained,

> It was so clear from the start at the East Bay Meditation Center that a lot of white folks were so excited to be in a more diverse space, but didn't have the awareness or skills to not enact our privilege. So, it seemed like a really fundamental, necessary part of building a multi-cultural sangha…Part of it is not to take our conditioning personally, but take personal responsibility.[36]

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33 Brach, "Facing My White Privilege."

34 Ruff, "No-One Wakes Up Until We All Wake Up."

35 See bibliography entry of White Awake for the group's website.

It was important, Schoen stressed, that white practitioners understand that such work was not about them helping People of Colour but for their own benefit. As she put it, "We really learn that this is about our own liberation. That there's no way to deny and minimize this huge reality of racism without a psychic, emotional, and spiritual cost to ourselves."[37]

Since then, Schoen and other white EBMC teachers, many of whom have also participated in a CDL program, have developed white awareness groups for Buddhist sanghas. Crystal Johnson and Schoen, for instance, have offered "White and Awakening Together" at EBMC, Spirit Rock Meditation Center, the San Francisco Zen Center, and for the Soto Zen Buddhist Association. A small group of white practitioners from the CDL 5 cohort, which ran from 2015–2016, developed "White Awareness Insight Curriculum for Uprooting Privilege or WAIC-Up." This curriculum is based on the White Awake program and was offered as an open-access resource for all white dharma practitioners.[38]

As with the white awareness literature, there has been a significant increase in white awareness trainings and affinity groups across the convert landscape in the last five years due to the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement. Framing themselves as Buddhist responses to racial harm and inequities, these courses range from shorter introductory offerings open to a wide range of participants to longer, more intensive programs embedded in sanghas committed to anti-racism as a Buddhist practice. An example of the former is "White and Awakening Together," an eight-week series, which was led by Schoen and Johnson at Spirit Rock in 2020. The course description states:

> This is a time in America when white people's awareness of the terrible impact of racial injustice has increased dramatically in the context of the pandemic and following the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. How can we respond? What can we do? What is whiteness, and how does it fit in with our dharma practice? How can we use the energy of this time to explore and address the suffering of racial injustice and pro-

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36 Kitsy Schoen, personal conversation with Gleig, June 2015.

37 Ibid.

38 Airborne et al., "White Awareness Insight Curriculum for Uprooting Privilege."

mote, nurture and maintain greater inclusiveness and racial equity in our communities?[39]

An example of the latter is the "Undoing Whiteness" curriculum at the Brooklyn Zen Center.[40] Its co-founder and head teacher Gregory Snyder has a long-term commitment to Buddhist anti-racist work and the centre has a well-established POC group.[41] They have developed a ten-month intensive program titled "The Bodhisattva Path of Liberation: Racial Suffering and Collective Transformation," which is "focused on exploring, witnessing, and transforming the individual and collective suffering and harm caused by race and racism." The course description notes it is designed for white practitioners who already have basic familiarity with anti-racist history and training.[42]

While the different "waking up from whiteness" groups utilize scholarship from Critical Whiteness Studies drawing on authors such as Gregory Jay, Robin DiAngelo, and Peggy Macintosh, all of them stress that their approach is primarily grounded in Buddhism, both in terms of understanding the causes and conditions that sustain racism and working with how to become fully liberated from it. The WAIC curriculum opens with the sentence that "As with all forms of suffering, the Dharma offers enormous gifts to meet the ongoing reality of racial suffering,"[43] and utilizes mindfulness, karuṇā, and *mettā* practice. The "White and Awakening Together" course sets dharma practice as the core content in which to "explore the (un)realities of whiteness, stay present with difficult experiences and enhance our capacity to skilfully be in diverse community."[44] Brooklyn Zen Center's curriculum is "framed by a theory of karma that understands racial harm as an embodied habit and historical product of greed, hate and delusion."[45] It aligns overcoming racism with the bodhisattva vow and each class is structured around one of the six pāramitās or perfections.

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39 Spirit Rock, "White and Awakening Together."

40 Brooklyn Zen Center, "Undoing Whiteness."

41 Snyder, "Waking Up to Whiteness."

42 Brooklyn Zen Center, "Undoing Whiteness."

43 Airborne et al., "White Awareness Insight Curriculum for Uprooting Privilege."

44 Spirit Rock, "White and Awakening Together."

45 Brooklyn Zen Center, "The Bodhisattva Path of Liberation: Racial Suffering and Collective Transformation."

## Suffering Whiteness and What To Do About It: Diagnosing Whiteness with a Yogācāra Framework

The conviction that white awareness work is an integral and essential part of Buddhist practice is of much significance given that, as Ann Gleig and Brenna Grace Artinger have shown, such work has faced considerable critique from other Buddhists who have declared it to be either irrelevant or in opposition to the tradition. Popular Zen teacher Brad Warner, for instance, has derided the adoption of anti-racist practices in American Buddhism. He declares that concepts such as "collective karma" have no precedence in Buddhism and are merely tools of identity politics designed to shame white Buddhists.[46] Buddhists of Colour advocating for racial justice have been accused of a range of Buddhist offenses from "being too angry" to causing disharmony and division in the sangha.[47]

Much of the opposition to racial justice work is due to selective modernist representations of Buddhism as apolitical and individualistic. Some reflects the wider reactionary backlash to racial justice gains in the US with the same reasoning and rhetoric employed to delegitimate it.[48] It is important to recognize, however, that contemporary practitioners' desire for continuity with earlier Buddhist traditions of thought, practice, and history is a legitimate one. In fact, such a desire could be seen as a point of contact rather than conflict between opponents and advocates, as the latter are also convinced of the continuity between racial justice and Buddhist praxis. Here is where we feel that Buddhist scholars who have both the tools and authority to bridge past and present iterations of Buddhist thought can play an important role. As one such scholar, Brennan here offers an analysis of whiteness as a psychosocial identity construct with the tools of Yogācāra Buddhist thought.

The approach taken in this second half of the paper is a philosophical one. Because our philosophical inquiry is directed towards the set of ancient texts that constitute the early Yogācāra corpus, the methods employed include philological ones, those concerned with the theory of language as used in texts. Furthermore, our approach to philology takes its cues from Sheldon Pollock, who understands

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46 Gleig and Artinger, "#BuddhistCultureWars."

47 Gleig, *American Dharma*, 154–56.

48 Gleig and Artinger, "#BuddhistCultureWars," 34–38.

philology broadly as the "discipline of making sense of texts."[49] Indexing the total work of philology to a text's three temporal planes (the moment of its birth; its existence between birth and now via a tradition of interpretation; and its presence to us now), Pollock notes that philological work of necessity seeks to determine the meaning of a text not only at its point of genesis, but also in its reception over time and as it is present to the reader's subjectivity. "Making sense of a text," Pollock writes, "resides in the sum total of the varied senses generated on these three planes, their lively copresence to our mind."[50]

The present interpretation of important early Yogācāra ideas emphasizes, in particular, the necessity of attending to these texts' presences to our own subjectivities, for we believe this has been neglected in contemporary studies of Yogācāra thought. In our quest, rightly undertaken, to overcome our philosophical preconceptions—grounded largely in early modern and modern western philosophy, in which many of us were trained as students—Anglophone and other contemporary Buddhist Studies scholars located in the west have sought to learn the histories, languages, and intertextual conceptual contexts that allow us to understand these texts at their points of origin. This is necessary work, and the field has been right to undertake it. But this is not the full work of philology, for it erases both the traditionist and presentist truths to be found in these texts, both of which, on Pollock's account embraced here, are incorporated into these texts' meanings.

We are, moreover, on solid ground interpreting early Yogācāra texts not only with attention to the contexts of their production, but also with attention to their presence to our own subjectivities, for the very concepts put forward in our texts demand such attention. Early Yogācāra ideas, particularly the concepts of subject-object non-duality as presented in early Yogācāra thought, as well as Yogācāra's robust conception of intersubjectivity, not only allow for but even require that we discern the meaning of a given object of perception and cognition—like a text—in relationship to our subjectivities. Pollock articulates this demand when he writes: "As Gadamer shows, our belief that our own historical being can be erased in grasping that past historical meaning is the ghost of metaphysics haunting historicism."[51] Here Pollock asks us to consider what

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49 Pollock, "Introduction," 22.

50 Pollock, "Philology in Three Dimensions," 400.

51 Ibid., 401.

our metaphysical commitments must be if our interpretive acts assume that we can erase our historical selves in our quest for a text's meaning at its genesis point. In other words, there is some metaphysics at play, and we best know what it is. Pollock does not here articulate a particular conception of "historical being." But our Yogācāra texts do elucidate a conception of subjectivity, and it is not consistent with a hidden metaphysics that would make allowances for a pure historicism. On the Yogācāra account, subjectivity is: fully constructed through past causes and conditions, as described by the causal workings of the storehouse consciousness; co-constructed along with its lifeworld; and always intersubjectively shared. Keeping these ideas close, we observe that Pollock's philological program is not a foreign imposition onto our early Yogācāra texts. Rather, the latter offer us a robust conception of an historical self which is understood to be operative in perception and cognition, not to mention in the acts of meaning making that arise from them. Thus, our early Yogācāra texts demand that we attend to our subjectivities even as we read and interpret them, granting us no reason to think we can evade this necessity in a quest for a purely historicist truth.

It is imperative then—from the perspectives of both Pollock and the early Yogācāra school—that we know who we are when we read a text. So, who are we when we read early Yogācāra texts? Some of us are, among other things, white people, and the major claim of this section is that to be white is to bear a particular psychosocial identity construct, called whiteness, that can be fruitfully analysed using the tools of early Yogācāra thought. For their part, early Yogācāra ideas—for the reasons just outlined—make such attention to the contours of our shared and individual subjectivities a requisite for understanding reality in its delusive and perfected forms. What's more, the relationship between whiteness as an identity construct and human suffering is close and fraught.[52] It has existed for over three hundred years, and has had a formative influence on the legal, political, economic, and social landscapes of the United States and, via colonization, the globe. It is therefore not only Yogācāra ideas,

[52] In addition to the historical, sociological, and phenomenological overviews discussed above, sociologist Steve Garner's *Whiteness: An Introduction* provides a concise introduction to some features of whiteness as a psychosocial identity construct. Contemporary philosopher George Yancy's extensive writings have been particularly influential on the latter part of our essay's treatment of whiteness as an intersubjective psychosocial identity-construct.

but also a commitment to the noble truths outlined by the historical Buddha, that compel us to assess this identity construct with a keenly felt interest—guided by our knowledge of the suffering it has caused—in knowing its features and causal origin, relinquishing its powers, and bringing into being some world beyond it.[53] If we care about suffering, we must care about this.

With these imperatives in mind, we turn our attention to a Yogācāra analysis of whiteness as an identity construct. There are three central features of whiteness identified in the extensive literature on it that are particularly conducive to analysis using Yogācāra ideas: individualism, invisibility, and ahistoricism. Individualism is that idea that one's subjectivity is primarily an individual rather than a social affair, that psychological states, social experiences and positions, and life outcomes are rooted in characteristics and actions that inhere in individuals rather than across groups. Whiteness tends to project an individualist ethos onto both white people and non-white people, such that the shared experiences and shared features of constructed and intersubjectively experienced worlds are ignored and obscured.[54] Invisibility refers not simply to the idea that white norms are projected into being as universal norms, but that whiteness itself is not perceived as an identity structure at all, such that white people take ourselves to be racially unmarked.[55] Invisibility is closely tied to individualism, as both entail a refusal to see the presence and operations of a shared psychosocial identity construct. Ahistoricism is the idea that particular features of whiteness, as well as features of the shared world of experience co-constructed with whiteness, are not the products of historical or causal forces, but are instead natural in the sense of unconstructed.[56] Ahistoricism is also connected to both invisibility and individualism. If there is no psychosocial identity called whiteness (if it remains *invisible*), then none of its features require any historical/causal explanation. They are, instead, taken either as natural features of the world or as *individual* characteristics which, while they

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[53] The language here consciously reflects the way that early Yogācāra texts take up the tradition's commitment to the four noble truths by linking them to the Yogācāra theory of the three natures of dharmas. See Brennan, "The Three Natures and the Path to Liberation in Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda Thought," 623.

[54] Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction*, 4.

[55] Ibid., 34–47.

[56] White ahistoricism largely follows from white invisibility: if there is no whiteness, then it has no history.

may have an individual causal explanation, are still understood as disconnected from the way a given subjectivity is both intersubjectively formed[57] and co-constructed with a world of experience.

Engaging Yogācāra thought, we find in particular that three of the ideas it systematizes within a Buddhist soteriological framework cut against these three features of whiteness. Those ideas are subject-object non-duality, intersubjectivity, and the path process inscribed in the diagnosis of mind-only and the corresponding promise of no-mind. The Yogācāra school positions subject-object non-duality in terms of the co-construction of subjects and worlds. That which is perceived as object is not really object because it has been co-constructed with that which does the perceiving, which likewise is therefore not strictly subject, since it is co-constructed along with the ostensible objects. It is of course the case that subject and object are non-distinct insofar as they are each empty of intrinsic existence. But more pointedly, for the early Yogācārins, that which is taken as subject and that which is taken as object within a given act of perception or cognition are produced through the same causal stream.[58] This idea cuts directly against both white invisibility and

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[57] An interesting question is whether the intersubjective formation of whiteness as a psychosocial identity construct would, on a Yogācāra account, entail intersubjectivity only between members of the class of people who bear the identity, or also between those who do share the construct and those who do not, or in other words between white people and not-white people, particularly Black people who are constructed by whiteness as the racial other. George Yancy identifies between whiteness and being Black what he calls "a deeper relational and corporeal ontology without edges, a social ontology that implicates the two of us within a relational dynamic of touching." (See Yancy, "The Practice of Philosophy: Truth-telling, Vulnerability, and Risk," 1258.) Here Yancy puts forward a white intersubjectivity that is co-constituted with Blackness as its inverse, or as something it casts as an anti-subjectivity, even while Black people undergo and suffer from the subjective experience of being co-constructed with whiteness in this way. It would be interesting to set Yancy's concept here alongside Vasubandhu's description of hell beings in the *Twenty Verses and Commentary*, where Vasubandhu considers what it is to be a hell-guardian, or one who takes actions in a hell realm, and yet does not suffer the characteristic experiences of that realm. On Vasubandhu's account, are hell-beings and hell-guardians intersubjectively constituted in some way, or not? Whatever the answer, it remains clear that on an early Yogācāra account, beings who share a world of experience are indeed intersubjectively constituted. See also Garner's overview of whiteness as a relational concept (Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction*, 51–52).

[58] This is the import of Vasubandhu's replacement, in his *Twenty Verses and Commentary*, of a causal account that takes dharmas (elements or tropes that bear identifying characteris-

white ahistoricism. For as long as historical and sociological data shows us a world in which white people and non-white people are subject to differentiable kinds and degrees of suffering, then we must attend to the subjectivities that have been co-constructed along with this world as part of our analysis of the causal conditions that have produced such differentiated suffering. If whiteness is inscribed in the shared world, then it is also inscribed in a shared psychosocial identity, and seeing this, making it visible, is the crucial first step. To uproot the attendant suffering, we must accurately identify this circumstance and its causes, and work on their relinquishment. Leaving the white identity that has been co-constructed with our world invisible—paradoxically both transparent and opaque[59]— poses a continued obstacle to this path work. And in order to fully understand the causes of this world of differentiated suffering, we must be historically—which in the Buddhist context is to say *causally*—minded. To know how this world can be ended, we must know what has brought it about.

The second element of this new causal framework, intersubjectivity, cuts directly against white individualism. Intersubjectivity is entailed by the function of the collection of potentialities that are brought into being by past actions and that will flower forth into future manifest events that constitute our experiences within a lifeworld. This collection of potentialities is of course the storehouse consciousness (Skt. *ālaya-vijñāna*), the container of all of the metaphorically named seeds (*bīja*). As Roy Tzohar has shown, a world is an

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tics) as causally efficacious with the seed-manifest event (*bīja-vijñapti*) causal theory, according to which actions lay "seeds," or causal potentialities, which later germinate into manifest events (*vijñapti*). Importantly, manifest events do not sustain a subject-object distinction, since the manifest event incorporates both aspects and is produced, in its totality, by one causal stream. In other words, they are, in their totality, products of past actions rather than products of the interactions between presently appearing phenomena. This replacement occurs in verses 8–9 and commentaries, where Vasubandhu asserts that the *āyatana*s, or fields of perception and cognition, cannot actually explain the arising of cognition, and embraces instead the seed-manifest event theory. See Silk, *Materials Towards the Study of Vasubandhu's Viṃśikā*, 62–70. Sonam Kachru interprets the *Twenty Verses and Commentary* thusly when he writes: "There is one causal mechanism. The mechanism responsible for adapting the environment to look the way it does is the mechanism responsible for generating subjects for whom the environment is so adapted." See Kachru, *Other Lives: Mind and World in Indian Buddhism*, 143.

[59] Georgy Yancy discusses the phenomenology of the opaque white racist self. See Yancy, *Look, a White!*, 136, and *idem*, "Introduction."

intrinsically shared thing, and the class of beings who inhabit a world share much of their subjectivities, while yet retaining some private or unshared subjective experiences.[60] Intersubjectivity is none other than this shared subjectivity, or the fact of being constituted through the same causal conditions that brought about our fellows and our shared world.[61] Intersubjectivity exposes the falseness of any form of individualist ideology, for it shows that we are always already within a given lifeworld alongside others with whom we share many aspects of our subjectivities.

For white people to recognize our mutual constitution, our intersubjectivity as bearers of whiteness, requires undoing white invisibility by seeing and recog-

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[60] Tzohar, "Imagine Being a Preta: Early Indian Yogācāra Approaches to Intersubjectivity," 348–49 and *passim*. Here, Tzohar also shows that in early Yogācāra thought, intersubjectivity is the context within which private experience unfolds, for even private experiences are mediated by conceptual activity, which is not merely shared, but in fact constitutive of our individual subjectivities and lifeworlds. Moreover, as both Tzohar and William Waldron have extensively shown, language use has a recursive structure such that language arises from our shared worlds and intersubjective experiences and then reinforces the same. Waldron identifies the Yogācāra incorporation of linguistic recursivity into its account of the causal workings of the storehouse consciousness as a key source of intersubjectivity. Waldron writes that these causal workings are, because of the operations of language, "karmically productive at a collective as well as individual level – that is, they create a common world." And it is not only the world that is common, but also the subjectivities that encounter it are shared. As Waldron writes: "These influences in the form of the 'impressions of language' comprise the common aspect (*sādhāraṇa-lakṣaṇa*) of the ālaya-vijñāna, our common 'psychic inheritance' if you will, which allows us to experience the world through similar perceptions and, all too often, provokes us to respond to these perceptions in similarly afflicted ways." (For both quotations, see Waldron, *The Buddhist Unconscious*, 168.) For the purposes of the present topic, this Yogācāra take on the relationship between language and intersubjectivity bears on Alison Bailey's treatment of "white talk." Taking her cues from Alice McIntyre, Bailey defines white talk as "a predictable set of discursive patterns that white folks habitually deploy when asked directly about the connections between white privilege and institutional racism." As students of early Yogācāra thought, we will not be surprised that Bailey identifies white talk as recursively feeding back into, and strengthening, whiteness as a psychosocial identity. See Bailey, "'White Talk' as a Barrier to Understanding the Problem of Whiteness."

[61] The singularity of the causal sequence that puts forward intersubjective experience accounts for why it is truly intersubjective and not just a set of instances wherein subjectivity works the same way for distinct subjects, as Jay Garfield worries in his response to Tzohar and others on the topic of intersubjectivity in Yogācāra thought. See Garfield, "I Take Refuge in the Sangha. But how?".

nizing that we do in fact live in a world indelibly and painfully marked by differential levels and kinds of suffering for white and non-white people, particularly Black people, marked as the perpetual, even ontological, other to the white subject. Seeing this, we are then further called to locate and identify the classes of beings intersubjectively formed as not just inhabitants but subjects of the world so marked. One such class is constituted by the intersubjectively formed white subjects, those who bear the psychosocial identity called whiteness.

With these first two Yogācāra teachings, subject-object non-duality and intersubjectivity, we can diagnose white individualism, white invisibility, and white ahistoricism as false, or delusive in the language of Buddhist thought. But it would not be in keeping with the liberatory promise of the Buddhist tradition for the Yogācāra school to stop at diagnosis, or for us to feel that whiteness as an identity construct is fatally fixed. And, indeed, the Yogācāra does not stop there. Instead, it organizes the causal system that accounts for both subject-object non-duality and intersubjectivity into a broad account of the world writ large as "mind only," or the world of experience as shaped through and through by past karma, individual and shared. And this teaching, in turn, is proffered not as a description of a static state of affairs, but as the diagnosis of a problematic condition: we are trapped within our mutually constituted subjectivities and object-worlds, thoroughgoingly shaped by past actions, and we are seeking a way out.[62]

The liberatory state offered as a fruit of the path beyond mind-only is called no-mind, here understood not as an absence of subjective awareness, but as freedom from the afflicted condition of mind-only. But what does this freedom look like? Here we take our cues from the early Yogācāra theory of the three natures of dharmas, which is keyed directly to the three path processes that are paired, in the teachings of the four noble truths found in the discourses of the historical Buddha and throughout Abhidharma literature, with the first three noble truths. These processes are knowing, relinquishing,

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[62] Dan Lusthaus's writings have been a major source of inspiration for our broad take on the import of the mind-only claim in the early Yogācāra school. Here we embrace his crucial insight that the early Yogācāra authors "did not focus on consciousness to assert it as ultimately real… but rather because it is the cause of the karmic problem they are seeking to eliminate." (See Lusthaus, "What is and isn't Yogācāra.") Brennan has referred to this in unpublished papers as "mind-only as a diagnosis," akin to the diagnosis of suffering offered in the first noble truth.

and directly realizing. Whereas the four noble truths would have it that we must know suffering, relinquish its causes, and directly realize its cessation, the three natures theory calls us to know the constructed nature of a dharma, relinquish its dependent nature, and directly realize its perfected nature, the latter corresponding to no-mind.[63] This move effectively reframes these processes as relative to each moment of experience, understood as constituted by dharmas, or elements of experience. As such, these path processes (which the Yogācāra author Sthiramati calls the "truth of the path")[64] must be undertaken again and again, with the arising of each new dharma in our field of experience. The point here, then, is that the affliction of whiteness cannot be permanently extinguished. For as long as there is a shared world of experience in which there is differential suffering between white and non-white subjects, there will be an afflicted psychosocial identity aptly called whiteness. This is the present that has been created by our collective pasts, and no discrete insight or act of will of a given individual can overturn it.[65]

So, is this account a fatalistic one? Are we stuck with whiteness?[66] On a Yogācāra account, no. First, because no-mind is still an important locus of freedom, even if it must be realized again and again. And second, because, as Roy Tzohar has shown, aspiration itself can be reality-forming.[67] In specific, the bodhisattva's aspirations to realize their vows beyond the strictures of the bound world can form new worlds in the future. So, while a white person would be wrong to embrace a naïve anti-racism in which the individual insights and character development of white people are enough to transform our world, we would be equally wrong to embrace a fatalism or cynicism, afflictions whose effect is equivalent to accepting whiteness as a natural state of affairs, about which we can do nothing. Instead, we can cut a middle way: one that sees and commits to investigating and relinquishing the deep and radical afflictedness

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63 For further reflections on the concept of no-mind in this context, see Brennan, "A Buddhist Phenomenology of the White Mind."

64 See Brennan, "The Three Natures and the Path to Liberation in Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda Thought," 624.

65 To think so would to remain ignorant of both subject-object non-duality and intersubjectivity.

66 For a recent non-fatalistic philosophical account of whiteness as unfixed and therefore changeable, see Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness*.

67 Tzohar, *A Yogācāra Buddhist Theory of Metaphor*, 187.

of the intersubjective psychosocial identity-formation called whiteness and yet does not seek a false leap beyond that identity, but instead commits to tarrying with it,[68] to seeing and identifying it in all its productions, and to aspiring to a world beyond it.

## Conclusion

Having shown how scholarship on Yogācāra can contribute to Buddhist anti-racist work, in closing we want to briefly reflect on *why* Buddhist scholars should engage in such work. The colonial and Orientalist history of Buddhist Studies has been well-documented.[69] Scholars such as Joseph Cheah and Natalie Quli have shown that Orientalist constructions of what does and does not count as real Buddhism have resulted in the marginalization and exclusion of Asian American Buddhists.[70] When white Buddhists claim that Buddhist anti-racism work is illegitimate as there is no textual precedence for it, they are also reflecting and reproducing that history. Indeed, alt-right Buddhists explicitly draw on Buddhist Studies scholarship to support their white supremacist and deeply misogynist interpretations of the tradition.

There are different ways to resist this. One is to disrupt the privileging of monastic elites and canonical texts as the standard of "real" Buddhism and to focus more on the lived practices of marginalized Buddhists from the premodern to the present. Such an approach is being advocated by Amy Langenberg and Stephanie Balkwill under their initiative "The Buddhist Bodies Collective." They seek to "take the body (rather than the text or institutions or transcendence, or the truth or the mind)" as the starting point to the study

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[68] We here take up the language and challenge posed by Georgy Yancy, who asks for white people to tarry with the way that whiteness draws us in and permeates our being. Yancy expresses frustration, righteous anger, despair, and love in his written and spoken efforts to get white people to see that when we move too quickly to resolution, we thereby persist in overlooking the deeply formative nature of white subject formations, and continue to reinscribe a subjectivity that has caused harm, terror even, to non-white people. See, for example, Yancy, *Look, a White!*, 158–63.

[69] Hallisey, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism."

[70] Cheah, *Race and Religion in American Buddhism*; Quli, "Western Self, Asian Other"; *idem*, "On *Authenticity*."

of Buddhism.[71] Another is to focus attention on understudied Asian Buddhist philosophers who have sought to forge more socially just articulations of the tradition. Jessica Xiaomin Zu's exciting work on Chinese modernist Lü Cheng, who developed a revolutionary social ontology grounded in Yogācāra that refuted materialism and individualism, is one such example.[72]

Another approach is to think anew the responsibilities of philology, as we have done here. Philological work is necessary if we are to engage responsibly and meaningfully with texts from the distant past. But it also must, as Sheldon Pollock has written, confront the "historicity, constructedness, and changeability" of itself as a discipline.[73] Pollock calls this "an epistemological necessity, not a moral preference," and argues that "the humbling force of genealogy must be part and parcel of every disciplinary practice."[74] Doing a genealogy of philology should free us from a narrow reception of old texts and encourage us to ask different questions of them and to bring them to bear on current issues in generative ways. It is also, as we have argued here, consistent with the Yogācāra-informed imperative that when making sense of texts and worlds, we account for our own subjectivities. Bringing this imperative to our philological work is a particularly potent way for philosophers to disrupt the claiming of Buddhist texts as fixed in the past and inherently conservative.

Whether employing ethnographic, philological, or philosophical approaches, in taking Buddhist anti-racist work seriously as legitimately Buddhist, scholars simultaneously grant it legitimacy. Some scholars might be uncomfortable with this, seeing it as an overstepping of intellectual parameters and a threat to the supposed scholarly ideal of objectivity.[75] Such a position, we believe, is both naive and irresponsible, ignoring the fact that Buddhist studies as a field has always been involved in the construction of its object of study. Our choice is not whether or not to have impact, but rather what impact we will have. Will our scholarship merely reproduce and re-centre pre-existing

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71 See bibliography entry under "The Buddhist Bodies Collective" for their Twitter page. A website for the project is forthcoming.

72 Zu, "A Spiritual Evolutionism."

73 Pollock, "Future Philology?," 948.

74 Ibid.

75 We agree here with American religions historian Kathryn Lofton who calls on scholars to overcome the confines of an assumed but illusory neutrality when writing about sexual abuse in religion. Lofton, "Revisited: Sex Abuse and the Study of Religion."

social and religious power dynamics and demographics or will it give voice to those at the margins?

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