The overall mood, or zeitgeist, of academic studies of Buddhism has been changing in the last five to ten years; scholars of Buddhism, especially in its Western iterations, have begun to carefully analyze the influence of racism on Buddhism in North America and Europe. There have been scholars pointing to this phenomenon for many years, namely Joseph Cheah, but many are now beginning to pay careful attention to the influence of racism on the development of Buddhism in the West and how that continues to influence practitioners of color who are attempting to engage with Buddhist teachings only to find themselves in sanghas filled with affluent white folks. How did Buddhism in the West become so white and how do modern sanghas reproduce this racialized space? In *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*, edited by George Yancy and Emily McRae, some of the top scholars of Buddhism in the West analyze this modern phenomenon in Buddhist spaces.

The text of *Buddhism and Whiteness* is split between fifteen chapters, with an additional introduction by the editors and afterword by Charles Johnson, who is an important scholar, novelist, and philosopher who wrote *Middle Passage*, which received the National Book Award for Fiction in 1990. Each chapter within the work reflects the personal research focus of the authors, but the content circles around notions of Buddhism and whiteness generally. At the outset, it should be mentioned that “whiteness” in this text is not tied strictly to phenotype, but the more academic theory of white supremacy and the racist notions which back up this thinking and way of interacting with the world. What the authors point out is not a predominance of folks with European heritage in modern Buddhism, but the ways in which ideological notions of whiteness (and Aryanism) have been promoted and favored in portrayals of Buddhism in the West;[1] this focus on white supremacy has even led to the disparagement of tra-
ditional Asian forms of Buddhism in light of supposedly new forms of dharma untangled from their cultural and historical heritage. What is of course ironic about this presentation of Buddhism is that the religion takes on Western notions of individualism, rationalism, and self-fulfillment in this supposed removal of cultural baggage. This is evidenced by multiple Buddhist groups and has had a direct historical impact on the modern academic research being done for *Buddhism and Whiteness*.

In fact, intersections of Buddhism and racism provide a particularly useful avenue for the academic study of white supremacy, as most Westerners would never associate the ancient Asian tradition with racism at all. The overlap of Buddhism and white supremacy shows the deep and subtle nature of racism within North American and European cultures. The articles in this edited volume are timely and important, not only within Buddhist communities but in Western nations generally. Discussions of racism and white supremacy have been front of mind in numerous countries for years, and Buddhism is no exception. In the field, there have been very few academic works dealing with issues of racism and Buddhism, and it is even more rare to focus specifically on whiteness. Buddhism makes a useful test case for analyzing racism because the religion seems to have largely taken on these notions within the modernist reform movements which claimed to be revolutionizing the tradition within the historical realities of colonialism; at the same time, Buddhism also offers emic resources to combat these notions. Buddhism shows the deeply nuanced and systemic nature of white supremacy but also the ways we can overcome it, and the chapters within this volume analyze this core ambiguity from various perspectives.

Each chapter does a nice job of analyzing Buddhism and racism today and discussing issues of whiteness and marginalization for people of color, but I wished there had been some more focus on the historical foundations which led to the construction of this modern problem. Leah Kalmanson’s chapter on white supremacy in Meiji Japan was very useful, as it shows the odd ways in which Buddhism and scientific racism were connected in the early twentieth century. More chapters like this, which provide the historical foundations for the modern phenomenon being analyzed, would have bolstered the arguments of writers working with Buddhists today as this would show the growth of these ideas and their pervasiveness in white supremacist thinking.

Another thought-provoking historical chapter is Carolyn M. Jones Medine’s “Beyond Vietnam,” which analyzes the influence of the Vietnam War on Buddhists and the racial overlaps it had in America with Martin Luther King Jr. and Thich Nhat Hanh. Medine deftly connects the personal stories of modern Buddhist leaders with the broader ideological influence of two important thinkers and spiritual role models brought together by the horrors of the Vietnam War. This chapter is a useful format for intellectual history more broadly, as it shows the influences of thinkers of a particular moment in history and the way that events can change patterns of thinking on a large scale. Medine’s historical account shows Vietnam as a turning point for major thinkers, connecting D. T. Suzuki to modern teachers like Ralph Steele. However, it did leave me wondering what today’s turning point will be. Is 9/11 and the resultant war on terror producing a new raft of teachers?

Some chapters provoke us to unsettle prevailing ideas and terms within the study of Buddhism. A stand-out entry in the ethnographic chapters is “Undoing Whiteness in American Buddhist Modernism” by Ann Gleig, who adds a productive sociological perspective to the book, including a brief overview of American Buddhism broadly. Gleig argues that the term “Buddhist modernism” has been overused and unquestioned for some time now, while people of color and others provide more nuance to this theory. Gleig suggests that
Buddhist modernism more accurately fit a particular time period in Buddhist history, while Buddhists in North America and Europe today are seeing new phenomena play out which do not fit as neatly within the framing of modernism. Another interesting critique of the field of Buddhist studies generally comes in the final chapter, with Hsiao-Lan Hu’s “The White Feminism in Rita Gross’s Critique of Gender Identities and Reconstruction of Buddhism.” Many of us are well acquainted with Gross’s *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (1995), but Hu shows the nuances of first-wave feminism and how deeply entrenched white supremacy is, even within the minds of scholars. One example is Gross’s preference for modernist forms of Buddhism over and above the so-called baggage Buddhism of Asian immigrants. Again, this shows a distinct shift in the perspective of scholars and the field more broadly.

Many of the chapters in *Buddhism and Whiteness* are personal in nature and combine academic analysis with the experiences of Buddhist people of color. From the outset, we are met with Sharon Suh’s proud admission she may sometimes have to function as a “killjoy” within a religion otherwise viewed very favorably in North America and Europe. Even in the first chapter, and continuing throughout the work, a feeling of “skin in the game” can be felt in emotions which range from anger to sadness, but also a sense of optimism and joy for currents of change present in Buddhism today. Other chapters, like “Exorciating the Demon of Whiteness from Within” by Lama Justin von Bujdoss, take a more distinctly insider perspective within the Buddhist tradition and offer meditations or Tantric “chöd” to help practitioners incorporate racial justice work within Buddhist practice. In another book, this regular switch between scholar and practitioner perspectives could have been dangerous, but the authors of this particular work do a very nice job of keeping their analysis even-handed while bringing unique emic viewpoints to their overall investigations. For instance, Emily McRae’s chapter on “White Delusion and Avidyā” and Rima Vesely-Flad’s “Racism and Anatta” both draw on Buddhist Abhidharma analysis to frame their overall academic breakdown of racism, which provides a compelling merger of ideas which would be accessible even for insiders and a useful model for other scholars. Joy Cecile Brennan’s chapter, “A Buddhist Phenomenology of the White Mind,” is another generative example of how to weave an emic argument to frame academic debate seamlessly, as Brennan compares Yogacara Mind-Only philosophy to the re-creation of whiteness within Western societies. I should also mention “Making Consciousness an Ethnical Project” by Jessica Locke and “Taking and Making Refuge in Racial Awareness” by Rhonda V. Magee, which both utilize insider Buddhist arguments to promote social justice work and active political engagement. Each of these works details how those who are interested in engaging political antiracist action can get involved and continue to use their Buddhist practice on this path. This marks a shift in the field of Buddhist studies, where academics have often been practitioners but were rarely politically motivated, an attitude that was in part tied to particular views of Buddhism as being apolitical. However, as the developments of Buddhist Modernism and Buddhism’s connection to scientific racism have shown, the religion has been connected to politics for centuries; thus, scholar-practitioners are pointing out a groundswelling within Buddhism and a shift in academic analysis. This text is on the forefront of a larger shift within academic studies of Buddhism more broadly toward the inclusion of intersectionality.

Throughout *Buddhism and Whiteness*, authors express a desire to reach a non-academic Buddhist audience but do not necessarily succeed entirely in this respect. Often, knowledge of feminist and critical race theories is required to understand the arguments. Carol J. Moeller’s chapter, “bell hooks Made Me a Buddhist,” provides a telling example of what I mean here. Moeller’s
chapter is insightful, with a concrete explanation for the importance of representation in Buddhist groups combined with an insider discussion of liberating versus nonliberating mindfulness; Moeller also discusses the need to use plain language in academic work, but then assumes the reader’s familiarity with concepts of feminist theory and the writings of bell hooks that she uses to make the remainder of the argument. Again, this chapter is a really useful analysis of capitalist uses of McMindfulness and the perpetuation of oppressive and marginalizing social forms within Buddhism; still, the text assumes knowledge that the lay reader likely does not have. The issue of accessibility is a common problem among academics generally, including myself; we need to ask ourselves whether we are serious about writing accessibly and using more plain language. If our audience really is Buddhists in North America and Europe, then there are very few of us who can say that we are writing on a level that the average reader would finish, much less retain a substantial amount of information. We desperately need the kind of analysis provided by the authors in Buddhism and Whiteness, and briefly introducing in accessible language ideas from theoretical frameworks the average reader might not be familiar with would help the text to reach that desired audience.

Buddhism’s position as a religion from outside of North America and Europe but which took on many of the same social problems already present in the West, provides a useful case study for the analysis of racism and white supremacy. By analyzing the impacts of white supremacy within the development of North American Buddhism, the authors are not engaging in a “cancelling” of Buddhism but instead begin to expose and root out the deeply racist views that even impacted Western Buddhist history. In other words, the important articles in this edited volume do not denigrate the Buddhist tradition but show how deep and subtle notions of white supremacy actually penetrate into Western culture. Buddhism and Whiteness is highly recommended to anyone inter-
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism


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