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Making #BlackLivesMatter in Buddhist Studies Curricula

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Abstract

This article focuses on the inclusion of Black history and perspectives in Buddhist studies courses. Although adding Black voices is a crucial step toward decolonizing the curriculum, anti-racist pedagogy necessitates that we do not limit our efforts to additive approaches that leave uninterrogated normative frameworks. Including Black voices in the Buddhist studies classroom necessitates a reorientation and deconstruction of the constitutive frameworks of Buddhist studies. This article provides as examples two courses that integrate Buddhism and Black Religious history to propose that centering Black contributions to Asian religions and highlighting Black-Asian solidarity can disrupt hierarchies of Orientalism, racism, and colonialism.

Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Buddhist studies has demonstrated an increasingly widespread interest in including Buddhism and race, and particularly Black Buddhists, in university courses.¹ This is due in part to a growth of available scholarship and writings by Black Buddhists and in part to the outbreak of mass protests in support of #BlackLivesMatter in the United States and around the world following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers on May 25, 2020. In Canada, the solidarity protests extended to police violence and racism toward Indigenous populations.² The public awareness of anti-Black and anti-Asian racism during this period led many to remark that COVID-19 was one of two pandemics—the other being racism. Just weeks after the murder of George Floyd, Levi McLaughlin, Kimberlee Sanders, Jolyon Thomas, and Michelle C. Wang submitted to the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) Board of Directors the “Petition to AAS to Support Black Scholars of Asia,” calling on

¹ An early iteration of my thinking in this article was presented at Princeton University in September 2023 as part of the Black Buddhism Faculty Project. I’m grateful to the participants for their contributions to this conference, which helped me develop my ideas. Joe Bandy, Ralph H. Craig III, and Christopher Jensen provided crucial feedback on a draft of this article, for which I would like to thank them, as well as the anonymous reviewer. I also benefited from Vanderbilt’s Center for Teaching. One course discussed in this article, “Asian and Asian American Religions in the U.S.,” was designed while attending their Inclusive Course Design workshop (May 2021) and while a Junior Faculty Teaching Fellow (2021–2022) with the center.

² Just a few months prior, in February and March 2020, anti-pipeline solidarity protests and blockades spread throughout Canada after the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) raided unceded Wet’suwet’en land in British Columbia to break up a protest against the construction of the Enbridge Northway Gateway Pipeline. Most blockades and protests were removed by or concluded due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A central concern of these protests was not only Indigenous land rights and environmental conservation, but also anti-Indigenous policing.

the association to acknowledge and combat anti-Black racism in the field.³ In direct response to this petition, two years later Marvin D. Sterling, Nitasha Tamar Sharma, and Will Bridges released the edited volume *Who is the Asianist?* In the introduction to this volume, they issue a call to scholars to ask, “Do Black lives matter for Asian Studies?”⁴

Buddhist studies has likewise initiated projects that seek to integrate attention to race and Black Buddhists into Buddhist studies courses. “Teaching Buddhist Studies,” supported by the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Centre for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto, hosted a project on Buddhism and Race in 2021.⁵ More recently, Rima Vesely-Flad established the Initiative for Black Buddhist Studies, an initiative bridging scholarship with community engagement.⁶ In Fall 2023

³ “Petition to the AAS Board of Directors in Support of Black Scholars of Asia,” Submitted June 15, 2020.

⁴ Will Bridges, et al., “Do Black Lives Matter for Asian Studies?,” in *Who is the Asianist? The Politics of Representation in Asian Studies*, ed. Will Bridges, Nitasha Tamar Sharma, and Marvin Sterling (Association for Asian Studies, 2022): 2.

⁵ “Teaching Race and Buddhism in Buddhist Studies,” Teaching Buddhist Studies, August 2021, <https://teachingbuddhism.net/teaching-race-and-racism/>. Not all resources from this project have been uploaded onto the website as of publication of this article, including the resources on Black Buddhists. The *Teaching Buddhist Studies* podcast, “The Circled Square: Buddhist Studies in Higher Education,” includes several interviews from Black Buddhists and about teaching Black Buddhist topics. Rima Vesely-Flad, “Rima Vesely-Flad, Learning About Black Buddhist Dharma Teachers and Healing Justice,” interviewed by Sarah Richardson, *The Circled Square: Buddhist Studies in Higher Education*, Dec 14, 2020 <https://teachingbuddhism.net/episode-14-rima-vesely-flad-black-buddhist-teachers/>; Marcus Evans, “Marcus Evans, Teaching Hip Hop and Buddhist Studies,” interviewed by Sarah Richardson, *The Circled Square: Buddhist Studies in Higher Education*, April 23, 2021 <https://teachingbuddhism.net/marcus-evans/>; Jan Willis, “Jan Willis: Stories from a Black, Baptist, and Buddhist Teacher,” *The Circled Square: Buddhist Studies in Higher Education*, interviewed by Sarah Richardson, March 30, 2022, <https://teachingbuddhism.net/jan-willis/>.

⁶ Black Buddhist Studies, Accessed January 2, 2026, <https://blackbuddhiststudies.org>.

Princeton University launched the Black Buddhism Faculty Project, resulting in the compilation of a library guide on Black Buddhism and a planned pedagogy workshop for August 2026 dedicated to equipping instructors to include Black Buddhism in their classes.⁷ One of the concerns of this project is to help support the emerging field of study centering Black engagements with Buddhism, including in the classroom. Although Black Buddhists have been writing and teaching for years prior to 2020 and the rise of Black Lives Matter in 2014,⁸ (in fact, African Americans have been learning about, engaging with, and teaching about Buddhism for over 100 years), and Buddhism and race has been the subject of academic and practitioner inquiry for years, we could also pinpoint 2020 as an important date for the increased awareness of the wider Buddhist studies academic field toward Black Buddhism. In addition, since 2020 several

⁷ “Black Buddhism Faculty Project,” Center for Culture Society and Religion, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://csr.princeton.edu/projects/bbfp>.

⁸ An incomplete list, in order of publication and focusing on book-length works: Lama Choyin Rangdrol, *Black Buddha: Changing the Face of American Buddhism* (self-published, Rainbow Dharma, 2001, 2006); angel Kyodo williams, *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace* (Penguin Press, 2001); Jan Willis, *Dreaming Me: An African American Woman’s Spiritual Journey* (Riverhead Books, 2001); Faith Adiele, *Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2005); Ralph Steele, *Tending the Fire: Through War and the Path of Meditation* (Sacred Life Publishers, 2014); Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening through Race, Sexuality, and Gender* (Wisdom Publications, 2015); angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens, and Jasmine Syedullah, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation* (North Atlantic Books, 2016); Ruth King, *Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out* (Sounds True, 2018); Pamela Ayo Yetunde, *Object Relations, Buddhism, and Relationality in Womanist Practical Theology* (Palgrave/Macmillan, 2018); Rhonda V. Magee, *The Inner Work of Racial Justice: Healing Ourselves and Transforming Our Communities Through Mindfulness* (TarcherPerigee, 2019); Pamela Ayo Yetunde, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue, U.S. Law, and Womanist Theology for Transgender Spiritual Care* (Springer Nature, 2020). Two anthologies that include Black Buddhist writings are Hilda Gutiérrez Baldoquín, ed., *Dharma, Color, and Culture: New Voices in Western Buddhism* (Parallax Press, 2004) and George Yancy and Emily McRae, eds., *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections* (Lexington Books, 2019).

anthologies of Black Buddhist writing have appeared, including *Black and Buddhist* (2020), *Afrikan Wisdom* (2021), *Lifting As They Climb* (2024), and *Healing Our Way Home* (2024), in addition to the Buddhist magazine *Lion's Roar's* May 2024 special issue on Black Buddhists, Rima Vesely-Flad's *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*, and Ralph H. Craig III's spiritual biography of Tina Turner.⁹

Black Buddhists themselves have criticized the privileging of white Buddhist practice and teachings as more authentically “American” and “Buddhist,” noting that this kind of cultural imperialism neglects not only the contributions of Asian American Buddhists, but also Black Buddhists and other Buddhists of color. As early as 1994, bell hooks wrote “surely it is racism that allows white comrades to feel so comfortable with their ‘control’ and ‘ownership’ of Buddhist thought and practice in the United States.” “No wonder, then, that many black people, people of color, have felt that they cannot maintain a connection with their race and culture of origin and walk a Buddhist path.”¹⁰ In 2000, a group of practitioners compiled a booklet on the racism and microaggressions experienced by people of color in predominantly white sanghas, which was presented to

⁹ Anthologies of Black Buddhist writing published since 2020 include: Pamela Ayo Yetunde and Cheryl A. Giles, eds., *Black and Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us About Race, Resilience, Transformation and Freedom* (Shambhala Publications, 2020); Valerie Mason-John, ed., *Afrikan Wisdom: New Voices Talk Black Liberation, Buddhism, and Beyond* (North Atlantic Books, 2021); Toni-Pressley-Sanon, *Lifting as They Climb: Black Women Buddhists and Collective Liberation* (Shambhala Publications, 2024); Valerie Brown, et al., eds., *Healing Our Way Home: Black Buddhist Teachings on Ancestors, Joy, and Liberation* (Parallax Press, 2024). There are also several solo-authored books by Black Buddhists that have been published since 2020 not listed here. See also Rima Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition* (New York University Press, 2022); Ralph H. Craig III, *Dancing in My Dreams: A Spiritual Biography of Tina Turner* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2023).

¹⁰ bell hooks, “Waking Up to Racism: Dharma, Diversity, and Race,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Fall 1994).

the teachers of Spirit Rock.¹¹ Jan Willis, in 2011, wrote, “many African-American children of the civil rights movement have been finding their way to Buddhism. Yet—as has so often been the case before—we are doing this without much fanfare or even recognition, once again being made—almost!—invisible.”¹² And in 2015, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel remarked,

It has been my experience that in many predominantly white spiritual communities people of color are expected to ‘graduate’ from being concerned with issues of race after having learned and put into practice all that has been taught, while others are considered to have an almost inherent understanding of the teaching [...] that does not require a similar ‘graduation.’ To speak of race, sexuality, and gender seems to be widely considered a reversion to a primitive, infantile place on the spiritual path.¹³

Black Buddhists and scholars have been vital contributors to not only discussions of race and American Buddhism, but also interpretations of the Dharma.

This article takes up the challenge of incorporating Black history and perspectives in Buddhist studies courses. Although adding Black voices is a crucial step toward decolonizing the curriculum, anti-racist pedagogy necessitates that we do not limit our efforts to additive approaches that leave normative frameworks uninterrogated. Rather, I propose that including Black voices in the Buddhist studies classroom necessitates a reorientation and deconstruction of the constitutive frameworks of Buddhist studies.

¹¹ Sheridan Adams, et al., “Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities,” 2000.

¹² Jan Willis, “Yes, We’re Buddhists Too!,” *Lion’s Roar* (Nov 2011), <https://www.lionsroar.com/yes-were-buddhists-too>.

¹³ Manuel, *The Way of Tenderness*, 61.

Reworking Fundamental Categories

Incorporating Black Buddhists and scholars in our teaching calls for a re-envisioning of the Buddhist studies classroom, including its disciplinary boundaries and the imagined students within it. Scholars writing about Buddhist studies pedagogy have previously imagined their classroom to consist of two types of students. This is illustrated by Brett J. Esaki, who, in his contribution to a co-authored forum on teaching Asian religions in the U.S. south, opens his reflections with the observation that “scholars of Asian religions have been trained informally and formally to craft their courses to teach an imagined White male student,” who typically has “unexamined Orientalist views” and “light experience with Asian cultures.”¹⁴ Secondly, scholars might imagine another kind of student, “an Asian international” one, who “enrolls to learn more about their own culture.”¹⁵ Although Esaki admits that students rarely fit these exact stereotypes, he utilizes them nonetheless to draw our attention to the (gendered) Orientalist framework through which scholars of Asian religions frame their narratives about the role of Asian religions in the U.S. and their pedagogical contexts. This kind of framework likewise appears—though unspoken—in the most recent edited volume devoted to Buddhist studies pedagogy, *Teaching Buddhism* (2017), edited by Todd Lewis and Gary DeAngelis. Although the volume includes a contribution by Jan Willis, who writes of her experiences as a scholar-practitioner teaching in a modern secular university, *Teaching Buddhism* does not include contributions on teaching

¹⁴ This is not to say that internalized ideas of Orientalism, race, and other identities are unique to this kind of student. All students have varying experiences and approaches to race, Orientalism, and colonialism, and preconceptions about Asian religions. See M. Brielle Harbin, Amie Thurber, and Joe Bandy, “Teaching Race, Racism, and Racial Justice: Pedagogical Principles and Classroom Strategies for Course Instructors,” *Race and Pedagogy Journal: Teaching and Learning for Justice* 4, no. 1, Article 1 (2019): 5–7.

¹⁵ Natasha L. Mikles, Brett J. Esaki, and Lisa Battaglia, “Forum on teaching Asian religions in the American South,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 22 (2019): 209.

Buddhism and race or how to conceptualize Buddhist studies in relation to Black religious history. Charles Prebish's entry on teaching Buddhism in the West, with a focus on those who teach in the United States, divides Buddhists into two groups: "Asian immigrants and Westerners," primarily introducing them as parallel communities who have had no interaction with one another.¹⁶ Although the two Buddhisms theory and the idea of parallel congregations have been the subject of much scholarly critique, these frameworks gesture to a broader limitation regarding what is thinkable within Buddhist studies and the study of Asian religions, eliding the imagined possibility of Black students interested in Asia.¹⁷

These Orientalist contours have shaped Buddhist studies undergraduate and graduate education. Although Buddhist studies is an interdisciplinary field, we might locate it within the interstices of several disciplinary boundaries. On the one hand, the area studies framework created in the context of the Cold War and global decolonization movements resulted in an instrumentalist perception of Asian studies in the service of geopolitical projects. Bridges, Sharma, and Sterling write that Asian studies' self-segregation from the concerns of ethnic studies results in an "unspoken racial logic through which Asian Studies organizes itself," a logic that results in a lack of Black and non-Asian racialized scholars in the field.¹⁸ The area studies framework was additionally Orientalist in

¹⁶ Charles Prebish, "When the Iron Bird Flies: Seeking Western Buddhism in the Classroom," in *Teaching Buddhism: New Insights on Understanding and Presenting the Traditions*, ed. Todd Lewis and Gary deAngelis (Oxford University Press, 2017), abstract. On critiques of the two Buddhisms theory see note 24.

¹⁷ A notable exception is Thomas Tweed and Stephen Prothero's *Asian Religions in America* documentary reader, which includes writings from/about Frederick Douglass, Howard Thurman and Sue Bailey Thurman, bell hooks, and Jacci Thompson-Dodd. Thomas Tweed and Stephen Prothero, ed. *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Bridges et al. "Do Black Lives Matter for Asian Studies?," 4.

perception, locating Asia as an “Other” geographically and disciplinarily. It is for this reason that the imagined Asian/American student characterized by Esaki is international, rather than American. This disciplinary structure contributes to the ongoing location of “true” Buddhism in Asia, and it is part of the Orientalist worldview that casts Asian Americans as perpetually foreign Others.¹⁹

Turning to the study of Buddhism in the United States, the field is additionally located in relation to ethnic studies and various sub-categories of American Religious history, such as Asian American religions. Asian American religions is a recent discipline that sought to bridge the gaps between Asian American studies and American religions. Asian American studies developed in the 1960s due to a series of strikes by the Third World Liberation Front to protest the predominantly Euro-American educational focus of US universities. These strikes allowed for the rise of ethnic studies, although due to the typically Marxist frameworks of labour and anticolonial movements, early scholarship in these fields did not address religion.²⁰ On the other hand, the study of American Religious history did not address Asian religions in the US or Asian Americans due to its Christian focus and racial focus on the white-Black color binary.²¹ The field of Asian American religions emerged in the 1990s in response to this gap, with the Asian Pacific American Religions Research Initiative (APARRI) founded in 1999.²² Its founding scholars asserted that the field of Asian

¹⁹ On this see Natalie Fisk Quli, “Western Self, Asian Other: Modernity, Authenticity, and Nostalgia for ‘Tradition’ in Buddhist Studies,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 16 (2009): 1–38.

²⁰ Helen Jin Kim, Timothy Tseng, and David K. Yoo, “Asian American Religious History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, ed. David K. Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma (Oxford University Press, 2016), 361.

²¹ Kim et al., “Asian American Religious History,” 362–363.

²² Asian Pacific American Religions Research Initiative, Accessed Jan 2, 2026, <https://aparri.org>.

American Religions required “the reworking of fundamental categories in both Asian American studies and American religions.”²³

Negotiating these disciplinary divides is necessary work for us to do as we reflect on how Buddhist studies structures itself. Though Orientalist approaches to Buddhism have been much critiqued in the field, they continue to impact the way that we tell the story of our discipline, conduct scholarship, seek conversation partners, and teach students. Many scholars have criticized these Orientalist constructions insofar as they have resulted in racialized bifurcations of American Buddhisms that elevate white meditation-oriented communities over Asian American communities.²⁴ Other scholars have similarly critiqued the way that Orientalism structures metanarratives of Buddhist studies—including ideas about “authentic” religiosity—and have offered alternate ways of studying the religion, many of which are helpful in the classroom.²⁵ For this reason, I do

²³ Kim et al., “Asian American Religious History,” 364.

²⁴ See Adeana McNicholl, “Buddhism and Race in the United States,” *Religion Compass* 15, no. 8 (2021): 1–13 for a summary. See also Joseph Cheah, “Buddhism, Race, and Ethnicity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, ed. Michael Jerryson (Oxford University Press): 650–661; Chenxing Han, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* (North Atlantic Books, 2021); Wakoh Shannon Hickey, “Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 11 (2010): 1–25. On the critique of the “Two Buddhisms” category in relation to Canada see Victor Sōgen Hori, “How Do We Study Buddhism in Canada?” in *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada*, ed. John S. Harding, Victor Sōgen Hori, and Alexander Soucy (McGill-Queen’s University Press): 12–38.

²⁵ Many contributors in Todd Lewis and Gary deAngelis’ *Teaching Buddhism* discuss ways to teach Buddhism that counter essentialist and text-based understandings of the tradition, although the book does not explicitly treat Orientalism as such. These approaches are summarized in Courtney Bruntz’s review of the book. Todd Lewis and Gary DeAngelis, eds., *Teaching Buddhism: New Insights on Understanding and Presenting the Traditions*, (Oxford University Press, 2017); Courtney Bruntz, “Teaching Buddhism,” *Religious Studies Review* 46, no. 2 (2020): 193–198. Amy Langenberg writes that the elevation of meditation and

not discuss the broader Orientalist structure of the field here (although it is worthy of further sustained critique). For our purposes, I want to note that this Orientalist white/Asian binary, as Bill Mullen has argued, contributes to the “mutual subordination and [. . .] separation” of Black and Asian Americans, and is therefore part of anti-Black racism and neglects Black American contributions to knowledge about Buddhism and Asia (as well as those by other non-Asian racialized persons).²⁶ And it is, in a sense, echoed in the religio-racial constructions of Black religious history, which remain closely associated with Protestant Christianity.²⁷ In response to this, a growing body of scholarship has underscored the diversity of Black religious life, although Buddhism has not always been included in these studies.²⁸ This Orientalist framework is at play when we imagine the Asian

doctrine over “cultural’ practices such as chanting, making offerings, Buddhist arts, prostration, dance or other movement traditions, festivals, and communal meals” elides and subordinates lay women’s practice, particularly Asian American women’s. Amy Langenberg, “Gender and Sexuality in American Buddhism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Buddhism*, ed. Ann Gleig and Scott Mitchell (Oxford University Press, 2024) 76. On the way that Orientalist portrayals of Buddhism might impact student assumptions about Buddhism and violence, see Dan Arnold and Alicia Turner, “Why Are We Surprised When Buddhists Are Violent?” *Know: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 159–160. See also the Listening to the Buddhists in Our Own Backyard project: *Listening to the Buddhists in Our Backyard* (2023–2024), <https://www.l2bb.org/>.

²⁶ Bill Mullen, *Afro Orientalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xv.

²⁷ For the pervading construction of Blackness through Afro-Protestant Christianity see Josef Sorett, *Black is a Church: Christianity and the Contours of African American Life* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

²⁸ Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Anthony B. Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience: Toward a Comparative Black Theology* (Fortress Press, 1998); Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (New York University Press, 2016). Pinn does include a chapter on Buddhism in his book. For studies on the importance of Buddhism to Black religious life see Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*, and Craig, *Dancing in My Dreams*.

religious traditions classroom to consist of white and Asian/American students, but not other racialized communities.

For this reason, I want to propose that just as the creation of the field of Asian American religious history required what Helen Jin Kim, Timothy Tseng, and David Yoo call “the reworking of fundamental categories in both Asian American studies and American religions,” particularly in relation to “the critique of disciplinary traditions, the genealogy of Orientalism and race, and the reduction [rather, under theorization] of religion,” responsibly including Black Buddhists and Black voices in Buddhist studies requires a reworking of the constitutive frameworks of the fields in which we teach and research.²⁹ This includes an interrogation of all three concerns at the heart of Asian American studies: the disciplinary boundaries through which we construct Buddhism in relation to race, the Orientalist framework underlying metanarratives of the field, and the reduction of religion in relation to race. This means that the inclusion of Black voices in the classroom must be done in a way that does not otherwise leave broader Orientalist narratives of Buddhism untouched.

Here I refer to what appears to be a common (though, to be sure, stereotyped) approach within the undergraduate Buddhist studies curriculum that can be characterized as an “additive” one. This (idealized) approach includes Black Buddhists within one single class session, typically close to the end of the syllabus, and usually devoted to a discussion of race. Although this is a necessary beginning to the decolonization and diversification of Buddhist studies curricula, the additive approach runs the risk of what Stephen Brookfield, using the work of Herbert Marcuse, refers to as “repressive tolerance,” namely the inclusion of alternative voices “in such a way that serves only to underscore the normality of the center

²⁹ Kim et al., “Asian American Religious History,” 364.

while positioning the alternatives as exotic others.”³⁰ In these frameworks, marginalized voices are included, but “never as the cultural center to which students should turn.”³¹ In this regard, the addition of marginalized voices, such as Black Buddhists, into a Buddhist studies syllabus that otherwise leaves intact normative assumptions of what and who counts as Buddhist can reinforce dominant frameworks, rather than destabilize them. Such an approach additionally risks essentializing Black Buddhists as the sole representatives of race, equating racism with anti-Blackness and implying that the only contributions Black Buddhists and intellectuals make to Buddhism is about race. As Rima Vesely-Flad argues in *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*, approaches to research and teaching that portray Blackness solely in terms of resistance can reify racial constructs that neglect the spiritual lives of Black people and continue to center whiteness and white supremacy.³²

Such an approach, then, leaves untouched the broader Orientalist and racialized assumptions often at play in normative definitions of Buddhism in the Euro-American academy. By retaining the disciplinary boundaries that separate the study of Asian religions, American religions, and African American religions, as well as the concomitant religio-racial

³⁰ Stephen Brookfield, “Diversifying Curriculum as the Practice of Repressive Tolerance,” *Teaching in Higher Education* (2007) 12 (5–6): abstract.

³¹ Brookfield, “Diversifying Curriculum,” 559. Harbin et al. note that “syllabi that adopt a group-centered model focus on individual groups in isolation [. . .] can make it more difficult for students to integrate deeper, and more fundamental concepts such as privilege and structural disadvantage. At worst, it can also affirm students’ misconceptions that racial literacy is achieved by touring the experiences of various racial Others, reducing complex racial histories and experiences to short discussions, and exoticizing racial difference as a subject of tourist fascination.” They instead suggest teachers utilize a “concept-centered model” that “uses key ideas such as colonialism, prejudice, and discrimination to examine broader social processes and understandings of the socio-historical significance of race and ethnicity.” Harbin et al., “Teaching Race,” 10.

³² Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*, 9.

assumptions about what these religions are and who constitutes them, this kind of syllabus unintentionally contributes to an Orientalist framing of Buddhist studies that arranges the construction of knowledge about Buddhism within a white-Asian binary. To combat this, when I design my courses, I attempt to include Black voices in a way that clarifies how they change the way that we think about Buddhism and that situates them as full contributors to knowledge about the Dharma. In telling the story of Buddhism and Asian religions in North America, I endeavour to do so in a way that situates Black Buddhists within the broader context of the development of Buddhism and its interpretations and that includes Black religious history as an essential part of the story of Buddhism and Asian American religions in North America.

Although I continually strive to improve my own syllabi in this regard, I wish to provide two examples from my own courses. My teaching experience is in a Religious studies department at Vanderbilt University, a research-intensive university in Tennessee. I teach primarily introductory-level courses to students who, for the most part, will not go on to specialize in Religious studies, or even the Humanities. As I am affiliated with the Asian studies department, which also includes an Asian American studies track, my classes majors from this department. The first course is "Asian and Asian American Religions in the United States," which I discuss to draw out some intersections between Asian American and Black religious history in the United States and their implications for teaching Buddhism in the U.S. (although in the footnotes I also include intersections with Canadian history). The second class focuses specifically on Buddhism and shows one way that I adapted a pre-existing class to better situate women and Black Buddhists. I use this as an example of how, through more moderate changes of existing classes, we can utilize Black Buddhist writing to shed new light on Buddhist teachings.

Asian American Religions and Black Religious History

“Asian and Asian American Religions in the United States” was a new course that I created coinciding with an undergraduate-led movement to include Asian American studies within the Vanderbilt curriculum. These efforts culminated in the creation of an Asian American studies major housed in the Asian Studies department shortly following the March 16, 2021 shooting spree targeting massage parlors in the metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia area. The shooter killed eight people, six of whom were women of Asian descent. Although “Asian and Asian American Religions” counts for Religious studies and Asian/American studies credit, most students lack a background in both fields. Many are Asian and Asian American students who enroll in the course to know more about their own background and other Asian American religions.

The class is organized into units based on different religions, including Buddhism, Sikhi, Hinduism, Islam, and Asian American Christianity (in that order), with each unit introducing the religions as well as their history in the United States. Important historical milestones are introduced early in the course, with students building on this knowledge and making connections as the course continues. These associations are reinforced by a collaborative timeline project (using TimelineJS) created by the students over the course of the semester.³³ Concomitant with my own research focus on race, the course connects Asian and Asian American religions to larger U.S. racial projects that are intimately bound up with the construction and definition of legitimate religion and religious practice.

In telling a story of Asian/American religions, I attempt to destabilize Orientalist assumptions that naturalize the engagement of white practitioners of these religions, obscure the internal diversity of Asian

³³ TimelineJS is an open-source tool that creates interactive illustrated timelines using Google spreadsheets that are then integrated into websites.

America, and neglect the practices of other racialized communities. As a result, my goals in the design of the course were (1) to present Asian Americans as diverse in terms of citizenship, race, ethnicity, class, caste, gender, sexuality, and religion; and (2) to connect Asian American religious history to Black religious history.

In the beginning of the semester, we identify key terminology, like “Orientalism” and “race,” and learn the history of the study of comparative religion, reflecting on how the colonial context of the field’s origins might impact the way that we think about Asian American religions today. I frequently begin such introductory classes with an exercise asking students to generate a collective list of key words, associations, and definitions of religion and race. We then engage in discussion on how the assigned materials changed their thinking about the topic. This provides an early overview to proactively address misconceptions about race, religion, and knowledge construction; equips students with critical terminology; and prompts them to begin interrogating their own positionality and preconceptions.³⁴ Early in the semester we also situate Asian American religions within the broader framework of racial triangulation articulated by Claire Jean Kim.³⁵ Kim’s theory of racial triangulation speaks to the relational nature of racial formation and centers Asian Americans in U.S. racial projects. For my students, this framework allows us to (1) attend to the ways Asian Americans have sought to gain access to whiteness through anti-Black racism; (2) connect anti-Asian racism, exclusion, and Orientalism to broader racial projects; and (3) highlight moments of multiracial and multireligious solidarities. In line with the importance of self-interrogation in anti-racist pedagogy, this is one opportunity in the classroom for me to reiterate my own positionality as a white Arab Canadian

³⁴ Harbin et al., “Teaching Race, Racism, and Racial Justice,” 9.

³⁵ Claire Jean Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (March 1999): 105–138.

immigrant to the United States who must continually interrogate her own participation in settler-colonialism, Orientalism, and white supremacy.³⁶ This models the self-reflection process that I hope my students will similarly engage in.³⁷ I highlight the history of Afro-Asian solidarity movements to provide students with a longer precedent of anticolonial and anti-racist solidarity as religious practice. In the words of Chandni Desai and Rafeef Ziadah, such an emphasis “enables the historicization of anti-colonial thought and praxis within an interconnected, international insurgent geography” that counters the Orientalist division of Black and Asian Americans.³⁸ Such divisions, Benjamin Chang reminds us, result in moments of “real disparities between [these] communities” who “have often been pitted against each other historically.” Chang proposes that teaching the “rich history of Black-Asian recognition, solidarity, and collaboration” can “disrupt racialized hierarchies, White supremacy, labour

³⁶ Kyoko Kishimoto, “Anti-racist Pedagogy: From Faculty’s Self-Reflection to Organizing Within and Beyond the Classroom,” *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 21, no. 4 (2018): 540–544. As Harbin et al. note, this kind of self-reflection needs to extend to an awareness on how as instructors, our positionality is implicated with student belonging in the classroom and student reactions to course content. Harbin et al., “Teaching Race,” 13–14.

³⁷ I utilize multiple kinds of self-reflective assignments in the classroom. Every course includes a “learning contract” that students write in the first two weeks of the semester, in which they position themselves in relation to course content. This is paired with a reflection due during the last week of the semester, in which students reflect on their journey as a learner. Halfway through the class and at the end of the class, students evaluate their participation in the class, set goals for themselves, and reflect on whether they met those goals. Other forms of self-reflection happen inside the classroom. When teaching units on race, for example, I begin with an introductory class session that orients students to critical terms, intervenes in potential misconceptions, and asks students to engage in a self-reflective exercise in which they consider their own positionality in relation to systems of structural inequalities and race. For an example of such self-reflective prompts see Harbin et al., “Teaching Race, Racism, and Racial Justice,” 15.

³⁸ Chandni Desai and Rafeef Ziadah, “Lotus and its Afterlives: Memory, Pedagogy and Anticolonial Solidarity,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 52, no. 3 (2022): 297.

exploitation, and old colonizer tactics of divide-and-conquer.”³⁹ As a result, these histories contain lessons for contemporary multiracial and multireligious social justice movements, such as #StopAAPIHate, #BlackLives Matter, and organizations like Equality Labs.

The framework of racial triangulation is particularly important for our institutional setting within the Southern United States. Many of my students grew up in the South and have experiences negotiating their religious, ethnic, and racial identities in this setting. Inspired by Khyati Joshi and Jigna Desai’s introduction to *Asian Americans in Dixie*, we interrogate the perception of Asian Americans as “doubly foreign within the context of the South;” consider how various Asian Americans have negotiated the hegemony of the white/Black racial binary; and use Asian American religions to rethink our understanding of the South.⁴⁰ To do so, we learn about Vietnamese Buddhists in Louisiana and read the memoir of a queer South Asian American Hindu from West Virginia.⁴¹ These stories help counter the erasure of Asian religions from the U.S. South and the Appalachian region and disrupt the construction of the South as a Christian space

³⁹ Benjamin Chang, “From ‘Illmatic’ to ‘Kung Flu’: Black and Asian Solidarity, Activism, and Pedagogies in the COVID-19 Era,” *Postdigital Science and Education* 2 (2020): 741–756. See also Moon-Ho Jung, “Confronting the Racial State of Violence: How Asian American History Can Reorient the Study of Race,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, ed. David K. Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma (Oxford University Press, 2016), 360–372.

⁴⁰ Khyati Joshi and Jigna Desai, eds, *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South* (University of Illinois Press, 2013): 1.

⁴¹ Allison J. Truitt, *Pure Land in the Making: Vietnamese Buddhism in the US Gulf South* (University of Washington Press, 2021). Neema Avashia, *Another Appalachia: Coming up Queer and Indian in a Mountain Place* (West Virginia University Press, 2022). “Preparing to Die Well” in *Pure Land in the Making* is well-suited to a course seeking to draw connections between Asian and Asian Americans, Black Americans, and Indigenous peoples, as this chapter traces how rituals honouring the dead include not only the Vietnamese, but also the victims of settler colonialism, state neglect, and racism, including Indigenous children, enslaved persons, and the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

operating on a white/Black binary. Such characterizations also contribute to the marginalization of Black Buddhists. For example, bell hooks, in reflecting on her experiences in the Appalachia, observes that Buddhism “is perceived to be so far away from what many think of as the more organic or fundamental ‘Black’ experience.”⁴² As a result of our discussions, in their final reflection for the class, one student from Louisiana remarked:

Many times, I have felt like people from outside the US South have seen the region as a lost cause, but these narratives of Asian Americans in the South demonstrate the diversity and richness of this region. [...] In a similar vein, the South too often understands itself in a racial binary, but these narratives disrupt that conception of race and racial history.

Our classes on Buddhism and Asian religions can therefore disrupt dominant religio-racial constructs in the areas where we teach.⁴³

Throughout the course we connect the history of anti-Asian immigration laws, surveillance, and policing to that of other non-Christian and non-white religions, including Black religions. Early in the semester, we engage with Duncan William’s work on the inter-war surveillance of Japanese Buddhists and its culmination in mass incarceration during World

⁴² bell hooks, Sharon Suh, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and Susanne Mrozik, “Women Changing Buddhism: Feminist Perspectives,” in *Women Practicing Buddhism: American Experiences*, eds. Peter Gregory and Susanne Mrozik (Wisdom Publications, 2008): 74.

⁴³ On understanding Asian Canadian history in a way that is contiguous with Asian American history but situated within its own global settler-colonial, migratory, and racial networks, see Henry Shuen Ngei Yu, “Asian Canadian History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, edited by David K. Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma (Oxford University Press, 2013) 116–132.

War II (in not only the U.S., but also in Canada).⁴⁴ In the South Asian religions unit we connect this history to the surveillance of South Asian Sikhs and gurdwaras by the U.S. Canada, and Britain in the interwar period.⁴⁵ We return to the inter-war period in our unit on Islam, which begins with Black Muslim slaves and the emergence of new religio-racial movements, such as the Nation of Islam and the Moorish Science Temple of America, during the Great Migration.⁴⁶ Utilizing Judith Weisenfeld's work on the alternative religio-racial vision of these groups and Sylvester Johnson's scholarship relating the surveillance of these groups to that of Muslims after 9/11, we connect the history of the surveillance and policing of Asian religions to that of Black non-Christian groups.⁴⁷ I help bridge these histories by showing students the publication of a World War II conspiracy theory called the "Black Buddhism Plan."⁴⁸ This theory, which proposed that African Americans would align with the Japanese during World War II through Buddhism, drew on the religious and racial construction of non-Christian Asian religions and new Black religious movements as politically subversive in order to cast Black Buddhists as potential threats to the

⁴⁴ Duncan Ryūken Williams, *American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War* (Harvard University Press, 2019). On Canada, see Terry Watada, "Looking East: Japanese Canadians and Jodo Shinshu Buddhism 1905–1970," in *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada*, ed. John S. Harding, Victor Sōgen Hori, and Alexander Soucy, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010): 62–83.

⁴⁵ Seema Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance and Indian Anticolonialism in North America* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴⁶ Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*, 15th anniversary ed. (NYU Press, 2013).

⁴⁷ Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (New York University Press, 2016); Sylvester Johnson, "Black Religion, the Security State, and the Racialization of Islam," in *African American Religions, 1500–2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 2015): 377–400.

⁴⁸ Adeana McNicholl, "The 'Black Buddhism Plan': Buddhism, Race, and Empire in the Early Twentieth Century," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 31, no. 3 (2021): 1–47.

American social order. I use this publication to illustrate the interconnect-
edness of the surveillance of non-white non-Christian religions in Ameri-
can history. In the Islam unit, we draw on these histories when discussing
the implementation of post-9/11 legislation like the USA PATRIOT Act and
the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSSERS).⁴⁹

The course also highlights moments of multiracial and multireli-
gious solidarity through which Asian Americans, including Buddhists,
have connected their experiences of religious and racial exclusion to
those of other racialized and marginalized communities. We situate the
anti-colonial activism of the Ghadar Party on the West Coast within their
experience of racism in the United States and Canada that resulted in their
increasing awareness of the connection between anti-Asian racism and
anti-Black racism. We learn that the Ghadar party's anti-colonial anti-rac-
ist vision was echoed by Black intellectuals' vision of the fight against In-
dian colonialism as one inherently connected to the struggle against

⁴⁹ This could be reoriented to situate Canada within a broader national security and sur-
veillance context between the U.S., Canada, and Britain, in which all three countries in-
creased the power of local police and federal intelligence agencies and coordinated with
one another in their surveillance apparatus post 9/11. In 2001, Canada expanded the
powers of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to enlist them in terrorist and
counter-intelligence investigation. In the same year the government of Canada also en-
acted Bill C-36, an anti-terrorist legislation that, among other things, increased funding
to law enforcement and counter-intelligence agencies and loosened the restrictions on
electronic surveillance. The U.S. and Canada also coordinated on surveillance pertaining
to border crossing. See Frederick Desroches, "Policing in the Post 9/11 Era," (Ottawa: Re-
search and Evaluation Branch; Community, Contract and Aboriginal Policing Services Di-
rectorate; Royal Canadian Mounted Police, May 2005). On the connection between Cana-
dian post-9/11 security and American imperial projects see Bruno Charbonneau and
Wayne S. Cox, eds, *Locating Global Order: American Power and Canadian Security After 9/11*
(The University of British Columbia Press, 2010).

racism in the United States.⁵⁰ We discuss the growth of Asian American and Muslim advocacy groups post 9/11 and how many South Asian, Arab, and Muslim groups utilize the language of racial justice to reframe their concerns away from a national security context and toward building multiracial solidarities. This is illustrated in the involvement of many of these organizations in multiracial police reform movements.⁵¹ This allows us to connect anti-Black policing to the discriminatory policing of Asian American religious communities.⁵² In the Buddhism unit, we examine the ways that Vietnamese Buddhists in Louisiana use ancestral rituals to engage with the complicated legacies of settler-colonialism, slavery, and the unacknowledged dead from the Vietnam War.⁵³ This discussion primes students to watch the 2021 May We Gather 49-days ceremony with an eye to how the event utilizes ancestral rites to memorialize and heal from anti-Asian racism and forge connections with other individuals impacted by settler-colonialism and religio-racial violence.⁵⁴ During our in-class conversations, students attend to the ways the organizers, speakers, and ritual experts connect anti-Asian racism to anti-Black racism and utilize

⁵⁰ Seema Sohi, "The Rise of Indian Anticolonial Politics in North America and the 'Making of the New World,'" in *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance and Indian Anticolonialism in North America* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 45–81; Gerald Horne, "Black America and India," in *End of Empires: African Americans and India* (Temple University Press, 2008), 79–92.

⁵¹ Deepa Iyer, *We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multiracial Future* (The New Press, 2015): 69. See particularly Chapter 3, "Surveillance Nation."

⁵² In Canada this would include a history of state and polite violence against indigenous populations. On the history of anti-Black policing in Canada, see Robyn Maynard, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* (Fernwood Publishing, 2017).

⁵³ Allison J. Truitt, "Preparing to Die Well," in *Pure Land in the Making: Vietnamese Buddhism in the US Gulf South* (University of Washington Press, 2021): 123–145.

⁵⁴ "May We Gather: A National Buddhist Memorial Ceremony for Asian American Ancestors," May We Gather, May 6, 2021, video, <https://youtu.be/665Gf6yyzVQ>. The 2024 pilgrimage had not yet occurred when this class was last taught.

Buddhist ritual to form multiethnic, multiracial, and interreligious solidarities.

In discussing yoga and meditation, we connect critiques of Orientalism and cultural appropriation to recent efforts to confront anti-Blackness in these spaces. It is here that the typical Buddhism syllabus will discuss Black Buddhists, with a particular focus on how Black Buddhist teachers have utilized discourses of race and liberation to critique white supremacy in predominantly white meditation spaces; have used Buddhist practices to heal from intergenerational and racial trauma; and have brought Buddhist teachings to bear on issues of social justice.⁵⁵ However, due to the wider structure of the course, these conversations do not isolate Black Buddhists to a single day of the semester, nor does it make Black people bear the burden of race, even though race is a central component to the discussion and the course.

If I were to adapt this course to one focusing solely on Buddhism, there are several additional areas where Black Buddhist voices could be included. Notably, the elision of Nichiren Buddhism in scholarship on American Buddhism has also resulted in the dismissal of the dominant form of Buddhism practiced by Black people in the United States. Craig suggests that this gap is due to a tendency among Buddhist studies scholars to focus on meditation-based lineages rather than communities whose

⁵⁵ See, for example, Nalika Gajaweera, "Sitting in the Fire Together: People of Color Cultivating Radical Resilience in North American Insight Meditation," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 22, no. 1 (2021): 121–139; Ann Gleig, "The Dukkha of Racism: Racial Diversity, Inclusion, and Justice Work," in *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (Yale University Press, 2019): 139–175; King, *Mindful of Race*, 2018; Magee, *The Inner Work of Racial Justice*, 2019; Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*, 2021.

practice orients around chanting.⁵⁶ Many Black Buddhists practice, or began their practice, in Nichiren communities—although we should be careful to heed the warning of bell hooks and not essentialize all Black Buddhists as Nichiren Buddhists.⁵⁷ Craig’s religious biography of Tina Turner offers one way for scholars to integrate Buddhism and Black religious history into our scholarship and teaching. In addition to Turner, we might also include other musicians and celebrities, like Herbie Hancock and Miles Davis. For example, in a course I am developing on Afro-Asian Religious Encounters, I am including a unit on creative expression, which includes visual culture and music. Readings for these classes will, in part, cover the intersection of Buddhism with jazz and hip hop.⁵⁸

Such a course might also include key civil rights thinkers. Vesely-Flad, in her book *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*, uncovers several resonances between Buddhist teachings and the Black Radical

⁵⁶ Ralph H. Craig III, “Nichiren Buddhism in America,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Buddhism*, edited by Ann Gleig and Scott A. Mitchell, (Oxford University Press, 2024) 209; Amy Langenberg also draws our attention to the gendered nature of this preference. See note 25. Amy Langenberg, “Gender and Sexuality in American Buddhism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Buddhism*, edited by Ann Gleig and Scott Mitchell (Oxford University Press, 2024), 76.

⁵⁷ bell hooks, “Waking Up to Racism,” 1994.

⁵⁸ Born I (Ofosu Jones Quartey), *Lyrical Dharma: Hip-Hop as Mindfulness* (Parallax Press, 2025); Jason C. Bivins, “Procession of the Great Ancestry: Traditions Jazz and Religious,” in *Spirits Rejoice: Jazz and American Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 28–65; Herbie Hancock, *Possibilities* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2015); Herbie Hancock, Daisaku Ikeda, and Wayne Shorter, *Reaching Beyond: Improvisations on Jazz, Buddhism, and a Joyful Life* (World Tribune Press, 2017); Justin F. Miles, “The Ground Path and the Fruition of the BBoy/BGirl/BThem Bodhisattva: Pt. 1,” *Miles Institute of Integral Living LLC*, Aug 20, 2024. <https://milesinstitute.net/blog/2024/8/29/the-ground-path-and-fruition-of-the-b-boybgirlbthem-bodhisattva>. See also Marcus Evans, “Buddhism and Afro-Asian Masculinities in *The Man with the Iron Fists*,” in *Buddhist Masculinities*, edited by Megan Bryson and Kevin Buckelew (Columbia University Press, 2023), 233–256; Marcus Evans, “Beyond Borders: Wu-Tang Clan’s Quest for Transcendence,” *Cross Currents* 74, no. 1 (2024): 1–20.

tradition, highlighting how Black Buddhists draw on both the Buddhist tradition and Black Radicalism in their thinking and practice.⁵⁹ This rich resource indicates the fruitful connection between the intersection of Buddhism and the Civil Rights movement that could be drawn upon in the classroom. Although civil rights intellectuals and activists who cultivated interreligious and international networks in their attempt to craft a methodology and praxis of nonviolence, like Howard Thurman, Sue Bailey Thurman, and William Nelson, are better known for their turn to Gandhian satyagraha, these figures also turned to Buddhism as a source for nonviolence. Other key figures of the Civil Rights movement, like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Vincent and Rosemarie Freeney Harding, also cultivated dialogues with Buddhists.⁶⁰

Buddhist Literature

Whereas the prior course illustrates how Buddhism, as a larger component of Asian American religious history, intersects with Black religious

⁵⁹ Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*.

⁶⁰ Stephen W. Angell, "Howard Thurman (1899–1981): Universalist Approaches to Buddhism and Quakerism," in *Quakers and Mysticism*, edited by Jon R. Kershner (Springer International Publishing, 2019); Sarah Azaransky, *This Worldwide Struggle: Religion and the International Roots of the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Dennis C. Dickerson, "William Stuart Nelson and the Interfaith Origins of the Civil Rights movement," in *Churches, Blackness, and Contested Multiculturalism: Europe, Africa, and North America*, edited by R. Drew Smith, William Ackah, and Anthony G. Reddie (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Rosemarie Freeney Harding with Rachel Elizabeth Harding, *Remnants: A Memoir of Spirit, Activism, and Mothering* (Duke University Press, 2015); Vincent Harding and Daisaku Ikeda, *America Will Bel: Conversations on Hope, Freedom, and Democracy* (Dialogue Path Press, 2013); Carolyn M. Jones Medine, "'Beyond Vietnam': Martin Luther King, Jr., Thích Nhất Hạnh, and the Confluence of Black and Engaged Buddhism in the Vietnam War," in *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*, edited by George Yancy and Emily McRae (Lexington Books, 2019) 119–142.

history both in terms of the hegemonic construction of religion and the formation of anticolonial, antiracist solidarity movements, the second class I discuss focuses specifically on Buddhism. This is a first-year writing seminar titled “Buddhist Literature from Buddha to the Beats” that, on the college level, acts as an introduction to university-level writing. Whereas my Asian American Religion course was a new addition to the course catalogue, this class already existed when I began teaching at Vanderbilt in 2019. In its prior iteration, the course examined the evolution of Buddhist ideas as expressed in literature about the religious journey of single individuals. The first two units traced these themes in India (through the *Buddhacarita*) and China (*Journey to the West*) before turning to the emergence of Buddhist modernism as seen in Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* and Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*. When I redesigned the course, I arranged it into three units: South Asian Buddhist literature (focused on the *Buddhacarita*, *Theragāthā*, and *Therīgāthā*), Buddhist Modernism (*Siddhartha*, *The Dharma Bums*, and writings from Nyogen Senzaki), and Buddhist Post-modernism (*The Way of Tenderness* and womanist interpretations of the *Therīgāthā*).

In the beginning of the course, students learn basic Buddhist concepts through Patrick Olivelle’s *Life of the Buddha (Buddhacarita)* and the *Therīgāthā* and *Theragāthā*. When we discuss the *Therīgāthā* and *Theragāthā*, students draw connections between the two works in relation to how they understand liberation and the renunciant lifestyle. We do this by completing “double bubble” sheets where students work in pairs to note similarities and differences between the two texts surrounding central themes—the body, impermanence, renunciation, liberation, etc. I then generate a collaborative visual map, using Canva whiteboard, of all the student observations. I ask students to practice creating arguments for a hypothetical compare-and-contrast essay focusing on the gendered differences of these texts, in response to the research question “does the *Therīgāthā* represent the real voices of women?” I wrap up our discussion with reference

to Kathryn Blackstone's work on the *Therīgāthā*. By this point, most students have remarked that the women tend to reflect on their own bodies to understand impermanence, while the men project these reflections onto women's bodies. I connect these observations to Blackstone's argument that the women in the *Therīgāthā* often use their own embodied experiences as sources for awakening in ways that are distinct to the portrayal of the men in the *Theragāthā*.⁶¹

In our second unit, students learn about the key discourses of Buddhist modernism and Orientalism in relation to *Siddhartha* and *The Dharma Bums*.⁶² We connect Orientalism to the history of anti-Asian exclusion and racism through a focus on Japanese American incarceration, in part through Nyogen Senzaki's writings during incarceration.⁶³ We also discuss the presence of multiple Buddhist modernities by using Michael Masatsugu's writing (and a short introduction to Scott Mitchell's *The Making of American Buddhism* from me).⁶⁴ Often the conversation about *Dharma Bums* and Japanese American incarceration provides me the opportunity to foreshadow our later discussions that will connect anti-Black racism with Orientalism in the construction of different visions of Buddhism in the United States. In the third unit, we turn to how contemporary Buddhists negotiate the themes of Buddhist modernism through Ann Gleig's *American Dharma*.⁶⁵ In the process, students find that their own critiques

⁶¹ Kathryn R. Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā* (Routledge, 2014): 78.

⁶² David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁶³ Roko Sherry Chayat, ed., *Eloquent Silence: Nyogen Senzaki's Gateless Gate and Other Previously Unpublished Teachings and Letters* (Wisdom Publications, 2008).

⁶⁴ Michael Masatsugu, "'Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence': Japanese Americans, Dharma Bums, and the Making of American Buddhism during the Early Cold War Years," *Pacific Historical Review* 77, no. 3 (2008), 423–451; Scott A. Mitchell, *The Making of American Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁶⁵ Ann Gleig, *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (Yale University Press, 2019).

of *Siddhartha* and *The Dharma Bums* align with contemporary anti-racist Buddhist discourse and practice. Students then situate Manuel's *The Way of Tenderness* within the longer history of Buddhist modernisms, as they consider the themes of romanticism, nature, emptiness, unity, and liberation in relation to *Siddhartha* and *The Dharma Bums*, and place Manuel's novel in the context of Gleig's characterization of the critical, collective, and contextual turns indicative of what she calls Buddhism beyond modernity.⁶⁶ This ensures that we integrate Black Buddhist authors into a broader history of Buddhist development and connect anti-Black racism to our discussions of Orientalism and anti-Asian racism. We conclude the course content by reading womanist interpretations of the *Therīgāthā*. We place the womanist authors not only within the broader framework of Buddhist postmodernism but also connect their insights to our earlier discussion of the *Therīgāthā*.⁶⁷ When put into conversation with Manuel's assertion that embodied identities like race, gender, and sexuality play a crucial role in the path to liberation, students see anew the poems' conceptualization of the importance of embodiment as a source for liberatory knowledge. In the process, these womanist interpretations help us engage with the texts that we had already read in fresh ways.

These are not the only options for changing our courses. Others might include bringing Black authors and intellectuals into conversation with Buddhist figures and ideas to shed new light on both sides of the

⁶⁶ Manuel, *The Way of Tenderness*.

⁶⁷ Melanie H. Harris, "In the Company of Friends: Womanist Readings of Buddhist Poems," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 36 (2016): 3–8; Linda E. Thomas, "Womanist Approaches to the *Therīgāthā* and the *Therīgāthā*'s Influence on Womanism," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 36 (2016): 29–42.

conversation.⁶⁸ In addition to drawing on the scholarship and expertise of Black scholars, we could also highlight Black interpretations of Buddhist doctrine, such as nonself, the three poisons, suffering and the four noble truths, and karma.⁶⁹ Black authors might be included in studies of Buddhist literature (such as the writing of Charles Johnson, as well as poems and memoirs);⁷⁰ practice (chanting, meditation, and ancestral and healing

⁶⁸ Vesely-Flad, for example, has a recently published book that reads the works of Audre Lorde and James Baldwin in relation to Buddhist thought. See Rima Vesely-Flad, "The Body as a Vehicle for Liberation: Gender and Sexuality in Black Buddhist Writings," in *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition: The Practice of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation* (New York University Press, 2022), 198–229; Rima Vesely-Flad, *The Fire Inside: The Dharma of James Baldwin and Audre Lorde* (North Atlantic Books, 2026).

⁶⁹ In addition to other resources listed in this article, see Lama Rod Owens, *Love and Rage: The Path of Liberation Through Anger* (North Atlantic Books, 2020); Larry Ward, *America's Racial Karma* (Parallax Press, 2020). See also David Chappell, "Racial Diversity in the Soka Gakkai," in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, edited by Christopher S. Queen (Wisdom Publications, 2000) 184–127; Ann Gleig, "The Duhkha of Racism," 2019; McNicholl, "Buddhism and Race in the United States," 2021; Rima Vesely-Flad, "Racism and Anatta: Black Buddhists, Embodiment, and Interpretations of Non-Self," in *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*, edited by George Yancy and Emily McRae (Lexington Books, 2019) 79–97; Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*, 2021.

⁷⁰ For fiction see Charles Johnson, *Oxherding Tale* (Indiana University Press, 1982); Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (Atheneum, 1990); Charles Johnson, *Dreamer* (Scribner, 1998); Charles Johnson, *Taming the Ox: Buddhist Stories and Reflections on Politics, Race, Culture, and Spiritual Practice* (Shambhala, 2014); Steven Barnes and Charles Johnson, *The Eightfold Path: A Graphic Novel Anthology* (Harry N. Abrams, 2022). For memoirs, see: Faith Adiele, *Meeting Faith*, 2005; Jarvis Jay Masters, *Finding Freedom: How Death Row Broke and Opened My Heart* (Shambhala, 2020); Rosemarie Freeney Harding and Rachel Elizabeth Harding, *Remnants*; Ralph Steele, *Tending the Fire*, 2014; Tina Turner and Kurt Loder, *I, Tina: My Life Story* (William Morrow and Company, 1986); Spring Washam, *A Fierce Heart: Finding Strength, Courage and Wisdom in Any Moment* (Parallax Press, 2017); angel Kyodo williams, *Being Black*; Jan Willis, *Dreaming Me*. For secondary sources see: Tracy Curtis, "Born Into This Body: Black Women's Use of Buddhism in Autobiographical Narratives," in *Reading African American Autobiography: Twenty-First Century Contexts and Criticism*, edited by Eric D. Lamore

practices);⁷¹ feminism and womanist thought;⁷² Buddhist ethics; socially engaged Buddhism;⁷³ and race and caste.⁷⁴ Black Dharma teachers could also be used in the discussion of contemporary Buddhist traditions, such as Theravada (Faith Adiele, Ruth King, and Ralph Steele); Vajrayana (Rosemarie Freeney Harding, Lama Rod Owens, Lama Choyin Rangdrol, and Jan Willis); Zen (Charles Johnson, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, Larry Ward, and angel Kyodo williams); and Nichiren Buddhism (Tina Turner, Myokei Caine-Barrett, and Kamilah Majid), to name a few. Many of these figures have

(University of Wisconsin Press, 2016); Linda Furgerson Selzer, *Charles Johnson in Context* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2009); Linda Furgerson Selzer, "Black American Buddhism: History and Representation," in *Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature into the Twenty-First Century*, edited by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff (State University of New York Press, 2011), 37–70; and John Whalen-Bridge, "Waking Cain: The Poetics of Integration in Charles Johnson's *Dreamer*," *Callaloo* 26, no. 2 (2003): 504–521.

⁷¹ Jennifer Leath, "Canada and Pure Land, a New Field and Buddha-Land: Womanists and Buddhists Reading Together," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 32 (2012): 57–65; Carolyn M. Jones Medine, "African American and Womanist-Buddhist Thought," in *The Routledge Handbook of Buddhist-Christian Studies*, edited by Carol Anderson and Thomas Cattoi (Routledge, 2022), 337–352; Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*; Brown, Gomez, and Lingo, *Healing Our Way Home*, 2024; Jan Willis, *Dharma Matters: Women, Race, and Tantra* (Colorado: Shambhala, 2020); Yetunde, *Object Relations*, 2018. See also note 56.

⁷² Pressley-Sanon, *Lifting As They Climb*; Nadra Little, *bell hooks' Spiritual Vision: Buddhist, Christian, and Feminist* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023); Yetunde, *Object Relations*; Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*.

⁷³ Carolyn M. Jones Medine, "Beyond Vietnam"; Sharon Smith, "Widening the Circle: Communities of Color and Western Buddhist Convert Sanghas," in *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*, edited by Christopher Queen, Charles Prebish, and Damien Keown (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 220–236; Rima Vesely-Flad, "Black Buddhists and the Body: New Approaches to Socially Engaged Buddhism," *Religions* 8, no. 11 (2017): 239–248.

⁷⁴ Padma D. Maitland, "Black Buddhist: The Visual and Material Cultures of the Dalit Movement and the Black Panther Party," in *Global Raciality: Empire, PostColoniality, DeColoniality*, edited by Paola Bacchetta, Sunaina Maira, and Howard Winant (Routledge, 2018); Thenmozhi Soundararajan, *The Trauma of Caste: A Dalit Feminist Meditation on Survivorship, Healing, and Abolition* (North Atlantic Books, 2022).

composed memoirs, which scholars of pedagogy and race have proposed can be particularly impactful on student learning outcomes. When used in combination with academic articles, memoirs “can surface, not merely students’ intellectual reactions, but also those emotional and social, and intellectual feelings, experiences necessary to growth, as well as new understandings.”⁷⁵ I have experienced this myself in pairing Gleig’s *American Dharma* with *The Way of Tenderness*. In some cases, students who are initially skeptical of the affinity between sanghas and DEI initiatives discussed in Gleig’s work shift their understanding once they read Manuel’s discussion of “multiplicity in oneness,” the importance of cultural refuges for the development of one’s practice, and the compatibility of gender, sexuality, and race in teachings of non-self/emptiness.

Conclusion

This article focused on changes that could be made to Buddhist studies syllabi as one component of an anti-racist pedagogical approach. Although syllabus design is only the beginning of anti-racist and inclusive design pedagogy,⁷⁶ anti-racist pedagogy necessitates the interrogation of not only a historically racist Buddhist studies past but also how we ourselves have been shaped by and contribute to patterns of colonialism, Orientalism, and racism. Buddhist studies as a field is not race neutral, and, as I propose in this article, making Black Lives Matter in the Buddhist studies classroom necessitates a reorientation and deconstruction of the constitutive frameworks of Buddhist studies and its various intersecting sub-fields. Centering Black contributions to Asian religions and teaching

⁷⁵ Harbin, et al., “Teaching Race,” 10; see also 22–24.

⁷⁶ Frank Tuitt, Chayla Haynes, and Saran Stewart, “Transforming the Classroom at Traditionally White Institutions to Make Black Lives Matter,” *To Improve the Academy* 37, no. 1 (2018): 63–76.

American Buddhist history in a way that highlights multiracial solidarities offers one way of disrupting hierarchies of Orientalism, racial divisions, and colonialism. While much of this article is oriented toward a geographically specific context, particularly the Southern United States where I teach, these reflections might also allow instructors to consider how Buddhists are interwoven with their own local, regional, and national racial projects and how we can teach these histories in a way that disrupts dominant religio-racial frameworks.

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