

Research Article

Inclusion and Exclusion in the White Space: An Investigation of the Experiences of People of Color in a Primarily White American Meditation Community

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More people of color have begun to attend American convert Buddhist communities that have, until recently, been almost exclusively white in composition. This study seeks to explore the ways in which people of color experience racialized inclusion and exclusion in one such community. Utilizing a phenomenological methodology to examine the experiences of eleven participants of color, the present study extrapolates six distinct themes related to their experiences of racialized inclusion and exclusion. These themes are Interpersonal Barriers to Full Participation, Institutional Barriers to Full Participation, Strategies for Coping with Racialized Exclusion, Failures of Leadership Support for People of Color, Range of POC Experiences, and Promoting Equity and Inclusion. Following the explication of themes, the authors offer recommendations for primarily white meditation communities to help guide their efforts toward greater inclusion and equity for people of color.

Keywords: Buddhism in America, racialized exclusion, convert Buddhism, race, Western Buddhism

Introduction

American convert Buddhism has, until recently, been composed largely of white community members (Pierce, 2000). This cultural phenomenon is well-documented in the literature, from the stories of white middle class Americans who brought back Asian Buddhism to the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s (Fields, 1986) to the segregation that occurred between these primarily white communities and pre-existing heritage Asian Buddhist communities in the 1980s and beyond (Cheah, 2011). The whiteness of convert American Buddhism has been noted in position papers (Hickey, 2010), ethnographies (Cheah, 2002), and the popular press (Fields, 1994; Han, 2017; King, 2017; Snyder, 2017), and has become a subject of discussion in various convert communities (Thompson, 2013).



In addition, in the past twenty years, due in part to the increased popularity of meditation in mainstream American culture, more people of color born in the U.S. have begun to seek out meditation communities (Dugan and Bogert, 2006). While white members of these communities might express a desire to make their communities a “multicultural refuge,” (IMS, 2015: 1) people of color (also expressed as ‘POC’) often experience meditation groups as bastions of “normative whiteness” (Harper, 2012: 1), where structures of language, dress, and other culturally sanctioned (i.e. “white”) behaviors are enforced. Unfortunately, when POC community members raise these issues, they are often met with resistance and disbelief (Harper, 2012), leading to a “silencing” (Arun, 2011: 1) that many people of color in American convert Buddhist communities find exhausting and alienating (Williams, 2002).

Over the past several years, some Insight Meditation communities¹ have made a concerted effort to address issues of race in their communities. For instance, recent iterations of the Community Dharma Leaders training, a three-year program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center (SRMC) that is designed to train aspirants to be leaders in their spiritual communities, have been explicitly focused on inclusivity, and they are perhaps the most diverse American Buddhist teacher training programs in history (Gleig, 2019). In addition, both the Insight Meditation Center (IMS) and Spirit Rock Meditation Center (SRMC) have instituted advanced teacher training programs that are committed to including at least 75 percent leaders of color. These trainings are an explicit attempt to ameliorate the imbalance of racial power disparities within the Insight community (D. Williams, personal communication, April 1, 2017).

Nevertheless, Insight Meditation communities, like other American convert Buddhist communities, remain predominantly white. IMS, a representative community, began tracking racial demographics in 2010. In the year 2014, approximately 84 percent of respondents identified as white or of European decent (L. Spink, personal communication, September 16, 2015). In addition, 6 percent identified as of Asian descent, just under 5 percent identified as Black or African descent, approximately 4 percent identified as Hispanic or Latino descent, 3 percent identified as of Middle Eastern descent, and less than 1 percent identified as being either Native American or Native Alaskan descent, or as Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander descent (IMS Diversity Questionnaire, 2015).

Members of American convert Buddhist communities have been calling for more explicit and holistic efforts to address issues of race and racism in their communities for nearly twenty years (e.g. Adams et al., 2000; Gutierrez Boldoquin, 2004; Pierce, 2000; Willis, 2000). As such, the literature produced by practitioners on the topic has progressed a great deal. Dugan and Bogert (2006) produced an informal paper on racial diversity in American Buddhist communities. In 2012,

¹ The Insight Meditation movement, also called “Vipassana,” takes its roots primarily from the modernist Burmese teachers Mahasi Sayadaw, Ba Khin, and S.N. Goenka, all of whom adapted traditional Theravadin teachings to the context of non-monastic practitioners. In the West, Insight Meditation communities often blend these practices with practices from the Thai Forest tradition, contemporary psychology, and critical textual studies, though communities differ substantially in their approaches and emphases (Cadge, 2008).

Larry Yang, the co-founder of East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland, C.A., which has been called “one of the most diverse sanghas in the world,” (Gleig, 2014: 1) published three articles in the *Huffington Post* dedicated to the topic of diversity in Buddhist communities. Also in the *Huffington Post*, Jaweed Kaleem (2013) profiled a people of color (POC) Buddhist affiliation group in Seattle. More recently, 125 Buddhist leaders gathered at the White House to meet with State Department officials about racial and other pressing issues in the United States (Boorstein, 2015). Meanwhile, Buddhists for Racial Justice, an online community of Buddhist leaders has begun to build support for unified actions on racial issues (Buddhists for Racial Justice, 2018).

In contrast, the academic, peer-reviewed literature on the topic of race and racism in American convert Buddhist communities remains underdeveloped. Particularly lacking is recent qualitative data. While Hickey’s position paper (2010) explicitly addresses issues of race, racism, and white supremacy in American Buddhist discourses, her analysis relies on ethnographic theories drawn from the 1970s and 1980s. Cheah (2011) usefully argues that the lack of discussion about race within American Buddhist scholarship is, in itself, an expression of white supremacy. However, his treatise relies on data drawn almost exclusively from heritage Buddhist communities, and suffers from a paucity of data drawn from American convert Buddhist groups.

Smith, Munt, and Yip (2016) and Gleig (2019) have most clearly articulated an empirically based understanding of racial diversity in convert Buddhism. Smith and her coauthors, for instance, conducted an ethnography about the experiences of people of color in two of the largest convert Buddhist communities in Great Britain. Gleig’s (2019) most recent work, meanwhile, has examined race through ethnographic interviews with a range of Buddhist practitioners in contemporary convert communities across the U.S.

In this article, we build on the work of Smith, Gleig, and other scholars (e.g. Cheah, 2011, Han, 2017, Hickey, 2010) to closely examine the racialized experiences of inclusion and exclusion in a single, primarily white, American convert Buddhist community. Utilizing a phenomenological analysis, we closely examine the experiences of participants of color in this environment. Ultimately, we show that the range of these participants’ experiences can be abstracted to six distinct, lived themes, explicated below. Each of these themes, meanwhile, conform to and extend Elijah Anderson’s construct of the “white space,” in which segregation is not only physical, as in the marginalization of communities of color to particular neighborhoods, but also “perceptual,” since the spaces in which people of color are “typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present” (2015: 10) create a sense of isolation and precariousness among people of color who enter those spaces, such that people of color feel they may be excluded from communities unexpectedly. This “normative sensibility” (2015: 10) is often called “the white space” by POC research participants, and is often defined by “microaggressions,” being those “commonplace verbal or behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults” (Sue et al., 2007: 271) to persons of color who enter or actively participate in the white space.

Finally, following the explication of the six themes uncovered by the present research, the authors present four suggestions for leaders of primarily white meditation communities who are attempting to better integrate equity and inclusion work. Each of these four suggestions is drawn directly from the experiences of the people of color interviewed for this project, and hues as closely as possible to their lived experiences.

Method

A discovery-oriented, heuristic phenomenological methodology (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007) was used to study experiences of race among members of color of the East Coast Meditation Community (ECMC, a pseudonym), a large, primarily white meditation community located in a populated urban center on the East Coast of the United States. (All names, places, and other identifying details in the research have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants, as is the custom in the social sciences and the requirement of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.) We recruited eleven participants for this phenomenological investigation, all of whom were people of color.

As Minikel-Lacocque (2013) and others have noted, white researchers inherit a special responsibility to be clear about their positionality when attempting to convey the experiences of people of color. As such, the lead author, Craig Hase, a graduate student in counseling psychology who identifies as white and Buddhist, conducted all analysis with a coding partner, James Meadows, an African American Ph.D. student in Education Policy who also identifies as Buddhist. During analysis Craig and James coded interviews separately and then met six times for one to three hours each time to discuss the findings. During each meeting, they debated each step of the analysis to consensus (Hill et al., 2005). They never failed to reach consensus. In addition, Dr. Stephanie Budge, a white, queer-identified, female non-Buddhist served as auditor for the project.

During the analysis process, the researchers utilized Charmaz's (2014) three step coding schema. In the initial coding phase (Charmaz, 2014), Craig and James used In Vivo coding to extract significant statements from each description. In the second phase of analysis, they used focused coding (Charmaz, 2014) to codify and develop meanings, ensuring that they remained faithful to the intended meanings of the participants through a process of constant comparison with the transcriptions. In the third phase, they used axial coding (Charmaz, 2014) to organize clusters of meaning from the focused codes, allowing for phenomenological themes to emerge.

Having produced valid themes, Craig shared these themes in detail during member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with eight participants who responded to email requests. These member checks occurred by phone in August 2016, several months after the initial interviews took place, when the analysis had produced phenomenological themes. We then integrated participants' feedback and interpretations into the data analysis, ensuring that the themes represented a valid hermeneutic interpretation of the lived experiences of participants. Finally, the team interpreted the analysis in the context of the sociohistorical literature referenced above.

Findings and Discussion

Participants offered richly descriptive accounts of their experiences at the East Coast Meditation Community (ECMC), both in the primarily white, mainstream milieu, and in the person of color (POC) affiliation group. While the views, experiences, and opinions of participants varied widely, a picture of ECMC as a primarily white community in the process of instituting anti-racist and equity-based work did emerge. This picture included participant references to a series of failures and successes on the part of the primarily white leadership to advance various inclusivity practices in the face of resistance from ECMC's white membership. A picture of the people of color engaged with ECMC also surfaced, as they sought to engage with various racialized difficulties brought about by contact with the white majority culture. Throughout the following sections, the main themes are illustrated with reference to direct quotes from the participants.

Theme One: Interpersonal Barriers to Full Participation

Interviews with people of color at ECMC revealed a persistent perception of the existence of interpersonal barriers to full participation at white mainstream ECMC events. While POC participants navigated these barriers differently (see *Strategies for coping with racialized exclusion*, below), the majority of participants agreed that their experiences at white mainstream events at ECMC were shaped by frequent *Tokenizing*, and by the persistent *Use of Buddhist doctrine to undermine the significance of POC experiences*.

Many participants spoke about experiences of *tokenism*, being “the symbolic inclusion of numerical minorities within a group, usually for the sake of appearances rather than for inclusiveness or true diversity” (Hirshfield, 2015: 1). At ECMC, these usually took the shape of members of the white majority culture inviting participants of color to be a part of the community in ways that seemed perfunctory, demeaning, or inauthentic. Participants told stories of the primarily white board asking them to be in promotional materials, without first establishing a relationship. Others spoke about being asked to teach simply because a person of color was “needed” to balance out the racial composition of a teaching team. These critiques usually focused not on the inclusion itself, but on the lack of real relationship that preceded such offers. Tasha, a 49-year-old African American leader and teacher in the community gave an example:

Yeah. I mean it's like—last time I was at ECMC, it was so funny. Oh my god. It's hilarious. Somebody talked about they're doing some race stuff and one of their objectives was to partner with more teachers of color. And right after the end of the meeting, some woman, some white woman, walked up to me and said, “I want to do a retreat with you.” I mean, can we talk about that? I never hear from this woman, she never picks up the phone. I don't know her middle name. I don't know anything about this woman. She doesn't know me. It was just because she wanted black people, a teacher of color.

While this pattern of interpersonal barriers to full participation might exist in different types of majority white institutions (e.g. schools, counseling centers, hospitals, corporations), one structure at ECMC bears special mention. This is the way white members used Buddhist doctrine to consistently undermine the significance of people of color's experiences. Specifically, they wielded the doctrine of non-self to invalidate people of color's attempts to challenge white majority culture at ECMC.

Put simply, the doctrine of non-self states that what human beings take to be a solidly existing, permanent, and independent self, is, in fact, far more fluid, dynamic, and interrelated than we usually consciously experience (Gethin, 1998). As the apex of Buddhist philosophy, the non-self doctrine is extraordinarily subtle and complex, and would require several pages to thoroughly explicate. For our purposes, however, it is important only to understand how members of the white, majority culture utilized the doctrine. For example, Rita, a 30-year-old African American woman, spoke about the ways in which white members used the doctrine of non-self to challenge the existence of the POC affiliation group. Rita reported white members saying, the doctrine pointed out how race was "just" a social construct. Anj, a 51-year-old Asian American transgender person, spoke directly to this point when they said:

[White folks ask] how do we transcend this so that we are all one. But is transcendence even necessary? Instead, [we need to ask] how do we honor what's happening? Because on a relative level that's not how we treat each other in the world. It's not even how we treat each other in this community.

Theme Two: Institutional Barriers to Full Participation

In addition to the interpersonal barriers to full participation in the ECMC community, several participants said that institutional barriers interfered with their ability to fully engage. During the process of analysis, the researchers organized these experiences into three categories: *Exclusivity of the flagship location*, *Socioeconomic barriers to full participation*, and the *Divide between white and POC cultures*. Of these, the most frequently cited was the exclusivity of the flagship location. ECMC hosts its weekly flagship event, in which founder and head teacher Jayla Braun (a pseudonym) offers meditation instruction and a Dharma talk, at a rented Unitarian church in a primarily white, wealthy suburb.

Speaking to the perceived inhospitality of the flagship location, participants called the flagship location "Whitesville," (Tasha, African American), "the Woods," (Alice, African American), "Upper Caucasia," (Anj, Asian American), and other epithets. For instance, Alice, a 60-year-old African American woman told the story of her first visit to the flagship location. "I get off the bus at the woods and I'm going, 'What the fuck?' Of course, it's not the woods if you're driving." Eve, a 44-year-old African American woman, acknowledged, "The location is definitely problematic. If you don't have a car, it's kind of a pain to get out there." Meanwhile, Carmen, a 68-year-old Latina woman said, "Where it's located is a problem. The fact that it is really difficult to

get out there with public transportation means that it tends to draw only pretty affluent, highly educated folks.”

Socioeconomic status presented another institutional barrier to full participation at ECMC. In addition to issues of public transportation, participants spoke of ECMC as a culture that has been built by and for the affluent. Alice summed up this point when she said,

What’s interesting to me is that if you connect, you’re going to a restaurant after. I’m going, ‘Sweetie, I can’t pay \$20 to get some sprouts some place.’ I’m always interested as to why aren’t we going to each other’s homes. But that’s not something that’s done. It’s just not built for me.

Rita also spoke about the prohibitive cost of retreats. While she acknowledged that the scholarships available to people of color were a step in the right direction, she also argued that they do not go far enough. Other participants agreed, pointing out that only a small minority of the POC community can afford to take time off work—for which they often will not be paid—and then spend money for a weeklong retreat.

A third institutional barrier to full participation was the divide between white and POC cultures and cultural experiences. When asked to envision what ECMC would look like if it were truly reflective of themselves, many participants imagined a radically changed atmosphere, in which children played, people danced, there were fully cooked meals, people ate together and talked together, and the meditation practice was deemphasized in favor of more interpersonal and socially engaged practices. In addition, participants spoke about not being “reflected” in the topics of the talks at the mainstream white ECMC meetings. Biyu, a 29-year-old Asian American woman spoke to this dynamic when she said,

I think being a person of color at ECMC, I don’t feel like my story or my life experience is reflected in a lot of the teachings actually. The perspective and the teachings itself are white centered.

Theme Three: Strategies for Coping with Racialized Exclusion

A third theme that emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts reflected the ways in which people of color at ECMC cope with racialized exclusion in their community. Three primary categories captured this theme, including *Accommodating White ignorance*, *Avoiding White ignorance*, and the *Importance of the POC sangha*.

Clarice, a 33-year-old Black woman who often attends events at the White mainstream sangha, described the way that she copes with subtle forms of exclusion:

This is the thing that probably a lot of Black people will tell you, is you have to make [white] people feel comfortable to be around you . . . And so I have to go over and I have to smile and I have to say, ‘How are you?’ and make people feel comfortable about being around me, you know, when...I’m the only person that is different.

Later in her interview, Clarice admits that she often feels like she has to be “the adult in the room,” and that she accommodates the anxieties of white members of ECMC in order to make the space welcoming for herself.

One of the primary ways that people of color at ECMC cope with racialized exclusion is through engaging the safe space of the POC sangha. Founded over a decade ago by Anj, a 51-year-old Asian American trans individual, the group has flourished. It meets monthly for meditation, Dharma talks, and open discussions about topics that are salient for people of color in the ECMC community, such as race, racism, workplace challenges related to being a person of color in primarily white environments, family concerns, and even the difficulties of interacting with the primarily white ECMC sangha. A number of participants described the POC sangha as “essential” (Rita, 30, African American) to their participation in ECMC and their development as Buddhist practitioners.

Patty, a 34-year-old African American woman who has participated exclusively in the POC sangha, and never attends events in the white mainstream ECMC community, describes her initial experience with the POC affiliation group this way:

I just—I felt so welcomed. Even though there were a mixture of—it wasn’t just African Americans there, there were people of different races there and just the diversity of the group and I just, I felt like I wanted to belong to that, and everybody was jovial and kind and, like I said, welcoming, and I just wanted more of that.

Patty was not the only interviewee to name this welcoming quality. For example, Clarice, the African American woman mentioned at the start of this section, who also attends mainstream, predominately white events at ECMC, spoke about her admiration for Anj and other POC leaders, and described the POC sangha as a place where she feels implicitly understood, and where she does not have to explain herself, her identity, or her experience.

Other interviewees spoke about avoiding the white sangha altogether as a way of coping with racialized exclusion. Patty, a 34-year-old African American woman, never attends the mainstream white ECMC events, because fellow members of the POC sangha have reported to her that participants in the mainstream ECMC community lack a basic understanding of race and racial dynamics. Speaking about her apprehension about possibly attending the primarily white sangha, Patty describes it this way:

I have a little nervousness. In the POC Sangha, you know, there’s just so much unspoken understanding of what we share. You don’t have to fully explain everything. Like if I experience something at work and it’s about race. If I bring it up in POC sangha, people get it. But I don’t know that [white people at ECMC] will understand, and they might start questioning me about how I’m making assumptions and I just don’t want to have to give the whole backstory. So I haven’t been yet.

In contrast, several participants immediately mentioned the POC sangha when they were asked to name an experience in which they felt truly at home. For example, when asked to describe an experience at ECMC in which she felt truly at home, Biyu, an Asian American woman in her late 20s, replied, “Really the people of color Sangha.” She then continued, “That has been a home and that’s interesting because I’m usually one of the only Asian people there.” Clarice, too, when asked about an experience in which she felt truly at home at ECMC named the POC sangha. She then clarified that the POC sangha has been “a beautiful experience,” but, “outside of something like that, no. Not particularly as a person of color.”

Theme Four: Failures of Leadership Support for People of Color

Another theme that emerged in the data was various failures of ECMC leadership, both white board members and community members, to adequately address difficulties around race and racism. These took the form of *Challenges to the existence of the POC sangha*, *POC members feeling unsupported by the ECMC leadership*, and a *Distrust of the White sangha wanting more diversity*.

From its inception, the POC sangha has faced unwelcome scrutiny from white members of ECMC. As Anj, the founding leader of the group recounts, “When the people of color sangha started, [white] folks were saying, ‘Why do you need to separate yourselves out, we’re welcoming here. Our doors are wide open to everybody,’” thereby invalidating the sorts of interpersonal and institutional barriers to full participation listed above. Anj continues,

[White community members] would say, “Oh, you know, I’m about as dark as you, I guess I’m a person of color.” Or they’d say, “I don’t see color. It’s not really that important.” Or they would say, “I’ve never experienced you as a person of color.”

This sort of color blindness, it seems, was pervasive in the majority white culture of ECMC. When it was challenged, tensions rose. For example, in one incident, a white sangha member approached Anj outside of an ECMC event. He challenged them to explain the necessity of the POC group. When Anj attempted to explain, the exchange grew heated. Anj tried to walk away, but the man, who was bigger than them, followed. Finally, a group of POC sangha members intervened.

While the incident itself was disturbing, the response from the ECMC leadership was far more damaging to the relationship between mainstream ECMC and the POC sangha. Rita, an African American woman in her early thirties explains what happened when the group took their concerns to the ECMC leadership:

What was so hard was that, we were trying to have a conversation about [the aggressive white sangha member] with folks on the board. They wanted us to justify why Anj...felt threatened by this person over the experience.... They were trying to really get into interpreting our feelings about him and reactions to him [rather than addressing his behavior]. There was a lot of that. [We had to defend] our own feelings and experience around it . . . without ever getting to the issues.

After multiple incidents in which the POC sangha asked the board or other ECMC leaders for support and encountered defensiveness, ignorance, or sluggish response times, many POC members began feeling unsupported by the ECMC leadership and distrustful of mainstream ECMC's stated intent to promote diversity and inclusivity. As Anj says about the idea of inclusivity, "Who decides? If they're like, "Okay, we're including you," who's the we? What I said earlier about, we're all one. It's like, "Well, who's "one" are we going to be? Who's getting to decide that?" Anj then compared ECMC's inclusivity efforts to a dinner party:

They're inviting other people, new people, new guests to this dinner party and these new guests are like, "Oh, we want to bring our own food. We want to bring some music because we like to dance after meals and we want to bring our kids," and the dominant culture hosts are basically saying, "No, we already have the menu. We just need you to sit at the table and eat our food." That to me doesn't lend to the sense of belonging. It lends to the sense of, "Okay, we're including you but we get to say how this is going to go down."

This sense that the white majority culture gets to decide "how this is going to go down" has led some sangha members to wonder why the white ECMC culture is attempting to become more racially diverse. Anj continued,

Sometimes I'm not even sure what the reason is. Why are all-white sanghas all up in the air about wanting people of color to be a part of them now? Where is that coming from? Sometimes I think it's a sense of being politically correct or something.

Theme Five: The Range of POC Experiences

A fifth theme that emerged from the data was the sheer variety of experiences and views that people of color reported about their interactions with ECMC. Upon analysis, the researchers divided these into three categories: *ECMC as a safe haven*, *Participant claims ECMC is not racist*, and *Not fully at home in the POC Sangha*.

Participants named a variety of racialized barriers to their full participation at ECMC. However, some participants described the white mainstream ECMC experience as a place where they felt very welcomed. For example, Trent, the 47-year-old African American man, described the white mainstream ECMC environment as a "safe haven." He went on to explain that he had gone through a very difficult time near the beginning of his tenure at ECMC, where he suffered two simultaneous losses in his life. Speaking about those circumstances and the role that ECMC played in helping him stabilize and find purpose, Trent began to cry. Through his tears, he said, "I didn't realize this was so emotional. You know, the rush of emotion is out of being grateful. That was a hard time, and ECMC was just a wonderful safe haven." He also reiterated twice more that he experienced ECMC as a "safe haven" and a place where he feels truly at home, a statement that

diverges sharply from experiences of other participants, who described a sense of not feeling fully welcomed by or at home in the majority white community.

Eve, the African American woman mentioned in the previous section, offered a similar narrative during her interview. Coming to ECMC after a time of confusion and loss, she too found stability and purpose through the ECMC community. When asked what it was like for her to be a Black woman at the flagship community that she attends several times a month, she stated that she felt very supported there. “I feel like I’m like everyone else. I don’t feel any different . . . It’s a wonderful environment where you feel loved, you know, it’s like we’re happy to see each other. I just enjoy it; I absolutely enjoy it.”

In fact, Carmen, a 68-year-old Latina woman, argued strongly against the idea that ECMC includes racist or exclusionary undertones, theorizing instead that people of color who come to ECMC could be projecting their trauma from previous experiences onto the neutral or positive intentions of white community members. She concluded, “It’s hard for me to believe that a true practitioner could be a racist.”

This diversity of experience also extended to participants’ relationship to the people of color sangha affiliated with ECMC. While many participants spoke of the POC sangha as essential to their participation at ECMC (see *Strategies for coping*, below), and still others participated exclusively in the POC sangha, bypassing the mainstream white sangha entirely, other participants felt uneasy about some aspects of the POC sangha.

For example, Tasha, the African American leader and teacher mentioned previously, stated that she felt excluded from the POC sangha because she did not share their “radicalized” view of race and preferred to work with her struggle around racial issues through meditation and contemplation rather than through direct political action. Likewise, Trent, mentioned previously, spoke about an incident in which white students had arrived at a POC event and were turned away due to their race. While Trent stressed that he values the POC sangha and the container that it offers for the discussion of issues important to people of color, this incident—and others like it—troubled him, and he reported feeling uneasy and “not at home” with the exclusion that the POC sangha sometimes seemed to encourage.

It should never be an issue when someone wants to explore the Dharma or to have community or build community with you. There shouldn’t be an issue where people are excluded, regardless. I can’t think of a reason why. At this very moment, I can’t think of a reason why I would want to exclude anyone from deepening their practice or me deepening mine because [of race].

Theme Six: Promoting Equity and Inclusion

Despite many participants’ critiques of the white majority culture at ECMC, nearly all agreed that ECMC is evolving in a positive direction and learning to more effectively address racial equity in the community. In fact, Theresa, a 60-year-old Latina, pointed out when giving feedback on our identified themes that Jayla, the founder and primary leader of the community, has made racial

equity a central issue at ECMC over the past several years, and that she is making measurable progress, such as working to relocate the flagship ECMC meeting to a downtown location near a public transportation hub. She said, “Quite frankly, we wouldn’t be doing [equity work] if not for Jayla. She’s just so committed to the issue.” Participants mentioned five basic categories in which ECMC has made progress on these issues, including *Diversity Committees*, *Inviting and training POC teachers*, *Institutional support for the POC Sangha*, *White awareness training*, and *An increasing willingness to have race conversations*.

A number of participants mentioned the benefits of the diversity committees that ECMC has instated over the years. The first committee was started as a “rogue effort,” according to Theresa, the Latina woman mentioned previously who was one of the founders. She noted that, though the board and the teacher’s council did not explicitly support the early iteration of the diversity committee, they also did not stymie its growth. As Theresa recounted,

ECMC is an interesting organization, because it’s fairly loose. But the powers that be never pooh-poohed [the diversity committee] or never said, “No, don’t do it.” That was kind of a test. It wasn’t like there was a whole lot of support for it. But no one said, “No, don’t do it.”

Biyu, the Asian American woman mentioned previously, notes that the diversity committees gained momentum and institutional support as time went on, which she viewed as a promising development. Rita, an African American woman in her early thirties, noted that the most recent iterations of the diversity committee have far more clout at ECMC, including a budget, which they are using to pay her a consulting fee for her work on the committee. This, she notes, is a litmus test of how serious an organization is about racial equity, or any subject: when they put money toward something, it means they care about that topic.

Theresa, who was on the ECMC board for years, and therefore has an insider’s perspective on ECMC issues, also mentioned that Jayla and the board have made a point of inviting POC teachers from around the country. Several participants mentioned the impact of this practice. For instance, Alice, the African American woman mentioned previously, mentioned that seeing a POC guest teacher at ECMC was the impetus for her further participation in the ECMC community. Clarice shared a similar experience in which she arrived at an ECMC event in which a guest POC teacher was speaking about the topic of rage. She related so profoundly to the teacher’s treatment of the topic that she made a commitment to the group then and there. In addition, Theresa mentioned that the board has also set aside money for the development of POC teachers within the ECMC community.

Another way that ECMC has supported equity work is by supporting the POC affiliation group. When asked what ECMC has done to advance these issues, for example, Anj notes, “I would say it’s probably being supportive of the POC sangha.” Anj also notes how complex that dynamic has been.

Of course, we've had to really navigate what that actually looks like. Sometimes it means supporting us, and sometimes it means leaving us alone. Sometimes it's writing the check and then allowing the community to self-determine.

Biyu notes that she feels grateful to ECMC for their financial support for the POC sangha, because, as she observes, she "wouldn't be in this practice right now without the POC sangha." In her interview, Rita also mentioned the POC scholarships that the board set aside for retreats, though she argues these scholarships only go partway toward addressing systemic inequities.

Several participants mentioned the white awareness training that the leaders at ECMC are now required to undergo. The program, which was co-created by two white members of ECMC, combines meditation with traditional anti-racist didactics to create a white awareness training based loosely on Buddhist principles. Biyu said that she felt "encouraged" by the work that ECMC leadership was doing through the white awareness training. Carmen pointed to the training as a clear sign that ECMC is working on anti-racist principles. Eve, the African American woman mentioned previously, also mentioned the white awareness training as a clear sign that Jayla and the board are serious about equity work. Trent, the African American man mentioned previously, also spoke about the white awareness work when asked what ECMC has done so far to combat racism in the community and make the sangha more inclusive and welcoming to people of color.

Even the most critical of the participants acknowledged that the leadership at ECMC is becoming more and more willing to have difficult conversations around race. Rita, a 30-year-old African American woman, left the community in the wake of one of the conflicts that erupted between the POC sangha and the primarily white board. After a five-year hiatus, she notes of her most recent meeting with the ECMC leadership:

It seemed like they were willing to make some investments that seemed a little bit different in terms of having conversations around real change. [T]hey were like, "We value your insight—not only your personal insight but your analysis—as a consultant. We will pay you to show up in this space." That's different from before.

In addition, nearly all participants expressed praise for Jayla Braun, the founder of and head teacher at ECMC, for modeling to other white members of the community how to have difficult conversations about race without becoming defensive. As Theresa put it during our member check:

Quite frankly, we wouldn't be doing this if not for Jayla. She's just so committed to it. She's been a model of this willingness to have these conversations. To sit there and be in difficult interactions and listen as people say how bad it was. But again, just keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. So really that kind of leader taking up the mantle and saying this is important, that's huge.

Conclusions

This article examines the lived experiences of people of color in a single, primarily white meditation community in order to extract overarching themes that might inform our understanding of how racial dynamics function to include and exclude people of color in this particular Buddhist convert community, as well as in communities like it in the United States. Through a series of naturalistic observations, semi-structured interviews, and theoretically driven phenomenological data analyses, the researchers were able to abstract six distinct themes, which are: *Interpersonal Barriers to Full Participation*, *Institutional Barriers to Full Participation*, *Strategies for Coping with Racialized Exclusion*, *Failures of Leadership Support for People of Color*, *the Range of POC Experiences*, and *Promoting Equity and Inclusion*.

Having now shared these findings, both with our own participants during member checks and with people of color from a number of geographically diverse, primarily white, meditation communities, it is our view as researchers that these themes likely describe a basic pattern. To wit, we believe that most primarily white meditation communities around the United States likely struggle with some version of the six themes uncovered by this investigation. We therefore conclude this paper with four recommendations, each drawn from the lived experiences of our participants. As the current project is phenomenological in nature, these recommendations hew as closely as possible to the lived experiences of the people of color we interviewed for this project. We hope that instituting these recommendations will speed the process of equity and inclusion work in primarily white meditation communities around the country.

1. *We recommend that white leaders of meditation communities undergo racial awareness training, especially concerning the deleterious impacts of microaggressions and unconscious acts of white supremacy.* As documented in theme one, *Interpersonal Barriers to Full Participation*, many of the POC participants in our study shared experiences of being systematically “othered” by white members of ECMC. These instances ranged from tokenizing incidents by white teachers and microaggressions committed by white community members, all the way up to statements from board members that undercut the experiences of members of color when they attempted to raise issues of racial equity in the community. To its credit, ECMC did, in fact, institute a white awareness training, and many white members of the community have now completed various levels of this training, leading to improved understanding of racial issues at ECMC and beyond. Based on ECMC’s relative success in this arena, we recommend that other primarily white meditation communities in the United States follow suit, and either institute their own trainings, or participate as a community in existing racial awareness trainings.
2. *We recommend that primarily white meditation communities consider opening new locations in or relocating flagship locations to multi-ethnic and working-class neighborhoods.* As outlined in theme two, *Institutional Barriers to Full Participation*, many POC members of ECMC perceived the community’s current flagship location, in a wealthy white enclave, to be inhospitable

and alienating. Besides the dearth of public transportation servicing the location, participants described a sense of foreboding associated with being a black or brown person in an overwhelmingly white neighborhood, and made light of these feelings by naming the location, “Whitesville,” “the Woods,” and “Upper Caucasia.” We therefore recommend that meditation communities in the United States establish themselves in more racially diverse neighborhoods, when possible, and that they promote leaders that reflect the racial compositions of those more diverse neighborhoods in order to present a meditation curriculum that can speak to a wider audience with a diverse background of culture and experience.

3. *We recommend that primarily white meditation communities institute scholarships for people of color.* As many scholars have noted (e.g. Reeves, Rodrigue, & Kneebone, 2016), race and socioeconomic status in the United States are inextricably linked. It is unsurprising, then, that the participants in our study, when asked to speak about racialized inclusion and exclusion, brought up the financial barriers that they have experienced in their time at ECMC. In response to reports like these, Spirt Rock Meditation Center, Insight Meditation Society, and others meditation communities in the United States have now instituted scholarships specifically to support people of color who would like to attend these centers. Based on our findings, we wholeheartedly support these efforts, and recommend that other meditation communities around the United States (including ECMC, which has been slow to institute such a policy) follow this example, and create scholarship opportunities specifically geared to POC members.
4. *We recommend that primarily white meditation communities support the formation of POC affiliation groups.* While ECMC’s POC affiliation group was originally contested, even by senior members of the ECMC leadership, it has now established itself as a thriving community in its own right, providing a safe space where members of color may come together and use the meditation teachings and practices in the ways that feel most relevant to them. In fact, a number of our participants named the POC sangha as either their primary support network within ECMC, or at the least, a supportive place from which they have further explored the wider offerings of ECMC. The authors therefore recommend that other meditation communities around the United States follow the example of ECMC and help establish spaces where members of color can fully explore meditation teachings and practices from within their own cultural and racial identities.

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