

## Sitting in the Fire Together: People of Color Cultivating Radical Resilience in North American Insight Meditation

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Drawing upon ethnographic research conducted in California with BIPOC practitioners of mindfulness, this article examines their efforts to create “safe spaces” to collectively experience and process painful embodied emotions around racialized trauma. These collective spaces, I argue, help meditators move from experiencing painful emotions as internal to their personal experience as individuals, and instead help relate their difficult emotions with those experienced and shared by other racialized minorities. Building such safe space communities help raise awareness of the shared socio-political nature of their individual emotions. This collective experiencing of racialized embodiment fosters a type of radical resilience, and, ultimately, develops an awareness of collective responsibility, care for community and direct action for racial justice within the individual meditator.

**Keywords:** mindfulness; race; PoC; American Buddhism; resilience; emotions; intersubjectivity

In August 2014, protests broke out in Ferguson, Missouri after the killing of unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown by a white police officer. Led by the Black Lives Matter movement, which had emerged after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Black teenager Trayvon Martin, hundreds of people took to the streets to express their anger and pain around the ongoing legacy of systemic racism against African Americans. Images of protestors being tear gassed by police were broadcast across the nation.

Just a few months earlier, popular magazines had anticipated a very different kind of year for the United States. According to the February issue of TIME magazine, 2014 was to be the year of the “Mindful Revolution.” Time’s cover—featuring a white, blonde, female blissfully meditating—was a striking counterpoint to images of police tear-gassing protestors righteously fighting for racial justice. While the concern of the middle and upper-class liberal TIME reader was “finding focus in a stressed out, multitasking culture,” disenfranchised minorities—especially people of African descent—were having to make a case that their very lives mattered.

While visually disparate, these two expressions of contemporary American life—focusing on the mindfulness movement and protests against systemic racism—are not unconnected. Drawing on ethnographic research and critical race theory, this paper is concerned with how people of color have both challenged the reproduction of racism within the dominant mindfulness movement and reconfigured mindfulness practice as a radical tool for healing from systemic racism. It looks at how people of color have experienced the normative assumptions of whiteness underlying contemporary discourses on mindfulness meditation, as exemplified by Time’s “mindfulness revolution,” and the ways this reality can impede their engagement in white majority mindfulness spaces. Subsequently, People of Color Groups (“PoC Groups,” more recently referred to as Black, Indigenous and People of Color Groups “BIPOC groups”) have emerged within the broad North American Insight community as “safe spaces” exclusive for Black and Brown participants to meditate.

These emerging safe space communities allow PoC to collectively experience and process painful embodied emotions around racialized trauma. PoC meditators move from experiencing painful emotions as individual experiences to understanding them as collective experiences shaped by socio-political conditions and shared by other racialized minorities. This collective experiencing of racialized embodiment fosters a type of radical resilience. The establishment of PoC Insight groups and the fostering of radical resilience through mindfulness meditation is part of the ongoing transformation of the mindfulness movement in North America, including within Buddhism.

## Terms and Method

Before proceeding, I will clarify key terms: mindfulness, insight meditation, and resilience.

Jeff Wilson describes the “mindfulness movement” as the “widespread and growing collection of people who practice (and, especially, those who actively promote) techniques of awareness derived originally from the Buddhist cultures of Asia, which are typically grouped under the label ‘mindfulness’ in the 21st century America” (2014: 9). He traces the mindfulness movement to three main lineages: the Vietnamese monastic Thich Nhat Hanh, the four American co-founders of the Insight Meditation Society, and the scientist and popular mindfulness advocate Jon Kabat Zinn (2014: 31–41).

This article focuses on PoC in Southern California and the Bay Area, who meditate in groups and retreat programs at centers that are part of the insight meditation network. These practitioners have learned to meditate through teachings disseminated at insight meditation centers such as Spirit Rock and the Insight Meditation Society (IMS), where the technique to meditate earlier referred to as Vipassana or Sati, but now sometimes loosely called “mindfulness” trace their roots to the Mahasi Sayadaw Burmese lineage of Theravada Buddhism. There has been much scholarship produced on the relationship between mindfulness in a Buddhist context and the secular mindfulness movement (McMahan 2008; Braun 2013; Sharf 2014; Wilson 2014; Gleig 2019). Teachers in the Insight community often teach mindfulness in both Buddhist and secular contexts (Gleig 2019: 63–67). Similarly, my PoC interlocutors move fluidly between the two, encountering insight meditation practice both in secular contexts that focus on well-being and Buddhist contexts that focus on liberation from suffering.

Hence, one finds a relationship between the practice of mindfulness meditation in secular and sacred contexts.

The term “resilience” as it is now widely disseminated in policy areas such as education, humanitarian disaster relief efforts, and mental health fields places significant emphasis on vulnerable individuals’ capacities and adeptness to respond to traumatic events and difficult conditions. In the field of psychology, resilience-centered approaches refer to the ability of individuals to “bounce back” from stress and trauma, the ability to cope with crisis (Barrios 2016) and adapt as agents of their own well-being (Joseph 2013; Humbert and Joseph 2019). Resilience theorists and practitioners have taken a keen interest in mindfulness meditation-based practice (Reveley 2016), especially for its purported capacity to help individuals acquire self-management skills or the capacity to gain greater self-understanding by learning to “be present” to one’s experience. Even at the level of government, both in the west and Asia, mindfulness, or Sati in Sanskrit, is recognized for its resilience cultivating capacities. (See Cook and Cassaniti in this issue.)

Mindfulness, as some scholars have argued, can also problematically dovetail with approaches encouraging making people responsible for their own mental health (Purser and Loy 2013; Purser 2019). Such discourse fits with neoliberal approaches that put emphasis on the “responsibility of the individual to govern themselves in appropriate ways” (Joseph 2013). The ethnographic material of this study contributes to growing interest within mindfulness communities to move beyond a focus on resilience building as an individual endeavor and towards more collective responses to the mental health and trauma challenges faced by communities.

In this article, I identify insight PoC engagement with mindfulness as a form of radical resilience because the self-knowledge participants cultivate places intersubjectivity at the center of their mindful practice. Centering intersubjectivity in this way fosters an understanding of subjective painful emotions as situated within broader histories of race, racism, and whiteness in the United States. Self-awareness cultivated in this way challenges the deracinated subject located at the center of normative white discourses of mindfulness.

## **Methodology**

This article is based in extensive ethnographic research conducted in Southern California and the San Francisco Bay Area between 2016 and 2019. Over the course of this period, I conducted participant-observation in over 50 short meditation groups at six Insight meditation centers, and two multi-day silent retreats. I also draw on participant-observation experiences in PoC sangha groups in over a dozen short sitting groups, in one multi-day POC retreat, and four, one-day retreats. My own positionality as a person of color allowed me to partake in these spaces, but I asked for oral consent by the teacher and participants to be present in the space as a researcher. In addition to participant-observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with thirteen adults who identify as persons of color, five individuals of African descent, four Latinos, and four Asian Americans).

### Whiteness in Insight Meditation and Mindfulness

As a number of studies have demonstrated, historically American Buddhist “meditation-based convert lineages,” such as the insight community, have been populated predominantly by a white middle-class demographic (Gleig 2019). For over two decades, PoC teachers and practitioners have been raising awareness of the reproduction of systemic racism and whiteness within these communities. PoC teachers have made a number of pragmatic and philosophical interventions to disrupt this racism and foster more multiracial communities (Hase, Meadows, and Budge 2019; Gleig 2020). This article identifies one particular intervention by PoC practitioners: a challenge to the way in which white insight teachers assume a universal individual unmarked by race as their ideal meditator. Through the experience of my PoC interlocutors, I will show the ways in which this supposed “universal subject” becomes conflated with a white subject and fails to attend to the racialized embodiment of PoC meditators.

As any neophyte to mindfulness is quick to find out, a key part of awareness built through meditation is to acquire a particular attentiveness of the mind’s embodied experience of the self. Through body scans, breathing exercises, and mindful movements, a practitioner learns to “be present” and seek to transfer regular “everyday focus of attention from the world to the inner lining of experience, to feel [the self] feeling the world.” (Pagis 2019: 55) The practice is described as an effective therapeutic practice for western students who, as seasoned meditation teacher Philip Moffitt says, are “all too often engaged in conceptualization,” whereas mindfulness focus on the embodied self brings attention to the visceral body rather than concepts and judgments about the body. In a blog post on his personal website, Dharma Wisdom, Moffitt offers instructions:

For example, the next time you’re feeling hurt and angry because you think your significant other doesn’t hear or appreciate you, rather than succumbing to these hindrances of mind, stay with them as body experiences. . . . Meet these body experiences with mindfulness and compassion by saying to yourself, “Hurt and anger feel like this.” This is softening into your emotions. You do not judge your feelings, nor do you try to get rid of the hurt or the anger; you simply stay with the sensations, and they *will* self-liberate in their own time. (Moffitt 2019)

Silent meditation is meant to offer an ability to observe objectively, without pre-judgement, self-criticism at one’s views, feelings, and thoughts. A dual process of self-cultivation and self-knowledge, mindfulness promises the capacity to step back, to be somatically aware of oneself as an object in the world, without, as sociologist Michel Pagis argues, “entering the specific content of an individual life-world, personality or emotions” (2008: 195).

PoC are, however, beginning to problematize the underlying whiteness of the methodology advocated by insight meditation teachers in North America. They raise issue with the tendency of instructions to assume the view of a universal individual unmarked by race. That is, there is a distinct hegemonic discourse they encounter in predominantly white meditation groups that claims all people as human beings subject to a universally shared experience of suffering and dissatisfaction.

While such a view faithfully reproduces the Buddhist doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, it does not attend sufficiently to the racialized context of the U.S. in which this canonical Buddhist teaching is articulated. In this racialized context, the universal subject becomes conflated with the white liberal subject (Wilson 2014; Gleig 2019).

As my interlocutors attest, this conflation between canonical and white liberal view of mindfulness defines the potential for mindful awareness as contingent upon appreciating one's true universal humanity, deracinated from the particular social and historical reality in which one is embedded. It disavows the particular racialized experiences of embodiment that PoC's carry in the United States. The implications of this discourse for PoC's is that mindfulness, and ultimately the liberation it promises, becomes "reserved" for the practitioner capable of "progressing" beyond the racialized corporeal reality of their bodies.

At the same time, in the view of some PoC practitioners that I interviewed, the embodied self-reflection of the type advocated by Moffitt for example, can lead to a painful acknowledgement of one's objectified, racialized body. They find the body-centered introspection can itself trigger intense feelings of pain, shame, fear, and anger. For PoC in the United States, especially for those from Black communities that have experienced systemic racism, police brutality, the carceral state, and economic precarity, the body-centered focus of mindfulness, albeit on a racially unmarked body, can be experienced as an interruption or break in the prescribed meditation process.

"Self-liberation" of the type that Moffitt advocates for is, therefore, not quite as straightforward for individuals inhabiting bodies that are socially overdetermined by their race, or as George Yancy describes, "supersaturated with meaning" (Yancy 2008) in the historical context of race relations in the United States. Indeed, the specific material histories of racialization can overdetermine subjectivity of non-whites by their race and otherness (Ngo 2016; Fanon 1952). This makes it extremely painful for PoC practitioners to make detached observations about their bodily sensations, to simply "sit through" meditation, as prescribed by mindfulness practice.

In an article in a Buddhist online journal, *Tricycle*, entitled, "Brown Skin, White Sangha," Atia Sattar, a first-generation Pakistani-American writer and scholar based in Los Angeles, writes about a painful discovery of racialized embodiment she made while following an online guided meditation session. It was the first of a series on the "Thirty-two Parts of the Body," a Buddhist meditation practice popularized in the west in the insight meditation tradition by way of the Burmese lineage:

The recorded meditation I was listening to at home asked us to contemplate the head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, and skin. . . . I passed through all of these reflections with little disturbance; then I came to my skin. It was nothing short of a confrontation. Suddenly, contemplating my skin as a separate entity for the first time, I was struck by intense pain and aversion. I was livid, like a wronged child, and overcome by a wave of emotions—shame and rage, but mostly pain." (Attar 2018)

As she contemplates the skin, she relives painful experiences of Islamophobic racism in the US, especially in the aftermath of 9-11, moments of self-hate to her South Asian identity and religious upbringing.

She continues:

In my course of study, I have learned that the ultimate goal of mindfulness of the body is to cultivate a sense of erasure of physical distinctions and consequently the identities and hierarchies we assign to them. . . . But I find no guidance concerning how to navigate the challenges that arise in the process of discovering the racialized body and the painful secrets it unveils, of which there are so many.

For Sattar the meditation instructions she received evokes experiences and thoughts of racialized othering. Since the meditation process does not itself acknowledge the category of racial othering, she found it provided no guidance on how to address these complex feelings. Indeed, it is unmindful of what Fanon called the “historic-racial schema” that lies below the embodied experience of the non-white body (Fanon 1986, in Ahmed 2007). As she remarks,

I find myself questioning whether my progress toward enlightenment is being crippled by my inability to “decondition [my] strong identification with the body and the suffering that results.” I find myself hoping that one day, I will finally be “over” the color of my skin—that being brown will no longer get in my way.

Sattar is not alone in having this experience of feelings “crippled” in realizing the “self-liberation” promised by meditation. Continuous confrontations with the racialized body was an experience familiar to many other non-white practitioners. Derek, a Bay Area-based long-time practitioner and teacher of meditation informed by the Theravada Buddhist lineage, recalled to me how in his early efforts at meditation he would frequently “get stuck” around his racialized experience as a “Black Man.” Like many contemporary practitioners, Derek started practicing meditation and learning Buddhism as a therapeutic measure to address mental health issues with which he was struggling. Meditation practice and the teachings became central to overcoming these challenges, but embodied awareness also brought to sharp focus how foundational his embodied racialized experience as a Black man was to his suffering. He experienced it as a source of frustration, an impediment to the liberation he was seeking.

Anita, a woman in her mid 30’s, is a Latina immigrant. Her family moved to California from Central America due to political persecution. Her experiences give us insights into yet another dimension of the PoC experience with mindfulness meditation. Ironically, in this case, rather than helping her cope better with her life experiences, the mindfulness experience itself seems to have caused a fair share of stress, anguish, and anxiety.

Anita first started practicing mindfulness meditation while in graduate school at UCLA in an effort to deal with mental health struggles she had been experiencing since childhood. Having taken an eight-week introductory course in Mindfulness Awareness Research Center at UCLA, an experience she described as “fairly life-changing,” she began exploring sitting groups outside of the MARC program, including those taught within a Buddhist framework. While the course at MARC attracted a diverse demographic in terms of race and class because of the public university setting that it occupies, the courses she encountered outside were less diverse, and this had a surprising

effect on her sense of comfort and well-being. She explained, “I kept showing up at places and sanghas where there were a lot of wealthy white women and I felt a little bit tokenized. In open sharing, relating, or during a break, there was not a lot of people like me at all. My experience of political persecution was so overwhelmingly exotic to them, and I started to feel uncomfortable.” Having worked in the field of international development, Anita continued, “I knew enough people to know that my life story is not unique, effects of violence and political persecution, unfortunately are so ubiquitous.” But in the context of a predominantly affluent and white sitting group, her particular set of experiences were deemed exotic. Intentionally or not, she was racially othered. She explained: “I would start to contract in sits. I started to get anxious. At that point in my practice, I could recognize my body’s response to stress, but I couldn’t get anything out of it. It was overwhelming.” For Anita, mindfulness is interrupted by the experience as an always already racialized and colonized body.

Anita’s stress and disquiet was especially intense in 2016 when the political scene in the United States was focused around the presidential election of Donald Trump. She continued: “I started to see how deeply classism and racism is embedded in this country, and in these sitting groups, I felt less and less safe. For lack of a better term, I felt myself contract.” Instead of “being able to stay with the sensations” with the aim of being “self-liberated” as mindfulness teacher Moffitt suggests, Anita found staying with the body experience of contortion and tension actually index the insecurity she experienced more generally in regard to the experience of systemic racism in the United States.

For some of my interlocutors, the trauma from everyday experiences with racialized embodiment leached into mindfulness spaces as well. As Jaz, an African American woman in her mid-40’s explained reflecting upon her experiences sitting in groups, “Nobody has ever harmed me in any of those spaces before, which would give me a lived experience to feel this way. I just feel this way as a Black person walking on the planet. I feel endangered. I constantly feel endangered.”

Meditation spaces, retreat spaces, and drop-in sites are carefully curated to produce relative social isolation from everyday life to enable practitioners to cultivate detached observation of the transient nature of sensations and emotions. For non-white racialized subjects, however, their experience of the space and the racialized social interactions, including microaggressions (Pierce 1974), for instance, claims that they need to “get over” race to cultivate mindfulness, can be a mirror of the lived reality from which they seek refuge. One of the most prevalent instances of microaggression happen in relation to the common assertion made by white practitioners that PoC experiences of racialized difference in meditation communities is due to their own misguided and underdeveloped self-perception.

Aki, a leading Buddhist meditation teacher of Asian ancestry and a prominent leader in establishing PoC spaces in the Bay Area, remarked on the typical responses that she has heard given by teachers or facilitators in major meditation centers in the Bay Area if a student poses the question, “How can we respond to racism?” “It is possible that a teacher at a center might say, ‘Remember we’re all one. We are fundamentally part of a unified humanity and we all have the same basic needs and we can empathize with one another despite our differences, it’s out of that kind of really

compassionate heart that we understand our basic interconnection.” Couched within this liberal injunction to realize the interconnectedness of humanity and the equality between people is a disavowal of the lived experience of racialized embodiment.

Aki shares this comment in an anecdotal manner, her observations, however, are substantiated. For example, well known insight meditation teacher Rodney Smith in an interview for a HuffPost publication (Kaleem 2012), remarked on the ongoing facilitation of a PoC group at IMS Seattle:

Buddhism goes against identity. Race is a very superficial way of looking at things. . . . Hopefully at some point the [people of color] will be relaxed enough within their humanity to be able to come into a greater room full of people and feel that same degree of relaxation, but that’s a stage of development and that can’t be pushed or forced upon them. And at some point they do . . . But it may take long.

The remark is meant to strike a conciliatory tone. Couched within it, however, are implicit assumptions of liberal whiteness. Construing race as a “superficial” construct disavows the violent processes—centuries of oppression, segregation and stigmatization—through which race becomes embodied and bodies are racialized. It also renders “development” out of race as the responsibility of the persons of color to “relax into their humanity.” In addition, references to “stages of development” subtly resonates with European colonial tropes of whiteness. Here, non-whites were viewed as being on different stages of development along the path of universal progress to full humanity, signified by whiteness (the unmarked race). Mindfulness is implicitly suggested as fulfilling this progress towards full humanity.

Alejendra, a native Angelino of Chicana descent who has been practicing meditation for over 15 years in California and today facilitates PoC groups in the southern California region, is very familiar with such approaches to race in mindfulness communities. She notes:

There’s something truncated about mainstream spaces. . . . In addition, [there] is [something that is] not being seen. It’s like there’s always a sense of not being heard, or seen, or not recognized . . . in a lot of Dharma spaces, and a lot of different spaces not just the Dharma, but our mainstream. It’s like, “well we’re all one.” “I don’t see color.” Especially in Dharma it’s so tempting I think for a lot of white students, like “well all this separation doesn’t really matter. We’re all one.” “What is the self? Why are you creating self?”

Responses that Aki and Alejendra received derive significantly from an ethic of universalist liberal humanism. Central to liberal humanism, what Talal Asad (2003) terms “the modern project,” is a claim to universal subjectivity, the assertion that we are all one people. It is grounded in Enlightenment premises about human beings existing as independent agents, endowed with a universal capacity for self-government and self-determination in the political, economic, and social spheres, rather than emplaced in the more collective structures of tradition and society (Ho 2011). A

legacy of this thought, contemporary mindfulness, is oriented around the assumption of a universal human being, a free and autonomous moral agent deracinated from history and social conditions.

When mindfulness practitioners invoke this universalism in response to PoC's concerns about racial othering (e.g., "We're all one"; "All have the same basic needs"; "our basic interconnection"; "I don't see color"), they implicitly preserve the legacy of racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva 2006). By invoking our shared humanity, the histories of racialization are erased and unacknowledged. This "dehistoricization is inevitably a project of depoliticization" (Malkki 1996: 385). To speak about the past, about the historical trajectories of slavery, segregation, and colonialism, is to speak about the politics of race and the racialized history of the United States. Insisting upon an abstract universalism "silences the concrete reality of racialized particularity" (Milazzo 2014).

PoC concerns about racial othering in mindfulness practice are not only met with appeals to universalism and our shared humanity. As Gleig and others (e.g., Yancy and McRae 2019) have shown, foundational Buddhist teachings such as *anatta* (non-self) and *nonduality* are also often being (mis)interpreted and reduced by majority white American sanghas to bypass lived experiences of identity and racial discrimination (Gleig 2019). Indeed, as we saw in Alejandra's case, core concepts of Buddhism, such as *nonduality* and *non-self* (*anatta*), and *compassion*, are deployed by mindfulness meditation teachers in response to questions of racialized subjectivity: "What is the self?" "Why are you *creating* a self?"

These comments posit race as a superficial aspect of identity that is a personal choice and involves the freedom to "let go," to use a Buddhist aphorism. This neglects how the experiences of self of non-whites are often overdetermined by racial othering imposed, and often imposed negatively, from the outside. By insisting upon the necessity of the PoC experiencing the white privilege of "relaxing" within one's humanity, an underlying liberal humanist sensibility seeks to dominate the PoC from another vantage point, one that presumes the unearthing of an autonomous self's ability to express itself through willed choice (Weiss 2011), while dismissing the systemic nature of racialized suffering and racialized embodiment.

### PoC Spaces

Since the early 2000's, there has been a growing discussion among PoC practitioners about potential solutions to these issues. A key outcome of this effort has been the establishment of PoC specific retreats and sitting groups within major western Insight meditation centers that have been predominantly white (Gleig 2014; Gleig 2019; Hase et. al. 2019).<sup>1</sup>

Many of my interlocutors welcomed the development of PoC-focused meditation spaces. Jaz explained:

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<sup>1</sup> For example, as Hate et. al (2019) show, at institutions such as Insight Meditation Center (IMS) in Massachusetts, 84 percent of respondents identified as white or of European descent (IMS Diversity Questionnaire, 2015, in Hate et. al. 2019, p2).

When I'm in PoC spaces, I'm more comfortable so my practice is just more relaxed. I just feel safer, even physically safer. I just feel like I can drop in so much more. Because then I can just be fuller in it and get more out of it. Like I'm not practicing with one eye open.

Another PoC practitioner, Derek, expresses similar sentiments:

“When we allow ourselves to just sit there and just relax and open up, and tell stories and laugh. It is, oh my god, it's such a distinctly different experience from me sitting in a small group where I'm the only person of color.”

Derek and Jaz are both African Americans. They both first encountered Buddhism through reading books on meditation and Dharma, which later inspired them to explore Buddhist practice spaces: first groups and traditions related to Shambala and Thich Nhat Hanh's training, and then later finding their regular practice through courses and training at Spirit Rock and Insight LA. Although regularly attending and practicing in such spaces was impactful in the cultivation of their meditation practice and discipline, they each articulated feelings of discomfort when inhabiting what they described as “predominantly white spaces.”

As Derek explains: “as people of color in that setting, we don't necessarily open up or practice in the same way because we're still needing to make sure that this is all palatable and comfortable for white people. In [a] sense, we're making sure that we take care of them.” Jaz similarly explained: “Most of my introduction to Buddhist communities has been in predominantly white spaces. I went to a predominantly white university and I went to a mostly white high school, so I'm familiar and comfortable, but I am also guarded. . . . I've had instances of saying things that people were offended by? or they needed to be taken care of after I said something which is just way too much.”

When a white sangha member asked Anita to share a personal story as part of a group discussion, she recounted how her family fled Panama and the difficulties she had to go through. This had the effect of making the person cry. As Anita put it, “political persecution was so overwhelmingly exotic to them, and I started to feel uncomfortable. It actually made me feel like shit, so I actually stopped going.”

A key concern, therefore, involved the discomfort of inhabiting a dominant white space. It is the discomfort of being closed off, guarded, uneasy, buffered or self-censored; where opening up about one's experiences inhabiting a racialized body risks posing an offense or discomfort to their white counterparts. More critically, being the cause of such discomfort resulted in having to interrupt the interior labor of mindful self-cultivation and instead labor to ensure the comfort and care of others who are made uncomfortable by their presence.

Parsing these experiences through the work of feminist queer theorist Sara Ahmed offers valuable insights. Ahmed argues in her essays on heteronormativity and whiteness that comfort is the effect of bodies being able to “sink” into spaces that have already taken their shape (Ahmed 2014), where to be comfortable is to be “so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins” (ibid). Speaking directly on whiteness, she says, “If white bodies are comfortable it is because they can sink into spaces that extend their shape” (ibid).

She describes how when white bodies dominate institutions, as is the case within mainstream mindfulness institutions, the bodies and the institutions get oriented towards each other, their bodies repeatedly extending silently, unnoticeably, and comfortably in such institutions. What is repeated and naturalized in such an institutional space is what she calls “a very style of embodiment, a way of inhabiting space, which claims space, by the accumulation of gestures of ‘sinking’ into that space” (Ahmed 2007: 159). Indeed, even in the silence and solitude of a retreat space, without the apparent discursive layer of speech, whiteness can invisibly extend into the space comforting the bodies that inhabit it.

Michal Pagis’ phenomenological analysis of her ethnographic work among Vipassana meditation retreat offers some observations helpful for teasing out how whiteness can extend into space in invisible ways. Pagis shows that although Vipassana training emphasizes shifting the mind’s attention from the judgment of others towards an internal gaze, it is “an unspoken synchronization” and “entwining with the bodily stillness of others [that] produces a safe ground, an anchor, from which meditators turn their gaze inward and attend to the tacit, embodied dimension of their being” (Pagis 2019: 46). She describes this anchor as the silent socialization and intersubjectivity of collective meditation environments. Although Pagis does not refer to the racial make-up of her field site, her point about this “mutual attunement,” when placed in relation to Ahmed’s point regarding the silent extension of whiteness, suggests that meditation spaces primarily comprised of white bodies can tacitly serve as the “safe ground” for other white bodies. As Ahmed describes it, to be comfortable or relaxed is “to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins” (Ahmed 2007: 158). It is this spaciousness that enables the turn inward, to experience what Pagis calls the “inner lining of experience.”

When non-white persons are judged as failing to fit, saying too much, or saying something “overwhelmingly exotic” or “unpalatable,” they are actually failing to “extend” or properly “sink in” to implicit white normativity of space. This situation produces the “discomfort” that Ahmed describes as “the effect of bodies inhabiting spaces that do not take or ‘extend’ their shape” (Ahmed, 2004: 161).

Indeed, when one fails the expectation of “sinking in,” one’s body may contort as Anita earlier described, or, as Jaz said only partly in jest, “I sit with one eye open when I’m in white spaces.” The “tacit awareness of others,” which Pagis refers to as serving to realign the gaze inwards, is frustrated when one’s racialized difference brings to surface one’s own racialized embodiment which is made all the more painful when such embodiment is normatively understood as something to be transcended.

In response to these struggles, PoC have used “PoC groups,” or “PoC Sanghas,” as so-called safe spaces to foster an environment in which difficulties of otherness inhabited on a day-to-day basis can be safely experienced and interrogated. The creation of PoC specific groups within the confines of a predominantly white institutional space, or as an institution catered specifically for the needs of PoCs, opens the possibility for non-white bodies to sink with more ease into spaces which at least temporarily can extend their shape.

Describing their experiences participating in PoC group sits and activities, a recurring sentiment was the embodied feeling of being relaxed, and feeling safe and comfortable. “I just feel safer, even physically safer,” as Paz said. At least within that time and place, they are extended by the spaces they inhabit. Borrowing again from Ahmed and Pagis, it could be argued that PoC spaces allow non-white bodies the safe anchor to sink into spaces that extend their shape.

No singular model exists for the format that POC groups and retreats take. The most frequent model for sitting groups is to begin with a guided meditation, followed by a “dharma talk” given by a teacher or facilitator, and then allow for dialogue. Dialogue is often where the impact of racism, race, and whiteness may be explored, particularly in how it has been manifested during meditation or day-to-day life. Other elements may be introduced, including sharing and listening in dyads/triads or journaling. These offer opportunities to introspectively reflect in discursive ways what is unavailable in silent sitting (Suh 2019). Teachers may actively “call in” ancestors of the students, and the indigenous inhibitors of the location before settler colonialism, as co-dwellers of the meditation space. In some instances, it is the distinct nature of the time and place when the group meets that implicitly brings silent attention to experiences of racialization. In the next section, I will elaborate in more detail the content and making of these spaces.

### **Decolonizing the Mind**

Describing the significance of such space, meditation teacher Devin Berry, of African American descent, explained: “[It is about] allowing ourselves this time to get off the Euro treadmill. We know what the treadmill is, and we know what colonization is and we know that we’re in it and we have to make use of it, we manipulate it and we do what we can to survive in it and thrive in it.”

The notion of the “Euro-treadmill” is an evocative metaphor that critically calls into question the promise of western ideals of progress, wherein the colonized and subjugated ceaselessly aspire to keep pace with a perceived sense of survival, progress, accomplishment, and victory, only to find themselves remaining in place. Instead, in Berry’s eyes PoC retreat spaces offer an opportunity to take a break from this conditioning to keep pace and allow, as he put it, an opportunity to “decolonize the mind”. “I don’t know that everyone knows it on the meditation retreat. But we’re all there to decolonize our minds.”

The idea of “decolonizing the mind” takes inspiration from anti-colonial tactics leading to personal and political independence, even through revolutionary wars. It includes post-colonial intellectual thinking on the ways colonized subjectivity is shaped not only by the physical extractive aspects of colonization, but also the psychological, social, and spiritual aspects (Thiongo 1986; Fanon 1952). Decolonization involves non-whites undoing and unlearning ideologies of Eurocentricism and whiteness as they have been conditioned to inhabit. Indeed, it can include an increasingly popular view by some PoCs of using safe spaces within mindfulness meditation groups in the service of unpacking the psychological and emotional conditioning of subjectivity by racialization and whiteness.

As critical race theorists argue, the bodily experiences of racialization are informed by “both the psychic wound of past violence and the physical expression of a tragic present” (Fassin 2011: 430). Practitioners, therefore, can insist on interrogating, through facilitated dialogue and conversation, the layers of historical conditioning resulting from racialized subjectivity and their impact on the present moment. Themes of reaching back, returning, and remembering recurred when PoC practitioners described PoC group and retreat experiences. This experience contrasts with the objectives of the mindfulness model in which freedom from the influence of the past is pivotal. Self-cultivation is based on a “de-contextualize subjective experience, detaching it from social relations, from the past-future continuum” (Pagis 20082). For PoC practitioners, mental freedom might be made possible by uncovering the historical depth to the present (embodied) experience of racialized suffering.

The communal aspect of the safe space ensures that this temporal “reaching back” is not a solitary enterprise. Rather it is carried out intersubjectively. The subjective emotions related to embodied experiences as a racialized people are explored in a collective manner through dialogue and facilitating an understanding of emotions that arise in meditation as situated within histories of race, racism, and whiteness. The process resists the tendency of instructions to view painful emotions as being one’s own and what one must cultivate self-mastery over. PoC spaces instead encourage practitioners to empathize with the intertwinement of lived experiences with racialized others and the shared socio-political nature of their emotions.

This approach in many ways captures the experience of Julio Rivera. Rivera is an Afro-Latino man in his 30’s now living in New York. Having worked a number of years as an engineer in the high stress environment of the tech industry, he found himself struggling with significant depression, stress, and anxiety. Finding ways to cope with these psychological symptoms, he first turned to web-based mindfulness Apps. Having found some initial respite in these mindfulness regimens, he sought out a meditation community in the city to help foster a regular meditation routine. Like most of my interlocutors, Rivera commented on the predominantly white demographic make-up of the organization, yet he later came upon a meditation center that hosted a regular PoC meditation evening that proved quite different.

He described: “Going to my first PoC sangha, I really had a deep spiritual experience and I attribute it to the sense of safety that I experienced among other people who identify as PoC, not only in our skin color, but with our experiences.” When asked to further elaborate on this “spiritual experience,” he explained, I learned to have “compassion for myself by being connected to people who are suffering like me. I felt a lot more empowered to change my relationship to suffering.” He continued with an example describing his discovery of the ways that his own mental health struggles were intimately connected with those experienced by fellow sangha participants, and their shared understanding of the role of race and whiteness in their life experience:

It’s taken some time for me to realize a lot of the challenges I have had in my life have a lot to do with my upbringing. . . . The inner perfectionist, where does that kind of mindset come from? I’ve grown up with this framework that Latinos can do as good as

white people, and we need to push and push. . . . So I remember, I was in a PoC space and there was another fellow sangha member, and I had this moment of awareness. You know when you're with someone and you hear truth? Well, we were talking about internalized racism and how that's impacted our parents, to push us, he too grew up in a white neighborhood, and I just started bawling. I realized how our suffering and truth was connected.

As we can see in the above quotes, PoC-based groups can provide distinctive forms of support in relation to mental health struggles tied to the experience of racialization as these peer groups share that context and understanding of race-related experiences. Relating back to Berry's claim that PoC groups offering a time to "get off the Euro treadmill," for Rivera, his encounter with another person who also experienced internalized racism and whiteness enabled an awareness of his own struggle. Seeing his own experiences reflected in the experience of another enabled him to perceive his own perfectionism and self-doubt as he strove to "be as capable as white people," according to his self-projected view of that capability, and the debilitating conditions of burn out and anxiety that he experienced.

Sharing such experiences through discussion facilitated in mindfulness PoC space allows an unveiling of the conditioning that racialization has had on non-white subjectivities. In Rivera's case, he found it instructive in understanding how oppression became internalized and perpetuated. These experiences later catalyzed Rivera's impetus to develop a meditation app called Liberate Meditation specifically designed to support Black, indigenous, and PoC, practitioners.<sup>2</sup>

The intersubjective nature of this process can be further nuanced with the example of how some PoCs hone in on specific types of racial identities and experiences. For example, some African American practitioners are also facilitating groups and programs where individuals of the African diaspora exclusively converge together to practice. Devin Berry, for instance, described the occasion in which himself and fellow practitioners and friends, also of African American descent, DaRa Williams and Noliwe Alexander, organized a week-long retreat specifically for African Americans entitled "deep time liberation." The seven-day retreat included both silent sitting and walking meditation, as well as scheduled times for sharing, and movement exercises incorporating dance and drumming. Most importantly, it was specifically arranged to take place on the site of a former slave plantation adjacent to New Orleans, the Whitney Plantation.

By locating the retreat on a former slave plantation, Berry and his fellow organizers aimed to foster an intimate connection among the participants sharing an experience as descendants of the enslaved. It also allowed for a connection with the suffering of those enslaved at the site. Describing the potency of the experience, Berry explained:

This was spending seven days with other people and realizing how much our lives are actually intertwined. That we might not be blood related people, but that that as people of color, and as Black people, our experiences have been so profoundly brutal that being

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<sup>2</sup> [www.liberatemeditation.com](http://www.liberatemeditation.com)

together and holding each other is key, is fundamental, and when that was front and center, when we were there in mutiny, in silence, but also dancing together, laughing together, there can be healing.

The dominant model of mindfulness places significant attention on the “immediacy of life.” For practitioners of color also, they are concomitantly committed to uncovering the historical depth to the present experience of racialized suffering, inflicted on themselves and others, both present and past.

Rivera, for instance, delved into his experiences of racialization as passed on from his parents to himself that resulted in what he felt was the “inner critique.” For Berry, this temporal “reaching back” was contingent on a “deep time” exploration of the suffering of enslaved ancestors and bringing them to the immediate present. As Berry explained, “sitting in stillness, the tears come up; but those are not just my tears, those are the tears of generations behind me as well; it is deep time liberation. To go back and have those voices come forward, so that to stop those cycles, to hear them and acknowledge them in the present moment, so that going forward, I can be somewhat healed.” Others are crucial anchors for this healing from pain.

The temporal move PoC practitioners make from the present to an awareness of a shared past—recognizing the historical effects of this socio-political contexts on the present—is an alternative mode for conceptualizing resilience. Dominant (western) models of resilience tend to regard the individual as an autonomous free moral agent with a capacity for self-betterment through actions, choices, and self-effort. My interlocutors’ experiences, however, suggest that resilience consists in having awareness of how the immediate present is shaped by a shared suffering of the past with racialized others. In Berry’s words, “As those things are rooted up, your resilience is there, your true nature.”

Resilience in this manner is conceived as self-knowledge and healing through the discovery of a “true self” cultivated through collective self-reflection of racialized past conditioning. Jaz suggests a similar conception of resilience, wherein as she put it:

I feel like in the silence, and in the sitting, and in the meditation, in the contemplation, if we returned and remember who we were and we could also tie that into what we’re learning, we could find the liberation, and the healing, and the joy that we’re looking for.

The safety of such spaces is not necessarily about making them easy or without intensity. For Berry, for instance, it entailed “sitting in the fire together.” This is what came to his mind, as he reflected upon the time he led a PoC meditation group in the midst of unfolding protests by activists against a recent police killing of a Black man at East Bay Meditation Center. EBMC is in downtown Oakland, and is an organization which has been at the forefront of racial justice work in the Insight network (Gleig 2019). Berry recalls police cars rolling by the building, their blue and red siren lights refracting through the meditation space’s window panes. Some of the participants meditating were shuttling back and forth between protesting and sitting in meditation. As Joanna Hardy describes the purposes of such spaces, in relation to the aims of the organization Meditation Coalition that she has helped

co-found, “we are here to practice in the mud together, bleeding together,” with little patience for “making it sterile and safe for the white patriarchy.”

Fire, mud, and blood are metaphors for the painful emotions that the ongoing effects and historical traumas of racism elicit. Indeed, these images capture the fluid and protean nature of emotions. To practice *together*, silently, in the deluge, is to identify how geographer Liz Bondi envisions emotions connect and flow between people (Bondi et. al. 2012). The intersubjectivity cultivated in sangha offers a sense of ontological safety to experience and process such emotions.

## Conclusion

According to most accounts of mindfulness methodology, present moment awareness of meditation is based on cultivating an inner sphere without dependence on others. Within the framework of resilience, this approach to mindfulness imparts a problematic perspective, that it is the moral responsibility of the individual to mindfully self-regulate their individual mental health: Emotions are one’s own and what one must cultivate self-mastery over.

For individual practitioners of color, this perspective lends itself to the view that liberation promised by mindfulness is reserved for those capable of “progressing” beyond the racialized corporeal reality of their bodies. Indeed, PoC practitioners problematize the efficacy of self-cultivation and resilience practices prescribed by mindfulness. They observe in mindfulness institutions an underlying insistence on privileging a notion of a universal self that is empty of race, of a self that is deracinated from the social and historical reality in which they are embedded. Such a perspective is built upon normative assumptions of whiteness that takes for granted a universal, unmarked body at the center of the practice.

By facilitating “safe spaces” exclusive for people of color to meditate, a collective environment can emerge in which difficulties of otherness inhabited on a day-to-day basis can be safely experienced and interrogated. Moreover, PoC spaces enable a form of radical resilience; that is, they cultivate awareness of personal suffering as intersubjectively linked with the suffering of other people of color. PoC safe spaces help foster an embodied awareness of painful emotions, especially around race, in relation to a historically and socially situated collective experience of racism and whiteness. Ultimately, this direct expression of personal and collective suffering helps foster within the meditating body an awareness of a collective responsibility to care for community and act for racial justice.

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