The interdependence and emptiness of Whiteness
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There is a broad academic consensus that racialized groups are socially constructed, though there is substantial disagreement over precisely what this means. A similar consensus has emerged in the everyday patterns of thought and talk among non-academics in the United States (US). In many contexts, the acknowledgement that race is socially constructed is thought to be the end of the conversation; and things become much more complicated when the conversation continues (Gordon 2004, 183). Few academics are willing to defend racial anti-realism; and few non-academics are willing to claim that races don't exist—even though many adhere to something like a colorblind ideology. The reasons for this reticence are simple. People who are raised in the US simply *perceive* others as white, Black, Latinx, and Asian; where they're unsure about someone's race, appeals to ancestry will usually clear up their confusion; and they find that patterns of racial categorization can sustain a wide range of inferences about unobserved traits (including ungrounded assumptions about intelligence, the propensity for aggression, and tolerance for pain). From a psychological perspective, the world appears to be racially organized. Of course, things look different from a biological perspective. The phenotypic differences between racialized groups are skin-deep, and insufficient to ground robust inferences about unobserved traits. Some of these traits are heritable, but this doesn't make race biologically real, even if it places limits on the kinds of variation that typically emerge in skin-deep differences. So, the scientific consensus is that races are not biologically real kinds (though see Spencer 2014).

Against this background, an account of the ontology of whiteness should address three interrelated facts about how people experience race (cf., Gordon 2014, 183-184). First, it must explain why people reflexively classify one another on the basis of observable properties, including skin color, distinctive phenotypic traits, distinctive displays of fashion, and spoken accent; and it must explain why they typically take these forms of classification to ground further inferences about unobserved properties. Second, it must explain why people assume that a person inherits their race from (at least one of) their biological parents—as this is what makes it seem like there is a biological basis for race. And finally, it must acknowledge the fact that race plays an integral role in structuring and organizing ongoing experience, as well as guiding patterns of thought and behavior. More specifically, it must account for the ways in which whiteness shapes the material, social, and inferential practices that are available to those who live in the US. My primary aim in this chapter is to show that Buddhist nominalism provides a framework for making these claims intelligible.

According to the form of Buddhist nominalism that I develop, whiteness is a conventional strategy for classifying people, which is conjured into existence by the social practices and material realities that organize our experience (Headley 2004). Drawing on resources from the work of Dharmakīrti, I argue that we organize our experiences functionally and conceptually, and that we reflexively treat our concepts as-if they were tracking essential features of the world; this motivates us to engage in actions that will

sustain our ontological illusions, and it fosters patterns of distress and anxiety where our ways of conceptualizing the world are called into question. Through the resulting patterns of action and interaction, "people create the cultures to which they later adapt, and cultures shape people so that they act in ways that perpetuate their cultures" (Markus & Connor 2011). So, in a world where actions are commonly organized around white bodies and white ideologies, many people will internalize whiteness as a lived orientation toward the social world; and they will act in ways that perpetuate structures of white supremacy. The internalization of whiteness as a lived orientation toward the world may be most transparent among people who are racialized as white; but the prevalence and stability of white ideology, and white social institutions, can leas to a situation where the 'white gaze' is internalized by people who are racialized in other ways as well (Yancy 2016). Finally, I argue that understanding the factors that give rise to the experience of whiteness can help to motivate ameliorative practices aimed at collective liberation, by focusing our attention on the disconnect between considerations of social justice and our assumed social ontology (Dunne 1999).

1. The emptiness of social categories

The author of *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* (*TSN*), *the Treatise on the three natures,* claims that experience can always be examined from three distinct perspectives.[1] We can ask how things appear to us; we can examine the *process* by which an appearance is fabricated; and we recognize that, contrary to appearances, nothing has a stable or essential nature (Gold 2014, 148-149). Consider the appearance of an illusory elephant, which is conjured into existence by a street magician (*TSN* 27-30). An observer might think that they are experiencing a real elephant. But this experience is produced by a street magician, who applies a mantra to various material items; and as the observer falls prey to the illusion, they assume that what they are seeing is real. Finally, since the elephant doesn't exist as it is experienced, it will cease to be experienced as *an elephant* once the patterns of interdependence between the magician and the observer are fully understood. Across the *Yogācāra* tradition, philosophers argue that "the objects of our experience, as we experience them, exist only in dependence on our minds" (Garfield 2009, 37). And they often claim that we are easily misled by appearances, treating the things that we perceive and the things that we conceptualize as ultimately real (Gold 2014, 158). The model articulated in *TSN* offers a plausible framework for thinking about the ontology of racial kinds, and of whiteness more specifically. Many people 'see' whiteness, and they treat it as a property that a person can have or lack; but this experience is fabricated, as habits of attention and action lead to distorted experiences of racialized groups. And we must learn to see through this distortion if we are to engage in the kinds of transformative practice that will rid our world of racial bias.

A similar argument has a long pedigree in Buddhist philosophy (Eltschinger 2012, xvii). Beginning in the earliest canonical sources, we find arguments against the natural existence of caste, which are grounded on the claim that no observable characteristics could ever "serve as a sign (*liṅga*) that some human individuals belong to a different class or species (*jāti*)" (Eltschinger 2012, 23). Many Buddhist philosophers have also argued

[1] *TSN* commonly attributed to Vasubandhu in Tibetan sources, though it's authorship is highly contested. See Gold (2014) for reasons to interpret this work as the culmination of Vasubandhu's Yogācāra philosophy; see Kapstein (2018) for skepticism about the authorship of *TSN*.

that strategies of social categorization often derive from assumptions about the situations where particular groups of people are likely to be encountered (Eltschinger 2012, 11). For example, Dharmakīrti argues that there are no causal factors that would allow a person to perceive the members of the Brahmin class as a distinct cluster from the members of the *śūdra* class, and that differences in categorization "may [very well] come from their practicing particular occupations (*vyāpāraviśeṣa*) [such as muttering prayers and sacrifices], and from [the fact that they are born in a] family (*anvaya*) [traditionally involved in such occupations], as is the case with denominations like 'healer', 'merchant', etc. (*vaidyavaṇigvyapadeśa*)" (PVSV 157.16-18, trans. Eltschinger 2012, 113). In this respect, he claims that the capacity to distinguish people on the basis of social class is radically different from the capacity to distinguish biological species.[2] You will only 'see' someone as a Brahmin if you have been socialized to do so, but you will be able to see that cows and chickens are different kinds of animals without explicit training (Eltschinger 2012, 109). From our current perspective, it may seem like racial categories are more natural groupings, as differences in skin color and other phenotypic traits seem like more natural indicators of a person's race. However, the kind of nominalism that Dharmakīrti defends makes it clear that race is also a conceptual fiction—or so I shall argue.

2. Process nominalism and *apoha*

Like many Buddhists, Dharmakīrti draws a distinction between things that exist ultimately (*paramārthasat*) and things that exist conventionally (*saṃvṛtisat*). He argues that only causally efficacious things exist ultimately, and that everything else exists conventionally. But there's a twist: the only causally efficacious things are momentary particulars. Particulars are "causally related to each other in such a way that one moment in the sequence acts as the primary cause for the next moment in the sequence" (Dunne 2004, 86). And some of them interact with the senses, to trigger flows of perceptual experience (Dunne 2004, 89). But there are no abstract objects, and there are no persisting entities. Each particular is unique and distinct; and difference is ontologically primary. Of course, Dharmakīrti also recognizes that we speak of enduring entities, and that we treat them as if they belonged to determinate kinds (e.g., pots, cows, chickens). To accommodate these facts, he develops a version of *apoha* theory according to which we impose categorical structure on experience to organize thought and behavior in accordance with our goals; put differently, we seek out useful patterns of functional classification, and project these onto the dynamic flow of experience as we attempt to engage in goal-directed action.[3] And through this process, our strategies of categorization impose conventional structure on the world we encounter.

The details of Dharmakīrti's *apoha* theory are complex. And any interpretation of it will be contentious. My primary goal in this section is not to offer a substantial intervention into debates over the nature or status of *apoha*. I simply hope to extract some important insights from a less differentiated understanding of *apoha* theory (Chatterjee 2011). In the next section, I will argue *apoha* theory yields a novel framework for thinking about why

[2] This type of argument has a long history within Buddhist thought. Its earliest articulation occurs in the Sutta Nipāta, in a discussion with Vāseṭṭha on the question "Who is a Brahmin"; for a further discussion of this sutta, as well as the other early antecedents of this argument in Buddhist philosophy, see Eltschinger (2012, 17-24).

[3] *Apoha* theory is a distinctively Buddhist approach to the defense of nominalism; and the term *apoha* designates a process of constructing meaning through exclusion.

people perceive the world as racially structured. But first, I must clarify the view of perception and conceptualization that I take to be at play in Dharmakīrti's *apoha* framework.

According to Dharmakīrti, sensory contact with causally efficacious things typically yields perceptual experiences with "nonconceptual" content (*nirvikalpaka*). Since such experiences are the effect of contact with particular things, they tend to stand in a relatively robust resemblance relation to the things that have caused them (Dunne 2004, 87). But we are rarely in a position to see things as they really are. The world is complicated and noisy, and we always have limited time to act. So practical activity requires us to focus on particular aspects of our experience that are likely to be salient to our goals and interests; and acting efficiently requires ignoring those aspects of our experience that are unlikely to have much bearing on how things go *for us*. This is where the *apoha* theory begins to take hold. Two things will always differ from one another in innumerable ways. So our ability to identify things that are relevant to our interests, to re-identify the things that we learn about, and to see two things as members of the same classificatory kind, requires focusing on the clusters of causal characteristics that are relevant to a particular goal, and ignoring clusters of properties that are irrelevant to seeing these things as similar to one another—and as different from other things (Dunne 2004, 91). As sentient creatures, we cannot do everything at once; but we can rely upon specific goals and interests to structure our habits of attention, and this allows us to construct conceptual understandings (*savikalpaka*) of the world, which are organized around things that are useful for our purposes. The implication is that experience is always partial, and always structured by our practical needs and interest (Chatterjee 2011).

When I think about coffee, a network of interests (e.g., my desire for caffeine, my desire for a particular taste, the pleasure I take in a warm drink) prompts the construction of a coffee-representation, which serves to distinguish coffee from other things that lack these causal properties.[4] And when I see a barista pouring coffee into a mug, this activates karmic imprints (*vāsanās*) of previous experiences, which will recruit this conceptual representation; and if there is some fact about my current experience that has been absent in previous encounters with coffee (e.g., if it comes in an odd colored mug), I will ignore this difference, since it is irrelevant to my goal of drinking coffee. More generally, thoughts about coffee will leave out many of the causal properties that particular cups of coffee have had, as these properties are irrelevant to my goals. This is striking, as any two cups of coffee will differ in innumerable ways that can easily be ignored; but the focus of our attention tends to be on factors that are relevant to the achievement of our goals. And because we ignore numerous differences between coffee experiences, "we can construe both of them as mutually qualified by a negation, namely, their difference from phenomenal forms that do not activate the imprints for the concept [coffee]" (Dunne 2004, 94).

My ability to conceptualize coffee as coffee becomes more precise and more determinate as I exclude more phenomena from the category (Arnold 2014, 10). To the extent that I become snobbish and exclude "gas station coffee" and coffee from Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks from the category, the boundaries around my coffee concept will become tighter; and to the extent that I happily drink these things, the boundaries around my coffee concept will become fuzzier. But in any case, our ongoing encounters with causal particulars, such as those that constitute cups of coffee, shape our tendencies to

[4] The argument in this paragraph follows Dunne (2004, 93-94).

attend to some, and to ignore other differences. This ongoing process of attunement, which is shaped by shifting attention away from particular kinds of differences provides the foundation for conceptual cognition (Ganeri 2011). As a result, when we think conceptually, our thoughts are organized by patterns of practical activity. So, while we lose phenomenal clarity as we impose our goals and values on decisions about where to lump and where to split, this loss of clarity is often worth the cost (Dunne 2004, 87).

3. The biological fragility of whiteness

Still, not every way of organizing the world will be equally successful. Some ways of lumping and splitting are resilient, as their primary cause lies beyond particular patterns of conceptualizing; others are fragile, showing signs of stability only within a particular conceptual framework. Attempts to milk chickens, like attempts to gather eggs from a cow, are bound to fail no matter where you are. Attempts at milking cows, like attempts to collect chicken eggs, will often succeed, no matter what you happen to call these entities. While cows and chickens differ in innumerable ways, these practical activities can be undertaken without changing the world—and without changing ourselves—in profound ways. So thoughts about milking cows are correct to the extent that they can "serve as a solid basis for successful action" (Kellner 2004, 2; cited in Prueitt 2017). And more generally, where resilient differences emerge, we can rely upon them to develop practically useful strategies for categorizing higher-order entities. But in some cases, differences only persist because of the ways in which we categorize things. I contend that 'whiteness' is always a fragile category and that racial categories are "nothing more than superimpositions of divisions, through words and conventions, on a humanity that is ontologically unique and undifferentiated" (Eltschinger 2012, 163). To see what this fragility amounts to, however, it will help to examine one plausible place to look for a resilient basis for race: Biology.

As Dharmakīrti might predict, things rapidly become complicated when you search for biological nondifferences. Most of the genetic diversity in our species is concentrated within sub-Saharan Africa, and the diversity in the rest of the world is "a subset of the African genetic variation with some newly arisen alleles" (Maglo 2011, 374). But genetic differences emerge both within and between human populations; so two people from the same population are likely to be just as different from one another, genetically speaking, as two people selected from two different populations anywhere in the world (Rosenberg 2011). Of course, this is not to deny the existence of traits that can anchor racialized discourse (e.g., skin pigmentation, hair texture, and facial morphology). But these traits also vary within and between populations, and they cross-cut patterns of shared ancestry (Hochman 2017). For example, most Melanesians look similar to people who are racialized as Black in the US. They have a "high frequency of dark skin pigmentation, curly black hair (and the ability to grow afros), full lips, round noses, etc." (Spencer 2015, 50). These nondifferences do not reveal a closer relationship to people in sub-Saharan Africa; indeed, like most regularities, these ones seem to derive from environmental similarities (e.g., similarities in temperature, sunlight, and proximity to the equator). Consequently, these nondifferences have had a shallow impact on human biology. But this isn't the end of the biological story.

Recent research in population genetics has used clustering algorithms to find evidence of human population structure. These algorithms compare allele frequencies, and attempt to find a unique way of partitioning the data into a specific number of clusters, K, by minimizing differences within a population and maximizing differences between

populations (Rosenberg et al 2002). Where K=5, data from the Human Genome Diversity Cell Line Panel (which includes samples from 52 global populations) the population clusters that emerge are anchored to the indigenous peoples of "Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and Eurasia west of the Himalayas, Eurasia east of the Himalayas, the Americas, and Oceania" (Spencer 2015, 48). Given the similarities between these clusters and the US census categories, this may seem to reveal a real joint in nature (Spencer 2014). But we should proceed cautiously. Where K=6, the Kalash people of northwest Pakistan constitute a sixth cluster; and I doubt that we should treat a group of ~4000 people as a distinct racial category. Where K=2, we find a population cluster that is anchored in East Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, and a cluster that includes the rest of the world. Finally, a larger dataset—which includes the previous dataset, along with a larger number of geographically distinct African populations, African Americans, Yemenites, Indians, and Native Australians—reveals five sub-Saharan African clusters at K=7 (Tishkoff et al 2009). A racial reading of these data suggest "that there is one Saharan African/European/Middle Eastern/Central Asian/Indian race, one Eastern Asian/Oceanic/American race, and five sub-Saharan African races" (Hochman 2013, 281). This seems far less like a plausible joint in nature. But we can't settle the question of how many racial groups there are *a priori.* And if "the race naturalist cannot name and number the so-called races with any specificity or reliability, and on any well-grounded basis, racial naturalism is in trouble" (Hochman 2013, 281).

To be clear, there are causal properties that produce observable differences. And there are even a small number of genetic markers that we can use to distinguish populations; but when we look at larger numbers of genetic markers, we find a huge amount of diversity within any group that we identify (Maglo et al 2016, 2). It may be important, for some practical purposes, to categorize people by appeal to genetic nondifferences. But when we do this, we risk mistaking social differences for biological differences (Kahn et al 2018); where genetic factors become salient, we are likely to ignore differences rooted in concrete material relations, such as access to medical resources, exposure to higher levels of toxins, and differential levels of racialized stress (Maglo 2011). And there is reason to think that focusing on biological nondifferences can lead us to ignore important medical differences, while focusing on biological differences can lead us to ignore important medical nondifferences (Maglo et al 2016). As I see it, this is a similar problem to the one that worried Dharmakīrti when it came to questions about social caste (cf., Maglo 2011, 21ff). Classification on the basis of biological properties is possible. But you have to ignore a lot of conflicting data. You have to ignore many equally real differences in the data that you do take seriously. And you have to decide which properties are relevant to your particular purposes.

> We could classify ripe fruit based on the colour of its skin. Yellow fruits would include bananas and lemons. Red fruits would include strawberries and cherries. This classification system would be stable enough, but it would offer a poor representation of fruit diversity. It follows that classification systems—even reliable classification systems—are not necessarily useful guides to diversity (Hochman 2013, 280).

As I read the existing data, there are no biological joints in nature. And this is true even though there are patterns that we can reify, in light of assumptions about how people

should be lumped together, and how patterns of differences and nondifferences are to be understood.

4. The social fragility of whiteness

We also lump people together using normative statuses such as 'white' to organize our experience of the world. But here too, boundaries have often expanded and contracted, as light-skinned people have searched for ways to justify their assumption that they were "more developed and more human in comparison with the darker-skinned 'others' (whether African or indigenous) whom they dominated" (Salter & Adams in press). Maintaining the boundaries around whiteness has required exploiting many different conceptual strategies at many different points in US history, but, in every case, whiteness has been both "the budding product of psychological subjectivity and the structural foundation for dynamic reproduction of racist action" (Salter & Adams in press, 2). Consider the widely reported fact that Irish immigrants were initially treated as *not-white*. In some respects, this claim might be overblown. But what is clear is that 19th century Americans thought the Irish had distinctive physical characteristics, which marked them off from other light-skinned people. Propagandistic images represented the Irish as dirty, dangerous, and unintelligent. And while their light skin made it easy for Irish people to become white, this nondifference did not guarantee the normative status of whiteness (cf., Ignatiev 1995, 70; Garner 2003). Only integration into an oppressive identity could do that (and this could only be accomplished by excluding any potential link between Irishness and Blackness).

The sense of superiority that constitutes white identity became even clearer in the early 20th century, when white people began to fear the collapse of their social supremacy. Virginia's *Racial Integrity Act* of 1924, for example, required each citizen to identify as 'white' or 'colored' on all legal documents. Whiteness was governed by the infamous 'one-drop rule', stating that any evidence of non-white ancestry was sufficient to be classified as 'colored'. This uniquely American claim about hypodescent would be enough to demonstrate the fragility of this mode of classification—after all, no one else racializes identity in this way, and there's no practical purpose for doing so, aside from grasping at racial purity. But the law also included a curious exception: although a white person needed unambiguous Caucasian ancestry, a person with less than 1/64th 'Indian' ancestry would also be considered white. This exception was made to accommodate the large number of high-status Virginians who saw themselves as descendants of Pocahontas and John Rolfe. When a proposal was introduced in 1926 to eliminate this "Pocahontas exemption", it was rejected because it would change the racial status of roughly 20,000 apparently 'white' Virginians; so instead, a revision was made that allowed 'white' people to have up to 1/8 'Indian' ancestry (Wolfe 2015). In this context, we can see that whiteness is being engineered to preserve power and privilege—high social status was sufficient for whiteness, so long as all future relationships preserved existing levels of racial purity. And if this doesn't show that whiteness was being conjured into existence (Headley 2004), I'm not sure what would.

The fragility of whiteness was also on display in the pattern of conceptual engineering that followed in the wake of the *Naturalization Act of 1906*. According to this law, which was a revision of the *Naturalization Act of 1870,* only white people and people of African descent could become US citizens. So, in 1922, a Japanese immigrant, Takao Ozawa, challenged this law by arguing that light-skinned Japanese people were actually

white; the Supreme Court held that the color of his skin didn't matter, as whiteness *actually* required 'Caucasian' ancestry. But things changed three months later, when Bhagat Singh Thind, an immigrant from Northern India, made a case for citizenship on the basis of his status as a high-caste Aryan, and a member of the Caucasian race; here, the Court held that there was no consensus regarding the nature of the Caucasian race, and that common-sense precluded the possibility of a dark-skinned Caucasian.[5] In both cases, racial difference was specified on the basis of a desire to preserve racial purity. And in this respect, arguments for the existence of whiteness look no less absurd than the arguments that Dharmakīrti was troubled by. But they didn't look that way to people in the early 20th century, and this was largely because of the way that people were socialized to think about the reality of race. Here too, Buddhist nominalism offers resources for thinking about the nature of this socialization. And in the next two sections, I turn to a discussion of the factors that sculpt our default understanding of whiteness.

5. Vāsanās, learning, and preparedness

Like proponents of contemporary learning theory, Dharmakīrti argued that the majority of our goals are organized by two factors: the satisfaction of desires, and the avoidance of undesirable outcomes. So, we tend to develop the capacities we need to re-identify aspects of the world that are important to satisfying our goals, and we do so by bringing past experiences to bear on our interpretation of our perceptual states (Guerrero 2015, 201). Where our actions are successful, they tend to be repeated; and where our actions are fruitless, their outcomes tend to be ignored. But in all cases, we think and act with an end in view. In this respect, we are like the rats in a city, who will approach anything that might be food. Every potential food source differs from every other potential food source in innumerable ways—and rats must determine which foods are likely to satisfy their needs. But they quickly learn to avoid locally salient toxins, as they are biologically prepared to learn about connections between food and sickness (Garcia & Koelling 1966). If Dharmakīrti's *apoha* theory is roughly correct, then these rats are learning what to eat, by learning which differences they can safely ignore. And they are doing so by relying on karmic imprints (*vāsanās*) that have accumulated over countless generations, as well as vāsanās that are accumulated through learning.

The accumulation of *vāsanās* also plays a critical role in shaping what we experience (Prueitt 2017). Some *vāsanās* are shared by all sentient beings, and provide the basic precondition for all samsaric experience; they function as constraints on the kinds of experiences that sentient creatures have. Other *vāsanās* emerge through learning and attunement to the world as we encounter it. These are the *vāsanās* that anchor our understanding of the world to our habituated needs and interests. They also organize our goals, and shape our conceptual experiences. But importantly, *vāsanās* are not persisting mental particulars. They are accumulated through our thoughts and actions, and they continually develop as we think and act. Our actions leave karmic traces on the world. And there is a dense feedback relation between our actions and our habits of thought (Prueitt 2017, 17). How we conceptualize things shapes the actions we engage in; the world is

[5] As Linda Martín Alcoff (2003) demonstrates, the fragility of this category was on full display throughout the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Whether Latinx-Americans or Chinese-Americans were considered white, or Black, varied over time, and varied from state to state. And as she rightly notes, the "clear lesson to be learned from this legal history is that race is a construction that is variable enough to be stretched opportunistically as the need arises to maintain and expand discrimination" (Alcoff 2003, 12).

shaped by our actions; and we attune to the structure of the world. In many cases, our actions also impact the parts of the world that others will encounter. And one of the most significant ways we affect our shared world is through shared habits of labeling and identifying things.

This enactive view of cognition helps to make it clear why Dharmakīrti thinks that the use of linguistic labels is not *just* a pernicious habit: "everything that people can cognize, whether an expression or something else, is an undertaking—a practical action—for the sake of some goal" (PV i.93, in Dunne 2004, 115). We use labels allows us to generalize from successful practices of excluding things from our awareness, and to figure out how to behave in novel situations. Of course, this leads us to misunderstand the structure of the world, as real "things are themselves different, but in conceptual cognition they appear as if nondifferent in that they appear in some single form" (PV i.68, in Dunne 2004, 339). But as we learn to ignore various differences, patterns of conceptual awareness arise through interaction between perception and the *vāsanās* that shape our tendencies to lump, split, and categorize. In each case, the resulting form of conceptual awareness will appear to be a simple representation of the world, with the imagined (*adhyavasita*) object having the same apparent status of an extra-mental particular (PVSV ad PV i.75 in Dunne 2004, 346). And since many of our patterns of conceptual thought cluster nondifferent things functionally, we are often able to achieve our goals, even though we are positing illusory universals.

6. The interdependence of social categories

I recently attended a ballet performance, which helped me to understand how the interaction between attentional biases and patterns of exclusion produce racialized experiences. The performance highlighted six social roles that women tend to play; and it was danced by five light-skinned women of European descent, one light-skinned Japanese woman, and one Black man. The male dancer's skin pigmentation became perceptually salient, because I was ignoring nondifferences between him and the other dancers. But I was also ignoring differences between the female dancers by treating them as a unified class. In both cases, habits of attention to particular kinds of differences shaped my initial impression, and it was only by attending to what I was ignoring that I began to see how the apparent simplicity of my experience concealed the process through which my experience was being constructed. Put bluntly, I was projecting the differences that I perceived as joints in nature, in a way that felt seamless. There was no magician to mislead me. The way that I conceptualized my experience generated this illusion all on its own. This would be surprising, if it weren't so banal.

My experience at this performance is an instance of a larger phenomenon, commonly known in psychology as the other-race effect (see Malinowska 2016 for a review). We are better at recognizing members of our own racial group; we are more likely to remember the faces of racial in-group members (and to forget the faces of racial outgroup members); and we tend to see racial outgroups as relatively homogenous. In more familiar terms, people who live in predominantly white spaces tend to think that all Black people look the same. Over the course of their first year of life, there is an observable shift in the way that infants categorize faces: focal attention begins to privilege the faces of racial groups that are most common in their environment (Kelly et al. 2009; Markant et al 2016). This all makes sense. For most of human history, we lived in small groups that were part of larger ethnies. The members of these groups shared stories, assumptions,

and phenotypic features. But there were outsiders. And humans learned to perceive group-based differences, and to see members of other groups as different from themselves. So, it's unlikely that evolutionary *vāsanās* have accumulated that would dispose us toward racial thinking; but it's very likely that we have inherited a tribalist psychology (Machery 2017; Van Bavel & Pereira 2018). And like the rat who learns what counts as food, we quickly learn what differentiates racialized groups, and we quickly learn which differences to ignore. But we do not do this on our own. Early understandings of race are probably "based on information children acquire by listening to those around them talk about social differences rather than by attending to physical differences that 'cry out to be named'" (Hirschfeld 2012, 24). One powerful way that adults shape children's racialized understandings of social groups is by using generic language; after hearing a generic term applied to a group, a child becomes more willing to assume that group members will possess similar inherited and stable traits (Rhodes & Mandalaywala 2017).

But there are other factors at play, including the material structure of different communities, and the ongoing patterns of thought and talk within these communities. Where religious beliefs are more central to social categorization, beliefs about ethno-religious identities will take on a racialized character (Rhodes & Mandalaywala 2017, 5-6). While people in the US rely on facial features and assumptions about racial ancestry in determining a person's racial identity, Brazilians are more sensitive to skin tone (Chen et al 2017). And the attentional biases that emerge in the US heavily depend on the fact that most white people are primarily exposed to material and social environments that are dominated by white bodies and interests, while excluding the interests and perspectives of people of color (DiAngelo 2011, 58; Moore 2008).

Beginning in the 1930s, redlining and biased lending drove Black neighborhoods into poverty, prevented the establishment of racially mixed neighborhoods, and entrenched the racial homogeneity of white neighborhoods (Coates 2014; Madrigal 2014). Bias in lending persisted throughout the 20th century, and the housing crisis disproportionately affected racially mixed neighborhoods, as well as Black and Latinx neighborhoods, contributing to the re-entrenchment of de facto segregation (Badger 2016; Hall et al 2015). There are many reasons why these factors are materially, socially, and culturally significant. But they are also psychologically significant, as people who inhabit shared environments tend to converge on similar psychological and behavioral dispositions, as they learn to devote attention to phenomena that are salient to the stability of their shared material and social environments. This is what allows forms of socialized attention to arise, as behaviors that conform to cultural rules are socially reinforced, while behaviors that contradict local norms are punished and abandoned (Kitayama, Park, & Cho 2015, 86).

In a series of recent papers, Shinobu Kitayama and his colleagues have argued that attentional biases arise through a process of cultural attunement. Through active and ongoing participation in culturally scripted patterns of behavior, we gradually develop "attention allocation strategies that are consistent with local cultural assumptions" (Kitayama & Park 2011, 77). But just as importantly, we are social niche constructors, and our understanding of what the world affords is dynamically shaped by the social and material structures that we simultaneously create and inhabit. People are rewarded for forms of social engagement that accord with local norms, and they are criticized for acting in ways that are socially "deviant." Consequently, people learn to categorize and to ignore aspects of their experience in ways that are culturally sanctioned (Kitayama, Park, and Cho 2010); and since culturally "deviant" forms of categorization are rarely reinforced,

many psychological processes will come to reflect the worlds, contexts, and social systems that people are chronically immersed in (cf., Dasgupta 2014). To put the point starkly, we accumulate *vāsanās* through our practical engagements in the world; and we accumulate racialized *vāsanās* through forms of practical activity that are shaped by socially entrenched forms of racial exclusion. Our habits of attention are shaped by our learning history, and by the goals that are served by prioritizing particular sources of information. Over time, we construct an attentional framework on the basis of everything from statistical regularities to semantic associations, and we adjust our responses in particular situations to fit our motivational and emotional state (Todd & Manaligod 2017). And in a constructed social niche that centers whiteness, habits of attention will converge on stimuli that are salient to white goals and white interests, while deflecting attention away from stimuli that conflict with these goals.

To the extent that anyone learns to think racially, this will be the result of living in a world that's thick with structural racism and xenophobia. As those of us who live in the United States watch TV and films, read novels and blogs, and walk through familiar and unfamiliar neighborhoods, we are bombarded with socially structured 'evidence' that we are categorizing things correctly. This is no accident! Like the street magician who fabricates an experience of an elephant out of various material items, the ideology of white supremacy fabricates a world that will confirm the ideology of white supremacy. People of color are routinely excluded from positions of social and institutional power, and in this context educational practices typically align with white goals and values (Táíwò 2017). This produces a shared background against which inferences and arguments are often evaluated, while at the same time allowing the pervasiveness of white ideology to fade into the background. This apparent neutrality fosters actions that continue to shape the distribution of social and material power, practices of justification and explanation, as well as legal and normative frameworks that protect white interests (Moore 2008). And it allows everyday practices to solidify around 'colorblind' ideologies, which promote practices, decisions, and policies that make no reference to race. As a result, white people tend to perceive less racism in their world, and they tend to "indicate less support for anti-racist policy when colorblind ideology is salient" (Salter & Adams 2013, 786). Because white ideology pervasively shapes attentional strategies, white people tend to see whiteness as a background against which to frame their understanding of the world (Mills 2004).

The *vāsanās* that accumulate as people in the United States move through social spaces that are shaped by whiteness will impose structure on their practical activities. Of course, there may be other salient factors that push back against this way of perceiving the world. And this kind of effect will be most pronounced in those who inhabit white spaces, and encounter predominantly white forms of cultural traditions. But repeated interactions in racialized contexts will lead to the development of attentional strategies, and to habituated patterns of ignoring particular kinds of differences between people; and anyone who searches for categorical structure among the remaining differences will end up projecting race onto the world. Consequently, when we experience someone as white, this appearance is thus sustained by three interacting processes: the tendency to ignore differences between 'white' people; the tendency to focus on differences between 'white' people and 'non-white' people; and an *apoha* process that constructs a simple representation, in accordance with the vāsanās that lead us to see 'white' people as having a normative status that darker-skinned 'others' necessarily lack. But the whiteness that we produce is an illusion, as nothing could have a stable nature that being white requires (cf., Dunne 1999). Our experience of the world is shaped by our learning history,

by aspects of the world we have recently encountered, by the nature of our current situation, and by the current state of our body. And this is because being a successful agent requires adapting to situations that we are chronically immersed within (Dasgupta 2014, 271).

Even more importantly, we take part in social and cultural practices, we don't just observe them. These are not just ways of thinking, they are ways of acting in the world, and staking out our positions in social space. And as we participate in culturally structured practices, we replicate the forces that impose structure on our social environments, often by imposing additional pressures on one another to conform (Kitayama & Park 2011, 77). The racialized forms of conceptualization that we employ, however, do not carve the world at natural joints, as there are no natural joints to be found; we construct these joints to facilitate particular forms of goal-directed action, and we reify them in ways that lead us to assume that they have a more ultimate reality than they actually have (Guerrero 2015, 210). But no matter how we decide to divide things up, we will not find objective similarities in our social world, aside from those that emerge as "the products of our interactions with the world" (Dreyfus 2011, 213). And as I see it, these kinds of facts give us very good reason to think that whiteness is conjured into existence (Headley 2004).

7. Shifting karmic flows

If the arguments I've developed are on the right track, we are now in a position to answer the questions I articulated in the introduction.

1. People classify on the basis of observable properties because they have been socialized to focus on particular differences and to ignore particular nondifferences;
2. The use of racial categories to ground practical inferences derives from commonly observed connections, just as Dharmakīrti would predict; and,
3. The assumption that people inherit race derives from observations of generational continuity in skin-deep features and observed correlations between race and social class that are built into the structure of our world (this tendency has also been enhanced by attempts to establish boundaries around whiteness that draw on illicit assumptions about ancestry and white purity).

In each case, the conceptual experience of whiteness depends on feedback from social, economic, and material forces that are organized by attempts to maintain white purity and white supremacy. And the resilience of whiteness depends on continuing efforts to sustain its existence. Put differently, seeing white people as a unified category depends on goals such as white supremacy and racialized oppression. These goals may not be represented consciously, but they are essential to this way of categorizing. This is important, as it means that whiteness is a fragile social category, which only persists through ignorance, and through ongoing attempts to manage and sustain that ignorance (Mills 2007; Mueller 2017)

Many white people are afraid to give up their assumed position of supremacy and power. And to preserve the illusion that the world is as it must be, many white people ignore the structural forces that organize and perpetuate racialized oppression. Consequently, they formulate atomistic and individualistic conceptions of racism, which "locate action and experience in isolated individuals abstracted from social context" (Salter

& Adams 2013, 785). And as a consequence, worries about enforcing Black–White racial boundaries tend to increase when racialized hierarchies are threatened (Chen et al 2017). Exclusionary attitudes tend to be enhanced when white people consider the possibility of a majority-minority America (see Craig et al 2017 for a review). And many white people become more likely to see racial differences when they feel economically vulnerable (Krosch & Amodio 2014). More generally, racialized anxiety increases attention toward threats, activating *vāsanās* that have been accumulated through previous experiences; and this leads to the construction of more heavily racialized representations (cf., Godsil & Richardson 2017, 2242).

One of the main tasks of Buddhist epistemology is to undercut biased theories, and to establish a less biased approach to human cognition (Eltschinger 2010, 405-406). If the story I've told is approximately right, then whiteness retains its causal power because we privilege goals like racial purity, white supremacy, and control over non-white populations. These are ugly goals, which can only survive when they are coupled to a distorted understanding of the causal structure of the world. We ignore the ways in which everyday patterns of thought and behavior are grounded in an exclusionary and oppressive identity; we allow whiteness to persist as a dominant social paradigm; and the feedback relations between our habits of conceptualization and our practical activities perpetuate the samsaric process of racialized world-construction. "As Dharmakīrti might have put it, just as essentialism about one's self perpetuates suffering, essentialism about one's community perpetuates oppression" (Dunne 1999, 289). And I think that there are at least a few significant points where Buddhist resources can be used to decenter these distorted forms of thought and behavior.

First, recall that Dharmakīrti's *apoha* theory suggests that we impose categorical structure on experience in light of our practical goals. Many of us ignore the fact that the practical goals that allow us to see whiteness as a category are oppressive and exploitative. But the cultivation of wisdom requires us to acknowledge the ways in which whiteness depends on racial oppression. And to the extent that we become aware of this, we can direct our attention toward changing the social structures that make us see whiteness as a real joint in nature, or at the very least withdrawing our support for those social structures. This is a way of changing our practical orientation toward the world, which focuses our attention on the structural forces that organize and perpetuate racialized oppression; and to the extent that we are committed to following the bodhisattva path, this awareness will motivate us to eliminate the epistemic distortions inherent in perceiving the world whitely, and to actively work to bring about the wellbeing of our fellow humans.

Second, there is reason to believe that we can begin to change our understanding of social categories by shifting to a higher level of generality. Seeing yourself as the member of a mixed-race group can shift patterns of attention, and patterns of categorization (Van Bavel & Cunningham 2009). And in some cases, seeing others as part of a shared struggle for a shared end can help to minimize patterns of bias and discrimination. For example, shared social identities "can override biases that are built upon years of social exposure and perceptual expertise" (Van Bavel & Cunningham 2012, 1574). Indeed, these forms of collective identification can even affect the kinds of facial memory and processing effects that I addressed above as the other-race effect.

> This thought is given expression in an art motif depicting a crocodile with one stomach and two heads locked in struggle over food. If they could but see that the

> food was, in any case, destined for the same stomach, the irrationality of the conflict would be manifest to them. (Wiredu 1995, 57).

A Buddhist perspective should push us in a similar direction. But committing to practices of mutual aid and mutual support across racial lines probably requires more than simply seeing points of nondifference. A well-known meditative technique known as "exchanging self for other" may be useful in this regard. We usually direct our actions toward the preservation of our own needs and interests, and the minimization of our own suffering. To intervene on this habitual pattern of thought, Tenzin Gyatso (n.d.) proposes the following meditative practice:

> On one side you visualize your own normal self, the self that is totally impervious to others' well-being and an embodiment of self-centeredness...on the other side, you visualize a group of beings who are suffering, with no protection and no refuge…[then]...view yourself as a neutral third person impartial observer, who tries to assess whose interest is more important here. Isolating yourself in the position of neutral observer makes it easier for you to see the limitations of self-centeredness, and realize how much fairer and more rational it is to concern yourself with the welfare of other sentient beings. (cf., Gyatso n.d.).

By engaging in a practice like this, we can work to change the attitudes we've formed about our 'self', as well as attitudes we've formed about 'others'. And more importantly, we can see where our self-interested habits are inhibiting our feelings of compassion, because we privilege our own perspectives.[6]

To achieve this, however, we need a final, and more fundamental shift in how we relate to the world. Specifically, we need to acknowledge the emptiness of whiteness as a category (Dunne 1999, 287). This requires seeing the people who we are socialized to treat as white as differing along innumerable dimensions. For if white people are not a 'real' group, then there is nothing to work to preserve. This is likely to require a great deal of Buddhist practice, as it requires not just seeing the skin-deep differences between people who are racialized as white, but also acknowledging that there is nothing that makes them all white aside from an oppressive ideology. I think that any chance at successfully internalizing an understanding of these facts will require a great deal of meditative practice, focusing on the emptiness of whiteness, and its interdependence on oppressive practices. The goal of shifting our patterns of thought and conceptualization in this way is not merely a self-directed practice (cf., Thompson 2017). It is to make a profound change in our motivations, our behavior, and our motivation to change the karmic flows that constitute our world. As Yogācāra philosophers have long noted: the

[6] In conversation, Emily McRae has suggested that there is another reason why this kind of practice is important in the context of racial bias. This practice was initially developed as a way of counteracting our tendency to privilege our own interests, while ignoring the suffering of others. And it helps to entrench the forms of practical motivation that flow from recognizing that 'self' and 'other' are empty of inherent existence. Likewise, if the argument that I've been developing in this paper is right, then racial categories are empty of biological reality; but we must still attend to patterns of racial injustice. As McRae puts this point, "the ethical imperative to respond to racism demands that we take seriously the social reality of race at the same time that we see it to be empty". This seems exactly right to me.

transformation of thought is intimately connected to the transformation of the world; and the transformation of the world is a necessary condition for the transformation of thought.[7]

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