White Privilege Conference Share Out/Discussion

- Students, educators, consultants, staff from organizations, activists, therapists, social workers – broad range of experience at conference

Below are summaries, reflections and afterthoughts from a few of the workshops attended by dialogue participants:

Orientalism, anti-Asian racism, American Buddhism

- Correlaries between way yoga is appropriated and way Native American traditions are appropriated – this idea of “this is shared”
- Led by two people, one Korean American, not raised in Buddhism, and a white person who had traveled a lot in Asia and built relationships
- American Buddhist magazine – Buddha’s face on Mount Rushmore – area around Mount Rushmore, sacred space that was stolen and all the layers of meaning behind that image
- Called American Buddhism “white supremacist Buddhism”
- History of Buddha’s head as remnant of white colonialization – caves in China – brought heads back to museums because they couldn’t bring whole statues – then this becoming a mass-produced icon of the tradition – thinking about what icons to have a relationship with
- Meditation – showed a slide of prominent meditation teachers in U.S. – many/most white – in 60’s, most Americans being drafted in peace corps in Asia, introduced to meditation there – the way that meditation was shared in the U.S. – China invaded Tibet, elite Asian men came to U.S. and sought support – elitism doesn’t erase trauma – this is when meditation got shared, with politicians in U.S.
- Idea of meditation – lay people don’t meditate (in Tibetan Buddhism) – monks go through long process to get to a point of meditating
- Idea of taking a tradition and shifting it to something else is damaging
- Cultural artifacts – “cultural baggage” – presenter talked about walking into a room filled with artifacts makes them feel small
- The idea that taking something and calling it meditation is anti-Asian racism
- Workshop didn’t delineate other forms of meditation/Buddhism – focused on Tibetan Buddhism
- “zen” being used as an adjective
- How will this inform being a yoga teacher?
- Spiritual story “Navajo grandfather” – black wolf, white wolf – which one will win? “the one that I feed” – breaking down black and white being good and evil, ways that Christian missionaries would implant stories and put an Indian American “mask” on it
- Climate institute – analogy – saying “a Native American said…” essentializes, not naming different tribes – like saying “a European said…”
- How do white women practice spirituality
- Self-abuse – yoga being used as social self-abuse for white women – a way to force health and happiness in the role they've taken – a way to perpetuate body image ideals “yoga industrial complex”
- Getting into shape/vanity versus spirituality/healing – how are contradictions there, and is there a both/and
- So much to talk about why white women like yoga pants etc.
- How do racism, spirituality, and class relate?

Triggers
- A lot of yes/and
- Appreciate triggers, noticing them within ourselves, appreciating our own journey
- Cyclical nature of triggers in interactions
- Having empathy for the trigger but also step back, breathe, notice what’s going on – a self-processing cycle
- What’s going on for me? What’s going on for the other person? Inquiry
- Intention versus impact
- Being triggered versus being activated
- How is it different/how do we respond differently between being triggered around privilege or around marginalization
- White women tears – crying because of
- Productive around privilege = growth and learning, productive around marginalized identities = healing trauma
- Recognizing you’re triggered in your body
- Putting a hand up to signal that you are activated
- Theater of the oppressed – slow down and notice
- Example of trigger – in a group, white man was attacking article for not being academic enough – made a good emotional case but... saying it in an aggressive way – felt like “aggressive white guy challenging emotional knowledge” – couldn’t address it because I felt overwhelmed
- Thinking about how we in White Noise Collective tend to stay in cerebral/heady space and have a hard time getting embodied
- When making someone else upset, relates to whiteness of “fix it” and also socialized woman thing of “helping”

Decision-making process and the WNC workshop – White Women and Helping Professions/Buffer Zone
- Drew on Paul Kivel’s description of the buffer zone – people who end up maintaining economic/racial inequality
- White woman savior complex
- At the end, talked about solutions, but some people left before we got to the end – agenda next time!
- White supremacy culture and how it manifests in organizations – Tema Okun + ??
Process – submitted after the deadline, and were notified a few weeks before conference – realized we’d replicated so many things in the white supremacy culture handout – also did so much caretaking – had intensity of pace (we have to do everything!) – most people in room were white women, but when talking about antidotes, a woman of color pointed out that one strategy we didn’t name was taking leadership from people of color – also thinking about “white woman invasion” – having so many people leading the workshop was many overwhelming for participants

One person of color wanted steps to take home to white women she worked with, and thinking about how to honor that challenge

How to have this conversation/who to have it with… thinking about POC being triggered – maybe starting workshop naming that this workshop could be emotional/triggering

The Colonial “white gaze” + savior complexes that appropriate the pain of others

- Watching the watchers – white colonial gaze
- The empire looks out on everyone else. Privilege to look / White Imperial Gaze
- What are the default narratives / pressure to play roles
- American Apparel ad / darkened skin / who gets to distort who?
- Who creates language?
- HP Lovecraft : On the Creation of N--. Who created this identity? Lists of people who support Lovecraft
- Roles and the rules of whiteness
- Patricia Hill Collins – the dominant group makes itself through imagining itself as everything the other is not
- Narrative of the savior as the white person who can translate pain
- Fracturing POC experience / choosing ‘parts’ of pain
- When we make emotional appeals to POC experience, how are we appropriating fractured portions of their pain
- “I am African” campaign
- Looking White People in the Eye – Sharine Razak (sp?)
- “Identifying so readily with the pain, the oppressor replaces the oppressed and obscures their complicity in privilege” (para)
- Whose story gets told?
- World art day in Sweden – FGM – Afro-swedish artist / huge cake of black female body, artist in black face, head coming through cake / Swedish politicians cutting out the genitalia of the cake / screaming the whole time / everyone eats cake
- Anaesthesia that is created / how can you cut that cake
- Pain as a commodity
- What would it mean to give problems back?
• Intersectionality / colonial white feminism (shift from white men saving brown women from brown men to white women saving brown women from brown men)

Hair
• Discussed Chris Rock's documentary about hair – people thought it was a comedy, but he felt it was very serious discussion about commentary about how African American women navigate around hair and white supremacy
• Presented himself when younger with an afro
• Question: When was the first time you had control over your hair?
• Impact: the privilege of who has to navigate around their hair and who doesn’t have to think about it?
• Gave out cards to associate first/real thoughts to terms: “blonde” “jewish hair” “weave” “perm” etc and then shared in small groups and answered questions – felt vulnerable
• Shared responses from youth about the terms/ideas – word clouds
• Showed image of Beyonce – hair is blond, skin has been lightened. Contrast it against other pics of her, which were different, but they denied the images were altered
• Showed images of hair and asked if people could determine the race/ethnicity of the person – also discussed “real” vs “fake” hair – people generally assume white hair is real and African American air is fake – we make a lot of assumptions about people because of hair
• Scientist interviewed about the chemical in perms – toxic. Health implications.
• Discussed little girls starting to get perms at age 2 or 3
• Showed an image of a white man with dreads and asked “is this wrong?”
• Discussed the need to alter hair to fit in
  • Group reflections:
    ▪ I have seen a lot of power and strength in African American peers about how much strength they gain from the control of hair
    ▪ Interested in what he said about white women’s hair – this wasn’t discussed in the workshop
    ▪ Noticing how I perceive/judge African American women because of their hair
    ▪ Reflections of white women and hair – why do we wear it long, why do/don’t we just chop it off, how do we relate to our hair, etc
    ▪ Intersections with queerness/femininity/identity and implications for power balances
    ▪ It’s this symbolic physical trait that represents aspects of identity partly due to its permanence
    ▪ Bodies that are okay vs bodies that are not good – what makes a body “less problematic” for society/the workplace/etc.
    ▪ Shaving/hairy legs/plucking facial hairs
    ▪ How much hair and class are interconnected – hairstyles that fit into class –
Class – feels like it was not directly addressed in the conference. It was brought up in keynotes, etc. How can we start to layer class on top of other themes?

Keynote: The anti-racist movement needs to integrate more cross-class analysis.

Collusion workshop: How do you collude with...

Closing circle: One thing I want to keep exploring or thinking out:

- How to navigate empathy/listening and when is it listening and when is it appropriation?
- Taking it all in, buffer zone, formulate my own questions about white/female/working class and gender/roles in the movement
- My relationship to “meditation” and my defenses related to hearing the reportback tonight/my relationships to class and the mixed-class experience
- Class – mixed/in flux/changed throughout life – cultural vs economic wealth/revisiting buffer zone from a personal lens
- White women’s tears
- The class piece (reading class matters by bell hooks)
- More vibrant intersectional class analysis – and also “meditation”
- Writing about our process in developing our workshop through lens of tema okun reading / embodiment – push myself to be more in my body
- Empathize but not so much you take it away from them, recognize that asking for help is an important step and not to force help
- Really looking at myself in the room, how am I perceiving identities, etc, what are my thoughts here, back to the embodiment thing – craving connection beyond the ideas with the people in the room / my own reactions to identifying as owning class
- How people in my life serve as buffers, taking on others’ pain/stories
- Embodied intersectionality around class, family circumstances and choice, “acceptable bodies” as I feel them through queerness and identity of dif/ability / external and internal borders, skin as border, hair a border
- These dialogues reinforce my trust, feels liberatory – noticing ways that spaces can require policing/safety systems and grateful for the process of strangers becoming known / how do we become accountable to what we’ve created / how do we share in a way that can build?
- Working with my addiction to white supremacy culture and how to still have an identity without these tactics

Next dialogue on difficult conversations in May!