

Sarah Jacoby TBR Interview

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SPEAKERS

Sarah Jacoby, Ann Gleig, Adeana McNicholl

Adeana McNicholl 00:00

Welcome, my name is Adeana McNicholl. I'm an assistant professor of Religious Studies at Vanderbilt University. I'm joined here by Ann Gleig, who is associate professor of Religion and Cultural Studies at the University of Central Florida. We're here as part of the Teaching Resources for Buddhism, Race, and Racism project which is being hosted by "teachingbuddhism.net" and funded by the Robert H. N. Ho Foundation Center at the University of Toronto. We're joined here today by Sarah Jacoby, who is an associate professor of Religious Studies and Charles Deering McCormick Professor of Teaching Excellence at Northwestern University. Dr. Jacoby is a scholar of Asian religions with a specialization in Tibetan Buddhism, and her research interests include Indo-Tibetan doctrine and ritual in practice, gender and sexuality, Tibetan literature, Buddhism and contemplation, and Tibetan Buddhism in general. So, welcome, Professor Jacoby, we're looking forward to talking with you about your teaching and your syllabi.

Sarah Jacoby 01:02

Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here with you, Professor McNicholl and Gleig.

Adeana McNicholl 01:09

I was wondering if you can begin by just telling us a little bit about your research specialization and some of your interests?

Sarah Jacoby 01:16

Sure, thank you. So I work on Tibetan Buddhism, broadly. I'm interested in Tibetan literature, forms of life writing, in particular, and Gender and Sexuality Studies. I think of myself as a historian of religion, in terms of how I would define my field, and these days, I'm mostly feeling guilty about not getting enough work done on a full translation of the autobiography of Sera Khandro Dewe Dorje, who is a Tibetan female visionary who lived in the early 20th century, and I am chipping away at that. The other project I'm actively writing these days is I'm rewriting a textbook that I published with Don Mitchell called "Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist experience", yeah, that's what I think we called it. So that's actually making me think a lot about pedagogy, and what goes in a book and how to say it. That's it.

Adeana McNicholl 02:23

Looking forward to it. I know that there was just a conference too on Buddhism and the body and they looked at textbooks, including your textbook, and so I'm interested to see what goes into the revisions in the updated version of this textbook, if race makes it in, if the body makes it in, and where.

Sarah Jacoby 02:39

So actually, I had no idea, I didn't know that it was discussed in a conference. I'd be curious to hear more about that at another time. But a short answer to that is yes, I'm rewriting the chapter loosely on modern Buddhism.

Adeana McNicholl 02:57

Well, I that's a good segue into thinking about teaching. Can you tell us a little bit about where you teach, what the student body is like, what your typical teaching load is, and what kinds of classes you normally teach?

Sarah Jacoby 03:10

Yeah, thank you. So at Northwestern University we have about 8000 undergraduates and about 12 or 13,000 graduate students. It's a kind of highly selective, R1 Midwestern University. If I were to give you like my actual quick version of an assessment of the climate of what it's like here, I would say it's heavily pre-professional. Students come here with a mission. Sometimes I am one of the people that welcomes incoming first years in our orientation program and they often come in under the archway kind of formally becoming university students, and then we sit on the grass together and they tell me that they want to be lawyers, or they want to be doctors, they have their entire schedule completely worked out already. So some of what I try to do with Northwestern students is tone down the ambition, and try to think about the process of learning and meaning making and what's important. So that's a little bit about the feel of this place. I teach a 2-2 teaching load, but I am blessed with the fact that I'm on the quarter system. So a 2-2 teaching load for me means essentially half of the year I'm teaching and the other half, summer and one quarter, I'm focusing on research, so that there's a balance between the two in my life, and I find them both very much mutually informative projects. The biggest course I teach is Introduction to Buddhism, I haven't seen the data recently, but at least pre pandemic, Introduction to Buddhism was the most popular course in my department, which is the Department of Religious Studies, and we literally cannot teach the course enough. It fills within the first day that registration opens. It's actually not because the professors are so stellar, I think it's actually because of certain ways in which Buddhism is aligned with mindfulness and de-stressing, and the sort of psychologization of Buddhism as a pathway to healing that students encounter, say, when they go to the psychological services and learn about mindfulness, it's that kind of stuff. This is a high pressure kind of place, and students are really dealing with a lot of stress, anxiety, and depression these days, not just the pandemic, but kind of more broadly. So I think that may play into why Buddhism classes are historically so much in demand. So there's Intro Buddhism, I also teach upper-level undergraduate courses that are more thematized, like Buddhism and Gender, this one Buddhism in the Contemporary World, Tibetan Religion and Culture, Feminist Theory and the Study of Religion, Theory and Method in the Study of Religion. So those are some of the ones that I cycle through often.

Adeana McNicholl 06:40

It's a great collection of courses. I think my experience is the same, a lot of my students wind up in my Buddhism classes because they're being introduced to mindfulness as a mental health resource, and then they show up in my class wanting to know more about it, having questions about like the ethics of it. So yeah, probably a lot of people have that same experience. In terms of your courses, which classes have you incorporated material on Buddhism, race and racism?

Sarah Jacoby 07:13

So that subject is in particular interwoven into my introduction to Buddhism course, and the course syllabus that I shared with your project called "Buddhism in the Contemporary World". I try to center thinking about race and racism, beginning with that in Buddhism in the Contemporary World. In Introduction to Buddhism, that is not exactly the beginning. It's more about how we study religion and a Buddha, Dharma, Sangha kind of typical intro Buddhism model. It's mostly when I try to narrate the story of how we have come to think of this thing called Buddhism that thinking about race, racism, and colonialism emerge. So how we tell the story of Buddhism as it has been inflected by British colonial imperial rule in South Asia, that version, but also how Buddhism came to America, and whose voices we center in that story. So that's something I've really tried to bring out in my intro class, as well as the more upper level seminar classes.

Ann Gleig 08:31

Oh, I'm gonna take over. So I know that Adeana will be really kind of excited to hear that, about how you really engage questions of race and colonialism from the very beginning as part of the story of Buddhism. I think that one thing that we've kind of discovered through these kinds of chats is that for most scholars of Buddhism, we are only bringing in race in the North American context, and so that kind of does a certain type of work that aligns these issues with certain types of populations, which we actually want to disrupt. So I think it's really powerful that you're really tackling it from the start, that race is right there at the beginning in how scholars have thought and constructed Buddhism. So that's like something I'm heartened to hear. I'm wondering if you have like one example that you can focus on that worked well, that you could maybe recommend to colleagues?

Sarah Jacoby 09:41

Sure. In my Buddhism in the Contemporary World class, that class starts with what I call a class covenant project, where before we even have a conversation about anything, an entire class period is dedicated to going into small groups and thinking about how do we want to speak to each other? How do we want to be heard? What are the rules and standards for our discourse in this space? And this was pre pandemic, actually, so we'd have to think about how we define space in the Zoom environment. But in the in-person class there's literally a physical space. When you walk in here, how do we speak to each other? How do we respect each other? So these small groups think about how they want this conversation to go. I think that's been helpful, because one of the elements of handling extremely sensitive personal information about people's feelings about race and their own backgrounds and racial formations, we have to establish a kind of trust and rapport to be willing to share that. That's how that class starts, and then towards the end of the class, I've been using the book "Radical Dharma" to think about what it means to actually have a talking book, how to bring a book like that into conversation. So that book is also I would say, I think... I'm trying to tell you the positive, but I have to

give you one caveat of one of the challenges. So at Northwestern, students are hyper vigilant about race and racism, in the sense that they're petrified to say something wrong. So there's this constant internal checking system that students are coming at the subject with, and they're all trying to be more careful than the next. So finding ways to break that down and feel okay with sharing a view, regardless of whether it's the right way to talk about race, is one of my big challenges. With Radical Dharma, I've done something really kind of simple, and that is pick out a quote from the reading today that really speaks to you, and read the quote out loud to your small group in the class and share your feelings about it. So trying to break out of a kind of intellectualized frame of what is correct to utter about race, to more of an embodied feeling that is tied to the book as a kind of buoy in a sea of discomfort, that we're all sharing the same reading, and we can pin our thoughts to that and then expand out. Sorry, that was probably too long.

Ann Gleig 13:03

No, I mean, I feel like we could do the whole chat just on that, there's so much in there. So I guess the things that stand out for me in what you say is that you're really kind of centering relationality at the very start of the class, like building relationality as the kind of holding space to have these really difficult conversations. It's quite interesting, because I also share... I think all of the things that you've spoken of are issues that we're all struggling with, and the way that I've tackled it is to do race at the end. My classes are typically organized into four modules, and I've typically done race, the focus on race I pick up threads of, but I really focus on race in the last module, with the kind of idea that by then we've really built up trust in the class, that it just takes a while to get to that space. But you're really inspiring me to kind of push harder, and really start, and actually one of the students in my evals last semester said "I loved the module on race, and I wish we'd done it earlier." So it's kinda interesting, I'm like, wow, I'm getting some messages here that I need to push that forwards, and I love how you're using radical Dharma as, what did you say, like a?

Sarah Jacoby 14:40

Like an anchor.

Ann Gleig 14:41

An anchor in a sea of discomfort. And bringing the body in as well, which I think is really a feature of racial justice work now, the somatics of race. So, yeah, I'm super excited and really happy that you shared that. There's just a lot there.

Sarah Jacoby 15:01

When you just said that you made me think of a couple more comments. I know you didn't just ask me a question, but I can I?

Ann Gleig 15:08

No go for it, of course!

Sarah Jacoby 15:11

So in some sense, Radical Dharma is at the end of my syllabus in Buddhism in the Contemporary World, so I suppose the reason for that is that I felt it would be especially sensitive, and that I should

wait for that rapport and trust to build. But I think just like when we talk about gender, it doesn't always have to mean that we talk about women, right? We want to center women, but we want to be thinking about gender and constructions of sexuality throughout our analysis of the formation of knowledge and how we're expressing it and recording it. Likewise, we want to be careful when we teach about race and racism to have it not only come up when we're talking about African-Americans, and so in this class thinking about race is interwoven in the sense that, it's really looking at the commodification and kind of extraction of concepts of mindfulness from Buddhist spaces where experts are often Asian monastics, to spaces in a Euro-American cultural context where the experts are psychologists or scientists, and the people teaching are wearing business suits and are white. So really thinking about whose expertise we're building on and who's being footnoted or cited is something that we can think a lot about as we look at how Buddhist mindfulness has been incorporated into the attention economy, into the tech industry, into the medical industry, into the kind of "Whole Foods Buddhism" that you encounter. Actually I have students go, there are two Whole Foods in our neighborhood, and I have students in this class go and walk around and just try to see where like visual images or words that are Buddhist appear, and to think about what kind of advertising work, what kind of messages, what kind of visual encounter people are having with Buddhism, and why, and what's making money. So anyway, I think that the racial formation of Buddhism in America is visible throughout all of these forms, they have just been Radical Dharma, you know.

Ann Gleig 17:48

Yeah, absolutely, and I just want to give a Adeana a shout out, because I think Adeana, I don't know if you want to kind of chip in here, but I know that that's something you're really passionate about, not just sectioning off race to the African-American, or even the Asian-American experience, but really bringing it in as a hermeneutic of how we think and teach and people do Buddhism.

Adeana McNicholl 18:16

I think we've talked about it doing like a wrap up conversation after we finish interviewing everybody on their syllabi, and maybe I can talk a little bit about mine. I mean, for context, I've been teaching for like a year and a half. Most of it's been in the pandemic situation, but in this most recent syllabus on Buddhism that I did, race does come up at the very beginning when we talk about sort of the ways that certain prioritized modes of knowledge are associated with race, the fact that the identification of the Buddha as Aryan, and with philosophy and doctrine is part of this kind of like Aryan understanding of Buddhism isn't a coincidence. It's connected to how Buddhism is continuing to be racialized. But I also first bring up race and ethnicity in Asia when we reach the Myanmar unit, we talk about the impact of colonialism, we talk about what is going on with Rohingya, we talk about how race and ideas of like race and ethnicity are already interwoven there. So by the time we get to the discussion on Buddhism and race and we talk about black Buddhists, it's not like black Buddhists have to do all the speaking for what it means to be racialized within Buddhism.

Sarah Jacoby 19:34

That's really important. I'd love to see your syllabus sometime.

Ann Gleig 19:40

Alright, I'm moving on a little bit, just with an eye to the time. Are there any themes that you find really... I bet you the students love that like Whole Foods task that you give them, but is there anything else that you wanted to share that really kind of engages them?

Sarah Jacoby 19:59

In Buddhism In the Contemporary World, I tried to make that syllabus multimedia oriented. So we're not just reading books, but we're also listening to TED talks, we're meeting people, guest speakers, and one of my assignments was we used this software called Yellowdig to create a blog. You can also do this with Facebook, but I was having anti-Facebook...

Ann Gleig 20:30

Rightly so, rightly so.

Sarah Jacoby 20:32

So I used Yellowdig, which is incorporated into Northwestern's online Canvas software kind of package. So basically, my students created a blog and I asked them to... I gave them course points for posting so they would feel that it was important and not just like a sidelined project, and I asked them to note... it was supposed to be visual, right. That's why I wanted the blog format and not just a discussion thread, where students would take pictures of any experience they had in which a Buddha statue or words they thought that came from Buddhism appeared in their lives. Again, this was pre pandemic, and so students were like going out to bars in the city in Chicago, and it was just fascinating! They were amazed as well. In the beginning students told me, "you know, I don't know how to do a blog, I don't know, like what is this really gonna do." They're so primed to be like, "when is the paper due" around here, you know, it's like everybody's marching on, aiming to pick up their A's so they can get into medical school around here. So telling them to take a picture of what they saw at the bar last night is a little bit out of like their expectation of what work is, and the students couldn't stop marveling at the images that each other were posting. So I think through the act of being asked to pay attention to the, I don't know if we want to call it commodification, white washing, cultural extraction, cultural appropriation of mindfulness and Buddhist oriented, visual and textual material, I think they really liked that.

Ann Gleig 22:30

Oh, yeah, that sounds amazing, and also I'm really getting the sense of how subversive you are. You're really disrupting that Northwestern straight route a little bit there. So kudos for that. So we all know as teachers that we learn as much from our failures as our successes. Is there anything that hasn't worked so well for you that maybe you'd do differently? Or that you've decided, I'm just going to put that aside?

Sarah Jacoby 23:00

I think before I started trying to center race and racism in my teaching in the Buddhist Studies context, I think I expected the big problem to be hostility between people or different viewpoints. But what I discovered here, and this may be really culturally specific to the climate that I'm talking about, I don't know how common this would be in different regions of the country, but as I've mentioned already what I discovered is that people are just unwilling to speak about it at all. They're unwilling to utter thoughts, not because they don't value it or think it's important, undergraduates tend to be thinking in detail about race and racism in their conversations in their dorms, in their personal life with their friends, but there's

just such a concern about not wanting to say the wrong thing, you know, and so I think I need to really think about that more and try to find ways to break that down, and try to do my best to find ways to enhance safety in contexts where they might hear something that is really painful. My classes are diverse, there are people who are identified in all different ways coming to these classes, and so there's a fear about that.

Ann Gleig 24:39

Yeah. I mean, I have studied Buddhist like racial justice work in kind of North American majority white Sanghas, and they're struggling with the same issues. That some of the reason why they've gone for kind of POC only groups and White Awake groups, you know, to kind of avoid some of the pain that can come from the mixed spaces. But we don't really have that option in the classroom. So, I think it does take a lot of thinking together, and I mean this is kind of why we want to do this series to kind of share strategies with our colleagues. So I'm sure that a lot of listeners to this talk will definitely empathize with what you say. Okay, so our last question is kind of like a vision/dream question. If you could teach your whole class on Buddhism, race and racism, how would you do that?

Sarah Jacoby 25:39

Thank you for asking that. I'm especially happy that you asked that because the syllabus that I shared with you, the Buddhism in the Contemporary World syllabus, I created this in, I guess it was 2017, or 2018, getting ready for my first iteration of this version of the class in 2018, and then I taught it again in 2019. In the intervening space between 2019 and now there's been an explosion of scholarship on Buddhism and race. It's really, really exciting. I would like to first center the great work that both of you are doing. And as I say that I'm...

Ann Gleig 26:21

Thank you!

Sarah Jacoby 26:24

Ann Gleig's, book, "American Dharma", and I'm also thinking of Adeana, your work, the thing that has been especially impactful to me is your JAAR essay, Journal of the American Academy of Religion essay, "Being Buddha, Staying Woke: Racial Formation in Black Buddhist Writings", so I think that deserves a seat at the table, a place in the syllabus. So I'm not just saying that, I actually really believe that. I have some books here I'll just whip by your screen. They happen to be in front of me now, there are many other books that are wonderful that aren't right in front of me. So I'm currently reading "America's Racial Karma" by Larry Ward, I also just got this book and I'm planning on reading it soon. It looks like it would be a great book for a syllabus, "Black and Buddhist" by Pamela Ayo Yetunde and Cheryl A. Giles. I'm also excited by Rima Vesely-Flad's work. So I think she has a book coming out that we are eagerly looking forward to called "Black Buddhism and the Black Radical Tradition", this one is on a list. This would be interesting, I would like to invite Lama Rod Owens too, I don't know if he has like lots of free time in his schedule to hang out with us academic types, but it would be really interesting to read "Love and Rage" and talk about that with him. It's been wonderful to see Jan Willis. Sorry, do I need to wrap up here?

Ann Gleig 28:06

No, keep going. We're loving this visual syllabus unfolding.

Sarah Jacoby 28:11

Yes. So it's been wonderful to see Jan Willis speaking publicly in the last couple of years, and before that as well with her autobiography "Dreaming Me", which came out in 2001, but I only just read it a couple of years ago and loved it, and so I think Jan Willis's work in general is really important, and her pioneering life of being one of the very few, one of the first perhaps, African-American Buddhologists. Is she the first? I can't think of another one off the top of my head. So this is a compilation of her important elements of her life's work, and so I think that deserves a place. Charles Johnson. I'm going to speed up because they're just so many! Larry Yang, "Awakening Together"; Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, "The Way of Tenderness"; Ruth King, "Mindful of Race." I just happened to have these here, but there's many others as well. Like Joseph Cheah, "Race and Religion in American Buddhism"; Spring Washam, "A Fierce Heart: Finding Strength, Courage, and Wisdom in Any Moment". It goes on. So that's really exciting, and I think this is fantastic. I think probably in 2019, if you told me "okay, now your next task is to teach an entire course on Buddhism and race", I would have sweat that a little, and now it just seems that there's a plethora of resources, inviting us to keep the focus.

Ann Gleig 30:01

Yeah. Well, I absolutely love that you kind of turn that last question into like a visual kind of platform, it was kind of reminding me of the student blogs, like, I can see why you're an award winning teacher. So fantastic. I'm really glad that you mentioned Jan Willis. Jan Willis is a tremendous pioneer, both as a scholar and as an African-American Buddhist practitioner, and I feel like in the last few years there has been this explosion of books by Buddhists of color and black Buddhists, but of course this work has been going on for like, over two decades, you know, it's just really now that it's getting the attention from the mainstream Buddhist press and also from Buddhist Studies, and so I think it's really important that we really like honor the pioneers, so I'm so happy that you did that. I also wanted to add, that Chenxing Han has a brilliant book called "Be The Refuge", which, really disrupts that Buddhism typology. I think it's got like 62 interviews with Asian-American Buddhists, just such a plethora of richness. Also our very own Sharon Suh, who's a Buddhist scholar, and she did "Occupy this Body", which is kind of autoethnographic and really engages issues of race and the racialized body, in both Buddhist studies as an academic community and American society at large.

Sarah Jacoby 31:44

Can I just say, thank you so much for bringing the those last two up, and I had in big print here "Be The Refuge" by Chenxing Han, I just didn't say it partly because I don't yet own the book, and so it's not part of my visual show and tell yet, but I can't wait to read it. Also about that, I think, in terms of conversation starters, I've used an essay by Funie Hsu that she published in 2017, it's called "We've Been Here All Along", it came out in Buddha Dharma and also Lion's Roar, and that has been really, really impactful to students and in my teaching, so I wanted to call Hsu's scholarship out as well as really important.

Ann Gleig 32:35

Well, yeah, that is a very powerful essay and some of the responses she got from white practitioners also were very hostile, but are also really pedagogically strong to consider. Because I think often students are surprised at some of the backlash that black and brown Buddhists have received. I did

want to give one final shout out to Adeana. Adeana has a review essay on Buddhism and race and racism coming out in what is it? Is it Religion Compass?

Adeana McNicholl 33:13

So we're in the peer review process, it's supposed to come out with Religion Compass.

Ann Gleig 33:18

I think it's going to be just a great resource for us all. So it's good to end on a note of mutual acknowledgement.

Adeana McNicholl 33:28

Absolutely. Well, thank you so much for joining us, Dr. Jacoby, and talking with us about your pedagogy, about teaching Buddhism and race. We really enjoyed it, and we appreciate it. We are going to put everything that was mentioned and showed in the notes below this video once it is uploaded so people can find it easily.

Sarah Jacoby 33:51

Yeah, it's an honor to be invited to be a part of this conversation, and as for whatever contribution I'm able to make so far, it's really very much a work in progress. It's an aspiration and a goal that is still ahead of me, you know, that I'm still working towards.

Ann Gleig 34:16

Great! Bye, everyone.