

Article

Contesting “Conversion” and “Reversion” among Young Adult Asian American Buddhists

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Abstract: This paper engages the perspectives of thirty young adult Asian American Buddhists (YAAABs) raised in non-Buddhist households. Grounded in semi-structured, one-on-one in-person and email interviews, my research reveals the family tensions and challenges of belonging faced by a group straddling multiple religious and cultural worlds. These young adults articulate their alienation from both predominantly white and predominantly Asian Buddhist communities in America. On the one hand, they express ambivalence over adopting the label of “convert” because of its Christian connotations as well as its associations with whiteness in the American Buddhist context. On the other hand, they lack the familiarity with Asian Buddhist cultures experienced by second- or multi-generation YAAABs who grew up in Buddhist families. In their nuanced responses to arguments that (1) American convert Buddhism is a non-Asian phenomenon, and (2) Asians in the West can only “revert” to Buddhism, these young adults assert the plurality and hybridity of their lived experiences as representative of all American Buddhists, rather than incidental characteristics of a fringe group within a white-dominated category.

Keywords: Asian American; Buddhism; young adult; conversion; reversion; identity

1. Introduction: A Diverse Group of “First-Gen” Asian American Buddhists

Scholarly and popular literature on American convert Buddhism is largely focused on white people.¹ Race is often implied rather than explicitly stated in this literature, as when these converts are described as “young, middle-class Americans raised as Protestants, Catholics, or Jews” (Machacek 2001, p. 69). Non-white Buddhist converts also figure into the literature, albeit to a lesser extent. For example, Paul Numrich (2000, p. 195) notes that “convert Buddhists in America are predominantly White, with some Black and Latino presence.”² In a rare acknowledgment of the existence of Asian American converts, Peter Gregory (2001, p. 242) writes: “It is also important to note that some ‘American converts’ happen to be Asian American (such as Bill Jakusho Kwong, a prominent Chinese American Zen Teacher in the lineage of Suzuki rōshi).” While this offers a helpful corrective to the assumption that American converts are universally non-Asian, the characterization of Kwong as someone who “happen[s] to be Asian American” has the unfortunate effect of diminishing his ethnicity to a side note.

This article examines the experiences of Asian American “convert” Buddhists such as Noel,³ who was raised by Filipino Catholic parents and considers himself a “first-generation” Buddhist as the first member of his family to be Buddhist in America. By contrast, he considers Asian Americans with long family histories of being Buddhist in America to be “multi-generation” Buddhists.

¹ We see an example of this in a journal article on Buddhism in the West that focuses on white converts, “leaving aside Buddhists from Asia living in Western countries” (Baumann 1996, p. 347).

² In addition, Soka Gakkai International is often celebrated for its racial diversity (Chappell 2000; Strand 2003).

³ Throughout this article, I use either real first names or pseudonyms based on interviewees’ stated preferences.

Second-generation Asian American Buddhists, by Noel's definition, are those who are the second generation in their families to be Buddhist in America, their parents being the first. In this paper, I draw on an analysis of thirty in-depth interviews with young adults of full or partial Asian heritage who were not raised Buddhist. These thirty individuals are a subset of a larger group of eighty-nine young adult Asian American Buddhists (YAAABs)⁴ I interviewed between 2012 and 2013.⁵ Borrowing Noel's terminology, I refer to these thirty young adults as "first-gen" Buddhists in contrast to "multi-gen" and "second-gen" YAAABs.⁶

These first-gen Buddhists come from a wide range of religious backgrounds. Some were raised Christian; others grew up Hindu; several come from nonreligious families. Still others grew up in Jewish, Muslim, Zoroastrian, or mixed-religion households. These young adults also represent an impressive range of Asian ethnicities, including Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Iranian, Japanese, Korean, Nepali, Turkmen, and Vietnamese.⁷ A third of the group is multiracial, thus expanding the list of ethnicities to include Ashkenazi, Belarussian, Danish, French, German, Irish, Mexican, Spanish, and so forth.⁸ Though I have chosen to group together all interviewees raised in non-Buddhist households, future studies of first-gen Asian American Buddhists on a more granular level could reveal significant differences between YAAABs raised in disparate religious communities.

In the opening section of this paper, I discuss several themes that arise in the religious lives of the first-gen YAAABs I interviewed, including the tensions they experience as they straddle multiple religious and cultural worlds, and the alienation many feel in both predominantly white and predominantly Asian Buddhist communities. In the next two sections, I examine how these young adults contest racialized definitions of "convert Buddhism" and debate the argument that Asian Americans can only "revert" to Buddhism. In the final two sections, I describe how first-gen YAAABs invoke Buddhist teachings on impermanence and interconnectedness to argue that the hybridity and fluidity of their complex identifications are the norm rather than the exception within American Buddhism.

2. Straddling Spiritual and Cultural Worlds

In the booklet *Making the Invisible Visible: Healing Racism in Our Buddhist Communities* (Adams et al. 2000, p. 53), an anonymous twenty-seven-year-old Asian American student at the San Francisco Zen Center reflects on the unexpectedness of how she, "a *yonsei* [fourth-generation Japanese American], came [to] find out about Zen Buddhism through a 'predominantly white Zen Center' rather than through a 'local Japanese American temple.'" Like this young adult Asian American Zen Buddhist, the first-gen YAAABs I interviewed defy expectations of being raised Buddhist and practicing solely with coethnic Buddhists.

First-gen YAAABs often integrate heterogeneous religious and cultural influences in their spiritual lives. Sarvin, who is Iranian American, sees his Buddhist path as being intertwined with the Zoroastrianism, atheism, and agnosticism that used to be more central to his religious identity. Oliver, who is of Turkmen heritage, considers himself "a person of multiple religious belonging" since he grew up in a Muslim family, was baptized Christian, and currently practices Buddhism. The home altars of these two YAAABs reveal an integration of spiritualities: Sarvin's includes a Buddha keychain and images of Tibetan teachers alongside a photo of his Zoroastrian grandfather; Oliver's has a statue of St. Francis surrounded by Buddhist artwork.

⁴ For a discussion of the ambiguities around defining the category "young adult Asian American Buddhist," see (Han 2017, p. 4).

⁵ I conducted twenty-six in-person interviews and sixty-three email interviews. For further details about my interview methods, see (Han 2017, pp. 5–7).

⁶ I shorten "generation" to "gen" so as to avoid confusion with the more common use of "generation" to indicate immigration status among Asian Americans. For a discussion of the importance of attending to generation as a dimension of American Buddhism, see (Han 2017, pp. 8–10).

⁷ See Appendix A for more information about the ethnic and religious backgrounds of these thirty first-gen interviewees.

⁸ While the twenty-six second-gen YAAABs I interviewed also represent a wide range of ethnicities, only about 5% of them are multiracial or multiethnic.

Gabrielle, who identifies as mixed race and *gosei* (fifth-generation Japanese American), cites an eclectic mix of religious influences, including a grandmother connected to new age spirituality, her mom who was raised Catholic, her stepfather who was raised as a Jehovah's Witness, a formerly Methodist and now-Jewish step-grandmother, and her Zen grandfather. Gabrielle's penchant for crossing racial and sectarian lines in her spiritual practice is typical of the first-gen YAAABs I interviewed:

I have an interesting experience of, on the one hand, sitting zazen with my Japanese American *jichan* [grandfather] in a group primarily of older, white male Buddhist practitioners, and on the other hand attending services at Shin Buddhist temples where Asian, and especially Japanese Americans, are the majority. As a hapa with a white husband, many white family members, and many privileges of being a white person, I am constantly straddling cultural, as well as spiritual worlds . . . I am sure as society continues to only become more racially diverse there will be a lot more people straddling these different worlds.

Like Gabrielle, many first-gen YAAABs tend toward inclusive characterizations of their religious identities. Some call themselves non-denominational Buddhists. Others use a hyphenated identity—Sanjeev identifies as “a practicing Hindu-Buddhist and a student of all religions.” Still others simply say they are Buddhist, seeing no need to append a modifier before the “Buddhist” label.⁹

2.1. Family Tensions

Non-convert and convert YAAABs alike experience cultural, religious, and generational tensions, though these tensions often manifest differently for multi-gen, second-gen, and first-gen Asian American Buddhists. For example, second-gen interviewees often encounter language barriers with Buddhist elders at temples, while first-gen interviewees may experience interreligious conflict with parents. As the examples below illustrate, family tensions of varying levels of intensity arise for first-gen YAAABs as they come to embrace Buddhism.

Eileen, who grew up attending a Chinese American Evangelical church, left after an aggressive interrogation session about her faith by an elder church member; this constituted her “first major break” from her family. Unfortunately, her mother and other Christian family members were not supportive of her Buddhist practice. Noah, a Korean American who was raised Christian and now practices in multiple schools of Buddhism, was also rejected by his family after he told them that he converted to Buddhism. “I experience quite a bit of conflict with my family because of my religion. They constantly tell me to convert and that I need to come back to Jesus,” he explains. Noah also faces conflict with Korean Americans outside of his family. “The Korean Christians that I've met have not been understanding of my religion and they criticize my religion at every opportunity,” he laments. Sharon Suh (2004) discusses similar dynamics in her study of Korean American Buddhists, who are vastly outnumbered by their Christian counterparts.

Vince's relationship to his parents is less vituperative than Eileen's or Noah's. While he and his Catholic parents might “never agree on the details of certain concepts or how to best put those concepts into practice in daily life,” he is also “learning to have equanimity about that and still have a sense of goodwill toward them” and others he disagrees with. Vince cites differing beliefs about God in Christianity and Buddhism as an example where “sometimes you can't overcome differences” and may need to decide that disengagement is the most respectful choice.

In an example of milder tensions, a few first-gen Buddhist interviewees from Hindu or nonreligious households observe that their parents are supportive of their Buddhist practice—so long as it does not entail aspirations to become a celibate monastic. This attitude is not confined to

⁹ A plurality of Asian American Buddhists (49%) in a 2012 Pew Forum report on Asian American religions identify as “just a Buddhist” rather than a specific branch of Buddhism (Pew Research Center 2012, p. 45).

non-Buddhists: [Cadge and Sangdhanoo \(2005, p. 26\)](#) note that many Thai Buddhist parents in America do not want their children to become monks.

2.2. Challenges of Belonging

First-gen YAAABs exemplify how “the usual ways of deciding who is Buddhist . . . fail[] to take seriously enough the complexity of religious identity . . . Scholars cannot locate a pristine beginning or pre-contact essence to use as a norm to define orthodoxy or orthopraxis. There is hybridity all the way down” ([Tweed 1999](#), pp. 72–73). As Kirthi puts it: “My spirituality has so many levels and layers . . . I’m hybrid, my life is hybrid. So is my spirituality.” As a person of South Asian descent, Kirthi struggles with the paradox of how Buddhism is simultaneously “of [her] culture and not . . . of [her] people, but not something [she] grew up with.” Influenced by Hinduism, yoga, and insight meditation, she often feels she “simultaneously belong[s] and do[es]n’t belong” in various religious communities.

Shubha describes a similar experience of ambivalent belonging. Like Kirthi, she was raised Hindu by South Asian parents and calls herself “a practitioner of insight meditation.” However, she is resistant to identifying as Buddhist, in part because she does not want to reject her Hindu upbringing, and in part because she worries that identifying as Buddhist signals an embrace of Orientalized stereotypes about Buddhism. She admits that when she hears the term “practicing Buddhist,” she assumes the practitioner is a white person who holds exoticized fantasies about Buddhism—“and then feels bad about it.” In her resistance to being grouped with white convert Buddhists, Shubha echoes second- and multi-gen YAAABs who see their Asian heritage as a useful safeguard against exoticizing Buddhism. In her guilt around making racialized assumptions about “practicing Buddhists,” Shubha recognizes that her wariness of white converts runs counter to ideals of Buddhism as a universal religion.

Alyssa, who was raised in a secular household, also struggled to understand her place in American Buddhism. Having lived among lay Buddhists in Thailand and monastics in China, she has an appreciation for respecting ancestors, bowing, and chanting—and bristles when people dismiss these practices as antiquated. Many second-gen YAAABs I interviewed share her consternation about the denigration of “traditional” practices associated with “Asian immigrants.” Alyssa’s sympathetic view suggests the limits of positing a rational/devotional divide along convert/non-convert lines in American Buddhism. “I find myself in the middle in a lot of ways,” Alyssa observes: in the middle of cultural worlds, having grown up ethnically Chinese in a primarily Caucasian neighborhood; in the middle of Buddhist worlds in Asia and America; and also, she says with a chuckle, “in the middle of learning.” Her observation encapsulates how first-gen YAAABs navigate multiple religious and cultural worlds, and how they regard this process as an ongoing learning experience.

As an example of her betwixt-and-between status, Alyssa describes the language barrier she faced at a Buddhist college in China where she taught English, and where being a layperson further set her apart from the predominantly monastic community. She also recounts not feeling fully at ease in predominantly white Buddhist communities. In one instance, Alyssa had the “jarring” realization that almost all the speakers at a conference hosted by a Hong Kong-based Zen center were Caucasian males. To her dismay, she realized she was “being more critical” than usual as she listened. Seeing herself as an open-minded person who does not prioritize one ethnicity over another, Alyssa was baffled by her visceral reaction, especially since she was accustomed to being the minority in the largely Caucasian environments she grew up in. She posits that some of her discomfort in overwhelmingly white Buddhist spaces may be out of concern that others will assume that Buddhism is not a religion she has actively chosen, but “a product of [her] ethnicity or family background.” In other words, she fears they will incorrectly assume she was raised Buddhist just because she is Asian. Her worry that she “should have some more connection” to Buddhism because of her ethnic background reflects the anxiety of other YAAABs confronted with the expectation that people of Asian heritage are somehow more “authentic” Buddhists by virtue of a biological and/or cultural connection to the religion, an assumption they find to be both intimidating and inaccurate.

2.3. In Search of Welcoming Communities

In a blog post titled “Meditation and Diversity,” Shubha reflects on feeling “out of place” upon noticing that she was one of only three “visible minorities” at a meditation retreat. “What makes me feel ‘in place’? I know that being around a group of Indians doesn’t suddenly put me at ease. I guess it’s the mix of people—it’s easy to feel out of place when you’re one grape in a bowl of apples, but a grape in a bowl of mixed fruit feels welcoming!” In noting that she does not automatically feel at ease among coethnics, Shubha implicitly challenges characterizations of Asian Americans as ethnically insular (Masatsugu 2008, p. 427). She goes on to acknowledge that Buddhism’s Asian origins contribute to her discomfort at seeing so few Asian Americans at the retreat, while also recognizing that the value of making Buddhism available to people of all racial backgrounds makes her uncomfortable about feeling this very discomfort. These conflicted emotions epitomize the tensions that arise when attempting to respect both cultural specificity and religious universalism.

Being of Asian heritage but not having been raised Buddhist, first-gen YAAABs, like non-Asian converts, must seek out religious communities on their own. The challenges they face in finding a place to belong within American Buddhist communities would seem to support Numrich’s (1996) theory of “parallel congregations,” which describes non-Asian convert communities and “ethnic Asian” immigrant temples as separate, non-interacting entities. Unfortunately, presenting these as the only two options for American Buddhists is often discouraging to YAAABs in general and Asian American convert Buddhists in particular, as their religious and cultural identifications seldom fit neatly into either group. A few of the first-gen young adults I interviewed found a spiritual home at the East Bay Meditation Center, where attendees hail from a wide range of racial, ethnic, religious, class, and immigrant backgrounds (Gleig 2014).

The challenges that first-gen YAAABs encounter in convert Buddhist communities suggests that characterizing these sanghas as “non-Asian” may capture a certain reality: it is not that they are entirely devoid of Asian Americans or that Asian Americans do not want to be part of them, but these spaces may not feel welcoming to Asian Americans—or to non-white people in general. In *Making the Invisible Visible*, Lewis Woods argues that “for Black folks, joining a predominantly White convert Buddhist sangha entails an immigration of sorts—a cultural border crossing into a land that is unsupportive of Black individuals and communities” (Adams et al. 2000, p. 28). Woods points out how sermons on topics such as police brutality can be heard at black churches while such topics are rarely discussed in dharma talks, where they are seen as “straying from the main purpose of the practice.” Larry Yang (2004, p. 160) also observes this “passive indifference to difficult and complex issues around diversity, discrimination, and oppression” in dharma talks, which he describes as “insensitive, at best, and often harmful” when they fail to recognize racial and cultural differences and assume a white middle-class convert Buddhist audience as the norm. Woods’ metaphor can also be extended to first-gen YAAABs, for whom white sanghas as well as “immigrant” temples may both feel foreign.¹⁰

3. Contesting Conversion

A 2008 Pew Forum survey erroneously reports that “only about a third (32%) of Buddhists in the U.S. are Asian; a majority (53%) are white, and . . . most [nearly three-quarters] are converts to Buddhism” (Pew Research Center 2008, p. 45). Though Pew researchers corrected these numbers in a 2012 report, noting that Asian Americans in fact comprise more than two-thirds (67–69%) of American Buddhists (Pew Research Center 2012), the newer statistics are not always cited, as when a 2015 *Washington Post* article mentions “the mostly white convert communities who make up three-quarters of U.S. Buddhists” (Boorstein 2015).

¹⁰ Additional testimonies to this experience of feeling out of place can be found in (Turning Wheel 2000, pp. 32–35).

Even if converts are in fact a minority of the total number of American Buddhists, research suggests that they have a disproportionately large influence within American Buddhism. Drawing on survey data to assess the scope of Buddhism's influence in America, [Wuthnow and Cadge \(2004, p. 373\)](#) conclude that "the effect of contact with converts is more than twice as strong as the effect of contact with life-long Buddhists."¹¹ Phra Nicholas [Thanissaro \(2010, p. 75\)](#) connects this phenomenon to issues of power and representation when he likens the disproportionate influence of white convert Buddhists to the Mercator projection of the globe and emphasizes the need to "give voice to the non-orientalist position."

3.1. Including Asians within American Convert Buddhism

As part of my interview protocol, I asked each person to respond to the following perspective on Asian American Buddhists: "In the introduction of a book by a Buddhist studies scholar, the author defines North American convert Buddhism as 'the Buddhism of Americans who are not of Asian descent'" ([Sharf 2002, p. 23](#)). The vast majority of the young adults I interviewed—whether or not they were raised Buddhist—pushed back against this statement.¹² To wit: Asian Americans can be convert Buddhists. Many first-gen interviewees cited themselves to prove this point.

Others argue against the implied inverse of the statement—that non-convert Buddhism is the sole province of Asian Americans—by noting that the children of non-Asian converts should not be considered converts. Interestingly, Paul [Numrich \(2003, p. 63\)](#) takes issue with this view, arguing that children of "non-Asian Buddhist converts in Western societies" should also be considered converts "since this new generation must at some point consciously choose to perpetuate their parents' rejection of their former religious worldviews." Even if we accept the curious insistence that children of converts should also be considered converts, its racialized logic remains confusing. Why would the children of Asian American Buddhist converts not be considered converts as well, since they are also rejecting their parents' former religious worldviews?

Wanwan [Lu \(2015\)](#), director of a documentary about a predominantly Asian American youth group at a Buddhist temple in Southern California, critiques the artificial binaries presented by the scholar's definition of convert Buddhism:

Many Asian American Buddhists learn about Buddhism through texts written by "convert Buddhists" and "convert Buddhists" study with Buddhist teachers in Asia or of Asian heritage. This definition of convert Buddhism implies that Buddhism belongs to certain groups of people and [that] the Buddhism of non-Asian Americans is inherently different from Asian Buddhism.¹³

By emphasizing the interconnections between the two groups, Wanwan refutes the existence of essentialized differences between "[non-Asian] convert Buddhists" and "Asian American Buddhists," thereby rebutting Numrich's racialized "culture/convert" dichotomy.

3.2. Beyond a Pauline Model of Conversion

Interviewees' objections to the scholar's definition of North American convert Buddhism extends beyond "Asian Americans can be convert Buddhists, too!" to a rigorous investigation of the limitations of the very concept of "conversion" within a Buddhist context. As Holly, a mixed-race Vajrayana Buddhist practitioner, notes: "I think 'conversion' is a Christian word and concept, so I find 'convert' ill-suited to describe the way that people newly take up Buddhist practice." Many of the YAAABs I interviewed associate "conversion" with (1) a sudden shift in belief, (2) renunciation of one's former faith (or lack thereof), and (3) the imperative to proselytize to others. These young adults raise

¹¹ In the article, the authors compare white and black participants but not Asian ones, limiting our ability to analyze Asian American Buddhists from their data.

¹² Of the handful who accepted this definition at face value, most are not converts themselves.

¹³ This quote comes from my email interview with Wanwan and not from [Lu's \(2015\)](#) film.

counterexamples for each of these Christianity-derived correlations to emphasize the limits of applying them to a Buddhist context. As such, they bolster Anne Spencer's (2016) argument that using the Christian apostle Paul—who certainly fits the three criteria above—as a paradigm for conversion in the American Buddhist context is inadequate and misleading.¹⁴

With regards to the idea that conversion entails a sudden shift in belief, several first-gen YAAABs argue that becoming Buddhist is a gradual process rather than a sudden one. It is tempting to consider Gabrielle a convert, but she eschews the label: “I don't really think one ‘converts’ to Buddhism. To me, becoming a Buddhist was more like a slow realization.” Aaron, raised by a Catholic mom and nonreligious dad, describes his spiritual journey in similar terms. He cannot pinpoint a seminal event, as he “just started meditating and reading more about Buddhism” and eventually felt “inoculated enough” by the dharma to be “comfortable enough to call [him]self a Buddhist.” His inoculation metaphor suggests a period of getting accustomed to new practices and teachings rather than an abrupt transformation in his religious identification. Sanjeev, raised in a Hindu family in the Bay Area, also cannot name a pivotal conversion moment. He describes his Buddhist journey as “a gradual process” that began with an early appreciation for Buddhist imagery and hagiography before expanding in late high school and early college to a regular meditation practice. Sumit, who was raised Hindu in India and came to the United States after college, does not consider himself a convert because he did not experience a “radical shift” in belief. These interviewees support Gregory's (2001, p. 242) definition of American convert Buddhists as “Americans (regardless of ethnicity) who are not Buddhist by birth but who take up various forms of Buddhist practice without necessarily undergoing a dramatic experience that could be characterized as a religious conversion.” This definition is an expansive one, as it allows for interpretations of “conversion” that do not fit a Pauline template, and does not exclude Asian Americans from the category of covert Buddhist.

Many YAAABs regard the idea that conversion requires renunciation of one's former faith as being anathema to the inclusive ethos of Buddhism. Sanjeev is among several interviewees who bring up the Dalai Lama in support of his opinion that “it is not necessary to ‘convert’ out of a religion and into Buddhism in order to practice Buddhism.” He sees no contradiction with practicing Buddhism and identifying as Hindu. Oliver also credits the Dalai Lama with influencing his belief that “Buddhism can enrich people without necessarily taking away from what they already have.”¹⁵ Anne Spencer (2016) calls this approach one of “religious accretion” and highlights how it challenges assumptions that “conversion” requires subscribing to a single religion.

Sumit is among the many first-gen YAAABs I interviewed who prefer a non-exclusivist orientation to religion. Indeed, exposure to Buddhism gave him a deeper appreciation for the tradition of his upbringing. For example, he used to dismiss chanting before meals as something only his grandfather or “very orthodox” Hindu practitioners did. Doing similar chants in a Buddhist context gave him a newfound appreciation for the Hindu practices he had formerly disregarded. Though he has a Buddhist name and lineage papers, Sumit is uncomfortable identifying as Buddhist if it means that he must renounce Hinduism. He does not consider his participation in Hindu rituals and ceremonies contradictory to his Buddhist practice, and he does not find Buddhism incompatible with his pre-existing beliefs. Sumit does not consider himself a “convert” because to him conversion implies antagonism and an “exclusionary principle” between religions. He prefers a complementary, inclusive approach to religious identity.

¹⁴ Andrew Kennedy (2004, p. 144) also makes this point with regards to British converts to Buddhism.

¹⁵ Another interviewee cites Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Living Buddha, Living Christ* as an influential part of his spiritual journey through Christianity and Buddhism.

3.3. Buddhist Interpretations of Conversion

First-gen YAAABs—many of whom share Sumit’s non-exclusivist approach to spirituality—would appear to be exemplars of religious hybridity, syncretism, or, to borrow Cristina Rocha’s (2010) term, creolization. It is important to remember, however, that their willingness to mix different faiths is not without limits. Vince writes:

I would be very interested to know about experiences of those who grew up in “mixed-faith” families—for example, one parent was Buddhist, but the other was Jewish. Did they choose one path over the other? Was this even an issue because Buddhism is more open to syncretism? Or is Buddhism not as open to syncretism as people think it is (e.g., what the Buddha said to the ascetic Subhadda in the Maha-parinibbana Sutta)?

In questioning the degree to which Buddhism is syncretic, Vince suggests potential limitations to the flexibility and openness associated with Buddhism. In Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s (1998) translation of the sutra passage that Vince refers to, the Buddha tells Subhadda, “the last of the Blessed One’s face-to-face disciples,” that “other teachings are empty of knowledgeable contemplatives” and puts forth a rule that those from other sects who wish to enter his order must first go through four months’ probation.

That teachings from other traditions may be incompatible with Buddhist doctrine is evident in the decision of several first-gen interviewees who have deliberately distanced themselves from their former faith of Christianity. Oliver recalls how being part of an evangelical Christian group “divided my world into us and them,” vowing, “I don’t want to be in that situation again.” Like many of his fellow first-gen Buddhists, as well as second- and multi-gen YAAABs, he disapproves of aggressive proselytization (Han 2017, p. 18). Ironically, this desire to avoid converting others—which would seem to be a mark of open-mindedness—also limits the possibilities of hybridizing or syncretizing Buddhist practices and beliefs with more exclusivist, missionizing religions.

In highlighting the incompatibilities between Buddhism and other religions, the YAAABs I interviewed take a stance of respectful resistance. Camilla, a second-gen Taiwanese American Buddhist, interprets conversion within a Chinese Buddhist framework:

I don’t think conversion plays as big of a role in Buddhism as in other religions, say Christianity. This is probably because in Chinese thought/culture in general there is the concept of affinities (yuan), which can be loosely explained as ties that connect you to things. So if you have affinities with a certain religion, it will click for you, even if you’ve never been exposed to it before, but if you do not have affinities with a certain religion, it will not click for you even if you’ve been exposed to it for most of your life.

By introducing Buddhist notions of karma and rebirth through the notion of affinities, Camilla implicitly rejects Christian notions of conversion that suggest anyone can and should be converted to Christianity.

Other interviewees also cite the Buddhist notion of karma to de-emphasize, or altogether disavow, the role of conversion in Buddhism. Brian, who was raised Methodist, notes that Buddhism “is not so much a religion of proselytization. People come to it if it is in their karma.” Noah points out that if one does not believe in Buddhism, the consequences are “not that serious; you will be reborn based on your karma,” whereas “in Christianity, if you don’t believe in it then you go to hell.” Unfortunately, he speaks from personal experience, having been on the receiving end of such rhetoric from Christian family members.

In a counterpoint to Noah’s family’s position, Camilla presents a Buddhist argument for respecting religious difference: “In the Diamond Sutra, the Buddha says: ‘This Dharma is level and equal, without superiority or inferiority.’ This means that any dharma (teaching, in this case) that gets you to liberation is equal.” Thus, “if different religions serve to fulfill the needs of different people . . . there is no reason why people have to believe in Buddhism.” It is not only Buddhists who characterize themselves as

non-proselytizing; sociologist Carolyn Chen (2002, p. 224) quotes a Taiwanese Christian interviewee who comments that “Buddhists don’t evangelize like we Christians.”

Noah insists, “We propagate the Dharma, which is different from converting others.” While this may seem to be splitting semantic hairs, several interviewees regard “conversion” as containing a degree of coercion that “propagation” does not. These young adults would rather see someone content in another faith than forced into Buddhist beliefs against their will. Since many of the YAAABs I spoke to do not see Buddhism as an easily definable “thing” to convert to, it is not surprising that these young adult Asian Americans engage in nuanced debates around the topic of conversion, with some choosing to reinterpret it as a Buddhist concept and others rejecting the term altogether.

Zheng, an interviewee who was born in China, moved to Canada for middle school, and attended college in Los Angeles, offers a reflection that acknowledges both the shortcomings and strengths of defining convert Buddhism as “the Buddhism of Americans who are not of Asian descent”:

I guess I am a little bit of a convert Buddhist myself, despite not fitting the ethnically oriented part of the above definition. In a sense, I do agree somewhat with the ethnic aspect in the definition of convert Buddhism, at least from a Chinese perspective. For someone not of Asian descent, becoming a Buddhist may actually be a more significant conversion given the cultural background differences.

In considering himself “a little bit of a convert Buddhist” despite being of Asian heritage, Zheng underscores the contested meanings of conversion. His suggestion that conversion to Buddhism may be less extreme for him as someone of Asian heritage mirrors Sumit’s comment about not identifying as a convert because Buddhism does not present a major challenge to his existing worldview. In his consideration of the cultural differences between non-Asian convert Buddhists and Asian American convert Buddhists, Zheng implicitly rejects the figure of the “banana Buddhist” (Arun 2014). While not wanting Asian Americans to be excluded from “convert Buddhism,” he also calls for attention to cultural specificities within the ranks of convert Buddhists. He sees Asian American convert Buddhists as a unique group in their own right and not just white Buddhists in yellowface.

4. Debating Reversion

In the same journal article in which he argues that children of non-Asian Buddhist converts should also be considered converts, Paul Numrich (2003, p. 69) makes another bold claim:

For ethnic Asians in the West, it is really not a matter of “conversion” to Buddhism, even if one’s family or ethnic group was not Buddhist in Asia in recent times. It is rather a matter of reversion, or of re-envisioning their Buddhist heritage, even if that heritage has suffered hiatus for some time, or has to be created in response to the social pressures involved in minority group identity formation.

The idea that Asian Americans can only “revert” rather than convert to Buddhism would seem to imply some sort of Buddhist “default setting” that ignores the different ways the religion has (or has not) developed in disparate Asian countries and the complex histories of various Asian diasporas. It is difficult to imagine an analogous claim for another racial group holding muster—that white/European Americans can only revert to Christianity, for instance. Wakoh Shannon Hickey (2010, p. 7) disagrees with Numrich’s thesis on reversion, pointing out that “[b]ecause we cannot link nationality or ethnicity to religion so tidily, we cannot assume that any ethnically Asian person who begins to practice Buddhism in the United States is reverting to a heritage faith.”

On the one hand, the “reversion” argument suggests a close cultural—one is almost tempted to say biological or genetic—association between Asian Americans and Buddhism. On the other hand, to quote Catherine, a Chinese American first-gen Buddhist raised by nonreligious parents, “The Buddhist scene in the U.S. is very White-dominated . . . Asian American Buddhists are not the faces you see at most conferences, temples, retreats, magazine covers, etc.” Debates around “reversion”

reveal complicated and contradictory conceptualizations of American Buddhism: white converts dominate the American Buddhist mediascape, yet Buddhism is conceived of as an Asian religion.

In what could be considered a rebuttal of Numrich's "reversion" thesis, several of the first-gen YAAABs I interviewed do not consider their Buddhism a "reversion" even though they have Buddhist family members. Aaron has a Buddhist grandmother, but he considers "her version of Buddhism [to be] much more mixed in with talisman and ancestor worship" than his. He distances himself from claiming Buddhism as part of his ancestral heritage, preferring instead to align himself with more "modern" Buddhist practices. Along similar lines, Eileen remembers a godfather who would take her to Buddhist temples to burn incense and pray, but she does not evoke a narrative of reversion or reconnection because she considers her godfather's practice "a very different kind of Buddhist tradition" than the "very American strain" she practices now. We can easily recognize the limitations of the "reversion" theory if we attend to generational differences between these first-gen YAAABs and their forebears. These young adults are born into unique historical circumstances, do not share the same generational immigrant status as their elders, and defy expectations of Buddhist heritage as first-gen American Buddhists whose parents are not Buddhist.

4.1. Buddhist Roots Real and Imagined

Before summarily dismissing Numrich's point about reversion, however, it is important to consider the perspectives of first-gen YAAABs who, as Numrich describes, re-envision Buddhist heritage in response to minority status. Though none of the first-gen YAAABs I interviewed explicitly describe themselves as having "reverted" to Buddhism, the act of "re-envisioning" that some first-gen Asian American Buddhists undertake connects to the concept of reversion insofar as imagining a culturally connected form of Buddhist heritage entails a harkening back to roots real and imagined.

For Brian, converting to Buddhism was an act of reclaiming a heritage that he traces to one of his parents. His story is a reminder of the complex religious identifications that can result from being raised in a mixed-faith family. His Japanese American mother wanted to raise him Buddhist, but his father, who is of English, Danish, and Irish ancestry, prevailed; he grew up Methodist instead. Unfortunately, Brian's mother died when he was young, ending his familial exposure to Buddhism. He considers himself to have "technically converted" at the age of 24 when he took refuge vows in Buddhism after being atheist for many years. Brian, who identifies as "mixed," "hapa," and "Asian American," has encountered challenges in the mostly white Tibetan and Zen communities he has practiced in: "I've been puzzled and at times frustrated by the lack of representation of Asian Americans within the communities and its media. As a fourth-generation Asian American who wants to journey back to my roots, I find being in an Americanized sangha counter to my goals." He admits that his attitude toward his cousins, who are evangelical Christians, ranges from happiness for them "to anger that they have sacrificed their roots as Buddhists." The affective dimension of Brian's connection to Buddhism is hard to miss in these statements. This "root" tradition is clearly tied to his Asian heritage, such that he is disappointed in his cousins' Christian faith as a squandering of their religious inheritance, and perplexed by American Buddhist representations and sanghas that are devoid of fellow Asian Americans.

For some first-gen YAAABs, the "re-envisioning" process that Numrich describes is more of a rediscovery, as when Catherine found out about Buddhist roots she was previously unaware of. On a family trip to Western China in high school, she learned that before the Cultural Revolution banned religion, her family was Buddhist. "I became interested in Buddhism as part of my heritage," Catherine explains, using a definition of heritage that extends beyond an inheritance from her atheist parents. During her freshman year of college, she took a religious studies course on Buddhism and delved into the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh. As a result, Catherine "began to integrate Buddhist teachings organically into daily life" and joined the campus Buddhist group. She later joined a people of color insight meditation group.

For other Asian American Buddhist “converts,” re-envisioning Buddhism as part of their heritage is more an act of imagination than discovery. While Joshua, who is of mixed Korean and Irish descent, does not have solid proof of ancestral connections to Buddhism, he evokes hypothetical Buddhist family members of the past to connect him with his Asian heritage:

Like a lot of American converts, I began exploring Buddhism in college. I was studying a lot of Western philosophy at the time and was curious about what the rest of the world thought about the big questions of existence. I was also curious because it was around this time that I became more interested in my own heritage; the Korean side of my family were all non-practicing Presbyterians, but I figured that several generations back at least some of them had practiced some kind of Buddhism.

The Korean side of Joshua’s family came to the United States in the early twentieth century. They gradually stopped speaking Korean, which he considers “a tragic loss of our cultural roots.” Growing up multiracial in a predominantly white community, Joshua was perceived as “other” and internalized a sense of being “not white,” leading him to identify strongly with his Asian heritage. By underlining Buddhism’s deep historical roots and specific cultural forms in Asia, Joshua finds a way to address the feeling of cultural loss that has resulted from immigration and assimilation.

4.2. A Pan-Asian Orientation to Buddhist Heritage

Even YAAABs from Christian backgrounds may claim cultural or ancestral affinity with Buddhism. These young adults offer creative justifications for this act of “re-envisioning their Buddhist heritage” that are not contingent upon being able to name Buddhist family members. Lola, whose Hong Kong-born mother moved to California at the age of fifteen during the Cultural Revolution, grew up surrounded by Christian family members. Thus, Buddhism came to her not through family but “by way of White Americans and non-Asian Americans of color bringing it to the forefront of [her] immediate observable universe[:] through [her] work as a therapist and health provider.” Lola admits that in the past she negatively “judged the devotional practices of Asian Buddhists.” After consciously working to overcome this “dominant culture bias” by lifting the “oppressive lens” through which she viewed these devotional practices, Lola came to a revelation about her own family:

I see just how much my family (although they did not identify with it) practiced (when we could) Buddhism in many ways—such as respect for all life; minding our impact on others; having compassion for suffering and doing what we can to decrease it; generosity with friends, neighbors, and family; and trying to appreciate what we have.

In this analysis, Lola reframes her family’s Christian history by reinterpreting their values and behaviors as being aligned with Buddhist principles and practices.¹⁶ This is an act of not only religious but also political reclamation, since she sees the denigration of devotional Buddhist practices as part of an imperialist and patriarchal agenda that valorizes white, male practices—religious and otherwise—as superior to non-white, female ones. Lola’s re-reading of her family’s actions as Buddhist thereby subverts the dominance of Christianity, whiteness, and maleness in American society.

Noel would also seem like an unlikely candidate for evoking a strong connection between his culture heritage, given the long-standing dominance of Catholicism in his birthplace of the Philippines. He points out that there are over a million Buddhists in the Philippines, “a small number compared to Thailand, but that’s still more than many Latin or African countries combined.” Given that most of the Buddhists in the Philippines are of Chinese ancestry (Dy 2012), Noel’s act of linking the Philippines with Buddhism takes a pan-Asian view of Buddhist heritage that challenges the assumption that

¹⁶ We see a parallel act of interpretation—albeit in the opposite direction—when an Asian American evangelical Christian student notes that “there are definitely teachings from Buddhism that are very Christian . . . not harming anyone, trying to live a good life”; see (Hyon 1992, p. 40), quoted in (Busto 1996, p. 139).

Asian American Buddhists are connected to coethnic religious practitioners. Catherine, Joshua, and Lola also take this pan-ethnic approach in their reclamation of Buddhism as part of their Asian heritage, since none of them practice in sanghas where the majority of the members are of their own ethnic backgrounds.

We see this pan-ethnic/pan-Asian orientation to Buddhist heritage in the prediction by some first-gen YAAABs that, in time, Asian Americans of various religious backgrounds will increasingly turn—or return—to Buddhism. The language these interviewees use to describe this process suggests a return to roots, even if these roots are more metaphorically constructed than literally traceable. Some might consider this to be a sort of conversion with reversion elements. Oliver wonders if those who converted out of Buddhism in response to pressure to assimilate might yet rediscover it: “As we grow, we get to appreciate what we might have lost, or have not discovered yet, and hopefully get a chance to do this little homecoming.” Oliver’s metaphor of returning home is striking given that he grew up in a predominantly Muslim country in a family strongly influenced by Islam; he does not have Buddhist family members.

According to the [Pew Research Center \(2012, p. 51\)](#), “One-in-ten Asian Americans (10%) were raised Buddhist and have left the faith, while 2% of Asian Americans have become Buddhist after being raised in a different faith (or no faith).” Responding to these statistics, Oliver considers the two percent of Asian Americans “who either came back home or found home in Buddhism” to reflect “a natural process,” an assessment that echoes arguments about the connection of one’s Buddhist identification with one’s karmic affinity. Sumit also predicts that people who have converted out of Buddhism “will come back” as the religion becomes more firmly rooted in America. As Supraja, who was raised in a Hindu household in the Bay Area, humorously puts it, “Just give it some time. Give it a few generations. Asian Americans are going to get real screwed and then everyone’s going to be like, we need Buddhism. They’re going to come back, I promise!” For these interviewees, the Buddhist teaching of impermanence is a source of optimism. Taking the long view helps them counter the narrative of decline presented by the Pew Forum statistics.

4.3. Conversion, Reversion, or . . . ?

Several of the YAAABs I interviewed wonder how to categorize those who are raised Buddhist and later strengthen their beliefs or rediscover their faith (e.g., after a period of attenuated connection to the religion or after identifying with a different faith or no faith). Some argue that the category of “converts” should be expanded to include those who are raised Buddhist and later reconnect with the religion on their own terms. According to this definition, many of the second-gen YAAABs I interviewed could be thought of as converts. This view posits a difference between being Buddhist by cultural osmosis and discovering Buddhism through intentional seeking—what [Cadge \(2005, p. 157\)](#) calls ascribed and achieved identity, respectively. This perspective also acknowledges the sheer diversity of types of Buddhism that are available to Americans, such that one cannot take people’s ethnicities to be determinative of their Buddhist tradition.

To cite a variation of Numrich’s reversion thesis by [Gregory \(2001, p. 247\)](#), some of the YAAAB converts I interviewed would seem to be “connected umbilically . . . with specific forms of Buddhism”—either through actual familial ties or imagined ancestral ones. However, to reduce the faith of Asian American Buddhists to an “umbilical” metaphor, which implies a biological/genetic transmission of religion, risks obscuring the hybridity and dynamism of the religious lives of Asian American Buddhists. In an interview about her book *Virtual Orientalism*, Jane Iwamura talks about being raised Jodo Shinshu, attending Seventh Day Adventist and Mennonite schools along with Catholic and Episcopalian summer camps, and considering herself a Christian in college before (re)discovering an affinity with Buddhism in graduate school ([Petersen 2013](#)). Is Iwamura converting to Buddhism? Reverting? Re-envisioning? Switching (to use the Pew Forum’s term)? Doing something

else entirely that we have yet to find a good term for?¹⁷ As the plethora of perspectives discussed in this section attest, there are no easy answers to these questions. Whatever label we choose, however, it is clear that the experiences of Asian American convert Buddhists complicate the “two Buddhisms” binary of white convert and Asian American “cradle” Buddhists.

5. Multiplicity of Identity Will Be the Norm

Born in the Philippines and raised in the United States, Noel used to call himself a Tibetan Buddhist to reflect the major influence Tibetan Buddhism has had on his life. Now, however, he prefers to call himself an “American Buddhist” because this is the country where he found Buddhism, and because it reflects “a type of Buddhism that is evolving” to be inclusive of a diverse array of Buddhist traditions. Noel considers the chaplaincy program at the University of the West (UWest) in Southern California to be quintessentially American Buddhist for the unparalleled opportunity to learn about different Buddhist traditions with classmates of heterogeneous religious and cultural backgrounds.

In embracing an inclusive and diverse definition of American Buddhism, Noel prefers a “space-making politics” over a “place-taking politics,” to cite a concept expounded in Monisha Das Gupta’s (2006) book *Unruly Immigrants*. Drawing on Das Gupta’s work in her MA thesis on Sri Lankan American Buddhist temples, Mihiri Tillakaratne (2012, p. 13) writes, “the changes that place-takers make are changes that benefit them and reflect the cultural and political hegemony in the homeland, while the changes the space-makers make are challenging this hegemony.” Noel’s definition of American Buddhism is space-making rather than place-taking insofar as it counters the hegemony of white convert Buddhism.

For Noel’s former classmate Holly, being “surrounded by a remarkably diverse community of varied ages, cultures, nationalities, primary languages and Buddhist traditions” during her years in UWest’s Buddhist chaplaincy program gave her a feeling of being “at home in a sangha” for the first time. When asked how she would categorize American Buddhists, Holly prefaces her answer with the caveat that she prefers to let people tell her what category they use. She then offers a page-long list—which she emphasizes is not exhaustive. Her categories include “hybrid North American Buddhisms,” under which she places “atheist or agnostic Buddhists” and “dual-or-multiple identity Buddhists.” Wanwan, mentioned earlier in this article, fits within the first of these sub-categories.¹⁸ The Jewish-Buddhists, Christian-Buddhists, Hindu-Buddhists, and Zoroastrian-Buddhists I interviewed fit into the second sub-category.

In stark contrast to the eight categories and twenty subcategories of Holly’s list, a 2008 Pew Forum religious landscape survey presents just four categories and three sub-categories for Buddhist respondents to choose from: “Theravada (such as Vipassana), Mahayana (such as Zen), Vajrayana (such as Tibetan), or something else” (Pew Research Center 2008, p. 151). The report concludes that more than half of all American Buddhists identify as either Vipassana, Zen, or Tibetan Buddhists, but a 2012 Pew Forum report that corrects for the methodological limitations of the 2008 survey finds that the majority of Asian American Buddhists—who comprise more than two-thirds of American Buddhists—do not fit into one of these three categories.¹⁹ That the 2008 report chose three groups strongly associated with white American converts in its survey instrument is an instance where “the ‘lack’ or inadequacy . . . lies not with Asian Americans, but rather with the survey apparatus” (Iwamura et al. 2014, p. 7). When I asked YAAABs what they thought were the best-known types of

¹⁷ Anne Spencer (2016) prefers the framework of “religious fluidity” to conversion, although this does not lend itself easily to verb form.

¹⁸ She identifies as agnostic, though she has spent time with a Buddhist meditation group at college and at a Buddhist monastery in China.

¹⁹ “About one-in-eight Asian-American Buddhists (13%) say they practice Mahayana Buddhism (including Zen and other branches), 8% practice Theravada Buddhism, 5% identify with Vajrayana (or Tibetan) Buddhism, and 2% identify with Vipassana Buddhism. About one-in-ten Asian-American Buddhists (8%) volunteered that they identify with other traditions, including Jodo Shinshu Buddhism (7%); see (Pew Research Center 2012, p. 45)

Buddhism in America, by far the most common answers were Zen, Tibetan, and Theravada/Vipassana. When I asked how they would categorize American Buddhists, however, I received a much more varied set of answers, including several detailed lists like Holly's.

Defying Easy Categorization

The first-gen YAAABs I interviewed resist reducing American Buddhism to the forms that are most popular among white converts by celebrating the heterogeneity of American Buddhism and insisting that diverse realities will triumph over homogenizing representations. As Holly remarks, "Buddhists like myself face challenges in integrating and expressing multiple cultural identities—as young, American, Buddhist, and Asian. Yet I think we are all moving toward a more pluralistic world in which multiplicity of identity will be the norm." Gabrielle makes a similar point in slightly different words when she predicts that "there are a lot of young adult Buddhists like me who feel like they don't quite fit into a box." In critiquing the inadequacy of the boxes so often imposed on American Buddhists—immigrant or convert (pick one), which Buddhist tradition do you practice in (pick one), what is your race/ethnicity (pick one)—first-gen YAAABs assert the plurality and hybridity of their lived experiences as representative of all American Buddhists, rather than incidental characteristics of a fringe group within a white-dominated category.

In Joshua's view, the difficulty of fitting into a single box is not a liability but a boon. Indeed, he considers it a hallmark of his generation of American Buddhists:

My life is going to be very different than the life of a Japanese immigrant in the 19th century, or even a Beat poet in the 1950s. How exactly this affects my perspective on Buddhism is perhaps a little difficult to tease out, but I would suggest that because we are at a point when many different dharma traditions are well-established in this country, we younger Buddhists have more opportunities to learn about and from more schools of Buddhism than ever before.

Joshua's awareness of the unique situation of being a Buddhist in twenty-first-century America, where "we have just about every tradition in one place," leads him to urge his fellow practitioners to "take this amazing opportunity to learn from different schools." He has certainly taken advantage of this opportunity himself: Joshua meditates in the Thai forest tradition; listens to dharma talks by Thanissaro Bhikkhu; includes Venerable Sheng-yen, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, and Uchiyama Kosho among his Buddhist influences; and models his ideal Buddhist community off of a bilingual Chan Buddhist sangha.

Not having inherited a Buddhist tradition and being engaged with an astonishing panoply of Buddhist traditions, first-gen Asian American Buddhists defy easy categorization. These young adults are rarely responding to the question "what kind of Buddhist are you?" by stating their ethnicity or a single Buddhist sect—and when they do, their spiritual lives are often a great deal more complex than a short label can express. Dolma, for example, considers a Shin Buddhist minister she met through a meditation group in college to be her "greatest Buddhist teacher": studying with him, she explains, "is how I really came into my Nyingma Buddhist identity!" The label "Nepalese Nyingma Buddhist" obscures the impact this Shin Buddhist teacher—as well as her Jewish heritage and interfaith work—have had on Dolma's spiritual journey.

"Your religious identity should be . . . something that feels right for you. It isn't static, it isn't something that you have to be born with, it just has to support you," Dolma insists. In an analysis of the religious autobiographies of sixteen British Buddhists raised in non-Buddhist households, Andrew Kennedy (2004, p. 144) observes that his interviewees' "involvement with Buddhism appears to be an ongoing process rather than a completed self-transformation." Dolma's definition of religious identity and the unexpected religious trajectories of the first-gen YAAABs I interviewed support this observation.

6. Conclusion: Articulating Their Own Identities

Several of the first-gen YAAABs I interviewed draw on Buddhist teachings of impermanence to destabilize the notion of a fixed, unchanging religious identity. Holly writes, “As a Buddhist, I know that the self is always inconstant and interdependent, so in a way my Buddhist practices help me be at peace in the midst of the tensions in multiplicity and diversity.” This observation corresponds with Angie Danyluk’s (2003, p. 136) findings that religious identification for Western Tibetan Buddhists in Toronto is “a choice that is constantly being questioned, re-evaluated, and reinterpreted.”

The first-gen YAAABs featured in this article highlight the fluidity of their religious identifications. Adam, who is half-Filipino, remarks: “I can be a Christian sometimes, and I can be a Buddhist sometimes, and an atheist sometimes.” His choice of how to identify is not arbitrary; drawing on the Buddhist notion of skillful means, Adam chooses the identity that helps him connect with others in any given situation. Bhikshu Jin Chuan, a Chinese American raised in a nonreligious household who became a Mahayana monk, also relates to identity labels as tools whose usefulness varies depending on the context: “Each person creates their own to help them make sense of their experience. Sometimes it helps clarify something; sometimes it obfuscates.” Many first-gen Asian American Buddhists caution against doggedly holding on to any particular identity.

Bhikshu Jin Chuan draws on Buddhist teachings of impermanence, not-self, and interconnectedness when he urges all American Buddhists to consider that “we are all on the same ‘team.’” He explains, “We have all been family. I might have been a European last life. They might have been Vietnamese. Who is to say that he or she was not my mother?” Though he recognizes that many people may not believe in past lives, Bhikshu Jin Chuan considers the notion of rebirth to be a Buddhist theory that, whether or not it is scientifically provable, has ethical value in encouraging us to extend compassion to others. Some may interpret his suggestion that “we have all been family” as an endorsement of race-blindness. However, his interview is filled with observations about the unique positionality of YAAABs, suggesting that Bhikshu Jin Chuan is not asking us to ignore race but calling for cooperation between Buddhists of different racial backgrounds—which is only possible when their differences are acknowledged.

An attitude of non-attachment to identity is not the same as being anti-identity. As Leah Kalmanson (2012) argues, active awareness of the truth of impermanence is not the same as nihilism.²⁰ Even though Vince’s Asian American identity is sometimes salient and other times “doesn’t arise in the present moment,” he considers it very important to know about events in Asian American history, such as the internment of Japanese Americans and the murder of Vincent Chin, as this knowledge contextualizes how Asian Americans are perceived and helps him respond to stereotyping and discrimination. After all, “people will choose an identity for you and a story about you, even if you haven’t chosen that identity or story for yourself.”

In their critical and creative articulations of their religious and cultural identities, first-gen YAAABs resist the reduction of American Buddhism to a story of white converts and Asian immigrants. In his satirical description of a “banana Buddhist” on the *Angry Asian Buddhist* blog, Aaron Lee²¹ writes, “It really doesn’t matter if she doesn’t speak up because whatever she says isn’t going to be any different from what the white Buddhists are saying” (Arun 2014). The first-gen YAAABs whose voices are woven throughout this article beg to differ.

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²⁰ Kalmanson (2012, p. 821) writes, “to be non-attached to beauty is not simply to be ‘anti-beauty,’ just as non-attachment to the self is not simply ‘anti-self.’ Non-attachment is not a reactionary stance. Rather, to be non-attached is to be open to, and to care deeply for, life in the present moment, while recognizing the futility of ever preserving, as if in stone, that for which one cares.”

²¹ After his death in 2017, the anonymous blogger behind the *Angry Asian Buddhist* was revealed to be Aaron Lee, a YAAAB of mixed Jewish/Ashkenazi and Toishanese heritage.

Appendix A. Interviewee Ethnicities and Religious Backgrounds

Table A1. The table below presents information about the ethnic and religious backgrounds of the thirty first-gen YAAABs I interviewed. The left column lists interviewees' ethnicities as written on a demographic form each person completed at the end of the interview, with clarifying information added in square brackets. The right column lists the religion each interviewee grew up in, based on information provided in his or her interview.

Stated Ethnicity	Religion of Upbringing *
Asian American [Taiwanese]	Catholic
Asian-American [Chinese]	Nonreligious
Asian/Caucasian [Korean, Belarussian]	Atheist
Chinese	Nonreligious
Chinese	Catholic
Chinese	Christian
Chinese	Mixed
Chinese American	Christian
Chinese American	Mixed
Chinese American	Secular
Chinese-American	Nonreligious
Chinese/Ashkenazi	Jewish
Filipina, Japanese, Chinese, Spanish	Catholic
Filipino	Catholic
Half Asian [Filipino]	Mixed
Indian	Hindu
Indian	Hindu
Indian	Hindu
Iranian	Zoroastrian
Japanese, English, Irish, Danish	Methodist
Korean American	Christian
Korean-American	Christian
Mixed (Iranian-Mexican)	Mixed
Mixed-ethnicity [Japanese, Jewish, Alaskan]	Nonreligious
Nepali and Belarussian American	Jewish
South Asian American [Indian]	Hindu
South Indian (Tamilian), Hindu, Canadian	Hindu
Turkmen	Muslim
Two or More Races, Hapa, Korean, Asian	Presbyterian
Vietnamese	Catholic

* A handful of these thirty interviewees have one parent who is connected to Buddhism and another parent who identifies with a different religion; I include these young adults' perspectives in my analysis because Buddhism was not their primary or only identity growing up.

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