Palliative Buddhism: Corporate Exoticization and Appropriation of Mindfulness Under Neoliberal Crisis

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Abstract

In 2014 at the annual Wisdom 2.0 *Conference in San Francisco, several people interrupted a panel hosted by Google on mindfulness and technology in order to protest economic inequality and displacement in the area. After the protesters were forced to leave, the panelists instructed their audience to utilize mindfulness techniques in order to move past the distraction and return to productive discussion. This moment encapsulates the interaction between the growth of corporate mindfulness and the ongoing crisis of neoliberal exploitation, in that the panelists sought to deploy mindfulness as a strategy for smoothing over the contradictions of capitalism. This paper analyzes the turn by an increasing number of people and corporations in the West to corporate mindfulness as a method for coping with uncertainty, stress, and anxiety associated with neoliberal crisis. I analyze the 2014 incident at the* Wisdom 2.0 *conference, as well as two guided mindfulness programs:* Headspace *and* Buddhify. *In particular, I argue that these corporate mindfulness programs are characterized by the appropriation, exoticization and whitewashing of Asian Buddhist practices that serve as a crisis management strategy in the contemporary neoliberal era.*

In 2014 at the annual Wisdom 2.0 Conference in San Francisco, a panel hosted by Google titled "3 Steps to Build Corporate Mindfulness the Google Way" sought to discuss how integrating mindfulness into company life might enhance gratefulness, compassion and wisdom at the corporation. However, several people interrupted the panel to protest economic inequality and displacement in the area, chanting "Wisdom Means Stop Displacement; Wisdom Means Stop Surveillance; San Francisco: Not for Sale!" while unfurling a banner that read "Eviction Free San Francisco" (Heart of the City, 2014; Wisdom 2.0, 2014). After a few moments, security forced the protesters to leave. One of the panelists then instructed the audience through a few moments of guided meditation, asking them not to judge the situation as good or bad, but to sit with it in order to move past the distraction and return to productive discussion. Throughout the rest of the

presentation, they explained how engaging in mindfulness at Google executive meetings had benefitted them. What this incident at the Wisdom 2.0 conference so paradigmatically captures is the way in which mindfulness is yoked from its original Buddhist context and placed in service of a secular, whitewashed, palliative strategy for helping a corporation to run more smoothly. Put differently, this incident encapsulates the interaction between corporate mindfulness and the ongoing crises of neoliberalism, in that the panelists deployed mindfulness as a strategy for smoothing over capitalist violence.

This incident at the Wisdom 2.0 conference is just one example of a broader phenomenon of Western adoption and appropriation of mindfulness practices. One of the most popular examples can be gleaned in Jon Kabat-Zinn's ideas about "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MSBR)," in which Kabat-Zinn claims to draw from Buddhist practice but simultaneously articulates MSBR as a secular practice of simply paying attention to the present moment without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). While Kabat-Zinn's MSBR program initially began by offering eight-week courses for stressed out Americans, it soon developed into an internationally marketed curriculum sold to corporations, schools, government and military institutions. Interest in mindfulness has exploded throughout the West, including a panoply of mindfulness programs in corporate spaces designed to increase productivity and decrease stress. Even the U.S. Army has integrated mindfulness practices in an attempt to foster mental resilience in their soldiers both during combat and after deployment (Myers, 2015). In Western countries outside of the U.S., mindfulness programs and interest in them have grown exponentially as well. For example, one study on the growing phenomenon of mindfulness in Aarhus, Denmark noted a 74% increase over just four years (Borup, 2016). Finally, in many ways this trend has resulted in scholars taking up mindfulness in similar ways. While Janine Schipper (2012) argues mindfulness can encourage sociologists to turn inward and question how their own illusions cloud research practices, Matthew Immergut and Peter Kaufman (2014) suggest Buddhist notions of an interdependent self can advance sociological inquiries into symbolic interactionism.

As examples of this larger trend, I examine corporate mindfulness training programs and mindfulness apps marketed for stress reduction and productivity. Scholars have criticized these practices for commodifying and appropriating a historically Buddhist practice, with some even referring to the process as "McMindfulness" (Purser and Loy, 2013; Healey, 2015; Toledo, 2016; Hyland, 2017; Purser, 2018; Purser, 2019). As Ronald Purser (2019) points out, Kabat-Zinn's

mindfulness empire and other programs like it exemplify the corporate co-option of Buddhist principles and the development of a dangerous capitalist spirituality. For him, these mindfulness programs are stripped of their ethical practices and made subservient to the demands of the marketplace, reframing social injustice and capitalist exploitation as individualistic problems of the mind that can be overcome through meditation (Purser, 2019). Here, mindfulness is yoked from the Buddhist emphasis on interconnectedness and social transformation of suffering and used to emphasize neoliberal values of individualism, productivity and consumerism. Moreover, many programs de-link their practices from Buddhism, touting a secular mindfulness that is inspired by Buddhist practices but adapted for a general audience and stripped of religious connotations. As Funie Hsu (2016) notes, this promotes an "ideology of white conquest" that invisibilizes Asian and Asian American Buddhists and their role in the legacy of mindfulness practices.

Scholars contending with neoliberal crisis provide avenues for considering the way in which corporate mindfulness acts as a strategy for expanding neoliberal value systems and co-opting Buddhist discourses of interconnectedness to serve the ends of the market. The contemporary era remains increasingly characterized by social fragmentation, individualism, the expansion of social inequality and existential threats. This crisis and its concomitant management process is an essential strategy in maintaining neoliberalism, as it relies on cycles of destruction and crisis to justify reconstruction (Harvey, 2007). As Wendy Chun (2016) argues, neoliberalism increasingly works through privatization, producing a plural "you" as opposed to a communal "we," in which consumer products claim to be specifically marketed to each individual. For Chun, contemporary capitalism requires consistent "updates" to deal with its contradictions, producing reoccurring crises that require correction (Chun, 2016). While her focus remains on the way in which new media technologies in particular portends to resolve ongoing issues, we might consider more broadly the ways in which contemporary society increasingly seeks to "update" itself to attend to crisis without confronting the structural and sociopolitical roots of that crisis. Corporate mindfulness programs present one such form of said "update," as a strategy that co-opts Buddhist belief systems in order to figure market forces, productivity and neoliberal self-help as solutions to crisis. As Lauren Berlant (2011 pp. 10, 81-82) has highlighted, the historical present is increasingly structured through "crisis ordinariness," a term she uses to refer to the way in which moments of change unfold in larger contexts of precipitating conditions. In other words, "crises" are not isolated events but occur as the result of systemically embedded social conditions, and are

often experienced as ongoing as opposed to instantaneous.

Building on this existing scholarly conversation, I consider the way corporate mindfulness programs are framed as solutions to ongoing feelings of stress, fragmentation and disillusionment with everyday life as a strategy of neoliberal crisis-management. Methodologically, I investigate how corporate mindfulness programs justify their products and attempt to persuade publics of the need for them. In doing so, I seek to identify the rhetorical strategies that they rely on to frame mindfulness as a solution to stress, fragmentation and crisis. For the purposes of scope, I limit this analysis to Wisdom 2.0 and two mindfulness apps: *Buddhify* and *Headspace.* In exploring Wisdom 2.0*,* I analyze the statements released by Wisdom 2.0 and the protesters in order to understand their perspectives on the incident, as well as to consider how mindfulness programs like Wisdom 2.0 respond when faced with the violence of corporate capitalism. At the same time, I consider how Wisdom 2.0 presents itself on its website in order to investigate what discursive appeals it relies on to sell mindfulness as a product to corporations and individuals. Similarly, in analyzing *Buddhify* and *Headspace,* I look at the rhetorical strategies employed on their websites to understand how they market and frame the products, as well as works published by their founders to gain insight into how they conceptualized mindfulness for these products. Ultimately, I argue that these corporate mindfulness programs are characterized by the appropriation, exoticization and whitewashing of Asian Buddhist practices that serve as a crisis management strategy in the contemporary neoliberal era.

In what follows, I briefly explicate the context of mindfulness and its emergence as a Buddhist practice. Then, I examine the incident at Wisdom 2.0 and its relationship to neoliberal crisis. Next, I consider the development of *Headspace* and *Buddhify* as corporations that produce mindfulness practice as a consumer good for dealing with stress, lack of productivity and unhappiness. Finally, I conclude by arguing that scholars ought to further consider the role between Western appropriations of mindfulness practices and attempts to produce palliative strategies to cope with ongoing crisis.

Crisis and the Appropriation of Buddhist Mindfulness Practices

As a religion over 2,500 years old, Buddhism encompasses several divergent traditions that are not a monolith but contain innumerable nuances, internal debates and interpretations that go

beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, at the heart of these Buddhist traditions lies the idea of *anatman,* or "no-self," which denotes the illusory notion of an independent or inherent selfhood. Instead, all phenomena are interconnected with other phenomena, and do not contain their own self-isolated existence (Keown, 2000). Within this larger tradition, mindfulness practices are often derived from the *Satipatthāna Sutta* of the Pāli Canon of Theravada Buddhism. This text is considered to be a direct instruction on mindfulness practice, with the word *satipatthāna* roughly translating to "presence of mindfulness" (Anālayo, 2003, p. 29). The text begins with the claim that the sutra points to the direct path to the realization of *nibbana* (or *nirvana* in Sanskrit), a word commonly translated in the West to mean "enlightenment" but which actually means "blown out" (Anālayo, 2003; Keown, 2000, p. 52). *Nirvana/nibbana* thus signals a "blowing out" of the self as the path to spiritual awakening. The *Satipatthāna Sutta* divides its instruction for the attainment of this awakening into four sections; mindfulness of the body (*kāyā*), feelings (*vedanā*), mind (*citta*), and mind-objects (*dhammas*) (Purser and Millilo, 2015). It proceeds with instruction on meditation practice, connecting its instruction to Buddhist beliefs (Anālayo, 2003).

A brief explication of these concepts may help to clarify the religious background from which mindfulness practices are drawn. Related to the notion of no-self is that of dependent origination or dependent co-arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda* in Pali, *prātityasamudpāda* in Sanskrit), which describes the interdependent nature of all phenomena and thus the impossibility they have an unchanging, inherent essence. Also related is the impermanent nature of all phenomena as a result of this interdependence and lack of inherent essence (Keown, 2000). Thus, mindfulness is situated within a wider religious context that seeks to end unwholesome attachments to greed, illusory notions of the self, and other delusions. Even from this brief explication, it is easy to see how many contemporary Western appropriations of mindfulness, which are increasingly focused on discourses of self-help and individualism, are situated in opposition to Buddhist notions of no-self and interdependence. Moreover, as the self-help industry is increasingly dominated by white men, it is worth considering whether these discourses are accessible models for alleviating suffering since the ability to overcome barriers to success without confronting structural issues is a luxury seldom afforded to marginalized people.

Bill Duane, one of the presenters at the Wisdom 2.0 panel interrupted by protesters, sought to demonstrate the value of mindfulness by using it as a strategy for approaching the interruption through value neutrality. I use the term 'value neutrality' to designate an amoral position whereby

one refuses to take an ethical stance for or against a given action or statement. As the Wisdom 2.0 blog states in its report on the incident, after the interruption Duane asked the audience "to embrace this moment, without judging it good or bad…what had felt like an emotionally jarring interruption was transformed into a moment of awareness and peace" (Wisdom 2.0, 2014). In this regard, mindfulness is converted from a practice designed to alleviate suffering to a practice oriented toward pacifying resistance to that suffering by refusing to judge the incident "good or bad." The protesters were attempting to draw attention to an ethical question of how the presence of Google and other tech companies has led to increasing gentrification and evictions, thus harming local residents and evincing "the company's own hypocrisy in purporting to be 'mindful'" (Heart of the City, 2014). That Duane asked his audience not to judge the situation implies neutrality in its refusal to render a value judgment on the situation and its ethicality. Instead, Duane calls for simple awareness of the incident, implying any decision to proclaim the protesters right or wrong would interrupt that awareness. Mindfulness here becomes not a strategy to alleviate suffering but an exercise in complacency, of turning away from the ethical questions the protesters posed in the face of capitalist violence by refusing to take a stance on it.

Moreover, Duane's use of mindfulness selectively interprets the practice as simple awareness of a moment. However, as Ronald Purser and Joseph Millilo highlight,

> Canonical descriptions differentiate between two types of *sati,* "right" (*sammā*) and "wrong" (*micchā*). . . . Thus, mindfulness is not merely a passive and nonjudgmental attentiveness to the present moment exclusively but an actively engaged and discerning awareness. (2015, p. 5)

Contrary to the practices led by Bill Duane, then, Buddhist conceptions of mindfulness are based in a process of discerning right from wrong and cannot simply be reduced to awareness in a moment.[1] Such a practice thus not only appropriates mindfulness from its historical basis but does so in service of ignoring attempts to alleviate suffering, essentially guiding the audience to be at 'peace' with Google's role in ongoing violence under the guise of tolerance and mindful awareness. This represents an example of what Berlant refers to as "cruel optimism," or an investment in something that actually impedes one's wellbeing or flourishing (2011, p. 1). Duane reduces mindfulness to simple awareness of the moment, promoting a neoliberal amorality that fails to respond to ethical questions in favor of being

[1] It is important to note that ideas of "direct perception" were emphasized in some later Buddhist schools of thought. Robert Sharf (2015) locates examples of this notion in certain Zen schools and the Tibetan Dzogchen school. Some might argue, then, that corporate mindfulness programs have a basis in Buddhism. However, it would seem that this notion involves more a rejection of the "discriminating" mind insofar as conceptual thought is often clouded by delusion, not the claim that we ought not distinguish ethically right from wrong. Even if so, as Sharf details, Soto Zen practitioners engaged in "Critical Buddhism" in the 1990s criticized this model of direct apprehension for helping to justify Japanese militarism, revealing that criticism of the idea of direct apprehension has been scrutinized from within Buddhist traditions themselves.

nonjudgmental. This approach works to smooth over the symptoms of an underlying problem instead of confronting it: in this case, gentrification and displacement.

It is worth considering the ways in which the conference is embedded in a system of whitewashing, appropriation and neoliberal crisis management. Jeff Wilson (2009, p. 19-20) differentiates "Buddhist appropriators" from Buddhist practitioners, sympathizers, or opponents, as individuals who use Buddhism for their own purposes, rather than the purposes of genuinely engaging the religion. I agree with Wilson that the appropriation of Buddhism, particularly in the West, is often implemented for the purposes of promoting a product or personal ideology that is unrelated to Buddhism, and that this appropriation is frequently (though not always) carried out by non-Buddhists. The Wisdom 2.0 conference illustrates precisely this phenomenon, in which mindfulness is adopted for corporate efficiency without any attempt to engage its Buddhist roots. Moreover, following Joseph Cheah (2011), I maintain that the Western appropriation of Buddhism occurs within a larger context of white supremacy and orientalism, and as a result rearticulates Buddhist ideas in ways that reinforce racial hierarchy.

Additionally, if capitalism exists as a system that constantly recuperates itself through crisis and recapitulation, we might situate the corporate co-option of Buddhism as part and parcel to a larger series of neoliberal strategies that absorb difference and resistance to sustain its perpetuity. In the contemporary multicultural era, for instance, Jodi Melamed (2011) identifies the way in which capitalism co-opts questions of racial justice and reformulates them as aesthetic cultural production. This enables neoliberal forms of representation that do not meaningfully transform conditions of violence. Indeed, capitalism functions to encourage the production and celebration of differing identities, capitalizing on difference in order to produce the next hottest niche market for profit. We might thus understand the corporate appropriation and commodification of mindfulness as an extension of this logic insofar as corporate entities like Wisdom 2.0 can capitalize on mindfulness as an exotic form of difference and repackage it as the latest self-care strategy for improving productivity and coping with stress.

In addition to hosting its annual conference in San Francisco each year, the Wisdom 2.0 conference sponsors retreats around the globe (costing thousands of dollars to attend and thus only accessible to affluent communities) and "summits" in different states across the U.S. The "About" page on their website describes Wisdom 2.0 as positioned to address "the great challenge of our age: to not only live connected to one another through technology, but to do so in ways that are

beneficial to our own well-being, effective in our work, and useful to the world" (Wisdom 2.0, n.d.). Yet contemporary capitalism increasingly works not only through fragmentation and individualism but through connectivism; or the desire to integrate diverse parts of the globe and social life into a global network of consumerism (Culp, 2016). Put differently, connectivism attempts to extend capitalism's reach to every individual and person on the globe. This desire to integrate everyone into a larger connected network of people and goods is not an attempt to dissolve unwholesome attachments but to produce attachments to capitalism by individually catering to niche identities and differences.

The opening statement above valorizes connection through technology and mindfulness insofar as it is utilised to demonstrate how they might be *useful* to the world and make their work more effective, and thus primarily centres on how to best integrate people productively into a diverse global economy. It is thus not surprising that the conference primarily names its audience as technology staff from corporations like Apple and Microsoft, venture capitalists and entrepreneurs (Wisdom 2.0, n.d.). Notable here is not only that the conference uses mindfulness as a means to an end for achieving global integration into capitalist productivity, but also the lack of any attempt to include Buddhist history or contributions. In doing so, they mimic the phenomenon noted by Hsu (2016) in her analysis of secular, neoliberal mindfulness programs in education, by invisibilizing a legacy of Asian Buddhists in developing mindfulness practices and remaining primarily focused on increasing productivity and coping with stress produced by neoliberalism instead of confronting neoliberalism itself. Therefore, Buddhist mindfulness practices are both decontextualized from those Asian Buddhists who developed them and exported in the West as a crisis management strategy to support integration into a system of capitalist productivity and utility.

Wisdom 2.0 is part of a broader phenomenon of Western corporate adoption of mindfulness strategies that not only includes companies like Google and Microsoft incorporating mindfulness into their boardrooms, but also extends to the development of new niche markets for mindfulness programs. I analyze *Buddhify* and *Headspace,* two companies with corresponding apps that are marketed to people with increasingly busy, demanding and diverse lifestyles. *Headspace* was cofounded by Andy Puddicombe, who trained as a monk but left monastic practice, and Rich Pierson, now the former head of business development for a creative advertising agency. Their aim was to bring mindfulness practice to as many people as possible and to help deal with

increasing stress in daily life (Wisdom 2.0, n.d.). *Buddhify* was founded by Rohan Gunatillake, who took interest in meditation during college and decided to combine it with the "fast-paced, digital, urban life he was living" while working at a large technology company (*Buddhify,* n.d.). The demand for mindfulness programs like these likely resulted both from the pressure and instability produced by neoliberalism as well as the opportunity for corporations to capitalize on every aspect of consumer life—turning even moments of down time into productive, efficient self-help.

It is worthwhile to pause here in order to consider the fact that Puddicombe was once a monk and did practice mindfulness in Buddhist settings at one point. My intention in this paper is not to claim there is a 'pure' or singular core to Buddhism, or to stake a claim to what real, 'authentic' Buddhism is, as such claims can be problematic at worst and at the very least are beyond the scope of this paper. However, I am in agreement with Healey, who contends that corporate mindfulness programs nevertheless destroy the integrity of mindfulness in the sense that they decontextualize, compartmentalize and cherry pick aspects of mindfulness as instruments for achieving desired ends, such as workplace productivity, while largely ignoring its broader cultural context (Healey, 2015). As such, we should not simply consider Puddicombe's role as a former monk as legitimating his use and adaption of mindfulness practices if the way he does so works to distort them, or otherwise repurpose them for capitalist productivity.

Furthermore, it is useful to consider the role that Buddhism itself can play in perpetuating violence—such as its involvement in authorizing Japanese imperialism and colonialism—as evidence that even if Puddicombe and others did 'authentically' utilize Buddhist practices, it does not excuse their larger role in violence (Sharf, 1993; Victoria, 1997). Although there is scholarly debate beyond the scope of this essay about whether Japanese Zen Buddhism - enlisted in service of supporting empire and colonial violence - strayed from its fidelity to Buddhist ideals and betrayed Buddhism's teachings, it is nevertheless important to recognize that Buddhism is not beyond reproach for its historical role in violence and the assumption that Buddhism is inherently peaceful is misguided. At the same time, this is not to suggest that all forms of Buddhism inherently lend themselves to violence. In fact, a number of Buddhist practitioners have drawn on the religion as a resource for combatting war, inequality, ecological crisis and racism, including resistance by some Japanese Buddhists to its application during the Japanese empire and the emergence of "Socially Engaged Buddhism," or Buddhist liberation movements across Asia and the West, which

draw on the dharma in order to challenge social oppression (Queen, 1996; Victoria, 1997; Shields, 2016; Williams et al, 2016).

Before delineating the specifics of *Headspace* and *Buddhify*, it is worth asking what makes these apps so attractive to new users. What both the founders of *Headspace* and *Buddhify* identified was that their apps could help users deal with stress, improve sleep, improve one's focus as well as reduce job strain and burnout (Headspace, n.d.; Buddhify n.d.). These intended effects therefore point to the companies' targeting of users who have a sense of disequilibrium and are seeking to better their outlook, their emotional state, and/or their focus. *Headspace* co-founder Puddicombe (2016) describes this feeling in his book:

> The more I spoke to people about the benefits of meditation, the more I found that many desperately wanted to find a way to relax, but were uncomfortable with the religious element that robes automatically imply. They simply wanted to find a way to cope with life, to deal with stress—in their work, their personal life, and in their own minds. . .They weren't looking for spiritual enlightenment, nor were they needing therapy. They just wanted to know how to "switch off" when they got home from work, how to fall asleep at night, how to improve their relationships. . . But most of all they wanted to know how to deal with that nagging feeling that all was not quite as it should be. (pp. 6-7)

As this quote illustrates, Puddicombe was inspired to produce a mindfulness program that did not have the same religious connotations as its Buddhist counterparts, and did not seek spiritual transformation but simply sought to provide strategies that allow users to "cope with life" and "switch off" after a long day. Here, mindfulness is characterized not as a strategy for transforming suffering but for coping with it, not for confronting the stress in one's life but being able to "switch off" from it (only to return again, presumably, the next day). In this regard, mindfulness works not to heighten one's awareness of a crisis they are enmeshed in, but to dull the edges in order to make it more tolerable. As a result, this form of mindfulness not only responds to a sense of neoliberal crisis and exhaustion but arguably capitalizes on and perpetuates it further by simply producing more resilient subjects that can tolerate it.

The "nagging feeling that all was not quite as it should be," as described by Puddicombe, finds resonance with what Lauren Berlant describes as an "impasse" (2011, p. 4). Berlant (2011, pp. 3-4, 65) works to apprehend a "historical sensorium" of the unfolding present, referring to the ways in which affective attachments create "structures of feeling" or collective experiences that are not reduced to an individual's feeling but is often shared and informed by the past. She explains that while impasse typically signifies a blockage that halts forward movement, she uses the term to

instead describe:

> A stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one's sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crisis with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event. (2011, p. 4)

An impasse is thus not a wall so much as it is suspension. Searching for material that may help to "maintain one's sea legs" implies the feeling of struggling to sustain one's balance on unstable ground or trying to stay afloat in an endless sea without the ability to get to shore. Indeed, as Puddicombe points to, many of those he spoke to felt a present and enigmatic sense that something was "not as it should be," yet that something remained elusive.

In addition, Puddicombe describes a feeling of uncertainty rather than panic, of low-level anxiety, or in Berlant's words, "melodramatic crisis." In this sense impasse is felt as "crisis ordinariness," which she uses to describe the way in which "the extraordinary always turns out to be an amplification of something in the works, a labile boundary at best, not a slammed-door departure" (2011, p. 10). In other words, for Berlant, crisis emerges as a result of precipitating conditions, something systemic that has always been just below the surface or present in the air, perhaps unclear but not out of the ordinary. While neoliberalism may paint competition as natural and ordinary, it creates conditions upon which a sense of crisis is built, where something feels "not as it should be," yet remains masked through normalization. Puddicombe makes an important observation; a general feeling of uneasiness on the part of his product's target consumers. This feeling highlights the way in which those who seek out these apps are responding to a sense of crisis, albeit one embedded in the ordinary. However, despite this observation, *Headspace* and *Buddhify* seek to address that crisis through incorporating Buddhism as a palliative coping mechanism, something that works to manage the crisis instead of confronting the underlying causes of suffering. We may thus understand this sense of *impasse* as an element of ongoing crisis that maintains its gnawing feeling on everyday people who seek out mindfulness programs as a result. We might also consider feelings of crisis ordinariness on the part of executives who desire their employees or boardrooms to adopt mindfulness practices, feeling as if they need a strategy to prevent burnout and maintain a productive work environment. While these instances present attempts to navigate the impasse of a demanding, fast-paced, neoliberal era, they do so through a containment strategy that manages the worst effects of systemic crisis instead of attempting to

eliminate its causes.

Headspace and *Buddhify* utilize simultaneous rhetorical strategies of whitewashing and exoticization in the promotion of their mindfulness apps. *Buddhify,* despite its name which clearly plays on "Buddha" and "Buddhism," contains no reference to Buddhism or the historical Buddha on its website (Buddhify, n.d.). Instead, the page's description of the app, manifesto, "why we are different" tab, and every other foregrounded page contains only vague references to "guided meditation." Of course, the juxtaposition between *Buddhify's* obvious titular reference to Buddhism and the religion's simultaneous invisibility reveal that while *Buddhify* may draw its inspiration from Buddhism, it has no intention to represent that connection to the religion, thereby whitewashing mindfulness of its connotations with Asian Buddhists.

At the same time, *Buddhify* relies on the very incorporation of Asian Buddhism as an exotic other—not in any genuine form, but as a mystic, aesthetic presentation that makes the app more attractive to its users. Indeed, what is lost in current accounts of corporate mindfulness programs are the way in which they not only rely on otherizing Asian Buddhism but on a desire for incorporating aspects of Asian Buddhism that are exotic and alluring. *Buddhify's* website is replete with subtle references to Asian culture and Buddhism (Buddhify, n.d.). The app presents different guided meditation exercises on a customizable 'wheel'—something that is reminiscent of the Buddhist Wheel of Dharma, or Dharma Chakra, meant to represent the Buddha's teachings and cosmic order. In describing the different, preset curated wheels that users might select, the app has options such as "Tough Times," and "Mindful Ninja," the latter explicitly playing on the figure of the Japanese ninja, which operates in the American cultural imaginary as a stereotypical symbol of adept martial arts skill, mysticism, and exotic cultural wisdom associated with isolationism (Buddhify, n.d.). Anne Cheng (2018) describes the process by which Asiatic femininity and personhood is figured through aestheticized, ornamental gestures that are adopted and appropriated in the West as a transferable style. A related dynamic might be said to be at play here, in which corporate mindfulness adopts the figure of Asian Buddhism as an image of exotic otherness in order to make a Western consumer product more attractive. In this way, *Buddhify* and corporate mindfulness operate as a crisis management strategy through the exoticization, whitewashing, and appropriation of Asian Buddhism, presented as a mythical, exotic practice that might aid in coping with neoliberal crisis.

Headspace similarly promotes mindfulness through a simultaneous whitewashed universality and exoticization, claiming to be a completely "secular" program while at the same time relying on the exotic ornament of Asian culture and religion to promote its product. *Headspace* seeks to de-link mindfulness from its Buddhist origins, claiming to be a "secular" mindfulness program that is free from the religious connotations associated with Buddhist meditation practices. In Puddicombe's (2016) book, he explains his impetus for creating *Headspace,* remarking he wanted to make mindfulness "relevant for modern-day living. Nothing kooky . . . just straightforward tools that people could use to get some headspace" (p. 10). He explains that meditation comes with baggage, and it is hard to hear the word without "thinking of a yogi in a loincloth . . . or a shaven-headed monk" (p. 18). Therefore, Puddicombe set out to produce an 'accessible' form of mindfulness that did not repel people with its religiosity. Indeed, he writes that although mindfulness "has its origins in the Buddhist meditation tradition, there is nothing inherently 'Buddhist' about it" and claims *Headspace* offers a secular approach to meditation that can benefit anyone (Puddicombe, p. 18). Yet as Candy Brown (2016) suggests, this rhetorical tactic of claiming to have modernized and secularized mindfulness fails to sever it from its Buddhist roots.

Even the impetus to secularize Buddhist mindfulness in order to make it universally accessible remains mired in a strategy of whitewashing. As Hsu (2016) notes, secular mindfulness in the U.S. is embedded in the context of a white supremacist nation state in which "the mass appeal of secular mindfulness can only be secured insomuch as secular mindfulness can establish itself in opposition to [sic] peculiar otherness" (p. 374). Indeed, as is clear in Puddicombe's introduction, he wants to de-link Buddhism from its connotations with "shaven-headed monks" in order to make it more "relevant for modern-day living"—essentially distancing himself from the "peculiar otherness" associated with Asian Buddhism and attempting to make mindfulness more secular, Western, and therefore modern. Secular mindfulness thus selectively incorporates those aspects of Buddhism that make it seem exotic, while at the same time divorcing it from the threat of otherness or seeming *too* different. Moreover, as Toledo (2016) contends, corporate mindfulness or "McMindfulness" works to "compartmentalize" Buddhism, severing mindfulness from its roots and instead turning it "into a technique for *obtaining results*" (p. 31). Like mindfulness programs utilized in corporate headquarters, *Headspace* compartmentalizes mindfulness from its embeddedness in a particular religious worldview and transforms it into a marketable self-help strategy. Also, it points to the way in which corporate mindfulness not only whitewashes mindfulness but does so in service of a

larger crisis-management strategy which presents an exotic yet approachable, compartmentalized mindfulness practice as the solution for feelings of uncertainty, unproductivity and lack of worth.

Though this compartmentalization of Buddhism might attempt to de-link it from its grounding in a historically Buddhist value system, the presumption that it becomes a non-religious and therefore neutral practice remains a problematic assumption. For David Loy (2002), capitalism has come to function like a religion in and of itself, insofar as the market occupies a God-like position and produces investments in a dangerous value system of productivity, individualism and exploitation. For him, this investment in an economic, military and corporate system of violence reproduces what Buddhism regards as the three poisons at the heart of suffering; greed, ill will, and delusion (Loy, 2014). In this regard, we might consider how the "secularization" of mindfulness represents not its transformation into a universal, neutral practice but the way in which it is instead rearticulated within the destructive religious value system of the market.

Furthermore, this move to "compartmentalize" and secularize a part of Buddhist practice in order to make it universal involves a strategy of *appropriative synecdoche*. Appropriation in this phrase refers to the process by which a traditional practice is de-linked from its roots to serve the interests of white, Western society, while synecdoche refers to the rhetorical process by which a part is used to stand in for the whole (Nate, 2006). Adoption and secularization of mindfulness in these instances represent a process of appropriative synecdoche considering that it removes and decontextualizes a portion of Buddhism from its roots and attempts to make it universally applicable and desirable. This may make mindfulness more attractive to a Western population, yet it does not seek to transform the suffering produced from whitewashing or neoliberalism. Of course, simply wanting to make Buddhism accessible to more people is not itself problematic. *Headspace*, however, does not only attempt to bring mindfulness to more people but does so by stripping it of its cultural and historical origins in order to make it more palatable to a consumer base.

What is peculiar about *Buddhify* and *Headspace*'s drive to universalism is the way they couple this drive with a simultaneous claim to individualism. Both apps proclaim to make mindfulness more accessible—applicable to all people regardless of religious background or work affiliation—yet at the same time customizable to any individual user's needs. This move to personalize a product to any individual needs or group is an insidious operation of capital. One only has to look

to the way 'rainbow capitalism' caters to queer people in order to expand the reach of exploitation and profit under the guise of inclusion to see the way in which this endlessly customizable function actually works to uphold a regime of violence.

Additionally, it is this tension that perhaps points to the seemingly paradoxical relationship identified earlier, namely that neoliberal capitalism simultaneously works through connectivism while at the same time relying on a logic of individualism. Puddicombe (2016) claims that mindfulness can serve any purpose from becoming more effective in one's profession to performing better in sports. He likens mindfulness to learning to ride a bike: one may learn to ride a bike just like everyone else, but they decide where to ride the bike and what to use it for (Puddicombe, p. 11). This metaphor is precisely what Toledo identifies in corporate Buddhism: namely, the drive to turn mindfulness from ethically embedded to a supposedly value-neutral mechanism for obtaining desired results. Doing so reintegrates mindfulness into a neoliberal economy of productivity, fueling many of the very conditions which cause stress, burn out and anxiety in a crisis-driven neoliberal era. Mindfulness thus becomes enlisted in service of a larger crisis-management strategy, which makes alleviating suffering a question of *personal responsibility* instead of addressing its systemic causes.

Similarly, *Buddhify* stakes it claim to uniqueness precisely on its ability to cater to an individual's specific needs. In the company's "manifesto," *Buddhify* characterizes itself as a "choose your own adventure" app, likening the app to the popular choose-your-own-adventure books and video games (Buddhify, n.d.b). They advertise the "on-the-go" features of the app in which mindfulness can be fit into the busy day of any individual in a modern society (Buddhify, n.d.b). In this regard, *Buddhify* typifies the individualizing function of neoliberalism, which endlessly produces personally customizable goods to fit every niche market and potential consumer. Indeed, as mentioned previously, Wendy Chun (2016) contends that neoliberal digital networks increasingly work to produce a plural "you," epitomized by the use of big data in a neoliberal era to cater advertisements, products and services to each individual in order to maximize profits. *Buddhify* evinces this dynamic, in its aim to produce an app that may be downloaded to anyone's smartphone; used on-the-go between work, play and any other activities; and customized to fit precisely an individual consumer's needs. Chun articulates this drive to produce a plural "you" within a larger system of crisis, in which digital platforms consistently produce "updates" to deal with ongoing crisis and smooth over conflict or impediments in a

neoliberal era. This only further appropriates and decontextualizes Buddhist mindfulness by essentially rendering it synonymous with personalized media and corporate stress reduction techniques devoid of its historical context. It is within this context that mindfulness apps like *Buddhify* and *Headspace* have come to produce a crisis-management strategy for feelings of uncertainty while simultaneously relying on the individualizing function of neoliberalism that often contributes to those very feelings.

Conclusion

The contemporary era of neoliberalism in the West has been embedded in a historical sensorium of crisis; a sense of impasse in which people are increasingly seeking out strategies to deal with stress, feelings of uncertainty, lack of productivity and anxiety. While we might understand these feelings as the result of increasingly fragmented community ties and the ceaseless drive for productivity driven by neoliberalism, individuals often turn to mindfulness and other palliative, self-help strategies to deal with feelings of crisis. It is in this context that programs like Wisdom 2.0 or apps like *Buddhify* and *Headspace* emerge, catering to the desire expressed by companies and individuals alike for something that might help them focus, excel in a profession or task or simply take the edge off. Moreover, in these instances, mindfulness is yoked from any commitment to alleviating suffering, interdependence, dispelling the illusion of the self or seeking spiritual awakening beyond providing a temporary respite from stress. On the contrary, corporate mindfulness presents meditation practice as an individualistic coping mechanism, framing fragmentation and suffering as problems with individual habits rather than systemic issues of inequality.

I join other scholars in denouncing these practices for appropriating, whitewashing and separating Buddhism from its investment in ethical questions such as the alleviation of suffering, but I also have attempted to expand this conversation by demonstrating the relationship of these dynamics to crisis. As the Wisdom 2.0 conference, *Buddhify,* and *Headspace* all point to, mindfulness has increasingly been appropriated, whitewashed and exoticized in order to serve as a palliative crisis-management strategy. This strategy relies on the simultaneous disavowal of the "otherness" of Asian Buddhism while at the same time remaining reminiscent of it and utilizing the allure of an Eastern, exotic practice as an ornament for catering to consumers. While crisis is

embedded in the ordinary and is a result of precipitating conditions, corporate mindfulness strategies exacerbate rather than alleviate socially-ingrained crises of neoliberalism and racial violence.

While, for purposes of scope, I have chosen to focus primarily on corporate Buddhism and two particular mindfulness apps, the appropriation and Westernization of Buddhist mindfulness practices is a widespread phenomenon. Future directions for scholarly inquiry might include examining how the appropriation of mindfulness interacts with ongoing crises of mass incarceration and U.S. militarism. In an era of neoliberal and racial violence, it is imperative that scholars be ever on the lookout for palliative strategies that essentially quell resistance or critical confrontation with the systemic causes of crises and focus instead on their symptoms. These strategies may provide temporary reprieve but ultimately only produce a cruelly optimistic attachment to individual self-help mechanisms that maintain the status quo.

Finally, scholars might consider how Buddhist thought presents ways for confronting these systemic causes instead of dulling their effects. Such scholarship might bring together perspectives on the aforementioned Buddhist practitioners who used the teachings of the Buddha to combat social violence into conversation with scholars addressing contemporary neoliberal and racial crises in order to contemplate what an ethical approach to the relationship between crisis and mindfulness might look like. As a religious system steeped in the belief that an illusory notion of the self is at the root of human suffering, scholars might consider the ways in which Buddhist beliefs can actually provide a trenchant critique of the individualizing and fragmenting functions of neoliberal crisis.

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