

## **The Costume of Shangri-La: Thoughts on White Privilege, Cultural Appropriation, and Anti-Asian Racism**

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*This piece poses cultural appropriation as an undertheorized aspect of white privilege in *White Privilege Studies*. By way of narrative exploration, it asserts that a paucity of scholarship on Orientalism and anti-Asian racism has created a gap in *White Privilege Studies* that curbs its radical transformative potential. It argues for the value of a structural and historically focused lens for understanding the issue of cultural appropriation, and extends questions of culture and race relations beyond the borders of the United States. It also explores the complex ways that interracial and transnational relationships can influence white racial identity, and illustrates the disruptive potential that queer interracial relationships can offer to dominant historical patterns of white behavior.*

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At the dawning of the year of the Iron Tiger, I attended my first Tibetan Losar celebration in the United States. My Tibetan language teacher had invited my partner and me, and encouraged us to come wearing Tibetan clothing. We obliged, and arrived at the celebration adorned in beautiful silk and wool outfits that had long been hibernating in the closet. We had both spent time living in Tibet, and rarely had the occasion to wear the intricate and ornate clothing that had been gifted to us by friends there.

As soon as we walked into the community hall in our Tibetan outfits, an immense feeling of discomfort pervaded the space around us. Almost everyone in the hall was Tibetan, and the majority of people averted their eyes, or smiled politely, but kept a fair distance. I noticed a controlled look

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on the faces of the men who collected our admission at the door. The look was not cruel, or even judgmental, but gave me an unsettled feeling in my stomach. It was a look of recognition. It was as if they had seen me before, or rather, someone who looked just like me. I could feel that as a white person consuming Tibetan culture, I was familiar.

Because she is Asian American, my partner experienced a different kind of discomfort. Believing that she would understand, several people approached her and asked in Tibetan where she was from. When she looked back blankly, they hesitated, and asked again in English. When she replied that she is not Tibetan, the discomfiting surprise on their faces was clearly visible.

My head spun as our role in this Losar celebration became suddenly clear. Despite years of involvement in anti-racist activism; of studying and teaching Edward Said's invaluable work,<sup>1</sup> here I was, costumed as another Madame Blavatsky<sup>2</sup>: exposed for all to see. When my teacher found us, her smile was as big and thoroughly approving as I had imagined, but it did not overcome the subtle disquieted feeling from other Tibetan community members that I had failed to predict. We talked, ate, and laughed together, but the presence of our outfits stained the evening with tension.

That celebration ringing in the Year of the Iron Tiger was a watershed moment in my own exploration of white privilege. I had spent the better part of the last decade immersed in race and social justice work, yet I had clearly made a glaring mistake in the arena of cultural appropriation. I wondered, with all of my knowledge of white privilege theory and experience with anti-racist activism, how could I have engaged in a cultural practice that clearly made so many people uncomfortable<sup>3</sup>? This article is a brief exploration of the circumstances that led to the Losar faux pas, as well as an exemplification of the ways that queer interracial relationships can push the current limits of white privilege theory. I assert here that the issue of cultural appropriation<sup>4</sup>—a common expression of both Orientalism and anti-Asian racism—is undertheorized in White Privilege Studies, and often goes unchecked in anti-racist work. This marked absence limits the radical transformative potential of work on whiteness and privilege.

## THE EVIDENCE OF EXPERIENCE

When I explore the circumstances that led to my Losar costume, I am confronted with a variety of justifications—evidence that convinced me of the culturally appropriate nature of my costume. Chief among these are the years I spent living in Asia. An extended stay in Tibet lent an air of authority to my decision to wear Tibetan clothing.

Importantly, however, my time in Asia did not prepare me well to make an assessment of cultural appropriation. In fact, upon returning to the United

States after several years there, I found myself less prepared to explore my own complicity with anti-Asian racism than I had been prior to my departure. This dulling of critical ability with regard to race, which grew the longer that I stayed in Asia, is crucial to explore.

In the fall of 2003, I moved to Qinghai province, a Tibetan area of what is currently known as the People's Republic of China. I had moved there to work as a volunteer English teacher at the provincial teacher's college. It was my first time in Asia, and I knew little of the language or culture of this Eastern Tibetan region. I stayed in Qinghai for four continuous years, developing and teaching courses in Sociology and Gender Studies for the Tibetan students who attended the college as a part of a special English training program. During vacations, I traveled to my students' village homes, and often stayed for weeks at a time. I studied Chinese and Tibetan language, and, as time passed, I slowly adjusted my habits and understandings to more closely reflect the cultures that surrounded me.

Many of these changes were in response to the differences I perceived between Tibetan culture and my own white upbringing in the United States. For example, I began to observe the importance of offering gifts when visiting people's homes, and I realized that I did not know how to eat a piece of meat clean off of the bone. I learned to find comfort sleeping on hard surfaces, and relinquished my desire to change clothing daily, finding one set of warm woolen clothes adequate for days at a time.

Indeed, clothing became an important marker of my cultural transition and adaptation. When I visited the rural village homes of my Tibetan students, their families often presented me with beautiful and intricate robes in styles that were specific to the area. Upon gifting, they would encourage me to try on the clothing, and a group of women would then carefully wrap, tie, tighten, and perfect the robes on my body. When I emerged transformed, faces lit up with excitement. Although the racialized nature of these interactions was complex, it was strikingly clear to me that donning these beautiful gifts was the most culturally appropriate action I could take at the time.

I was acutely aware of the cultural differences between myself and the Tibetan families who hosted me, and noted with delight to friends and family abroad how my own cultural habits were slowly shifting to reflect the practices that I encountered in villages. But given that I spent the majority of my time teaching and speaking English in a college in the city, I was also being subtly influenced by another culture of which I was far less aware: that of my white male expatriate colleagues. This culture was also subtly affecting my habits: At social gatherings, I felt pressure to drink heavily, with the pervasive assurance that I was simply adapting to a local Qinghai drinking culture. My sense of fear and paranoia about government surveillance heightened. I became inured to offhand comments about the corruption, naiveté, and irrationality of the Chinese and Tibetan people around me, and

I slowly became convinced of my own importance as the bearer of much sought after “Western” culture.

As an English teacher, I learned to stop questioning the very practices of our English training program that had disturbed me when I first arrived. For example, all the Tibetan students were assigned English names in place of their given names. I ignored this unsettling practice. I also volunteered the majority of my free time in order to assuage the guilt that I felt about the inordinately high salaries that I and the other white teachers were paid compared to our Tibetan colleagues.<sup>5</sup> I became convinced that in teaching English, I was bringing a crucial skill to a minority group sorely in need of empowerment. I was compelled by the consensus that English should be the “international language” and that white people were its preferred vessels.

At the same time that I began to internalize these white supremacist<sup>6</sup> values, I followed my white male colleagues in targeting those who most blatantly represented global white supremacy—missionaries and tourists—of which our city had many. Together with my expatriate colleagues, I lamented about the brute arrogance of the missionaries, who came to Tibet to convert rather than to support, educate and empower the Tibetan people. Equal amounts of patronizing condemnation were directed toward tourists, who madly scrambled through the area seeking to catalog the set of tired stereotypes that their travel guides advised: political dissidents, peaceful monks, and famished dirty children. Those of us involved in English teaching and development work assured each other that we knew better. We told ourselves that we respected Tibetan culture and were fighting for its preservation, and that we honored Tibetan people and cultivated deep relationships with them. Tibetan friends, colleagues and students were among the greatest supporters of our logic, constantly affirming the value and indispensability of the English teachers, and repeatedly commending our intentions and efforts. Respect for teachers, after all, was fundamentally important to Tibetan culture. Concentrating on their own struggle to maintain Tibetan language and culture in the face of suppression by the government of China, these friends and students spoke little of the history of white supremacy and attempted European colonization throughout Asia.

When I returned to the United States, the only kind of acculturation that I was prompted to speak about was the one that I experienced in Tibetan villages. Although my time in rural Tibet indeed had a profound effect on me, it represented only a small portion of my time there. The majority of my time was spent in a city, steeped in the culture of an English training program run by white male expatriates. When I spoke to people in the United States about Tibet, there was little room for discussion of the white supremacist culture that I had been immersed in as an expatriate. That cultural context melted away, and it was as if I had spent the entire time living in a Tibetan village. Because the people I spoke with had little or no knowledge of Tibet, my experience there was often reduced to an exotic adventure, and I had

no way to contextualize, process, or explain the white supremacist culture that had also influenced me.

This continued erasure of white expatriate experience is key to understanding how time spent outside of a white-dominant country can dull rather than sharpen one's critical ability in terms of race. Through this erasure, I was slowly persuaded to take the Orientalist role of "Tibet expert," and speak for Tibetans on any number of topics. As Edward Said explains in his classic text *Orientalism* (1978), such expertise is greatly rewarded in the white dominant countries that comprise "the West." The clothing and objects that I had accumulated in Tibet thus served doubly as a nostalgic reminder of my friendships with Tibetans and as a testament to the expertise that I had accumulated through my experience. Hence, falling into the positivist trap described by Joan Scott (1991), I began to assume my experience as a form of evidence which would render me incapable of perpetrating acts of cultural appropriation. Simply put, the fact that I had "been there" justified my choice to wear Tibetan clothing.

But just "being there" did not give me the information I needed to understand my own possible role in cultural appropriation. It was the expatriate cultural expression of whiteness that I needed to understand when choosing my outfit for the Seattle Losar. I was lacking a nuanced understanding of whiteness in the context of Tibet, and I did not grasp how the meaning of race shifted when I was in the United States. Without this understanding, I was unable to effectively predict the impact of my Tibetan clothing on Tibetans who were more thoroughly acquainted with the racial dynamics of the United States.

## EVIDENCE OF RELATION

In my years of living in Tibetan areas, I cannot recall any uncomfortable gazes like the ones I encountered in North Seattle the evening of Losar. I assert this is because the people with whom I interacted in Tibet had comparatively little experience with the impacts of white supremacist culture and the practice of cultural appropriation that often accompanies it. Unlike many of the Tibetans at the Seattle celebration, the people I met in Tibet had not lived for decades with the pressure to assimilate into a white dominant culture. Instead, in the wake of the capitalist reforms begun by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, and in concert with the Tibetan government in exile's practice of reaching out to white dominant countries like the United States for support, they had been deluged with positive images of white people like me as rich, smart, powerful, and generous.<sup>7</sup> This may help explain why so many people in Tibet encouraged my interest in their way of life, and strove to build relationships with me. As a white person living in an area of intense ethnic and racial strife between Han Chinese and Tibetans, I encountered few

people who challenged me to think of myself as a member of a racially dominant group. Instead, I felt myself acting from a place of neutrality when it came to race and ethnicity, and I grew accustomed to being greeted as a benign outsider.

The positive exchanges that I had with Tibetans in Tibet left a deep impression on me, one which I was not quite prepared to re-contextualize when I returned to the United States. On the night of the Seattle Losar, I used the memories of friends in Tibet as a compass guiding my actions—fondly remembering how people’s faces had glowed when they saw me, a white foreigner; emerge proudly in their ethnic clothing. In addition, I chose to rely on my Tibetan teacher for advice about how to dress for the Losar celebration, thus following a de facto rule of race relations in the United States. I placed the weight of responsibility for my actions on a person whom I considered an insider. I was buying into the problematic notion that “Native voices embody a genuine authenticity that renders them more authoritative” (Springwood 2004:56). But that evening, I felt sharply the limits of this shaky reasoning, because it became clear to me that there is nothing inherent in the experience of being Tibetan that would impart one with the knowledge of the particular history of Orientalism as it pertains to white supremacy and anti-Asian racism in the United States, a history that was crucial for me to understand as a white person dressed in Tibetan clothing in Seattle.

## THE MYTH OF SHANGRI-LA

The history of anti-Asian imagery in the United States would be incomplete without a discussion of the quintessential Orientalist fantasy—the myth of Shangri-La—which has shaped the western imagination of Tibet since its creation in the early twentieth century. James Hilton’s 1936 novel, *Lost Horizon*, introduced to the world the specter of Shangri-La: a remote and exotic Himalayan paradise for world-weary white travelers. In this novel, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery is appropriated by a white catholic monk in order to serve his interest in preserving the best of white European culture from the ravages of world war. The Tibetans in Shangri-La are depicted as willing, childlike servants to their white and Chinese masters. For example, shortly after their airplane crash lands deep in the Himalayan Mountains, the novel’s four white protagonists are greeted by several Tibetan attendants carrying an elder Chinese man in a sedan chair. To arrive at the monastery, they must traverse a steep and treacherous mountain pass in the middle of a snow storm. During the journey, the Chinese elder falls asleep and the Tibetan guides are left alone with the beleaguered white travelers. Although he is completely unfamiliar with the terrain, the white protagonist Hugh Conway soon feels comfortable leading the group, and the Tibetan guides happily acquiesce:

He [Conway] put himself next to Mallinson, with Tibetans ahead and to the rear, and with Barnard and Miss Brinklow and more Tibetans further back still. He was prompt to notice that the [Tibetan] men, during their leader's continuing sleep, were inclined to let him deputize. He felt a familiar quickening of authority; if there were to be any difficult business he would give what he knew was his to give—confidence and command. (Hilton 1936:77)

This scene perfectly illustrates Edward Said's notion of the positional superiority of the [white] West, and alludes to a system of racial hierarchy with white men at the apex, followed by Chinese and then Tibetan men. Without such a hierarchy in place, it is difficult to imagine why a group of local mountaineers familiar with the treacherous terrain they are traversing would feel compelled to yield their expertise to the "command" of a newly arrived visitor.

In later parts of the novel, the white supremacist hierarchy of Shangri-La is presented even more explicitly. For example, the allure of the monastery rests in its mysterious power to convey superhuman longevity to some—but not all—of its admitted adherents, allowing them to live for several hundreds of years. The high priest of the monastery, who is himself a white Christian man, explains the workings of this phenomenon to the protagonist Conway, expressing his delight at the arrival of several new white visitors. He describes the monasteries' adherents who live normal lifespans as failures who lack sensitivity to the special powers of Shangri-La:

A Japanese arrived in 1912, and was not, to be candid, a very valuable acquisition [. . .] In general we have found that Tibetans, owing to their being inured to both the altitude and other conditions, are much less sensitive than outside races; they are charming people and we have admitted many of them, but I doubt if more than a few will pass their hundredth year. The Chinese are a little better, but even among them we have a high percentage of failures. Our best subjects, undoubtedly, are the Nordic and Latin races of Europe; perhaps the Americans would be equally adaptable, and I count it our great good fortune that we have at last, in the person of one of your companions, secured a citizen of that nation. (181)

The racial hierarchy described here reflects the racist political agenda in Europe and North America at the time of the novel's creation in the mid-1930s, when Japan posed a military threat to global white hegemony, and the United States was providing limited military support to China to counter this threat (Hornbeck 1981:129; Neumann 1963:203–05). While the ascension of a white America in the world order is clearly highlighted by the high priests' excitement over the long awaited arrival of the white travelers, Tibet remains a "charming" background in which the drama of white protagonists

can unfold. The legacy of Shangri-La continues to shape visions of Tibet to this day, encouraging Tibet enthusiasts to exoticize and consume Tibet in pursuit of their own desires (Lopez 1998).

Deborah Root asserts that individual acts of cultural appropriation “do not float in space but are underlain by very precise systems of authority” (1996:103). In the case of Tibet, such authority is shaped by narratives like *Lost Horizon*, narratives that individual Tibetans may not be aware of or necessarily oppose. Hence, if one is interested in challenging white privilege on a systemic level, an identity-based model for defining cultural appropriation that hinges on individual interpretations (i.e., “My Tibetan friend said it was OK”) will often fall short. Indeed, as Jamyang Norbu points out in “Dances with Yaks”:

Tibetans by and large do not seem to consider such condescending characterizations [as seen in *Lost Horizon*] of their country and culture objectionable. In fact, although they may not be accurate or altogether flattering, these depictions of Tibet are considered good publicity for the Tibetan cause. (Norbu 1999:20)

The important point to underline here is that good publicity for the Tibetan cause may not always be congruent with the goals of dismantling white supremacy and challenging white privilege. To do so, it is paramount to go beyond an identity-based model for understanding cultural appropriation, to one which focuses on white privilege and white supremacy on a systemic level. It thus becomes clear that in my reliance on my Tibetan teacher to guide my choices during the Seattle Losar celebration, I evaded my own responsibility as a white anti-racist, and I failed to understand how my placement in larger systems of authority would shape the evening.

White supremacy and similar systems of social dominance invariably incite an array of strategic responses from those who find themselves among the targets of oppression. These responses can include complete ignorance of the system itself, a willful disregard of aspects of the system in the effort to conserve precious time and energy, a strategic embrace of stereotypes and oversimplifications in the effort to forward certain personal or political aims, subtle expressions of discomfort, and/or blatantly expressed hostility against the system and those who support it. The Tibetan Seattleites who witnessed my costume, including my teacher, expressed a variety of responses to my act. Although the subtle discomfort expressed by some Seattle Tibetans helped alert me to the larger systemic and historical roots of my actions, my understanding could not rely on these responses alone. A system-based model for cultural appropriation does not depend on the reactions of cultural insiders. Rather, it requires that all actors in a particular situation take responsibility for the historical and systemic consequences of their own racial positionality.



## FROM SHANGRI-LA TO XIANGGELILA

The participation of my Asian American partner in the Losar blunder exemplifies the importance of a system-based model for cultural appropriation. Her opinion as a politically aware and critical Asian American mattered to me, and my own confidence was buoyed by the fact that she too had donned a Tibetan costume to the Seattle event. But once it was revealed that she is not Tibetan, a palpable discomfort pervaded the space around her. Although the Tibetan people in the hall that night were likely to notice her difference from them as soon as she spoke, there are many instances in the context of the United States in which she would be considered a cultural insider just for the fact of her Asian heritage.<sup>8</sup> The facet of Orientalist thinking that asserts Asia as an unchanging monolith and reduces people with Asian heritage to one cohesive group is crucial to challenge (Said 1978:347), for it undermines the ability to understand and respond to historical tensions within Asia. To effectively interrupt the practice of cultural appropriation, it is crucial to look both at and beyond legacies of white supremacy to other racial and ethnic hierarchies that reflect and support it.

Within the current political context of the People's Republic of China, for example, appropriation of Tibetan culture by the Han Chinese ethnic and racial majority is an integral part of Han Chinese hegemony (Harrell 1995). In fact, in order to draw tourists, one city in the Kham Tibetan region has officially changed its name to Xianggelila, in a direct reference to the exotic landscape of James Hilton's imagination. Although this mountainous town does draw a number of curious international travelers, including a large contingent of white people, the overwhelming majority of tourists who visit the city are Han Chinese (Llamas and Belk 2011).

In the months after the Seattle Losar celebration, my partner and I discussed our shared unease about our costume choices, and analyzed what had happened. Like me, she had relied on the evidence of her experience and relationships with Tibetans to inform her decision. Her silk shirt that evening was a gift from her own stay in Tibet. During her time there, Tibetan friends strove to mark her as different from the Han Chinese with whom they experienced so much tension, and de-emphasized her Chinese heritage in favor of her Vietnamese roots, or the American (read: white) part of her cultural upbringing. Although she was rarely asked by Tibetan friends to question her relationship to Han Chinese hegemony, evidence of this link shaped her daily experiences.

I witnessed this effect during a joint trip back to Tibet. During our journey, we spent a week with Tibetan friends in Xianggelila, where we were both pushed to consider our complex relationships to white supremacy and Orientalist fantasy. Our critical approach to the place did not alter the fact that the streets, parks, and restaurants we visited were designed with people like us—and not our Tibetan friends—in mind. As we watched young

Tibetan waitresses hasten to fill our orders in English and Chinese, it became increasingly difficult to deny the connection between ourselves and other white and Asian travelers who flocked to this destination.

While the appropriation of Tibetan culture by a Han Chinese majority may be more obvious within the context of China, this dynamic can disappear within the racial constructs of the United States. In the United States, understanding of Chinese–Tibetan tension is limited, and the Orientalist notion of Asian sameness continues to operate. In addition, for anyone who has spent a lifetime on the receiving end of cultural appropriation, it is fundamentally difficult to suddenly conceive of oneself in the role of cultural oppressor. To assert that my Asian American partner was engaged in cultural appropriation at the Seattle Losar is to fundamentally challenge the politically valuable notion of pan Asian ethnicity. A system-based approach to cultural appropriation requires that my partner's actions be understood not only within the context of Asian America, where her racial positionality may not be questioned, but also, in this case, within the context of Asia, where the phenomenon of Xianggelila makes her Chinese heritage matter differently. This approach helps explain the discomfort expressed by Tibetans that evening upon meeting an Asian American in their ethnic garb. Importantly, however, a system-based approach to cultural appropriation does not depend on such a response in order to function.

## RACISM IN BLACK AND WHITE

As evidenced above, a nuanced approach to cultural appropriation that is global in scope is critical to challenging white supremacy and racism. However, most popular literature on white privilege is silent on the issues of Orientalism and anti-Asian racism, and offers little to no exploration of the practice of cultural appropriation. For example, consider the edited volume *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism* (Rothenberg 2004), which includes essays by a number of well-known white privilege theorists who are often quoted in Critical Race and Whiteness Studies literature, including bell hooks, David Roediger, Karen Brodtkin, George Lipsitz, Peggy McIntosh, Tim Wise, Joe Feagin, and Paul Kivel. In this edited volume, there are zero references to Orientalism or cultural appropriation. Although several of the pieces in this collection mention anti-Asian racism, it is usually in reference to legislation regarding Asian immigration to the United States and the legal limits of whiteness (Rothenberg, 36, 42, 44, 59, 68) and does not discuss the consumption of Asian culture. Other popular books on white privilege, such as Robert Jensen's *Heart of Whiteness* (2005) or Frances Kendall's *Understanding White Privilege* (2006) are similarly silent on Orientalism and cultural appropriation. Although Ruth Frankenberg's now canonical text *White Women, Race Matters* mentions cultural appropriation,

it does not elaborate, defining it only as a “range of practices, symbols and icons [that] have been drawn from elsewhere into the practice of white culture” (Frankenberg 1993:233) and she does not connect this practice to the issue of Orientalism, which is mentioned only as a footnote on page 274. A review of white privilege literature, in fact, reveals an overwhelming dominance of the black/white paradigm for race, a paradigm which scholars such as Andrea Smith (2006) as well as Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) have challenged as inadequate when it comes to describing the complex nature of race relations in the United States. Although existing literature on white privilege warns us against the error of “eating the other,”<sup>9</sup> (hooks 1992) the “other” we are prepared to think about in White Privilege Studies is Black by default.

### SHANGRI-LA MISREPRESENTED

*Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, by Mike Hill (1997), opens with the quintessential example of the under-theorization of Orientalism within White Privilege Studies. Hill’s introduction, titled “Vipers in Shangri-la, Whiteness, Writing, and other Ordinary Terrors,” turns on the dominant concept of Shangri-La as a paradise, and does not acknowledge or discuss the myth’s white supremacist foundation. Here, Hill focuses on the suburban location of violent white groups like the “vipers,” who stockpiled ammonium nitrate with plans to blow up government buildings. He describes the shock expressed by many white people at the terror that “we suddenly realize was always right here” in their white suburban paradise (2). According to Hill, “Vipers in Shangri-la” is a phrase that signals what he calls the “ontogenic crises of whiteness” wherein the seal of white neutrality is snapped. The “crisis” Hill wishes to describe here would be considerably sharpened if his piece included a critical exploration of Shangri-La’s etymology. According to Jamyang Norbu, “the name ‘Shangrila’ has found a place in the English language as a catchword for a secret haven of peace and spirituality lost to mankind” (1999:19). But a critical understanding of Shangri-La reveals this myth as the ultimate white supremacist fantasy, a fantasy that depends on Orientalism as its primary logic. As Donald Lopez illustrates:

In James Hilton’s 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, what makes Shangri-La invaluable is not the indigenous knowledge of the indigenous people, but that over the centuries of his long life, a Belgian Catholic missionary had gathered all that was good in European culture—first editions of great books, priceless works of art, musical scores—and that a brotherhood of foreigners (mostly Europeans but some Americans and Chinese) protected them from the impending world conflagration. They lived in the lamasery of Shangri-La, which towered physically and symbolically

above the Valley of the Blue Moon, where the happy Tibetans lived their simple lives. (1998:5)

If we acknowledge white supremacy as a form of violence, then a critical reading of *Shangri-La* enhances the contradiction that Hill wishes to illustrate with his reference to “Vipers in *Shangri-La*.” Rather than appearing as an abhorrent anomaly in the *Shangri-La* fantasy, terror is revealed as fundamental to its logic. In congruence with the idea of *Shangri-La* as fundamentally violent, we find the United States landscape dotted with locations that emulate this specific form of white supremacist terror. Indeed, as Norbu points out, Camp David, the country retreat of the presidents of the United States, and a formidable military installation, was initially named “*Shangri-la*” by President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1999:19). Thus, if Hill had explored the Orientalist roots of *Shangri-La*’s logic, it would have strengthened his assertion that “white terror is distinct in that we suddenly realize that it was always right here” (2). Hill’s uncritical use of an Orientalist icon in the introduction to his book on whiteness illustrates perfectly the ways in which white privilege scholarship fails to prepare its readership for confronting Orientalism and dismantling anti-Asian racism in their various manifestations.

## CONCLUSION

When I first returned to the United States from Tibet, I was carrying a lot of baggage, some of which manifested as a suitcase brimming with Tibetan paraphernalia. To assuage the sense of loss that I experienced upon my return, I filled my walls and closet with these treasured items. But my relationship with an Asian-American woman soon challenged me to confront my own complicity in Orientalism and anti-Asian racism. When we moved into a shared apartment, I brought my luggage along with me. My partner patiently watched as I tacked up my Tibetan Buddhist Thangka<sup>10</sup> paintings, and set out a small Buddhist altar. My Tibetan decorations dominated our shared living space, and prompted conversations about my time in Tibet whenever friends visited.

In time, I came to understand the challenges that my partner faced as someone who grew up Asian American and Buddhist in the United States. I saw the way that she flinched every time a white person put her hands together in front of her face and bowed her head at my partner in the popular Buddhist greeting. She shared how playground taunts that she had experienced as a child often included this gesture, and how different it felt when different people, Asian and non-Asian, performed it. I witnessed the barrage of questions that were launched at her from white Buddhists when she disclosed that she had grown up in a Buddhist family—“What lineage do you practice? Are you Tibetan? Have you read the latest book by Thich

Nhat Hanh?"—they asked with curious, wide, and eager eyes. I felt their disapproval and judgment when she responded bluntly that she could not answer these questions.

I listened as she recounted her surreal experience with a white woman who had lent a trunk full of traditional clothing and art pieces from Vietnam to a Vietnamese-American organization for the annual Vietnamese community's culture night. As with many Vietnamese-Chinese Americans, her own mother and sisters had come to the United States as boat people during the late 1970s, and were not able to bring even the smallest of mementos with them. She shared with me that while she was excited to see the invaluable items in the trunk, she wondered how the white woman had acquired them, and why she was loaning instead of giving them to the Vietnamese-American organization. I understood why this white woman's attempt at generosity prompted anger, frustration, grief, and sadness.

Slowly, I began to see the connection between my own actions and those that had wounded my partner. These were the experiences that sensitized me to the discomfort of some members of the Tibetan community of Seattle the night I wore Tibetan clothing. From the beginning, my partner and I built our relationship on a shared commitment to understanding and naming the larger structures that acted on our daily lives, and seeing how these were connected to histories of power and domination. In the end, it has been this aspect of our relationship that has taught me the most about racism. While the white privilege literature was silent on the interwoven issues of anti-Asian racism, Orientalism, and cultural appropriation, I learned about these issues through structural and historical understanding of the daily routines of a queer interracial relationship. This facet of my own racial awareness illustrates the radical potential of queer relationships to uproot the regulation of identificatory practices (Butler 1993:3).

The morning after the Seattle Losar, I told my partner I wanted to take down and pack away all of the Tibetan items that I had displayed on our walls, and all of the Tibetan clothing hanging in my closet. She smiled, disappeared into the kitchen, and returned with a ladder and hammer with which to more easily remove the nails. She did not help me put these Tibetan items up, but she was more than happy to help me take them down.

One year after that Tibetan New Year celebration in Seattle, my partner and I traveled to Tibet and visited the home of a longtime friend to celebrate Losar with her family in her small farming village. It was a trip marked by our privilege as cultural outsiders, a trip that many of the Tibetans in Seattle would not be able to make without risking imprisonment. On that trip, we brought with us a luggage full of Tibetan items that we had pulled down together from the walls of our apartment. In it was a string of exquisite turquoise prayer beads that I had bought in Lhasa years earlier. I had bought the beads for their beauty, to use as an accessory, and had worn them a number of times at public gatherings in the United States. I had coveted

them, hanging them in a prized place on my bookshelf for all to see. On that trip, I gave the beads to my friend's mother—a farmer and devout Buddhist. Several days into our visit, I placed them in her hands as my friend helped me explain their complex history. As she touched the beads, her face lit up with recognition. She immediately began to turn them between her thumb and forefinger, naming the different parts that were there to help keep track of the number of chants that had been recited. In Seattle, where I had kept the beads for so many years, I had not used them for prayers, and could not even distinguish, let alone name, the different parts of the string. The beads came alive in her hands. They transformed from an exotic decoration into a practical spiritual tool. She began to use them immediately. As I watched her turn the familiar beads in her hand, I felt a sense of awe at the life that she breathed into this long-dormant object.

In searching for methods to understand the painful legacy of cultural appropriation, it is common to eschew structural and historical explanations. When we do begin to see the harmful patterns of the past that support present power hierarchies, it is tempting to search for quick fixes, and resort to simple admonishments of “never” and “always.” Because of its complex contextual nature, however, the act of cultural appropriation resists absolutes. Exasperated by this complexity and lack of clear guidelines, some become mired in a kind of post-structuralist determinism that erases power hierarchies in favor of universalizing concepts (i.e., “You can never guess what will offend people, so why try?”)

Within the arena of White Privilege Studies, an array of in-depth work is needed to move conversations about cultural appropriation beyond such limited responses. When white privilege theorists remain silent on the issue, ignorance of the complex interweaving of anti-Asian racism and cultural appropriation will continue to shape anti-racist work, sharply limiting its radical potential. This piece proposes a focus on the ways that historical and structural patterns inform our everyday relationships as an urgent and valuable project for white privilege theorists. In conducting such work, we can begin to reveal the many facets of the costume of Shangri-La that limit our ability to build healthy cross-cultural and cross-racial relationships. Only thus can we propose more revitalizing garments with which to adorn ourselves.

## NOTES

1. In *Orientalism* (1978) Edward Said illuminates an oppressive relationship wherein “the West” has granted itself to speak for and about “Orientals” and thus shape their future without consulting them. Domination in the form of cultural expertise is one core aspect of Orientalism.

2. One of the original founders of the Theosophical society, and one of the first “white Buddhists” noted by Donald Lopez (1998) and Rick Fields (1998) as a quintessential Orientalist, and whose theories influenced the openly white supremacist book *Lost Horizon* with its fantasy of Shangri-La.

3. Over the next several months, I had the opportunity to speak with a number of Tibetans who had grown up in the United States who confirmed the sense of discomfort and unease they often felt

when confronted with a white person in Tibetan clothing. Through the course of my research project on whiteness in Tibet, I also spoke with several Tibetans who had grown up in India and Tibet who shared these feelings of discomfort. It is important to note, however, that the majority of people who grew up in Tibet or India did not express discomfort with white people wearing Tibetan clothing, and like my Tibetan teacher, often encouraged the practice.

4. “The taking—from a culture that is not one’s own—of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge” (Ziff and Rao 1997:3).

5. While it could be argued that a U.S. or EU citizen of any race would be paid a similarly high salary regardless of race, a number of non-white English teachers who were born and raised in English-speaking countries told me of very direct racial job discrimination they had faced. Asian-American teachers were often told that they had an “accent,” and black teachers were outright denied job opportunities. In addition, I was told several times by my colleagues and peers that the school needed a “white face” to promote itself.

6. Critical Race Theorists and activists use the term “white supremacy” to describe the individual and structural practices associated with whiteness. This definition of white supremacy is as follows: “White supremacy is a historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white people and nations of the European continent; for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power and privilege” (CWS 1995:1). This bold terminology is designed to directly counter current practices of silence and invisibility around white privilege.

7. See Kleisath (2012) for further information about positive stereotypes that accompany white foreigners in both Tibetan and Chinese areas.

8. This assumption conforms to a historical manifestation of anti-Asian racism wherein widely different and sometimes opposing groups of people are lumped into a common category of “Asiatics” or “Orientals” and assumed to share cultural characteristics (Kibria 1998:934).

9. The term bell hooks uses to describe cultural appropriation.

10. An ornate Buddhist painting of a deity.

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