

# (S4,E2) Wellness, Racism and White Yoga Instructors

Hello friends! So, last episode I spoke about wellness, the corporatisation of self-care and how this might be the brand of neo-liberal nightmare that actually ends up killing us all. I mentioned that I'd do a two-parter and surprise! This is me following through. Obviously, I'd love it if you had a listen to the last episode – I think it's pretty interesting and it sets up this one nicely. But I'm not the boss of you.

Anyway, because I am terminally online, I have spent a chunk of this week looking at Twitter discourse about whether friends should ask their friends to pick them up from the airport. A bunch of people were saying things like "It is SO disrespectful when my friends request that I pick them up from the airport when they come visit. Grow up." I don't often say this but like... Jesus Christ, go outside. Touch some grass. Like what the fuck are friendships for if not sharing and supporting each other.

It reminded me how prevalent that hyper-individualistic thinking is, and how it forces people into viewing relationships as somehow transactional. And to be honest, if you've pissed off everyone you know in real life by saying things like "asking me to pick you up from the airport is abuse", you're probably more likely to be isolated, and turn to an online

community for companionship. Which in turn, makes you more likely to brush up against some weird echo chamber where people genuinely believe that vaccines cause autism, or 5G towers are causing... I dunno. Mind control or whatever it was. I've lost track. And that particular positioning all seems like a nice segue into this week's topic.

I'm Alex, this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about the wellness to white supremacy pipeline.

So, weirdly enough, I started thinking about the links between wellness and conspiratorial thinking because I know someone who is in a multi-level marketing scheme, or MLM, that sells health and beauty products. Without wanting to oversimplify, MLMs are gussied up pyramid schemes that have fiddled with the revenue model enough that they aren't illegal. I'll cop some flak from the MLM enthusiasts for that explainer, but if you're interested, I would strongly recommend Jane Marie's podcast *The Dream* from 2018. Anyway, because the MLM model relies heavily on an aspirational social media presence, this person posts a lot on Instagram. One of their captions caught my eye. For the sake of anonymity, I won't quote it directly but it was about the suspension

of self-doubt, raising of vibration, and embracing the law of attraction. Which raised some alarm bells for me, because it's a very New Age-y concept, which is a fun little step closer to weird anti-vaxx shit and from there it's a short tumble into outright fascism.

Now, I'm obviously not saying this person I know is a sneeze away from becoming a tiki-torch wielding monster. But it's kind of jarring that the idea of "treat your toe fungus with herbs like Mother Nature intended" and "grab your gas masks and proceed to your bunker for the impending race war" live close enough together to make me do a double take on an aspirational health and wealth post. So, I thought we could have a little poke around at some of the base ideas of for these 'woo-woo' wellness thoughts, and how people end up going from gentle hippies who want to embrace natural healing to violent conspiracists yelling about taking down the deep state.

I first remember hearing the phrase 'wellness-to-white-supremacy pipeline' being thrown around post-2016 when QAnon started to become more prevalent. QAnon is a behemoth, all-encompassing conspiracy juggernaut that centres on messages from a mysterious Q who is allegedly working inside the Whitehouse to help Donald Trump overthrow a cabal of Satanic child molesters. Specifically, I remember it coming to the forefront in early 2020, when a couple of news articles appeared about influencers becoming radicalised in the midst of the pandemic. Some family bloggers were spruiking the (very, very thoroughly debunked, and definitely insane) conspiracy that American furniture company Wayfair was

being used to traffic children alongside its tasteful collection of lamps. QAnon had already taken a pretty strong foothold in some corners of the internet, and a few dedicated reporters – particularly Mike Rothschild and poor Will Sommer at The Daily Beast – had been looking into it since at least 2018. But influencers mixing the conspiracy into their regular, carefully curated lifestyle content was enough to make some mainstream news outlets like Buzzfeed or The Guardian pay attention. A lot of mainstream coverage focused on how jarring it was to see people who were often associated with peaceful things like yoga practices or beige and white homewares start parroting off talking points about how Hilary Clinton was murdering babies to harvest their adrenochrome.

As an aside for those of you lucky enough to not be totally poisoned by the internet, adrenochrome is a chemical compound caused by the oxidation of adrenaline. As I'm sure you're aware, adrenaline is produced through stress, and conspiracy theorists have become convinced that so-called 'Hollywood elites' are torturing trafficked children to harvest adrenochrome from their blood because it's the fountain of youth. In reality, you can actually synthesise adrenochrome, it can be purchased by most bio researchers easily, and some countries use it to treat blood clotting disorders. But reasonable explanations have never really been what conspiracists are after, so by the time anyone has made it to that specific bandwagon, it's probably too late for a generic explanation of synthetic compounds.

Anyway. Even though it feels like there's

a huge disconnect between the white woman with the soothing voice walking you through her morning routine and an armed right-wing militiaman screaming about free speech, or at least it feels like any connection between them might be new, the truth is actually a little more complicated. Back in 2011, Charlotte Ward and David Voas published a piece in the Journal of Contemporary Religion called The Emergence of Conspirativity. In it 'conspirativity' is identified as an emerging digital trend that blends the hyper-masculine, overtly political, generally negatively-oriented world of conspiracy theories with the feminine, positive, self-improvement focused world of New Age spirituality. You're probably pretty familiar with conspiracy theories by now, but New Age spirituality is kind of harder to pin down. Chances are you already have a picture in your head – a holistic focus on the mind, body and spirit, yoga and meditation, a lot of talk about the divine power of the universe. You might recall that part of the reason wellness stuff took off in the last 50 years was through the New Age movement, because both things seek to bring mind, body and spirit into alignment. It's also the same stomping ground as the 'law of attraction', 'raising your vibration' stuff that my MLM friend was referring to in their posts. According to Ward and Voas, the two fields are primed for cross-propagation.

They suggest that the three core principles of a conspiracy identified Michael Barkun – that is, that nothing happens by accident, that nothing is as it seems and that everything is connected – actually align closely with New Age thought and alternative spirituality. Where conspiracy

theorists attribute agency to hidden political forces trying to re-establish a world order, New Age spiritualists assign a lot of agency to the hidden forces of the universe. Both groups are waiting for some sort of 'paradigm shift'. Ward and Voas' conception of conspirativity is as a politico-spiritual philosophy with two core convictions – one from each side of the spectrum. The first from conspiracy theory, is that "a secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order". The second, from New Age spirituality, is that "humanity is undergoing a 'paradigm shift' in consciousness, or awareness, so solutions to the first issue lie in acting in accordance with an awakened 'new paradigm' worldview".

The key risk identified by the paper, is that both conspiratorial and New Age thinking are naturally anti-authoritarian. They exist in opposition to the current order of things, whether it's big pharma, big government or the mainstream media. But the anti-authoritarian bent of New Age thinking can pretty easily be co-opted into a far-right conspiratorial ideology which turns the spotlight of that anti-establishment thinking on "hidden elites and hidden threats", which can then become increasingly more radical as time goes on.

Jumping 12 years down the track from when this paper was written, social media has continued to strip away at the context of basically everything. Algorithmic recommendations will put a toothpaste ad next to footage of the earthquake in Turkey, next to someone doing a fast fashion haul, next to an explainer on ADHD, next to footage of

war in the Ukraine. And you could tap through all of them with absolutely no meaningful engagement with the content. The caption on the Ukrainian war footage might tell you that it's faked (an actual conspiracy that's doing the rounds on far-right Twitter at the moment). And you'd just be like "yep", before moving to the next thing which is a history of colonial genocides condensed into a five-image slide show complete with bubble font and pastel pink background.

So, if we return to QAnon, the sudden rampant proliferation of conspiracy theories amongst yoga practitioners and suburban mummy bloggers doesn't really seem so wild if you consider it in this context. You're looking at a community of people who were already looking for alternatives to pharmaceutical companies or had concerns about the wellbeing of their children. They were already participating in a holistic wellness practice, or doing alternative therapies. Then March 2020 hits and suddenly they were locked inside, maybe their business was totally shut down and they had nothing to do but look at Instagram or Facebook all day. There, they were flooded with a bunch of aesthetically pleasing, seemingly uncontroversial questions - do you believe children shouldn't be abused? A fairly universally approvable statement. Do you believe that pharmaceutical companies are exploiting people? Sure. It's a soft on-ramp that aligns with concerns they already have about the world. They're worried about their kids and they're living through a poorly managed global pandemic where a vaccine has had more money than god thrown at it and been developed in record time, seemingly without all the usual

rigmarole applied to normal consumer products. As some of their concerns were addressed, new concerns are introduced. Do you know who is abusing the kids? Do you know what they're putting in the vaccines? The answers don't have to be true; they just have to feel true. They're all designed to move you further down the pipeline. Depending on which answers feel truest to you, you can end up at vaccine hesitancy, or Hilary Clinton torturing sex trafficked children to harvest adrenochrome in tunnels under New York City in time for their impending Satanic shadow government takeover. It doesn't get everyone, and it doesn't even get every single person all the way to storming the Capitol, but it gets enough of them.

I recently read Amanda Montell's *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism*, which is a good read if you're interested in linguistics particularly. But in the opening chapters she talks about the fact that cults had a huge moment in the 1960/70s, because there was an incredible period of social and economic upheaval - the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, the brutal treatment of protestors and activists in both instances, a tanking economy, the Kennedy and King assassinations. While this profound, and often isolating, cultural moment was boiling away, traditional Protestant spirituality was declining, and there was an increased interest in alternative spiritualities. People fell into the general cultic milieu because, as I've said before, human beings are necessarily social creatures. We love people and purpose. Hold that cultural moment up against 2020. COVID-19 tanked the economy in March. In May, the murder of George

Floyd by Minneapolis police kicked off a wave of protests across the country, which sparked further law enforcement retaliation against protestors. The protests excited the local fascists, not to be confused with the police... although sometimes to be confused... anyway... they'd had been gunning for an open street fight since Trump's election and they started showing up in full force. By January 6th 2021, QAnon freaks were in the Capitol.

My point here is that socially we're kind of ripe for another wave of cults. But this time we have the internet, which means that not only can the net for adherents be cast wider than ever before, but the spectrum of belief can also be broader. There's time and space to develop even more in-roads.

Now, I've gotten this far into the wellness-to-white supremacy pipeline episode and I've said more about Satanic baby eating cults than I have about white supremacy. And if I'm being honest, it's because it's actually kind of tricky to know where to start. 'Conspirituality' is a reasonably new term, and it's specifically referencing a digital trend, but if you look at the conflation of racism, conspiratorial thinking, and spirituality, you can get real funky with it and go back almost as far as you want. There's a whole wandering path I can take you on through Esoteric Nazism, the Neo-Nazi movement in India, and American theosophical concerns. Which is tempting cos I've read a shitload of stuff in the last couple of days – but I won't. If you want to get into it on your own time, I recommend Nicholas Goodwin-Clarke's *The Occult Roots of Nazism* as a start

because it was written as antidote to the kind of sensationalist stuff that takes up most of the History Channel now.

Anyway. I think there are two things that I want to say about white supremacy's proximity to a sort of "woo-woo", yoga practicing, mind-body-spirit culture, and they sort of tie into each other. The first is that the wellness industry has a racism problem. Now, that's probably true of every industry on earth, but the specific problem with wellness is the conflict between the maximum practical benefit of wellness practices like yoga, mindfulness or meditation, and the industry's image of itself. On the one hand, wellness practices have the potential to be of benefit to communities who are traditionally locked out of mainstream medicine either by the prohibitive costs or because they are part of a marginalised group that suffers at the hands of conventional medical practitioners. What do I mean by suffers? Let me give you an example – did you know that a study of American medical practitioners found they were twice as likely to underestimate a black patient's pain because of a persistent racist belief that black people's skins are thicker than white people's and their nerve endings are less sensitive?

In that sense, having a wellness practice like yoga or meditation, that strengthens the body and/or allows you to be aware of and catalogue changes and better articulate medical concerns is phenomenally beneficial. Significantly more beneficial in a practical sense than say, it is for someone wealthy who uses yoga to supplement their weights routine and spin classes, and meditation to unwind after work. Now,


obviously I think the solution is that we burn the system down, properly socialise healthcare and force medical programs to incorporate critical thinking skills and anti-bias training into their curriculums. But I'm talking about things to tide us over. According to Nicole Cardoza, a black yoga practitioner writing in 2019, considered outside a capitalistic system, wellness has an opportunity to increase health equity for marginalised groups. She says, "The positive benefits to lower-income populations and communities of colour would be cost-effective, as they would promote preventative ways people can stay well in the face of America's health-care system, an industry that often overlooks these groups."

In contrast to this, the wellness industry largely views itself as white. When you close your eyes and you think about the type of practices I've been describing – yoga, mindfulness, clean eating – depending on the approach, you probably have a couple of pictures in mind. Perhaps it's a thin, blonde, white woman, standing on a beach at sunrise looking hopefully into the middle distance as though her entire life has been improved by the consumption of organic strawberries and a crystal in her water bottle. That's the sort of Gwyneth Paltrow school of wellness. Or it might be a thin, blonde, white woman in a flowing linen dress, smiling as she wakes up early to hand puree home-grown fruits for her toddler to avoid the harshness of pesticides and waits for the cloth diapers to dry on the clothesline. That's moving towards what we'd call more a 'Crunchy' school of wellness, which was a term coined in reference to granola, and refers to a particular brand of all-

natural motherhood that eschews plastic toys, avoids food additives and leans into natural medicines. Whichever one springs to mind first, they're both white, and specifically they're both white women.

Kelly Gonsalves, writing for The Cut in August of 2020, interviewed 9 black women who were wellness practitioners – from actual medical professionals to energy healers – and every single one of them had a story of being called too aggressive for the peaceful practices they work in. So, while the maximum benefit of holistic wellness practices would probably be reaped by non-white people in marginalised communities, the wellness industry views itself as the realm of white, moneyed femininity.

Which brings me to the second thing I wanted to say. When we think about Neo-Nazis, we tend to think about things like Charlottesville. Angry young men, jack-booted thugs kicking in teeth. It's masculine, aggressive and explicitly violent. What that image fails to do is acknowledge the role that white women play, and have always played, in spreading white supremacy. Kathleen Belew, writing for the Atlantic, notes that the crunchier brand of wellness I mentioned earlier shares similar preoccupations as a number of far-right white supremacist organisations, particularly from the late 70s and early 80s, and that hippy and white supremacist compounds often existed alongside each other in the same rural communities. Things like organic farming, a macrobiotic diet, neo-paganism, anti-fluoridation, and traditional midwifery were all the realms of white supremacist women, and their hippy sisters half a paddock away.



**A less aggressive, more family-oriented approach is a much more appealing advertising technique for white supremacy, and white women are primed and ready to develop the Instagram-able, non-threatening cottage industries to go alongside. Take, for example, a white nationalist soap brand written about by Mark Hay for the Daily Beast which I won't bother naming. They don't include specific white supremacist messaging in the branding of their, all natural, handmade soaps, but they do sometimes share message of "patriotism" on their social channels, like a white, classic pin-up style image of a nude woman in a White Lives Matter sash.**

**Kathleen Belew says, "The white-power movement is not just men marching in the street. It's also women sharing cultural materials through social networks. Women, and the cultural materials upon which they exert their most intense influence, are where we can see that this is a social movement."**

**So it's not just that there is a coincidental overlap in thinking between white supremacists, conspiracy theorists, and self-proclaimed wellness gurus. It's that there is a conscious and consistent push to incorporate that into a white supremacist outlook.**

**What can be done about it? Look it's hard and I don't really have an answer. I think it requires that we actually actively engage with whatever we're consuming through social channels, rather than just let us passively wash over us. I think it requires talking to your friends and acquaintances about their mystical thinking and helping them interrogate**

**whether it truly aligns with their beliefs. I think it requires more than the knee-jerk derision you might usually have to conspiracy. It's exhausting and it's a project. But I do believe it's worth it in the long run.**

**Welp... there we go. That's our first two part-er. Like I said, just because someone thinks that you can manifest stuff doesn't mean they're a Nazi. But it seems good to keep an eye on overall – just to make sure they don't get too far down the rabbit hole. Anyway, help me take a break from being upset about the prevalence of white supremacy in our current political climate by talking to me about Satanic rituals next time you see me at the pub! Peace!**



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