

Yoga and the Metaphysics of Racial Capital

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Abstract

The professionalization of yoga teacher-training at Kripalu Center, a yoga facility named after Swami Kripalu, not only displaces the forms of spiritual quest from which the Center emerged. It also makes its yoga culture vulnerable to the circulation and consumption of racial fetishes, or racially inscribed images that distract from, or magically veil altogether, the endemic complications and histories of racial capitalism. Kripalu Center installs professionalization procedures – including the standardization of curriculum and assessment to legitimate teachers for competition in an expanding yoga market – that make it complicit with the transmission of racial fetishes. Ultimately, professionalization becomes one vector of a larger complex I call the *metaphysic of racial capital*, or an underlying narrative of capitalist production plotted by various forms of racial fetishes that ensure capital's continuous regeneration.

Keywords: Metaphysics; Racial Capital; Fetish; Professionalization

Introduction

In 2009, I began a consistent yoga practice to find a sense of balance within the strangeness of my professional life. Doing yoga is common among many contemporary educated, middle-class Americans who seek relief from physical or emotional maladies, and my initial reasons for practicing yoga closely resembled what current research shows (Park et al. 2015).¹ Yet, as a heterosexual, cisgendered, married, Black man, I held an ambivalent relationship to the sanghas in which I practiced, many of which resembled the racially homogenous workspaces that had nudged me to yoga in the first place. Although I had been introduced to yoga during graduate school, I abandoned it while writing my dissertation, in part because I perceived my time as too limited to do anything but research and write, but also because of the peculiar feelings I experienced in most yoga communities. More often than not, I found myself in a sea of middle class, white women who seemed to claim studios as their own special cultural spaces of millennial feminism for expressing emotional vulnerability, releasing stress, and, of course, showing off the strength and power of their bodies through asanas and expensive athletic wear. When I entered these spaces, I felt like my presence either elicited terror, or piqued their curiosity about an exotic racial world they only wondered about. When I devoted myself consistently to yoga in 2009, I committed to blocking the command of their gazes, and to rendering them as distractions surmountable by strong focus on my practice. In fact, not being diverted by their consuming stares became a pivotal part of my practice itself.

The benefits of yoga felt worth enduring the discomfort of being in yoga's "white space(s)." ² The calming effects of my practice helped me to cultivate another relationship with my body that imbued me with tools to diminish the rage, frustration, and disappointment I experienced with my job. As I practiced throughout the Southeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Northeast, learning the discipline and lessons of yoga – listening to my inner voice, allowing myself to feel my embodiment, focusing on my breath as my connection to a more peaceful state – continued to *call* me. I traveled extensively that year, even moving from the Southeast to the Northeast in August, but I practiced in a community at least twice a week no matter where I was. The asanas surfaced my habits to my conscious awareness – my fierce self-criticism, my intense anger, and my constant leaps of consciousness to a future world of different conditions.

In many unexpected ways, yoga ushered me to a new understanding of my life and research. My scholarly work explores the professionalization of Black ministers, particularly the ways in which designed institutional training alters, if not erodes, traditional forms of the call to ministry, or those specific moments in a person's life that signal a divine beckoning to preach. Professionalization processes – from seminary training to denominational ordination to self-fashioning in the image of popular, commercialized models of ministry – streamline preparation for ministry into a rationalized logic of labor, wedding preachers to market culture that can erase prior modes of calling. Professionalized self-fashioning can also steer Black ministers away from structural explanations of material inequality that call experiences historically summoned, and push ministers towards complicity with racist images of Blackness for understanding America's racial order. In an age of multicultural neoliberalism, anti-Black imagery and discourses are *racial fetishes* consumed to distract from, or magically veil altogether, the failures of racial capitalism, to satisfy erotic desires, and to feed the benevolent sympathies of liberal paternalism. ³

I began to discover that the concerns raised in my scholarship on Black ministers were bearing down on my own life. Entering graduate study brought me face-to-face with the Academy's pressures of professionalization, where thinking itself has become determined by disciplinary training, and through it, packages ideas for assessment by a professional guild. After completing graduate school, I was thrown into a different phase of professionalization. My work was interesting enough to warrant my hiring as a tenure track professor at an institution, and my identity as a Black man also signaled, in a more profound way than in graduate school, a supposed complicity with an ideology of racial fetishism uncritically embraced by some of the ministers I studied. Like Chris Jaynes, the protagonist in the novel *Pym*, I was expected to support my new institution's anachronistic efforts at "diversity," whether it meant representing my race on committees or even lending my own physical image to glossy marketing advertisements. ⁴ What is more is that my courses on Black religion and culture were reduced to symbols of curricular difference within my department, emptying them of intellectual value and the historical challenges they presented. My racial identity and scholarly work were ensnared in the peculiar vacuum of institutional multiculturalism: I was financially compensated and promised the future benefits of tenure for staying in the place my elder white colleagues prescribed for me.

Yoga became a means of observing, as well as resisting, my profession's failure to systematically critique, or eliminate, its institutional consumption of fetishized Black subjectivity. As I encountered asanas in my yoga practice that made me uncomfortable or were beyond my abilities at the time, I was moved to humble acceptance and appreciation of my

body's limitations, as well as the transitory nature of its presence. As I learned my habits of desire, I was challenged to assume a sense of detachment from them. Poses became a new language for my body that was different from that of my profession, or similar white spaces, even the yoga communities in which I practiced. As I realized the impact of professionalization on my experiences, the ways physical and symbolic uses of my body trapped me within institutional settings, my professional life assumed a form that I began to imagine as an asana through which I had to breathe with full awareness regardless of the sensations that arose for me from its demands. Yoga moved me towards disciplined detachment from my body, from which emerged a critical perspective on professionalization processes, both within the Black ministries I researched, and within my own occupation of the professoriate. My practice created an awareness of the limits of racial capital's encroachment on my being.

For my fortieth birthday, my wife gifted me a month-long yoga teacher-training session at the world-renowned Kripalu Center in Lenox, Massachusetts. Founded by Yogi Amrit Desai in the the 1960s, Kripalu Center is named for Swami Kripalu (or Bapuji), a talented artist who developed a method of improvisational yoga called "meditation in motion." The distinctive feature of Kripalu Yoga, "meditation in motion," is a state of surrender to the divine "Source." The aim of Kripalu teacher-training is to guide its practitioners towards an embodiment of prana – or life-force energy – that they can then transmit to others through specific methodologies. Though named for Bapuji, Desai and his adherents translated Kripalu Yoga for a mass, Western audience as part of "transnational Anglophone yoga" (Singleton 2010). In its current form, Kripalu Yoga does not rely on the charismatic guru model, as it did with Bapuji and Desai, but standardizes, through its systematic curriculum, individual inquiries into the body to achieve transformation through psychological growth and emotional healing.

When I entered Kripalu Center for my 200-hour teacher-training in June of 2014, I anticipated an intensification of what I had felt in my previous classes, particularly those I had taken in another New England city with current students of Desai. In some of those classes, I felt, albeit momentarily, that I was outside my body, watching it move vigorously through challenging postures, but with little strain, and with no judgment of the sensations they aroused, whether stimulating or uncomfortable. By enrolling in teacher-training, my hope was to strengthen my practice and further fortify myself against the power of professionalization's hold on my life. What happened, however, was that I was propelled into a similar, yet distinctive simulation of what I tried to escape in my profession, and what I had observed in the worlds of the ministers I studied. Our yoga training was intended to open us to the power of prana, and to impart this practice to others, but most pronounced to me were the ways it *professionalized* us into teaching yoga. This was accomplished by instructing us in Kripalu's philosophy and methodologies of yoga, including its asana training and practice teaching, and building community through exercises designed from psychology. Kripalu's professionalization, I also found, included a passive absorption of racial fetishes through discourses of diversity and multiculturalism that are animated by a grammar of colonial imagery.

What follows is an ethnographic account of Kripalu Center's professionalization of yoga teacher-training, and the ways it is intimately entwined with racial fetishes.⁵ A mass marketer of yogic life, Kripalu Center is part of a longer history of yoga's encounter with American racial capitalism. Recent scholarship has taken up yoga's encounter with global modernities, particularly the consequences of its assimilation into American capitalist culture (Jain 2015), yet

these insightful studies omit race as an integral, if not indispensable, feature of capitalism. To this end, I employ the concept of *metaphysic of racial capital*, an underlying narrative of capitalist production plotted by various forms of racial fetishes that ensures capital's continuous generation.⁶ Similar to Black ministry, and the American Academy, Kripalu Center installs professionalization procedures including formalizing a discourse of yoga philosophy, imparting techniques of asana training, and practice teaching using a toolkit of methods. These procedures enable aspiring yoga teachers to consume, and to be complicit with, an expansive economy of racial fetishes naturalized by reinscribing the embodied guru as a strange, exotic figure at the expense of its history and traditions; by invoking empire through missionary work; and by rendering fetishes of the body – the ideal white feminine body and exotic Black body – for consumption.

Gurus and Anglophone Yoga in Racial Capital

As I entered the main program room of Kripalu Center on the first evening of my teacher-training, I found the space filled with over sixty other aspiring yoga instructors. The sanctuary was crowded with young, white women, all under the age of 30 – and some surprisingly still in their teens – while I was one of only eight men, and the only Black man. Clad in what has become traditional gear in America's yoga culture – Lululemon bras, camisoles, and stretch pants – my new classmates immediately seemed to cohere into a collectivity of which I was not a part, yet we were all now between two phases of our lives: before our Kripalu training and our emergence as teachers in the Kripalu lineage.

Our instructors – Raj, a fifty-something year old white man, and Divya, a white woman in her sixties⁷ – told us that the room in which we were located, a large lecture hall with posters of information on the *Yoga Sutras*, the koshas, and the Kripalu toolkit, was a sacred sanctuary, and that within it, we would experience the limitless power of yoga. On the first morning of the training, Raj and Divya led us through an initial, cursory reading of the immense manual disseminated to the trainees the previous evening, a thick binder entitled, “Kripalu school of yoga 200-hour teacher-training manual.” Over the next 28 days of training, this text would serve as scripture for me and my fellow trainees. Divided into fourteen chapters, the manual covered a range of topics, from the history of Kripalu Center to meditation to the “business of yoga.” One section introduced us to the Kripalu understanding of “guru” as illuminated through the “Saha Navavatu Prayer,” or the “student-teacher mantra.” Raj and Divya took us through each verse, translating specific words they believed important to our understanding. The careful translation of key terms in the prayer also served to deconstruct and expand our understanding of the word “guru,” the subject of the mantra. Our manual defined guru as “that which is important, weighty, and respectable... [I]t can be a phenomenal teacher... [or] anything that draws us away from habitual, unconscious behavior to deeper learning and growth.” Thus, guru not only carries its traditional meaning as a spiritual leader, but anything that releases us to our potential. The mantra was intended to clarify our relationship with Divya and Raj, but to also inform our responsibility to our future students. Its importance was signified each morning, when either Raj, Divya, or one of their six teaching assistants, would lead us through the mantra while playing a harmonium – a portable, pump organ.

This expansion of the meaning of guru beyond its colloquial meaning, I would later learn, was pivotal to the transformation of Kripalu Center, in the mid-1990s, from an ashram for nurturing the guru-disciple relationship to a yoga education center. The guru of our morning mantra was an ethereal force accessible to us through our individual devotion to Kripalu Center's method, but the meaning of the term in the Kripalu lineage is much more varied. In his writings, Bapuji referenced the more abstract, malleable meaning of guru advanced in my training, but he also used the term to refer to his actual guru, Swami Pranavanandji (or Dadaji), who Bapuji believed achieved the ultimate aim of yoga by reaching a state of the "divine body" or immortality, as well as to his specific practice of yoga, from which he developed his own three, distinct facets of yoga – *pranotthana* through *saktipat diksa*, *pranayoga sadhana*, and *divine body* (Goldberg 2014b; Kripalu 2014).⁸ When Bapuji died in 1981, Desai's yoga, which emphasized his personal experience of *saktipat*, or an awakening to prana leading to "meditation in motion," became the dominant yogic philosophy of the Center (Goldberg 2014a). Bapuji's pursuit of the "divine body," which he had witnessed in Dadaji, has been, in effect, sacrificed over time for a yoga philosophy more compatible with popular modes of self-discovery and overall well-being along with the very idea of embodied guru as spiritual leader.

Still, there is another meaning of guru that has gone unrecognized in the Kripalu system, but that continues to carry significant power. Even as our Kripalu teacher-training manual notes Swami Vivekananda's famous speech at the 1893 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago as a key moment in yoga's birth in the West, and in the development of Kripalu's transnational lineage, it does not acknowledge Vivekananda's anti-colonialist sentiment: how he recognized the colonial attitude behind the encroachment of Western religion on his native India, and how his body was enmeshed in a system of racial signification in America. His biographer, Swami Nikhilananda (1953) notes that upon entering America Vivekananda soon "discovered that the lecture bureau was exploiting him. Further, he did not like its method of advertisement. He was treated as if he were the chief attraction of a circus" (70). Vivekananda's grand debut on the American stage introduced him through the fetishized language of the "guru."

Nowhere in the Kripalu curriculum does it note the crucial lesson of Vivekananda's struggle to withstand his misappropriation as an exotic guru by America's metaphysics of racial capital. As Bapuji's model of yoga perfection has been attenuated at the Center, reproductions of his image emerged as an important marketing tool of Kripalu's authenticity. Enlarged photographs of Bapuji adorn the walls of the main entrance to the Center. Underneath, or beside, his images are aphorisms credited to his writings about yoga. While Bapuji is deified through iconography throughout the Center, Desai is somewhat erased from the grounds, even though he founded Kripalu Yoga. He was cast from the flock because of his involvement in a sex scandal in the early 1990s,⁹ leading to the Center's transition to "a community that values and honors all traditional and contemporary spiritual paths... [It's] mission values empowering the learner while accessing and exploring the depths of yoga without an external guru." In the wake of the scandal – which evades questions about how the guru fetish may have influenced it – the guru is not embodied, but available through right practice thoughtfully appropriated from a designed curriculum.

More long-term affiliates of Kripalu consider the scandal as a death and rebirth of the Center.¹⁰ The controversy led to the deconstruction of the "guru" figure in Kripalu Center's institutional culture, and the routinizing of its yoga methodology. But as the guru idea moves

away from an actual individual, and is rationalized into textual discourse, yoga becomes more immersed in racial capital, creating a more intense focus on the body, at the expense of the mystical elements of Bapuji's practice. Kripalu Center's commercial success, which is extraordinary by any monetary measure – in 2011, the Center's revenues totaled over \$30 million – emerged from its various ventures into natural health and publishing. The presences of Bapuji and Desai – whether in the teacher-training manual, marketing advertisements, or casual conversations with Kripalu instructors – are abstracted from the larger narrative of Bapuji's yoga quest. As we watched a grainy video of Bapuji during one of our sessions, my colleagues snickered at his jerky and admittedly strange hand gestures and speech rhythms. Without a full comprehension of *saktipat*, or the details of his extraordinary yoga quest, the spiritual father of our new lineage was perceived as a cartoonish figure by his young adherents.

At Kripalu Center, the meaning of guru has transitioned from a charismatic figure that carries divinity achieved through a rigorous, ascetic spiritual quest to a subtle form individually accessible from a commoditized session of training organized around a routinized curriculum. While this might raise questions of “authenticity,” of whether current training diminishes the legitimacy of yogic traditions, my observations reveal how professionalization processes resulting from the elimination of the embodied guru make yoga vulnerable to the power of racial fetishes, even beyond the caricaturing of Bapuji himself, that are endemic to the metaphysic of racial capital. Displacing the intricacies of Bapuji's yoga experience with professionalization makes yoga more palatable for mass consumption to build the yoga industry. Yet, by imprinting a form of labor onto yoga, it prepares aspiring teachers to willingly consume racial fetishes that distract from their own participation in an ongoing colonial drama.

Professionalization into Kripalu Yoga and the Exotics of the Racial Fetish

Dadaji, Bapuji, and Desai each represent different temporal yogic paths. While Dadaji achieved the divine body, there has been no witness to whether Bapuji himself reached this state, yet his life is the yogic example *par excellence* for Kripalu's contemporary lineage. Desai, on the other hand, took his point of departure from his experience of *saktipat*, even as that experience only marked the beginning of Bapuji's journey. The current professionalization of yoga teachers in the Kripalu tradition – marked by a designed curriculum around symbolic economies of the body – orchestrates the performance of *saktipat*, condensing it into a routinized form that thrives on racial fetishes, while making adherents vulnerable to their consumption.

Within the first few days of our training, we were introduced to a performance of *saktipat*. Upon entering a large sanctuary, we received mala beads as we listened to a recorded refrain, “Om (all that is); namo (I bow down to); Bhagavate (divine light of consciousness); Vasudevaya (God of all Gods).” As the volume lowered, Raj told us that, taken together, the mantra we heard meant, “thy will be done.” He then silently demonstrated for us “meditation in motion” as his body rhythmically moved through a series of vigorous postures pulsed with the sound of his ujjayi breath. When Raj was finished, he asked us to do as he had done, to allow prana to direct our movements. A few of my classmates found each other's eyes, silently acknowledging trepidation, but then retreated to a corner of the room to attempt the practice. When we finished, we were told that we had been initiated into the Kripalu lineage. The language of *saktipat* was not used, nor was its meaning contextualized within Bapuji's, or even

Desai's, yogic journey. Instead, *saktipat* was manufactured through Raj's demonstration, and then pruned to accommodate, but not disturb, the professionalization exercises of the training, which included learning Kripalu's carefully crafted curriculum culled from ancient texts like the "Saha Navavatu Prayer" and Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*.

Our asana training, though explained to us as part of a larger philosophical and methodological system, was central to our course. Despite the centrality of the five koshas to the philosophy and methodologies of Kripalu Yoga, much of our training was devoted to the first two sheaths – the annamaya kosha and the pranamaya kosha. The emphasis on asana training was not surprising; what was remarkable to me, however, were the ways asana and the annamaya kosha were primarily conceptualized through the language of anatomy (Hately 2006). Through films, books, and lectures, we learned about the body's extremities, the differences in pronation and compression, and the functions of our organ systems. A few sessions were devoted to discussions and film viewings of muscles and bone structure. Our studies of anatomy added nuance to our understandings of the poses, but over time, it became clear to me that our anatomy instruction was intended to equip us with knowledge to protect our students from injury, to aid us in avoiding legal action resulting from improper instruction, and to serve as an important source of legitimizing our knowledge as professional yoga teachers.

Despite our focus on the body, our instruction failed to penetrate, or even acknowledge, the racial economies of bodies at Kripalu Center. As various writings have noted, the young, fit white woman's body dominated the culture of my training, and the culture of Kripalu at large. Many of my fellow trainees resembled, or sought to resemble, images on various yoga publications, like *Yoga Journal*, as well as Kripalu's own quarterly magazine. Photographs are central to the Kripalu landscape, and function, as Singleton proposes, as a means of "bringing forth... the modern yoga body... [It is] part of the apparatus of commercial and cultural domination that defined Empire" (Singleton 2010, 163-164). By naturalizing the young, white, female fit body, photography facilitates its mass production and consumption on an open market, and generates self-conscious awareness of one's own body. Photographs are just one of many marketing strategies for being successful in "The Business of Yoga," the subject of our final session when, for almost two hours we were instructed to determine how much we should charge; to search for ways to use our skills, whether in private classes, workshops, corporate wellness sessions, or work at colleges and universities; to survey our competitors; to acquire insurance; and to create a business plan for our desired clientele. I could not help but consider the irony: the pressures of modern society that might lead one to yoga could prompt many to discover that those same cultural conventions have absorbed this ancient practice.

Although young, white women constituted the mythical norm¹¹ of Kripalu Center's space, I could not help but contrast that model with those representing the organization's "Africa Yoga Project" upon meeting Kwame, one of the three Black men I saw at Kripalu during my thirty day residence. Kwame was working at the snack bar in front of the Gift Shop. Upon seeing me he happily extended his hand, introduced himself, and began to tell me about his journey from West Africa to New England in a tone familiar to narratives of "uplift" in early Black autobiographies. Upon his immigration to the United States, Kripalu had "saved" Kwame – his 200-hour teacher-training led him to self-discoveries that ultimately resulted in his achievement as a global representative of Kripalu's power. He was now an acolyte of Kripalu's "Africa Yoga

Project,” which according to its website, “educates, empowers, elevates and employs youth from Africa using the transformational power of yoga” (Africa Yoga Project 2016).

Based in Kenya, “Africa Yoga Project” is a familiar story of missionary work. One of the pictures on the website is of a young Black girl in tightly coiled cornrows dressed in what looks to be a school uniform. Her gentle smile disarms the viewer, and her lovely eyes stare into the camera suggesting her happiness, but about what it is not at all clear because she has no demonstrable connection to yoga. Another image features a young dreadlocked Black man in dancer pose in a field with three zebras. Dressed only in loose-fitting pink pants, his well-sculpted, graceful body is at one with the natural, safari landscape. Still another image profiles a white woman assisting young Kenyans into eagle pose. Of all of these, my eyes were immediately drawn to a picture of seven Kenyans, presumably Masai, dressed in “traditional” attire in an open, Serengeti-like prairie. Stretched into Virabhadrasana Eka (Warrior One), their dark, long, thin arms reach towards the heavens, seemingly in gratitude for the gift of yoga. Reminiscent of an issue of *National Geographic*, the pictures visually document and fix racial types, evoking fantasies of the “heart of darkness,” but also suggesting the power and necessity of yoga’s civilizing project. “Africa Yoga Project” invites interested yoga practitioners to travel to Kenya to learn and share yoga with native peoples. Its imagery and promotion of yoga appears blind to the West’s history of colonialism, and reinforces the history of exotic tropes and stories that have organized and sustained racial categories in the Western mind for centuries (Lutz and Collins 1993). Yoga creates new labor possibilities for marginalized communities by healing the injuries of impoverishment. By offering yoga teacher-training for young people in Africa to transform “urban slums,” it imparts teaching, leadership, and entrepreneurial skills for oppressed youth through a common model of missionary work. Taken together, the white, fit female body and the impoverished Black body in need of conversion to modernity were in an orbit of racial fetishes occupied by Bapuji’s decontextualized representation in photographs and video.

Practice Teaching in the ‘Jungle’

Over the course of our month-long training, we were required to attend classes taught by experienced Kripalu teachers at the Center, and to note their applications of the toolkit designed from Kripalu’s philosophy, methodologies, and asana training. But more than that, we would see in our observations of them other features of the Kripalu professional yoga teacher – dressing professionally; presenting a clean, organized yoga space; making eye contact with students throughout a class; guiding students carefully through postures thoughtfully selected for students’ performance levels; and coordinating movement with breath awareness. Class observations prepared us for our own teaching by revealing, in multiple ways, the beauty of Kripalu’s curriculum: its flexibility. Like a jazz performer who improvises within the chord changes of a melody, the Kripalu Yoga teacher can use the toolkit to articulate a personal inquiry into the body. We were instructed to visualize a sequence of postures from our own practice, and to then use our toolkit to guide students to our vision. In guiding students into the poses, we were advised to use “descriptive language” that would help students experience the posture in new ways. Upon assuming Virabhadrasana Dwi (Warrior Two), for example, a teacher might invoke the imagery of seaweed flowing in the water to move students to assume fluidity in the asana.

Each week, we were required to “practice teach” an actual yoga class that adhered to each stage of the Kripalu course model – a meditation, pratapana (warm-up postures), asana, pranayama, and closing meditation. We instructed our classes in a group of five students, in a timed round robin of durations that increased each week. My classmates and I felt a sense of achievement upon completing the third, and final, practice-teach. We started together without any knowledge of the Kripalu tradition and could now design a class for others to experience yoga. Our collective sense of accomplishment as a group was also because we had been strategically brought together through community building exercises dispersed throughout the training. Yet, on the morning following our final teaching session, the power of racial fetishes revealed themselves when each of us was invited to lead three minutes of the morning sadhana. One by one, newly credentialed yoga teachers ascended the stage to show what they had learned during the training. Instructors led us into meditation, then pratapana, and then into a series of asanas.

Following the Kripalu toolkit of using descriptive phrasing to lead students into poses, the fourth teacher asked the class to imagine that we were in an African jungle before guiding us into Balakikasana (crane pose). The next teacher continued the jungle theme as she demonstrated eagle pose. Between the sixth and seventh teacher, one of the teaching assistants tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to lead the next pose, but I refused. Irritated by the public display of gross colonial attitudes, I excused myself from sadhana. While walking around the exterior of the grounds to clear my head, I saw Kwame in a spirited conversation with two white women, and wondered whether he was doing the work of decolonizing yoga, or supplicating the colonial narrative from which I just excused myself. After ten minutes, I returned to our supposed sanctuary to find three of my classmates in the foyer – the only two other people of color in the program, Ankita and Sophia, and Adam, a white man – with distraught looks on their faces. The “Africa” theme had apparently devolved into even more problematic territory upon my departure, with teachers taking the room of yogis even more deeply into the metaphorical jungle. Images of dark, scary headhunters were invoked to bring students into the mood of the posture sequence, a peculiar, homegrown iteration of the Africa Yoga Project.

After demonstrating our teaching skills to each other, our professionalization was ritually formalized by a ceremony in which we received certificates indicating our completion of over 200 hours of “intensive training.” We learned what our Kripalu membership earns – a one-year membership with Kripalu Yoga Teachers Association (KYTA), which includes a “Yoga Bulletin” and quarterly compact discs, as well as admission to annual KYTA conference; a 10% discount on future stays at Kripalu; eligibility for Teaching for Diversity support; a listing in the Kripalu directory and eligibility for marketing assistance; and access to liability insurance. My classmates and I were prepared for the business of yoga through our certification in a curriculum that included teaching asana, pranayama, and meditation, and yogic philosophy. Our scientific knowledge of the anatomy eclipsed the necessity for a deeper awareness of our own embodiments, and symbolic performances of, racial meanings swirling around us both within and beyond Kripalu. Instead, our professional certification – indicated in bold print on our diplomas—authorized us to use the title “Kripalu Yoga Teacher,” and promised us new possibilities for competing in an expanding yoga market. Still, my Kripalu training, informed by my research on ministers and my own professionalization into the academy, left me feeling that our work was far from complete.

Conclusion: Professionalization and Metaphysics in Transnational Anglophone Yoga

Although our teacher-training manual instructed us to learn the metaphysics underlying the tradition of yoga, my observations of Kripalu Center suggest that our training concealed a particular metaphysic that is similar to what I found in the guild of Black ministry, and what I experience in the academy. What seems assumed in Kripalu's training of teachers is the efficient transmission of ideas and techniques to prepare instructors for competition in a yoga market. Kripalu's administrators have designed an apparatus of professionalization common to training in other industries, which includes an established curriculum with an identifiable philosophy, a determined duration of instruction, and a standardized form of assessment that measures competence in skills traceable to the curriculum. Professionalization places laborers in an advantageous relationship to consumption, which is part of a process that objectifies reality into fetish things. Kripalu's yoga teachers are encouraged to spread the message of yoga far and wide through similar discourses of the racial fetish – either of multicultural inclusion or a colonial project for proselytizing the beneficent mission of American yoga. Ideas of the racial fetish are pervasive in other yoga communities, as previous writings have noted the criminalization of Black bodies in yoga spaces (Klein and Guest-Jelley 2014; Murphy 2014; Strings 2015). Distinctive about professional apparatuses, however, are the ways they absorb bodies into complicity with the market through offering the promise of consumption practices that will satiate desire. Consumption feeds the ego with an inflated sense of self in relation to an economy rife with racial typologies, and that hides its enduring, brutalizing, and exploitative consequences for non-white groups.

But even as the guru's image remains in the shadows of Kripalu's culture, it, along with the colonial images of the "African" I observed in Kripalu's "African Yoga Project," become uncritically weaved into the mass, efficient production of yoga teachers who then compete for their market share of the yoga industry. In modern American culture, the mass production of material goods are entwined with racial fetishes, whether caricatures on rice and pancake boxes that remind us of the genteel days of plantation life, boogeymen that necessitate our contempt, exotic natives in African jungles, or gurus from foreign lands that tantalize us with the promise of spiritual (or sexual) freedom. In its shift from a guru-disciple ashram model to an educational center, Kripalu Yoga has become subordinate to an ethic of professional apparatuses that fashion instructors for creative entrepreneurialism to satisfy desire at the expense of deeper critiques of our peculiar modernity.¹²

A metaphysics of racial capital – identifiable in the normalization of the white female body through photographs, clothes, and jewelry, and appropriations of the fetishes of blackness and the guru – underlies the professionalization of yoga instruction and reception at Kripalu. The acceleration of the process by which one becomes a skilled instructor contributes to the failure to delve deeply into the typifications emerging from this metaphysic. Through professionalization, the yoga teacher becomes another servant in the generation of commodity life, as training processes enhance the teacher's capacity for success by acquiring a literacy, technique, and brand for gaining employment in the yoga industry.

While it would be improper to generalize Kripalu's procedures of professionalization to other contemporary yoga institutions, my observations do spark questions about yoga's

relationship to racial capital: can yoga, practiced in the American context, move others to an awareness of the relationship between professionalization and the racial fetish, and the larger metaphysical landscape that encompasses them? Does yoga continue to carry the capacity to resist the consumption of racial fetishes? And if it does, how might that capacity be transmitted, through training, given the powerful forms of racialization that are endemic to the production of capital? These questions, and more, gesture to our need for new, possible orientations to yoga that turn devoted practitioners from a world dominated by the racial fetish towards another that holds alternative realities and possibilities for social relations.

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Notes

¹ Park et al. found that “the typical yoga practitioner” is “female, upper socioeconomic status, educated, middle-aged and White” (2015, 463).

² I intentionally use the term “white space” in the same vein as sociologist Elijah Anderson (2015) who theorizes “white space” as public spaces that are predominantly occupied by whites. He writes, “When the anonymous Black person can demonstrate that he or she has business in the white space, by producing an ID card, or simply passing an initial inspection, the defending ‘agents’ may relax their guard, at least for the time being... When venturing into or navigating the white space, black people endure such challenges repeatedly” (14).

³ A number of writers have appropriated “fetish” as a means of understanding anti-Black racism: hooks (1992); Long (1999); Mercer (1994); and Tate (2003). Also, my reference to the “benevolence” of liberal paternalism is inspired by Geoffrey Whitehall’s and Cedric Johnson’s use of the term “benevolent neoliberalism” (2011). They describe benevolent neoliberalism as, “[P]rojects [that] obviously entail an ethical commitment to those in need but simultaneously promote market-centric approaches to disaster relief and seek to manage inequality through the inculcation of neoliberal technologies” (71).

⁴ Mat Johnson’s *Pym: A Novel* (2011) opens with Chris Jaynes, an English Professor at an institution where he is the only Black man, discussing his tenure denial with the College’s dean. The dean explains to Jaynes that Jaynes was hired to serve a particular “racial role” on campus, and that he was fired for not having done so.

⁵ My method in this essay most closely resembles sociology’s iteration of phenomenological ethnography, or “the study, through various participant observation-like methods, of the structures of the life-world, meaning the forms, structures or features that people take as objectively existing in the world as they shape their conduct upon the presumption of their prior, independent existence” (Katz and Csordas 2003). Because my observations disassembled the world of teacher-training Institutional Review Board approval was unnecessary: “Generally speaking, if a project is limited to interviews that document a specific historical event or the experiences of individuals, the project would not be considered human subjects research because it is not designed to have predictive value or lead to development/testing of a hypothesis” (University of Chicago 2015).

⁶ I am appropriating the idea of “racial capital” from Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* where he describes it as the “racialism” that “permeate(s) the social structures emergent from capitalism” (2000, 2).

⁷ I have used pseudonyms for all the names of the students, teachers, and employees at Kripalu.

⁸ Ellen Goldberg (2014b) outlines these three phases. In *pranotthana*, prana, or life force, is partially awakened through an initiation called *saktipat diksa*. A receiver of “*saktipat* directly from the guru typically experiences a variety of spontaneous movements or preliminary signs (*laksana*) called *kriyas* that could include shaking, spontaneous postures, crying, dancing, chanting, or visions in his or her meditation.” Once revived by the power of prana, the adept enters *pranayoga sadhana*, a harnessing of prana that stills the mind, and awakens kundalini that heals the body resulting in the attainment of the “divine body,” or immortality (172-176).

⁹ Desai now directs the Amrit Institute in Salt Springs, Florida, a community that remains centered around his embodiment as a charismatic guru who can evoke within his students a disciplined healing practice that includes detoxifying the body, reducing stress, and recognizing that pain and suffering lead to freedom.

¹⁰ Stephen Cope describes his, and the Kripalu community’s, reaction to the Desai scandal in *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self* (1999). See also Goldberg (2014b) where they discuss the pervasiveness of sex scandals in guru-disciple ashrams.

¹¹ I am reappropriating Audre Lorde’s concept of “mythical norm” (1984), Lorde defines America’s “mythical norm” as “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society” (116).

¹² I should add here, too, Max Weber’s genealogy of the West’s labor practices in “The Protestant Ethic and the ‘Spirit’ of Capitalism” (2002). Weber saw that the accumulation of capital would build a “monstrous cosmos” of consumption.

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