

## How the Yoga Community Made Me, Then Tried to Break Me

Sabrina Strings  
*University of California, Irvine*

I came to yoga because I was in pain, but I might not have expressed it that way at the time. I was five years into my graduate school experience, making the “should I drop out?” calculus that many graduate students try to work out at some point. It was just after the Great Recession. The job market outlook was frightening. I was given an added boost to scoot by a white woman administrator who was trying to convince me it was in my best interest to drop out. It would save me the time and tears of what she believed would be my ultimate failure. Later, of course, she would catch the vapors.

When I came to yoga, I was overjoyed to have found a practice that would allow me to build up my muscles and my endurance. To revel in the tension and release I could experience through a series of postures. To have found a community of other (mostly women) with whom to have a practice that would bring us back to a reverential connection to our bodies, instead of denying ourselves that self-appreciation while we work to “perfect” our figures in ways that other forms of embodied movement routinely demand.

Yoga allowed me to transform more than just my relationship to my body. It cracked open a space in my consciousness. Suddenly, I could touch the spiritual deficit that I and many others were suffering through. I could feel the importance of building a spiritual community as a means of working towards collective liberation.

In short order, I met and began a collaboration with the originator of a working group named *Race and Yoga*, Tria Blu Wakpa (then Andrews). I enrolled in a yoga teacher training, working under some of the most notable and influential yoga teachers in the US. One of the yoga teachers, let’s call him Jan, took me under his wing. He became a friend and mentor, introducing me to other powerful women in the yoga community from whom I would learn so much.

I’d felt such incredible promise. We were ignited. All of us were working, usually for no compensation, for a cause that it seemed at the time would dictate my path for the foreseeable future. We gave talks across the country, promoting yoga as a tool for freedom and social justice. All we’d have to do, we’d tell our audiences, is push back against the white heteropatriarchal capitalist messaging that says the best part of yoga is its ability to help young white women achieve a tight ass.

But then capital got in the way. There was in-fighting between two studio owners I loved about who owned the rights to said studio. They split up, creating a rift in the local yoga community. People were being asked to take sides. I was asked by Jan, someone I loved, to take his side and publicly drag someone else I loved. I refused. In no time I found myself outside the inner circle.

Then, Jan took me to another event he helped organize where I was publicly shamed for my hairstyle. One of the women was part white. The other was a Black woman whose husband is white. Her son had a blond ombre at the same time, but no matter. What business did *I* have

dyeing the bottom third of my hair if our goal was to challenge white domination? Blond ombre = allegiance to white supremacy, everybody knows that. It was a pile-on.

Do you know that one of these women went the further step of trying to bully me in the next organizing meeting? Turns out she'd long resented me but had been masking it during the good times. I didn't capitulate to her (I don't capitulate to anybody), but I also didn't try to fight her. I could feel her own loneliness and pain. And sadness.

I would have thought that the yoga practice might have prevented her from violent attacks on other Black women. But neither the practice nor the remaining people in the meeting – who were all white women – saw any problem with her mean-spirited and spiteful treatment. I stopped working with her.

Nor did my relationship with Jan ever recover. He found new ways to show me he was spurned that I hadn't had his back. If in the earlier event I couldn't be certain of his role in the attempt to publicly shame me for my appearance, his handiwork was all over the next incident. He had organized a teacher training and asked me to lead a section. Then, he helped orchestrate a backlash to the ideas he'd help teach me, the comments he'd asked me to present. I maintained my dignity. Left there feeling whole in my own body, and yet still betrayed. I noticed for the first time that there were hardly ever any men around him. Only an increasingly youthful harem of women.

I found out months later that he'd been accused of sexual assault by a Black woman I'd never met. Owing to his prominence in the yoga community when he was #MeToo'd it made the news. Shortly thereafter, he'd fled the country.

I didn't bring this to *Race and Yoga*. Didn't see the use of exposing these wounds in the middle of the critical work we were trying to do. This is the first time I've ever publicly addressed this series of events.

Tria Blu Wakpa and Jennifer Musial, our managing editor, have been great collaborators. We didn't always agree on everything, but we always found a way to honor one another's vision. The strength of this collaboration kept me going years after my other relationships, and the community I was trying to build with other yoga practitioners, had dissolved.

I left yoga because I was in pain, although this is the first time I've thought of it like that. I stopped teaching, stopped studying the texts, stopped practicing in public. I stopped practicing.

Yoga is in me. It never left me. It transformed my consciousness. I'm practicing again. I'm studying again. I will teach it again. I continue to believe in and am willing to fight for the aims of spiritual justice. But have you ever lived through a movement with so much promise that deteriorated due to money, power, jealousy, and in-fighting?

Most of the time, we are critiquing those outside of our network. Those persons who profit from the Yoga Industrial Complex. I thought I might turn the lens inward. Force us to think about the messy and tenuous allegiances of those of us doing the political work. Get eyes on how money and ego and the sanctioned mistreatment of Black women was with us all along.

*Race and Yoga* has meant something to me. I think it has the potential to continue the critical work of raising awareness about the power of this practice to free us from the -isms that oppress us. A practice that is, well, far more than just a series of postures some of us try to hold for far too long. I leave the journal thinking highly of Tria and Jennifer and of what we achieved during our eight-year collaboration. I leave knowing that (re)building a spiritual community is the only way forward. All the while, I'm meditating on how that might look.

**Sabrina Strings** is a Chancellor's Fellow and Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Irvine. Sabrina has been featured in dozens of venues including *BBC News*, *NPR*, *Huffington Post*, *Vox*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Essence*, *Vogue*, and *goop*. Her writing has appeared in diverse venues including *The New York Times*, *Scientific American*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, and *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Her book, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (2019), is a New York University Press Bestseller. It was awarded the 2020 Best Publication Prize by the Body & Embodiment Section of the American Sociological Association. Follow Sabrina's latest moves at <https://www.sabrinastrings.com/> and on Twitter @SaStrings.