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Teigha VanHester

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Finding the Lorde in Me: Using Lordean Counterstory to Thwart Bureaucratic Violence in Community-Based Literacy Projects

Teigha VanHester

Abstract

This autoethnography chronicles an Afro-Polynesian femme scholar's struggle to secure funding for research due to bureaucratic violence and the strategic potential of Lordean counterstorying to write a way free for Black and Brown scholar-activists and community-based projects. Extending the work of previous scholars who discuss counterstory and institutional violence, this work uses re-imagination and creativity to mobilize radical research agendas geared towards empowering and amplifying community-based literacies.

Keywords: auto-ethnography, Black, femme, counterstory, community, community writing, faculty, institutional violence, literacy, Audre Lorde, pleasure activism, radical imagination, research, research agenda, tenure-track

On an oppressively hot August afternoon, I put the finishing touches on my new office. I made sure my wrestling figurines of MJF, Adam Cole, and CM Punk were devoid of dust or any imperfections, alphabetized and categorized books, positioned LEGO skylines of Paris and Shanghai, and then collapsed into a \$40 midcentury modern loveseat I found at an indie grocery store with my department chair. Gazing around, my office walls were covered in art, concert posters, and pictures of my nephew, Maxton, and plant stands fanning out lush green foliage in every direction. Sure, I could have been prepping for the courses I was to teach in the coming week or feverishly attending Faculty Welcome Week sessions, but I knew that putting my stamp on this place mattered. I wanted my colleagues, administrators, and students to know that I was here, this was my new homeplace, cultivated in love, kitsch, and my truth.

I had/have no interest in accumulating academic clout or power, I don't play politics; instead, I have what has been described as performing an "unbossed and unbothered" Chisholm-esque energy. I am driven as a scholar-activist to challenge the status quo, resist limitations, fight with precision and purpose, and demand a reimagination of the co-opted academy. Make no mistake, this is labor, undervalued and often not compensated but essential to an ethos steeped in liberation and sovereignty. So, in my new office, adorned from corner to corner with my contradictory, unique, sarcastic flair, I took a deep breath, smiled, and set out to not only survive the tenure-track but thrive within it.

Those first weeks and months of the semester were a whirlwind. Being able to navigate obstacles, violence, committee invitations, disciplinary-specific webinars, department meetings, student crises, and the illusive beast that is research required community, solidarity, and intellectual ancestry. Scholar-activists often pursue academia for the opportunity to conduct research and write scholarship (at least I hope I am not alone in this). I wanted my research to align with the need for the academy to radically reassess what research is and how it is done in the 21st century. A view of research that allowed podcast series, non-academic publications, artistic collections, social media content creation, public archival and community-engaged projects to be seen as the scholarship they are. I saw amazing work from senior-level colleagues, but as a first-year professor, I didn't see how without youthful naivety (or job security) I would be able to advance a non-traditional research agenda that required institutional support, external funding, and publications that adhered to tenure-track guidelines calling for peer-reviewed articles or book publications as the only scholarly pursuits worthy of our time. To see my research validated, funded, and published, I had to step into the unknown, take a risk, and write a way free.

The goal of this article is to equip scholar-activists with a key concept for thwarting institutional violence that targets our radical research agendas or our emphasis on community writing and literacies that I call Lordean Counterstorying. By using the gospel of the warrior poet Audre Lorde's writings on anger, love, and silence as key for resistance, this article seeks to present Lordean counterstorying as a strategy for surviving and thriving in our scholastic truth when faced with institutional violence to radically reimagine research and scholarship needs. Institutional violence is not only felt in the academy, but it can be felt in spaces where community literacy projects seek funding and support for their initiatives as well. Aligning with Black Feminist Scholarship, this work blends lived experience with critical implications to aid in the development of a strategic action plan or the building of a community necessary to complete our exigent work, specifically securing the necessary funding. Lordean counterstorying is an embodied and compositional response that challenges institutional violence and neoliberal narratives by repurposing anger, eros (love), and language in ways that allow for radical reimagining of scholar-activists' positionality. As a tool, Lordean counterstorying advances scholar-activist resilience, flexibility, and authenticity. This is especially useful for junior faculty and/or emerging community-based intellectuals.

The chances of securing any significant amount of research funding as a first-year assistant professor, fellow, lecturer, contingent faculty, or community organizer feels as likely as finding a Serena Williams-like pickleball partner. But no matter how unlikely the opportunity, I argue we should still be prepared. The story that follows is my own quest to fund my research agenda through competing for an equipment fund grant sponsored by my private PWI. I do not think that my story is necessarily oozing with drama and surprises, but I do know it is important to share, especially with those engaged in community writing and research because we are inherently inundated by our neoliberal institutional narratives to undervalue ourselves and our research. Whether those narratives are attempting to invoke humility, honesty, or fear in Black

and Brown scholar-activists, I am not here to speculate. I am here to say, though, that we (as individuals, communities, and scholars) have every right to demand more and fight for more. Our work is not a pursuit in vanity, but it is a compulsion to show our communities' truth and inherent value.

This autoethnographic-adjacent piece speaks directly to my experience. I invite my fellow community writing scholar-activist kinfolk to find their truth within Lorde's work and the radical, resistance potential of counterstorying. Throughout this paper, I will focus on how this embodied and compositional strategy works to support the importance of community-based research. In her 2017 CCW keynote address, Ellen Cushman states, "community-based research ... becomes a microcosm for the learning ecologies and networks we hope to inspire, especially in this time of great division, uncertainty, and cultivation of fear of others" (18). We need our community-based research and teaching to be validated, compensated, and supported now more than ever. The effects of critical community research and writing being marginalized and undervalued is one of many intersections that contribute to books being banned, bodily autonomy being reversed, and genocide being justified. As community-based scholar-activists, our work does a myriad of things—it can humanize, illuminate, story, celebrate, and speak truth to power—but it most importantly works to inspire, develop peace/justice, and place harmony into praxis. The concept of Lordean counterstorying as strategy in community-based writing is my attempt to heed Cushman's call, to inspire possibilities and counterattacks to neoliberal violence coming in the form of devaluation of community-based labor, programs, and projects.

The Key Tenets of Lordean Counterstory

Lordean counterstorying is a strategy for radical resistance and reclamation that juxtaposes the work of Audre Lorde and the method of counterstory to illuminate sustainable strategies of resistance and research for all levels of scholars, activists, and/or community-based practitioners. Lordean counterstory as a method (both embodied practice and literary genre) has the potential context and opportunity to make sense of a community-based scholar-activist's positionality, identity, and mission within the academy and/or community organizing. It calls for the transformation of the love (erotic), anger, and silence into motivating forces that can be used to combat the invalidation of our communities, work, and literacies. Lorde's arguably most famous piece "The Master's Tools will not Dismantle the Master's House" highlights the need for us to identify imaginative ways of sustaining our work, lives, and teaching in the face of ever present—and at times all consuming—violence.

As defined by Aja Martinez, "[c]ounterstory [is] a method for telling stories by people whose experiences are not often told. Counterstory as methodology serves to expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance" (34). As a rhetorical method, counterstory provides the field of RhetComp a tangible way to employ CRT in scholarship and pedagogy. Community-based researchers can utilize

CRT counterstory to reclaim their identity and lived experience and provide (alternative) narratives and histories in the making (Toliver 509). In essence, counterstory expands the narratives available to us across the humanities, performances, and rhetoric in ways that challenge hegemonic, heteronormative dominance in credibility, validity, and visibility. Audre Lorde as a scholar and warrior poet embodied the essence of everything she published. Her words radically articulated approaches for sustainable resistance, eloquently challenged dominant narratives of oppression, and unapologetically centered Black Women's emotive intellect in ways that continue to inform movements today. Lordean counterstory as a strategy then situates the intellectual legacy of Lorde—her embodied praxis and effortless prose—regarding anger and eros with CRT counterstory to create an opportunity for relentless advocacy for scholar-activism based in and with community. For community-based scholar-activists, Lordean counterstorying (as opposed to CRT counterstorying) utilizes Lorde's intellectual ancestry to challenge dominant narratives and to curtail instances where community-based work is subjected to various forms of institutional violence. Lordean counterstory as a strategy also does the very important work of validating and celebrating community-based scholar-activists' critical, full, authentic humanity—guided by our commitment to empathy and compassion. As an embodied and compositional concept, Lordean counterstory inspires scholar-activists to honor the emotions of anger and eros (love) in projects, initiatives, and research, allowing us to see them not as signs of weakness, fragility, or vulnerability. Instead, community-based scholar-activists' ability to experience anger and eros signal authenticity, ferocity, and passion. With Lordean counterstory, scholar-activists can begin to develop ways of writing radical resistance, channeling unapologetic passion, and embodying dissent.

Letting Love Lead: Counterstorying Lordean Eros

"Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning in our lives."

—Audre Lorde

The journey of any scholar-activist's identity or community literacy project starts with an agenda. Articulating my research agenda is something that I constantly struggled with as I inched towards my dissertation defense. In a mock interview I did while on the market with my dissertation committee, I vividly remember Dr. Ela Przybylo gently suggested that I embellish my plan, even if I know the trajectory may change. I knew my dedication to researching things that brought love, joy, and liberty for myself and my communities was considered radical for scholars outside of Race, Women's, Gender, Sexuality Studies or Cultural Rhetoric departments. As a self-defined Afro-Polynesian femme scholar, I can tell when I walk into a room, raise my hand in a meeting, or am featured on a conference abstract, that some people expect my research to come from a place of anger at societal injustices and oppressions. I refused to allow oversimplified typecasting to define me or my work, just as it should not

define my community. Thus, while on the market, I was fully transparent about the need for research to be sustained in joy, adventure, and healing—something radical to life-long academics indoctrinated into the neoliberal narrative. We begin writing our Lordean counterstory in our research agenda by centering love and the galvanizing force of its power to inspire us.

In “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Lorde charts the etymology of the term *eros*, which means to love; and yet, society relinquishes erotic love to the bedroom, when its potential should extend far beyond the private. As emerging scholars in community-based research, it is imperative to center love and pleasure in our research. Our passion for the work will free us from the sort of sentiment eloquently discussed in adrienne maree brown’s collection *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. When selecting a research area, when radically reimagined, when steeping community-based projects in literacies of love—one can feel as though their research is indulgent, self-serving, or lacks exigency (brown 17). Lordean counterstorying and its key tenet in creating *eros* (love) directly challenges that and speaks to the violent narratives that call the pursuit of love and passion in academia or social justice community work a non-scholastic pursuit, unimportant, or vain (Redden 2018). Not only is the idea that love is not worthy of research, funding, or validation incorrect, it is one of the ways in which institutional violence is perpetrated. To combat that violence, we need to remember the words of Ersula Ore, Kim Weiser, and Christina Cedillo: “so long as mainstream education continues to be *whitestream* education, the academy will continue to demean and exclude our culturally situated knowledge-making processes, our use of language, our bodymindspirits, and the stories we tell, including our research” (207). If Lorde challenges us to center love and institutional violence devalues our cultural creations (borne of love and in community), using Lordean counterstorying allows us to shift our view of our scholar-activist self from a deficiency lens (that of institutional violence) to a lens of abundance (Lordean *eros*).

Being at odds with our trueness, aliveness, leads to an existence where violence is not only placed upon us, but also lives within us (brown 6). It also perpetuates a world within which we have no interest (hopefully) in occupying. So, while “we have been raised to fear the *yes* within ourselves, our deepest cravings” (Lorde 57), we also have the opportunity, in defining and cultivating our research agenda, to do the work that we *need*. When we love our work, when we choose to survive and thrive in spite of violence, we create theory, concepts, movements, projects that are built in the love of Lordean counterstory and are also akin to the liberatory strategies of hooks who stated, “when we hold fast to our beliefs... folks will yearn, yes yearn, to be a part of [our movement]” (11). The energy we perform when talking about our work, passions, projects, and people is contagious. By loving fully, we challenge others to do the same and radically reimagine the power of love, a charge given to us in the use of Lordean *eros* and counterstorying research agendas.

I painstakingly negotiated, rewrote, revised, remixed, deleted, and amended a cacophony of research trajectories and strategies that had to (1) be authentic, (2) bring joy, (3) explore potential, (4) place Black and Brown liberation into praxis, (5)

heal, and (6) be sustainable. Something that took me a while to understand as I engaged in this thought work was that my research had to embody the qualities listed above for my communities and for myself. Then like a lightning bolt, I was reminded of Treva Lindsey's words that I paraphrased in my notebook during one of her lectures: our work exists and is most meaningful when rage and joy are experienced simultaneously (2023). So, with this priceless nugget of intellectual ancestry squirreled away in my mind, I began to devise a plan—a plan that would help me achieve tenure, help expand the potential for Afro-Polynesian liberation, empower my community, and build spaces of fun, sovereignty, play, and authenticity along the way.

Scholars such as Jafari Allen, Lyndon Gill, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, and Ela Przybylo and Kaiya Jacobs situate Lorde's work regarding eros and the erotics within a queer theory lens to highlight the importance of abundance, truth, and authenticity in queer worldmaking, embodiment, and performance. The use of Lordean erotics has led to advancements in the understanding of the erotic, from the term eros as love, desire, pleasure; not always to be seen as private, deviant shameful behavior, but more fluid and complex. According to Jafari Allen, "[A] Lordean Eros [is] pleasure in coming to know what we know about ourselves and our world (epistemological pleasure) and pleasure in teaching what we have learned and learning from those who find pleasure in teaching us (pedagogical pleasure)" (14). Through this redefinition of the erotic, scholars, activists, and communities can center the importance of pleasure and passion in their work, solidarity, and activism.

Putting Lordean Love-Lead Research into Praxis

The community literacies my research agenda was working to empower, center, and uplift sought to provide young Black and Brown scholar-activists (Butler students and (in the future) Indianapolis-area scholar-activists) with communal literacies for healing, leisure, rest, and resistance. Historically, Black and Brown bodies have been validated and valued largely in terms of the labor they provide in the advancement of capitalism and white supremacy. I align my community-based research agenda with scholar-activists like Tricia Hersey of the Nap Ministries, adrienne maree brown's call for pleasure activism, and the power of Lorde's discussions on the erotic, anger, and transformation of silence into action. I believe that communal literacies and the work we do in and with the community starts from a subjective, culturally-situated approach to advancing literacies of healing, mindfulness, and sovereign embodiment.

Some communities may have already completed this work, but I could see at my PWI that many of our Black and Brown students were compelled to excel, assimilate, and silence their intersectionality in exchange for access to institutions that equate worth to capitalist achievement. Using Lordean counterstorying strategies, I wanted to challenge that narrative and join the myriad of scholar-activists whose research advances the notion that Black and Brown bodies are worthy of rest, love, pleasure, and joy. Thus, it was serendipitous during this research epiphany to see the CfP for the "Equipment Fund" on my Daily Digest listserv for my institution. The requirements were relatively straightforward—can't be used for space, must relate to faculty

research, priority given to student-involved research, and half of equipment needs to be covered by faculty college. The leanings to equipment required for STEM-fields was inherent, but I wanted to empower others in the Humanities and Social Sciences to see the radical potential of our community-based research.

So, with the full support of my amazing chair, I wrote a proposal to purchase a meditation pod for emerging Black and Brown scholar-activists (students) within the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. This research aligned with my agenda to discover ways to situate healing and love our research. It would allow students to place into praxis mindfulness and healing from any potential microaggressions or stressors they may experience in earlier classes by providing a space for privacy, recentering, and rest. It was my hypothesis that with this pod, students of color would see that the institution acknowledged the struggles they might be facing in the day to day and support marginalized students with the hopes of increasing student attendance, resilience, and prioritizing wellness practices into their lifestyle. We would have been the first higher education institution to acquire a meditation pod and this initiative could serve as a strategy for setting my home institution apart from other benchmark institutions while simultaneously empowering Black and Brown students to prioritize their mental health and academic success in the face of insurmountable adversity. For the pilot, the students selected to have access to the pods would be paid to rest and engage in a series of interviews with me about their experiences with the pod and in their classes to improve the collegiate experience of our most vulnerable student populations. Lordean counterstorying illuminated the potential for loving this community of student scholar-activists by imagining a place where they can practice self-love and self-care, strategies that would galvanize them to understand its significance and situate it within their personal and professional lives.

Black and Brown students at a PWI can experience the same imposter syndrome in their classes as felt by Black and Brown community scholar-activists in their research. Through the meditation pod project, my goal was to empower our marginalized students to prioritize, cultivate, and embody literacies for self-care, self-love, healing, and rest as key to their success in the public sphere. I agree with the concept of literacy as defined by the *CLJ* website: “the realm where attention is paid not just to content or to knowledge but to the symbolic means by which it is represented and used. Thus, literacy makes reference not just to letters and to text but to other multimodal, technological, and embodied representations, as well.” Using that definition and maintaining a connection with Lordean counterstory, I felt as though this project situated embodied literacies of meditation, breathwork, and mindfulness as a potentially transformational loving strategy for Black and Brown students’ survival, joy, and academic success in a PWI. Practicing mindfulness, experiencing a reprieve from surveillance, and having a private space for 15-30 minutes where students could breathe, reset, and persist in their courses (I hypothesized) would provide the opportunity for Black and Brown student bodies (literally) to see themselves not as subjects only valued based on their output – understanding themselves to be valued subjects based on their input, capable of prioritizing their own mental health.

The project proposal invigorated me. With so many of our institutions “prioritizing” DEI initiatives, I felt as though it would be difficult to challenge such an innovative and (dare I say) radical proposal. I was rewriting the equipment fund, I was meeting the needs of my research agenda, and I was engaging in a project that my department and I thought could transform underrepresented student support in revolutionary ways. During finals week of my first full semester as an assistant professor, I received an email congratulating me on receiving the equipment fund grant. Little did I know that although a counterstory of Lordean eros got me here, it would take so much more to navigate the looming neoliberal minefield I was about to traverse.

Speak Truth To Power: Counterstorying with Lordean Language

“For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in the silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.”

—Audre Lorde

Institutional violence, as referred to throughout this work, is interrogated heavily by the work of other community literacy scholars and cultural rhetoric scholars who discuss the violence marginalized/underrepresented subjects experience in the academy, society, and in neoliberal institutions. Institutional violence may not be overt, but it follows a ‘business as usual’ form of violence that, according to Ore et al., “[D]raw attention to the academy’s complicity—indeed, centrality—in promoting the oppressive structures and dominant culture’s imaginary that continue to harm [Black folk]” (“Diversity is not Enough” 207). These violent acts are not specific to my institution; they can be seen throughout the academy where marginalized/underrepresented scholars are expected to speak their truth, translate that truth into the dominant format, and sacrifice time, resources, and research to meet the requirements of arbitrary structures with the ability to affect our employability (Ore et al. “Diversity is not Enough” 208). And it is important to remember that institutional violence is meant to only encumber those in the margins. As Victor Del Hierro and colleagues remind us, “Works on the margins are never meant to expand the center; in naming something or someone marginal we are reiterating and confirming their place in the relationship. Within academia and outside of it, we encounter examples of how marginalization operates as a colonizing tool to make one believe that a static center exists” (Del Hierro et al. 2016). The violence one can experience at an institution that leans towards neo-liberal narratives is complex. I feel comfortable writing this article and speaking to this experience not only because it is my truth, but also because I refuse to single out any one person, group, department, or entity as the culprit for my forthcoming struggles. It is systemic and takes many forms.

After being awarded the equipment funds, I began to distribute and celebrate the coming project internally and externally. As with any research project, I had identified a variety of places to publish the work, informed colleagues in department meetings, and began the IRB process for the student participants. I was excited and ready

to bring about a project that could improve the marginalized student community experience at my institution when the project, the Race, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (RGSS) program steering committee, and I unearthed the ever-present roadblocks and bureaucratic nonsense (for lack of a better term) that would descend upon us.

It began with concerns about a location for the pod, then there was an error on the application that required the matching funding to come from the department and not the overall College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and lastly a wild card concern about accessibility. For months, my chair and I sent emails, sat through meetings, and held strategy sessions over coffee at least once a week to refute concerns. It was mayhem. So many times, I wanted to quit, forget the project, and restructure my research agenda, but my program director would not allow it. Her energy—as a veteran of the institution’s culture, literacy, and battle strategy—empowered me to continue fighting for the project. She called in favors, met with deans, highlighted flaws in documents, toured the building with facilities, and at times held more firmly to the need for this work than I.

Just as Lordean counterstorying with eros aided in navigating the work of identifying my research agenda and was key in thwarting institutional violence performed via myths of the inferiority of love-based community research, the planning phase required skills to traverse a process plagued by institutional violence. As soon as the funds were awarded to secure the pod, the neoliberal institution shifted its support to bureaucratic violence in the form of complex reporting requirements, institutional red tape, and institutional policies that only live in the memory of those with 20-plus years of engagement with the institution. This is how institutional violence manifests and perpetuates epistemic exclusion, “a form of scholarly delegitimization rooted in disciplinary biases about what types of research are valued as well as social identity-based biases against individuals from marginalized groups ... [that] may have a disproportionately negative effect on women and faculty of color due to negative stereotypes about their competence, and their likelihood of engaging in research outside of the disciplinary mainstream” (Settles et al. 32). Without the proper strategy, dissent, and support, community-based research and researchers suffer.

Acknowledging the need for support—vocalized, lived, and steeped in solidarity—was essential. We tag teamed this with the ferocity of Darby Allen and Sting (I really enjoy wrestling): when I needed a break, my program director stepped up; when she got stumped, I suggested solutions; and so it went for months, but I learned I wasn’t alone, and I learned I didn’t have to settle. Community-based research allows us to engage with various communities in the world, but community-based researchers must remember the importance of community in the academy and ask for it. Now depending on one’s institution, available colleagues, and institutional climate, this may not be simple, but it is not impossible. Inviting solidarity from established scholar-activists in the communities we love and work to liberate is as essential as junior and emerging scholar-activists who inarguably need mentorship, guidance, institutional literacies, and accomplice-ship.

Creating a Way: Counterstorying with Lordean Anger

“[T]he strength of women lies in recognizing differences between us as creative, and in standing to those distortions which we inherited without blame, but which are now ours to alter. The angers of women can transform difference through insight into power. For anger between peers births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth.”

—Audre Lorde

Lordean anger is directly drawn from the speech “The Use of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” in which Lorde speaks of the daily micro- and macro- aggressions faced by Black Women in feminist spaces and movements (127). While acknowledging the ineffectiveness of hate, guilt, and silence, Lorde challenges the white women in the audience to understand how they contribute to racist practices, while claiming to be allies and feminists. She also, more implicitly, speaks to Black Women, making visible the ways they can and do use their anger creatively as a driving force for their liberation and response to the matrices of domination, within which their identities are deemed irrelevant. Lorde informed the audience in her talk that, “Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being” (144). Lorde challenges us to see anger as utilized with precision, intent, and strategy as an emotion that can lead to survival, solidarity, sisterhood, and change.

After months of fighting and meeting and indecision, my RGSS kinfolk and I were angry and exhausted. There were no more emails to send, no more time for half answers, no more patience for the myriad of emerging stakeholders that we were tasked with lobbying to our cause. Institutional violence pretends that it operates in coincidences, bureaucratic processes, and without bias, but it is that non-acknowledgement and lack of accountability and transparency that is the most violent of them all. In these moments it is very easy to want to release “hood Teyoncé” to the masses, but I know that would only prove them right. I would have to control my emotive state, not silence it but intentionally channel that anger and frustration into motivation. It became clear: we had to develop a new course of action, a Plan B. The plan became to secure the equipment funds at all costs. I scheduled a meeting with the dean of our college with the goals of getting a definitive answer on the meditation pod and having a comprehensive plan to pivot the funds and research to something that still aligned with my desire to work in the borderlands of Black and Brown rage and joy in a way that was impactful and sustainable.

Sometimes regardless of the research agendas/projects, we are forced to adapt—at least temporarily. I spent weeks thinking about a different project that would require funds for equipment that cultivated the same excitement as the meditation pods. I was consumed by the anger I felt towards the bureaucratic violence I had endured. If I am being completely honest, I wanted to just go back into my gorgeous office, pump out some standard archival research, get tenure, and settle for status quo mediocrity. But being raised by the best single mother in South Central Los Angeles

who raised me to know my default setting was unapologetic and authentic excellence, I knew the perfect Teigha-esque research project and agenda inhabited the recesses of my brain. I was reminded of a “coming to Jesus” moment I had when reading SA Smythe’s “Can I Get a Witness? Black Feminism, Trans Embodiment, and Thriving Past the Fault Lines of Care” inviting Black Feminists “to continue living into their principles by sitting with the discomfort and then operationalizing that feeling to struggle and shift from oppressive tendencies and structures” (104). As marginalized members in society and the academy, scholar-activists must (a) live their truth, (b) feel fully, and (c) make use of the elements and interactions provided to them.

Everything has a purpose and can provide energy to the work of the Black, queer femme scholar. Repurposing anger, just like repurposing food waste or seeds, inevitably leads to sustainable growth. Marginalized folks can harvest that anger in transformative ways of meaning-making, allowing that anger to nourish and give life to creativity. This sentiment is echoed in the work of Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, who tell us that composing queerness is an impossible task due to the ambiguity therein where the emotions one feels and attempts to compose are ones we “do not always know what to do with or know how to contain” (197). With identities steeped in the perpetual act of becoming, the perpetual act of being affected and called to a position of hypervisibility or invisibility, the Black, queer femme scholar-activist and scholar-creative benefits from authenticity and, as Tommaso Milan discusses, an approach to queer composing of the self that resists the “facile” adoptions of queer identities and emotion-based composing (444).

Neoliberalism does not allow imagination and experimentation; instead, it relies on the traditional status quo that dictates its next move based on benchmark organizational success, making others take the risk at the cost of their own right to innovation. For us in community literacy work, we know the personal is political, we know that it is through our own liberation that we can liberate others, and so I went back to reflect on my community and myself as a beautiful cacophony of potential. We knew the ‘no’ was coming, but *they* didn’t know I was working on a plan.

Using Lordean anger, I refused to allow my rage to end in surrender, I creatively used that anger to shift my project to another that did not pose the same problems as they claimed came about in the initial project. I used Lordean eros to think about other ways of liberating my community akin to the overarching goals of healing, rest, love, and joy. I did this by looking at what I love and would want to share with others. Lordean counterstorying not only provides a new way of articulating the needs of our community, writing our research, and requests for funding, but it is also a strategy that can be used in our thought work or radical reimagining that galvanizes us with the ability to shift and reorient in the face of adversity. As scholar-activists, we have multiple projects in our minds or notebooks. I remember my dissertation chair suggesting I put ideas that emerge in my dissertation work on a post-it for another project. I was inundated with post-it notes.

In the next meeting, we got the no. We got some push back about the same logistical, bureaucratic violence we had grown accustomed to over the course of this saga. In response, I presented an alternative plan. My alternative plan came from my post-

it notes and strategic reflection. As a Black, Fijian, American Samoan, Irish femme intellectual, that plan centered round researching in the water. Every corner of my identity centers around the water—my ancestors crossed it, I lived my childhood years in it, and so much of my healing practices require engagement with it. I realized that diasporic (Black and Polynesian) histories, cultures, and identities are not in traditional archives but are present in what I call sunken archives. So much of who we are, our legacy, our connections, our desires are buried in the world's two largest oceans. I proposed an alternative plan that would allow me to further research this Black and Brown communal connection to the water—as a site of healing, history, and home. The ocean for Black and Brown people is a site of anger, love, and healing that inextricably links to the words of Audre Lorde and the need to radically reimagine the potential spaces and places where Humanities and Social Science research can be conducted. Armed with the intellectual ancestry of Alexis Pauline Gumbs' *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Animals* and *Dub: Finding Ceremony*, the works of Jamaica Kincaid, Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, and the Merwomanist Jalondra Davis, we made the case.

I am not sure if it was the guilt of not being able to support the meditation pod, actual intrigue in the new project proposal, excitement that other funding for this project had been attained, or an understanding that this project is something that the college could get behind, but the dean endorsed the updated project and I was able to use the equipment funds for the SCUBA and AV equipment I would need to move forward with my work. As we left the meeting, we were invigorated and so excited to have this victory. In the summer of 2023, I went to Aotearoa (also known as New Zealand) and began my new research project that focused on theorizing the potential of aquatic literacies in Afro-Polynesian kinkeeping, community healing, and ancestry. Conducting sunken archival research requires physically diving into the ruins of transatlantic slave ships and utilizing key tenets of Maori/Oceania Feminist resistance and liberation, I am theorizing that the connecting, healing, and loving practices that members of the Black, Polynesian, and Afro-Polynesian community utilize to heal from the harms of capitalism, colonization, and imperialism reveals legacies, knowledges, and connections that are just below the surface, in the still, quiet, ferocious sea. My hope is that this work/project helps members of the Black diaspora (specifically) see the water as a homeplace, to show them an often-forgotten site of our heritage and legacy. Capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism have led to many Black folks fearing the sea, when really the sea was the only place between our native Africa and the Caribbean where we could attempt to preserve our freedom.

It is important to note that while the meditation pod project about Black and Brown healing and consciousness was not going to be approved, I firmly believe it will happen eventually. Currently, I am working with other organizations on and off campus to advance that project. A “no” from institutions, bureaucrats, and neoliberals cannot and will not define our work; our persistence has the power to move forward any initiative that we choose. In this instance, I chose not to dwell on this impending denial but instead to strategize with other stakeholders, spaces, and places where the answer can shift to an enthusiastic “YES!”

Nevertheless, We Persisted

"I urge each one of us...to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices".

—Audre Lorde

Black and Brown community-based scholar-activists do not often have the luxury of adhering to a neoliberal understanding of work-life/personal-professional balance (Kelenyi 18). Our survival and ability to thrive are oftentimes intricately interwoven within our subject-position. Often, I have borne witness to the sacrifice of life, to continue the work and the death of the personal in exchange for the professional. Unfortunately, this is an all too often feature of academic violence that remains unchecked.

Only being able to complete research and writing over the summer while not on contract—violence. Inability to incorporate articles/books related to one's research into the classroom—violence. Minimal start-up funds or access to research-related funding in the Humanities—violence. Institutional service requirements that take precedent over community engagement—violence. We must begin to radically reimagine strategies for prioritizing sustainable engagement over bureaucratic deliverables. Community-based research should not be defined by external forces, devoid of fiscal, temporal, or personnel support; instead, it should be defined internally by the researcher and the communities and based on that definition, we should be able to demand support and equity from the external. This work, our work, is a reclamation of "research and professional paths unhindered by white interests" (Ore et al. "Diversity is not justice" 601).

Lordean counterstorying as performed in this article and research project empowered my community-based research to thrive—in love, through language, and with anger. I am aware that my experience may not be available, practical, or applicable to all community-based researchers, but we all have the opportunity to radically reimagine a way forward. Regardless of status, research, or need, we all as community-based researchers have a role to play in supporting work adjacent to our own and developing a network of practitioners committed to empowering community-based research, funding, and job security for one another. Allowing our work, our academic homeplaces, and accomplice-ship to be led in love and liberation is what our work is all about.

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Author Bio

Teigha VanHester (she/they) is an Assistant Professor of Race, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Butler University in Indianapolis, IN. VanHester is currently an Emerging Scholar with Coalition for Community Writing and an Indiana Humanities Fellow. Their work has been published in *Race and Yoga*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, and *Rhetorics, Politics, and Culture*. She completed her PhD in English Studies and a Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies Graduate Certificate at Illinois State University.