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The Tale of the Fat, Beautiful, Black Butterfly: My COVID-19 Chrysalis and the Disruptive Potential of Cultivating Yoga Practices Emerging from Black Feminist Thought

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**The Tale of the Fat, Beautiful, Black Butterfly:  
My COVID-19 Chrysalis and the Disruptive Potential of Cultivating Yoga Practices  
Emerging from Black Feminist Thought**

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As a Black feminist scholar, embodying a certain perpetual level of anger is inherent. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I found this anger encompassing more than my scholarly identity, but every other facet of my existence. I was angry about my lack of community, angry about my forced solitude, angry about my government's response. Anger seeped into my personal and professional relationships, it defined my partnership, and it overtook my identity in ways that felt impossible to overcome.

With remote work, I found a groove soon exploited through additional job responsibilities, no pay increase, exploitation of exterior skillsets, and fear narratives of depleting employment opportunities staved off any sort of rebellion. We were conditioned to be thankful for our position even with these unfair, uncompensated conditions because we had no other opportunities. The only thing I knew to do at that time was breathe, reflect, regain some consciousness of my power, potential, influence, and resist the exploitation and appropriation that has intensified for women in the COVID-19 era. But if that had been successful all its own, this would be a very short narrative.

Instead, I chose to journey down a path of healing. Maybe not so much a path as a space, a chrysalis. In my home, my yoga chrysalis began with a Peloton 30-minute Yoga Flow hosted by Dr. Chelsea Jackson Roberts. The main component of the class that I remember was Roberts's repetitive mantra, "If they only knew...". I filled in my pain and struggles from the last months and wondered, 'if they only knew what it took to get here, what it takes to put me first, what it takes to love myself and my life, my power, my potential, and my intellect as much as it deserves!' This narrative aims to assemble my Black feminist COVID-19 chrysalis and the movements and components I engaged with to accumulate enough energy to fight the daily battles of life in 2020 and beyond. By moving through themes of traditional yoga sequences, I hope to inspire others to find their chrysalis, to heal, and transform into a beautiful community of Fat, Beautiful, Black Butterflies.

***Chakravakasana (Cat-Cow Stretch)***

To begin any yoga flow, stretching is imperative. My favorite is the Cat-Cow posture: I feel as though I am breathing in productivity, love, potential, and exhaling doubt, hatred, pain, guilt. COVID-19 and the year 2020 in general filled me with rage, self-deprecation, and feelings of inadequacy. All of this manifested as anger. I could not get rid of the anger, frustration, and pain fast enough, and the work of the late Audre Lorde's essay "The Uses of Anger: Women

Responding to Racism” inspired me not to see my anger as a negative, but a source of energy to achieve greatness as this quote so eloquently articulates,

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tension, nor the ability to smile and feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives ... anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies (1984, 127).

I no longer feared or dreaded the anger I was undoubtedly breathing in but viewed it as fuel to create the change in the world I needed to see. Black feminist thought, as an ideology and practice, allows Black women to understand that their stories matter and they are part of a collective identity that can be healed through community, breath, and acceptance. Lorde allowed me to feel and breathe in my fierce and ferocious anger. She did not tell us to disregard it but hold it in and then release it. Flex on it! And let it be fuel for the great creative performances that will make sure those feelings were not felt in vain. It is exceedingly simple to compartmentalize, to store away anger and not allow it to do anything but fester. By storying our anger and showing a potential pathway, Lorde allows us to see (for lack of better phrasing) the light at the end of the tunnel.



**Figure 1** – Robben Island, South Africa. Resilience is gained through the strength of the past, authenticity of the present, and the imagining of Black Futures (Photo Credit: Emmy Reed).

As a fat, Black woman, I often thought that yoga was not accessible to me, that my body did not move in ways that could cultivate a practice of mindfulness, and I hardly think I am alone in these prevailing narratives. But then I am reminded of barriers being broken and norms being changed by Black women every day; we were born to resist our labels as Jezebels, Mammies, or Sapphires and be our unapologetic best selves. So I took my body (rolls and all) to the mat and was truly amazed and fell in love with what my body could do in the comfort of my own living room. By using yoga as the first site of resistance, I was able to marvel in my bodily strength. I then sought out communities in which I found fat, Black yoga instructors doing handstands and pushups and advanced poses.<sup>1</sup> I learned to breathe in love and power, grown out of anger to then breathe out guilt and doubt, emotions that serve no purpose in healing the body, mind, and spirit.

### Sun Salutations

These postures are aimed at warming and awakening the body, putting the movements in alignment with the practice. So, in an effort to align my anger to my purpose as a fat Black feminist, I continued reading and discovered another wonderful scholar, adrienne maree brown and her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017). I found that for my anger to be transformational (as Lorde frames) I needed to be emergent, by which brown means I needed to pay attention to how small compounded actions create complex systems for radical transformation. My chrysalis became an incubator of sorts, a place in which I forced myself to find *value* in reflection, pleasure in isolation, and foster an anger that drove me to develop community.

I did not look for the positives (so to speak) in our negative global pandemic, but instead chose to engage in activities that brought me pleasure, made me feel empowered, and most importantly made me feel as though I was part of a community while physically alone. I searched for healing communities, spaces where suffering was not a site of defeat but a catalyst for change. I continued to love my body for all of the stretch marks it held and all of the stairs it could climb; I reclaimed a sense of community through adopting a plant-based lifestyle that allowed me to gain nutrition without having to sacrifice my cultural gastronomy.

Veganism or plant-based diets (as I prefer to call them) have been seen as a function of the white elite. Sometimes people assume that vegans are millennial activists for environmental justice. This is not at all a horrible thing, but what tends to happen to movements devoid of representation from the margins in its inception is the facilitation of an origin story devoid of the contributions of the disenfranchised. It becomes Westernized lore, devoid of the Indigenous, Diasporic, Eastern, and African roots that contributed so much to its adoption as a way of living. In my world, kale cannot hold a candle to collard greens and tofu is no substitute for chicken, but I was able to find emergent ways to build an archive of recipes and I found frugal foodie friends in digital spaces that found “The Culture” amongst this highly white landscape. I took pleasure in the food preparation and enjoy being plant-based not for weight-loss or conforming to a new trend, but because it allows me to be more in touch with what my body needed, craved, and would use efficiently to aid me in completing the academic work I love so much.

Being plant-based, I did not, by any means, swear off meat and dairy products, but I was able to perform an act of agentic potential and claim my identity as someone who is fat and healthy, fat and happy, and content with how my body looks but always working towards practices and behaviors that allow me to *feel* my best.

## *Vinyasa*

To complete a *vinyasa*, yoga postures and poses are strung together seamlessly to allow attention be paid to breath and body synchronously. And within my chrysalis, it was time for me to align my healing flesh, my nourished body, and my intellectual ancestry with my scholarly purpose. In a graduate seminar at Illinois State University, Dr. Ela Przybylo (she/her/ona) challenged us to develop and submit a proposal for the ISU Student Sustainability fund grant. The project was entitled “Sustainability and the Soul” and worked to center Black feminist thought in wellness practices. I wanted my journey of self-discovery and self-love to inspire my direct community (Black, women, graduate students in middle America). The project was selected for submission and alongside four of my classmates (most significantly Shawna Shepard and Faith Borland) we developed a grant proposal to be submitted for funding.



**Figure 2** – Warrior One Pose (Photo Credit: Teigha Mae VanHester).

In this grant we proposed hosting one day of events during Black History Month that would challenge the history of anti-Black ISU and move towards a more inclusive and justice-oriented approach to sustainability efforts. In the morning, students would be able to participate

in a yoga class with Radiance Campbell, an ISU alumni and Georgetown Law student who conducts Black feminist “Yoga as Healing” courses, and receive a Yoga Mat<sup>2</sup> adorned with an image of James Baldwin and his famous quote “Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” For the evening session, students could participate in a Vegan Soul Food cooking demonstration hosted by Afya Ibomu, author of *The Vegan Soul Food Guide to the Galaxy* (2008), and receive a meal kit with all necessary ingredients from the local Co-Op in Bloomington, Illinois. We wanted to not only showcase Black excellence in sustainability efforts but provide students with the materials to potentially adopt these lifestyles for the long term. After a presentation to the Student Council on Sustainability, our project was awarded just shy of \$16,000. We hosted the event on February 26, 2021 to over 100 ISU students, faculty, staff, and alumni. While this event was hosted over the course of a single day, it was emergent in its development and emergent in its outcomes. It took Faith, Shawna, and myself small steps of collaboration and coordination to create a transformational form of sustainability. And for the participants, it provided the resources (e.g. yoga mats and recipes) to slowly make changes in their lives to practice healing, wellness, and sustainable lifestyles beyond one day. It is imperative that we provide participants with an example of how they can implement these small acts to create transformational change in their everyday lives.

During COVID-19, mentalities, especially within the Black community have been focused on surviving, not thriving. Bringing my brothers, sisters, and siblings of color into yoga practices as potential sites of sustainable existence has (hopefully) illuminated and empowered them to resist the dichotomy of survive and thrive by instead unapologetically occupying a nuanced existence and identity all their own. I aspire to engage with my community members in a way that empowers them to emerge from their own chrysalis, to spread beauty across their community, and see themselves on the earth and in the skies.

### *Savasana*

Following the birth of something beautiful, whether it be an identity, an ideology, a purpose or a lifestyle, taking a *savasana*, a gradual relaxation of every muscle in the body, helps to thank the body and mind for what it has aided you in doing and recuperate for the next phase of existence.

My daily yoga practice, plant-based lifestyle, and commitment to producing Black creative intellect is far from over. I am currently writing this essay on the beaches of Cancun, a necessary journey to recharge and reflect on my goals, my anger, my power, and my body. Cancun is a place with a tumultuous past and present. It was once the home of ancient civilizations that was stolen and exploited by capitalist ideals. Being conscious of this and coming here to not support the elite but the people and protectors of this great place (during a pandemic) allows for real human connection, relationships, and ecological engagement. While physically, it was unsafe to fellowship, being able to cultivate an authentic identity in quarantine allowed for exploration of communities of the past and present. Peoria, Illinois is the land I currently call home, and this was only made possible by the Indigenous people who steward it, my ancestors who fought for my freedom, and the knowledge that I am able to live through respecting and amplifying their (often invisible) history of resilience. Yoga provided me with the skills and consciousness to access the need for connection within myself as I interact with the world. It acknowledges the challenges, repurposes negative emotions or experiences, and allows for control over one’s circumstances and their bodies. Yoga provides a necessary reprieve for



**Figure 3** – Showing my nephew, Maxton, the beauty of Peoria, and the stewards who made it possible (Photo Credit: Karla Van).

racialized and engendered bodies. It serves as a gateway to the illumination of power, potential, and agency. The ability to calm, awaken, relax, or invigorate one’s own body through mindfulness practices creates a site for radical change – both internal and external.

‘If they only knew what it took to get here’ is still my mantra. If disenfranchised peoples only knew the power they each possess to change their world and THE world. Now emerging from my chrysalis, I have begun working on projects that invite and amplify women of color’s work on homesteading and urban farming. If my work begins with centering Blackness in the wellness of our bodies and minds, it seems only natural to continue that path and center Blackness in relation to the lands and ecologies within which we are a part.

Over a century ago, there were over 1 million Black farmers in the United States. Now, of the 3.4 million farmers in the United States, only 45,000 are Black (Reiley 2021). Systemic oppression, institutional racism, and centuries of domestic terrorism on the Black people of the US has led to this decline. It is my hope to use emergent strategies to reclaim our right to cultivate, to nourish, and to respect the lands on which we live. Just as yoga teaches pleasure and potential of the mind and body, homesteading and urban farming have the potential to transform food deserts, combat comorbidities, and increase ideals of sovereign sustainability. If, as Lorde

held, the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house, imagining Black futures that do can reshape the world to ensure they are sustained.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> These fat Black yoga teachers included Jessamyn Stanley, Roz “the Diva” Mays, Latoya Shauntay Snell, Meg Boggs, and Ashley Graham.

<sup>2</sup> The yoga mat was designed by a small Black woman-owned business named BougieBlack.Ink.

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**Teigha Mae VanHester** (she/her) is a disruptive intellectual and unapologetic scholar currently pursuing a PhD (ABD) in English with a Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Graduate Certificate at Illinois State University. She has lived in over ten countries and currently works full-time as the Director of International Education at Illinois Central College. As a writer, she writes in a unique, diverse format demanding the academy allow students (like herself) have the right to their own language. As a native of South-Central Los Angeles, California, speaker of Mandarin Chinese and multi-racial woman, she writes to have her community of nuanced individuals seen. Teigha has presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the Watson Conference, Computers and Writing, and Cultural Rhetorics. She has received the Scholars for the Dream award, is a Forum Editorial Fellow, and peer reviewer for *Emerging Voices in Education* (EViE) journal. Her writing right now is focusing on providing a rhetorical framework for a key millennial demographic that decolonizes and reclaims the intellectual ancestry of the real academy. As a writer, Teigha is looking to critique, connect, and create the rhetorical components/strategies used to perform diversity, inclusion, and acceptance within the academy and other capitalist institutions. You can find Teigha on Twitter and Instagram @teighamae or through her website <http://www.teighamae.com>.