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## Reclaiming Radical Healing: The Role of Youth Activism in Understanding Oppression and Building Resilience

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**Abstract:** The youth organizing field--and critical youth voice work in general--is embracing and adopting radical healing and healing justice in our work (Eagle Shield et al., 2020; Fernandez & Watts, 2021; Ginwright, 2015; Greene et al., 2021). Organizers in communities of color draw on ancestral traditions, including Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Chicana feminisms, and the Black African diaspora, to invite young people to anchor their activism in a healing framework. This means gaining insight into root causes of harms and developing strategies to address them. This welcome development calls for systematic inquiry about how to practice and sustain the many “both/ands” of healing justice, including individual/collective, healing/activism, self/other, ancestry/futurism, and acceptance/critique. This session will introduce theoretical and practical tools that foster critical healing praxis in community organizations and schools.

### Symposium rationale

Our primary goal in this paper symposium is to invite critical reflection and dialogue about radical healing in youth activism and social justice education. We will discuss ancestral and cultural traditions that inform healing justice and dilemmas that emerge in practice. We want to generate implications for a research agenda that honors the liberatory aims of radical healing.

The youth organizing field--and critical youth voice work in general--is embracing and adopting radical healing and healing justice (Fernández & Watts, 2021; Greene et al., 2021; Valladares et al., 2021). According to Ginwright (2015):

Healing justice is an emerging movement that seeks both (a) collective healing and well-being, and also (b) transforming the institutions and relationships that are causing the harm...healing justice advocates view the practice of healing as political action. (p. 38)

Organizers and educators in communities of color draw on cultural traditions, including Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Chicana feminisms, and the Black African diaspora, to invite young people to anchor their activism in a healing framework (Anzaldua, 1981; Eagle Shield et al., 2020; Greene et al., 2021; Mendoza, 2022b). This welcome development in social justice youth work calls for systematic inquiry about how to practice and sustain the many “both/ands” of healing justice, including individual/collective, healing/activism, self/other, ancestry/futurism, and hope/critique. How do multiracial spaces honor (and learn from) ancestral healing practices without appropriating them? What happens when the emphasis on well-being and self-care comes into tension with the slow grind of community organizing?

### Theoretical perspective



Recent scholarship on healing justice includes important theoretical contributions (Ginwright, 2015), but studies of high-quality healing justice practices are needed, particularly examples that inform the design of learning environments (Mendoza et al., 2018; Trejo, 2023). As “healing” is popularized in the youth sector, it risks becoming a buzzword, packaged to appeal to funders but carrying the individualistic and depoliticized DNA of Eurocentric models of mental health. This session will provide a critical, hopeful space to examine tensions and dilemmas in radical healing with youth and open new directions for participatory and community-engaged scholarship about healing justice.

## Symposium structure

This interactive session combines brief engaging presentations with group discussion. Presenters will each take 8-10 minutes to bring the audience into a core question or dilemma emerging from their work. The first paper examines how youth activism around transportation issues proved healing for youth and educators. The second paper examines the healing aspects that grad school can provide Latine/x students. The third paper details a sacred, communal pause in a youth activism project. The fourth paper draws on the lens of hummingbird medicine to examine healing spaces where youth activists create the conditions to learn from failures and setbacks. The final paper explores youth experiencing healing through looking at past school-based traumas through the lens of trust and distrust. Discussant Dr. Kalonji Nzinga (CU-Boulder) will then lead conversation after the paper presentations.

### Paper 1: Healing through YPAR transportation projects

Dane Stickney, Milahd Makooi, Emilleo Moralez, Ashera Adler-Eldridge, Caleb Burns and Dave McPartlan

#### Rationale

In Denver, Colorado, the streets aren’t safe and youth have been noticing and taking action in response. Eighth-grader Emilleo, for example, often spent his lunch meeting with his peers and even grilling city council members as part of a research project aimed at making a deadly local street safer. Ash, a high school senior, led her classmates in another transportation-related research project: an examination of the lack of school and city bus routes serving the growing school. In both cases, the transportation focus, emerging from youth participatory action research (YPAR) proved to be generative and healing for students. The more they understood how local transportation services oppressed them, the more they could devise solutions and actions that eventually proved empowering and healing.

#### Theoretical perspective

Unlike other papers in this symposium, these projects did not set out to explicitly implement healing practices. Instead, we focused on implementing YPAR, an emergent epistemological approach that positions youth to name problems, conduct their own research around them, develop equitable policy solutions, and work with adults to implement them (Ozer & Douglas, 2015; Fox & Fine, 2013). In this case, both youth teams implemented YPAR projects that dealt with transportation inequities. Emilleo’s class launched their YPAR project after their teacher’s friend was hit and killed by a car while crossing a notoriously dangerous street. Ash’s class explored their past negative lived experiences with transportation to and from school. Through later individual and collective reflection with university researchers—via writing, video testimonials, and online group discussions and presentations—youth described the YPAR work as healing.

#### Methods

After completing the projects, the youth met online with a group of university researchers to develop a reflection process. The intergenerational group, with members ranging from 13 to 64 years old in the US, United Kingdom, and Greece, developed two research questions. The first looked at what external changes the youth made. By external, we meant “outside of yourself,” like using YPAR to change school lunch offerings. The second examined internal changes or shifts occurring in students’ “heads or hearts.” Students, and one teacher, wrote and filmed video responses to those prompts, and the intergenerational group collectively analyzed the findings and engaged in regular online video discussions about their implications.

#### Findings

In terms of external changes, the young people noted the tangible things they had achieved. Emilleo’s group had worked with elected officials to reduce lanes of traffic on a street from four to three and pilot pedestrian-only hours. Ash’s group secured the promise of a city bus line to their school. Progress is underway but not complete. In terms of internal changes, intergenerational analysis revealed a pattern of healing outcomes. The youth felt



safer, more powerful, and able to use YPAR to mediate problems inside and outside of schools. Specifically, they described interactions with powerful adults as important. The young people in these cases interacted with adults ranging from school district administrators to the state's governor, who listened, gave feedback, and even enacted some level of change. The youth said this political progress helped alleviate the immediate anguish of the transportation problems they faced and actually induced pride. "It was so healing to have adults sit down and be like 'Wow, you're passionate and committed,'" Ash said.

## Discussion

The two YPAR projects, while not explicitly designed with a healing justice framework, proved generative and reparative for young people. The transportation focus allowed young people to do the "both/and" work that Ginwright (2015) described: finding collective well-being in their school-based groups while also working to alleviate social oppression, in this case, the transformation of local transportation systems.

## Paper 2: Latine/x healing in graduate school

Beatriz Salazar, Marlene Palomar and Carlos Hipolito-Delgado

### Rationale

We often hear about the harm that is perpetrated on students of color during graduate school, but we rarely talk about the healing moments that accompany graduate study. In this paper, we seek to complicate this narrative and share our stories of *healing* in graduate school. Pursuing graduate school provides students of color access to theories of greatness, validation, and the opportunity to re-create the lens in which our communities are seen. We argue that access to knowledge and creation brings healing.

### Framework

Through the centering of LatCrit we would like to nuance several of the conversations taking place regarding race, graduate school, and healing. LatCrit seeks to dismantle the Black-White dichotomy when addressing discussions on racism within different systems. Particularly, an examination of how Critical Race Theory (CRT) can extend its scope beyond what Iglesias (1997) describes as the constraints of the Black/White plagiarism to intricately assess the cultural, political, and economic aspects of white supremacy in the experiences of Latine individuals in their personal and collective journey for healing and joy. In the realm of education, (Solorzano & Yosso, 2010) frames LatCrit as a framework that can be employed to conceptualize and understand how race and racism, both overtly and covertly, influence educational systems, procedures, and dialogues that have consequences for Latine individuals and communities. Given its emphasis on the experiences of Latines in educational settings and its dedication to the principles of scholarship, teaching, and interdisciplinary methods within the context of a social justice initiative, we opt to prioritize healing. We make this choice because our lived experiences have shown that various forms of subordination, such as sexism and ableism, operate in intricate ways. They have the potential to oppress and marginalize while simultaneously having the potential to emancipate and uplift, underscoring the significance to prioritize and also center and highlight healing and joy in the graduate schooling experience.

### Methods and analysis

We are choosing to present our work through *testimonio*. Testimonios are "a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more human present and future" (Cervantes, 2020). Testimonio allows us to experience this healing journey collectively, being witness to the stories of our peers, their joys and sorrows, thus affording us the opportunity to remix the *remedios* that are helping others be our own. As we focus on the journey of healing, the utilization of testimonio anchors us in an ongoing process and commitment to reconstructive life stories that incorporate moments of adversity with an acknowledgement of the self and others as a whole, sustained hope and transformation of the hardships and grief into healing and possibility (Fernández, 2022). Together, the three Chicane/Latine authors share our *testimonios* of healing through the creation of knowledge as scholars and as researchers who co-create and also present the *testimonios* of youth activists.

### Discussion

Graduate school allows us the experience to not simply transcend the suffering brought to our communities through systemic racism, but also to move our communities beyond those pain points and re-create our narratives. By sharing our *testimonios*, our stories, we hope to bring another narrative into the discussion of graduate students of color and youth activists. Through graduate school and activism, we are given access to mentors, theories and



frameworks that provide counternarratives, which, in turn, allow us to dream, create, and validate the knowledge and cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) found in our communities. In our own testimonios we share the hardships and grief that we experienced in our educational experiences, and also the healing that has emerged from working with youth-activists who engage in knowledge building with us. Testimonio work involves not just participants, in our cases many who are youth activists, but also researchers in terms of our personal experiences. Together, we embody experiential knowledge while focusing on knowledge co-creation.

### **Paper 3: A sacred, communal pause: How marginalized youth's commitment to healing expands our understandings of activism**

Lex Hunter, Chanelle Jones-Ahmed, Ben Kirshner and Soliday Lopez

#### **Objectives**

The ongoing pandemic, continued state-sanctioned violence of marginalized people, and reactionary political landscape have exacerbated the need for young activists to prioritize holistic wellness. Healing is necessary because although our engagement in advocacy work addresses the root causes of harm, it also takes an immense toll on the mind/body/spirit (Conner et al, 2023). This toll, and possible strategies to address it, have not been sufficiently addressed in the emerging research literature looking at the intersection of activism and healing. This paper explores how our Participatory Action Research (PAR) project engaged in a sacred, communal pause as we reflected on our commitments to healing and justice and lovingly invited our communities to take up healing alongside us.

#### **Theoretical framework**

Critical race theory (CRT) in education (Lynn & Dixon, 2013) and healing justice (Ginwright, 2015) informed our design of the study and analysis of data. CRT works to contextualize and amplify how racialized experiences impact our material conditions (Lynn & Dixon, 2013). Healing justice calls for us to center embodied, ancestral practices that prioritize collective wellness as we journey toward eradicating oppressive systems (Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, 2021). Together these lenses inform our exploration and analysis of how youth of color expanded our understanding of activism by noticing healing as an act of activism.

#### **Methods**

Our six-week PAR project, "Our Stories, Our Healing" brought together eight racially marginalized young people to discuss experiences at the intersections of healing and activism. The team is affiliated with youth organizations across the Colorado Front Range and between 15-25 years old. We draw on two sets of data to identify findings about the relationship between healing and activism: 1) notes documenting reflections and discussions among our collective and 2) interviews ( $n=22$ ) that team members conducted with youth and community leaders. After completing the interviews, we invited the interviewees and other trusted community members to a convening where we shared our insights and reflect with us. Following this PAR cycle, two members of the team, one university-based and the other a member of a youth organization, came together to write about how the PAR team identified and embodied healing and activism as interconnected.

#### **Findings**

Our PAR team's work highlights that healing itself is a form of activism that disrupts white supremacy if we allow ourselves to slow down and offer loving attentiveness to our full, beautiful, and complex humanity. When we pause in community, opportunities open up for us to heal and invite our communities to join us.

#### **Significance**

Our understanding of healing helped us see that PAR spaces do not necessarily need to culminate in policy recommendations or formal presentations because healing is a radical, ancestral act of refusal that prioritizes communal wellness. Healing is a life-giving disruption that counters white supremacist tactics that encourage communities of color to keep going until we experience racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2004), spirit-murdering (Love, 2013), and other mental health crises. Youth of color's commitment to slowing down and tending to the self reminds us that self-preservation is essential to our pursuit of justice and collective liberation.



## Paper 4: Learning from hummingbird medicine

Elizabeth Mendoza, Beatriz Salazar, Adria Padilla-Chavez and Susan Jurow

### Rationale

Schools can cause harm to students (Dumas, 2014), particularly individuals with marginalized identities (McGee & Stoval, 2015). The dominant ways learning is defined and implemented contributes to this harm. For example, in Learning Sciences, epistemological violence, ontological violence, and symbolic violence (e.g. The Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017) illuminate how moment-to-moment interactions can be microcosms of larger social structures and histories (Cole & x) harm students through eurocentric curriculum, narrow definitions of smartness, and scapegoat individuals for systemic issues. Further, in and through such interactions, students learn not only content but, ultimately, who and what they are allowed to be by societal expectations (Nasir, 2011). Additionally, through a dominant school-defined view of learning, where learning is achieved as an outcome and ranked by grades and external markers of success, students learn to move away from their intuition and internal forms of validation. In this paper, we offer an alternative perspective on learning that foregrounds Indigenous and Ancestral wisdom and weaves them together with sociocultural theories of learning. We use personal stories to make explicit the embodied impact of academic harms on students and educators. Stories also offer points of entry into holistic healing through mind, body, and spirit connection.

### Theoretical perspective

Sociocultural theories of learning posit that learning happens in everyday, moment-to-moment interactions (Jurow & Pierce, 2011), learning and identity are interconnected (Nasir, 2011), and the present is a point of connection between the past and the future (Mendoza, et al., 2021). Joining sociocultural theories with teachings from Curanderismo, an Indigenous Mexican healing art and other spiritual and holistic practices (e.g. Dillard, 2012; Lorde, 2012), we aim to connect Learning Sciences perspectives on learning and the human endeavor of healing as a process of learning. We define healing as a journey back to ourselves (Mendoza, 2022), where the journey is a series of learning and unlearning social conditioning (Anzaldua, 2015) in ways that allow a re-connection to our intuition and ultimately a deeper interconnection with our human and non-human relations (Meixi et al., 2022). We gain insight into the spirit—and medicine—of plant and animal medicine by understanding its physical role on Mother Earth (Andrews; 2010; Cervantes). The hummingbird, for example, is anatomically deemed not able to fly; however, it flies with great agility. Thus, we call on hummingbird medicine to help break through the barriers of what may appear impossible. With this teaching, we integrate theories of learning to understand how to embrace learning as interconnected with healing.

### Methods

We embraced *autohistoria-teoria*, which draws personal histories and lived experiences to inform and shape theory (Bhattacharya & Keating, 2017). Stemming from personal writing regarding the teaching of hummingbird medicine, the authors have gathered for over a year to share narratives, write, read, and re-shape our approaches and understanding of learning. Through *platicas* (Fierros & Bernal, 2016)—gatherings that are pivotal to ‘traversing academic spaces that has allowed us to weave the personal and academic’(p. 99)—we shared vulnerable losses, struggles, and successes. We drew openly from lived experiences, teachings grounded in mind, body, and spirit connection, and rejoiced in our moments of learning. By being witnesses to each other’s lives, we engaged *tesitmonio* (Cruz, 2012), in ways that allowed us to become each other’s story holders.

### Findings

Through storytelling, we honor hummingbird medicine and teachings, which remind us to embrace impossibility, move through bitterness to bring in joy and love, and illuminate the interconnectedness of the past, present, and future. We overlay these teachings onto theories of learning in order to expand contemporary sociocultural theory to attend to healing in educational spaces. Through our analysis of stories, we have identified three main points of contact. First, to embrace impossibility requires failure to be reframed as a natural and necessary part of learning. Learning to move beyond what is considered impossible cannot happen without mis-takes (Klemp et. al., 2008). Second, cultivating trust, respect, care, and commitment to one another is where the transformative possibilities lie in the practice of love (hooks, 2001). Centering love reignites a commitment to educational spaces where play, creativity, and imagination are regarded as intellectual phenomena that guide pedagogical practice and where the wisdom and light of children are held with sacred care. Third, the present is a point of entry for both theories of learning and Hummingbird medicine as a way to connect to the past and the future. This overlap provides texture to the way theories of learning can be leveraged to remember what we have been taught to forget



(Dillard, 2012), and sit in tensions to reclaim and reconcile histories toward a new future and possibilities (Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010).

## Discussion

Attending to healing in the field of the Learning Sciences is a way to contribute to and expand upon the important conversations that we are having about learning, social change, and our ethical commitments to one another (Curnow & Jurow, 2021). In particular, it underscores the need to understand people holistically –in body, mind, spirit, and heart – as we create designs for dignity-affirming learning (Espinoza et. al., 2020) that can strengthen the field's capacity for advancing transformative education.

## Paper 5: Healing from the harms of schooling: Latinx high school students and the circles de confianza study

Blanca E. Trejo Aguilera

### Rationale

Since the time of boarding schools and with more proliferation in recent decades, scholars from a range of disciplines have elevated concerns about trauma, mental health, and healing in U.S. schools. Literature regarding trauma-informed schooling practices offers an important understanding of the ways in which children and adolescents experience traumatic events and how schools can best respond in supportive ways with students. This work, however, tends to ignore harms inflicted on BIPOC students by dominant ideologies and practices of U.S. schooling itself (Graham & Negrelli-Coomer, 2018). In discussing healing, I am not exploring traumas that young people bring into school. I choose to attune to the ways students have identified schooling practices as a source of harm, focusing on more holistic and communal healing grounded in ancestral wisdom.

### Theoretical perspective

Ginwright (2015) discusses the idea of intentionally integrating traditional community organizing trainings with individual and collective practices of healing and deems it “required for lasting community change” (p. 35). He describes this integration as a “braiding together” of strategies that “holds the power to restore a more humane, and redemptive process toward community change” (p. 35). Ginwright calls for the act of healing justice to be understood as political action, a call that my co-authors and I further develop in our work describing Circles de Confianza (Teeters et al., 2022). Ginwright (2011) argues that “radical healing” is not only an action; it is required for restoring hope amongst African-American youth and building the capacity of young people to imagine a radically different future for themselves and their communities. This healing among youth fosters a larger impact on building a stronger, more vibrant community network. I draw on Ginwright’s notions of radical healing, in tandem with indigenous perspectives on learning and healing (Yunkaporta & Moodie, 2021), to analyze data from a project with a small group of Latinx high school students.

### Methods

This study is based on research conducted with the Belonging and Trust research team based in the Renee Crown Wellness Institute at the University of Colorado at Boulder. The Circles de Confianza study (Teeters et al., 2022, 2023) enabled us to set aside existing models of youth organizing or social-justice oriented youth work and instead iterate our work in response to what we were learning and hearing from the young people themselves. Our team recognized the importance of BIPOC youth being centered, heard, supported, and trusted and thus released any methodological commitments to any set model of social-justice oriented youth work. What emerged was a space where we, as adults, asked this small group of Latinx high schoolers to explore their experiences of confianza (trust) and desconfianza (distrust) in schooling spaces.

### Findings

Through the use of written and oral storytelling and photography, students developed multimodal testimonios that they shared publicly. This time to reflect and share together was reported by students as being a space of healing. Students engaged in school- and district-level meetings where they shared their collective list of suggestions on how to create schools of confianza. Through the lens of research and scholarship, CdC offers a valuable case study of a school-based healing justice program, in a field that is lacking in descriptive accounts.



## Discussion

This paper is part of a scholarly project that partners the best of youth organizing practices with frameworks of radical healing, hope, and imagination (Ginwright, 2010) while acknowledging the roots of such practices as stemming from ancestral and Indigenous wisdom and medicine. By carefully describing what healing practices in activism spaces look like, I hope to provide scholars, activists, organizers and philanthropists with suggestions on how to intentionally incorporate healing into youth organizing models. Additionally, I hope to re-connect and re-member these collective practices with ancestral wisdom. I seek to situate practices of healing within an Indigenous framework that brings to the fore-front the ways that Indigenous people have responded to various forms of oppression and trauma. I seek to shift the focus away from a policy-only driven solution to address the harms of schooling and include practices of community healing, grounded in curanderismo wisdom.

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