

Utilizing Healing Frameworks to Address and Challenge Racism and White Supremacy In and
Out of Educational Settings

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Abstract

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White supremacy and other systems of oppression have been and are currently at the forefront of today's society. With all of the racial trauma and violence Communities of Color face, I questioned how are Students of Color healing amidst explicit racial injustices. This three paper project is guided by the following overall research question: How do Students of Color create racial refuge in and out of educational settings? I refer to racial refuge as spaces that challenge trauma-informed characterizations. Instead, these spaces nurture culturally-sustaining healing practices and processes to address systems of oppression. In order to address this, this project utilized participant observations, in-depth interviews, pláticas, and document analysis to better understand how Students of Color make sense of their racialized experiences and describe pathways to healing. Additionally, this project utilized autoethnography as a method to describe my experiences working with a doctoral Student of Color group and how my relationships with this group informed my research and positionality as a Chicana MotherScholar invested in community-based research. This project ultimately informs how various fields of study,

especially social work, can better holistically support Students of Color in and out of educational settings by proposing and incorporating healing frameworks and practices to address, challenge, and eliminate white supremacy, along with other systems of oppression.

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Positionality

It is important for you, the reader, to know who I am as it will tell you a lot about how my positionality shapes my epistemology, the ways I navigate academia and my purpose for doing the work that I do. I am a first generation Chicana college student from Oxnard, CA, a predominantly Latinx and Mexican/Mexican American city located in Southern California. I believed for a long time that my beloved Oxnard community was diverse because it had a lot of Brown people, but once I became more educated, I realized it was not diverse at all---Oxnard was/is hyper-segregated. As I came to my critical consciousness, I began to see more injustices within my city, such as hyper-policing, inadequate schooling practices, and a lack of mental health services. These injustices were present because there is a lack of commitment and investment in Brown communities and Communities of Color in general. Although many of the injustices and oppression I experienced, along with my family, friends and community, still haunt me, my experiences growing up in Oxnard greatly inform this dissertation project. I never felt represented as a Chicana in any of educational institutions I attended and as I climbed the education ladder, and recently became a Mother, I felt even more alone and isolated. My hope through this dissertation project is to highlight that not only does racism, white supremacy and other systems of oppression persist in higher education especially for Students of Color, but that these experiences continue to be damaging to our overall well-being. We, educators and society, need to invest in the well-being of Students of Color by creating spaces and environments that they can thrive in, where they feel represented and empowered, and most importantly a space to reflect and heal from past racialized trauma that continues to be inflicted upon them.

Introduction

Racism, white supremacy and other systems of oppression have persisted for decades within educational institutions (Kohli, Pizarro & Nevárez, 2017). Educational institutions were established without People of Color in mind, excluding and restricting them from receiving any type of formal education (cite). Unfortunately even after it was deemed unconstitutional to uphold segregation (Brown v. Board, 1954), a form of white supremacy, Students of Color continued to face discrimination and racism and experienced inadequate schooling practices that impacted their overall well-being. Today, many scholars (Orfield et al., 2014; García et al., 2012; Laura, 2014; Morris, 2016) have documented the various ways the educational system has failed Students of Color—there continues to be a lack of support and investment in Students of Color. Because of the continued racialized stress and trauma Students of Color experience I wanted to focus my efforts towards the mental health and well-being of Students of Color. During the creation of this dissertation project, I thought deeply about how Students of Color were navigating higher education when their physical and mental well-being is constantly put at risk?

The current study is a three part paper series that details the stories of Students of Color navigating educational institutions at the high school and undergraduate level, and doctoral level. Building from the aforementioned literature about Students of Color and their experiences with racism, white supremacy and other systems of oppression within educational settings, this project is guided by the following overall research question: How do Students of Color create racial refuge in educational settings? I define racial refuge as spaces that go beyond the trauma-informed characterizations and instead nurture culturally-sustaining healing practices and processes to address these systems of oppression. Because it is my priority to highlight the various ways Students of Color are creating racial refuge and especially how this relates to their

healing processes, this three paper series will document the racialized experiences Students of Color continue to experience, but more importantly how they were able to cope and navigate through these experiences.

The first paper of this three part series is informed by my relationship with a social justice-based organization, The Root of Us (TRU), located in the Pacific Northwest (PNW). TRU is dedicated to various social justice efforts, but particularly efforts around supporting young People of Color with their mental well-being as it pertains to race, racial identity, and systems of oppression. During my time with TRU, I had the honor and privilege of working with three Students of Color, two high school students and one undergraduate freshman student. Utilizing *pláticas*, informal everyday conversations and check ins (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016), we were able to engage in conversations around our past racialized experiences and traumas, how they (students) utilized TRU as a space to engage in reflection about these experiences, and identify ways that they (students) have used their cultural identities, values and beliefs as a tool for healing. Ultimately, the work with TRU highlighted the lack of spaces in educational settings to even have conversations around racism, white supremacy and other systems of oppression and the need to better support the overall well-being of Students of Color as they encounter racialized trauma and stress.

The second paper of this three part series documents the journeys of five doctoral Students of Color, including myself, attending a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the PNW. This paper is informed by the relationships I created with each of the four doctoral students within a collective project called Critical Conversations Collective (CCC). The CCC was co-created out of necessity; there was a lack of critical dialogue within each of the their doctoral curriculum, lack of diversity among peers, and an overall lack of support and

sustainability for doctoral Students of Color. Because of these isolating and toxic environments that CCC experienced within their respective programs, they decided to create their own racial refuge, a space that validated their identities and prioritized difficult yet necessary conversations about systems of oppression and how we can engage in healing collectively. During my time with CCC, I utilized pláticas to engage in conversations around white supremacy, systems of oppression and mental health and healing. Similarly to the first group of students I worked with, pláticas allowed for us to be vulnerable in order to even have conversations about our past trauma experiences. The important difference between this doctoral student group, CCC, and the first group of students is that CCC hung out with one another outside of regular scheduled pláticas. This not only meant that we would actively participate in events that resisted white supremacy and centered the liberation of People of Color, but we were also able to talk through and visualize ways we were engaging in healing—through our collective space of refuge in and out of the PWI we were attending. Ultimately, this work with CCC provided insights into the importance of supporting doctoral Students of Color, especially those attending PWIs, but to also create ways to engage in healing practices with students that centers their lived experiences and sustains them throughout their doctoral programs.

The last and final paper of this three part series is an autoethnographic piece that outlines my experiences as a Chicana Mother and first generation college student navigating a doctoral program at a PWI. This paper is greatly informed by my lived experiences and critical conversations I had with my friends and partner about what research can look like as People of Color. Specifically, I share about how I navigated a toxic relationship with a faculty member who tried to pressure me into adhering to white western ways of the academy. Instead of becoming complacent in the white ivory tower norms, I leaned on my community of critical

scholars to help support me through exploring theoretical frameworks and methods that valued my existence and People of Color alike and to engage in writing that was accessible to my community. Although this paper is similar in topics around systems of oppression and healing, it is distinct in that I utilize autoethnography to illustrate my findings. Utilizing as rarely been done before in the field of social work, yet the field is moving towards an emphasis on positionality and reflexivity. This paper can provide a framework of how social work scholars can utilize autoethnography, but more importantly why we should be talking about reflexivity, positionalities and the processes we engage since we often work with marginalized populations.

“I’ve just been able to unpack everything”: Utilizing Healing as a Step Towards Addressing and Challenging Racism and White Supremacy

Racism, white supremacy and colonization have been and are currently at the forefront of today’s society. With all of the racial trauma and violence Communities of Color are facing, I questioned how are People of Color, especially Students of Color healing amidst explicit racial injustices and COVID-19. This project builds from social work’s “Grand Challenge of Eliminating Racism” and examines how participation in healing circles impacts the mental well-being of Students of Color and highlights cultural practices, tools, and events used in their healing process. To address these aims, this project utilized participant observations, in-depth interviews, pláticas, and document analysis to better understand the impact of healing circles and the process of healing among Students of Color. Participants were recruited from two different locations within the greater Seattle area that I have existing partnerships with. This project ultimately informs how various fields of study including, but not limited to, social work, education, and public health can better holistically support Students of Color in and out of educational settings by proposing healing as a step towards addressing, challenging, and eliminating racism and white supremacy.

Keywords: racism; white supremacy; healing; Youth of Color

Racism and white supremacy In and Out of Educational Settings

The U.S. is grounded in racism, colonization, and white supremacy. From the stealing of land from Indigenous Communities and forcing them into boarding schools to school segregation of Black and Brown to the current day state sanctioned violence targeting Communities of Color (Brave Heart et al., 2011; García et al., 2012; Pulido, 2017), there is much to say about the traumatic and complex histories of the U.S. and how it has impacted and continues to impact People of Color today. Even with some historical “wins”, such as desegregation, ending ‘stop and frisk’, and enforcing fair housing laws, for Communities of Color, still much has not changed in regards to the amount of racism these communities continue to face. In educational settings today, we see these racially targeted traumas through the hyper-segregation of schools (Orfield et al., 2014), the disproportionate rates of school suspensions/expulsions among Youth of Color contributing to the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Laura, 2014; Morris, 2016), and the continuous monolingual, monocultural and colonial education curriculum (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Outside of educational settings, Communities of Color experience state sanctioned violence via police officers assaulting and murdering Black people, immigration, and customs enforcement (ICE) officers targeting Latinx people and other marginalized groups to detain and “send them back to their countries,” and the U.S. government forcefully occupying and destructing Indigenous homelands in attempt to erase Indigenous communities. It becomes clear that even with progress, racism and white supremacy continue to be at the forefront of Communities of Color, therefore impacting their well-being and livelihood. Fortunately, in 2013 the field of social work created a committee to oversee the 12 Grand Challenges of Social Work, broad meaningful and measurable changes that should change in the next 10 years (Grand Challenges for Social Work, 2023) and now including the thirteenth Grand Challenge of Eliminating Racism. With the continuous racial trauma, tension and inequities, social work must

continue to prioritize the Grand Challenge of Eliminating Racism, an important goal in order to address and ultimately eliminate racial inequity (Teasley, et al., 2021).

Racism at the Forefront of the Dual Pandemics

It's hard to state all the impacts caused by the dual pandemics, especially the impacts it has had on People of Color, because we are still living it. What we do know from these last two years is that the racialized violence of seeing Black Americans killed by police and the injustices of People of Color not having adequate accessibility to masks and COVID-19 tests is nothing new. In fact, the United States was “founded” from the labor of People of Color, particularly the Black community. Although COVID-19 is a newly surfaced pandemic, racism and white supremacy have a long complex history in this country. Jones (2021) highlights how even though racism and white supremacy have historically infiltrated educational settings, like many other entities, Students of Color are experiencing further racial stress and trauma because of the 2020 racial uprisings. For example, Students of Color as young as third grade are questioning why they must keep having to explain to adults, sometimes their own family members, that Black Lives Matter (Jones, 2021). This calls urgent attention to the health and well-being of Students of Color who constantly have to convince people that their lives, joy, and humanity matter, and how intergenerational white supremacist beliefs manifest and carry on. In addition to the racial trauma of violence, Students of Color faced the uncertainty of themselves and their loved ones recovering from such a deadly virus. People of Color experienced disproportionate rates of infection, hospitalizations, and death from COVID-19 (Murray-Lichtman et al., 2022). With these negative outcomes on their health and well-being, we can only touch the surface of the amount of stress Students of Color are experiencing.

Healing and Youth of Color

In fields of health and social sciences, like medicine, social work, and education, Trauma Informed Care (TIC) has been taken up to address trauma in people's lives. TIC became popular, because it 1) acknowledges past and current traumas, 2) allows for a more holistic approach to treatment, and 3) understands the role violence and victimization play in the roles of those who seek mental health and substance abuse services (Harris & Falot, 2001). TIC is an important concept for social workers and other health-related practitioners to consider when thinking about trauma, but the concept seems incomplete when addressing trauma directly inflicted by systems of oppression which is an important factor in addressing the Grand Challenge Eliminating Racism. TIC values a holistic approach to treatment but doesn't offer insights to address the root causes of trauma, leaving out the toxic environmental and societal factors (Ginwright, 2018) that contribute to these traumas. For example, TIC acknowledges the trauma of experiencing intimate partner violence and can offer individual needs to minimize or eliminate the violence yet fails to address and challenge the systems of oppression at play, like patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism. Additionally, TIC seems to fall into the traditional medical model of focusing too much on the trauma (symptoms) instead of, "strengthening the roots of well-being" (Ginwright, 2018).

Instead of TIC, Ginwright (2018) calls for healing-centered engagement (HCE) which highlights how trauma and healing are experienced collectively in order to offer more holistic approaches that foster well-being. HCE doesn't provide a cookie-cutter solution to trauma, but rather pushes people to examine trauma and understand that healing is a complex process critically and holistically. HCE moves beyond the question, "what happened to you," to "what's right with you" and uses this strengths-based lens to encourage agency in the creation of their own well-being (Ginwright, 2018). Ultimately, healing-centered engagement shifts from a deficit-based approach to a more holistic strengths-based approach that promotes well-being.

In Ginwright's recent book, *The Four Pivots*, he pushes us to think even deeper about the work of healing.

Healing involves more than repairing the deep wounds of racism, healing the scars of sexism, or easing the pains of poverty. Healing is the capacity to restore our humanity and care for our-selves and others even during our fear. Healing is the only pathway to real justice because it requires that we take an honest look at what harmed us and pushes us to restore our humanity and finally to move us confidently into a possible future.

(Ginwright, 2022, p. 3).

While there is still much collective harm and trauma that needs to be addressed and ultimately abolished in and out of educational settings, Ginwright encourages the move, or what he calls pivot towards healing (Ginwright, 2022). This could be the step towards addressing and eliminating racism that has been long needed.

Healing Circles

Healing circles, which directly derive from talking circles, were established by Native American tribes as a means to facilitate dialogue regardless of differences (Wolf & Rickard, 2003). More importantly, these circles are a necessary life tool as they get introduced to children at a very young age in order to pass down knowledge, values and culture throughout adulthood (Wolf & Rickard, 2003). Over the years, healing circles have adapted and found their way into places like drug and alcohol treatment centers, adolescent interventions, and public schools (Wolf & Rickard, 2003). Even more so, healing circles have become more and more popular in recent years following the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement towards racial justice as a way to engage people of all ages in difficult conversations around racism, white supremacy and other systems of oppression. Although talking circles and/or healing circles have adapted, scholars

have found them to be also instrumental in supporting the healing process among People of Color, particularly around mental health and well-being (Ginwright, 2016; Haskie-Mendoza et al., 2018; McArthur et al., 2019). The strengths and promising outcomes that healing circles embody can be a tool for many to use as a means to address systems of oppression like racism and white supremacy.

The Current Study

Building from Ginwright's (2018; 2022) work on healing and understanding the need to continue to address and challenge racism and white supremacy, this study highlights how a social justice-based organization cultivated a foundation for Students of Color to be their authentic selves that allowed them to share experiences of racial trauma and discuss ways that they have been able to heal from those experiences. This study is particularly interested in the healing circles offered through the social justice-based organization. With this in mind, the current study is guided by the following research questions:

1. *How does participation in healing circles help Students of Color make sense of their racialized experiences?*
2. *How do Students of Color describe pathways to healing and well-being?*

Critical Race Theory

Given the emphasis on racism and racial trauma Students of Color experience and the racialized nature of the discussions that took place during the study, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used as a guiding theoretical framework. CRT was developed by legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberly Crenshaw and Richard Delgado to talk about the various ways systems of oppression such as racism and patriarchy manifest and ultimately intersect with one another (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). Since the inception of CRT, it has extended to many fields, including education and has been widely used as a way to discuss

educational inequity, particularly as it pertains to race (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Kohli & Soloranzo, 2012). Fortunately, the field of social work has recognized the importance and significance of incorporating CRT into its curriculum (Constance-Huggins, 2012; Abrams & Moio, 2009). Building from the extensive work scholars from various disciplines have put forth about CRT, the current study utilizes CRT through a social work lens. CRT through a social work lens ultimately helped guide this work to 1) make sense of the “racialized, gendered, and classed experiences,” of the Students of Color who participated in this study, 2) challenge traditional static ideas about race, gender and class by illustrating the intersectional impact these systems of oppression have on Students of Color, and 3) promote a path towards healing from systems of oppression that utilizes “the interdisciplinary knowledge base” such as Education, Law, Ethnic Studies and Social Work and is grounded in Communities of Color (Pérez Huber & Soloranzo, 2018).

Healing Centered Engagement

As expressed earlier, HCE attempts to understand the root of the problem which can offer more holistic approaches to foster well-being. The four key elements of healing-centered engagement include: 1) “HCE is explicitly political, rather than clinical, which means that trauma and well-being are viewed as a function of people’s environments and because of this, when people build an awareness of justice and liberation, it contributes to overall well-being and hopefulness (Potts, 2003; Prilleltensky, 2003, 2008; Ginwright, 2018), 2) HCE is culturally grounded and views healing as the restoration of identity, 3) HCE is asset driven and focuses on the well-being we want, rather than symptoms we want to suppress, 4) HCE supports adult providers with their own healing” (Ginwright, 2018). These four key elements directly align with many social work values and commitments yet, there is very little scholarship on HCE within

social work education, practice and/or research. In addition to CRT frameworks, HCE key elements helped guide the understanding of trauma and healing among the Students of Color who participated in the healing circles. For example, the key elements of HCE helped to 1) name the system(s) of oppression involved in their trauma(s) expressed during the healing circles, 2) encourage and highlight the various ways their cultural values, wisdom and knowledge aided in their healing process, particularly around their racial/ethnic identity, 3) call attention to the assets and supports of mental health resources they had available to them and the need to continue to support such mental health efforts for Students of Color, and 4) acknowledge the author's own healing process during and after this study.

Materials and Methods

As a Woman of Color in academia, my scholarship is greatly informed by my lived experiences growing up in a predominantly Latinx city. With the continuous racial trauma and violence Communities of Color continue to face and now with the added deadly impacts of COVID-19, I thought deeply about how youth, specifically Youth of Color were navigating the dual pandemics and how it will impact their mental well-being in the future. It has been a devastating time for many of us—for those grieving the lives of loved ones, those continuing the fight against racial injustices, and those simply trying to make sense of the world. Although this study was informed by my experiences prior to my doctoral training, it is a direct result of the persistent racial trauma, white supremacy, and other systems of oppression that impact Students of Color. To further this, this study took place during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a life changing event that many people are still struggling and surviving through.

Shortly after the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement for racial justice and building from an existing relationship, I began working more closely with The Root of Us (TRU), the partner

organization of the current study, to offer support to the Students of Color associated with TRU. TRU is a social justice-based organization, led and directed by Fernell Miller, a self-identified Black woman, mother, teacher and activist who has spent many years organizing and building lasting relationships with Youth of Color and their families across the greater Seattle area. TRU provides services focused on diversity, equity, inclusion and identity and offers a range of programming to People of Color, especially Youth of Color. TRU offers multiple in-person and zoom meetings throughout the week to provide the community a space to unpack whatever struggles/hardships and /or traumas they may be facing, especially as it pertains to race/ethnicity, systems of oppression and anti-Black racism. Over the months of December 2021-February 2022, I spent even more time getting to know the Youth of Color at TRU by showing up to their weekly healing circle sessions, which I eventually became a facilitator of. TRU's weekly healing circles can be described as intimate and informal yet intentional. The healing circles were intimate because they often consisted of no more than ten students at a time, this was due to the fact that some students couldn't make it every week and/or did not have the capacity to participate given that we all were still on zoom 24/7. The circles were also informal yet intentional, because although there was no formal agenda or check list of things to cover, the facilitator many times asked a question that would spark discussion that ultimately led into conversations about identity and healing. Although it was not a requirement to share, the majority of students who attended the healing circles shared vulnerable stories about themselves and sometimes their families regarding racism and trauma. This time spent participating and facilitating the healing circles was intentional because I wanted to continue to build rapport, trust and transparency with the youth before, throughout, and after the study. With the guidance and

support of the director, Fernell, Youth of Color from TRU's healing circles were invited to participate in the current study.

Data Collection

This qualitative study utilized pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016), also referred to in this study as TRU's healing circles, and semi-structured zoom interviews consisting of open-ended questions to better understand how participation in social justice-based organizations impact the well-being of Students of Color. Pláticas are understood to be, “everyday conversations we have: the check-ins, the catchups, the regañadas, the consejos, a myriad of all the different ways that we engage with one another,” (Flores and Morales, 2022, p. 36). Because TRU's healing circles were already aligning with these characteristics of pláticas, it became a smooth adaptation of what pláticas could look like in this setting when I began facilitating. Ultimately, pláticas provided a pivotal methodological framework that welcomed Students of Color to share vulnerable stories, build community with one another and acknowledge their intersectional identities and made “connections between everyday lived experiences and the research inquiry,” (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 112) by inviting all conversations and discussions related to Students of Color experiences. Four pláticas were conducted with each plática being left open, with no formal agenda, for discussion—whatever topics were pertinent to the youth at the time. Topics ranged from racial microaggressions during college to confronting fatophobia and beauty standards.

Three semi-structured interviews were also conducted and included three main categories: (1) Student's background and participation in TRU, (2) Experiences of racism and other systems of oppression, (3) Healing. Each plática and interview ranged from one hour to one and a half hours in length. Because of my already existing partnership with TRU and trusted

relationships with the students who attended TRU's healing circles, participants included the following identities: (1) 14 years of age or older, (2) Identified as a Person of Color (i.e. Black/African American, Indigenous/Native American, Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander/Native Pacific Islander), (3) Currently attending high school or college/university, and (4) A member of TRU. Each plática fluctuated in the number of youth participants, with a consistent three participants, AT, DI, and JK, who attended each plática and showed up mostly every week and were included in the study.

The Students

AT

AT is a Black Filipina Pacific Islander from a predominantly white city just north of Seattle, WA. AT was quite shy in the beginning when I first met her and to be honest, I actually never got the chance to see her face because we were on zoom and well, you know, zoom can be awkward at times. For AT, being on camera via zoom was anxiety provoking. But, although I never got the chance to see AT's face, I heard her laugh as we laughed and joked about random embarrassing moments in our lives, I heard her shaky voice as we discussed fatphobia and colonial oppressive standards of beauty, and I felt her nervousness as she shared personal "secrets" of her own sexual identity over the zoom chat box during our individual interview. As mentioned, multiple times during our time together, AT is at the beginning stages of healing and self-love—I know she is going to do some amazing things.

DI

When I first attended the healing circle, DI was one of the first students I met. During my first meeting, I was already so inspired by her passion and commitment to social justice, because I had the privilege and honor to listen to DI read her public comment that would then be submitted

to the Washington State legislative meeting on whether the state would adopt or ban Critical Race Theory in schools. DI self identifies as biracial, African American and white. Her mother is white, and her father is Nigerian. Although this was not always the case up until recently, DI takes a lot of pride in her Nigerian roots and expressed her eagerness to learn more about her Nigerian culture. DI has been a member of TRU since Summer of 2020 shortly after the devastating killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.

JK

JK is one of those people that greets you with enthusiasm and always makes you feel great, even if you're exhausted and had a long day—well that's how they made me feel every healing circle. JK self identifies as a non-binary Asian and Pacific Islander immigrant from Guam. After migrating to the U.S. they lived in a predominantly white city north of Seattle, WA, where they were constantly confronting white supremacist views. They now live in Seattle, WA and attend a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the Pacific Northwest. JK has a strong love for and relationship to the land, they constantly share their knowledge about the land and how frustrating it is to be in classes where professors only want to talk about the deficits of land while ignoring the histories of Indigenous cultural wisdoms and teachings of the land. JK had shared that they had been invited to TRU healing circles a while ago, but it was not until 2021 when they realized they needed a space to unpack the racial trauma they had been experiencing for quite some time.

Data Analysis

All pláticas, healing circles, and in-depth interviews were conducted and recorded via zoom due to the pandemic. After data collection was completed, they were transcribed and cleaned using a transcription service platform. Because grounded theory utilizes real-life events to further discuss theoretical explanations (Oktay, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) this approach

was used to investigate and explain the complex and multifaceted relationships between healing circles and well-being among Youth of Color. Each interview was coded by utilizing an inductive coding approach, which allows for codes to be created as you go, rather than creating codes before the coding process. Coding took place using ATLAS.ti that led to several themes, but ultimately were condensed into three major overarching themes due to the overlapping commonalities (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2014): Community Space of Belonging and Care, Identifying and Processing Racism and Other Systems of Oppression, and *La Cultura Cura* (Culture is Healing). Additionally, CRT and HCE were used within data analysis. CRT served as a theoretical framework to make sense of and properly represent the Youth of Color's experiences of racial trauma and the impacts it has had on them. Ginwright's HCE approach allowed for further explanations about healing and how Students of Color are practicing healing in their daily lives.

Results

Community Space of Belonging and Care

Through participant observations and my own active engagement in TRU's weekly meetings, also referred to as TRU's circles, I quickly noticed this virtual space was a space of belonging and care. The beauty of TRU was that although this was a group that focused its efforts on social justice, particularly around addressing racism and white supremacy, it also centered the joy, rest and healing of People of Color which reminded folks this was a space of care.

DI: "...it's like when you're when you're constantly with a group of people that tell you like how valuable you are, and like, actively show that through their actions, because they want to hear what you say and want to hear your check in." (Interview, May 2022)

Through our conversations together and individually, the Youth of Color---JK, DI and AT described TRU as a community space of belonging where they could be their true authentic selves. This desire to feel a sense of belonging was a result of their lived experiences growing up in and/or going to school at predominantly white spaces. For JK, they continuously expressed such pridefulness in being a non-binary Asian and Pacific Islander immigrant, while also being disappointed in and exhausted from the colonial and white supremacist harm and trauma they experienced in school. AT also shared similar sentiments of racial trauma that stemmed from her identities as a biracial Woman of Color and how TRU became her community.

JK: “But like we know, we know internally we want validation, but also more likely we want listening and just like kind of like relating more relationships...” (Interview, April 2022)

AT: “I’ve always felt nervous to join places like TRU and BSU because I’ve had my identity invalidated before in multiple ways. But I was like, okay, I really need this for me. So let me take a little risk and put myself out there.” (Interview, April 2022)

AT: “So it [TRU and BSU] gave me like, the chance to really open up and say what’s on my mind and that was super healing.”(Interview, April 2022)

These testimonies were not only connected to their past and present experiences of racism and/or other systems of oppression, but most importantly connected to how TRU’s healing circles fostered a community space of belonging and care. Similarly, to Love’s (2019) work, during these circles the Students of Color were never questioned, reduced or belittled because of the color of their skin, citizenship status, or gender identity. TRU fostered this virtual space through the words they shared in circle and by their actions---by showing up to circle for each other week after week.

DI: “Yeah, I think it [TRU] really helped my mental health in 2020. Just like having that consistent community because I was feeling like when we first like, what remote I was

feeling like so like isolated, I think, I think it was just like being alone for so long.”
(Interview, May 2022)

During the 2020 racial uprisings and COVID-19, the youth at TRU, like many others, were hit with uncertainty and loss. Despite these traumatic life changing events, TRU really came through by providing a virtual space where youth felt like they belonged, were cared for and could express and share things about themselves that they couldn't otherwise. Highlighting the importance of fostering a community space of belonging and care, Gonzalez (2022) provides examples of how he and the organization he worked with, a predominantly Mexican, Mexican American group, created a counter-space at a predominantly white university. Through this organization, he describes how Students of Color created this space for, “everyone to be themselves without having to worry about anyone else judging them,” (Gonzalez, 2022).

Identifying and Processing Racism and Other Systems of Oppression

TRU was also a space to openly talk about the impacts of racism and other systems of oppression on our health and well-being as People of Color. Over the past two years, students had been hit with racial uprising that were at an all-time high, not to mention this was also the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. TRU became an outlet for Students of Color to vent, process and organize together---a space that was greatly absent from their schools. AT had expressed how much racial trauma she had experienced growing up as a Black Filipina Pacific Islander in a predominantly white city where every other day people would question her identity.

AT: “I’ve been called, like, an Oreo before or like, people have implied that like, Oh, you’re like really white. But I’ve learned that like there’s no right way to be like Black or Filipina or Pacific Islander.” (Interview, April 2022)

AT: “It’s all kind of traumatizing and really hits you hard and you don’t realize how it affects you until you like, have some type of turning point.” (Interview, April 2022)

JK also shared similar experiences during their freshman year of college. As an Asian and Pacific Islander and fairly recent immigrant, otherness was unfortunately not new to JK, but what was new and exhausting was the constant pressure to conform to whiteness.

JK: “They had a mold I needed to fit into. They wanted me to conform. They wanted me to assimilate. So definitely, like, there’s just been so much unconscious rejection of my own identities from myself.” (Interview, April 2022)

For DI who phenotypically looks Black (López & Hogan, 2021), often discussed in our circles the tension of identifying as an African American white biracial woman. She shared how for the majority of her life she was the only African American, and sometimes the only Person of Color, in spaces. Unfortunately for DI these experiences had lasting negative impacts on her identity and well-being.

DI: “I think the reason why I knew that I knew then was because like, every time the summer came around, and my skin got like darker because of the sun, Because that’s how it works. It’s like my least favorite time of the year. My most favorite time of the year was winter when it was cold and my skin would lighten up.” (Interview, May 2022)

During our one on one interview, JK described the struggle of experiencing racism while also describing the beauty of having a space to unpack and heal.

JK: “I’ve just been able to unpack everything...I think the healing circles are definitely my coping mechanism at this point, because they’re sustainable, they’re healthy. And there’s just so many conversations...” (Interview, April 2022)

It’s overwhelmingly devastating to continue to hear stories like these from Students of Color, because we know that these experiences of white supremacy have negative impacts. AT, DI, and JK emphasized how important and healing TRU and other student groups they were apart of like, Black Student Union (BSU) and Queer Alliance, were on their well-being because they were able to unpack their racial trauma they had experienced. Despite the continuous white

supremacist attacks on these three Youth of Color's identities, they utilized TRU as a place of refuge---a space to decompress, rejuvenate and build.

La Cultura Cura

La Cultura Cura, which literally means “Culture Cures,” is a phrase used in many Latina/o/x communities and is often said as a way to describe how one's own culture can be a foundation for curing and/or healing (Haskie-Mendoza et al., 2018; Tello & Acosta, 2012). Although this phrase derives from Latinx communities, many scholars have identified and illustrated how various Communities of Color utilize *La Cultura Cura* to create culturally tailored projects that contribute to their well-being (Anderson et al., 2018; Beltran et al., 2020; Desai 2020; Goebert et al., 2018; Robbins et al., 2016). During the weekly healing circles, the concept of *La Cultura Cura* was present. For example, during circle, we would make it a point to intentionally center Communities of Color within PowerPoint presentations, ask questions of joy and love within each of our cultures, and welcome and encourage participation from folks from various cultural backgrounds. During my one on one interviews with DI and AT, they also described how their racial/ethnic identities played a role in their healing process.

JK: “I remember finally meeting like not only a California Native, but also Yakima native and having the conversation about being Indigenous was so much healing.”
(Interview, April 2022)

AT: “I enjoy participating in, like the big things are the little things that make me really proud of what makes me and like my culture, like I love to talk about Filipino food, I love to wear all my sorts of earrings...I think the love for my culture has overtaken like all the negativity, because it is always made me sure of my identity...” (Interview, April 2022)

DI: “...my aunt came from Nigeria and brought a bunch of clothes with her, it was the clothes that like [with] really beautiful fabrics...we went through all those clothes and my cousins were there and we had a lil fashion show and then I got to take some home. And

so I think I remember that was like kind of like a really key turning point and yes specifically kind of like accepting myself and loving myself.” (Interview, May 2022)

As demonstrated from JK, AT and DI, one’s own culture can have positive impacts and foster a sense of healing, especially when one has experienced so much racial trauma. The framework of *La Cultura Cura* has shown up in healing research because of its power and importance of culture in Communities of Color. Additionally, during one of our healing circles, DI told a story about when she began wearing headwraps, traditional African headwear, she received a lot of stares from peers, yet she still continued to dress in her cultural African attire because it made her feel good about her identity that had been suppressed due to experiences of being sometimes the only Student of Color.

DI: “...like the looks I would get when I wore, like the head wrap but I just had my hair covered by that and it's like, I feel like part of that has to do with like, the stigma that comes from like, head scarves and like headwraps in general.” (Healing Circle, March 2022)

DI: “I feel like I feel I guess more connected to my identity when I like yeah, when I do when I am wearing clothing.” (Healing Circle, March 2022)

Ultimately, DI describes how not only is her culture and cultural attire important to her, but how it has had a positive impact on her identity as a biracial student growing up in a predominantly white space. These feelings and experiences about culture happened outside of our healing circles, yet JK, AT, and DI felt that our healing circles were a safe enough space to share those experiences especially knowing that all of them were still grappling with the racism they had internalized. The healing circles demonstrate how simply showing up and being able to share different cultural traditions, such as food, music, attire or even the ways you talk, can create a sense of community that contributes to the well-being of Students of Color (Gonzalez, 2022). These examples and testimonies from Students of Color about *La Cultura Cura*

demonstrate how important the role of one's own culture plays in the healing process, especially from trauma and harm that has been directly inflicted by racism, white supremacy and other systems of oppression.

Discussion

Even with much progress over the years, it is not enough. Students of Color in and out of educational settings continue to face hostile, detrimental, and draining experiences of racism, white supremacy and other systems of oppression. What is hopeful in thinking about the next 5 to 10 years, is that there is a movement forming and happening—a movement towards healing. It can be difficult to even begin to think about what healing can look like, but we know Students of Color are engaging in it, living in it. AT, DI, and JK, like many other Students of Color, are proof of this movement towards healing. Despite their racial trauma and stress they experience(ed), they make it a priority to show up for each other and other Students of Color in order to restore the humanity (Ginwright, 2022) that has been lost. TRU's healing circles have been able to provide a space of belonging and care, where students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, like AT, DI, and JK, can show up as their authentic selves and feel loved even through a computer screen. These circles also curated a space where students could unpack their racial trauma and stress they experienced and continued to experience in and out of school settings. Lastly, TRU's healing circles encouraged, welcomed and centered the lives of People of Color which in turn made it known that this is a space where one's culture will be valued. Because of these, students were able to have a place to come to every week—a place of healing and refuge; a place to call home.

Although the study took place during a time with heavy mask use and safety precautions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it did not derail students from attending TRU's healing circles

via zoom, an online video platform. In fact, AT, JK, and DI stated that they needed to come to TRU's healing circles, even if it was on zoom, because the circles were one of the most consistent things in their lives at the moment. Hosting the healing circles via zoom also made it even easier to build connections and deeper relationships with one another from the comfort of our own homes. Although The zoom virtual space was an intimate space that allowed for much more personal discussions that related to past traumas. Additionally, students in general are typically very busy with studying, going to school/classes, engaging in extracurricular activities etc., that having the option to join the healing circles via zoom was convenient and oftentimes worked well with their schedules. In order to really gain a perspective of both zoom and in-person healing circles, future studies will be conducted. In person healing circles may provide a relationship that can further center healing practices for Students of Color.

The racial/ethnic demographic make up our group lent itself to offer a unique perspective in understanding different lived experiences. All participants, including the facilitator, identified differently in regards to their racial/ethnic background which does not necessarily meet the requirements for generalization of a finding, yet it should be known that when it comes to describing racial trauma and healing, no two experiences are the same. Because of diverse historically marginalized backgrounds, we were able to hear various perspectives and experiences that oftentimes led to critical discussions about the detrimental impacts of racism and other systems of oppressions that apply to many People of Color. Additionally, the diversity within our group allowed for us to hear about the various healing practices we engage in based on our racial/ethnic and cultural identities.

Working alongside TRU has taught me transformational lessons as a social worker and researcher. I believe in order to effectively address and challenge racism and white supremacy as

it relates to the Grand Challenge of Eliminating Racism, it is necessary and critical we learn and continue to learn from organizations and community spaces like TRU. Utilizing CRT urges us to acknowledge that racism is endemic, and it (along with other systems of oppression) manifests in various ways throughout our lives (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001) . As evidenced in the responses within this article, Students of Color provide examples of how they have experienced racism, like being called an “oreo,” and how those experiences manifest into feelings of exclusion and dehumanization. To further center the lens of CRT, Students of Color expressed how their experiences of trauma went beyond race/ethnicity and included other marginalized identities such as being queer and/or being a woman which ultimately provided students an intersectional approach to understand how these systems of oppression operate in society. Despite JK, DI, and AT experiencing various levels of discrimination and oppression, they utilized TRU’s healing circles as a way to also discuss healing practices. A major being was ultimately pushing back against the white supremacist views and stories told about each of them and seeing the beauty and assets of their own cultures, from cultural foods to clothing. The findings in this article add to the scholarship of how Students of Color experience ongoing racial trauma, and other traumas, in educational settings (Yosso et al., 2009) while finding spaces that affirm and value them holistically (Gonzalez, 2022b).

In the field of social work, we focus much on trying to fix the problem, teaching people to be less racist, and encouraging social workers to engage in social justice. While there is still value in these objectives, what does it mean if we are not thinking about the future of healing, if we are not focused on centering the lives of the Communities of Color we work alongside and those who are most impacted by systems of oppression. Organizations, like TRU, and Communities of Color embody a wealth of knowledge and there is much social workers and

other scholars can learn from and with, but only if we are truly willing to listen, care and love one another to reimagine and create a better future. More specifically, spaces like TRU need to be institutionalized in and out of school settings. For example, more spaces need to be co-created with students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. This co-creation approach breaks down the walls of power dynamics, which tells students they are also creators of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002) and contribute unique lived experiences to each intervention, project, and/or curriculum. Additionally, these spaces need to embody a place, in person and virtually, where belonging and care is prioritized, racial trauma and stress can be processed and addressed, and student's culture is valued and centered every day. With the continuous racialized trauma and stress in and out of educational settings, these types of spaces are critical to the livelihood of students across the world. As social workers it is our duty to care for and support those who are the most marginalized. Healing is the future of social work.

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A Place to Rest My Soul: How a Doctoral Student of Color Group Utilized a Healing-Centered Space to Navigate Higher Education

Abstract

Students of Color have historically faced explicit and implicit forms of discrimination and oppression in educational settings. Unfortunately, not much has changed over the decades as Students of Color today continue to experience white supremacy and other systems of oppression. As Students of Color enter graduate school, there are less and less Students of Color, making these educational settings isolating and hostile. These experiences often encompass white supremacist policies, practices and remarks that negatively impact Students of Color. With this in mind and as someone who identifies as a Chicana in a doctoral program, I questioned how doctoral Students of Color navigate their programs at a predominantly white institution amidst racial trauma and stress occurring in and out of academia. This project is specifically guided by the following question: In what ways do doctoral Students of Color rely on each other to help navigate higher education? In order to address this, this project utilized participant observations, in-depth interviews, pláticas, and document analysis. With the extensive community-based and collaborative work I conducted with a doctoral Student of Color, two themes emerged from the data which included 1) Community Space of Rest, 2) A Place to Heal. This project ultimately informs how various fields of study, especially social work, can better holistically support doctoral Students of Color in educational settings by centering healing frameworks that actively address, challenge, and eliminate white supremacy, along with other systems of oppression.

Graduate Students of Color and Racism

It is known from the literature and those who have gone through graduate school that pursuing higher education, particularly a doctoral degree, can be challenging and isolating (Masta, 2021; Phelps-Ward, 2022). The transition into a doctoral program often comes with a heavy reading load, the pressure to write and publish multiple manuscripts, and need, or lack thereof, to find mentors to support your doctoral journey to the finish line. These factors all influence those feelings of challenge and isolation. We also know from the literature that graduate Students of Color not only experience the pressures of productivity within their respective programs, but they also experience the burden of racism. For example, Soloranzo (1998) discusses how experiencing racism such as racial microaggressions (Pierce, 1974; Sue, 2007) has lasting impacts on graduate Students of Color, particularly Chicano/a students, in this case affecting their career trajectories. Smith, Allen and Danley (2007) also highlight how Black students experience various forms of racism that leads them to be hypersurveilled on campus and feelings of “not fitting in”. It becomes very clear that racism persists in educational settings, and does not discriminate within higher education. These experiences graduate Students of Color have to navigate are dangerous and deadly, not just to their educational and career trajectories, but to their livelihoods.

Racism is like a never ending virus that continues to slowly penetrate you from the inside out (Anderson, 2022). I utilize Dr. Anderson’s (2022) metaphor because it is a reminder of how racism affects mental health and well-being, especially among graduate Students of Color who are already having to navigate the toxic cycle of productivity. Experiences of racism and/or other race-related trauma and stress has been linked to various forms of mental health issues among graduate Students of Color (Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010) including but not limited to

anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Hwang & Goto, 2008). Although this research illustrates the impacts of racism on mental health, Phelps-Ward (2022) urges us to think about the sites of oppressions that create barriers to wellness and healing for graduate Students of Color. In particular, Phelps-Ward (2022) illustrates the ways graduate Students of Color were resistant on campus, such as participating in cultural specific student groups, despite the ongoing stress of racism.

Healing

With the continuous experiences of racism and relatively recent Black Lives Matter uprisings in 2020, higher education institutions are pushing to have more conversations about racism and how to move towards anti-racist education. This is a great start to a systemic issue that impacts not just students in higher education, but people in general. What is missing from many of the conversations around addressing systemic issues such as racism, white supremacy, and patriarchy is healing.

“Healing involves more than repairing the deep wounds of racism, healing the scars of sexism, or easing the pains of poverty. Healing is the capacity to restore our humanity and care for our-selves and others even during our fear. Healing is the only pathway to real justice because it requires that we take an honest look at what harmed us and pushes us to restore our humanity and finally to move us confidently into a possible future,” (Ginwright, 2022, p. 3).

While there is still much collective harm and trauma that needs to be addressed and ultimately abolished in and out of educational settings, Ginwright encourages the move, or what he calls the pivot towards healing (Ginwright, 2022). In addition to Ginwright’s extensive work on healing, Chavez-Dueñas and colleagues (2019) propose their ethno-racial healing framework,

HEART, which is grounded in Indigenous Aztec culture and centered in social justice, as an approach to healing where People of Color and their families can be heard and their identities and cultural values affirmed. French and colleagues (2020) further the point of radical healing by arguing that healing cannot occur without the critical consciousness that resists racial trauma, but more importantly healing needs to consist of one's own ancestral roots---honoring their cultural traditions and knowledge (French et al., 2020).

The Current Project: Healing Spaces within Critical Conversations Collective

More and more research is emerging for undergraduate students navigating racially hostile campus climates (Gonzalez, 2022; Yosso, 2009), but is less discussed in the literature about how doctoral Students of Color navigate such hostile campus environments. In conversation with the scholarship on healing, the current study is guided by the following research question: In what ways do doctoral Students of Color rely on each other to help navigate higher education?

Particularly, my goal within this project was to, 1) to understand how the Critical Conversations Collective (CCC), a doctoral Student of Color group I was also a participant in, co-created a space that centered their health, well-being and healing and 2) what characteristics about CCC aided in their well-being and healing while in doctoral programs. This project with CCC stems from the work of Dr. Shawn Ginwright, in that it seeks to understand the healing journeys of the five doctoral students who participated and the space they created together.

Materials and Methods

As a Woman of Color in academia, my scholarship is greatly informed by my lived experiences growing up in a predominantly Latinx city. With the continuous racial trauma and violence Communities of Color continue to face and now with the added deadly impacts of COVID-19, I thought deeply about how myself and other doctoral Students of Color were

navigating the dual pandemics. It has been an emotionally and physically laborious experience navigating higher education as a Person of Color and I needed to find a space where I can come as I am, feel loved, and engage in critical dialogue that would advance my knowledge.

Fortunately, in the Fall of 2019, I had the honor of meeting other like-minded folks who were desperate for critical conversations related to our lived experiences and most importantly, down to cultivate a space of love, healing, and accountability—shortly after was the creation of Critical Conversations Collective (CCC). The creation of CCC stems from the group’s collective understanding of how taxing it is for Students of Color to navigate racially hostile spaces in and out of the academy. My work with CCC is greatly informed by experiences growing up in racially hostile spaces and attending racially hostile schools. For example, even though I grew up in a predominantly Latinx, specifically Mexican/Mexican American city, my family, friends and community were constantly harassed and hypersurviellenced by law enforcement in the streets and excluded and dehumanized by teachers and school administration within schools. In addition to my upbringing and after attending a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) for undergrad, I found myself yet again in spaces where People of Color were excluded and harassed but this time I was in a predominantly white space living in a predominantly white town. These experiences became very familiar as I walked through the campus and sat in the classrooms of a prestigious predominantly university as one of the very few, and sometimes the only Chicana, Students of Color. Although this study was informed by my experiences prior to my doctoral training, it is a direct result of the persistent racial trauma, white supremacy, and other systems of oppression that impact Students of Color, particularly those in higher education. More importantly, my experiences coupled with those of CCC members remind us of the need to create spaces of healing that value and center the lives of Students of Color. To further the importance of this

study, the CCC's creation and work together took place during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a life changing event that many people are still struggling and surviving through.

Critical Race Theory

Given the racialized nature of the discussions that took place during this study, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used as a guiding framework. CRT is a framework proposed by critical legal scholars who were interested in, "studying and transforming the relationship of race, racism, and power," (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In simple terms, CRT offers an alternative lens to examine how some laws, policies and practices that are embedded in institutions, like schools, operate in ways to racially discriminate or oppress some and favor or privilege others (Martinez, 2022). CRT is also guided by several tenants. Although there has been variation and expansion of CRT, the basic CRT tenants include, "1) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, 2) the challenge to dominant ideology, 3) the commitment to social justice, 4) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and 5) the transdisciplinary perspective," (Solorzano, 1997; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Since CRT's inception, these tenants have been adopted and taken up in many fields, including education and has been widely used as a way to discuss the racialized educational inequity (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Kohli & Soloranzo, 2012). For example, Solorzano and colleagues (2000) utilize CRT to further understand racial microaggressions, campus climate, and experiences among African American students.

Over the years, scholars in various fields like social work have recognized the relevance and importance of including CRT in social work scholarship (Constance-Huggins, 2012). Education scholars, Pérez Huber and Solorzano (2018) provide a foundation for social work to build from and adequately represent CRT in the field. CRT in the field of social work can be

defined as, “a set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural, cultural, and interpersonal aspects of society that maintain the racial, gender, and class subordination of Communities of Color (i.e., racism and white supremacy,” (Pérez Huber & Soloranzo, 2018). For the current project, the following tenants were utilized: Challenging dominant ideologies, commitment to social justice, and the centrality of experiential knowledge. These three CRT tenants and the framework of CRT in social work proposed by education scholars ultimately helped guide this work to 1) make sense of the “racialized, gendered, and classed experiences,” of the Students of Color who participated in this study, 2) challenge traditional static ideas about race, gender and class by illustrating the intersectional impact these systems of oppression have on Students of Color, and 3) promote a path towards healing from systems of oppression that utilizes “the interdisciplinary knowledge base” such as Education, Law, Ethnic Studies and Social Work and is grounded in Communities of Color (Pérez Huber & Soloranzo, 2018).

Healing-Centered Engagement

Ginwright (2018) calls for healing-centered engagement (HCE) which highlights how trauma and healing are experienced collectively in order to offer more holistic approaches that foster well-being. The four key elements of healing-centered engagement include: “HCE is explicitly political, rather than clinical,” which means that trauma and well-being are viewed as a function of people’s environments and because of this, when people build an awareness of justice and liberation, it contributes to overall well-being and hopefulness (Potts 2003; Prilleltensky 2003, 2008; Ginwright, 2018); HCE is culturally grounded and views healing as the restoration of identity; HCE is asset driven and focuses on the well-being we want, rather than symptoms we want to suppress; HCE supports adult providers with their own healing”

(Ginwright, 2018). HCE doesn't provide a cookie-cutter solution to trauma, but rather pushes people to examine trauma and understand that healing is a complex process critically and holistically. HCE moves beyond the question, "what happened to you," to "what's right with you" and uses this strengths-based lens to encourage agency in the creation of their own well-being (Ginwright, 2018).

Ultimately, healing-centered engagement shifts from a deficit-based approach to a more holistic strengths-based approach that promotes well-being. In building from Ginwright's (2018;2022) work on healing, this project utilizes these healing frameworks to discuss the ways a doctoral Student of Color group, CCC, fostered a space of healing that ultimately helped them navigate higher education. Because healing frameworks were a central piece to the creation of CCC, recommendations will be offered in the discussion to further explore how educators and institutions as a whole can provide more holistic approaches to well-being for doctoral Students of Color.

Pláticas

Rooted in Chicana/Latina Feminism (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016), pláticas are understood to be, "everyday conversations we have," like the check-ins and catch ups we use to engage with one another (Flores and Morales, 2022) and oftentimes used to survive and thrive in hostile place like academia (Hampton & Aviña, 2023). Pláticas as a methodology have been heavily used by Scholars of Color, particularly Latinx and Chicana scholars, because of its structure that moves away from objectivity and more towards relationality (Flores and Morales, 2022). Chicana and Latinx scholars, specifically Women of Color, have also offered insights in how engaging in pláticas provides a sense and space of healing and resistance (Morales et. al, 2023). The five principles of pláticas include the

following, 1) Research draws from Chicana/Latina Feminist theory, 2) Relationality is key in the research in which it honors participants as co-constructors of knowledge, 3) There is connections between everyday lived experiences and the research inquiry, 4) Provides a space for healing, and 5) Relies on reciprocity, vulnerability, and reflexivity of the researcher throughout the research project (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Within this project, pláticas were utilized to describe our weekly meetings we hosted, because our meetings embodied the principles of pláticas as methodology. As an active participant in CCC, I found myself not only deeply responsible for the CCC plática space (i.e. weekly meetings), but also how I was a co-contributor to the space we created that encouraged the reciprocity, vulnerability and reflexivity embedded in the sharing of stories and community building we engaged in.

Data Collection

This qualitative study utilized semi-structured zoom interviews consisting of open-ended questions and document analysis from pláticas (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) that were hosted weekly throughout the academic years from January 2020 to the present day. The pláticas provided a methodological framework that welcomed us, Doctoral Students of Color, to share stories, build community and acknowledge our intersectional identities and connections between our everyday lived experiences and the research we wanted to conduct (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). During the first year of the CCC's inception, we collectively created syllabi for each quarter, outlining materials (i.e. readings, videos, podcasts, poetry) and activities to engage in during our weekly meetings which became our pláticas. The CCC intentionally chose critical and necessary materials that we felt were missing from our respective doctoral curriculum and would challenge our thinking and ways of knowing within our research, teaching and daily lives. Each plática consisted of a different topic, but ultimately built off each other; we discussed topics

around accountability, self-reflexivity, healing & learning, and radical & revolutionary love. Each plática ranged from 1-2 hours in length weekly from January 2020-present day. As we moved along in our doctoral programs, the structure of the pláticas changed to meet those needs. The CCC has hosted Faculty of Color to discuss careers within academia, facilitated collective writing sessions to advance the completion of our dissertations, and invited early stage doctoral Students of Color to join CCC as a way to mentor and provide stability to future students at their university in the PNW.

In addition to the ongoing pláticas, six semi-structured interviews were conducted and included three main categories: (1) Student's background and participation in CCC, (2) Experiences of racism and other systems of oppression, (3) Healing. Each interview ranged from one hour to one and a half hours in length. Because of my already existing friendship and participation with CCC, participants were recruited from CCC via convenience sampling. Participants included the following identities: (1) 18 years of age or older, (2) Identified as a Person of Color (i.e. Black/African American, Indigenous/Native American, Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander/Native Pacific Islander), (3) Currently attending a university in the PNW, and (4) A member of CCC.

Critical Conversations Collective

Sivar

Sivar is a Brown queer and proud Salvadorian woman from El Salvador who now resides in the California Bay Area. I first met Sivar during a prospective doctoral student visit at a university in the PNW. I was really happy to see Sivar because she was the first person who phenotypically looked brown, like me, in the whole doctoral program. I knew that if she decided to come to this PNW institution that it was going to be great, because we would have each other. Before she left

her visit, I told her, “if you come here, I got your back...there’s a group of us that got your back.” Sivar joined CCC a year later and has been an active member in the group since. Sivar has shared stories and has challenged our group to think about the systems of oppression that impact her identities of being Brown and queer, especially in a somewhat religious household.

Baldwin

Baldwin is a biracial Black man who has lived in many places that have shaped who he is today. I met Baldwin through other members of CCC during the Fall of 2019, when the group was established. My first thought of Baldwin was, “Wow this dude is ready to burn down these walls—let’s do it.” Because of Baldwin’s experiences growing up in predominantly white spaces in addition to his own white conservative family members, he didn’t tolerate the white supremacy in his doctoral program and within his second year he was ready for change. Baldwin along with others were the cultivators of CCC. Baldwin not only brings his life experiences as a biracial Black man to CCC, but he also does some really amazing work around healing spaces and coaches youth football.

Mayari

Mayari is a mixed Asian woman, half Chinese half Filipina, from Ohlone homelands now known as the San Francisco Bay area. I also met Mayari through another member of CCC during the Fall of 2019. Mayari and JM would often sneak me into their department’s cultural student center since I didn’t have that space in my own department. From then on, I knew Mayari was all about building connections with other critical like-minded folks. Mayari was also one of the cultivators of CCC and has been deeply involved in CCC community building events. Lastly, Mayari often pushes our group to think about what it means to be accountable to our work and the communities we work with.

Journey

Journey identifies as a Black woman from Lansing, MI. She takes pride in being raised in a close knit family, particularly a family run by badass Black women. From CCC, Journey and I are actually the longest friendship—we met during a Student of Color event hosted by the Graduate School’s diversity group. Journey and I were really happy to have met each other, because come to find out we had a lot in common. When Baldwin and Mayari approached Journey and I with the idea to start CCC, we immediately said yes. Journey, like all of us in this group, bring such unique and valuable experiences to our research, teaching, mentorship and most importantly our friendship. Through Journey’s work, she centers Black joy, especially Black girl joy, and how we can reimagine a life People of Color deserve.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory, a theory used to discuss explanations directly related to real-life experiences (Oktay, 2012;), was utilized to further discuss theoretical explanations that investigate and explain the complex and multifaceted relationships between spaces like CCC and well-being among doctoral Students of Color. In addition to grounded theory, CRT and HCE were used within data analysis. CRT served as a theoretical framework to make sense of and properly represent CCC’s experiences of racial trauma and the impacts it has had on them. Ginwright’s HCE approach allowed to explore further explanations about healing and how CCC cultivated a space of healing while attending a PWI.

Since CCC pláticas began prior to the pandemic, January 2020, there were multiple pláticas that took place in person, but once the pandemic started, pláticas switched from in person to online via zoom. Because half of CCC no longer resides in the same city, we continue to host our CCC pláticas online. Pláticas were never recorded, with an exception of a few, due to

the personal and sometimes traumatic nature of our conversations. As a collective we discussed that we would prefer to not record in order for us to maintain confidentiality, but during our one on one interviews and more recent pláticas we reflect back on some of those experiences of racism, white supremacy, accountability and healing.

All of the in-depth interviews were conducted and recorded via zoom and were 1-2 hours in length. After data collection was completed, they were transcribed and cleaned using a transcription service platform Otter.ai. Each interview was coded by utilizing an inductive coding approach, which allows for codes to be created as you go, rather than creating codes before the coding process. Coding took place using ATLAS.ti that led to several themes, but ultimately were condensed into two major overarching themes due to the overlapping commonalities (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2014): Community Space of Rest and A Place to Heal.

Findings

Community Space of Rest

As critical doctoral Students of Color studying and addressing an array of social justice topics, I think about the burn out, fatigue and stress Students of Color experience, because oftentimes they themselves are also experiencing the issues they study. During some of our initial meetings back in 2020, one of the questions that was asked to each of us was, “What do you need to feel supported in this group/space?”. The unanimous response was, “being grounded in community” (Plática/Group Session 2020). At that time we were all feeling a bit overwhelmed with the amount of stress from our programs and lack of representation of People of Color on campus and in the city as a whole. We were in desperate need of community-like-minded people who looked like us, talked like us, and were willing to support each other in a city with

predominantly white people. As the years went on, we continued to hold each other accountable and be in community by attending community events, supporting local businesses owned by People of Color, and just checking in with one another. It was not until I interviewed the CCC members that a big part of “being grounded in community,” also meant being able to rest.

Rest can mean a lot of things to different people, but in regards to CCC we meant a rest from white supremacy, from the exploitative and/or patriarchal professors we encountered, and from the white-washed doctoral curriculum we experienced. Rest within the CCC space meant we could be our true selves without judgment, engage in critical dialogue without feeling exhausted, and share our dream research and teaching projects without having to prove rigor. During my one on one interview with Sivar, she shared how the CCC has been a space to have difficult, but necessary conversations, and even though the conversations were sometimes heavy, it was a, “good place to get some rest and just being in community,” (Interview May 2022). Similarly Baldwin described CCC as, “a community care type of environment that is both safe, critical, and growth oriented,” (Interview May 2022). Baldwin continued by sharing how his identities as a biracial Black man, he often found to difficult to retain friendships, yet described how he kept regularly attending CCC meetings, even throughout the pandemic, because “it’s just built into our practice of care with one another,” (Interview, May 2022). CCC became a home away from home for all of us who uprooted our lives to attend our respective doctoral programs in the PNW.

The concept of rest is also connected to the physical and mental health and well-being for CCC. The Nap Ministry founder Tricia Hersey (2022) reminds us that because the U.S was built from the labor of People of Color, especially Black folks, we have that intergenerational stress and trauma in our bodies which impacts our physical and mental well-being. During my

individual interviews with Mayari and Journey, they each described how CCC has been a space to rest their body from the constant pressure of adhering to whiteness. The CCC space that was created positively contributed to their well-being during their doctoral programs by shielding them from the harm of being Women of Color in academia and offering shelter to rest their whole selves.

Mayari: “It is [CCC] impacting my health in positive ways, because I don’t have to exhaust myself. It’s a place of like, I get to not rest as in like, go to sleep, but like rest as in, rest my soul. Or like rest in not having to over explain my existence and myself....So it’s a place of rest and emotional sustenance,” (Interview, May 2022).

Journey: “I felt like I had this forcefield of care and protection around me that made me not have to be so all consumed with the expectations or the deficit views or the nonsense of whiteness because I had my people, like CCC,” (Interview, June 2022)

Rest continued to be a big part of our individual interviews together, focusing on how building and creating community is rest, because when you build and create community with like-minded people, you can show up to these spaces as your authentic self. During my interview with Journey, she shared how CCC has signaled to her the importance of building relationships throughout her doctoral program that went beyond just studying for an exam, but allowed for her to show up with all her experiences as a Black woman from Lansing.

Journey: “I think it [CCC] has given me a sense of community that I can show up as myself...and so CCC has represented the importance of friendships and relationships throughout the educational journey,” (Interview, June 2022)

Journey: “It’s not just about getting through our PhD programs, but it’s like a way of being it’s a way of knowing and being in community with each other,” (Interview, June 2022)

The community space of rest that CCC created was about rest, the physical rest where you close your eyes and go to sleep in order to refresh and reset, but it was also the rest from white supremacy in our classrooms, the microaggressions we received from faculty and other students, and the continuous traumatizing world we live in. In CCC’s community space of rest, we reminded each other that we didn’t have to do this PhD thing alone, that we can create a community of care that encourages rest, despite what we had been taught otherwise.

A Place to Heal

Early in our first pláticas, as a group the topic of healing came up. As early stage doctoral students we were invested in learning more about what healing meant to us and our communities. We discussed Dr. Shawn Ginwright’s work on Healing Centered Engagement and how it shows up within our own research agendas. To our surprise we all in some ways included healing frameworks in our research and teaching, but what was most apparent was how the process and journey of healing itself was present within our CCC group. Week after week we shared stories and testimonies of our healing journeys, things we were actively engaging in to heal, and how to move beyond individual healing to a more holistic and collective healing. Knowing that there were very few spaces on campus where we could be our authentic selves, let alone talk about healing, CCC became a physical and virtual place of refuge that allowed for us to share, process, and challenge experiences with systems of oppression while inviting stories of joy, healing and liberation. During my one on one interview with Sivar, she expressed gratitude for the CCC

space we cultivated because it was a place to stay grounded amidst the structural barriers of attending a PWI as a queer Salvadoran woman.

Sivar: "...we can have the space to, to process to, you know, get support and talk things through and we also can have a space to just get away from it all, be who we are outside of this white shit. But I think the CCC has been really instrumental in helping me stay grounded..."

Mayari and Baldwin also emphasized how much harm and trauma educational institutions have impacted Students of Color and the need to disrupt the internalized racism and other systems of oppression we were forced to embody. In each of their interviews they describe how CCC has been the place to undo some of these injustices by just having a space that not only affirms one's own identity, experiences and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), but also rejects the ivory tower of academia—the white supremacist, colonial, and patriarchal practices and policies that are still deeply rooted in higher education.

Mayari: "...systems of oppression have taught me how to doubt myself for 27 years. But by having this space to share with y'all and y'all having the same politics as me, like, there's a lot of affirming that I wish I had younger and I think especially as a woman and a Woman of Color, like that's rare unfortunately."

Mayari: "I'm learning to continue to heal about my internalized racism of my communities and myself, and now because I get to actually study, learn and dive deep into my own identities and experiences I feel like that healing is happening."

Baldwin: "when you're educated you like turn your back on the system that in which you were educated in and like critique it and so I'm like that's healing right like in and of

itself because then people are like, I want to change this so that other people don't have to deal with the same shit."

Throughout CCC's time together, we have made it a point to center our mental well-being, especially healing. During our weekly pláticas we often talked about what healing even looks or feels like to each of us, particularly during moments where we feel the most drained, isolated and unwelcomed from our doctoral programs. Although I personally have had the opportunity to listen to and read healing scholars' work in and out of academia, I was not sure how CCC members were making sense of their own healing process. During my interviews with Mayari and Journey, we talked about what healing meant to them and how they were processing their healing journeys.

Mayari: "healing cannot be rushed. Healing is not linear. Healing is not like a checkbox type thing. It's super messy and it's supposed to be messy because we're supposed to feel the things we're supposed to feel."

Journey: "Healing is me caring for my younger self—me trying to take care of my future. And so I think that's been part of my healing, to know that I don't have to be alone. I don't have to be so ultra independent and I think it [CCC] has given me a sense of a community that I can show up as myself."

The CCC space allowed and invited this type of healing aforementioned to the forefront of our conversations and work. Within our doctoral programs, like many others across the country, we felt those feelings of isolation and exhaustion, yet the space we created within and beyond the academy () provided that sense of healing and racial refuge—where we can process microaggressions, problematic power dynamics between us and faculty and administrators, and imagine a more just world in academia where Students of Color feel welcomed and valued

holistically. To build from this, Mayari and Journey remind us that the work of co-creating such a space, like CCC, is critical and necessary to the well-being of Students of Color, but it's the work within that space that can and is messy. It is messy because the work of healing and breaking intergenerational trauma can be difficult to identify and address, but if we utilize and lean on the communities that support us, like CCC does, we may have opened the door to our healing journeys.

Discussion

The space CCC co-created is an example of why critical conversations need to happen in and out of classroom settings. Returning back to the guiding research question, “In what ways do doctoral Students of Color rely on each other to help navigate higher education,” it is apparent that they relied on each other to create a space that supported their needs, especially their mental well-being, in order to successfully navigate graduate school. This is a group that needed, wanted, and demanded change, change that was not happening fast enough in their doctoral programs. As Students of Color in predominantly white spaces within the classroom, burnt out from the tension and uncomfortableness when talking about race, racism and/or white supremacy is something we all know too well. So, when CCC shared how they demanded a space that was different, a space that cultivated rest and healing (Morales et al., 2023), this should signal to educators that maybe there is something happening within the classroom and/or higher education that needs immediate attention.

Utilizing Grinwright’s (2018) HCE framework helped to make sense of the healing space CCC created and why and how it could be recreated in classrooms. HCE emphasizes a strengths-based approach by asking, “what is right with you,” which encourages agency in healing. This was demonstrated in the creation of CCC space as their initial reasoning for starting this group

was because they had heard so many deficit stories and perspectives told about People of Color and wanted a space that moved from deficit to strengths-based. CCC strived for a space where they can engage in critical dialogue about their experiences while acknowledging their trauma and healing can be experienced and practiced collectively (Ginwright, 2018) within their group. What would it mean if educators recreated their classrooms to center healing while actively engaging in conversation on how to disrupt the various systems of oppression that impact Students of Color and their families.

Utilizing a CRT framework provided an explanation of how white supremacy, along with other systems of oppression, are endemic and can manifest in various ways (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). For example, within this project, my conversations with CCC provided a pattern—experiences with racism, patriarchy, and homophobia were not just present within their early college days, but have been persistent throughout and even outside of the academy. However, although we know through CCC and many other stories that white supremacy is endemic, Students of Color continue to find ways to challenge the dominant ideologies. Building from the CRT tenant of commitment to social justice, we can see how the CCC recognized that their doctoral education was doing a disservice to them—by not only incorporating critical theoretical and methodological frameworks in the curriculum, but also through the lack of critical mentorship. Their demand for a more inclusive and critically conscious space that valued their identities holistically demanded their commitment to social justice which ultimately became the fuel they needed to create CCC, especially for future generations of doctoral Students of Color.

Rest & Healing

Hersey (2022) reminds us about the importance of rest and how rest is an act of resistance. Students of Color have a great deal of stress from their coursework, while having to experience and navigate racial trauma in and out of educational spaces. Rest is necessary for the survival and well-being of Students of Color. How are we as educators creating space for rest and healing in and out of the classroom? These spaces need to transcend beyond classroom spaces. There is a wealth of knowledge that CCC has shared within their space they created, so how can we include the knowledge of students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, into our curriculum. Doctoral programs have much to offer—I hope they consider what Students and Communities of Color have to offer.

A Call for Reflexivity

In reflecting on the CCC, self-identity was a component that was threaded throughout their rest and healing process. This self-identity and reflexivity work allowed for their group to flourish, because they were not only able to see how society has oppressed them based on their identities, but how they perpetuate systems of oppression and more importantly how they unlearn these ideologies and/or behaviors. I believe that this is part of the healing process that Ginwright (2022) urges all of us to work on in order to restore humanity. There is so much internal work we must do and for CCC it was necessary that we started this work while being in such a space that was welcoming of reflexivity. Although we still have much to work on, we hold each other accountable to this self-identity work so we can be our best selves, educators, parents, partners, family members, and community members. The self-identity work that CCC demonstrated in relation to their rest and healing process is another call to educators. This type of reflexivity needs to be present in all classes, especially within social work classes because as we can see from CCC, even with commitment to social justice they still continue to identify the ways they

could improve and ultimately heal from. Reflexivity is a lifelong commitment, not just one that happens in the diversity and social justice requirement. How are we as educators creating a space to have critical conversations about systems of oppression, while centering the lived experiences of Communities and pushing all students to think critically about their identities and how they impact the world around them. Not every space, or classroom, is perfect, but we must begin to recognize and act on whether our work is challenging systems of oppression in and out of the classroom or further perpetuating them.

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Critical Conversations Collective Saved Me: An Autoethnography About a Chicana MotherScholar

Abstract

Students of Color continue to experience racial trauma and stress in higher education and as they continue up the higher education ladder, partly because very few are represented. With the lack of representation of Students of Color in doctoral programs, students often find themselves feeling out of place, isolated, and undervalued. Additionally, many programs still maintain colonial and white-centered practices through their teaching and curriculum, mentorship and recruitment and sustainability of Faculty of Color, which discourages doctoral Students of Color from continuing in the academy. This autoethnographic piece details the experiences I, a Chicana MotherScholar, had during my doctoral education. Specifically this article discusses the tensions and resistance of “traditional” research practices and how I leaned on a community of critical doctoral Students of Color to support me in finding research methods and practices that best represented me and my participants. I highlight the need for reflexivity in academia, for educators to take a closer look at their teaching, mentoring, and research practices to see if they are perpetuating or resisting white supremacists and colonial practices, and to make doctoral programs more inclusive, especially those who embody marginalized identities like being a Person of Color and mother.

Introduction

Doctoral programs in any field come with the expectation that students need to produce (grants, manuscripts, research projects, etc) (Rawat & Meena 2014) in order to succeed and/or get a job. This culture of constant productivity is damaging to the students. Specifically, this pressure can have negative and lasting impacts on a student's physical and mental health (Hersey, 2022). There should be rigor and high expectations for doctoral students which is normally present in doctoral education programs, but not at the expense of students' physical and mental well-being. There are added layers of complexity and injustice when we think about what type of students this pressure impacts more deeply. For example, first-generation Students of Color may have an even more traumatizing experience in their doctoral programs because they have to navigate learning how to write 'academically', and what I mean by academically is that in higher education we are taught very rigid western-based ways of writing that are uninviting and oftentimes inaccessible to our communities (Gonzalez, 2022). In addition to learning and unlearning this type of writing style, Graduate Students of Color face racism, discrimination, and exclusion/isolation (Masta, 2021). Similarly to my experience and I am sure other Graduate Students of Color, Gonzalez (2022) discusses the uncomfortableness and resistance from white students when topics of racism, white supremacy and other systems of oppression are brought up. This experience in the classroom further excludes and isolates Students of Color, making it that much more difficult to even want to engage in the material.

Even through all the trauma and western-based practices and expectations in doctoral education, Phelps-Ward and colleagues (2021) remind us that Students of Color, especially Black students, continue to seek out spaces of reformation in order to resist, challenge and heal from the toxic and hostile environments systemically embedded within higher education. These

spaces Students of Color create and/or gravitate towards are often referred to as counterspaces, a space where Students of Color can challenge deficit views of themselves and other Communities of Color while centering and sustaining asset or strengths-based ideologies of People of Color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). For Students of Color, counterspaces are among many strategies that aid in the process of finding community and surviving academia.

As a first generation Chicana college student and mother, it is critically important for me to intentionally name some of my most prominent identities. I do this because I believe it's important to discuss the ways in which one's positionality and life experiences impact the relationships with the communities or people they work with and the ways in which they go about their research. For example, I grew up in a predominantly Latinx (Mexican/Mexican American) city in Southern California and did my undergraduate studies at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) not too far from home, so when I began my graduate studies at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the Midwest and now at another PWI in the Pacific Northwest, I was in major culture shock. This example is important to the story I will later tell about resisting western-based research and finding community in predominantly white spaces, because since being in graduate programs, I have constantly felt targeted because of my identities as a first generation Chicana college student.

Additionally, during the third year of my doctoral program, I had the honor and blessing of becoming a mother. My body was full of joy when I found out I was pregnant, but that soon disappeared as I thought, "what is going to happen with my doctoral program? Will I be able to do it, especially given the toxic faculty-student relationship I am currently in?" Unfortunately, my feelings and story are not unique. We have heard too many stories of people having to prioritize their jobs/careers over creating a family of their own, because we are told that, "the

spoken and unspoken expectations within academia are that you separate your identities,” (Mogro-Wilson et al., 2021) in order to be successful in the academy. As Mogro-Wilson and colleagues (2021) writes, academic mothers carry a heavier load of expectations (i.e teaching, research, and service) making it that much more difficult to earn tenure. Because of this normalization, it is not surprising to me that I began to worry and center the feelings, expectations and thoughts of what my doctoral program would say instead of sitting with the joy of knowing I would be welcoming new life soon. “Many academic mothers of color have not had an opportunity to grieve or process the stressors from these dual pandemics that are intimately affecting their own families. Yet we still have to show up for work in environments that constantly tell us that we do not belong,” (Mogro-Wilson, 2021).

This autoethnography is deeply personal and details how my personal experiences relate to and connect to cultural and societal structures within higher education. It discusses the toxic student-faculty relationship I had to endure at the peak of two pandemics, COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter uprisings, while finding out I would soon be a mother and the beauty and joy of finding a community of critical scholars that became family. When you are reading this autoethnography, I hope you get the chance to reflect on your experience during higher education. This piece is meant to demonstrate to scholars, particularly those in doctoral programs, that you can do research that challenges and resists western-based practices in academia. Most importantly, I hope this article encourages you to seek out others (i.e. colleagues, mentors, faculty, community members, friends and family) who will push you to think critically about your research approach and practices while supporting you through the process. As a MotherScholar (Matias & Nishi, 2018) of Color, I know life in academia (and the world in general) might be that much more difficult, but at least I will know who I can lean on in

times of support, advocacy and healing. Ultimately, this research is informed by the following guiding question: In what ways did critical conversations with doctoral Students of Color inform my research approach and positionality as a Chicana MotherScholar?

Methods

As a social welfare race scholar, this article utilizes autoethnography and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to theorize about my personal experiences in a doctoral program while centering my identities as a first generation college student and Chicana mother. Autoethnography is a type of qualitative research method used to write and tell personalized stories from the author's own lived experiences that relates the personal to the cultural (Ellis & Bochner 1996; 2000; Richardson, 1994). More specifically, the telling of the author's own lived experiences offers a unique approach, "to examine how particular structures, perspectives, and experiences in a particular location and time can be used to critically examine and/or construct other social contexts," (Rodriguez, 2009). Autoethnography can appear in different forms such as short stories, narratives, poems and personal essays, which often positions the author as vulnerable (Rodriguez, 2009). This vulnerability allows for reflexivity to occur throughout the research process. Within this article specifically, I not only reflect on my experiences, including microaggressions, in a doctoral program but also the ways in which I approached community-based research during a global pandemic and becoming a first time mother.

CRT was also used as a guiding methodological framework given the racialized nature of my experiences throughout the doctoral program. CRT in the field of social work can be defined as, "a set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural, cultural, and interpersonal aspects of society that maintain the racial, gender, and class subordination of Communities of Color (i.e., racism and white supremacy,"

(Pérez Huber & Soloranzo, 2018). Utilizing CRT in social work ultimately helped guide this work to 1) make sense of the “racialized and gendered experiences,” of my doctoral experiences, 2) challenge traditional static ideas about race and gender by illustrating the intersectional impact these systems of oppression have on Students of Color, particularly Women of Color in doctoral programs and 3) promote a path towards healing from systems of oppression that utilizes “the interdisciplinary knowledge base” such as Education, Law, Ethnic Studies and Social Work and is grounded in Communities of Color (Pérez Huber & Soloranzo, 2018).

Navigating the Toxicity of Higher Education During A Pandemic

As I reflect on my doctoral education journey, I think about how much joy and appreciation and anger and hostility co-existed in me. When I started my doctoral studies I was an eager student, like many of us, who said yes to almost every project I was invited to. This was in fact partly because I was genuinely interested, but also because I was told that in order for me to be successful in the program and competitive on the job market, I had to take on these projects. This type of rhetoric often told to people in academia whether you are a student or faculty member is extremely damaging to one’s physical and mental well-being (Masta, 2021). It teaches us that we must be productive (ex. writing manuscripts, applying for grants, conducting research, etc.), always, and if we are not we are considered “slackers” and not valuable contributors to the academy (Rawat and Meena, 2014; Coolidge, 1932). Unfortunately, I internalized these toxic messages told to me from faculty and peers, which impacted my mental health drastically.

I was halfway through my second year in my doctoral program, when the devastating and deadly COVID-19 pandemic hit. The two things I thought about were 1) how can I support my family and friends during these uncertain times and 2) how will I be able to continue doing

research in order to successfully graduate. Research was on my mind while thousands of people died across the world and now reflecting on that experience, I asked why was it such a priority for me? Revising the aforementioned, academia taught me to put productively at the top of my list. I was desperate to find research opportunities and when I was invited by a faculty member to join their research project I was beyond excited and grateful—this was my ticket to being a successful doctoral student. To my unfortunate surprise, the relationship between the faculty member and I became toxic. I was consistently asked to omit language from manuscripts that explicitly named systems of dominance, like patriarchy and white supremacy, in order to make the paper sound more inviting to reviewers and journal editors. These demands to write, “more academic,” became the self doubt in my head as a scholar and writer that maybe I was not meant to be in the academy. The self doubt in my head was easy to internalize, especially during a global pandemic, and so I began to take better care of my mental health by not exhausting myself in the research project. In social work, we like to emphasize self care and that was exactly what I was doing, yet the faculty member whom I was working with began asking me week after week, “this is all you have written?”, “with this writing, I am basically going to have to go back in and rewrite the whole thing.” Again the self doubt set in and had me questioning my own approach to mentorship and research. After consulting my partner and a group of peers, they assured me that this was in fact an example of exploitation and white supremacy views of what academic language should and shouldn’t be. My body full of anxiety, I decided to share with the faculty member how I was feeling, yet to my disappointment they became defensive and told me, “you should be grateful for this opportunity.” The moral of my story is I burned the bridge with that faculty member. I realized that this, “grind culture,” (Hersey, 2022) that is intertwined with

western and colonial-based approaches within academia was not worth my mental health and well-being.

This story that I share is not meant for readers to empathize with me, but rather to reflect on their own experiences. What kind of mentor do you perceive yourself to be? How do you resist adhering to power dynamics and exploitation between faculty and students? How will you hold yourself accountable when colleagues and/or students call you out for upholding oppressive policies and structures? And lastly, how do you make it clear to yourself and the students and communities with whom you work with that their health and well-being is far more important than getting published in a top tier journal. My experiences during the peak of the pandemic taught me a lot about who I am as a scholar-educator and allowed me to reflect on and actively practice what I preach in the classroom and in the community. It can be easy to default to the same harmful toxic environments that we may have experienced when we were in doctoral programs, but I hope this writing urges you to do the opposite. Fortunately, I was part of a doctoral student group that saved me from internalizing these toxic and oppressive practices that I was experiencing.

Critical Conversations Collective Saved Me

The Critical Conversations Collective (CCC) is a doctoral student group intentionally made of Students of Color, who support each other holistically—academically, socially, emotionally, and beyond. During 2019, myself and four other students realized that much was missing from the doctoral education we were receiving, so we decided to create CCC. Not only did we not see ourselves as People of Color reflected within the curriculum, we also did not feel welcomed to speak our truths among peers who still appeared to be hopeless and in denial of white supremacy, colonization, patriarchy and other systems of oppression. The CCC is a space

where we feel seen and valued; a place where we can openly discuss our lived experiences and reflect and heal from those experiences. In thinking about the work of Phelps-Ward and colleagues (2021), CCC was built similarly to that of counterspaces (Solorzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000) where we challenged and resisted systems of oppression within higher education, but more importantly served as a space of racial refuge and healing.

CCC became my racial refuge, a space that steered me away from the harmful colonial and white supremacist practices. During the time I was working with the faculty member mentioned earlier, I leaned on CCC for guidance. Our group had been reading and discussing how to challenge deficit models of research and move to more asset-based approaches, yet here I was being diminished and reprimanded for not adhering to “traditional,” (i.e. colonial and white supremacist) research approaches. CCC saved me, not just from this toxic relationship with this particular faculty member, but saved me from being eaten up by academia. They encouraged me to find research approaches, methods and models that spoke to me, that honored my lived experiences, and most importantly research that valued the communities and people I planned to work with for my own dissertation.

As the start date of the dissertation project came closer, I began feeling nervous about what research methods I would choose. I had been participating in two different groups, the CCC and a group (TRU) with high school and first year college students, where we joined on zoom once a week to talk about whatever was on our mind but mostly centered around racism, patriarchy, state-sanctioned violence, and other systems of oppression. I knew I wanted to continue participating and working alongside CCC and TRU, especially since we had built rapport with one another, so I expressed collectively with each of the groups my desire and commitment to working with them on my dissertation research project. Over the next few years,

our relationships, particularly within CCC, grew stronger and my “research participants” became family. Academia would have told me that this type of research is unethical, because research needs to be objective, but fortunately for me, the CCC taught me that all research is subjective—everything is biased in some shape or form, it is what you do with that bias within your research that really matters (Gonzalez, 2022; Villenas, 1996).

Since the CCC and TRU were already hosting and participating weekly in conversation, pláticas, a research method I had learned about through colleagues and professors and not in my doctoral studies, became my method of choice. Rooted in Chicana/Latina Feminism (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016), pláticas are understood to be, “everyday conversations we have: the check-ins, the catchups, the regañadas, the consejos, a myriad of all the different ways that we engage with one another,” (Flores and Morales, 2022). Pláticas allowed for us to strengthen our community, not just because of the content but rather the structure; the structure of moving away from objectivity and towards a reciprocal relationship and dialogue (Flores and Morales, 2022). Additionally, the use of pláticas encouraged me to constantly engage in reflexivity. Because pláticas prides itself in the importance of positionality and the role of the researcher (Flores Carmona and Malena Luciano, 2014; Flores and Morales, 2022), I was able to reflect on the ways my own identity as a first generation student and Chicana mother impacted the relationships I built with each of the participants. Pláticas were never a topic of conversation, let alone a method utilized in qualitative research. Through the advice and guidance of CCC, I found a research method that best fit me, my participants, and my research as a whole.

While engaging in these pláticas early on in the research process, I had the urgency to revisit an article (1996) written by Dr. Sofia Villenas discussing the, “Colonizer/Colonized

Dilemma.” The urge to revisit this piece stemmed from my commitment to engage in research that not only was ethical, but was also asset-based and a space to reflect and share personal stories without retraumatizing and/or exploiting any of my participants. The “colonizer/colonized dilemma” is a concept put forth to describe how one can identify as someone who is colonized based on society (ex. I am a Chicana, who in society would be seen as someone who is colonized) while also being a colonizer because of one's association with dominant institutions in conducting research for and about marginalized communities (Villenas, 1996). This is where the approach and use of language became extremely important to the type of research I was striving to conduct. What I mean by the use of language is how we (researchers) speak about the people we work with matters. There is a difference when a research describes doing research “on” a particular community, especially when it is a Community of Color, versus doing research “with” and “alongside.” Additionally, I began, and continue to this day, to unlearn the deficit narratives about Communities of Color and moved towards more asset and strengths-based language. Because of this language shift within the framework of the “colonizer/colonized dilemma,” I also shifted the way I approached my research. Research is very political (Brown et al., 2014), so for me I was not only intentional about the methodology I chose, *pláticas*, but I also included CCC throughout my research process and asked for feedback. Similarly to the Gonzalez’s (2022) counterstory, I questioned and consulted with CCC and mentors until I made sure I was conducting research that would recognize Students of Color as worthy and producers of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

I hope this signals to folks to find mentors, professors, and colleagues that will push you to think outside the boundaries of what academia tells us is traditional research, whether it’s the theoretical approach we use, the methodology we choose, or the language to describe our work.

Because higher education, especially doctoral education, is steeped in colonial and western-based research practices (Masta, 2018; 2021; Tarin et al., 2019), Scholars of Color may find themselves in the dilemma of adhering to such practices or resisting and seeking research practices that align with more justice and asset-based practices.

Personally, I get emotional every time I think about graduation, because of my relationships I have built with such an amazing group of scholars. The CCC has pushed me to think critically about research, encouraged me to be and stay true to myself as a Chicana mother from Oxnard, CA, and provided the most genuine and loving support to my family and I. The emotional part stems from the fact we will no longer live in the same city and for some even the same time zone, but I know the CCC support and commitment to each other goes beyond our time in the Pacific Northwest. The CCC literally saved me.

Discussion

In more recent years, institutions of higher education have voiced a commitment to be more accessible, diverse, and equitable, yet the stories I shared with you have yet to reflect those commitments as a first generation college student and Chicana mother. Although the stories of being a mother-scholar (cite) I shared throughout this autoethnography stem from my doctoral experience, it is vital to understand that these experiences are not just isolated events in doctoral programs, but rather systemic issues throughout higher education (Mogro-Wilson et al., 2021). As a future faculty member who will soon have the responsibilities and expectations of a tenure-track professor, it is necessary for us in higher education to take a good look at what is already in place to support Faculty of Color, especially those who are Women of Color and/or caregivers, and what is missing. Institutions of higher education run the risk of losing talented faculty when they are not holistically supported, especially early career faculty. Academia must reflect on

what it truly means to be welcoming, accessible and supportive even if it means challenging the western-based and white supremacist policies and expectations that have been embedded into higher education. Additionally, as a community-based scholar, asking and listening to those who are at the forefront of such oppressive and detrimental inequities is necessary to centering their voices and concerns. This centering approach also attempts to break down power dynamics and hierarchies by actually inviting faculty to express their concerns, but what is most important here is the policy change that happens after. We have to walk the talk. If a specific department claims to be diverse, equitable and accessible, collectively we must hold them accountable to making change in the department. I believe that if we can holistically support faculty, especially those from historically marginalized communities, we will see and hear better outcomes. We will begin to see and hear stories of departments and schools' supportive efforts, rather than the oppressive ones that continue to keep us down.

The CCC was a prime example of how students came together to support and push each other through their educational programs without institutional support. The CCC should have felt supportive without the creation of their group, because their respective programs, school-wide organizations and initiatives should have ensured that these Students of Color, along with others, were holistically supported and that they were represented and valued within the curriculum. The CCC has been asked if institutional support is what we are asking for, but what we have always wanted is change first. Because higher education, like many institutions, are steeped in white-supremacy and colonial western-based policies and research practices, we believe that institutional support cannot fully happen if none of these systems of oppression are challenged and ultimately abolished. What I am recommending is for current faculty to reflect on their own research, teaching, and service commitments. Is your current approach to research, teaching and

service representative of social justice? Do you make it a priority to center historically marginalized communities in asset and strengths-based approaches? How do you hold yourself accountable to diversity/equity statements that you wrote to get hired and/or written on your department's web homepage? Lastly, how is your current department holistically supporting Students of Color? The CCC was a place for me to grapple with these hard questions within my own work and now as a soon to be Chicana faculty member, I feel confident in holding myself accountable to this work in order to best support the students and communities I work with in the classroom, on campus and in the community.

As I reflect on my doctoral educational experience, I cannot help but think about all the amazing and critical people that supported me through such a long and sometimes toxic journey. Y'all the real MVPs. I use the term MVPs to describe them, because they supported me throughout this journey, while having a job and responsibilities of their own. Their jobs were to also engage in healing from their traumas in and out of academia. I know this because they resisted colonial and western-based research and challenged the rigid boundaries of what mentorship can look like. Healing is difficult, but necessary. Grinwright (2022) tells us that, "Healing involves more than repairing the deep wounds of racism, healing the scars of sexism, or easing the pains of poverty. Healing is the capacity to restore our humanity and care for ourselves and others even during our fear. Healing is the only pathway to real justice because it requires that we take an honest look at what harmed us and pushes us to restore our humanity and finally to move us confidently into a possible future," (Grinwright, 2022). Since coming across Grinwright's work (2018; 2022), I have committed myself to work on my own healing and collective healing especially as a Woman of Color. I believe healing is how we begin to transform academia, because we begin to recognize the systems of oppression that are impacting

marginalized communities and unlearn the deficit narratives told about these communities to restore humanity. Academia, but especially the fields that pride themselves in social justice, working alongside historically marginalized communities, and challenging systems of oppression, like social work, must do better.

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Future Directions

This three paper dissertation project speaks volume about the need for healing in our daily lives, especially for People of Color. The educational system was not built or created for People of Color, yet we have persisted and made the educational system allow for Students of Color to be part of it. Even if we feel isolated, unwelcomed, and undervalued, Students of Color continue to survive academia for themselves, their families, and communities. Educators, mentors, adult community need to find ways to better support Students of Color at all levels within the educational system, and one of the first steps should center healing.

As Ginwright (2018) mentions, incorporating a healing centered engagement (HCE) to anything whether it is a program or curriculum, one must know that it is political in nature because our identities as People of Color and how we show up and that HCE is strength-based. In order to fully embrace a HCE, one must first acknowledge that systems of oppression exist, persist, and deeply impact the lives of Students of Color. If one can acknowledge this then the next step would be to actually incorporate these conversations within the classroom. How are you making space for Students of Color to share their lived experiences? How are you centering Students of Color in the classroom? How are you supporting Students of Color when they are experiencing trauma and/or racialized trauma? Having conversations about white supremacy, racism, patriarchy and other systems of oppression can be overwhelming for everyone. If you, the facilitator, feel this way, reach out to other critical educators and mentors that are willing to support you in this journey of dismantling white supremacy and centering healing in the classroom.

Another aspect of the healing process that has been learned through this research is the concept of rest and reflexivity, which are concepts I want to put fourth for educators and those

supporting Students of Color to consider. The work conducted with the doctoral Students of Color reminded me of Tricia Hersey's work (2022) on rest. Hersey explains that in current day society, we are fixated on production—how much people can produce, whether that is to make money or as she explains in higher education to become successful and graduate and/or get promoted (Hersey, 2022). Working with the CCC encouraged conversations around productivity and if it was really feeding our soul and well-being. Because the CCC group all were in doctoral programs there was a level of productivity we did have to uphold in order to graduate on time, but there were times when we had to pause and really ask ourselves, how can this project or event also be rest. With this in mind, it is important for educators and Students of Color to reflect on what is their goal they are trying to accomplish and how is it challenging systems of oppression. Although not always, Students of Color find themselves doing projects or events that perpetuate productivity rather than conducting projects that center their lived experiences and bring them joy. I encourage educators and Students of Color to engage in projects that are meaningful to them, that center their lived experiences while actively challenging systems of oppression. This approach can and hopefully feel less like productivity and more like healing.

Reflexivity was a major part of this work with the two student groups and a concept that is constantly needed in higher education and society in general. Reflexivity begins with first understanding one's own positionality; the identities that one embody and often impact or influence how one moves through society. The second piece of reflexivity is how you consistently reflect on your identities, because some may be visible like your racial and ethnic identity and some may be invisible like your sexuality identity. The second piece is what I have experienced to be the hardest for many people. Within this project, because I was actively part of these two groups as a participant and researcher, I constantly had to engage in reflexivity. I had

to make sure I was not over stepping my boundaries as a researcher and perpetuating power dynamics. Within the CCC group we repeated discussed our different research projects and highlighted the ways it was asset-based and identified ways we needed to challenge traditional research methods that were not representative of or serving the communities we worked with. The work of reflexivity is hard work, but this is a call to action for educators, students and anyone working in educational institutions. How are you checking your positionality? What privileged identities do you hold that may influence your work, especially when working with marginalized populations? More importantly, how are you utilizing reflexivity to challenge white western and colonial ways of conducting research. Reflexivity allows for us to take a good look at ourselves in the mirror and heal from trauma that has been inflicted upon us. As Ginwright (2022) reminds us, we must be able to engage in the mirror work in order to imagine and visualize a more just society.

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