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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

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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 continue to experience white supremacy and other systems of oppression. As Students of Color enter graduate school, there are often fewer 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 who was once 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, and pláticas. From the extensive community-based and collaborative work I conducted with a doctoral Student of Color group, two themes emerged from the data, which included (1) Community Space of Rest and (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 and challenge white supremacy, along with other systems of oppression.

Keywords: healing; students of color; higher education

1. Graduate Students of Color and Racism

From the literature and experience, pursuing a graduate 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 the need, or lack thereof, to find mentors to support your doctoral journey to the finish line. These factors all influence feelings of challenge and isolation. Nettles and Millett (2006) highlight the 50 percent attrition rate of graduate students across the U.S., which means that 50 percent of graduate students leave and/or discontinue their programs. Although this seems like a reasonable attrition rate, the rate goes up to 70 percent for minority graduate students (Nettles and Millett 2006; Brunsma et al. 2017). 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.[1] For example, Solórzano (1998) discusses how experiencing racism, such as racial microaggressions (Pierce 1974; Sue et al. 2007), has lasting impacts on graduate Students of Color, particularly Chicano/a students, in this case affecting their career trajectories. Smith et al. (2007) also highlight how Black students experience various forms of racism that can lead to being hyper-surveilled 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 have been linked to various forms of mental health issues among graduate Students of Color (Torres et al. 2010), including but not limited to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Hwang and Goto 2008). Although this research illustrates the impacts of racism on mental health, Phelps-Ward (2022) urges us to think about the sites of oppression 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 culturally specific student groups, despite the ongoing stress of racism.

Healing

With the continuous experiences of racism and the relatively recent Black Lives Matter uprisings in 2020, higher education institutions are pushing to have more conversations about racism and how to move toward anti-racist education. This is a great start to a systemic issue that impacts not just students in higher education but the community at large. 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 both in and out of educational settings, Ginwright encourages the move, or what he calls the pivot toward healing (Ginwright 2022). In addition to Ginwright's extensive work on healing, Chavez-Dueñas et al. (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 et al. (2020) further the point of radical healing by arguing that healing cannot occur without a critical consciousness that resists racial trauma, but more importantly, healing needs to consist of one's own ancestral roots—honoring cultural traditions and knowledge (French et al. 2020).

The Current Project: Healing Spaces within Critical Conversations Collective

More and more research is emerging on undergraduate students navigating racially hostile campus climates (Gonzalez 2023; Yosso et al. 2009), but less discussed in the literature is how doctoral Students of Color navigate such hostile campus environments. In conversation with the scholarship on healing, the current project 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) 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) identify 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 five doctoral students and the space they created together.

2. Materials and Methods

Positionality

As a Woman of Color in academia, my scholarship is greatly informed by my lived experiences growing up in a predominantly Latinx city in Southern California. With the ongoing 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 other doctoral Students of Color and I 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 could 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 the Critical Conversations Collective (CCC) was created. 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 and participation with CCC are greatly informed by my 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 hyper-surveilled 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 white university as one of the very few, and sometimes the only, Chicana or Student 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. 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 project, the CCC's creation and work took place during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a life-changing event that many people are still struggling with 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 and Stefancic 2001). In simple terms, CRT offers an alternative lens to examine how 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 guided by several tenets. Although there has been variation and expansion of CRT, the basic CRT tenets 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", (Solórzano 1997; Solórzano et al. 2000). Since CRT's inception, these tenets have been adopted and taken up in many fields, including education, and have been widely used as a way to discuss racialized educational inequity (Ladson-Billings 1998; Kohli and Solórzano 2012). For example, Solórzano et al. (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 Solórzano (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 and Solórzano 2018). For the current project, the following tenets were utilized: challenging dominant ideologies, commitment to social justice, and the centrality of experiential knowledge. These three CRT tenets 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 toward 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 and Solórzano 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 does not 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 well-being (Ginwright 2018). Scholars Wilson and Richardson (2020) build from Ginwright's HCE framework to highlight how certain spaces can be examples of collective care—care that creates conditions for well-being.

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 and 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 2021), and are oftentimes used to survive and thrive in hostile places like academia (Hampton and Aviña 2023). Pláticas as a methodology have been used by Scholars of Color, particularly Latinx and Chicanx scholars, because of their structure, which moves away from objectivity and more towards relationality (Flores and Morales 2021). Chicanx and Latinx scholars, specifically Women of Color, have also offered insights into 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 are 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 and Delgado Bernal 2016). Within this project, pláticas were utilized to describe the 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 and Delgado Bernal 2016) that were hosted weekly throughout the academic year from January 2020 to June 2023. 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 and 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 and learning, and radical and revolutionary love. Each plática ranged from 1 to 2 h in length weekly from January 2020 to June 2023. 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, four 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) Identifies 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 is a Brown queer and proud Salvadorian woman from El Salvador who now resides in the California bay area.[2] I first met Sivar during a prospective doctoral student visit to 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, 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 of 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 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 did not 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 is a mixed Asian woman, half Chinese half Filipina, from Ohlone homelands now known as the San Francisco Bay area. I met Mayari through another member of CCC during the fall of 2019. Mayari and Journey (another CCC member) would often sneak me into their department's cultural student center since I did not have a space like it 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's 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 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 actually have 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 we came to find out, we had a lot in common. When Baldwin and Mayari approached Journey and me with the idea to start CCC, we immediately said yes. Journey, like all of us in this group, brings 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. Field notes, memos, and coding were utilized to document these relationships. In addition to grounded theory, CRT and HCE were used in 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 us 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 resided in the same city, we continued to host our CCC pláticas online. Pláticas were never recorded, with the exception of a few, due to the personal and sometimes traumatic nature of our conversations. As a collective, we discussed that we would prefer not to 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.

3. Results

Community Space of Rest

As a critical previous doctoral Student of Color studying and addressing an array of social justice topics, I think about the burnout, 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 regard 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 was 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 it 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 had 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 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. Rest in CCC was critical rest that encouraged us to show up as our true authentic selves even when it seemed impossible in a predominantly white institution like ours. Although traditional and normative ways of resting are vital to our well-being, CCC pushed this notion of rest to another level. Instead, rest in CCC meant allowing our body, mind, and spirits to breathe and rest from the toxic spaces that tried to strip us of our identities, our histories. Similar to Hersey's (2022) concept of rest, rest in CCC provided a space of vulnerability and softness that has been intentionally excluded from our histories. Rest is "just the beginning, a preparation for resistance work towards liberation" (Cullors 2020). In CCC's community space of rest, we reminded each other that we did not have to do our PhD programs alone, that we could 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. In the early stages as 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 us to share, process, and challenge experiences of 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 had 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 et al. 2009) 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 when we feel the most drained, isolated, and unwelcome 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 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 could 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 a space like CCC is critical and necessary to the well-being of Students of Color, but it is the work within that space that can be, 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 as CCC does, we may have opened the door to our healing journeys.

4. 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 discomfort 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 there is something happening within the classroom and/or higher education that needs immediate attention.

Utilizing Ginwright'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 could engage in critical dialogue about their experiences while acknowledging that 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 communities alike?

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 and 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 although white supremacy is endemic, Students of Color continue to find ways to challenge the dominant ideologies. Building from the CRT tenet 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 and 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 the 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 the group to flourish because they were not only able to see how society has oppressed them based on their identities but how they perpetuate and participate in 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 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 a commitment to social justice, they still continue to identify the ways they could improve and ultimately heal from oppression and trauma. Reflexivity is a lifelong commitment, not just one that happens in the diversity and social justice required class. How are we as educators creating a space to have critical conversations about systems of oppression while centering the lived experiences of Communities of Color 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 respond to whether our work is challenging systems of oppression in and out of the classroom or further perpetuating them.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Washington (STUDY00014563, 19 January 2022).

Notes

[1]   The phrase Students of Color refers to any student who identifies as Black, Indigenous, Native American, Latino/a/x, and/or Asian American.

[2]   Pseudonyms (Sivar, Baldwin, Mayari and Journey) were used throughout this paper to uphold the anonymity of participants.

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