

A SACRED, COMMUNAL PAUSE: HOW RACIALLY MARGINALIZED YOUTH'S COMMITMENT TO HEALING EXPANDS UNDERSTANDINGS OF ACTIVISM

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Abstract

The continued state-sanctioned violence towards marginalized communities and a reactionary political landscape have exacerbated the need for youth of color activists to prioritize holistic wellness. Healing is necessary because although engagement in activism may address root causes of harm, it also takes an immense toll on the bodymindspirit (books, 1993; Ginwright, 2015; Conner et al., 2023). Understanding this toll and identifying strategies to address it calls for research into the intersection of youth activism and healing. To explore this topic, we convened a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project comprised of high school and college students, young adults working in youth organizations, community organizers, and multi-generational university researchers. This paper explores what members of the PAR team have learned about the relationship between healing and activism from youth of color.

Introduction

Communities of color have deep histories of understanding that liberatory efforts must tend to personal and communal well-being as well as work towards dismantling oppressive systems (Page & Woodland, 2023). As youth of color activists continue to lead efforts towards collective liberation, they are increasingly noting the need to center holistic well-being alongside commitments to justice (Ginwright, 2015). Our community-based research collective, Voices of Healing, collaborates with local youth organizations to support initiatives to integrate healing justice practices into social justice advocacy. We see how “healing” and “wellness” are being popularized in the youth sector and risk becoming buzzwords that continue to perpetrate Eurocentric and individualistic mental health models that reify white supremacy. Therefore, we note that racially marginalized communities’ conceptualizations of healing are grounded in communal healing and nourishing the soul in ways that can

build and sustain civic engagement. These activist-oriented practices of care restoration must be destigmatized. As Lorde (1978) asserts, culturally rooted approaches that honor joy, rest, and pleasure are known to destabilize racist power structures. Youth of color activists' continued attentiveness to ancestral healing weaves together old and new culturally situated approaches to activism that are grounded in futurity as they unapologetically proclaim that a world in which we survive and overcome empire is possible (Hunter et al., in press for 2026). This multigenerational Participatory Action Research (PAR) study is grounded in critical race theory (CRT) in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and the ancestral traditions of healing justice (Ginwright, 2015; Page & Woodland, 2023) and reflects on the following research question:

- (1) How do youth of color activists understand and enact healing?

To answer this question, four members of the PAR team (two university-based, one community organizer, and one youth of color activist) came together to write about how the youth of color activists, as part of the PAR team we participated in, came to identify and understand healing and activism as interconnected pursuits.

Activism Among Youth of Color

Structural Racism and Wellbeing

The need for research that focuses on how communities of color prioritize healing is becoming increasingly important due to ongoing struggles over racial justice and social movements to counter white supremacy. McGee and Stovall (2015) discuss how oftentimes, “educators and researchers whose central focus is race and racism in education have only rarely theorized the mental health outcomes associated with racial stress and racial battle fatigue” (p. 495). Various scholarship examines the impact of racism in the lives of communities of color, such as racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004) and spirit murdering (Williams, 1987; Love, 2016). Racial battle fatigue is described as the stress caused by experiencing racial microaggressions, which are everyday instances of racism. This scholarship examines how occurrences of racial violence impact one’s emotional, mental, and physical state (Smith et al., 2006). Relatedly, the concept of spirit murder notes that just as the physical murders of communities of color are horrific, so is enduring ongoing systemic oppression. Love’s (2016) scholarship examines how racialized oppression inflicts “slow deaths.” Both racial battle fatigue and spirit murdering emphasize the detrimental impact of everyday racism on the bodymindspirit (Lara, 2005).

Shifts in Youth Activism

Youth activism to counter systemic oppression, whether focused on educational access and equity, policing, climate justice, or immigration rights, has gained attention in the past twenty years for significant policy accomplishments and movement-building (Conner & Rosen, 2016; Kwon, 2013). Whereas initial studies documenting

campaigns tended to focus on organizing strategy or policy victories, more recent work has described a pivot toward mental health and healing (Conner et al., 2023; Frost et al., 2019). They note, for example, that mental health challenges and stress are often heightened for racially marginalized youth who engage in activism to disrupt systemic oppression (Hope et al., 2017; Palomar et al., 2024). Palomar et al. (2024), for example, argue that activism can bring both benefits and threats to health and well-being and identify varied types of healing practices in community groups and social movements.

Although the empirical base is small and still emerging, studies document how youth of color activists find innovative ways to stay connected to their bodymindspirit through centering cultural practices that promote healing, such as humor, play, rituals, and art (Ginwright, 2015; Greene et al., 2021; Palomar et al., 2024). For example, Desai (2020) discusses a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project that brought together five Chicana youth and members of Leaders Organizing 2 Unite & Decriminalize (LOUD). The YPAR project was informed by how police brutality impacts communities of color and how the ongoing Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement encouraged the team to create a Día de los Muertos float to honor the lives and spirits of youth of color who experienced extrajudicial deaths. The youth were experiencing continuous heartbreak over the unfathomable deaths of communities of color; however, they found healing in uplifting the lives of those who have passed on through a cultural, personal practice that invited creativity, solidarity, and critical hope.

Ginwright (2015) discusses how young people involved in social justice advocacy recognize healing as a political practice (Chavez-Diaz & Lee, 2015; Page & Woodland, 2023) that “rests on the theoretical premise that well-being is a function of social justice” (p. 9). From this lens, Ginwright (2015) adds that there is a slight, yet noteworthy, distinction between healing and well-being. Healing focuses on identifying the root causes of harm and taking steps to repair the damage, while well-being is concerned about how to sustain wellness. In youth organizing spaces this understanding is crucial: youth of color are blending healing and activism together by focusing on addressing root causes in their campaigns while also supporting each other’s well-being along the way (Chavez-Diaz & Lee, 2015).

McGee and Stovall (2015) acknowledge that deep analyses of what healing looks like, especially from a critical race theory (CRT) lens, are understudied. We, too, see that this issue is being taken up by young people themselves, but qualitative accounts of how youth of color define healing and how it relates to their activism are still rare. Such studies are needed, particularly those that are carried out in collaboration with youth through participatory methods. This article aims to add to the emerging knowledge base about how youth of color define healing and how it can accompany social justice activist projects. Our scholarship works to contextualize how youth of color activists’ mental health journeys are informing their desires to prioritize healing in their organizing efforts.

Theoretical Perspectives

In order to highlight how the racialized experiences of our PAR team inform the framing and embodiment of healing as an ongoing, urgent activist-oriented practice, we draw upon critical race theory (CRT) in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and the ancestral traditions of healing justice (Ginwright, 2015; Page & Woodland, 2023). CRT works to contextualize and amplify how racism is an epidemic that impacts one’s material

conditions in the United States (Bell, 1992; Lynn & Dixon, 2013), while healing justice calls for the centering of embodied, ancestral practices that prioritize collective wellness as we journey toward eradicating oppressive systems (Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, 2021). Together, these lenses inform our study design and analysis of how youth of color activists are understanding healing.

Critical Race Theory

As a social justice framework, CRT in education provides tools to articulate and critique how racism and white supremacy manifest and function in the United States (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). A CRT-informed analysis underscores the importance of creating PAR spaces where racialized experiences are held and honored so youth of color activists can reflect and process together. Below we explain CRT's explicit relations to our study:

The Centrality of Race and Racism

This tenet unapologetically acknowledges that racism is deeply ingrained in the United States and that race must be centered in contextualizing the experiences of communities of color (Bell, 1992; Huber et al., 2008). In context to this study, the PAR team's interest in understanding and employing healing into the fabric of their everyday lives is informed by the harsh reality that racism is embedded into the organizing logics of the United States.

The Challenge to Dominant Ideology

Critical race scholars are encouraged to interrogate and critique mainstream perspectives. In our study, we leverage the tenet challenge to dominant ideology by rejecting Eurocentric mental health and wellness practices. Through a radical departure from dominant mental health ideologies and a return to ancestral knowledge, the PAR team highlights the power of rooting healing in one's cultural identities.

A Commitment to Social Justice

As we continue to embark on the lifelong journey of social justice, CRT in education is committed to dismantling systems of oppression and all other forms of marginalization and subordination (Solórzano, 1997). Concerning this study, this tenet uplifts how the PAR team's commitment to healing simultaneously prioritizes personal well-being, communal care, and, ultimately, the transformation of systems.

The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge

Additionally, CRT in education acknowledges that the experiences of the racially marginalized are legitimate and important (Smith et al., 2007; Huber, 2009). By centering youth of color's experiential knowledge, we position them as experts in their healing journeys and appreciate how they are leading efforts in dreaming and designing sustainable healing practices.

An Interdisciplinary Perspective

Lastly, critical race scholars note the importance of drawing from other fields to interrogate race and racism within a historical context (Yosso, 2005). This study draws upon healing justice in conversation CRT to explore the ingenuity of youth of color who employ culturally situated healing practices that support them to tend to themselves and heal.

Healing Justice

While CRT can support us in unearthing the consequences of racialized oppression in the lives of youth of color, theories of healing justice support us in acknowledging marginalized communities' responsive healing strategies. Healing justice is a political and spiritual framework, grounded in communal care that fosters the envisioning of new worlds beyond our current colonial context (Page & Woodland, 2023). This is a necessary departure from the Westernized, ahistorical, individualized ideologies around healing (Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, 2021). By uplifting the everyday healing practices of marginalized communities as sacred and essential, healing justice offers joy, community, and rest amidst the ongoing struggles for collective liberation. Everyday healing activities can include storytelling, music, and art (see Greene et al., 2021). Youth of color are increasingly noting that advocacy and healing must occur simultaneously as marginalized communities engage in the lifelong fight for liberation (Ginwright, 2015). Healing justice is an embodied practice that invited the PAR team to bring in their cultural experiences and understandings of healing to disrupt mainstream narratives that devalue non-Western perceptions of mental health.

Research Context

Our research collective, Voices of Healing, explores connections between activism and healing for the historically marginalized. To support healing practices that racially marginalized communities are engaging in in our local context of Colorado, Voices of Healing came to fruition in Spring 2022. We began by hosting multigenerational conversations with community members who surfaced the need for opportunities to reflect and strategize on how to integrate healing into activism. Our aim was to create a community-based research collective that centers the lives and experiences of Black/African American, Latine, and Indigenous youth who are interested in the connectedness between activism, healing, and mental health and challenging dominant perspectives that market wellness as merely individualized self-care. In Spring 2023, Voices of Healing launched a participatory action research (PAR) project entitled "Our Stories, Our Healing" that brought together high school and college students, young adults working in youth organizations, community organizers, and multi-generational university researchers to share experiences and hopes for healing and is situated in the lineages of local and global movements for social change. The long-term aim is to enhance the capacities of youth activists and youth organizational staff and, ultimately, ground ourselves in more sustainable organizing approaches while working towards social transformation.

Methods

Research Design

As part of a long-term effort to develop a healing justice action research collective, we carried out a multigenerational PAR project in which the Voices of Healing co-creators (Alexis, Ben, and Solicia) collaborated with eight youth of color activists (Chanelle is a youth of color activist) to discuss experiences at the intersection of healing and activism. The Voices of Healing team is made of two university researchers and a local community organizer/activist. The eight youth of color activists who joined were affiliated with youth organizations, spanned ages ranging from 15 to 25 years old, and, more specifically, comprised three high school students, two undergraduate students, and three young adult organizational staff members.

For the full PAR team, including the co-creators, four members self-identified as Black/African American, one as Somali/African American, one as Latine, one as Hispanic, one as Arab, one as East Indian/African, one as Native-Chicana, and one as white.

Alexis is a Black doctoral student and scholar-activist in education policy and learning sciences where she explores how racially marginalized communities engage in healing and activism both online and offline. At the time of the PAR project, Alexis was under 25 and also identified as a youth activist of color. Chanelle is a Somali/African American second-year undergraduate student. She was born and raised in Aurora, Colorado, and participates in social activism and healing justice work. Ben is a white Jewish professor of education who brings experience as a youth worker, learning sciences scholar, and PAR facilitator. Solicia is a Native American who identifies as a Chicana organizer and activist. Born and raised in Denver, Colorado, she has dedicated her career to organizing youth around education and social justice.

The PAR project was developed in collaboration with participants, placing their lived experiences at the forefront of the research process. PAR is an orientation to inquiry that values collaboration and knowledge production that emerges from communities whose lived experiences provide them with invaluable insights, thus positioning community participants as co-researchers and ‘insiders’ in the phenomenon being studied (Fine, 2017). By utilizing participatory action research (PAR), we emphasize a collective approach that positions youth of color activists’ knowledge as sacred (Torre, 2009) through valuing the perspectives of those located at the margins (hooks, 1984). Drawing inspiration from hooks’ (2015) assertion that spaces of marginality are locations of unlimited possibilities, the Voices of Healing co-creators cultivated a PAR space with youth of color activists that prioritize youth agency and social justice, which is in alignment with the CRT tenets of centrality of experiential knowledge and commitments to social justice. We asked the PAR team what they would like to explore together during the PAR cycle and what possible goals might be. Furthermore, our design and enactment of the PAR study embodied principles of healing justice that position communities’ expertise in their own healing journeys and emphasize the importance of creating spaces for their own healing while also engaging in activism for systems change (Ginwright, 2015; Page & Woodland, 2023). The table below summarizes key activities of the project and how they contributed to our analysis for this article.

The PAR team members were recruited by the three co-creators of Voices of Healing (Alexis, Ben, and Solicia), who hosted various listening sessions and 1:1 conversations with youth organizations and staff to build relationships with potential participants. Those interested applied through a Google form, and the co-creators held informal virtual interviews to learn about the potential participants and their interest in the project. Throughout this recruiting process, we emphasized our interests in collaborating with youth of color who are interested in the intersections of mental health, healing, and activism. In the Google form application, applicants were asked to share their interests in applying, discuss what healing means to them, and that this collaborative project would be centered around thinking about how communities think about wellness in relation to social justice. We had 20 young people apply, and after reading over the applications, we invited ten to join the project. In selecting participants, we valued racial diversity, affiliations with youth organizations in the area (though we did not limit to those in our existing network), capacity, and their willingness to discuss and share experiences. While we initially began with ten PAR participants, two youth had to drop early based on other commitments, leaving eight youth participants plus the three co-designers. At our kickoff dinner, we asked them all to share a bit more about themselves and their experiences with healing and involvement in youth organizing contexts. All the participants identified themselves as activists and noted their excitement about being able to reflect on their experiences alongside other youth of color. The youth members received a \$1000.00 stipend for their participation.

As summarized in Table 1, the project followed the contours common in the PAR cycle, including building community, critical self-reflection on experiences with the topic, design of research protocols, data collection, data analysis, and a culminating event. The key data collection completed by the team was interviews with members of the community. Each team member recruited two to three interviewees based on personal relationships and networks. The PAR team invited these participants to be interviewed either by verbally asking or sending them a text message. This process was carried out with the approval of the University of Colorado Boulder's Institutional Review Board.

Table 1.
Activity Sequence of Our Stories, Our Healing (February–May 2023)

Activity/Event	Purpose	Prompts	Data Sources
Kickoff dinner	Build community through bread-breaking, discuss the aims of the “Our Stories, Our Healing” project	Who are we? What brought us to the project?	N/A
Personal reflections and discussions	Meet in person to reflect on and discuss the role of healing in our own lives	How do you understand healing? What does healing justice look and feel like? How can youth spaces support healing?	Meeting notes
Co-creation of interview questions	Co-design interview questions to ask community members and trusted friends and family members who identify as racially marginalized about their conceptions of and relationships to healing	What insights about healing and activism do we want to gain from conversations with trusted community members?	Meeting notes

(contd.)

Activity/Event	Purpose	Prompts	Data Sources
Data collection check-in	Check in with the PAR team about how the interviews are going and provide support.	How is the interview process going?	Meeting notes
Community interviews	Connect with local community members and ask them the co-designed interview questions	PAR team members each selected eight questions from a longer interview protocol that the group had developed at prior meetings. Interview foci varied slightly, although drawing on the same list of questions.	Notes summarizing key themes from interviews written by PAR team members.
Interview shareouts	Discuss community interview experiences, reflect on what was learned through the stories and experiences shared, and identify shared themes that are emerging	What was the community interviewee experience like for you? What are we learning from these conversations? Is your understanding of healing evolving? * For these questions, the PAR team was encouraged to create visual/ artistic representations.	Meeting notes Artistic representations
Co-designing the community convening	Define aims of the community convening and respective roles, focus on creating a healing space for all who attend	What do we want to share with community members? What do we want the spirit of the convening to embody?	Meeting notes
Community convening	Host convening, have fun, enjoy food, share stories and experiences from PAR experience and the relatedness between healing and activism with local community	What are your experiences with healing? Why is healing important for communities of color?	N/A

Data Collection

The PAR team collected a few types of data from which to identify lessons and learnings about healing.

Meeting notes and self-reflection prompts. Each meeting included opportunities for participants to reflect on their own experiences and perspectives. These reflections were documented through journal writing, discussions, and drawings. Most discussions were documented through notes that were written on poster paper or in Google Docs. During the PAR cycle meeting, notes were typed up by Voices of Healing organizers and the PAR participants. The Voices of Healing team asked for consent to take notes, and all the participants had the option to opt out of their insights collected or analyzed while still being able to participate in the PAR cycle. The collective notes document was accessible to all members and shared with edit access via a team Google folder entitled “Our Stories, Our Healing team folder.”

Interviews with trusted friends, colleagues, and family. In addition to drawing on our own lived experience, the PAR members each selected 2–3 racially marginalized people to interview about their perspectives on healing. The interview protocol was created over several weeks to maximize the collective expertise of the group. After the first conversation, we (Alexis, Ben, and Solicia) refined the questions, organized them, and shared them back with the PAR team for final edits before submitting them to IRB for approval. We did not audio record interviews. Interviews were documented through summary notes submitted to a

Google form by each interviewer within 24 hours of completing the interviews. The PAR team interviewed community members who were 18 and older due to our university's IRB regulations. The interviews were intergenerational, as community interviewees ranged from undergraduate students to parents and community elders. The PAR team completed a total of 22 interviews. Community interview participants received a \$25.00 e-gift card.

Analysis

We analyzed data in two phases. The first phase of data analysis occurred during the PAR project, as Alexis created initial codes from the internal conversations and community interviews and brought them to the PAR team to reflect upon and engage in further sensemaking during an in-person gathering. We drew on techniques for collaborative qualitative data analysis (Cornish et al., 2013; Jackson, 2008). These include making biases visible to each other, clustering examples from interviews thematically, making meaning together about how themes contribute to an overall story, and collectively constructing a narrative about the key lessons or themes from the work. In addition, we clustered in small groups with the prompt to “draw a picture” that represented key themes related to healing in the data and then shared those pictures with each other. Following the collective reflection on the interviews, the PAR team organized a convening where the interviewees and other trusted community members were invited to share insights and reflect on their orientations to healing.

The second phase of data analysis occurred after the PAR meetings had ended. Alexis invited the entire PAR team to co-author an article together. Chanelle worked with Alexis to refine the codes and developed a specific focus for writing. The themes presented here reflect both the thematic processing of the PAR team and the continued thematic analysis by Alexis and Chanelle. Both identify as youth of color. Ben and Solicia are adults who were a part of the PAR team and joined the writing process after the initial abstract was written and participated in sense-making conversations and writing revisions. The paper was shared with the entire PAR team to incorporate their insights and feedback and for transparency.

Themes

We identified three main themes based on ideas voiced during the PAR project about how youth of color activists understand healing. The first theme—recognizing the barriers to healing—surfaces the challenges racially marginalized communities face when trying to prioritize their mental health. The second and third themes represent practices and strategies identified by the PAR team that counter those barriers. The second theme—disrupting personal and generational cycles—acknowledges that healing requires disrupting personal and general cycles of harm. The third theme—creating communal opportunities for healing—acknowledges that in our current systems, we need alternative practices in PAR spaces alongside commitments to policy change, which expands understanding of what “action” looks like.

Recognizing the barriers to healing

The PAR team frequently discussed that they face additional obstacles in their healing journeys because of their racial identity. PAR members shared how, as youth of color activists, they rarely encounter spaces designed for renewal; many shared that the PAR space was the first time they were being asked to explicitly reflect on their own healing journeys and expressed gratitude for the space we cultivated together.

During the second PAR meeting, for example, Alexis and Solicia asked the team to reflect on two questions. First, the team was asked to reflect on “times in their life where they experienced a healing space(?) and think about who/what healing elements were present” and second to consider “a social community, physical space, peer and/or organization space where you felt whole, seen and like healing was occurring.” Participants reflected on their own for a couple of minutes before discussing collectively. After a couple of minutes of thinking, a youth participant spoke up and asked the group if we wanted to switch the order of the activity and begin by noting spaces where they were not experiencing healing. The PAR members agreed and explained that in order to notice where healing is taking place, “it is easier to start with where healing does not feel present.”

Many noticings emerged from this dialogue. The PAR team noted that even spaces that are explicitly designed for healing can be harmful to racially marginalized communities. For example, a PAR member shared how many of the traditional “wellness spaces” she has encountered often have good intentions but have been harmful to her because they are rooted in whiteness. She shared how the spaces she encountered disregarded her racial identity. PAR members noted that places where they experienced healing were often everyday environments, where healing attributes might be overlooked. For example, people named being in nature, digital spaces (ex. social media), beauty shops, and spending time with friends and family as everyday environments that can facilitate healing. It is also worth noting that the PAR team discussed how the lists they curated had far more spaces where healing was not being experienced.

Although some PAR members talked about sharing time with friends and family as a healing experience, some PAR members shared that pursuing healing can often be a lonely experience because of the stigmas associated with mental health in their own families and friend groups. They shared this with compassion and noted that complexly their interpersonal circles can be both healing and harmful. For example, PAR members shared that it is healing to be around their family and learn more about their cultures. However, the team also noted how it can be difficult to pursue healing because some family members may fail to recognize the importance of taking up healing outside of tending to physical and visible wounds. The PAR team shared a desire to interrupt the silence around mental health in marginalized communities. During a PAR team reflection, a member shared that because of the ways we have been socialized to see mental health as a taboo topic, healing requires self-transformation alongside shifting broader perspectives on wellness.

As conversations regarding the barriers to healing continued, the PAR team noted it is important to understand how intersectional experiences make pursuing healing more layered. Members of the PAR team shared that intersectional identities (e.g., Black and woman, Latine and queer) can make healing journeys more complex. A community interviewee shared how, as a woman of color, sharing struggles about mental health can be daunting because being vulnerable and sharing feelings have caused people to weaponize her emotions against

her, and her feelings have been neglected in the past. Women of color members of the PAR team echoed these sentiments and also shared that their needs are often pushed aside because of societal gender framings that position women of color as caretakers. A PAR member shared how personally these expectations for her are burdens that she is working through releasing.

Lastly, the PAR team voiced frustrations about the lack of access to culturally responsive healthcare providers. While the PAR members do not prefer engaging with the healthcare system for mental health support, they acknowledged that it is the approach most often encouraged. Many PAR members shared harmful personal experiences with counselors, therapists, and other healthcare workers due to their lack of training on how to accommodate the needs of racially marginalized clients. Furthermore, PAR members noted that even once they can access culturally responsive healthcare workers, they often run across financial barriers that continue to make the support they need inaccessible. It can be scary to pursue therapy or other healthcare practices for the first time, and the PAR team argues that these negative experiences and barriers can understandably turn away historically excluded communities.

As the PAR team continuously noted how overwhelming these barriers can be, they also discussed how ancestral teachings, such as spending time in nature, ritual practices, spirituality, and staying connected with ancestors are ways marginalized communities embrace healing despite the lack of access. Importantly, a community interviewee said, “Although we have inherited trauma, we have also inherited cross-cultural, scientific, metaphysical, and artistic healing mechanisms.” These insights moved the PAR team to discuss the importance of leveraging their cultural guides to disrupt personal and generational trauma.

Disrupting personal and generational cycles

In internal discussions among the PAR team and in interviews with community leaders, people emphasized a shared desire to disrupt personal and generational cycles. Healing is seen as a practice that can interrupt harmful cycles and also inform the creation of new patterns and ways of being in the world. Many PAR members shared that communities of color need to situate their experiences in the broader context of white supremacy to understand historically how trauma is shaped. A community interviewee shared the importance of understanding healing as a full-time practice because “since adolescence, we have been experiencing forms of trauma. Our ancestors pass on their lived trauma through bloodlines, stories, and artifacts.” Throughout the PAR process, the team continued to acknowledge how identities play a significant role in our relationships to healing. Due to how systemic oppression affects the everyday lives of marginalized people, the PAR team expressed that desires to heal are aligned with broader ongoing struggles toward collective liberation. The PAR team echoed these sentiments throughout the PAR cycle and reflected on the importance and difficulties of disrupting familial and generational trauma. However, the team also noted that as one comes to understand personal and generational trauma, one must do so comprehensively to acknowledge the transmission of both trauma and ancestral knowledge from ancestors.

Yet, the PAR project also surfaced an important *both/and*: commitments to healing should not be solely in relation to systemic violence; trauma and white supremacy cannot be the only frame of reference. A PAR member

shared, “We are so much more than our healing journeys.” Therefore, while the PAR team values their roles as youth of color activists, healing reminds them their purpose goes beyond solely striving for social change or dismantling oppressive systems. The PAR team and the community interviews emphasize that for the marginalized, healing has traditions before and beyond the constraints of white supremacy that should be honored and express the importance of affirming that communities of color are already whole and worthy.

During a large group debrief, a PAR member shared that slowing down to process and learn about her racialized experiences has allowed her to develop more self-compassion and empathy for how marginalized communities are navigating the world, which resonated with many. The PAR team noted that this understanding has led to the realization that healing is not a “one and done” experience but rather an ongoing process, informing a sustainable desire to not only disrupt trauma but to dismantle all systems that inflict harm. The PAR members displayed this understanding through various analogies and artistic expressions. For example, one PAR member conveyed this in a poem, writing, “it is okay to be myself/transformation should not be rushed/open yourself to trust,” and that this poem represents healing as an ongoing, transformative “process people should be open to.” Another PAR member compared healing to “intersecting waves” because of the way waves represent dynamic movement and flow. Many discussed this realization as salient to their understanding of healing and an important departure from Westernized perspectives that have a “fix it” approach to mental health, and all PAR team members expressed that this motivates them to pursue healing and encourage others to do the same in order to interrupt harmful cycles and continue growing into better versions of themselves.

Creating communal opportunities for healing

All PAR members shared how our collective time together provided a rare environment to transparently express the dilemmas of healing and activism as racially marginalized people. They also shared that communal spaces are an essential aspect of developing and implementing healing practices in their own lives. During an internal PAR gathering, a member shared that communities of color need sacred spaces to pause and check in with oneself and community. The other PAR members agreed and shared that creating opportunities for pausing is critical to holistic wellness and movement building. A PAR member shared that, “as I tend to myself, it supports my community, and healing does not just happen individually. It happens in community.”

As the group started thinking about the “action” part of the PAR cycle, we had conversations about how to culminate the work of the group. The third author, with prior experience leading PAR, brought an assumption there should be some kind of public action, like sharing policy recommendations to youth organizations or schools. As the group began envisioning what a culminating event might look like, however, team members were less interested in recommendations or proposals and instead decided to create a sacred space for themselves and their extended community to heal and commune together.

To honor this understanding and to close this iteration of the PAR cycle, the group planned and hosted a small convening for family and friends. While different PAR members took leadership for different aspects of the convening, the overall vision was agreed upon by the whole team in discussions held over two meetings. The convening took place at a community organization in Denver, where one of the PAR participants worked. Team

members invited local community leaders and loved ones. The space was multigenerational: friends, teachers, parents, and children were all in attendance. Food was catered from a local Mediterranean, BIPOC-owned business and laid out on a buffet table, family style, so that people could enjoy it throughout the convening. A healing playlist curated by the PAR team played in the background.

The convening opened with a spoken word poem co-created and performed by two members of the PAR team. The poem honored artistic expression as salient and sacred to marginalized communities' sense-making and healing. The PAR team's poem addressed key conversations and insights that emerged from internal discussions and conversations with the community interviewees. The poem specifically spoke to the importance of historicizing experiences and (re)connecting with roots as critical pieces that guide approaches to healing. Following the poem, two other PAR members introduced themselves as the emcees for the convening, introduced the team, and provided a glimpse of what the community convening would offer. Then members of the PAR team led the attendees through healing activities that foster inclusivity and a chance for us to connect to our bodies and each other through breathwork and affirmations.

During the convening, PAR members introduced us to local BIPOC healers and vendors as resources for us to connect with throughout, as their work is grounded in culturally situated healing practices. These healers and vendors provided reiki, essential oils and lotions, tarot card readings, and handmade jewelry to community members throughout the convening. Through paired and large group discussions, we shared our personal healing experiences, and the PAR team shared common themes with the attendees who emerged from internal meetings and the community interviews. We closed with members of the PAR team opening up space for final reflections, expressing gratitude for the opportunity to share space, and with the Voices of Healing co-creators sharing next steps and future opportunities for continued collaboration.

As co-authors and members of the PAR team, we wanted to share aspects of the convening that resonated with us. Alexis loved the familial energy of the convening that the music and the fellowship through food and storytelling offered. She also appreciated the opportunity to meet and connect with the PAR team's loved ones and trusted community members throughout the convening. Chanelle's favorite moment from the convening was bringing the community interviewees, family, and friends experiences into conversation with the PAR team's learnings to highlight shared desires for healing and systemic transformation. Ben, who attended with his partner and two middle school students, appreciated that the convening made guests feel welcome and how the activities inspired the two middle school students to engage in conversations about healing. Solicia enjoyed how the convening centered on the healing insights of youth of color activists while also tending to broader multigenerational community needs for spaces to reflect. She saw the convening as a tangible confirmation of the healing, learning, joy, and activism that emerge from communing with one another and noted that while the event was planned and hosted by the PAR team, it was a reciprocal space where everyone engaged in the questions and ideas inspired by the project.

Discussion & Implications

This article reports our efforts to identify youth of color activists' understanding of healing that were expressed during the PAR cycle. In order to contextualize healing, our findings began by identifying various barriers to

healing and sources of harm identified by the PAR team. We then discussed two themes that underscore the agency and ingenuity of youth of color as they seek healing and well-being: the importance of disrupting personal and generational cycles of harm and the critical role of communal spaces.

One limitation of this analysis is that it was carried out by the four authors, and we did not have the opportunity to continue analyzing the data with the full team after the PAR cycle ended. Another limitation pertains to the varied level of detail across interview notes. Because we relied on written summaries rather than transcripts, this analysis is likely a closer reflection of the themes that interviewers found most salient in the moment, which might differ from what a close analysis of a transcript could yield.

Nevertheless, by drawing on a close reading of the PAR meeting notes and interview summaries, as well as the first two authors' reflections about the experience, we have identified themes that add to the literature about how youth of color navigate systems of oppression and find strategies for healing. The insights from the PAR team are expanding understanding of activism by framing healing as an activist-oriented practice that centers on personal and communal well-being and social change and recognizes even amidst the barriers to healing youth's agency and innovation.

With regard to barriers to healing, these findings are consistent with arguments in the healing justice literature about the need for mental health practices that depart from conventional Eurocentric health models. (Ginwright, 2015; Page & Woodland, 2023). Centering collective spaces can help foster youth of color healing journeys by creating opportunities for processing and communal care. McGee and Stovall (2015) add that healing is necessary in the lives of youth of color because while the coping strategies that young people are leveraging, such as grit and perseverance, may help them move through violent contexts, these strategies may still leave them with psychological and emotional scars. Alvarez (2020) adds that healing opens us up to more comprehensive, culturally relevant ways of exploring racial youth trauma that go beyond Eurocentric medical paradigms. All the PAR team members shared experiencing some degree of mental health crises, such as racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004) or spirit murdering (Love, 2016), in consequence to commitments to organizing and advocating for social change. CRT literature provides a race-conscious lens that understands that racism is a public health issue and commits to addressing root causes of racial injustice by challenging systems and power and inviting us to self-transformation and collective transformation. CRT's attentiveness to the racialized realities of communities supports our approaches to embracing non-dominant research practices that center youth of color agency.

At the same time, what young people said about spaces where they experience healing and their readiness to highlight spaces where healing was not present adds in important ways. The literature on community organizations and youth development often underplays the developmental value of peer spaces and online spaces that are away from the gaze of educators or youth workers.

The second theme of disrupting personal and generational cycles, participant perspectives, lends evidence in support of healing justice theorizing because healing justice practitioners discuss how tending to the personal is tied to disrupting generational cycles of trauma. For example, through a healing justice lens, Page & Woodland (2023) argue that those steeped in organizing work are required to commit to their own healing journeys as all of us perpetuate and cause harm due to being socialized under white supremacy. This is aligned with hooks (1993) theorizing of self-recovery. At the core of self-recovery is identity work because it is difficult to identify strategies to organize and resist when one is not in a deep relationship with the self. She explains that in order

to know ourselves and build personal awareness, in order to take up self-recovery, one has to understand their sociopolitical contexts and systems of power (hooks, 1993). With this framing, hooks (1993) explains that pursuing personal healing through self-recovery is an ongoing process that is inextricably tied to challenging systems.

This literature supports the PAR team's discussions and offers support for arguments that embodying the practices of healing justice, which are both personal and collective, is supporting them in taking up more sustainable organizing practices so they can stay engaged in movement building while preventing burnout. As the PAR team understands, when we situate our activism in healing, we can "begin to see collective practices for grief, replenishment, and well-being as integral to dreaming our futures" (Page & Woodland, 2023, p. 125). This is crucial to disrupting cycles where activists are seen as disposable and expected to advocate at the expense of their own health. Spade (2020) discusses how often in organizing work,

We have not been taught to notice or care about how things went along the way to victory, whether people's capacity for confronting the next challenge was improved, or whether it was destroyed through burnout or damaging group dynamics (p. 65).

However, as the PAR members showcase, youth of color are "expanding conventional modes of civic engagement in order to assert human dignity collectively" (Ginwright, 2015, p. 34).

The third theme of creating communal opportunities for healing also adds to the literature by opening up new directions for participatory action research, highlighting the importance of prioritizing communal well-being alongside research endeavors. Healing justice scholars discuss how youth of color need spaces to process their experiences and maintain their own well-being, as it is important to remember that systems are impacting their everyday lives (Chavez-Diaz & Lee, 2015; Ginwright, 2015). A key aspect of leaning into communal opportunities for healing is learning how to be vulnerable. Although vulnerability can be scary, Okpalaoka and Dillard (2011) remind us that our healing is next to the wound.

Throughout the PAR members' time together (internal meetings, community interviews, and convening), the team created space for vulnerable reflection through storytelling. Storytelling is an ancestral practice "wherein relating to others and the world is automatic, and they boost imagination towards a place of self-knowledge" (Somé, 1999, p. 250). With roots in CRT, counterstories agentially uplift the experiences of those at the margins, and Ladson-Billings (1995) notes how sharing stories is a remedy that can support the marginalized in healing from the violence of racialized oppression. Chavez-Diaz & Lee (2015) add that entering and honoring ways of being that are historically and traditionally rooted is empowering and engaging with "a process of empowerment, self-discovery, and self-love" (p. 9). Through the sharing of counterstories, we become "mirrors for us at our most vulnerable places, so we can see what we are learning, see new possibilities in our lives," allowing "new patterns to become possible" (brown, 2013) as they provide opportunities for healing and world-building.

This study offers important contributions to the field because while much of the literature on youth activism has tended to celebrate policy victories or mass demonstrations, youth of color activists in this PAR project spoke about the importance of activist projects that are more reflective and call for pausing so that loving spaces to just be together can be created. For example, by designing a culminating event free of policy prescriptions and hostile

audiences, the team showed that there are various enactments of activism, and all are important. While policy transformations are crucial and visible to systems of power, the youth of color in this study also understand that creating spaces to heal is tethered to collective liberation. Therefore, we distinguish our conceptualizations of healing by grounding it in CRT and healing justice to reject orientations to healing that are not rooted in ancestral (re)memory, self-actualization, and understanding that collective progress should reclaim/restore/build realities where all people and the natural world can thrive. This broader repertoire of social action ultimately sustains the fuel needed in the long-term organizing efforts toward collective liberation.

Moving forward, it is crucial for future scholarship to further explore youth of color's relationships to healing and to also consider how these understandings might inform approaches to participatory research that integrate healing aspects in the design process. Future work from Voices of Healing, inspired by this PAR project, will explore how youth of color cultural practices reveal their unique healing wisdoms. Youth of color will reflect on their personal identities, cultures, and families, and this work will position these embodied knowledges as ancestral archives to explore enactments of resistance and activism in their everyday lives.

Conclusion

The themes of the PAR team and the experiences shared in this paper underscore the urgent need for structural changes and, ultimately, the dismantling of white supremacy. Yet, the themes also display that amidst ongoing structural violence, communities of color can intervene and create moments of pausing that are grounded in relationality and communal care that sustain capacities to organize for systems of change. Youth of color activists are positioning healing as an invitation to center our dignity through resting, recovering, and processing alongside advocating for social change, as both are integral to our survival. The PAR members' understanding of healing in relation to their commitments to activism is aligned with Birdsong's (2020) assertion that "another world is not only possible but is emerging all around us" (p. 21).

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Author Notes

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Appendix

Interview Questions

Thank you again for taking your time to participate in this interview. It should take about 30 minutes, but it can be longer if you'd like to share more. Please remember that there are no right or wrong answers to these questions; we just want to hear from you—your stories and experiences.

SHARED QUESTIONS *(for all of us to ask)*

1. What does healing mean to you?
 - a. What are some practices that you find healing?
 - b. When do you use them?
2. Do you feel like your identity (ex. race, gender, etc.) impacts how you pursue healing? (For example, as a man, does it feel harder to heal when there are stereotypes about emotions?)
3. Tell me about a time when you realized that healing was needed.
4. Describe how you're feeling, without using "good," "fine," or "okay." Please be as specific as you are comfortable with.

UNIQUE QUESTIONS *(select 2–4 of these questions to ask based on what is most important to you)*

5. Can you share a form of art (song, poem, painting, etc.) that resonates with you and feels healing?
 - a. What led you to select that piece of art?
6. How have other individuals or groups contributed to your healing?
 - a. Have you been part of a healthy, healing community? What has that been like? What does it feel like?
 - b. Is there a healing person from your childhood?
7. Do you ever feel like healing takes up too much space and/or is a burden?
8. When you feel lost or that you've fallen off the path of healing, how do you gain peace again?
9. If you could create a space that had healing qualities, what would that look like or feel like?
 - a. What would it take to maintain or sustain a space like that?
 - b. Have you had a positive healing experience dealing with health care institutions, like a hospital or clinic? Tell me about it.
10. Do you think healing is complete and/or do you think that happens?
11. Have you ever had to persevere through social injustice?
 - a. If yes, please tell me about it.
 - b. If you haven't, do you believe you will ever have to in the future?
12. Tell me about a time when you pushed for change.
 - a. How was that related to healing?
13. How do you maintain a balance between taking care of yourself and others while doing social justice work? (Alternative wording: How do you prevent burnout while doing social justice work?)
14. Our research group will be sharing recommendations for healing with community organizations and people engaged in social justice work. Do you have any advice you want us to share when we present our results?