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**Social Justice Healing Practitioners: *Testimonios* of  
Transformative Praxis and Hope**

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Based on the *testimonios* of 16 social justice healing practitioners from the greater San Francisco Bay Area, this article examines the principles and practices guiding their healing praxis when working with urban youth of color, particularly of Chican@/Latin@ background. I identify social justice healing practitioners as community educators who center healing and social justice when engaging youth in transformative social change. As a methodological tool, *testimonios* provide great insights into the life experiences and reflexivity of these community educators. By explicitly making a commitment to restoring and renewing young people's social well-being, as well as their own, these practitioners promote more holistic practices that are inclusive of young people's mind, body, and spirit. Social justice healing practitioners seek to facilitate healing spaces that provide a context for young people to reconceptualize individual challenges as a politicized collective struggle, and through this process create a platform for both youth and educators to collectively engage in healing and transformative praxis. The findings from these *testimonios* suggest that social justice healing practitioners strive to create community healing practices to support young people in their individual and collective processes of healing with the goal of cultivating their resilience, hope, and capacity to see themselves as agents of change.

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## Introduction

You can't keep your soul open. All that compassion and empathy for what young people are going through, old people, and your family, and your loved ones because we go to the raw. And we feel it raw. That is how we can transform it into a *remedio* or a poem, or a canto, or a painting. *El floricante* is what they call where the poets go. That is where the healers go. So with the butterfly medicine we can stay focused with the flower during turbulent times. We take on the beautiful colors of flowers because there is a correlation between healing and the visuals. When entering a healing relationship we need to close up. Started using cocoon medicine mother taught me. The blanket to close up when feeling too raw.

~Tata Tecolote

I met with community elder Tata Tecolote<sup>1</sup> in the comfort of his home's backyard, also the setting where he conducts many of his healing ceremonies. To begin, we settled in the coziness of the top level of his tree house. From this viewpoint, we were able to enjoy the sun's warm rays of light and appreciate a spectacular sunny autumn morning surrounded by hummingbirds and redwood trees. My altar was placed on the center table where sage was burned as I attentively listened to Tata Tecolote unfold his life journey. Since he is a powerful and gifted storyteller, it was an emotional and intense four hours in which I got to experience a range of emotions that deeply touched my heart and spirit. At times, his animation of stories and *dichos* also brought moments of humor and laughter. This helped to lighten the heaviness that arose when remembering and retelling traumatic experiences. Tata Tecolote was born in 1950. During the Native American Urban Relocation program of the 1950's, he and his mother were forced to relocate to Rainbow City's housing projects, where his family faced great adversity and discrimination within a context of the city's racial and economic segregation. These experiences fueled his motivation to become a community activist during Rainbow City's rich period of Chicano activism in the 60's and 70's. As a licensed clinical social worker he helped create a community mental health clinic, which he directed for nearly three decades. He refers to himself as a "social justice healer offering a traditional healing praxis," and his traditional healing praxis emerged by interweaving his mother's teaching of traditional healing and Paulo Freire's theories of pedagogy of the oppressed. His leadership and multiple roles as a social justice activist,

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<sup>1</sup> All participants, organizations, and cities have been given pseudonyms.

therapist, healer, writer, and traditional Aztec dancer<sup>2</sup> over the past three decades have made him a respected and legendary elder in his community.

In addition to working in the capacity of mental health clinician for a youth organization, he opens his home to offer free monthly community Temazkals<sup>3</sup> for educators, activists and youth to receive traditional healing. It is at Tata Tecolote's monthly Temazkal that I was first introduced to his healing praxis. In the process, I have encountered many community educators, like Tata Tecolote, who are fostering alternative practices that nurture hope and a sense that change is possible in the hearts and minds of urban youth of color and community members. For the purposes of this paper, healing<sup>4</sup> is understood as a process that is inclusive of our mindbodyspirit and aims to restore and renew the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of students, educators and broader community.

My motivation to explore the relationships between healing and social justice came about from my own personal experiences in seeking to heal my own wounds and my desire to achieve balance and harmony in my life. My background as the daughter of immigrant Mexican parents and struggles in the face of institutional oppression have shaped who I am today and have cultivated a commitment to social justice from a young age. Experiencing and witnessing social injustices injures the spirit and takes a heavy toll in our mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. Thus, healing for me is not optional; it has been vital to being able to thrive. It has been a revolutionary act of self-love and self-transformation in the process. It has facilitated my connection to my ancestors for I feel a responsibility to continue to pass on the generational knowledge and wisdom that lives inside of me despite all attempts to erase and repress my full humanity as a woman of color. It is my intimate connection to the earth, for each day, I am reminded of her generosity and abundance. More importantly, I do it for my daughter and all the

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<sup>2</sup> Danza Azteca or "Aztec Dancing" is a complex and ancient form of communications among the nations of central Mexico. It is a living, evolving, cultural tradition filled with the artistic, spiritual, and traditions of the Precolombian Aztecs that is practiced throughout Mexico and the U.S. (see Luna, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Temazkal is an ancient Indigenous purification sweat ceremony that is traditional to many but not all native peoples of the Americas. Entering the Temazkal is entering the earth's womb and the lava rocks embody the spirit of ancestors, the water poured over the rocks emits steam or the breath of creator. For Medina (2014) "The process of sweating in the ceremony requires physical and emotional sacrifice. It is a process of letting go of one's fears, of working through material and temporal concerns. It is a process that requires trust, trust in one's creator, and trust in the ceremonial leader or water pourer" (p. 175).

<sup>4</sup> Unlike Western therapeutic approaches to healing that mostly entail getting rid of symptoms that are present because of trauma, my understanding of healing borrows from the work of Native American psychologist Eduardo Duran who highlights that a key component to healing "is a deep understanding of why the trauma may have occurred and what type of life lesson is embedded in the suffering and the event itself" (2010, p.10).

younger generations for we have a responsibility to help co-create with them a better world; one in which we can appreciate our sacredness and interconnection to all life.

This work honors the creative capacity and constant drive to heal among educators in community settings. As a decolonizing healing project, this study aims to contribute to creating more holistic models of education that nurture individuals' innate resilience to nurture hope and collective healing. By shifting away from a predominant focus on stress and deficiency in relation to community educators' commitment to teaching, this article focuses on the principles and practices community educators deploy when working with historically marginalized youth of color and how this knowledge can help bring greater insights into the strengths and potential of a healing praxis for social justice education. Thus, this article highlights how some community educators consciously integrate healing in their social justice praxis. Some, like Tata Tecolote, maintain a lifelong commitment to social justice and community healing; yet research has not illuminated the characteristics that foster this ongoing commitment.

Based on sixteen *testimonios*<sup>5</sup> of *social justice healing practitioners*, who I identify as community educators who center healing and a social justice framework when engaging urban youth of color, this paper explores the following research questions: 1) How do community educators experience and develop practical definitions of healing and collective agency in relation to social transformation? and 2) What are the principles guiding the healing informed approach of these practitioners when working with urban youth of color? These questions help further an understanding of the potential role healing spaces can play in supporting transformative and holistic models of teaching and learning that expand beyond the walls of the classroom.

First, I discuss the theoretical framework that informs this work and a description of the research design and methodology. My methodological approach deploys a decolonizing lens and epistemology that aims to engage alternative forms of knowledge that expand beyond dominant paradigms of thinking in mainstream educational research. Next, I present the findings that emerged from practitioners' *testimonios*. These findings highlight how social justice healing practitioners draw from a diverse range of healing modalities in their praxis and how four healing principles inform what I am calling a *social justice healing praxis*. These include: 1) A

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<sup>5</sup> Latina Feminist Group (2001) proposes *testimonios* as a method for feminist research praxis. The authors in this anthology speak to the power of story, personal narratives, and how *testimonios* can be legitimate sources of data and evidence. Framed by common political views, a *testimonio* is a way to collectively create knowledge and theory based on experiences.

critical understanding of what urban youth of color are healing from, 2) A commitment to self-healing, 3) A commitment to merge healing and social justice, and 4) An understanding that healing is rooted in community understandings' of cultural and spiritual wellbeing. Some of the challenges that community educators face when centering healing in their praxis are also presented. To conclude, I discuss the implications of these principles in helping to inform healing pedagogies in education.

### **A Healing Paradigm Shift in Social Justice Educational Praxis**

Healing means far more than emoting or discharging feelings. It is a process of experiencing emotions, gaining insight into their source, and identifying and changing negative beliefs and behaviors. It is a holistic process, which calls on the powers of the mind, the emotions, the body and the spirit and results in freeing of these powers for positive action in the social and political world.

~Bill Mussell, quoted in Graveline 1998, p. 155.

Educator and Skwah First Nation member Bill Mussell understands healing as a process that is inclusive of mindbodyspirit and results in social and political change, thus expanding mainstream understandings of healing as it relates to individual and collective agency. Yet, too often when one invokes the concepts of healing and trauma in most academic settings, the fields of public health and psychology dominate our understandings of these two concepts. Images of impoverished, traumatized, and unhealthy communities of color in need of "healing" may surface in the imaginary of many working professionals. Moreover, mainstream understandings of trauma in the social sciences fail to include a political and historical analysis to contextualize how trauma and healing are understood and experienced among communities of color (Prussing, 2014).

More recently, a growing and critical body of literature in these fields has begun to explore the cumulative impacts of health and socio-economic disparities facing communities of color. Scholars in the field of counseling psychology have demonstrated how marginalized communities are adversely impacted emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually by the burden of discrimination and racism (Carter, 2007; Bryant-Davis, 2007; Williams and Mohammed, 2009; Flores, 2013). We also know that the emotional impact of being othered since childhood is a precursor to depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and acts of aggression and violence directed toward the self and others among youth of color (Hardy and Laszloffy, 2005). Psychologist Isaac

Prilleltensky (2012) introduces the approach of “wellness as fairness” that centers justice to reinforce the idea that healing happens in a political context and must promote individual, interpersonal, organizational, and community wellbeing. By defining wellness in terms of justice, the work of Prilleltensky (2012) reminds us of our capacity as agents of change that can alter the conditions of injustice. In particular for urban youth of color, healing within community urban settings makes it possible for youth to foster a culture of non-violence, activism, and renewed hope in community justice (Ginwright, 2010). This body of literature has been critical to deepening our understanding of the ways in which trauma and stress build in our bodies and the dire consequences this cumulative and systemic trauma can have on the wellbeing of communities of color.

My work also draws from decolonizing approaches in education and community understandings of trauma and healing that center Indigenous Knowledges (IK) (Battiste, 1998; Cajete, 2000; Delgado-Bernal et al., 2006; Grande, 2004; Graveline, 1998; Gonzales, 2012). Decolonizing approaches place Indigenous concerns with exercising self-determination and protecting cultural distinctiveness at the center of research and practice (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2009). Moreover, the concept of historical trauma (HT) brings attention to the ways in which for Native Americans and other communities of color trauma is not experienced simply as an isolated event; cumulative and on-going trauma, if not healed, is passed on from generation to generation (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Duran & Duran, 1995). For Indigenous communities, historical trauma recognizes the collective unresolved grief resulting from the violence of colonization and how on-going present day policies that colonize, exploit, and dehumanize Indigenous Peoples continue to scar this open wound. Especially for historically marginalized communities, it is necessary to make the links across these various bodies of work to better understand how this knowledge can best assist educators in sustaining their commitment to teaching in ways that affirms the humanity of their students and themselves.

### **Pedagogies of Healing, Spirit & Decolonization**

In the past two decades scholars in education have begun to theorize how K-12 institutions of schooling socially and psychologically injure rather than heal wounded learners and how schools can be spaces where teachers, students, and parents can begin to heal from these



wounds (Kennedy & Morton, 1999; Koplow, 2002; Olson, 2009). While this body of work helps to bring attention to the intersection of education and healing, it fails to include a critical analysis of the socio-political and interlocking systems of oppression that dehumanize and negatively impact the educational and life trajectories of urban youth of color. Indeed, not much research has focused on exploring the potential and new possibilities that may arise from a healing approach that does not ignore the socio-economic-political realities of urban youth of color and aims to move beyond trauma. Thus, classroom and community spaces that center pedagogies of healing, spirit, and decolonization are vital sites of knowledge production for transformative education.

In particular, scholars of higher education have articulated the need for integrating spirituality and healing into their teaching praxis as vital to humanizing their students and themselves (Chavez, 2001; Delgado-Bernal, et al., 2006; Dillard, 2007; hooks, 2003, 2004; Palmer, 1983; Ritskes, 2011; Ryoo, et al., 2009; Wane, 2011). Moreover, a growing number of classroom and community educators are seeking to draw from a diverse range of tools and healing modalities in order to be able to build more inclusive learning environments that recognize the assets students bring with them and aim to decolonize the space by teaching in ways that affirms their whole selves in mind, body, and spirit (Ayala et. al., 2006; Villanueva, 2013).

In particular, educators committed to decolonizing epistemologies are being intentional about integrating healing in their teaching through alternative approaches that center Indigenous Knowledges (Dei, 2011; Graveline, 1998). In *Circle Works: Transforming Eurocentric Consciousness*, teacher/healer/activist and Metis Aboriginal woman Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) draws from traditional Aboriginal knowledge and the Medicine Wheel to put forward a holistic and healing teaching *Model-In-Use*<sup>6</sup>. This *Model-In-Use* is embedded in the circular flow of the four directions: East (conscious-raising and empowerment), South (enacting Aboriginal cultural practices), West (healing and community-building pedagogies), and the North (enacting change). *Circle Works* inspires us to embrace alternative ways of teaching and offers the possibility of an alternative paradigm. Similarly, Regnier (1994) proposes a framework to develop the notion of healing as a process pedagogy. Regnier identifies a *process pedagogy of healing* as having three phases: belonging, understanding, and critical reflection. Practices such as the sweetgrass

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<sup>6</sup> Graveline (1998) presents Model-In-Use as a model from which she is “teaching/learning through application” (p.15).

ceremony and healing circles are incorporated into the school's culture to allow students and educators to see their interdependence with each other and to promote student and community wellbeing. These works view students more holistically and contribute to decolonizing approaches that do not subtract from students' cultures. By recognizing students and community as knowledgeable, the role of teacher shifts. Moreover, these models make a conscious effort to break down the power dynamics present in schooling by allowing individuals to bring their whole selves and experiences into the knowledge production process in transformative ways. Similarly, community educators are deploying hybrid approaches that center healing and social justice when working with urban youth of color.

### **Community Healing, Organizing, and Social Justice**

Especially in the past two decades, we have witnessed more holistic models of community and youth organizing that are taking shape across our state. This movement is gaining momentum among organizers who are expanding our understandings of the kinds of practices that can help promote the social, mental, psychological, and emotional wellbeing of young people. These community educators are increasingly exploring modalities and methods that not only work towards changing the systemic causes of oppression but are also providing spaces to experience individual and collective healing in the process, or what community organizer and activist Nicole Lee calls healing centered organizing (Lee, 2014). Specifically, this work builds on previous research I conducted in partnership with Nicole Lee on the principles guiding healing centered organizing (Chavez-Diaz & Lee, 2015).

In the field of youth organizing, research has shown how experienced adult organizers in community-based organizations play a critical role in developing the political consciousness and identities of urban youth of color (See Hosang, 2006; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007, 2011). Moreover, youth civic engagement and activism provide opportunities to facilitate critical consciousness and increase positive social capital in young people (Akom, 2006; Lewis-Charp et al, 2006; Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) introduces the framework of *community cultural wealth*, "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 77). Yosso (2005) outlines

six forms of *community cultural wealth* that often go unacknowledged and include: *familial, social, linguistic, aspirational, navigational, and resistant capital* (Ibid). A *community cultural wealth* framework offers an alternative to the deficit thinking that dominates educational discourse. It entails an understanding and recognition of the many forms of “cultural wealth” urban youth of color and communities utilize. Thus, I argue that healing *conocimientos* (knowledges), represent another form of *community cultural wealth* that often goes unrecognized by mainstream youth and community development approaches.

However, a focus on youth organizing and healing reveals how community educators are creating healing spaces to support young people’s wellbeing and their capacity to revitalize their strength, courage, and commitment to work with underserved youth and communities of color. Ginwright (2010) argues that as a form of political resistance African American youth engage in a process of *radical healing* in order to recognize and fully reach their individual and collective potentials. He highlights four factors that contribute to the radical healing process: 1) caring relationships; 2) safe spaces and communities that help facilitate this process; 3) development of youth’s critical consciousness of their social worlds and how to resist social toxins; and 4) utilizing culture to connect young people to a racial and ethnic identity that is historically grounded and contemporarily relevant. His work highlights the significance of adult caring relationships with youth and how this care “is perhaps one of the most revolutionary antidotes to urban trauma because it facilitates healing and a passion for justice” (p.211). Thus, processes of *radical healing* help support creating holistic models of education that foster hope, joy, and a sense of possibility with youth as ways to contribute to individual wellbeing, community health, and broader social justice.

## Methodology

Indigenous<sup>7</sup> scholars are transforming the production of knowledge by articulating new ways to define and carry out research that centers Indigenous Knowledges<sup>8</sup> (see e.g., Wilson,

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<sup>7</sup> I understand Indigenous Peoples of the Americas to refer to the original inhabitants of the land area now known as the United States as well as Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, and their descendants.

<sup>8</sup> My understanding of Indigenous Knowledges draws from Ritskes (2011) who asserts “Indigenous Knowledges are not a desperate reach into a static, romanticized past but a realization that, through history and embodied experience, the past and the future can be informed and transformed; Indigenous Knowledges are dynamic and fluid” (p.413).

2009; Gonzales, 2012; Smith, 1999; Graveline, 1998; Kovach, 2009; Cajete, 2000; Grande, 2004). These scholars are bringing forward decolonizing methods of research and new tools to transform knowledge production and have laid the stepping-stones for new generations of scholars to carry out research in ways that are meaningful to our lives and communities. Thus, as part of the research process I was intentional about creating research principles to help inform my research methodology. In an upcoming article, I expand on the epistemological implications of employing what I call methodologies of healing that draw on six principles that include: 1) Addressing the heart of the matter, 2) Acknowledging and centering Indigenous Knowledges, 3) Including spirituality, 4) Deep listening, 5) Respecting relationships, and 6) Reciprocating with humility (Chavez-Diaz, forthcoming).

To document the experiences of these practitioners, this qualitative study used the method of *testimonio*. During 2014-15, I conducted 16 *testimonios* with adult practitioners who ranged between the ages of 26 to 65 and who reside in the greater San Francisco Bay Area and Central Valley. This geographical location is of special interest given that it serves as a dynamic location from which to examine the relationship between healing and social justice efforts among community educators and activists who work towards building healthy and safer communities. Especially in the past 25 years there has been a greater focus on mental health and healthy development of urban youth of color and communities. This has provided a context for many of these practitioners to pursue alternative strategies in order to better serve urban youth of color.

## **Testimonio**

The practice of *testimonio* has its roots in oral cultures and human rights struggles in the Americas (Menchu, 1984 Barrios de Chungara, 1978; Partnoy, 1986). For Chicanas and Latinas *testimonio* has been deployed to deeply and critically delve into their everyday struggles and builds solidarity among women of color (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002; Latina Feminist Group, 2001). As methodology, *testimonio* involves the participant in a critical reflection of their personal, political, spiritual, and intellectual understandings of self and community (Delgado-Bernal et al., 2012). It is a first-person account of one's life experiences with attention to the injustices one has suffered and the effect these injustices have had on one's life (Aron, 1992, p.174). In this way, *testimonio* "produces knowledge based on subjective experience, not as

empirical historical facts, but as strategy of cultural survival and resistance” (Ibid). It differs from autobiography in that it engages the participant in a critical reflection of their personal experiences within a context of their particular sociopolitical realities. It provides new approaches to understanding and addressing the struggles of communities of color within our collective histories of oppression.

For many of the participants, the methodology of *testimonio* provided a familiar entry point. In addition, supplemental questions regarding healing, resilience and spirituality were included to fully capture the practitioners’ perspectives and histories. *Testimonios* were conducted in person and took place in fall of 2014 and spring of 2015. Duration ranged between 2 to 4 hours. They were audio recorded using a digital voice recorder and later transcribed. *Testimonio* material was coded based upon thematic content related to their understandings of healing and social justice work. Data collected was analyzed for patterns, themes, and ideas that emerged from these *testimonios*. Information that could identify the individuals was removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of the research participants.

## **Participants**

Participants were invited to partake in this research based on their explicit commitment to center healing and social justice in their praxis with urban youth of color and communities. They represent a convenience sample of practitioners taken from a population of local community educators. All practitioners are people of color working with low-income youth and communities of color, particularly of Chican@ and Latin@ backgrounds. Out of the 16 participants, 10 are 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrants, nine are parents, six were raised in a single parent home, and one participant identifies as queer. Twelve are men and four are women. Five of the practitioners have started their own community based youth organizations, and four of these five practitioners are currently the Executive Directors. The remaining can be classified in the following areas: four community organizers working for community based organizations, three healing activists working as independent consultants in schools and community spaces, three positive youth development practitioners working in community based organizations, and two mental health counselors who have retired but continue to volunteer their time promoting community healing. All have either collaborated with and/or know at least one other practitioner from this sample; at

least twelve work closely together through various collaborative projects and/or as part of youth coalitions. The Appendix includes a summary of all participants and some key characteristics. In addition, Table 1 below provides a brief description of the various kinds of healing modalities that these practitioners deploy under what I am calling a *social justice healing praxis*.

**Table 1: Social Justice Healing Praxis**

Where It Happens	Participants	Intervention(s)	Healing Modalities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Schools</b></li> <li>• <b>Community Based Organizations</b></li> <li>• <b>Community Spaces</b></li> <li>• <b>Community Health Centers</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Middle School &amp; High School Youth of Color &amp; Families</li> <li>• Community Organizers &amp; Activists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• After school programming</li> <li>• Individual session(s)</li> <li>• Multiple series of workshops</li> <li>• On-going community events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mesoamerican Traditional Healing               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Healing Circles</li> <li>➤ Temazkal (sweat lodge)</li> <li>➤ Danza Azteca</li> <li>➤ Drumming</li> <li>➤ Ceremony</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Curanderismo</li> <li>• Sound Therapy</li> <li>• Art Expression</li> <li>• Land Pedagogy</li> <li>• Crystal/gemstone Therapy</li> <li>• Hip Hop Culture</li> </ul>

## Findings

The *social justice healing practitioners* included in this qualitative study represent a very diverse group of individuals --each with a rich and unique life story to share. However, a reading across their *testimonios* also reveals their similarities, the intersections and points of juncture that unfold as these practitioners reflect on their trajectories of struggle, healing, and commitment to social justice. In particular, four healing principles emerged across all their *testimonios* in terms of what informs their ways of being, knowledge, and praxis. These principles of healing include:

- 1) A critical understanding of what urban youth of color are healing from,
- 2) A commitment to self-healing,
- 3) A commitment to merge healing and social justice, and
- 4) An understanding that healing is rooted in community understandings of spiritual and cultural wellbeing.

Next, a brief description of each principle will be presented. These principles emerged across all the *testimonios*, however, I have selected a few examples to help illustrate each principle.

## **Social Justice Healing Principles**

### *Principle #1: A Critical Understanding of What Urban Youth of Color Are Healing From*

Central to the discussion of healing among community educators in this study is the principle that adult practitioners must have a critical understanding of what urban youth of color are healing from within a context of their family histories and socio-economic political realities. This includes being in critical dialogue around issues of racial, gender and economic justice within a context of histories of colonization and institutional racism. For Latin@ communities, this also means addressing issues of language and immigration justice. Thus, for any practitioner working with urban youth of color, this requires a commitment to not only become informed and politically conscious around issues of social injustice affecting communities of color but also be opened to learning by listening to youth tell their stories and creating spaces for them to release some of the “cargas” (baggage) they carry with them. This provides opportunities for practitioners to be more intimately connected with the lived realities of the youth and be able to nurture spaces that address the whole individual. These spaces also become opportunities to collectively unpack punitive and discriminatory policies experienced in the form of police brutality, unjust immigration deportations that separate families, mass incarceration and zero tolerance policies in schools that impact youth and families. Thus, there is a common understanding among these practitioners that these systemic and institutional structures are especially repressive to poor urban youth of color who have few opportunities to experience healing spaces where they can address the persistent on-going violence and trauma they are subjected to on a daily basis.

Moreover, the majority of these practitioners have experienced and overcome great adversity coming from similar socioeconomic backgrounds as the youth they now work with and consciously draw from their personal *testimonios* to help contextualize the lives of urban youth of color. For some, as the *testimonios* of Tonatiuh, Emiliano, and Raul demonstrate, their personal experiences as former youth affected by the juvenile prison system have provided them

with valuable insights when understanding what some of the youth who have been impacted in similar ways may be experiencing. Drawing from their own personal experiences and professional expertise, they deploy holistic interventions that get to the root and complexity of issues affecting youth and communities of color.

Elder Tonatiuh draws from many years as a practitioner interweaving mental health and ancestral healing to inform his understanding of what communities of color are healing from and why the need to center healing in his praxis. As community educator, he holds multiple roles as an artist, musician, practicing Buddhist and traditional Indigenous ancestral healer, and a retired licensed clinical social worker (LCSW). In a soft-spoken voice, he shared his struggles being raised in the projects by a single mother struggling to provide for her family. By the age of 13, he was spending most of his time detained and in solitary confinement. These were some of the most painful years of his youth. Later, inspired by the Civil Rights movement in the late 60's, he became involved as a young Chicano activist and firm believer in the notion that "change was possible." With only a fourth grade level education, at the age of 27, after becoming a parent of two children and chronically unemployed, he decided to pursue his education. Despite the negative messages he had received about not being "smart" he worked tirelessly and obtained his GED in six months, a bachelors degree in three years, and eventually his LCSW degree. His graduate studies focused on Yaqui ancestral community healing.

When reflecting on what communities of color are healing from, he shared, "We are healing from a legacy of historical oppression, of discrimination. We have to heal from this so we are not embedding that in our own behavior, either with our own children, or people who may be different." Tonatiuh speaks of the legacies of historical trauma that are deeply embedded in some of the destructive behavior individuals may project towards one another, their children and themselves. His commitment to community healing and years of experience doing healing work with youth also means he is hopeful and affirming about the ways in which generational trauma can be healed when one takes the time to deeply reflect and be intentional about the kinds of blessings and "cargas" we pass on to the next seven generations.

Similarly, Emiliano draws from his personal experience to promote healing as critical to addressing urban violence and understanding its impact on youth and communities. He is the co-founder and executive director of a community based organization dedicated to restorative youth justice that empowers youth and communities and is rooted in Indigenous traditional healing.



Like elder Tonatiuh, Emiliano was raised by a single mother in the projects. In the context of racial, gender, and economic oppression, Emiliano came to normalize and internalize the domestic violence he witnessed both at home and in his community. This unresolved pain eventually led him to a life on the street and consequently on a downward spiral that resulted in him facing a long-term prison sentence. At a critical turning point in his life, he received a second opportunity and instead was able to get off on probation. This provided him the opportunity to pursue his education at community college. These were formative years in his personal growth and self-transformation. At community college, Ethnic Studies provided a platform to become a community organizer and his activism on campus led to gaining a foundation as a community organizer grounded in cultural and spiritual healing in the Native American tradition. Emiliano went on to obtain his bachelor of science and a masters degree from a top tier university. Access to higher education nurtured his critical political consciousness and provided an analytical framework to challenge and deconstruct normative paradigms that are oppressive to youth and communities of color. Moreover, his own personal hardships as a youth have provided him with a deep understanding that has been critical to being able to contextualize the lives of the youth whom he works with today. Reflecting on his own suffering as a youth, he shared, “I rebelled against a system that I perceived seemed inherently adverse to me but I ended up doing it in ways that were self-destructive which is a lot of what these young boys and men of color do. Initially it became a way for me to feel a sense of power when you feel powerless in a society where there is such prevalent racism and structural inequalities, such as race, class, gender and so many other things.”

In his testimonio, Emiliano highlights the importance of drawing from his lived experiences with systemic oppression to inform his healing praxis with urban youth of color going through similar struggles. Indeed, the *testimonios* of these practitioners reveal how they are able to lead resilient lives that are informed by overcoming great adversity and a commitment to see communities thrive. By drawing on ancestral knowledge and cultural healing they work towards healing the legacies of colonial oppression and foster transformation from within. By deploying healing strategies that give meaning and purpose in their lives, these community educators bring attention to the root causes of trauma and the need to create spaces of healing that are inclusive of students’ emotional and spiritual wellbeing. To this point, Emiliano shared, “Our young people are carrying trauma into the school and we are asking them to take time to

learn, to pay attention and to regurgitate because of this banking system. But we don't create any space for them to heal, to be able to let go, transform, and be able to move beyond trauma. As Emiliano elaborated above, for adult allies working with young people there must be recognition of the trauma they are carrying and the processes that help youth to move beyond trauma. Emiliano clearly points out the need for healing spaces for youth to "let go, transform" as part of their healing processes.

Raul, a first generation Chicano and young adult organizer, also knows first hand about the challenges urban youth of color face. Despite turning his life around, Raul was identified as a "gang" member and as a "danger" in his neighborhood according to the city's gang injunction that discriminatorily targeted men of color with past criminal records independent of their present reality. This was the impetus that fueled Raul's motivation to organize around changing punitive policies that target communities of color. Moreover, he is committed to creating healing spaces for young boys who may otherwise have no alternative avenues to release their pain and anger. He reflected, "There are no healthy outlets or anything to try to deal with trauma. If you are suffering from trauma and you don't heal that in a healthy way, what ends up happening is that you end up dealing with it in a not so healthy way, which is usually self destructive, using drugs to mask feelings or even reproducing that trauma on to other people." The *testimonios* of Tonatiuh, Emiliano, Raul, and the other practitioners show a deep understanding of the kinds of trauma and challenges young people are carrying with them and the need to create spaces for young people to have healthy outlets to unpack and release some of their pain and woundedness. Having a critical understanding of what urban youth of color are healing from, these practitioners highlight how community healing necessitates a focus on the whole person and includes an understanding of healing that is inclusive of one's emotional, spiritual, and cultural wellbeing, individually and collectively.

### *Principle #2: A Commitment to Self-Healing*

The second principle that emerged from practitioners' *testimonios* is a commitment to self-healing. In other words, healing work always begins first with ourselves. One can not attempt to embark on doing healing work with young people unless you have traveled on a path of self-healing yourself. For these practitioners, self-healing is a critical intervention in their own transformation and ability to engage in this work with others. Thus, practitioners share a

commitment to maintaining an on-going process of self-healing in their lives. A willingness to be vulnerable when facing their fears, pain, and/or loss has been key in being able to move forward with “less *carga*” (baggage). As the *testimonios* of Olin, Emiliano, Salvador, Luz, and Pedro suggest, self-healing allows one to let go and release what no longer serves you well. It nurtures an ability to experience a greater sense of freedom, tranquility, harmony, and balance in one’s life. By explicitly positioning the self as political, practitioners connect their personal struggles with the collective struggles of the communities they are a part of and with whom they work.

Born in El Paso, Texas, and of Indigenous/Mexican American ancestry, Olin is a multi-talented healing artist who dedicates his life to bringing about transformative change rooted in universal Indigenous earth-based practices, mind-body-spirit harmony, and playful joy. He weaves holistic empowerment, permaculture activism, mindfulness-based education, Danza Azteca, and traditional music when mentoring community organizers and young leaders. Over the years, he has learned to listen to the wisdom that comes from his body and has developed a discipline around self-care and self-healing. He integrates yoga and meditation practice as essential components of his ability to replenish his energies and create sustainability in his life. In addition, being raised in the border and in close proximity to the Chihuahua desert, he speaks of the desert plants and the coyotes as some of his first teachers. As such, he also integrates the use of traditional Indigenous medicine such as Temazkal and ceremony in his own self-healing: “the sacred medicines help me clean up.” Moreover, he reflected on how he interweaves his self-healing practices intentionally when activating the creative powers within youth for collective healing:

I let my body cleanse, go to the sauna, do massages, my yoga, things that are fun, and that *reposo* (resting) time, that quiet time so that everything integrates. I do that and I teach it to the youth too. I sneak it in. We do the martial arts, some capoeira, yoga, danza moves, some breathing and cleanse our lungs and our brains, and then lay down. I play some music, some flute, drums, rattles, and the Atecocolli (conch shells) and I tell them things, and I guide them [...] so they release traumas, and then we fill them up with confidence and love and light of the sun, of the music.

As Olin highlights, being attuned to our bodies and utilizing our creative energies to heal our bodies is an important aspect of maintaining wellness and sustainability. While not all practitioners possess the same level of rigor and discipline as Olin when it comes to their physical wellbeing, all understand the importance of somatic healing practices in their strategies with young people. For practitioners like Olin, his daily practices of self-healing are critical to being able to project authenticity in his interactions with young people: “Before I work with the

youth or anyone, I ensure I have done my practice that day, that I have given myself that moment to touch my heart, feel my heart, and be grounded so that when I go into that space with the youth I can be myself, I can be authentic, and come from my heart. That helps to create a condition, an environment for me to be real. For me, the body practices help me access the deeper layers.” For Olin, reconnecting with his heart is one way he is able to get grounded in his practice and thus be able to model and offer young people confidence and love. However, accessing “the deeper layers” of one’s self healing to “release traumas” and be able to make space within ourselves to be filled with good intentions entails a process of turning inward that is not always easy. It takes courage and inner strength to dig deep within ourselves to heal wounds that may have resulted from childhood and experiences with structural inequalities and systemic oppression over one’s life trajectory.

In the case of Emiliano, the Temazkal or sweat lodge became a sacred medicine that helped unleashed his desire for self-healing:

I began to dig deeper into my own pain from my childhood and just let it out [...] I would be in sweat lodge, I would be just bawling, just letting it out. You know we have a lot of negative male socialization that we have internalized and even if we know it not to be true it is hard to shift. One of the things they tell us is to man up; don’t cry. During those years I had a lot of healing to do and still do to this day; I’ll share my tears very openly. I am a pretty sensitive guy and that is who I am innately but I had to suppress all those tears during my adolescent years as part of my mask, part of my protection. But what happened is that pain became anger, that anger became rage, and that rage became violence. Those were some of the most violent years in my life because of all those years that I repressed my tears.

In her book *Chicana Without Apology*, Chicana feminist Eden Torres (2003) reminds us that we can learn to heal by making “good use of our pain, memory, and rage” and here lies “the potential for strong and lasting alliances in various political struggles [to] become a reality” (p.46). Moreover, she argues that due to the wounds of conquest we also carry the legacy of our ancestor’s suffering in our body and spirit and that these wounds continue to physically manifest themselves in the present day. This historical *susto* or “soul loss” continues to wound the lives of people who have a history of colonization (Duran, 2006). In this way, Torres (2003) contends that crying can cleanse, provide release, and help heal the hurt for we no longer hold the grief in our conscious thought. However, as Emiliano reflected, we are socialized not to cry and to treat the act of crying as a sign of weakness. Yet the act of crying humanizes us and can help us to heal the embodiment of our pain and suffering.

Like Emiliano, Salvador’s healing praxis draws from his own personal experiences of self-healing. Out of frustration with traditional models of working with urban youth of color that

divest from their cultures and ignore the need for healing, Salvador founded and became Executive Director of a community-based organization focused on fathers, youth and family empowerment. Raised by migrant parents in a low-income neighborhood, Salvador became involved in gangs and drugs as a young person. He grew up in a violent household and eventually his involvement in gangs resulted in him being incarcerated as a young person. In a deep moment of reflection and with the sage burning in our altar, Salvador stated in a soft-pitched tone, “It’s interesting to be at this point now where all of these experiences have become medicine for others who are struggling to find their way out through the same darkness.”

For Salvador, participating in healing circles with elders and other young man who were wounded like him was his entry point to beginning his own healing process. The sharing of *conocimiento* (knowledges) and accessing the ancient medicine of our ancestors via the four elements in the sacred space of a healing circle allowed him to open up and begin the process of shedding the many layers of his pain. Deeply reflecting on the impact of his own healing, he shared, “Through this process, not only have I become un-rage but I have been able to heal and as a result I have broken generations of pain.” He goes on to elaborate how “sitting there and imagining that the smoke starts to cleanse me, starts to reconnect my heart and my spirit and my thoughts and my intention was powerful and I wanted others to join me.”

For Pedro, self-healing entails a commitment “to bring your pain out of isolation.” Raised in Chula Vista, California, Pedro spent much of his youth going back and forth between his home in Chula Vista and Tijuana, Mexico. Today he is a multi-faceted practitioner who is a well-known published poet, performance artist, playwright, and spoken word artist. In addition, he is also the co-founder of a community-based organization dedicated to creating spaces for young people to speak their truth through poetry and spoken word. In his current position, he manages a mentorship program for Latino boys focusing on providing academic, mentoring, and social wellbeing to help nurture each students’ full potential. The opportunity to facilitate healing circles with young people allowed him a space to process his own pain and more intimately connect with young people. He shared, “I couldn’t get enough circles, I wanted more because this was healing to me. The more I broke down in front of kids the more they opened up and trusted me”. As such, the process of healing entails a willingness to move beyond our fears and comfort zone in order to be able to share our pains. To this point, Pedro stated, “Telling your pain to another person out loud and their being witnesses in the *circulo* [circle] to hear, that

might give you that one step over the hill where now you feel more confident about who you are because you have begun the process of healing. You are no longer grieving so much because you're now moving towards 'I am not afraid to talk about it.'”

Similarly, for Luz, self-healing is about “holding space” and “transforming ourselves.” Luz is a healer, medium/channeler and ceremonialist of Filipina and Indigenous Bontoc and Ibaloi lineage. She is trained in several healing modalities including sound healing, art and color, and crystal/gemstone therapy. Moreover, in 2007, she began studying plant medicine in the *curanderismo*<sup>9</sup> tradition. Her background working with youth has focused on youth organizing, immigrant rights, and ecological justice. When reflecting on her understanding of self-healing she shared,

Healing is just really holding space and having that intention around transforming ourselves from within in order to transform the planet [...] A big part of the healing process is forms of release [...] whether it is crying, screaming, or writing down whatever you need to release. And we don't do enough of that as men or women together in public and together in private. We have privatized a lot of our healing, we have to do it on our own all the time and we are asked to do it on our own. We don't hold space for people.

Luz is critical of the ways in which healing is privatized and treated as an endeavor that is the sole responsibility of the individual without any regard to our interconnectedness with each other and the greater web of life. Healing in this way is aligned with an individualistic and consumerist way of being that often packages healing in the form of “self-help” aids, books, and trainings that come with great promises of “personal growth and development” and a price tag often accessible to only a small group of privileged individuals who can afford it. However, healing as understood by these practitioners is not something that can be easily packaged into a one size tool kit, or commodity for mass consumption. Healing as the intention of “transforming ourselves from within in order to transform the planet” is a revolutionary political act of self-love and transformative praxis. By positing self-healing as political, many of the practitioners call for the need to create spaces for young people and educators to engage in collective healing and thus be able “to bring your pain out of isolation.” By modeling healthy models of being, these practitioners teach alternative ways of being that go beyond the superficial consumerist and rugged individualism mainstream media and culture attempts to impose on young people.

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<sup>9</sup> *Curanderismo* is a healing art that comes from ancient Mesoamerica and is steeped in ancient spiritual practice that integrates the use of herbs, rituals, religion, and spirituality to treat physical, spiritual, and emotional illnesses (see Avila and Parker, 2000).

*Principle #3: A Commitment to Merge Healing and Social Justice*

One of the challenges of effective activism is learning to simultaneously hold a clear picture of radical transformation and take advantage of the smaller opportunities that present themselves without being distracted or seduced into thinking them adequate. [...] Finding ways to ease the burden of oppression is a perfectly acceptable tactic, if the real goal of eliminating it completely is kept in sight.

~Aurora Levins-Morales, *Medicine Stories*, p. 45

The third principle that emerged from *testimonios* is a commitment to merge healing and social justice in their praxis. While too often healing and social justice activism are treated as separate domains that are mutually exclusive, practitioners in this study see the value and strength of merging both. By merging or bringing into dialogue healing and social justice strategies, practitioners are able to better balance the need for achieving short term and long term goals in our struggles for liberation without the dangers of burning out or reproducing destructive behaviors that get in the way of achieving long term sustainable systemic changes. In other words, these practitioners understand that it is not enough to simply focus on healing communities without also keeping in sight the need to work towards eliminating the systems of oppression that create the suffering in the first place and vice versa. For these practitioners, it is vital and necessary to merge healing and social justice in order to be able to sustain their activism and their sense of hope and possibility. In particular, I will highlight the voices of community organizers Cathy, Emiliano, and Aurora. Both Cathy and Aurora have been immersed in grassroots organizing and social justice movements since their years as high school youth and college students. For both, merging healing and social justice work has been central to being able to implement and promote more holistic strategies to better serve urban youth of color and communities.

Cathy is a fourth generation Chinese American who was born and raised in the Bay Area. While both of her parents were highly educated and she grew up middle class, Cathy experienced her great share of pain from having to cope with the severe mental illness of her mother throughout her childhood. For the most part, Cathy remained silent about these painful years of her life, and she shared that it was this feeling of having no voice and seeking to break through her silence that fueled her passion for social justice since an early age. For the past 16 years, Cathy has been a relentless leader in the areas of labor, community organizing, and policy advocacy work around issues of economic and racial justice. As a young activist right out of college, Cathy became fully immersed as an organizer working with high school youth to defeat

Proposition 21<sup>10</sup> in California. Despite the monumental collective efforts that took place across the state to fight the passage of Prop 21, the measure was passed in 2000. Cathy's experience as organizer during this political campaign offered her insightful and lasting lessons.

On the one hand, Cathy was deeply inspired by the collective sense of mobilization that came out of this movement and continued her involvement in grassroots organizing campaigns around issues of economic and juvenile justice. On the other hand, she was also greatly disappointed and wounded from witnessing the tensions and conflicts that arose among organizers in the aftermath of Prop 21. These internal divisions resulted in the break up of existing coalitions and in leaders fighting among each other. This painful experience made Cathy acutely aware of the need to integrate healing into existing traditional models of organizing. Particularly when working with urban youth of color, Cathy saw a need to not only foster young people's leadership but also acknowledge and help carry their pain and suffering. Cathy reflected:

In the model of organizing, we weren't helping them [youth] to deal with their whole person, we were primarily concerned with their political development as activists and much less with their human development as human beings. [...] coming to realization that something about this model was missing. When you have a social model that is just about fixing the structural part of oppression or dealing with the structural part of our liberation, there are other parts that are being neglected.

After realizing that traditional models of youth organizing failed to see the whole individual, Cathy felt compelled to merge healing and social justice organizing in her practice. Today, Cathy is the founding Executive Director of a community based youth organization dedicated to promoting urban peace through an emphasis on healing and cultivating the leadership of young people.

For Emiliano, it would take the continued encouragement of a Native American elder who insisted that he attend the sweatlodge in the tradition of the Navajo for him to experience the value of merging healing and social justice activism in his praxis. Observing Emiliano's passion for social justice as a young organizer at community college, this elder saw the need to share the wisdom of traditional healing medicine in order to nurture Emiliano's growth as a leader. Emiliano reflected on his early years as an organizer, "When I started this work I didn't

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<sup>10</sup> California Proposition 21 was approved by voters in 2000 and has resulted in various changes to California's laws related to the treatment of juvenile offenders. In particular, it greatly increased the prosecutorial discretion as to whether a minor is tried as an adult. This has had detrimental impacts for communities of color for it has shifted the focus of the juvenile justice system from prevention and rehabilitation to incarceration and punishment.



realize that organizing was another way that I was numbing my pain. Before I used violence, and certainly weed and alcohol, but then I realized that organizing was also a numbing tactic. Organizing didn't force me to deal with my stuff because I felt self-righteous and committed to a good cause." As Emiliano reflected, for many social activists it can be very seductive to work 40 to 60 hours a week dedicated to the "cause" without any attention to addressing the need for healing. Yet, overworking ourselves in this way can be a way of masking our internal pains and wounds that often end up manifesting in unhealthy ways in how we may relate to one another.

Similarly, Aurora is deeply committed to merging healing and social justice with urban youth of color. Aurora is a first generation Chicana who was born and raised in a predominantly rural and agricultural based community in southern California. The daughter of farm workers, she grew up aware of the persistent poverty and environmental racism that plagues her community. In her experience, healing and social justice go hand in hand, "It's not like it begins with the healing, and then you go to the organizing. Healing is a life journey and organizing to me is also healing; it's liberating, and they converge together, merge together." Bridging healing and social justice work when working with young people means Cathy, Aurora, and the other practitioners are not conducting business as usual but rather focusing on a praxis that aims to address the young person as a whole. For example, Cathy stated:

I think it means we do more than just traditional organizing with young people, we actually do identity exploration, space to grapple with internalized oppression, or what people also call decolonization, grappling with all the negative messages we have all gotten about what it means to be a person of color, a woman, a man, LGBTQ and really giving people the space to restore their relation with themselves. The other piece is giving space to do work that is healing.

Both Cathy and Aurora work hard to create collective spaces for youth to foster leadership organizing skills and healing in the process. For example, both organizations run year long after school programming in which young people have the opportunity to do political work by organizing around issues relevant to young people. As such, young people speak out at their local school board and city council meetings to help push for change in their communities. They also participate in healing circles that combine mindfulness, dialogue, and deep reflection as key elements to organizing for social change.

*Principle #4: An Understanding that Healing Is Rooted in Community Understandings' of Spiritual and Cultural Wellbeing*

Community educators share the central principle that healing is rooted in community understandings of spiritual and cultural wellbeing. Practitioners' understandings of the spiritual are anchored on the acknowledgement of spirit(s), or what can be understood for some as the common life force within and between all beings or that part of the individual that has to do with finding meaning and purpose. These practitioners are intentional about being inclusive of spirit when facilitating the space for collective healing. By embracing the power of spirituality<sup>11</sup> that traditionally has healed communities of color (see, e.g. Anzaldúa, 2002; Facio & Lara, 2014; Galvan, 2006; Roman, 2012), these practitioners' movements for social justice integrate ritual and ceremony that are rooted in community understandings of spiritual wellbeing. For example, understandings of spiritual wellbeing for many of these practitioners are rooted in Aztec, Maya, Yaqui, and Inca Indigenous civilizations that promote balance and harmony, and which inform the heritage of many Chicana@/Latin@s in the U.S. Moreover, many of these practitioners are also strongly influenced by northern Native American ancestral traditions because of relationships of solidarity that have been nurtured over time.

By drawing from Indigenous Knowledges, these practitioners treat culture as not static but rather dynamic and as such, culture is enacted in our daily lives and evolves in connection to our environment. This means practitioners emphasize the importance of embodied learning that comes from the lived experiences of the individual and community and our relationship to the natural world. Such an understanding of culture allows these community educators to see beyond the pains and struggles of victimization to the strength and endurance of cultural survival and resistance of youth of color and communities. In this sense, practitioners see cultural wellbeing as a powerful antidote that can help facilitate healing for it is about promoting a positive cultural identity among urban youth of color.

For example, for community educator Jesus, community understandings of spiritual and cultural wellbeing are foundational to his praxis in facilitating community healing: "Healing really has to do with first of all being rooted in a spiritual way. It has to be you having a philosophy of life that is interconnected with the sacredness of all things." In particular, his

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<sup>11</sup> I understand spirituality and organized religion as two distinct concepts. Thus, one can be religious without necessarily being spiritual and one can be spiritual without being religious. I am also mindful that for some individuals there is no separation between the two but rather their spirituality is interconnected with their religious beliefs.

praxis draws on more than thirty years of experience working with Chicano/Latino youth and families. As such, he weaves his life experiences, research-based knowledge, and Indigenous cultural based teachings to facilitate individual and collective healing among families and communities. He is an internationally recognized author and co-founder of a statewide network of Chicano/Latino leaders that promotes a healing informed model of culture as healing. He defined how he understands culture as healing: “Within every culture, within every family, within every individual is everything necessary, all you need is right there. It’s in you. And some people take that individually but I don’t mean it that way. You are connected to ancestral wisdom, cultural traditions. The channel of your roots, within that is everything necessary for you to find balance and harmony.” Drawing from this premise, Jesus developed a culturally relevant curriculum for young men and boys of color that aims to foster strength, harmony, and balance in families and communities and is rooted in instilling cultural resiliency through spiritual and traditional rites of passage.

For Luz, acknowledgement of spirit has been central to deepening her praxis both with youth and families. For Luz, acknowledgment of spirit entails: “Allowing spirit to hold the space, for spirit to be there, to be the connecting thread [...] acknowledgement of spirit, creator, the earth, nature, the elements, our ancestors whatever you want to call it or see it [...] that has to be there first, that is the foundation of it all, there has to also be a level of the intention and folks having an understanding of what it means to go through a transformative process.” By integrating her background as a multi-disciplinary storyteller, designer, and art maker directly with her social justice work, practitioners like Luz are inclusive of the spiritual –or systems of beliefs, whether institutional or not. Luz and other practitioners who follow this approach understand spirituality as inseparable from questions of social justice: “Complete transformation is not just going to happen with what we have been doing, it’s not just going to happen through the policies and education. We have to completely transform and that means our spirit, our spirits within, our spirits within the collective, our ancestors, and seek that from within.” While for Luz, acknowledging spirit in her practice may come in the form of conducting a *limpia* (cleanse) or doing crystal work on an individual, other practitioners may manifest their spirituality in the form of creating an altar to honor ancestors and the four directions when conducting healing circles with young people, participating in Temazkal, and or other rites of passage.

In particular, for many Latin@ youth and their families their cultural beliefs are rooted in Indigenous Knowledges that Chican@ communities and other communities of color continue to practice to various degrees (Flores, 2013; National Latino Fatherhood and Family Institute, 2012; Acosta, 2007; Tello et. al., 2010). As such, rituals, ceremony, and prayer are tools that people have developed to help access an understanding rooted in our interdependence with all life, both human and non-human and sources of life. Elder Tonatiuh shared, “There is something empowering about culture and understanding *cultura*, knowing that you are not born out of a vacuum you know that there is a track history and ancestry, that for some of us that history goes much more deeper.” For Emiliano and Roberto, learning about their history and using cultural art as a medium of healing have been powerful modalities that have been critical to promoting wellbeing with Chican@/Latin@ urban youth. Emiliano reflected,

Being able to learn my own history, my own culture to be able to find the language and a theoretical framework to articulate everything I had felt that had been delegitimized by my teachers and the systems that I encountered. Every time I had been discriminated against and I expressed that, it was dismissed. And of all of a sudden I had this vocabulary that described everything I had felt my entire life and it was empowering, but it was also infuriating; and learning my own history, I thought about many of my friends who we lost, who were dead, in prison. How many of us would be in much healthier situations if we would have been taught this since the time we were children.

In another example of an effort to promote cultural pride and healing, Raul has worked hard to co-create murals and community gardens with local youth from his neighborhood as a means of creating a vision of what beautiful and healthy communities look like: “Murals to beautify our neighborhood with cultural images, images that empower our neighborhood. Not just painting images for the sake of it but using art medium as a form of healing and transformation for our neighborhoods.” Thus, for social justice healing practitioners, spiritual healing is necessary for instilling hope and a vision of what can be possible in our communities. In this sense, spiritual and cultural community healing work allows healers to work from a place of wholeness and not fragmentation.

## **Exploring Challenges**

Like in any social justice oriented community based praxis, challenges and tensions arise for practitioners committed to long-term transformative and sustainable social change. Some of the challenges practitioners talked about are common to social justice activists doing community-

based activism. These include a lack of funding to support healing work and the resistance they may encounter when attempting to institutionalize healing in schools and other institutional spaces that may not always be receptive to a healing paradigm. However, for this piece I will focus on two areas of tension that emerged from *testimonios* and represent an opportunity to deeply reflect on how we can grow our understanding of how these practitioners implement a social justice healing praxis with urban youth of color. These challenges include: 1) Not all youth may be ready and/or receptive to a healing praxis, and 2) Practitioners may not be able to hold the pain of young people in a sustainable way.

*Not all youth may be ready and/or receptive to a healing praxis*

One of the challenges of integrating a healing approach when working with urban youth of color is the initial resistance that youth may have towards doing healing work. The reasons for this resistance may include but are not limited to the fear of facing their own trauma(s) and/or the initial reaction to categorize healing as doing “therapy” (for many youth there is stigma attached to participating in therapy). Moreover, when drawing upon Indigenous traditional modalities of healing careful attention must be given to how these practices are introduced. It must always be done so with the utmost respect of the diverse spiritual traditions that exists among youth of color and vigilance around issues of cultural appropriation. As the experiences of Tlaloc, Tonatiuh, and Raul highlight, healing is a process that can’t be forced and that process may look different for each individual. Thus, practitioners are acutely aware that healing interventions may not always be successful in reaching out to every youth immediately.

For Tlaloc, a queer and spiritual activist in the movements for food, environmental and healing justice, self-healing requires “deep trust” and “courage” to be vulnerable. He reflected on facilitating healing circles with young people, “I am not going to heal nobody, I am just going to hold that space that I need and I will actually receive healing and everybody in the space as much as they allow themselves to, they will also experience healing and that is their decision, their own courage to come out to be vulnerable to heal because that is the biggest step. It is a whole process of deep trust and understanding.” Specifically, Tlaloc reflected on some of the challenges he has experienced integrating Indigenous ancestral healing in his praxis with youth. As director of a yearlong youth program focused on social justice and healing, Tlaloc worked closely with a small group of urban youth activists. As part of their training the youth were asked to

collectively plan and implement a weeklong healing retreat for themselves. During one of their planning sessions, Tlaloc extended an invitation to the youth to integrate the ceremony of Temazkal. The youth were very receptive to the suggestion and collectively came to a consensus that they wanted to integrate the ceremony as part of their retreat.

Tlaloc took great care in preparing the youth for the ceremony over a period of months. In fact, elder Tata Tecolote was invited as community healer to speak at length with the youth about the meaning and significance of Temazkal ceremony for healing. All the rituals and procedures were explained to the youth prior to the actual ceremony given they were all participating in Temazkal for the first time. However, on the actual day of the ceremony, two of the youth were emotionally triggered, and they opted not to participate. At first, Tlaloc didn't know how to react and saw it as a failure on his part to successfully facilitate the space for these two youth. However, after checking in with each youth about their experience that day, Tlaloc learned from both youth that the process had triggered painful wounds that they were not yet ready to open up. In going through this experience, Tlaloc was reminded that as eager as he may be to share the healing medicine of Temazkal with all youth, it is important to honor young peoples' healing processes and that not all youth may be ready to do traditional Indigenous healing practices.

Similarly, based on his experience facilitating healing circles, Tonatiuh shared how for some youth that may have suffered great trauma, collective healing practices might not be enough to help cope and/or break through their individual trauma.

When you have collective ritual, you will have people who will fall into ritual with a real certain ease and it's just enough because they already feel connected either as friends, as human beings. You will have people who will be in circle with much more trauma, deeper trauma, and the ritual is not going to hold and it's not going to have that kind of continuity because trauma is more individualized. So collectively we can heal and if there is not a whole lot of in-depth trauma usually we can go from there as a collective.

In addition, Tonatiuh reflected on the challenges of facilitating intergenerational healing circles with elders and youth. Listening to elders share their traditional healing praxis is not something that all youth are ready to hear and/or necessarily find relevant in their life, "We have young men that come into our group and they don't stay and we have to look at that because in many ways we are not relevant to them."

For Raul, it is critical that adults be willing to meet young people where they are at in their process, especially when working with young people who are really struggling to stay positive: "We got to meet them where they are at. Not everyone wants to just learn about their

culture. They are still heavy out there. Still rough around the edges and you can't just be like, 'hey come over here to ceremony.' It don't work like that cause some of them are not ready for that." As the experiences of Tlaloc, Tonatiuh, and Raul highlight, some urban youth of color may not see healing practices focused on Indigenous ancestral healing as relevant to their life. Moreover, not all urban youth of color experiencing trauma are going to be receptive to calls to organize and act politically in terms of seeking social justice via a healing informed approach. Similarly, not all youth are likely to engage in and become transformed by meeting with other youth in social justice healing circles and may require more intensive healing processes over longer periods to be able to initiate a shift. There are differences based upon age, gender, and past experiences, and as such there is variation and differences in participation rates, and degrees of learning and transformation among the youth targeted for these interventions. In the next phase of my research, I am focusing on youth in order to understand these differences better.

*The lack of ability and sustainability to hold the pain of young people*

One of the most profound dilemmas that social justice healing practitioners articulated in their discussion of the challenges they face working with urban youth in healing spaces is the ongoing struggle of not always being able to hold on to the pain of young people in sustainable ways. Many shared examples of moments in their praxis when they felt they could be doing more when in reality they were already doing all they could possibly do to support the youth and families whom they work with. Most expressed how their commitment and passion for nurturing the next generations of youth compelled them to go the extra mile in working towards the collective healing of our youth and communities but this also often came at the cost of working long hours and often doing so by neglecting their own needs. For many, this also entailed a willingness to take on some of the pain that our youth bring with them. At the same time, many emphasized the importance of knowing that you can't heal anyone but rather attempt to provide youth with support and tools necessary for them to be able to carry their pain with less weight in their shoulders. Finding ways to provide this support without necessarily taking their pain on as your own is crucial to maintaining your own wellbeing. Yet, here lies the tension for many of these practitioners for letting go and releasing the collective wound they may carry in doing social justice healing work is not always an easy task.

Practitioner Pedro openly spoke at length about the tensions that arise when facilitating the pain of young people. He candidly shared about a period in his life when he struggled with his own personal pain of coping with divorce in the midst of doing intensive healing work with really wounded youth. Sharing his own personal pain with his youth during healing circles opened up the space for him to also be able to experience collective healing in the process. Yet, being able to both hold and release the pain of young people while maintaining one's wellbeing requires a firm commitment to finding healthy outlets to release those *cargas*. As Pedro shares, not doing so can lead to a lack of balance and impatience with the work: "I hold a lot of people's pain along with my own. Some people's purpose is to do that. Be a container for pain, as long as they know how to cleanse it. Some people are good at holding it but don't know how to cleanse. I struggle with it all the time; the selfishness that goes into the work and the lack of balance."

Like Pedro, many of the participants struggled at times to keep a healthy balance given the high needs of the communities whom they work with. And for some this may come easier than for others. For example, Salvador reflects on how witnessing that the demand in his neighborhood is much more than his organization's capacity to make a difference is emotionally draining. He shares, "It does burn you out a lot because for every young man there is a lot of them out there that need guidance, nurturing, and support." Moreover, the ongoing demands of running programming and always seeking new funds to continue the work adds another layer of pressure that makes it hard to maintain a healthy balance. This is especially true for practitioners who maintain an open door policy for youth to drop in for this may entail setting aside whatever projects you are working on in order to attend to the needs of the youth.

Especially when thinking about how to integrate healing into the classroom, Pedro discussed the challenges of capacity that may come up in terms of who can do this work in our schools. He was critical about the expectation of having educators as healers in their classrooms:

Trauma of immigration, trauma of poverty, trauma of racism, trauma of war, all those things are present in our youth. They are part of their whole identity and they bring those things into their classrooms. And to ask a teacher whose job is to educate a young man on algebra to try to access this kid's pain, find a point of healing is a lot to ask for a teacher who you pay \$42K a year to teach because you are asking that teacher to take some pain without perhaps giving that teacher an outlet for it.

When we think of an individual teacher taking on the pain of 20+ students in their classroom, the thought itself seems daunting and impractical. However, if we can think of the care of our students as the responsibility of all of us together including educators, healers, community members, parents, and the students themselves than the thought of collectively caring for our



students may not seem as overwhelming. One person alone may not be able to make all the difference in the world but collectively we can work towards nurturing and creating more healing spaces in our schools and communities that can help us carry on our collective pain with less weight in our shoulders. Yet, exploring the relationship between collective-care, activism, and sustainability is a discussion that is often not on the radar of most folks engaged in social movements. However, as activists/educators/healers/leaders engaged in social justice work, there are many challenges and demands that place a heavy burden in our lives. Attention to the intersections of community-care, activism, and sustainability is important in being able to maintain a healthy balance in which practitioners working with urban youth can find ways to collectively care for youth and themselves in light of the on-going trauma that our communities face. In all reality, there may not always be concrete or easy solutions to the challenges identified by these practitioners. However, they each shared a passion to persevere no matter what the odds are given that each sees their work as a life long commitment to creating models in which communities are thriving and instilling hope in the hearts and minds of our youth.

## **Implications and Conclusion**

Long-term activism requires more or less reliable, ongoing sources of hopefulness, faith, joy, and trust because it is a matter of believing in and working for possibilities that are nowhere in sight.

~Aurora Levins Morales, in *Medicine Stories*, p.127

I'm not saying that this [healing] is the secret to changing structural racism, structural bias, but I am saying that this type of healing can create a more balanced person and if that is possible then it's possible for someone who is totally traumatized to achieve whatever it is that they want to achieve, and that is potential and that's possibility and that's hope and that's what a lot of our kids don't have, it's what a lot of our teachers don't have.

~Pedro

The social justice healing practitioners that participated in this study show tremendous hope. Their *testimonios* reveal they have overcome great adversity themselves and how through their own processes of self-transformation and healing they have gained great insights in how to promote a diverse range of healing modalities with youth and communities. While the challenges of working to achieve social justice in historically marginalized communities have not become any lighter, these social justice healing practitioners are able to carry this weight with less “baggage” on their shoulders. They express a life long commitment to being long distance

runners in our struggles for liberation from all forms of oppression. By centering the intersection of healing and trauma in their work with urban youth of color, social justice healing practitioners reimagine how success is defined and are inclusive of mindbodyspirit in the process. Together, the breath of their work brings complexity to the praxis of healing. They help model new possibilities when it comes to promoting teaching and learning that aims to address the full humanity of our youth. From their *testimonios* emerges a healing imperative that calls upon all educators to embrace ways of being and teaching that honor and respect our humanity within a context of our lived realities and the greater web of life.

In a society in which too often the dominant master narrative views urban youth of color as a “problem,” and mainstream approaches treat youth and families in ways that dehumanize and wounds their spirit, the social justice healing practitioners in this study illuminate an alternative way. Their hybrid approach to working with urban youth of color helps to cultivate what poet, essayist, and historian Aurora Levins Morales has called a “politics of integrity, of being whole: A political practice that sacrifices neither the global nor the local, ignores neither the institutional power structures nor their most personal impact on the lives of individual people. That integrates what oppression keeps fracturing. That restores connections, not only in the future we dream of, but right here in the glory, tumultuous, hopeful, messy, and inconsistent present (1998, 5).

As such, the *testimonios* of the social justice healing practitioners presented here have promising implications for educators committed to social justice education. Integrating healing in education is not only necessary; it is vital to being able to support the growth, sustainability and wellbeing of both educators and students. Especially for educators working within a context of historically marginalized communities, teaching can at times be exhausting, draining, and can lead to burn out given the lack of systemic support and tools for educators to holistically meet the needs of their students and empower them to be critical thinkers. Creating healing spaces in our schools for educators and students to experience individual and collective healing can provide more healthy and vibrant pathways of being that acknowledges and recognizes their whole humanity in the process. And this is key to being able to foster both students and educators’ wellbeing and their capacity to dream and imagine new possibilities.

In particular, the four healing principles that emerged from these *testimonios* can inform pedagogies of healing that acknowledge the wholeness of students and treats learning and

teaching as a craft of healing (Villanueva 2013) rather than a burden. While not all educators may be equipped to be healers in their classrooms, we can work towards creating a healing consciousness among all educators that strives to teach in ways that integrates the four social justice healing principles outlined: 1) A critical understanding of what urban youth of color are healing from, 2) A commitment to self-healing, 3) A commitment to merge healing and social justice, and 4) An understanding that healing is rooted in community understandings' of spiritual and cultural wellbeing. Being inclusive of these healing principles in educational praxis can prompt new insights among classroom educators.

These four principles can help inform a critical dialogue that brings healing and education into conversation and which de-centers Western approaches of schooling that often negate the centrality of culture and spirituality in affirming teaching and learning that happens within a context of community. The four social justice healing principles position and recognize community educators as producers of knowledge that can help inform transformative spaces of teaching and learning that go beyond the walls of the classroom. Classrooms and community spaces are vital spaces that can help support and sustain collaborative learning that is inclusive of students' cultural background and community. By placing value on existing understandings and practices of healing and wellbeing within students' communities, educators can help instill hope and a language of possibility in their praxis. This is critical to nurturing future generations of young people who see themselves as agents of change committed to transformative social change.

## Appendix

### Summary of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity/Race	Position	College Graduate
<b>Alfonso</b>	32	Man	Mexican	Program Director	Yes, B.A.
<b>Aurora</b>	26	Woman	Chicana	Community Organizer	Yes, B.A.
<b>Cathy</b>	36	Woman	Chinese American	Executive Director	Yes, B.A.
<b>Emiliano</b>	41	Man	Native American/Peruvian & Columbian descent	Executive Director	Yes, B.A., M.D.
<b>Jesus</b>	62	Man	Indigenous Chicano	Healer Activist	Yes
<b>Luz</b>	34	Woman	Filipina	Healer Activist	Yes, B.A.
<b>Manuel</b>	27	Man	Native American/Chicano	Community Organizer	No
<b>Miguel</b>	36	Man	Indigenous Chicano of Mayo/Yaqui roots	Program Director	No
<b>Olin</b>	33	Man	Chicano	Healer Activist	Yes, B.A.
<b>Pedro</b>	42	Man	Latino	Program Manager & Healer Activist	Yes, B.A. M.D.
<b>Raul</b>	26	Man	Chicano	Community Organizer	No
<b>Salvador</b>	40	Man	Chicano	Executive Director	No
<b>Tata Tecolote</b>	65	Man	Chicano	Mental Health Counselor	Yes, B.A., LCSW
<b>Tlaloc</b>	31	Man	Meztiz@ of Mapuche & Spanish descent	Healer Activist	Yes, B.A., M.D.
<b>Tonatiuh</b>	64	Man	Chicano	Mental Health Counselor	Yes, B.A., LCSW
<b>Xochitl</b>	39	Woman	Salvadorian	Community Organizer	Yes, B.A.

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