

Tracking our History: Voices of Healing

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Voices of Healing: Our Origins

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Voices of Healing: Our Origins

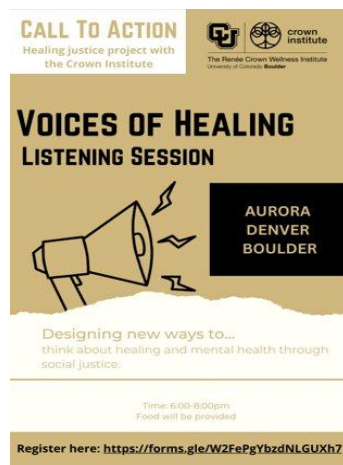
Voices of Healing came into fruition in Spring 2022 and is organized by a team that includes Ben Kirshner, Solicia Lopez, Lex Hunter, and Beatriz Salazar-Núñez. This collaborative project is the tangible manifestation of years of dreaming and organizing rooted in our commitments to young people and aimed at materialized transformations in our various walks of life. Our community-based research collective 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. Regina Wallace (2014) describes *healing justice* as an emerging movement that fosters collective, multigenerational healing and well-being while simultaneously working to transform systems and environments that are causing harm. We collaborate with marginalized youth across the Colorado Front Range as we explore healing justice and challenge dominant perspectives that perceive well-being as merely individualized self-care.

Voices of Healing team

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Listening sessions with youth organizations across Colorado Front Range: Spring 2022

In Spring 2022 Voices of Healing hosted [listening sessions](#) in Aurora, Denver, and Boulder to connect with various youth organizations and youth of color about their personal and program's journey with healing. These sessions were informal conversations and a reciprocal sharing space as we introduced ourselves, shared our grapplings with healing, and began working to build intentional relationality so that the work we are all committed to is not happening in silos. Conversations followed the logic of appreciative inquiry, which begins with people's values, practices, and organizational strengths. We learned how organizational leaders engage in healing in their own work, tensions or dilemmas they experience, and where they see possible contributions from us as a university partner. Voices of Healing is guided by the beautiful legacies of community-led work and aims to actively respond to the needs/desires of those we collaborate with. Importantly, we note that these listening sessions are an ongoing practice in our approach to the work, but something that we felt was a vital step in the early stages of launching the Voices of Healing collective.



Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP): Summer 2022 - Spring 2023

In Summer 2022 Voices of Healing expanded our team through CU Boulder's [Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program \(UROP\)](#) and intentionally recruited students of color to collaborate with and supported us in understanding how racially marginalized young people are grappling with healing while attending historically white institutions (HWI's) and/or in environments where they are the racial minority. The UROP team consists of three phenomenal undergraduate students whose lived experiences as historically marginalized students position them as experts in understanding how healing is conceptualized and taken up by young people. They are interested in exploring how young people think about the relationship between activism, healing, and mental health and what kinds of programs and institutional support would facilitate healing justice.

UROP team

Michelle Brannon (she/they) Sophomore, CU Boulder Majors: Flute Performance and Computer Science	Evangelynne Eliason (she/her) Senior, CU Boulder Major: Psychology Minors: Political Science and Psychology Certificate: Care, Health, and Resistance	Japhia Long (she/her) Junior, CU Boulder Major: International Affairs Minors: Leadership and Computer Science
		

That summer the UROP crew (along with Lex) held a [kitchen table talk](#) to reflect on their experiences as Black women pursuing healing while attending CU Boulder. Kitchen table spaces value the everyday, informal, sustainable ways racially marginalized folks pursue healing by understanding the importance of being in community with one another. Inspired by how racially marginalized youth are noting that advocacy and healing must occur simultaneously as they combat societal injustices (Ginwright, 2015), they designed their kitchen table to deepen their sisterhood and solidarity and discuss how their healing journey is impacted by racism. Their conversation was guided by this critical co-constructed autoethnographic question: “How are we as young women who identify within the Black/African diaspora approaching healing while attending a historically white institution (HWI)?” Three main findings emerged from their study: 1. non-medicated approaches to healing are necessary survival tactics and more sustainable ways to practice healing (prayer, being in community with a support system); 2. everyday resistance (such as getting enough sleep, negotiating classroom interactions, or watching your favorite movie) is an important form of activism that should be valued alongside more conventional activist behavior (protests, marches); 3. creating and joining healing counterspaces at HWIs ([Project Kind](#), [Black Student Alliance](#)) is necessary, even if it takes energy and work.



In Fall 2022 inspired by their [kitchen table talk](#) the team lead an interactive, informal workshop entitled “Healing, Activism, & Resistance: How Racially Marginalized Youth Approach Healing” through the [Boulder Youth Health Summit](#) to reflect with young people about their experiences with healing and the necessity of pursuing healing in our communities. The aims of the workshop were to examine the culturally relevant ways marginalized young people are conceptualizing and pursuing healing. The session highlighted the embedded, non-medicated approaches to healing that our communities have long been engaging in and honors our lived experiences in dignifying and healing ways.

1:1 Relationship-Building: Summer & Fall 2022

Following the energy and generative discussions from our listening sessions in Spring 2022, we met with various youth organization leaders and staff to continue building relationality and hear more about their specific needs. These 1:1 meetings provided a more intimate space to learn about their experiences, affirm each other, and discuss what our coalition building might look like. During this time we met with staff and youth from:

- [Youth on Record](#)
- [Boulder County Mental Health Services](#)
- [Colorado Health Foundation](#)
- [Youth Equity Council](#)
- [Public Achievement](#)
- [Youth Empowerment Broadcasting Organization](#)
- [Young Aspiring Americans for Social & Political Activism](#)
- [Student Voice & Leadership](#)
- [Young African Americans and Latinx Leaders](#)
- [Project VOYCE](#)

Through reflecting on our listening sessions in Spring 2022 and 1:1 conversations in Summer & Fall 2022 we saw the following themes emerge from the conversations:

- **Healing spaces function as sanctuaries and homeplaces in what are often hostile institutional environments.** How do we protect and guard these spaces so that transformative healing can occur when these healing environments are in institutional environments that inherently collide with our healing practices?
- **Healing for marginalized young people is unique in that it is both a survival/coping strategy and an opportunity for connection.** For example, a young person might talk to friends after a racially traumatic experience – being in community with those who understand these experiences can help us process and heal.
- **Fighting for social change is not sustainable if we are not taking care of ourselves.** Young people are recognizing how racial battle fatigue and burnout impacts their ability to stay engaged in the work they care about, and that gives them purpose.

- **Extending ourselves grace on the healing journey is an act of resistance.** It is crucial that we understand our healing is constantly colliding with the violent and dehumanizing presence of white supremacy so that we can forgive ourselves and others when we “slip up.”
- **Healing is interconnected with our activism.** Centering our healing journeys is what sustains us in the work. We are in community together, breaking bread, sharing our experiences, and collaborating to move towards action and social change.
- **Healing is a collective endeavor.** We are engaging in freedom dreaming as we understand our relationship to healing as a lifelong communal practice that disrupts colonial understandings of mental health that are rooted in medicine, temporary relief, and individualized practices.

Following many reflections with each other about our conversations with youth organizations/staff, young people, and other trusted community leaders we developed some next steps for our team that aligned with the noticings of the community:

- Creating an informal network with youth organizations and young people from across the Colorado Front Range
- Multi-age, youth-centered, participatory action research (PAR) project
- Intergenerational convening with network members, with peer-led workshops related to healing justice and emerging tensions.

We share these reflections to highlight that all the past, present, and future work of Voices of Healing is lovingly anchored in the beautiful conversations we are having with those doing the groundwork.

Women Investing in the School of Education (WISE) Grant: Fall 2022

In Fall 2022, Voices of Healing was awarded a \$10,000 [Women Investing in the School of Education \(WISE\) Grant](#) from the School of Education. This grant supported the team in planning, recruiting, and collaborating with racially marginalized youth to launch a paid co-designed participatory action research (PAR) project in Spring 2023.

Our Stories, Our Healing (OSOH) PAR Project: Spring 2023

PAR team members: Evangeylne Eliason, Chanelle Jones, Emran Al Ghareeb, Karen Nuñez Sifuentes, Jelie Jones, Aaralyn Zayas, Ceirra Noel, Soraya Latiff, Solicia Lopez, Ben Kirsher & Lex Hunter

In Spring 2023 Voices of Healing collaborated with eight youth/youth-serving community members from various youth organizations to launch a 6 week participatory action research (PAR) project entitled Our Stories, Our Healing. This project brought together local (across the Colorado Front Range) racially marginalized young people (15-25 years old) to explore their experiences at the intersections of healing and activism. The team interviewed community members about their experiences with healing to leverage research to honor the wisdom and their communities and to uplift community visions.

The following themes emerged from the conversations in relation to different questions:

- **How do you understand or define healing; how do you think about healing?**
 - **Healing is an ongoing process**
 - Healing is not...
 - **Facilitated by understanding/acknowledging/recognizing (gaining awareness of) family and generational and societal histories of trauma**
 - Importance of self-reflection
 - Historicizing trauma; taking it out of the person and locating trauma in systems of oppression
- **What contributes to healing, for you?**
 - **Nature**

- Going on walks, spending time with pets
- **Ritual practices**
 - Journaling, spending designated time with family/friends
- **(Re)connecting with ancestors**
 - Building an altar, spirituality, prayer
- **Being part of community**
- **How do you balance healing and social justice work?**
 - Understanding that both are long-term commitments
- **What are some barriers/challenges/threats to healing that we heard about?**
 - **Pursuing healing particularly as a person of color raises many challenges**
 - Location
 - Stigma
 - Family
 - Access to therapy
 - Intersectional experiences (ex. race, gender, religion)

Guided by their lived experiences at the intersections of healing and activism as racially marginalized young people and the conversations with trusted community voices the team planned/hosted a community convening to share what they learned about pursuing healing while advocating for social change as a person of color.



We opened the convening with two of the members sharing a [poem](#) they co-created to reflect the ideas they saw resonating with the PAR team and the community interviewees about the dynamic, ongoing processes of healing (historicizing personal and generational trauma, (re)connecting with roots, moving forward). The convening continued with introductions and community bread breaking. We then engaged in healing movement activities that connected us to our bodies and each other. Finally, we reflected in pairs/large groups about our personal experiences with healing and shared our findings from the interviews with the community. Local healers/vendors were present in the space during the convening to connect us to local resources.



Based on this PAR experience two of our members (Chanelle and Lex) are co-writing a piece entitled “A Sacred, Communal Pause: How Marginalized Youth’s Commitment to Healing Expands Our Understandings of Activism.” Below is the abstract, which has been submitted to the American Educational Research Association annual conference:

The ongoing pandemic, continued state-sanctioned violence of marginalized people, and reactionary political landscape have exacerbated the need for young activists to prioritize holistic wellness. Healing is necessary because although our engagement in advocacy work addresses the root causes of harm, it also takes an immense toll on the mind/body/spirit (Conner et al, 2023). This toll, and possible strategies to address it, have not been sufficiently addressed in the emerging research literature looking at the intersection of activism and healing. Our understanding of healing helped us see that PAR spaces do not necessarily need to culminate in policy recommendations or formal presentations because healing is a radical, ancestral act of refusal that prioritizes communal wellness. Healing is a life-giving disruption that counters white supremacist tactics that encourage communities of color to keep going until we experience racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2004), spirit-murdering (Love, 2013), and other mental health crises. Youth of color's commitment to slowing down and tending to the self reminds us that self-preservation is essential to our pursuit of justice and collective liberation. This paper explores how our Participatory Action Research (PAR) project engaged in a sacred, communal pause as we reflected on our commitments to healing and justice and lovingly invited our communities to take up healing alongside us.

Spencer Foundation Conference Grant: May 2023 - May 2024

In Spring 2023, Voices of Healing was awarded a \$50,000 conference grant from the Spencer Foundation and is working to plan and host an intergenerational Colorado Healing Justice Convening in Denver, CO in Fall 2023.

This convening proposal is guided by two mutually reinforcing purposes. The first is to develop and refine a framework for enacting and implementing healing justice in youth programs serving marginalized and minoritized youth. The second is to identify innovative research methods, anchored in a participatory, collaborative approach, to document healing practices and evaluate impact in ways that are useful for program quality and honor the sacred, liberatory aims of healing justice work. This work advances a racial equity agenda in that it will support a healing justice movement that seeks to transform systems to promote health and well-being for racially minoritized and marginalized youth (Hipolito-Delgado & Kirshner, under review). Too often, youth of color who want to access psychological support are met with interventions that are grounded in the western ideal of individualism (Chavez et al., 2016), and ignore the impact of racial oppression (Cokley, 2005; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019), and reproduce deficit assumptions

(Baldridge, 2014). Our proposed research is methodologically innovative because of its participatory, multi-generational approach that brings together young people, adult educators, community leaders, and university researchers to co-define research aims and designs.

The convening will be designed and structured to leverage the varied lived experiences and expertise of participants. Doing this kind of participatory, democratic work is not easy: convening groups across differences in age, educational attainment, professional status, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, if not carefully facilitated, can reproduce differences in power and privilege (Vakil et al., 2015). It calls for intentional facilitation with explicit norms and varied participation structures. This is a pedagogy that embraces a series of both/and in which participants will be experts and learners (Vossoughi et al., 2021). Rather than traditional keynote presentations, invited scholars will be positioned as teachers and storytellers; they will be asked to either facilitate an interactive workshop (such as by modeling a healing practice they have designed) or share their knowledge through narrative storytelling (such as a story about how they addressed a dilemma in research). Our approach to this is informed by theories of learning in multigenerational communities that center young people's experiences while drawing on the wisdom and expertise of all (Eagle Shield et al., 2020; Rogoff et al., 2003).

Healing Justice Research Action Collective (HJRAC): July 2023

Co-design team members: Emran Al Ghareeb, Paige Buchanan-Hall, Evangelyne Eliason, Jellie Jones, Karen Nuñez Sifuentes, Malachi Ramirez, Mateo Manuel Vela, Solicia Lopez, Ben Kirshner & Lex Hunter

In July 2023, Voices of Healing brought together a racially diverse team of young people to engage in a collaborative, community-centered process to design a [healing justice framework](#) for youth development and education spaces. The framework aims to identify key qualities of spaces that foster and sustain healing and social justice advocacy. It will also include guidelines and tools for assessing youth and education programs so that they can document and improve their work. To design the framework the team dreamed up what we want to see in youth development and education spaces, reviewed existing frameworks to see what ideas we want to build on, spoke with trusted community voices about their visions of healing justice, and began designing a working framework that can be shared at the Voices of Healing Colorado Healing Justice Convening in October 2023.

During the team's time together (internal meetings and community surveying) the following ideas emerged as important elements to consider in a healing justice framework:

- Conflict resolution & humanizing relationships
- Intergenerational wisdom
- Race-conscious & culturally sustaining values
- Collective historical literacy
- Ancestral ways & traditions
- Transformational learning

Colorado Healing Justice Convening: October 12th & 13th 2023

This October, Voices of Healing will be hosting an in-person [Healing Justice Convening](#) in Denver, CO to bring together key local community members (youth/youth organizations/activists) and national partners to co-create a healing justice framework for youth organizations and educational spaces.

The convening is guided by the following questions:

- How do racially marginalized youth, who engage in social justice activism, conceptualize and embody concepts such as healing, wellness, and mental health?
- What strategies do young people employ to take care of their health and well-being while engaged in social justice activism?

- How can we leverage ancestral and culturally sustaining healing practices in our daily lives and in our organizational routines?
- What are the tensions and challenges of engaging in healing justice work with youth?

Student Experience Research Network (SERN): September 2023 - August 2024

In April 2023, Voices of Healing were awarded a \$200,000 grant from the Student Experience Research (SERN) to continue developing the healing justice framework with the same group from our Colorado Healing Justice Convening. We will launch a project entitled “Healing Justice in Schools and Youth Programs.” This work will focus particularly on learning contexts and is anchored in an equity and anti-racist agenda that seeks to transform structures of education to promote health and well-being for racially minoritized and marginalized youth. For this reason, we believe an approach that brings together educators leading community spaces that prioritize healing and social justice with K12 educators and leaders offers a promising strategy for creating a shared agenda around a healing justice framework for schools. Moreover, consistent with calls from other scholars of trauma-informed education and healing justice (e.g., Brown et al., 2018; Ginwright, 2015b) we will engage young people as partners in setting this agenda and collaborate to formalize partnerships between students, adults, and systems that attends to, and transcends, known limitations of healing justice.

Research-Practice Partnerships: 2024+

Following the convening we aim to launch a research-practice partnership with a subset of the convening participants to continue designing the framework and eventually pilot test our co-created healing justice framework in youth organizing spaces across the Colorado Front Range. We hope that this feels like a generative and exciting opportunity to move intentionally and delicately from theorizing to praxis. The details of this research of this research-practice partnership collective will be co-designed by those who participate so that we maximize its relevance with the communities we are privileged to partner and dream with.

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