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The Role of Spirituality in Healing from Sexual and Relationship Violence in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine how radical healing grounded in spirituality can be transformative for college student survivors of sexual and relationship violence. We explore the history, challenges, and current dynamics that create tension and barriers for student survivors accessing religious or spiritual support in their healing journeys on campus. The paper includes two case studies describing the role of spirituality in healing for student survivors of color. We provide insights into practices and frameworks to empower practitioners, institutional leaders, and scholars to better support the needs of student survivors by incorporating spirituality into their work. Specifically, we discuss the importance of (a) encouraging students' connection to nature and land, (b) offering trauma-informed yoga programs, (c) promoting community knowledge, and (d) creating supportive communal spaces.

Keywords: spirituality, college students, healing, sexual violence, relationship violence

Issues of sexual and relationship violence (SRV) have a complex and political history in higher education. In this paper, we use the term sexual violence to refer to experiences of sexual assault or unwanted sexual contact. Defined as a pattern of coercive behaviors exerted by one romantic partner toward another, relationship violence includes physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse. Though these forms of violence have existed on college campuses since the founding of higher education in the United States (U.S.; Wilder, 2013), the experiences of student survivors, including their healing journeys, is vastly under-researched and under-resourced (Harris et al.,

2021; Karunaratne, 2023a). Further, the experiences and needs of minoritized student survivors in higher education, namely students of color, are marginalized (Harris et al., 2020; Linder et al., 2020), despite the root of these forms of violence within histories and current structures of racism, white supremacy, heteronormative notions of gender, colonization, and imperialism (INCITE!, 2016).

Given this context, in this article we examine how radical healing grounded in spirituality can be incredibly transformative for student survivors of SRV. We use the term spirituality to encompass religious and spiritual identities, experiences, practices, and traditions. We understand spirituality to be an expansive concept, incorporating connections to nature and land, body-based or somatic ways of being and knowing, and communal wisdom and practices—all of which we discuss in this article. In this paper, we first explore the history, challenges, and current dynamics that create tension and barriers for student survivors accessing religious or spiritual support in their healing journeys on campus. Acknowledging that structures of religion have played a role in violence is critical to understanding how students and their communities navigate and experience their identities in the context of these histories and structures. We then introduce two case studies grounded in advocacy and healing frameworks that involved student survivors of color who attended large public institutions. Lastly, we provide insight into practices and frameworks that can help empower student affairs professionals, advocates, and institutional leaders to better support the needs of their student survivors.

THE CONTEXT OF SRV IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The history of SRV in the U.S. is deeply connected to settler colonization, slavery, and white supremacy (INCITE!, 2016). White colonizers have used sexual violence as a tool of genocide and conquest to remove Indigenous peoples from their land and disenfranchise Indigenous communities since they arrived to the land now known as the U.S. (Simpson, 2014). Further, enslavers perpetrated sexual violence to control and terrorize enslaved Africans, and this use of sexual violence to threaten Black communities continued beyond the formal abolishment of slavery (McGuire, 2010). Consequently, the first anti-violence activists in the U.S. were Black feminist abolitionists like Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Maria Miller Stewart, and Harriet Jacobs (Hancock, 2016; McGuire, 2010). Furthermore, the first anti-violence activists in higher education were students at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, a historically Black university (McGuire, 2004). Despite the contributions of these activists, the mainstream anti-violence movement has erased the contributions of Black and Indigenous activists and has marginalized the needs of communities of color (Crenshaw, 1991). In higher education, institutional and policy responses to SRV have largely centered the needs and experiences of white women students (Harris & Linder, 2017). Institutional leaders, federal and state policymakers, and advocacy groups have often ignored how racism and other forms of oppression influence students' experiences of SRV in college (Harris, 2020; Karunaratne, 2023a).

The existing limited federal, state, and institutional policies have led to the development of specific programs and practices on college campuses, including

reporting processes, advocacy offices, and prevention education. Many institutions have created advocacy offices to serve student survivors of SRV, replicating community-based models of service provision (Voth Schrag et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2020). These advocacy offices support students to access resources, develop safety plans, and receive accommodations for their classroom or co-curricular needs (i.e., changes in living situation; Wood et al., 2020). Advocates work with faculty and student disability services to support students' academic accommodations and often connect students to other campus resources like LGBT centers (Voth Schrag et al., 2020). They also develop plans for safety for students currently in abusive relationships and for emotional safety as they navigate higher education (Voth Schrag et al., 2020). Other student affairs functional areas, such as gender equity and women's centers, cultural centers, and LGBT resource centers, have engaged in advocacy for student survivors (Karunaratne, 2023a); however, these offices are typically not supported or resourced adequately as they engage in this work.

While some institutions have created these advocacy offices, colleges and universities have primarily focused their efforts on creating reporting and adjudication processes because of the heavy focus on compliance and reporting at the national level (Harris & Linder, 2017; Wooten & Mitchell, 2016). Generally, institutions of higher education have promoted a narrow and procedural application of federal legislation, such as Title IX and the Clery Act, that is focused on compliance as opposed to an ethical commitment to prevent SRV (Wooten & Mitchell, 2016). These policy responses do not necessarily address the needs of student survivors of color, due to their heavy focus on reporting and adjudication processes that replicate classist and racist criminal justice systems (Anderson Wadley & Hurtado, 2023; Shepp et al., 2023). Historically, the anti-violence movements within and outside of higher education have promoted carceral responses to SRV that are deeply connected to ideologies of punishment (Kaba, 2021; Kim, 2018). However, advocates of color have championed radical healing tied to ancestral visions of abolition, healthy relations, and spiritual connections to restorative practices (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020).

Radical Healing in Higher Education

Partly due to the heavy focus on compliance, students' needs for healing have been continually marginalized in higher education research, policy, and practice (Harris et al., 2021; Karunaratne, 2023a). Consequently, practices that support students' spiritual and religious identities in relation to their healing are often ignored. The sparse literature on college students' healing from SRV has shown that social support, the ability to make meaning about traumatic events in one's life, religion, and recognizing one's internal strength can support students' healing, often defined and measured as posttraumatic growth or psychological symptom reduction (Banyard & Cantor, 2004; Polichnowski, 2008; Rodenhizer et al., 2021; Voth Schrag & Edmond, 2018). While some of these findings may hold true for student survivors from many backgrounds, the samples upon which these studies are based are overwhelmingly, and, as in the case of Rodenhizer et al. (2021), exclusively, white. There is growing research exploring the healing journeys of college students of color

that highlights the importance of body-based modalities, peer support, connections with family, and opportunities to (re)connect with oneself (Harris et al., 2021; Karunaratne, 2023a, 2023b).

Though the healing scholarship within higher education is limited, there are radical frameworks for healing among communities of color that emphasize the importance of collective healing and considerations of other forms of domination like racism and classism (French et al., 2020; Ginwright, 2016). French et al. (2020) articulate the centrality of radical hope, emotional and social support, self and cultural knowledge, resistance, and critical consciousness in radical healing, defining radical healing as simultaneously "resisting oppression and moving toward freedom" (p. 24). Ortega-Williams et al. (2021) propose a framework for posttraumatic growth that expands beyond the traditional personal-level healing domains that involve individuals' ability to find new possibilities, appreciation for life, and personal strength. They provide an expansive framework that incorporates collective, ancestral, and group-level domains as essential to healing, including relating to ancestors and culture and collective spiritual change. However, these radical frameworks do not speak specifically to the healing and spiritual experiences of college students, leaving a gap in knowledge about best supporting student survivors.

The marginalization of spirituality and healing in SRV response efforts is particularly problematic given the negative impacts that these forms of trauma can have on college students. Experiences of SRV can negatively impact students' physical and mental health, academics, and relationships with others (Christopher & Kisler, 2012; Fish et al., 2017). Specifically, these forms of trauma can result in high rates of anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, and depression (Amanor-Boadu et al., 2011; Amar & Alexy, 2005). For survivors of color, trauma from SRV may be compounded with other forms of trauma, like racial violence and intergenerational trauma, which can have detrimental impacts on their learning and experiences on campus (Gómez, 2020). The negative effects of these forms of trauma necessitates the prioritization of healing in response to SRV in higher education. Further, to fully address and support the healing of student survivors, particularly survivors of color, students' spirituality must be centered in healing programs, policies, and practices. This manuscript aims to support this focus on spirituality by addressing the existing gap in current research and practice.

CASE STUDIES

Case Study One: Azaadi

I, Nadeeka, remember Azaadi (pseudonym) walking into the room, smiling at me and radiating positive energy. As a graduating senior, she had spent much of her college experience navigating an abusive relationship and her subsequent healing journey. As we talked about her college life, she highlighted the many communities she belonged to and the many ways she contributed to them. Her enthusiasm for supporting other students as a teaching assistant in her STEM classes shone through. She spoke about her roommates, friends, and her religious community on campus. She shared her desire and plans to attend law school after graduating. Many of these

experiences served a purpose in her healing journey. Azaadi articulated how she found purpose in her current work supporting other students and in her future goals; in turn, this sense of purpose fueled her healing. While Azaadi identified many spaces, people, philosophies, and experiences that supported her healing from dating violence, her spirituality served as an underlying guiding force in her healing journey.

I met Azaadi while conducting a qualitative research study about the experiences of South Asian college students who had experienced dating violence (see Karunaratne, 2023b). As a child of Sri Lankan immigrants, I was motivated to explore and understand the complexities South Asian students face when navigating issues of abuse, violence, culture, intergenerational trauma, and healing. In my second conversation with Azaadi, I invited her to share photographs she had taken that symbolized or depicted elements of her healing journey. With every picture she showed, her explanations grew more and more poetic as she highlighted the spiritual significance and meaning of each picture in relation to her healing journey.

For Azaadi and many other students I have worked within my capacities as a violence prevention educator, trauma-informed yoga instructor, and scholar, spirituality is felt and embodied. Spirituality can be embodied in students' relationships with the natural world and their parents, ancestors, and peers. Students may feel spiritual connections in their bodies when they are in nature, in a temple, and in relationship with others. And their spirituality can be deeply connected to their healing from SRV. Many students described their healing as reconnecting to themselves, to things they used to love to do, to their religious communities, and to their place in the natural world. For Azaadi, her religion and spirituality were sources of strength, essential to her (re)connection with herself and her power. Azaadi found healing in her community of other Hindu students, who she would often go home with on weekends to attend their local Mandir.

In addition to her religious community at home, Azaadi found strength and meaning in nature. Azaadi showed pictures of and spoke at length about Zion National Park, describing "the layers of the cliffs" that were "carved by the wind and water." She said, "you can see all the layers and that the canyons have been through a lot. It's the same thing with us right—we all have different components." To Azaadi, Zion National Park was a spiritual place with a sacred history that provided present-day meaning for her own philosophical understandings of her life, journey, and experiences. Azaadi's connection to other settings in the natural world also supported her healing from dating violence. Describing a cloud-filled mountain top she hiked to in India, she shared,

> It just felt really peaceful because when you're above the clouds you can't really see anything else except it. You don't know what's behind the cloud, you don't know if there's another mountain or if it's just a drop like straight down. You can't tell if you only have the ground underneath your feet at that point like moving forward like you don't know necessarily what's ahead of you. And for me, that's good because sometimes we get so future focused.

In this quote, Azaadi highlighted the importance of the natural world, grounded in her spirituality and faith, in helping her to embrace the unknown and have hope that

things will be okay. Further elaborating on the spiritual connection she felt to that place, she said, "you're floating in the clouds, you're like letting go like, it feels like a different world up there. And that was another place where I felt a lot of peace." These feelings of peace, calm, and connection to something greater than themselves were echoed by other participants in the study as being important to their healing.

The healing significance of places, people, and practices that fostered spiritual feelings of peace has also been shared by other student survivors I have worked with as a trauma-healing yoga instructor and student affairs professional. However, in my work, I have seen the ways in which healing is often marginalized in campus efforts to respond to SRV. Even offices that provide support to student survivors often prioritize talk therapy and cognitive processing of trauma, instead of also centering the multitude of ways that survivors, particularly marginalized survivors, may find healing through their spirituality. Many students, especially students of color, often find opportunities for points of spiritual connection and subsequent healing through spaces not typically provided or even considered as "healing" by administrators and practitioners. Survivors have found healing and connection to their spirituality through critical conversations about issues of race and gender in classrooms, from yoga and other body-based modalities, by engaging with activist and advocacy groups, by fostering connection to their ancestors, through cultural rituals and practices, and in familial and religious spaces.

Case Study Two: Alejandra

I, Karla, am the daughter of an Indigenous Oaxacan father, Chatino, and a Honduran mother from Central America. I had a very spiritual and religious upbringing, having learned and engaged in traditions, spiritual practices, and ceremonies from my father's side and Catholic practices on my mother's side. As a first-generation college student and the daughter of parents who migrated from their ancestral lands, spirituality and radical healing have been critical to my development as a scholar-practitioner, advocate, and prevention educator on college campuses. The following case study is a composite narrative used to describe the experiences of several Indigenous and Chicanx student survivors within their context of radical healing. Composites are helpful in highlighting key aspects of phenomena while preserving confidentiality and anonymity (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

I worked with Alejandra, a graduate student and mother in her third year of her PhD program. She had been in an abusive relationship with another graduate student of color for about two years. The relationship had started healthy, both students connecting on their research interest that centered around restorative justice interventions to community policing in the U.S. Over time, Alejandra started to experience abusive behavior and ongoing sexual violence from her partner. At first it was hard for her to acknowledge the conflicting emotions and gradual escalation of unhealthy behavior in her relationship, noting that her research and values focused on restoring and healing the trauma of others through non-violent systems. Reporting to the criminal justice process and campus administrators, like the Title IX office, felt disingenuous and counterintuitive due to these systems focusing on accountability

through punishment, expulsion, and ostracization compared to more restorative processes like healing, repairing, and community accountability.

Although general advocacy needs were part of our process, Alejandra's spiritual needs and connections to her identity and community as a woman of color were foundational to her persistence with her holistic and academic goals. Our advocacy sessions heavily focused on resilience-building, discussing her connection to her mother who had also experienced violence (like many other women in her lineage). Sexual violence for her was a lived experience that connected her to her mother, grandmother, and many other women around her. It was both an experience that pained and angered her, while also providing her with strength, courage, and the ability to not feel alone in the experience. It prompted her to explore how she could heal traumas and understand how trauma manifested in her and her family's lives, while also exposing cycles that she wanted to break and redefine for herself. As a mother, what inspired her to persevere and "show up" for her healing or seek support was to redefine that experience of violence for her children. Cultivating spiritual traditions, healthy cycles and relations, and making choices that empowered safety for her children, as the next generation, were important to her to voice, explore, and center in sessions.

SRV can isolate student survivors because of stigma, internalized self-blame, and shame within their social and professional communities. Alejandra felt ashamed of her experience, often mentioning, "as a doctoral Woman of Color, I'm educated—I research violence and should know better." Finding faculty, advisors, and other graduate students that could understand her experience without judgment and shifts in perceptions of her was a challenging part of her journey. Being surrounded by a support network who understood her healing needs and experiences and who could hold sacred space for her spiritually empowered her. At that time, our advocacy office had developed and co-sponsored several spaces to allow survivors of color to hold space for one another, connect on a transcendental level, and heal together. We had implemented a "Yoga as Healing" space that allowed survivors to build a ceremonial space together. We also partnered with a cultural center on campus to build a trauma-informed space to honor the experiences of survivors of color that focused on the generational and current needs of our Chicanx/Latinx student survivors within a spiritual and cultural diaspora. Alejandra joined these programs and was able to connect and expand her support system with other survivors of color on campus.

Acknowledging that her campus experiences were only part of her life as a student survivor, helping her develop support outside of campus was part of our journey and work together. We worked to connect her with an online community of scholars, spiritual practitioners, and survivors who could help her heal through research, decolonizing clinical therapy, self-care, and affirmative messages about generational healing. This was facilitated through curating libraries of social media accounts, podcasts, and scholars who elevated the voices and journeys of survivors of color who experienced SRV.

Self-care, healing self, and self-needs were concepts that Alejandra wanted to explore and put into practice. Colonization, white supremacy, and imperialism often teach us to value labor that produces products, to think of ourselves for profit, and to exploit our internal and external resources (Okun, 2021). Alejandra struggled with

the notion that focusing on her needs instead of the needs of her children or community perpetuated selfish beliefs and in some way perpetuated white supremacy. It was a journey for Alejandra to come to accept the belief that caring for herself and making choices to engage in ceremony with a therapist and in spiritual spaces served a purpose for bringing balance to those relations and healing for her future lineage. She created altars that had images, items, and plants that honored her ancestors and herself. She also connected with her with elders and spiritual leaders that taught her about crystals and herbs (like sage and yerba santa) to utilize in her healing. We explored practices that focused on connecting her to spaces that brought her peace, grounding, and health, such as connections to nature (scheduling trips to mountains, the ocean, etc.) while also planning trips to see her family in her ancestral lands. Her ancestral lands were her "sacred home," as she described, where herself and her children could reground, feel safe, and spend time with her elder family members.

Lastly, we held space for exploring how her spirituality and understanding of forgiveness, accountability, compassion, and connection to others made her feel about her partner who harmed her ongoingly. Her partner was both someone who was a survivor of trauma and who also engaged in harmful behavior toward her and others. This was a critical aspect of our advocacy sessions as it determined her safety planning, boundaries, potential reporting mechanisms, and her own eventual separation from her partner. Her journey as a scholar-practitioner and desire to continue her holistic development as a student and human being was supported by her spirituality and recognition that trauma, pain, and resilience were part of her journey; however, she would continue to pursue her purpose and self-realization and graduate while still staying true to her values.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS: INTEGRATING SPIRITUALITY INTO SEXUAL & RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE RESPONSE EFFORTS

Campus professionals may promote students' spiritual development, and subsequently their healing, through 1) encouraging students' connection to nature and land, 2) offering trauma-informed yoga programs, 3) promoting community knowledge, and 4) creating supportive communal spaces. In the following section, we describe these different components of spirituality and offer suggestions for how professionals may integrate spirituality into their efforts to promote radical healing from SRV.

Connection to Nature, Land, and the Elements

> *"El mar y la tierra sanan [the ocean and land heal you]," my elder aunt, Tia Irma, shared with me, Karla, as we walked on the beach on my father's ancestral lands in Oaxaca, Mexico.*

Understanding how healing from SRV can be facilitated through nature and connection to land can be captured through understanding how violence impacts these relationships to self. Sexual violence historically, through colonization, has been used to fragment familial relationships in communities, control and assimilate Indigenous

and other people of color into dominant cultures, and intentionally prevent survivors from engaging in healthy traditions, rituals, and connections to identity and family lineages. Trauma essentially can fragment connection to culture, self-worth, and community (Suzack et al., 2010).

Indigenous knowledge epistemologies and embodied belief systems are often connected to nature, relations with the elements, and connection to land and environments. Exploring the intersecting identities and experiences of students is important to consider as "there is no singular Native experience, no singular Native culture, or singular Native identity" (Keene et al., 2018). Utilizing an Indigenous Holistic Wellness Wheel, we can conceptualize balance and wellness as they are tied to the physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental health of individuals and communities (Linklater, 2014). These elements can regulate emotions, behaviors, and thoughts brought about by sexual and complex trauma. "Land-based activities (and healing) such as harvesting, education, ceremony, recreation and culturally-based activities are components of integrative practices" and are grounded in Indigenous pedagogy and epistemology (Redvers, 2020, p. 90). This form of healing can be described as "remembering" and "reconnecting" to where individuals come from and to their identity through connection to humanity and ancestry.

Spirituality as it is tied to nature and land is also a profound foundation of many communities of color. For many Indigenous and non-Indigenous students of color, having a connection to space and community is critical for a sense of belonging and persistence in higher education institutions. More specifically, for survivors of SRV seeking to find connection and healing through their spirituality, finding opportunities and developing healing spaces to connect to nature, horticulture, the elements, and relations to the land can be a way to cultivate resilience and support (Linklater, 2014).

Engaging and learning to care for living beings through planting, working with animals, and reconnecting with sacred spaces can be incredibly powerful for student survivors. With this framework in mind, the advocacy center where I, Karla, worked developed and facilitated a succulent planting workshop for student survivors that focused on learning about the healing elements of the plant. We integrated spiritual wellness discussion prompts and breathing and mindfulness exercises throughout the planting, and invited participants to see themselves in the living plant. This program was facilitated in person, in a circle where survivors and other students of color were able to connect with one another and share their experience of the process. The development of a zine that outlined these prompts allowed students to reflect on self-care, watering their plants, and environments where the plant (themselves) could learn to thrive. Many of the survivors were able to take their living plants back to their homes as a reminder of their own connection to living beings that need care taking—including themselves.

Engaging with land can be a transformative experience of creating rituals and practices that bring about purpose, connection to self, and moving energy (Linklater, 2014). Advocacy offices can work with student survivors to connect them with meaningful spaces in their lives and with local environments such as local lakes, rivers, mountains, and botanic gardens. Spirituality as it is tied to non-western traditional concepts of healing often also emerges in nature with medicinal plants. For example, there are several plants and herbs like lavender, eucalyptus, sweetgrass,

sage, and yerba santa that can be ceremonial and grown and cultivated to support well-being. These plants can be utilized to calm the nervous system when experiencing anxiety, triggers, or panic attacks, which many student survivors may experience (Amanor-Boadu et al., 2011; Amar & Alexy, 2005). More sacred traditional medicines like sage, yerba santa, and sweetgrass are used mostly in ceremonies to cleanse and close heavy traumatic sessions or invite good energy when initiating a healing space (Linklater, 2014). I, Karla, have worked with Indigenous student survivors and other students of color that have utilized and reconnected with these medicines as part of their healing journeys and part of their identity development on campus.

In addition to the program mentioned above, the advocacy office co-developed a series of horticulture programming for survivors in partnership with our community garden and sustainability department on campus. We developed the curriculum with Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and students to center knowledge, community, and experiential learning. This program series included survivor-only spaces where students could gather in the community garden and smell, touch, listen, see, and taste aspects of our campus community garden and local native plants. Students were able to taste fruits and vegetables, learn to cultivate their own plants to take home, and hear stories about the local tribal community. For many student survivors, reclaiming a safe space, relearning ancestral knowledge, and connecting with elders is a way to heal generational traumas connected to colonization, systemic racism, and ongoing violence. These connections can also empower the development of their religious and spiritual identities tied to their past, current, and future understandings of their purpose.

Yoga

> *"Yoga can be a pathway for the integration of mind, body, and spirit amid all of the disintegration that trauma causes."* - *Zabie Yamasaki (2022, p. xxii)*

Originating as a religious practice with roots in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism (Emerson & Hopper, 2011), what is now referred to as "yoga" in the western world primarily involves the physical practice of one branch of yoga—Hatha yoga. The philosophy of yoga, which had little emphasis on physical postures, originated in Northern India over 5000 years ago, and also has ties to ancient African civilizations (Parker, 2020; Sood, 2020). Beyond the physical practice, known as *asana*, yoga includes many principles and practices that involve connections to the breath, mind, emotions, and higher powers (Desikachar et al., 2005). *Asana* is one of the eight limbs of yoga philosophy, of which two limbs are the *yamas* (ethical guidelines like non-harming) and *niyamas* (spiritual observances such as contentment, devotion, and self-study; McCall, 2007). In Sanskrit, the root word of yoga is *yuj*, which translates to "to yoke," meaning "to join" (Berger, 2018). At its core, yoga involves fostering a sense of connection to our breath, bodies, minds, emotions, and divine beings.

Yoga has been found to reduce the effects of trauma on mental health symptoms, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, and trauma-informed yoga

interventions in particular may support survivors of SRV (Emerson et al., 2009; Rhodes et al., 2016; Telles, 2012). Practicing yoga in a trauma-sensitive group setting may support survivors in increasing their self-compassion as they move through feelings of self-judgment toward self-kindness (Crews et al., 2016). The physical practice of yoga can help reduce physical symptoms of trauma and support overall wellness (Crews et al., 2016; Emerson et al. 2009). The benefits of mindfulness associated with yoga may also support survivors' reconnection with their physical bodies after experiences of dissociation that are common with trauma (Yamasaki, 2022). Further, yoga may support students of color in navigating racial trauma through supporting self-regulation and connection to "something greater than [themselves]" (Parker, 2020, p. 163).

Many campuses have implemented "yoga as healing" programs for survivors of SRV (Yamasaki, 2022). These programs often involve a multi-week series where students engage in a physical yoga practice, group discussion, art, and other activities, which are led by a trauma-informed yoga teacher. Each week is typically centered on a theme related to healing from violence, such as safety, self-care, boundaries, and strength. Guided by principles of trauma-informed care, which include promoting safety, fostering collaboration, supporting choice, inspiring hope, and emphasizing strengths (Butler et al., 2011; Elliott et al., 2005), the instructors invite student survivors to listen to their bodies, needs, and emotions and engage in a practice that feels most comfortable for them. Further, instructors of color often integrate culturally-resonant artifacts, rituals, and practices that center minoritized students (Karunaratne, 2022). For example, some instructors display artistic cards with diverse bodies and individuals represented and affirmations printed, such as "I am divine." Others read poetry and quotes written by women of color authors and play music by women of color artists.

While the multiple roots of yoga philosophy and the ways in which the practice has evolved over time suggests anyone can practice yoga in our present day, it is important to be mindful of the continued legacy of cultural appropriation of yoga in the west (Nair, 2019). Despite deep philosophical origins, as yoga has become popularized in the western world it has become divorced from its religious and spiritual roots through cultural appropriation and commercialization (Antony, 2014; Scafidi, 2005). Facilitators must be knowledgeable about the religious origins of yoga and give credit to this history when implementing yoga programs in a western higher education context. Instructors should introduce elements of yoga philosophy beyond the physical practice of *asana*, highlighting simultaneously the spiritual power of yoga and honoring the practice for all that it is. They may also use Sanskrit names for poses along with the posture names in whatever language they are instructing in.

In my capacity as a trauma-healing yoga instructor, I, Nadeeka, have worked with many student survivors who have found that the practice and philosophy of yoga resonate with them in their healing journeys (Karunaratne, 2023a, 2023b). The environment of the yoga program fosters feelings of safety and allows for opportunities for them to feel connected to their bodies, spirits, and selves. The group setting of the yoga as healing program may support student survivors to find connection and validation in these peer relationships (Crews et al., 2016). The practice of yoga also serves as a spiritual practice for many student survivors as it

allows survivors to create meaning for themselves and make sense of their experiences and the world around them (Parker, 2020). Activist and yoga teacher Gale Parker (2020) describes yoga as a "path to self-discovery that leads you to come into direct contact with your spiritual nature" (p. 163). Despite the perpetuation of yoga as solely a physical activity for the purpose of exercise in the western world, the capacity of yoga to support healing is deeply connected to its roots as a spiritual practice. Yoga allows individuals to "rediscover [their] interconnectedness to something greater than [themselves]. Some call it God, others the Universe, and others call it Truth" (Parker, 2020, p. 163). Through studying and practicing the eight limbs of yoga, individuals might be able to access healing through supporting renewed connections to themselves and to "something greater."

Intergenerational, Ancestral, and Community Knowledge in Practice

"As I heal, I transform my lineage and legacy." - Octavia Raheem (2020, p. 33)

Storytelling, oral and written histories, and community knowledge have always been powerful teaching tools, traditions, and radical practices of communities of color. Passing down sacred ancestral gifts, lineages, family histories, and familial stories serves to teach lessons and acts as a reminder of important concepts and practices that are core to existing and living healthy, balanced, and fulfilled lives. In my experience, I, Karla, have seen how these practices have been important to preserve connections to our identities and sacred customs that allow us to celebrate and continue to exist in a society that constantly pushes assimilation, violence, and erasure of our people, especially in institutions like those in higher education that were founded to maintain and perpetuate white supremacy (Wilder, 2013).

Decolonizing advocacy efforts on campus also means reIndigenizing and developing services and healing spaces that allow survivors opportunities to engage in their full authentic selves in healing trauma. Péan (2021) speaks about the importance of efforts to decolonize, unlearn, and create spaces to learn about her ancestry and spiritual practices. She describes her spiritual identity as a "religion that has no written literature, yet it is 'written' everywhere for those who care to see and read" and that "[i]t is largely written in the peoples' myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies, and shrines, and in their proverbs and pithy sayings" (Péan, 2021, p. 5).

Practitioners and advocates must hold space that allows survivors to bring their authentic selves to conversations regarding the role of familial and community systems in their religious or spiritual identities. For some, familial and community relationships have been fractured due to trauma and generational violence, while others may have strong support systems tied to matrilineal and cultural protective factors that have empowered healthy understandings of community care. Part of our role as campus advocates and practitioners *is* working with student survivors to explore their needs and connect them with concepts, ideas, professionals, and leaders in their communities, *if they are interested in these connections*. Spaces that bring together survivors of SRV can be healing when developed and led by appropriate spiritual leaders and practitioners in the community. These spaces can consist of

rituals, discussion prompts, physical actions, and movements that release trauma and invite peace, harmony, and compassion into the space. However, while creating these spaces, it is critical to not appropriate sacred Indigenous traditions and ceremonies.

Spirituality as it is tied to prayer can also be a powerful tool for survivors of SRV. Praying, whether for oneself, to ancestors and for descendants, to a creator or higher being, or in a community, often allows survivors of trauma to play a part in visualizing concepts, feelings, and environments that can bring hope, optimism, and possibilities for themselves and others (Linklater, 2014). As a form of meditation, prayer can also bring about a process to invite calmness and surrender intense emotions. In previous advocacy sessions with student survivors, I, Karla, have been invited to pray with students before institutional sexual misconduct hearings to invite strength, courage, and calmness. Prayers can also be written down as affirmations and in journals as a way to seek guidance and clarification with painful experiences that can be hard to verbally discuss (Smyth & Helm, 2003).

Creating altars and special spaces can be a powerful practice for survivors of color (Karunaratne, 2023a). Some survivors have a desire to reconnect with the ancestral healing practices of their families through utilizing altars to recenter special people and items that hold memory and energy. This can include family heirlooms, medicinal herbs and plants, images and photographs, and crystals that can bring about strength, self-affirmation, joy, and peace. They can serve as reminders of lineages and ancestry and as spaces to grieve and retrieve spiritual connection and energy. Altars can also provide safety and consistency, which are often impacted by trauma. I, Karla, have worked with several survivors that have created altars on their desks or in a special space in their room. When they have experienced stress or trauma triggers, some survivors will utilize altars to pray, meditate, and engage in self and intergenerational conversations as a way to ground and ask for support from their ancestors and loved ones in times of duress.

For survivors of color, sharing their stories of resilience, wisdom, radical hope, or community and family histories with violence and perseverance while being listened to can be a spiritual moment in itself. Kanuha (2021) mentions that the stories shared are passed down from ancestors and elders; the stories created will belong to descendants in the community highlighting the active role that current community members have in the healing process. For some religiously- or spiritually-identified survivors, the first moment they share with a *supportive* family member, elder, or spiritual leader, or in spiritual prayer or ceremony can be described as a release and connection to those individuals or space. It can be a challenging process for survivors to decide who or where to disclose their experience of violence; however, hearing a story from their elder, about a grandparent or someone in their spiritual community with similar experiences, can help them feel empowered and find healing.

Community and Peer Support Outside of Higher Education

> *"Liberated relationships are one of the ways we actually create abundant justice, the understanding that there is enough attention, care, resource, and connection for all of us to access belonging, to be in our dignity, and to be safe in community." - adrienne maree brown (2019, p. 407)*

For many individuals, particularly those of color, religion and spirituality are deeply tied to community and connection with others (Gillum et al., 2009). Though there is not much research on college students' healing through peer support, some scholars have found that peer support is helpful for healing from SRV (Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Rodenhizer et al., 2021; Voth Schrag & Edmond, 2018). Additionally, reactions from peers to a disclosure of violence have significant consequences for a survivors' coping, help-seeking behaviors, and mental health (Bonnan-White et al., 2018; Edwards & Dardis, 2020; Edwards et al., 2015). While the scholarship is limited, existing research points to the fact that relating to others, maintaining relationships, reestablishing trust with others, and feeling a sense of belonging can be important aspects of an individual's healing journey (Draucker et al., 2009; Sinko & Arnault, 2020). Religious and spiritual communities offer opportunities for students to find spiritual connections to peers and to communities outside of higher education.

Religious affiliations and organizations can provide supportive networks of people (Dale & Daniel, 2011). For many women of color survivors, religious involvement is related to increased social support (Acker, 2017; Gillum et al., 2009). For example, as described in the case study, Azaadi found spiritual connection from fellow students who went to the same Mandir. Survivors may develop meaningful relationships with clergy and religious leaders that support their spiritual connection and healing from violence (Knapik et al., 2008). Attending religious institutions, such as churches, mosques, and synagogues, and viewing these community spaces as sources of strength and comfort, has been found to decrease symptoms of depression and increase quality of life for survivors of violence (Gillum et al., 2009). Survivors have identified that "getting together with others in settings that were seen to be spiritual in nature" and "connecting to others in very deep and spiritual ways" helps to foster healing from SRV (Knapik et al., 2010, p. 7). Further, engaging in prayer with others and participating in spiritual support groups may support survivors' healing (Knapik et al., 2008, 2010). Thus, practitioners connecting and co-developing spaces with partners, cultural centers, and individuals in the community is essential. Ceremony can bring individuals with shared experiences together to heal wounds, share feelings, and connect to self and others. Developing culturally-specific spaces for student survivors *within* cultural and/or gender equity centers can be another way to promote this healing. At a previous institution in which I, Karla, worked, our advocacy and prevention center partnered with a Middle Eastern cultural center and a South Asian student organization to lead targeted discussions on women and violence. These were spaces specifically organized for women and survivors where they could share and discuss cultural healing, ancestral stories of violence and resilience, and stigma and barriers. The students' collective strength and stories of their mothers, grandmothers, and aunties allowed many of them to feel validated and safe and gave purpose to their healing and path toward culture change, strength, and perseverance as students.

While formal or organized religious spaces have been shown to support healing for survivors, many student survivors find spiritual connection and healing in other kinds of community spaces. Sarita, another student in the study with South Asian student dating violence survivors that I, Nadeeka, conducted (Karunaratne, 2023b),

spoke about activist and advocacy spaces that supported her healing. Through her involvement in an anti-violence student organization on campus, Sarita found meaningful connection to fellow students, many of whom were survivors themselves, as they advocated against SRV in higher education. Another student from the study, Lalita, shared that being a part of protests advocating against injustice around the world helped her to feel a sense of community and connection, ultimately supporting her healing.

Finding purpose and meaning in their experiences through helping others is important for many survivors (D'Amore et. al, 2018; Karunaratne, 2023a). Many survivors engage in activism with the intention of redefining their legacy, connection, and lineage to prevent violence from happening to others. Essentially, reclaiming narratives can be both a form of spiritual and healing activism. French et al. (2020) describe their framework of radical healing as one that "requires a shift away from a deficit-based perspective and fosters a sense of agency to challenge and change oppressive conditions" (p. 24). Communities and organizations that work to challenge oppression may offer survivors opportunities to embody their spiritual purposes, receive validation from others, find meaning, and foster healing (Scoglio et al., 2021).

Community and peer support can be effective in supporting survivors' healing when taking into account specific community needs. Restorative spaces can be co-created after harm has already been done to establish safety and support for smaller communities if done appropriately. Forgiveness, restoration of harm done, accountability, justice, and concepts of bringing balance again often are also connected to spirituality within a community. In working with cultural centers and survivors of color, I, Karla, have often seen the impact that an action of violence has on smaller cultural communities and spaces like campus cultural centers, gender equity centers, and queer resource centers. An experience of SRV among members of a specific community can often make a center feel unsafe and unwelcoming if actions are not taken to atone, repair, and restore balance and safety to the space. Co-developing ceremonies, meetings, or dialogue spaces immediately after an incident of violence in the community, where survivors, students, faculty, and staff can reset expectations of support, make commitments to safety, reexamine boundaries and culture, and bring closure to pain is essential to fostering healing and moving beyond compliance. When done appropriately, these actions can also support the development of an important connection to community for spiritually-identified survivors.

Considerations for Integrating Religion and Spirituality into Healing Work

Spiritual identities are complex and diverse. It is important to not make generalizations or assume that spirituality and identity are monolithic and static. Colonization, immigration histories, and political projects have often shaped generational practices, current perspectives, and traditions in communities of color. Some student survivors that I, Karla, have worked with have felt conflicting emotions between their Indigenous identities and their Christian faith that supported their healing. It can be helpful to focus advocacy sessions on promoting learning and understanding of students' multiple identities that may feel conflicting. Family

histories and lineages shape students' religious and spiritual identities, including how they "practice" their spirituality. Assimilation projects, like boarding schools, have created spiritual identities diverse in traditions, ideologies, and belief systems often passed down generationally. Allowing student survivors to develop their own spiritual identities through the exploration of their histories, lineages, and contemporary community experiences is critical for centering how they move forward in making sense of their healing and developing purpose within their spiritual community.

Although healing from SRV through religious or spiritual identities can be transformational for some students, it can also be complex for many survivors who experienced harm from religious communities (Turell & Thomas, 2002). Many survivors have experiences of violence where religious or spiritual leaders (i.e. priests, pastors, guides, etc.) utilized their power to harm survivors and exerted their influence in the community to keep survivors silent (Dale & Daniel, 2011). There have also been cases where religious communities created barriers for reporting or healing due to victim-blaming cultures, promoting shame, or protecting the religious community and leader. Student survivors may have experienced these practices before coming into college or may experience challenges in their current collegiate religious or spiritual environments. These experiences can be very traumatizing and complex for student survivors exploring their identities in connection with their specific religious communities. For some survivors, healing, repairing, or reconnecting with their religion or spirituality can be a part of their healing (Knapik et al., 2008, 2010); thus, practitioners should be knowledgeable about the complex dynamics when facilitating advocacy and healing spaces connected to religious and spiritual communities. Many survivors hold multiple truths regarding their religious identities and communities and can still heal and participate in their religious community while practicing self-care, boundaries, and safety planning. Survivors may also feel empowered if there are processes of accountability involving the religious community. Survivors may shift in their needs, perceptions, and feelings toward their spiritual and religious identities and communities over time.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR PROMOTING HEALING FROM SEXUAL & RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

> *An offering: "To travel into the trauma of past generations is costly; may we do so carefully, with a companion who is safe and trustworthy. Ase." - cole arthur riley (2024, p. 151)*

It is critical that violence prevention educators, advocates, and other student affairs practitioners in higher education understand how spirituality *and their role in this process* can be a transformative framework for student survivors of SRV in the context of radical healing. To promote healing for student survivors, we urge institutions to move away from focusing solely on western individualistic, compliance and risk-management mechanisms and processes that only perpetuate violence and often retraumatize student survivors (Karunaratne, 2023a). We also hope that institutional leaders invest in spiritually-informed prevention efforts,

survivor support programs, and research that centers holistic approaches to SRV in higher education. Developing SRV response and healing spaces that allow student survivors of color to explore and authentically navigate their spiritual identities in the context of their persistence and healing is essential. Finally, administrators, practitioners, and scholars must continuously challenge and critically analyze how religious and spiritual identities influence larger systems that impact the most minoritized student survivors. Our work toward social justice, promoting equity, dismantling white supremacy, and eliminating oppression within our institutions requires us to bring this complex lens in our work regarding SRV to not replicate the systems we are working to eliminate or transform.

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