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Becoming CRITICAL CREATIVES: Radical Healing for Liberatory Futures in Higher Education and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

This article examines trauma-informed healing and multidimensional well-being as key to radically (re)imagining and critically co-creating liberatory futures in higher education. Utilizing a bricolage, critical arts-based methodology, this multi-study qualitative research explored the meta-research-question: *How are higher education stakeholders radically (re)imagining liberatory, abolitionist, decolonizing, and queering futures within U.S. higher education and beyond*? Emergent findings cast visions for humanizing and radically healing higher education futures and identified that trauma-informed healing and multidimensional well-being for individuals/collectives/ecologies are both strategies for sustaining radical imagination and critical creativity (RICC) praxis to engender those futures, as well as practices that are reciprocally sustained through RICC praxis. Because of the embodied and communal nature of RICC praxis, trauma-informed healing (i.e., repairing harms, restoring generative relationships with individuals, community, and ecologies) that is both interpersonal and intrapersonal is integral to the praxis of dismantling *what is* while simultaneously radically imagining and critically creating *what can be*.

Keywords: trauma-informed, well-being, radical imagination, critical creativity, praxis, liberation, abolitionist, Indigenizing, queering

> *The ability to imagine how things could be different waters the grounds for transformation.* —Wilson Kwamogi Okello and Stephen John Quaye (2018, p. 44)

Education can, and should, be humanizing, transformative, and liberatory; however, U.S. higher education is failing to realize this liberatory potential because it is twisted at its roots (Stewart, 2020), neither designed for (Wilder, 2013) nor presently equitably

or effectively serving (Arminio et al., 2012) intersectionally diverse students. Many colleges and universities replicate and reinforce the matrix of intersectional systems of oppression (P. H. Collins, 2009; i.e., White supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia and Trans* oppression, Christian hegemony and other religious oppression, capitalism, ableism, nationalism, Western imperial settler- colonialism) in ways that perpetuate trauma-cycles because their cultures, policies, and practices are rooted in these very systems that higher education is positioned to disrupt (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Stewart, 2020). Therefore, *radical imagination* and *critical creativity,* engaged as a praxis for simultaneous interruption of these systems and alternative world-building, are key to engendering the transformation required to realize liberatory futures for higher education and beyond.

This article shares meta-findings from three arts-based qualitative research studies, which each engaged diverse cohorts of Collaborators in a praxis (Freire, 1968/2005; hooks, 1994) of radical imagination (reflection) and critical creativity (action). The purpose of this collaborative research was to explore and examine liberation within U.S. higher education and intersecting contexts. Emergent findings identified that *trauma-informed healing* and *multidimensional well-being* for individuals, collectives, and ecologies are both strategies that sustain radical imagination and critical creativity (RICC) praxis and are reciprocally sustained through RICC praxis. Said another way, prioritizing healing and well-being supports sustained engagement in RICC praxis and RICC praxis supports continued healing and well-being creating a symbiotic relationship between healing/well-being and RICC praxis. Because of the embodied and communal nature of RICC praxis, inter/intrapersonal trauma-informed healing (i.e., repairing harms and restoring generative relationships with individuals, community, and ecologies) is integral to the praxis of dismantling *what is* while simultaneously radically imagining and critically creating *what can be*: liberatory, abolitionist, decolonizing, and queering futures.

Problem Statement

Contemporary global higher education is rooted in western imperial, White supremacist, settler-colonial logics, for which education (at all levels) has been a primary advancing technology. In the contemporary global knowledge economy, education (and higher education in particular) continues to be a neocolonial and neoliberal force in perpetuating western global hegemony through concepts of banking education (Freire, 1968/2005), human capital development (Klees, 2018; Riddell et al., 2018), academic capitalism (Koenig, 2019; Münch, 2014; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009) and the practices these concepts inform. The violence of these practices is obscured by neoliberal compassion narratives, which situate educators as helping those educated in these systems (De Lissovoy, 2018), meanwhile obfuscating the role higher education plays in perpetuating global social (C. S. Collins, 2011) and environmental (Hursh & Jowett, 2018) injustices.

Education has been key to institutionalizing historic and modern caste systems (Wilkerson, 2020) shaped by colonial and cultural imperialism (Black, 2010; Young, 2018), capitalism (Klees, 2018; including academic capitalism [Koenig, 2019; Münch, 2014; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009] and racial capitalism [Kelley, 2002; C. J. Robinson,

2000, 2019]), and other forms of intersectional oppression. In *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, Wilder (2014) chronicled the violent histories of several seminal U.S. colleges and universities, many of which were founded with missions to convert (i.e., assimilate or annihilate) North American Indigenous communities and were built using either the direct labor or indirect capital derived from the brutal enslavement of African people. In the documentary *Schooling the World: The White Man's Last Burden*, Black (2010) illuminated several past and present educational policies and practices designed for domination while ostensibly presented as charity, service, or aid. For example, Black compared Native American boarding schools, a colonizing technology developed and enforced by the U.S. government to "civilize" Indigenous children (resulting in centuries of intergenerational trauma [Pember, 2019]), with present-day examples of international education policies and practices in middle- and low-income developing countries; this juxtaposition illustrated cyclical patterns of western onto-epistemological neo/colonial domination. Insidiously framed as "helping," education has had irreparable global impact, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, while absolving educators who understood their missions as benevolent (De Lissovoy, 2018).

Within U.S. higher education, empirical evidence demonstrates ongoing negatively disparate educational outcomes for diverse students, including retention and graduation rates (Pendakur, 2016; NCES, 2020). Students of Color (Museus, 2014), LGBTQ+ students (Slater, 2019), and other marginalized students frequently report experiencing hostile climates, which significantly influences their persistence. Coupled with untenably escalating student-loan-debt trends (Blumenstyk, 2015; Johnstone & Marcucci, 2010; St. John et al., 2018), these experience and outcome disparities create an urgent ethical imperative for higher education stakeholders to address.

At the root of this problem are campus cultures (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012) steeped in the matrix of intersectional systems of oppression. These campus cultures both perpetuate direct interpersonal harm (e.g., microaggressions; Sue, 2010), which over time may constitute cumulative trauma experiences (Xue et al., 2023), as well as echo and replicate intergenerational harm and trauma (Borges, 2022; Gaywish & Mordoch, 2018) that also stem from higher education's twisted roots (Stewart, 2020). What constitutes a traumatic experience varies by individual; however, what characterizes a traumatic experience is that these experiences "cause intense physical and psychological stress reactions" (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014, para 2). Cumulative trauma occurs when, over time, individuals have "experienced multiple types of traumatic experiences, and …may result in complex PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] and yield more severe symptoms of psychopathology than single-event traumas" (Xue et al., 2023, para 2). Without interruption, these cultures (re)traumatize new generations of students (Budge et al., 2020; Slater, 2019; Peters., 2020), as well as staff and faculty who support them (Anthym & Tuitt, 2021; Jackson Preston et al. 2023), with particular negative impact for those who hold marginalized identities.

We cannot utilize existing tools (i.e., logics, technologies; e.g., strategies, policies, pedagogies, and practices), which have been created by dominant ideologies, to interrupt cycles of systemic oppression, to heal intergenerational trauma, or to engender liberation. Lorde (1983) poignantly illustrated this conundrum when she wrote, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 27). Therefore, *radical*

imagination and *critical creativity* are necessary to design new tools for building liberatory futures in education and beyond.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section reviews contemporary literature related to imagination and creativity, which were key concepts in all three studies. I seek to complicate canonical connotations of these concepts as "neutral" through juxtaposing them with radical and critical literature, which informed the radical imagination and critical creativity (RICC) praxis conceptual framework that guided this multi-study research. Finally, as the purpose of these studies was radically (re)imagining and critically co-creating liberatory futures, I conclude by examining Indigenizing/decolonizing, abolitionist, and queering/Trans* scholarship, which informed the conceptual framework and other research components (e.g., research questions).

There is a vast body of literature about imagination and creativity. Imagination is most often understood as a cognitive or thinking process (Davies, 2012). Whereas, creativity is frequently described using some combination of the four "P's" (Collard & Looney, 2014; Cropley, 2006; Csíkszentmihályi, 1996; Hulme et al., 2014; Rhodes, 1961): (a) persons (i.e., individual thoughts/skills); (b) processes (i.e., creative activities); (c) products (i.e., creative outcomes); and (d) press (i.e., creative environments). Most of this literature is rooted in positivist paradigms, with quantitative methodologies and "neutral" understandings of these interrelated phenomena. Yet, one cannot engage imagination and creativity "neutrally:" *Uncritical* imagination and creativity are more likely to replicate intersectional systems of oppression in novel iterations than to interrupt or transform these systems.

Conceptual Framework: Radical Imagination and Critical Creativity Praxis

A *radical* imagination and *critical* creativity (RICC) praxis conceptual framework guided this multi-study qualitative research, with "radical" and "critical" as important modifiers. Radical signals uprooting the root causes of injustice (A. Y. Davis, 1990). Critical derives from critical theory traditions (including, feminist [Ahmed, 2017; P. H. Collins, 2009; Dillard, 2006; hooks, 2000], Queer and Trans* [Ahmed, 2006; Nicolazzo, 2017], Indigenous [Archibald et al., 2020; Meyer, 2013; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021], and Critical Race Theories [Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001]), which are inherently creative because they challenge the dominant paradigms of systemic oppression to forge (k)new ways of knowing, being, and doing (Meyer [2013] used the term [k]new, coined by S. Edwards [2009] to describe the feeling/fact of epistemologies and ontologies being simultaneously ancient and new).

The concept of *radical imagination*, informed by the work of many scholars (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014; Hambrick, 2020; Kelley, 2002; Okello & Quaye, 2018), is action oriented: It constitutes the process of breaking through dominant patterns of thought and practice in the imperfect present to engender liberatory futures. Okello and Quaye (2018) identified four "R's" that tangibly underpin radical imagination processes: (a) recall, (b) (re)membering, (c) rehearsal, and (d) (re)presentation. Recall is the self-reflexive praxis of discerning one's sociohistorical positionality related to

one's context. (Re)membering is the (re)assembling of one's pluralistically embodied existence, particularly the wholeness of mind, body, and spirit, which has been severed through being steeped in dominant onto-epistemologies. Rehearsal involves practicing using one's embodied being (e.g., voice, body) to prepare for situations in which one may subversively disrupt the status quo. (Re)presentation activates agency through performance strategies to challenge dominant systems.

The concept of *critical creativity*, also shaped by the work of several scholars (Anzaldúa, 2015; Mehta & Henriksen, 2022; Titchen & McCormack, 2010, 2020), catalyzes prismatic onto-epistemologies for purposeful action toward collective well-being and thriving. Prisms are tools that refract light to reveal the rainbow color spectrum contained within. Prisms have been used as a metaphor within Queer communities, both as a direct reference to the rainbow color spectrum and more abstractly to represent brilliance and diversity. Herein, I use this term to modify onto-epistemologies to connote how multiple ways of being, knowing, doing, and feeling can simultaneously expand and complicate dominant or singular approaches and can also constitute pluralistically integrated holism. Titchen and McCormack (2010) defined critical creativity as "a paradigmatic synthesis in which the assumptions of critical social science are blended and balanced with, and attuned to, creative and ancient traditions and the natural world, for the purpose of human flourishing" (p. 532). Coupled together, radical imagination and critical creativity constitute a reflection-action cycle of *praxis*, which Freire (1968/2005) defined as "the action and reflection of [people] upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 79). The positive psychology (Carr, 2011) concept of everyday, or "little c" (Richards, 2007), creativity helps operationalize radical imagination as a strategy for transformative change (Glăveanu, 2010) through small-scale, transgressive acts (hooks, 1994).

Indigenizing/Decolonizing, Abolitionist, and Queering

Indigenizing/decolonizing, abolitionist, and queering/Trans* scholarship(s) were integral to developing the meta-research question and RICC praxis conceptual framework that guided these studies. The RICC praxis framework is underpinned by Meyer's (2013) Indigenous holographic epistemology, which recognizes intertwined mind/body/spirit ways of knowing. Decolonizing praxis is a "double movement of anticolonialism and rematriation" (la paperson, 2017, p. xxii) holding in tension "'the *not yet* and . . . the *not anymore*" (p. xxii). Intentionally used in gerund form, decolonizing praxis represents the transformational potential inherent in *not yet* (la paperson, 2017), which requires imagination and creativity. Embedded in decolonizing praxis is stewardship of the grief, loss, and violence inherent in *not anymore* (la paperson, 2017), which requires trauma-informed, interdependent self- and community-care. Abolition means action for politically and materially abolishing (i.e., removing, eradicating, destroying) logics, systems, and technologies of violent domination while radically (re)imagining and collectively co-creating that which will replace these: new liberatory logics, systems, and technologies (A. Y. Davis, 2018; A. Y. Davis et al., 2022; Du Bois, 1935; Gilmore, 2022). Abolitionist praxis requires us to hold the tension of what is (i.e., oppression perpetuated through violent carceral systems) and what can be (i.e., liberatory world-building) together with an urgency to

address past and present harm, violence, and trauma. Queering refers to transgressing and transcending binaries, boundaries, and false dichotomies (Barnett & Johnson, 2015). As a prefix, trans- connotes a crossing, shifting, or evolving across categories, planes, or binaries. Transgressing, transcending, transforming are all actions related to "becoming," which Anzaldúa (2015), using the Nahuatl word/concept of "nepantla*,"* described as a liminal process wherein critical consciousness and creativity deepen.

Research Rationale

There has been increasing attention to creativity as an important skill among post-secondary student affairs educators (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, 2016; Hernanez et al., 2018; Hulme et al., 2014; Morriss-Olson, 2017; C. Stewart et al., 2019; Stoller, 2012), faculty (D. Robinson et al., 2018), and students (Casanova, 2008; Smith, 2019). However, literature examining the intersections of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) outcomes and/or liberatory praxis with creativity within higher education is only beginning to emerge (Franklin, 2018; Kelly et al., 2020; Okello & Quaye, 2018). This multi-study qualitative research examined lived experiences of higher education stakeholders, building upon extant literature by empirically exploring radical imagination and critical creativity as a praxis to advance liberatory, abolitionist, Indigenizing/decolonizing, and queering futures within higher education and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

With diverse Collaborators, I explored the following meta-research question across three qualitative studies: *How are educational stakeholders radically (re)imagining and critically co-creating futures that are liberatory, abolitionist, decolonizing, and queering, both for higher education and beyond?* I utilized a bricolage methodology (Hammersley, 2008), which blended the traditions of critical arts-based methods (CABR; Finley, 2011), critical participatory action research (CPAR; Fine & Torre, 2021), and interactive interviews (Ellis, 2008) and focus groups (C. S. Davis & Ellis, 2008). All three studies employed purposive sampling (Maxwell, 2013) to identify a diverse collective of higher education stakeholders interested in collaboratively (re)imagining liberatory, abolitionist, decolonizing, and queering futures for higher education. Collaborators represented: (1) multiple intersectional social identities (i.e., each identifying with two or more marginalized identities; e.g., race, gender, sexuality, first-generation and socioeconomic statuses, age, spiritual beliefs, geographical situational locations); (2) a multitude of experiences within higher education (including myriad institutional types and stakeholder roles); and (3) varied critically creative approaches. Data gathered and co-created included: (1) Collaborators' stories, lived experiences, and radical imaginings (CPAR and interactive interview/focus group methodologies) and (2) art and creative artifacts (CABR methodology), including found art (e.g., third things, or creative pieces that support oblique reflection [Palmer, 2009]), creative writing (e.g., short-story fiction, poetry), visual art (e.g., collages, drawings, sculptural paintings), and creative experiences (e.g., guided-meditations, facilitated activities, and higher-education situated programs).

Analytic rigor was accomplished by triangulating methods both within each and across all studies. I addressed validity and trustworthiness through a robust process of member checking and reflections (Tracy, 2020), as well as extensive researcher memos, which included self-reflexive reflections on my positionality. See Table 1 for a summary of the three studies, including research questions, methods, Collaborators, data collection and co-creation, data analysis, and trustworthiness and validation. To center Collaborators' agency, I asked them how they would like to be represented (i.e., names, pronouns, and, in later studies, self-authorship of their own introductions; see Table 2 for Collaborator names and introductions), systematically engaged them in collective meaning making through checking/reflecting processes, and iteratively shared learning from each study with them as we continued to engage in collectivist work through our shared community connections (see Table 1, trustworthiness and validation section for additional detail).

Table 1*:* Methodology: Summary of Three Studies

Methodology element	Study 1 *Imagine Otherwise*	Study 2 *Compassionistas*	Study 3 *Critical Creatives*
Research questions	1. *In what ways do higher education administrators and staff (HEAS) perceive creativity and imagination as related to advancing justice/equity outcomes in higher education?* 2. *How can professional development experiences, such as* Imagine Otherwise, *support HEAS in developing critically creative goals and strategies for equity-based practices that foster inclusive environments at Pacific Lutheran University (PLU)?*	1. *How are higher education stakeholders* defining *liberatory, abolitionist, and decolonizing praxes in higher education contexts (and beyond)?* 2. *What is the relationship between these praxes and radical imagination and critical creativity?* 3. *In what ways are higher education stakeholders radically (re)imagining liberatory, abolitionist, and decolonizing futures?*	1. *How are artists/creatives who are also higher education stakeholders* defining *liberatory, abolitionist, decolonizing, and/or queering praxes in higher education contexts (and beyond)?* 2. *What is the relationship between these praxes and radical imagination and critical creativity?* 3. *How are artists/creatives who are also higher education stakeholders radically (re)imagining liberatory, abolitionist, decolonizing, and queering futures?*
Methods (in order of study emphasis and salience) [1]	Participatory action research (PAR) Case study Interactive interviews Arts-based research (ABR)	Critical participatory action research (CPAR) Interactive interviews and focus group Critical arts-based research (CABR)	Critical arts based research (CABR) Interactive interviews and focus group Critical participatory action research (CPAR)
Collaborators	HEAS participants in the Spring 2021 *Imagine Otherwise* cohort at Pacific Lutheran University who opted into the study (n = 4) Collaborators[2]: Casey, Asa, Jamie, and Jordan	Members of the *Compassionistas* research collective (i.e., doctoral students studying higher education; current/former HEAS), all of whom opted into the study (n = 3) Collaborators[3]: Niki, Britney, and Jes (Author)	Higher education stakeholders who self-identify as *artists and/or critical creatives* with 2+ marginalized identities, invited to participate via individual outreach from author (n = 9) Collaborators[4]: Sola, Rey Duran, Lynn, Julie, Kem, Saiyare, Smith, Luz, and Rosa
Data collection / co-creation	1. Two 60-minute Zoom-recorded interviews with each Collaborator 2. Collaborators identified creative *third things* to bring to second interview for dialogic exploration 3. Additional institutional data and seminar documents	1. One 60-minute, Zoom-recorded, interactive interview with each Collaborator 2. One 90-minute, Zoom-recorded, interactive focus group with all three Collaborators 3. Collaborators created/identified arts-based data to bring to focus group; *optional* critical creativity journal prompt	1. One 60-minute, Zoom-recorded, interactive interview with each Collaborator 2. Collaborators could choose their second interaction: Either one 120-minute, in-person, interactive focus group OR a second 60-minute, interactive interview (either in person or on Zoom) 3. Collaborators created arts-based data to bring to second interaction; *optional* critical creativity journal prompt

Methodology element	Study 1 *Imagine Otherwise*	Study 2 *Compassionistas*	Study 3 *Critical Creatives*
Data analysis	In all three studies, I used an iterative, phronetic approach to analyze data, or one that blends emic/inductive (i.e., emerging from data) and etic/deductive (i.e., guided by existing theory) coding strategies (Tracy, 2020). This process entailed (a) primary-cycle coding to inductively identify descriptive codes and analyze emergent themes and (b) secondary-cycle coding to deductively connect emergent findings to the conceptual framework (Tracy, 2020).		
Trustworthiness and validation	In all three studies, I sought to self-reflexively examine reactivity and bias threats through member checking (Study 1) and member reflection (Studies 2 and 3) validation techniques. These checking processes entailed: 1. Summarizing and paraphrasing what I was hearing in real-time during interactions to confirm my understandings; 2. Sharing full transcripts along with my preliminary meaning-making notes for both first- and second-interactions for Collaborator feedback; 3. Reviewing salient themes from first-interactions with Collaborators during section-interactions to confirm my meaning-making processes. Additionally, because I utilized C/PAR methodology for each study, I iteratively shared learning from each of the three studies back with Collaborators as we continued to engage in collectivist work through our shared community connections, in higher education contexts and beyond. Particularly in Study 2, where CPAR was the most salient methodology, I engaged findings from that study with the *Compassionistas* as we collaboratively shared our scholarship in our daily work contexts and at professional conferences with extended colleague networks. Through these continued conversations and application of research findings/learning, I received affirmation from several Collaborators about the *Becoming CRITICAL CREATIVES* model and its implications for application in higher education contexts. Finally, I kept extended researcher memos through my own critical creativity journal examining how my positionality, situational location, epistemology, and worldview influenced reactivity and bias. Positionality statements and researcher memo summaries can be accessed in the full dissertation (Takla, 2023).		

[1] Information about Institutional Research Board processes, including complete study protocols, can be accessed in the full dissertation (Takla, 2023)
[2] All names are pseudonyms. Collaborators were invited to select their pseudonym; however, all four declined the invitation. Names and pronouns (they/them) are researcher assigned and were selected for gender inclusivity, to protect Collaborator anonymity, and to follow APA (2020) guidelines.
[3] Collaborators were invited to select their pseudonym; however, instead, they gave their permission to use their actual names and pronouns.
[4] Collaborators each were invited to choose their pseudonyms; one Collaborator requested their real name be used, which I honored in this study.

Table 2*:* Collaborator Introductions

Study	Collaborator Names[1] and Self-Authored Introductions[2]
Study 2 (*Compassionistas*)	**Brittney.** Brittney (she/hers), MS, is a proud daughter of Mexican immigrants and identifies as a first-generation college student from East Los Angeles, California. Brittney is dedicated to creating liberatory practices in student affairs settings and hopes to learn how to pursue this goal while pursuing a PhD in higher education. To prepare for her career in Student Affairs, Brittney earned her Master's degree in College Counseling and Student Development from Azusa Pacific University. Brittney is a proud alum of Mount Saint Mary's University, Los Angeles where she earned her Bachelor's degree in Psychology and Spanish and James A. Garfield High School.
Study 2 (*Compassionistas*)	**Jes.** Jes (she/they), the primary researcher of this study, is a wife, auntie, sister, daughter, friend, dog mom, artist, and student affairs educator with a PhD in higher education. From Egyptian/Irish immigrant roots (Jes' father was born/raised in Egypt, and Jes' maternal grandfather was an Irish indentured servant), Jes is a Queer, cisgender woman who grew up in a U.S. military family (and lived all over the United States and internationally by age 11). Jes has studied/worked in U.S. higher education for 20+ years, including at small private, religiously affiliated institutions, art schools, and rural, midsized, public institutions in the Midwest and Pacific Northwest. Jes lives and works on the traditional lands of Nisqually, Puyallup, Squaxin Island, and Steilacoom peoples, whom she acknowledges and respects as traditional caretakers of this land.
Study 1 (*Imagine Otherwise*)	**Jordan.** *A note from Author:* Jordan was a participant in the Spring 2021 *Imagine Otherwise* professional development seminar cohort at Pacific Lutheran University who opted into Study 1. Jordan self-identified positionality and situational location as: (1) a higher education administrator/staff member who held multiple stakeholder roles; (2) having two or more marginalized social identities; (3) an advocate for DEIJ; and (4) a critical creative and/or imaginative person. Because Study 1 was an institution-specific case study, further detail is not included as this could make Jordan identifiable.

Study	Collaborator Names[1] and Self-Authored Introductions[2]
Study 3 (*Critical Creatives)*	**Julie.** Julie (she/her) is a mom, sister, wife, educator, and water lover. Born and raised on Maui, HI, Julie identifies as multiracial (her mom is Hawaiian-Chinese and dad Italian-Irish) and was brought up in a house of Hawaiian phrases and meatballs. Julie has been working in higher education for 13+ years, primarily with social justice education, commuter student support, and Indigenous studies.
Study 3 (*Critical Creatives)*	**Kem.** Kem (they/them) is a transplant to the Pacific Northwest from the desert town of Bakersfield, CA. Kem identifies as a Black, Queer person and is pursuing their doctorate while working full time in the field of data analytics. Kem is also a visual artist who regularly shows their work in galleries. Since 5 years of age, they've gotten in trouble for touching art displays and "not following clear instructions." Kem believes there's something rebellious about boldly laying colors and letting people mentally blend and make connections themselves. A little like life, we all are going to have different colors (building blocks/talents/experiences), and those aren't going to blend with the next person; but there's beauty in observing how these differences interact.
Study 3 (*Critical Creatives)*	**Luz.** Luz (he/they) is a queer, Chicanx, scholar, aspiring mycologist, and student affairs professional. He comes from a strong Mexican American familia (San Luis Potosi to Texas to California) and was born and raised in a small barrio in the San Joaquin Valley. Education has always been a key value growing up, which led them to look critically at the world we live in. Through 10 years of navigating higher education settings, he merged two of his passion areas of identity development and student engagement into a career path within equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts. Luz currently resides on the traditional lands of the spuyal?pabs and c'tilqwsbs peoples and feels a deep connection to the Salish Sea.
Study 3 (*Critical Creatives)*	**Lynn.** Lynn (she/her) is a Queer, partnered, cisgender, white, female, Lutheran pastor whose life and work have often played/imagined/advocated/explored among the paradoxes and tangled intersections of sexuality, spirituality, community, and justice. The heritage she knows most about is her Norwegian/Scandinavian ancestors, partially through several self-published life stories from grandparents and great grandparents. Part of this heritage is a tendency toward stoicism on the outside, although Lynn feels fun inside.

Study	Collaborator Names[1] and Self-Authored Introductions[2]
	Currently serving a small, liberal arts university in the Pacific Northwest as pastor, this is a calling that pulls together her skills, experiences, and values in a way that fosters a deep sense of meaning and purpose.
Study 2 (*Compassionistas*)	**Niki.** Niki (she/they), is not just a co-collaborator for this study but also a friend and co-conspirator with its primary researcher Jes. Niki researches the intersections of African-American women, antiracism, and leadership identity development. Prior to completing her PhD in 2023, Niki completed two B.A. degrees (English, Communication) and a Masters of Public Administration at the University of Missouri. Niki has worked in government, higher education, and corporate sectors blending all her experiences. In all of these spaces, Niki celebrates her racially Black, ethnically African-American heritage and invites the wisdom of Black women intellectuals past and present to encourage and inform all aspects of her life and work. Niki lives and works with her family in the unceded lands of the Duwamish people in the Pacific Northwest.
Study 3 (*Critical Creatives)*	**Rosa.** Rosa (she/her/ella) es una hija, she is a sister, a tia, a fur momma, and a granddaughter. She is a student affairs scholar-practitioner currently pursuing her PhD in student affairs. She is a first- generation college graduate, first-generation professional, and soon-to-be first-generation doctora. Rosa's Latina identity disrupts assumptions of what it means to belong to the diaspora, and she is a whole being, not subscribing to the notions of half-ethnic identities. She has worked in higher education for over 11 years in various geographic locations and in an array of capacities, always working with and for the better of students' educational experiences.
Study 3 (*Critical Creatives)*	**Rey Duran.** Rey's (she/her) father's ancestors lived on the land of northern Mexico/southern Arizona long before there was a border there. Rey's mother's ancestors were colonizers and immigrants to this country from Germany and Scotland in the 17th and 18th centuries, and Rey now lives on the traditional lands of the Ojibwe. While she has been successful academically, her siblings have experienced the stigmatizing label of "learning disabilities" (aka ADHD), the school-to-prison pipeline, and other discriminatory practices of an educational system and society ill equipped to embrace, nurture, and incorporate the varied gifts of its

Study	Collaborator Names[1] and Self-Authored Introductions[2]
	creative and spiritual contributors. As the primary caretaker of her 7-year-old nephew, Rey is doing her damndest to make sure he can both read and commune with the ancestors.
Study 3 (*Critical Creatives)*	**Saiyare.** Saiyare (they/she) is a quiet community artist and activist with roots from Hong Kong and Iran. Saiyare grew up in McMinnville, OR and currently rides and works on traditional lands of the Puyallup people (Tacoma, WA), working with local food growers and providing free gardening and farming education. Saiyare has worked in a local youth-serving nonprofit, in higher education in a diversity center, and now in local non-regulatory government. They are also a member of Justseeds Artist Cooperative.
Study 3 (*Critical Creatives)*	**Smith.** Smith (they/them) is a marketing professional with a salient queer and transmasculine identity, white-coded with heritage connected to Native communities in North Dakota. Smith leads a design, marketing, and communications group at a mid-size regional liberal arts university in the Pacific Northwest. With almost 20 years of experience in higher education, Smith is responsible for developing and implementing a strategy that integrates website, social media, and digital campaigns with print and external communications. Passionate about adaptive and justice-based content, Smith believes in the power of storytelling as a catalyst for education and positive change. Smith firmly believes creative teams thrive when members co-create psychologically safe(r) environments, which allow for new voices, evolving vision, and equitable working principles.
Study 3 (*Critical Creatives)*	**Sola.** Sola (she/they) identifies as a very Black Nigerian, very Queer, and very goofy higher education practitioner and PhD candidate. Born in the Midwest, Sola is currently learning how to survive and grow in the rainy, rainy Pacific Northwest. She is learning more and more about Afro-feminist decolonization and strives to authentically use this lens in her work and writing. Sola is constantly grateful for her ancestors who always guide her toward better things—even when she has been stubborn!—and constantly dreams of a better world where all can be free away from the oppressive systems that fuck us over.

[1] Most Collaborators included in this article are referred to by pseudonyms; however, for a few Collaborators it was important to them that their real names be used, which I honored at their request.

[2] As the three studies informing this article unfolded, my methodology evolved. For example, by Study 3, I asked Collaborators to write self-authored introductions of themselves *in their own words* to honor their agency in co-creating this research with me. For the purposes of this article, I retroactively asked Collaborators in Study 2 to contribute self-authored introductions. However, the one Collaborator from Study 1 directly included in this article was unable to provide a self-authored introduction; therefore, instead I offer an explanatory narrative.

SIGNIFICANT META-FINDINGS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION & BEYOND

The meta-findings from these qualitative studies were multifold. First, radical imagination and critical creativity (RICC) praxis is an onto-epistemological process of becoming (including unlearning and relearning), which is accessible to anyone, pluralistically embodied, and situationally located within our broader intersecting sociopolitical and ecological contexts. Second, RICC praxis is necessarily collectivistic, both engaged across intersecting communities and experienced as a continuum from our ancestors to future generations. Third, to promote and sustain individual, community, and ecological flourishing through RICC praxis, we must prioritize holistic, mutual well-being and inter/intrapersonal trauma-informed healing. Finally, RICC praxis is an ongoing process (not a "one size" blueprint). For the purposes of this article, I will be focusing on the third meta-finding related to holistic, mutual well-being and inter/intrapersonal trauma-informed healing; however, as each of the meta-findings co-inform one another, tendrils of the other three are woven throughout. The third meta-finding comprised three salient themes: (1) harmful and/or traumatic experiences catalyzed desires to become transformation agents; (2) greater-than-self (e.g., collectivistic, ancestral) inheritances were a source of creativity for surviving, healing, and thriving; and (3) everyday creativity supported strategies for engaging in trauma-informed, multidimensional well-being for interrelated self- and community-care.

Theme 1: Harmful Experiences Catalyzed Desires to Become Transformation Agents

Collaborators shared intersecting narratives (from their experiences as students, employees, and other stakeholder roles, both within higher education and beyond) that illustrated experiences of violence, harm, trauma, marginalization, macro/microaggressions, and/or othering as a result of navigating institutions rooted in intersectional systemic oppression. Collaborators recounted myriad direct and indirect experiences, which they identified were rooted in capitalism, settler-colonial logics, White supremacy, and other systems of oppression.

Several Collaborators (Sola, Rey, Lynn, Julie, Luz, and Rosa) described harmful instances studying and working within institutions that prioritized the "business" of higher education over people's lived experiences. They shared stories illustrating how the colleges and universities at which they worked valued institutional financial preservation over humanizing treatment of the people who comprised the institution's community, particularly as many of their institutions had weathered fiscal solvency

turbulence through the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., unsafe and/or unsustainable working conditions, layoffs and furloughs, furnishing of benefits, etc.). Several Collaborators emphasized the untenable accrual of loan debt for their students (and for themselves as current doctoral students and/or alumni) as harm perpetuated by the higher education system. Collaborators who were working or who had worked in higher education (e.g., in faculty and/or staff roles) identified that the negative material impact of their own student debt was compounded by low pay for higher education employees; for example, Rey described still paying off student loan debt nearly 20 years post degree completion, which she likened to "indentured servitude." Julie expressed cognitive dissonance related to participating in a system that perpetuated socioeconomic inequity:

> I question myself, "How can I be part of a system that accrues debt to so many people?" In which, I and my colleagues are also poor. It's a poor system for the user—the student and the employee—that has so much innovation but also does so much harm.

These practices (e.g., prioritizing finances before people, student-loan debt, low-pay), underpinned by capitalist logics, created harm for students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders.

Connected to capitalist-rooted practices, Collaborators also described settler-colonial logics embedded in the ways in which resources are extracted and exploited within higher education, which affect both people (e.g., labor) and agents/relations within our natural world (e.g., plants, animals, land). For example, Saiyare called for restoration of that which was dismembered on the land of their alma mater as a spiritual imperative for community well-being:

> Talking about decolonization, this is my wish for [my undergraduate alma mater] . . . bring back the creek. You know, in the ways that, historically universities have taken land, but, like, have altered natural ways of being . . . spiritually, is really impacting this space . . . I always have this, like, kind of like theory/hunch that if [alma mater] brings back the creek that, that the University will do better, right. Because they've, yeah, taken away this, like, really precious resource—lifeforce—that, like, salmon used to swim up. And it is dry now because it's been rerouted to cemented, kind of, culverts . . . and that the physical environment too be one that is, like, most respectful to the land that it's on and the people who it was taken from. And the animals, and, like, the other creatures who have also been harmed by the creation of these spaces.

Sola identified that intersectional harms caused by capitalist- and settler-colonial-based practices combined with social-identity-based microaggressions and other negative experiences created cognitive dissonance for her related to higher education's liberatory potential:

> Being Black in higher ed and all the microaggressions to the macroaggressions of being Black in certain schools. But even seeing, I think especially when a Black woman graduates and leaves, how much debt we have. . . . how much we are set

> back beyond our peers. And so it got me thinking, like, is higher education really a great equalizer?

Like Sola, several Collaborators described instances in which systemic oppression was perpetuated through interpersonal experiences, which occurred both in- and out-of-classroom, as a result of identity-based and institutional power dynamics. Niki recounted how unsolicited and unhelpful advice from a White male dean derailed her doctoral journey by several years. Brittney noted, "I do think it's interesting that some of the most decorated on paper, you know, educated people really aren't. They're the ones in the classroom saying the harmful things. . . . But they're educated. They have PhDs." Similarly, Kem described challenges navigating a doctoral program at a dominantly White, for-profit, Christian institution as a Black, Queer person:

> In my dissertation and my doctoral program, I do have a lot of hesitancy about being very open about being abolitionist . . . the doctoral process and standards are kind of contributing to that colonial mindset. Because when you look at the ways in which you study different problems, some of them do not lend themselves to studying issues that are specifically within the Black diaspora. Or the Latinx community. Or other communities like that. And I don't think it's done unintentionally—I think it's done with intent . . . I think that's really harmed a lot of the doctoral process . . . within my own school, mentioning that I want to tackle LGBT bias or bias in recruiting for people who are nonbinary, sometimes I get push-back . . . I have to realize, "Oh, I'm in a Christian college" . . . me getting a chair and getting it passed and then being okay with it, is kind of political. I have to pick and choose my battles.

Illustrating navigating tensions within their doctoral experience, Kem's arts-based data sculptural painting depicted a face carved into pieces and torn asunder by various strings that simultaneously rip and bind (see Figure 1). This art piece viscerally expressed their experiences of code switching, compartmentalization, and feeling like their whole, pluralistically embodied existence was severed as they navigated myriad personal, professional, and doctoral dynamics.

Figure 1. Kem's Arts-Based Data: Sculptural Painting

Luz described similar experiences of needing to choose his battles when it came to navigating his master's degree experience. Luz shared a story about how he tried to be critically creative in demonstrating his DEIJ learning through his master's comprehensive exams, which was not received well by his evaluators—the gatekeepers to his degree conferral. Being shut down confused him because he thought he was practicing the very DEIJ values instilled in him by his master's program in taking a creative approach that challenged the status quo. To pass, he ultimately chose to comply with the content and format directives because otherwise his degree would have been withheld. Luz opted for a path of lesser resistance, despite feeling it limited his ability to be authentic and critically creative in his own learning. However, nearly a decade later, Luz catalyzed this negative master's experience into radically (re)imagining and critically co-creating a new multicultural center on the campus where he worked as a student affairs administrator. Luz identified the center as his creative arts-based data, which he represented through Polaroids and other artifacts (see Figure 2). When discussing his arts-based data with the focus group, Luz lit up describing how he engaged his creative agency and nurtured collective imagination with his students to create everything from scratch in the center's 1st year. Luz also articulated the tensions of contingently existing within an institution that one is trying to change:

> I kept saying to myself, "Don't fuck it up." (*laughter*) . . . This is the first year it's existed so, you know, I think that's just pressure I put on myself, but I think sometimes that hinders my creativity when I put too much pressure. But then, I remember the fun part of, like, I get to do whatever I want. It's my space, I'm building. But I want [institution] to see the value in it. Embrace it. And *fund* it."

Luz's stories demonstrated his resilience and commitment to creatively advancing DEIJ and his awareness of the risks inherent in liberatory praxes that creatively disrupt the White supremacist underpinnings of higher education. Knowledge of these risks is a constant companion; several Collaborators described actively resisting letting their fear of risk-taking hinder their creativity.

Like Luz, many Collaborators identified that navigating negative, violent, and marginalizing experiences in educational spaces inspired them to do better for others by creatively using their sphere of influence and positional power, regardless of their level in the organization. For example, Smith catalyzed difficult early educational experiences into a self-authored (counter)narrative, transforming deficit experiences into strengths that now underpin their critically creative work as a higher education marketing and communications professional. Smith shared that growing up in a rural area they lacked "autonomy on what I could consume or what knowledge I could create," which was difficult as "a Queer identified person with an expansive idea around gender." Smith's RICC (counter)narrative involved understanding that their experiences as a Queer/Trans* person gave them a type of "superpower" that allowed them to better understand social and power dynamics of certain situations and supported them in engaging creativity with answerability to/with marginalized communities:

> [I] have lenses that work to identify (*pause*) what's really happening. Underbellies. Like x-ray specs to be able to say, "Ok, I see what is being presented to me—what's actually rooting this thing." And it's usually the subjugation of another identity. And so that, to me, brings that search for (*pause*) authenticity to the fore . . . a creative, an artist or a communicator, has to balance "is this representation or is this exploitation?"

In their marketing and communications work, Smith sought to transcend transactional university recruitment and public relations; rather, they have collaboratively co-created multimedia, community-serving DEIJ resources, which are freely and broadly available within and beyond their university, that feature authentic storytelling and culturally responsive representation.

Unfortunately, negative, violent, and marginalizing experiences were common for all Collaborators, which created cognitive dissonance related to what many of them believed was higher education's liberatory potential or purpose. However, within this first theme also emerged a narrative that most Collaborators' *whys* for becoming transformative change agents were rooted in catalyzing their lived experiences into generative, critically creative approaches that allowed them to interrupt these cycles and co-create the futures they imagine and desire.

Theme 2: Greater-Than-Self Creativity for Surviving, Healing, and Thriving

Building on theme one, every Collaborator described in some way how their motivations to engage in transformative, critically creative change transcended personal experiences. The second theme identified that *what* fueled Collaborators' commitment to RICC praxis for liberatory, abolitionist, decolonizing, and queering futures was a sense of being connected to a greater-than-self continuum over time (e.g., ancestors to future generations) and space (intersecting communities and ecologies). These connections supported their transgressive strivings to disrupt and dismantle the matrix and engender thriving for themselves and others.

Multiple Collaborators framed creativity as an inherited strength forged and honed by their ancestors' struggles for survival. Both Sola and Niki identified that their ancestors' survival of slavery required creativity, which allows them to be here now, continuing creative resistance to dominant power systems. Brittney described her ancestors as healers who learned how to care for their communities through research-like processes (i.e., experimentation, trial and error):

> [My ancestors] were creative. . . . It was with the resources, access, mind, talents, skills that we have—how can we address this problem? . . . trauma-informed care. And it's vital and essential, especially in this work. And I don't think we talk about it enough sometimes. But, there is something, like, when you're mentioning the ancestors, like some of the trauma that stays with us. . . . my grandma was a *curandera,* and she was a healer. So people would go with her to town to heal whatever they had. There's no doctor. . . . you will get *sobada*, which is like a massage, for mostly anything. So you know if you have a migraine, a headache,

> stuff like that. But I think it was absolutely creative to say I'm going to serve my community in this way. I'm going to do my own research. Trial and error to figure out this is the best way to combine these leaves with this tea . . . you have it 100% where we can't forget our ancestors in these conversations.

Brittney connected her vision of liberatory futures with her ancestral inheritances regarding the stewardship of collective, trauma-informed care, framing these as creative research endeavors.

As Jordan reflected on their early experiences with creativity, they noted a pattern of creativity for surviving: "I watched my parents be very creative with budgeting and being creative around resources. But I never saw creativity as pleasure. Or as something of innovation, in that essence of drawing something out to be new and catalytic." Jordan's understanding of creativity evolved over time from an inherited strategy for surviving to one that could be engaged to advance justice and engender thriving for their intersecting communities. Jordan shared that they had come to see creativity as essential to DEIJ work:

> I use creativity to help me empathize and draw humility to the work that I do. I see creativity as a form of investigation, of inquiry, of challenging current knowledge. I see creativity as a way of exploring boundaries of thoughts and concepts. I try to see creativity as my foundation of having a growth mindset.

However, Jordan encountered resistance to engaging creativity to advance DEIJ at their university, which they sought to understand empathetically through the lens of their own family-based experiences of creativity for survival. Jordan knew that their colleagues had needed to be creative to survive as their institution had weathered several financial crises in the past decade; therefore, Jordan perceived their colleagues were reluctant to let go of the deficit-based strategies they innovated for survival to make room for asset-based creativity, which could promote different ways of thinking, working, and being to improve DEIJ-related outcomes.

Sola described how rooting in something greater-than-self through joyful community connection is key to sustaining liberatory praxes amid the harm and suffering caused by the intersectional systems of oppression that she seeks to disrupt and (re)imagine:

> You need the joy! . . . If we don't have joy, you know, we don't want it. . . . Audre Lorde wrote about the erotic. And, like, just being gay. And it being cute . . . always fighting and being cute. hooks talked about love. Like, different types of love. . . . We're advocating for folks to feel fully joy all the time. And I think sometimes we forget that. . . . When the collective society thinks of activism, we think of, like, only suffering. And we have to think of the suffering, *and* we have to experience joy or we're not going to make it, right. And so I think it's both. It's both for, like, checking to make sure we don't look away. Doing work . . . knowing what we can do, and actually doing that. But then also, doing joy shit . . . it has to be all those things, otherwise we're not going to survive.

Well-being and joy emerged as important threads for several Collaborators, particularly as it was rooted in love for self/others and in the acknowledgment of and respect for our embodied existences through care, healing, rest, and grace as we engage in processes of becoming.

For many Collaborators, greater-than-self answerability through RICC praxis extended beyond the people immediately within their personal or higher education spheres to the communities and contexts in which they or their institutions were situationally located. Saiyare identified how decolonizing praxis required relationally tangible creative action in addition to reflective, imaginative work (i.e., moving beyond notions of decolonization as rhetorical or metaphorical). Decolonizing praxis must focus on healing and repairing the legacies of historical harm and trauma that exist today. Saiyare named building generative relationships with local Indigenous community members and land/ecologies as essential to decolonizing praxis:

> How do we have better relationships with the Tribe? . . . How do we be accountable to them in the work that we're doing to repair some of the historical trauma and hurt. . . . what is our responsibility to Indigenous folks . . . who have been impacted by colonization? Or folks may even call it imperialism that we still see today all over the world? . . . I basically see it as harm reduction. That decolonization is questioning, you know, how we are in a relationship with the land in our communities? And how can we do our best in our lifetime to reduce the harm for future generations?

For Saiyare, harm reduction included repairing relationships with people and the earth, including land, water, animals, and other agents/relations in our natural world, both now and for the future.

What these stories of creativity for survival, healing, and thriving had in common was connecting one's direct lived experiences (theme one) with a continua of greater-than-self (theme two). Catalyzing negative or harmful experiences into generative critical creativity was a praxis that Collaborators identified was fueled by love for their students, their families, themselves, and, for several (e.g., Julie, Saiyare), the natural world also. For example, Luz described the multicultural center he created (as represented through arts-based data in Figure 2) as a "love letter" to those with whom he was in community. What emerged from these stories was a conceptualization of RICC praxis as fueled by love, for a greater-than-self purpose of stewarding long-term and larger-scale change for intertwined and interdependent flourishing through ongoing, collectivistically-engaged everyday processes (connected to theme three).

Figure 2. Luz's Arts-Based-Data: Polaroid and Artifact Collage of Multicultural Center

Theme 3: Everyday Creativity for Trauma-Informed Stewardship of Well-Being

Amid intersectionally oppressive lived experiences, Collaborators identified how they used RICC praxis to interrupt, disrupt, challenge, and forge new paths of being, knowing, and doing through everyday creative acts, many of which advanced and/or were sustained through trauma-informed stewardship of well-being. This third theme identified transgressive, everyday creativity strategies as a *how* for engaging their visions for liberating futures: Everyday creative and trauma-informed approaches to healing and multidimensional well-being, as both an interpersonal and intrapersonal endeavors, emerged as an integral component of the praxis of dismantling *what is* while radically imagining and critically creating *what can be*.

Connected to themes one and two, Collaborators catalyzed and transformed their negative lived experiences, both within and beyond higher education, to creatively advance liberatory praxes for the purpose of disrupting intersecting systems of oppression and promoting thriving with/for others. For example, Sola described her resistance to White supremacist sense of urgency and capitalist scarcity mindsets by embracing creative agency within her role as a supervisor to support the sustainable well-being of her staff:

> What gives me joy is being . . . able to think of creative ways to give my staff a break . . . being like, "Y'all did that for the day. Like, many of y'all are salaried. Go home. Go home" . . . being creative and being like, "But if I go home, this can't

> get done." Like, well, how can I get this done? . . . And that's made me feel good, I think, to be that boss.

Several Collaborators identified unlearning capitalist grind culture and (re)learning rest as an important part of sustaining DEIJ activism, which Lynn described as "long-haul" work:

> Activism is, like, it's long haul work. So how do you both see it that way and know that it's not going to be fast, quick results. And then also, how do you pace yourself? And maybe even, like, step in and step out as needed? . . . I think well-being is critical to it. Because I think if we, like, start feeling hopeless or stuck because we're not finding joy in our work or our lives, if we're not rested, like, we're not going anywhere. Like, this movement doesn't go anywhere with burned out, stuck people. . . . Overall seeing that it's part of a larger movement. . . . There's a river analogy. . . . The river started long before you. You're sort of stepping in, and it goes beyond you. So I think that's the generational, ancestral, like, let's do our part to be both good descendants and good ancestors—to people who have begun this work and will keep this work moving. That also, I think, there's some place for humility in that. . . . On good days, I feel that sense of, like, okay, I'm part of something larger. Do my part.

Connected to theme two, Lynn described the long-haul nature of everyday-creative movement work as necessarily intergenerational and greater-than-self, and, because of this long-haul nature, she identified that attention to well-being is critical for sustaining this work across time.

Many Collaborators expressed an ethic that self-care is community-care, including care for people and the natural world, and community-care is self-care. Our communities are only as healthy as their least thriving member(s). Collaborators identified the current higher education landscape, which represents a microcosm for our broader global society, as lacking emphasis on trauma-informed care, particularly in work/professional settings. Niki's arts-based data was meditation, which she engaged as humanizing, RICC praxis rooted in well-being:

> I've been exploring meditation as a creative outlet and, so I've had a couple of opportunities to present. And I've started each of my presentations with meditation. And for me, it's both a praxis as I'm talking about leadership and leading from an abolitionist lens from like thinking about our spaces and reimagining how you gather in the workplace. Then one of the ways that I can hold space to do that when someone has me speak is to bring everybody together in a moment of extended reflection and meditation.

Centering meditation required courage for Niki to resist her "*cagent"* socialization (in vivo term: Niki noted our "agents" are molded and shaped by the matrix of intersecting systems of oppression; liberatory praxes help to free one's authentic self from one's *cagent,* a portmanteau of "cage" and "agent"): She had to interrupt her own inner

dialogue, which said meditation practice would not be received positively. She said, "The tapes in my head aren't helpful." However, when recounting listening to her coworkers' responses to these meditation activities, she identified:

> You know, it's like you come in. And they're like, "We gotta get shit done. And bah bah bah." Ready to, like, fight their battles. And I'm like, "So, here's what we're gonna do. Right, everyone's gonna take some breaths. We're going to remember that we're human beings." Yeah, but I've gotten really good feedback about it and it's really funny because, like I said, I just feel so insecure. But people are like, "Thank you for doing that."

Niki radically imagined, what if every higher education experience (e.g., class, meeting, program) started with meditation? A moment to pause, to human, and to tend to well-being? Meditation as RICC praxis underpinned by a desire to foster thriving could support slowing down, interrupting, and rewriting the narratives that one's worth is contingent on productivity. Somatic practices, like meditation, are a start to this embodied healing process but not the end.

Rey captured the ongoing, process-based nature of everyday creative well-being practices through her arts-based data poem:

> It's a small thing, to light a match
> Quick, easy, insubstantial really
> Light one three times a day, every day
> For a year
> Three years
> Ten years
> Pile the burnt matchsticks all up
> And it's become a thing
> Not a small thing, but a real thing
>
> – *untitled* by Rey Duran

Rey's poem, dedicated to her late mother, captured the simultaneity of joy and grief as well as the cumulative impact of purposeful small-scale actions. Every day, she lights a candle for her mother with matchsticks. She has a jar where she keeps the spent matchsticks, which she has to empty often. Alone, a single matchstick is a small thing. But over time, she reflected that this daily practice becomes a substantive, very real thing. This poem was a reminder that we bring our whole, embodied selves with us into educational settings, disrupting the notion that we must leave parts of ourselves at the door upon entry. Similarly, Sola captured how frustration and grief can coexist with joy and creativity in this excerpt from her arts-based data, a fictional short story:

> The policy, deaths, and lack of employment shocked Sola, Ife, and their closest Black friends into action. After one night, filled with storytelling, tears, laughter, and lots of wine, Ife suddenly asked, "What if we started our own shit?"

Together, through the process of engaging this qualitative research, we (Collaborators and I) *both* mourned devastating grief, anger, and frustration at the matrix of intersectional systems of oppression that continuously and insidiously cause harm, pain, and trauma *and* nurtured within each other audacious hope that we can, as radical imaginaries and critically creative agents, catalyze change through our collective efforts (i.e., start "our own shit" [Sola]).

Collaborators described everyday, creative practices of resisting systemic harm as processes of becoming that require trauma-informed healing. Because of the violence of the systems constituting the matrix in which our pluralistically embodied selves are situationally located, healing can/must occur in the becoming process. Niki imagined:

> What would the trauma-informed care version of [our work] be like? Because the people who were conditioned to respond in a way, like, respond a way like something happened. . . . I think about the people, who feel like they have to produce, came from a place where they *had to produce*. . . . I also have just, like, such a tender heart for that. It's like an onion. Peeling back, like, ivy vines around a person's mind and heart . . . I mean, you could spend a whole career—someone trying to get, trying to get that shift, you know.

The process of engaging this qualitative research in of itself became a space for trauma-informed healing. Rey reflected that engaging in RICC praxis as part of this study was a generative experience. Lynn described their experience in this study, particularly the arts-based data creation, as "really grounding." Kem said, "I want to thank you for this, too. What I've discovered about myself in these conversations." Rosa described study collaboration as a healing process. These Collaborator reflections affirmed my intent to co-design and co-implement a research process that reified the expansive, humanizing, and liberatory potential of RICC praxis.

Collaborators identified myriad everyday higher education examples, such as co-creating multicultural centers with students (Luz), humanizing marketing work (Smith), supporting wellbeing for themselves (Lynn) and co-workers (Sola, Niki), and engaging in collective healing through collaborative research (Rey, Lynn, Kem, Rosa), in which they are engaging in critically creative resistance to begin engendering the futures they radically imagine are possible.

DISCUSSION

From the meta-findings emerged visions of liberatory futures in higher education and beyond in which collectivistic trauma-informed healing and multidimensional well-being is integral. Engendering these futures requires necessarily interdependent, embodied processes of becoming, wherein our thriving and liberation are intersectionally concomitant: "Existence is fractal—the health of the cell is the health of the species and the planet" (brown, 2017, p. 13).

Theme 1: Harmful Experiences Catalyzed Desires to Become Transformation Agents

Related to the first theme, (counter)storytelling played a large role in reframing deficit-based experiences into asset-based commitments. Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars (Bell, 2023; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Martinez, 2020) identified counterstorytelling as a powerful method for complicating our understandings of reality by illuminating the matrix of intersectional systems of oppression as it operates to keep certain groups categorically disenfranchised. Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008) offers a methodology for (counter)storytelling underpinned by seven principles of: respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, wholism, interrelatedness, and synergy. Several of these principles were present in Collaborators' transformational narratives, regardless of whether they self-identified as Indigenous (and/or influenced by Indigenous epistemologies). For example, themes from their stories included respect for all people and planet; responsibility for/with others for liberatory praxes; reverence for ancestors, intersecting communities, and next generations (e.g., Lynn's river continuum); reciprocity for mutual striving and mutual investment in getting oneself and others free; wholism of (re)membering (Okello & Quaye, 2018) that which has been severed in people (e.g., Kem's code switching and compartmentalization) and nature (e.g., Saiyare's call to "bring back the creek"); interrelatedness in the intersectionality of the matrix of systems of oppression and the harm these cause to everyone, even if experienced differently due to one's positionality and situational location; and synergy in identifying innovative disruption through RICC praxis. For many Collaborators, key to interrupting deficit-based narratives for marginalized stakeholders and (re)writing liberatory (counter)narratives was valuing their community cultural wealth (CCW), or diverse onto-epistemological ways of being, knowing, and doing, as assets that they and others bring from their ancestral inheritances, lived experiences, and cultural contexts into higher education spaces (e.g., familial/social, linguistic, navigational, resistant, aspirational, and transgressive CCW; Pennell, 2016; Yosso, 2005).

Theme 2: Greater-Than-Self Creativity for Surviving, Healing, and Thriving

CCW was also deeply connected to the second theme. Creativity has long been used for survival. Author, Ocean Vuong, asserted, "Nobody survives by accident. . . . Survival is a creative act" (as cited in Doyle, 2022, 46:37). In a meta-study analyzing creativity scholarship, Mehta and Henricksen (2022) similarly identified:

> resilience and resistance as a means to engage creativity, is grounded in dialectical approaches to creativity that show how African American and Black and/or Indigenous people have long used creativity as a force to survive and counter systemic oppression and life-threatening circumstances (p. 117).

These creative survival inheritances are deeply contextual. Archibald et al. (2020) asserted one cannot understand Indigenous ontology and epistemology out of context;

the collectivistic Indigenous storywork methodology they described "educates and heals the heart, mind, body, and spirit" (p. 8) because "Indigenous values, philosophies, resilience, and resistance that are at the core of Indigenous stories help ease the pain of intergenerational trauma that may surface when sharing lived experience stories" (p. 9). These epistemological and ontological inheritances constitute CCW (Pennell, 2016; Yosso, 2005) that each of us brings into the intersecting spaces we navigate; however, with these legacies of survival also comes intergenerational trauma.

In *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies*, Menakem (2017) wrote of the intergenerational anguish White supremacy has inflicted, which is now embedded in all bodies, but particularly Black and African American bodies. In addition to the trauma many of us experience directly and/or have inherited, van Dernoot Lipsky and Burk (2009) identified that secondary trauma (i.e., work with traumatized individuals) presents additional psychological and spiritual layers of this trauma onion to peel back, or, as Niki described, ivy-vine tendrils wrapped around our hearts. Writing about the experiences of Black student services professionals in higher education, Preston et al. (2023) wrote, "Exposure to student trauma in the context of their roles can result in a traumatic response in professionals known as secondary traumatic stress (STS)" (p. 94). This highlights the need for trauma-informed pedagogy and practices that "enable practitioners to recognize trauma, deliver sensitive care, and avoid retraumatization of the person" (Gaywish & Mordoch, 2018, p. 6) as a reciprocal strategy that supports interdependent self/community-care. Lorde (2017) poetically wrote, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (p. 130). Trauma-informed self-care as community-care and community-care as self-care are, therefore, not only required to *sustain* this work but also are *transgressive and transformational direct action* toward radically healing, liberatory futures.

Theme 3: Everyday Creativity for Trauma-Informed Stewardship of Well-being

Flowing from the second to third theme, from all three studies emerged Collaborators' deep desire to foster multidimensional flourishing and thriving for themselves and others. As embodied beings, trauma-informed approaches to well-being must engage mind, body, spirit, and heart across multiple dimensions (e.g., intellectual, psychological, creative, spiritual, social, environmental, physical, financial, and vocational) to steward healing for repair, restoration, and remediation of the harms and violence caused by the matrix of oppression. RICC praxis can directly support this healing. Empirical studies from the field of positive psychology have established a reciprocal relationship between everyday creativity and human flourishing (Conner et al., 2016), positive affect (Conner & Silvia, 2015), and resilience (R. Patel et al., 2017), meaning that everyday creativity can support well-being and well-being can support engagement in creativity practices, creating a positively reinforcing symbiosis. RICC praxis, therefore, can be a strategy for navigating the spectrum from surviving to thriving while engaging the simultaneous praxis of disrupting systems of oppression and world-building liberatory futures.

Niki described how somatic practices, like meditation, became for her an everyday creative strategy to interrupt work-place assumptions rooted in White-supremacy (e.g., color-evasive [Annamma et al., 2016; also/previously known as colorblind; Bonilla-Silva, 2018] myths of meritocracy [Brown-Dean, 2019; Tapia-Fuselier & Irwin, 2019] that have compounding negative consequences for people with systemically marginalized identities [Anderson, 2017]) and capitalism (e.g., the paradigm of the "ideal worker," which promotes an unbalanced commitment to paid work while simultaneously regarding people as fungible [Sallee et al., 2019], thereby upholding inequality regimes, or "interlinked organizing processes that produce patterns of complex inequalities" [Acker, 2006, p. 459]). Simultaneously, somatic practices, like meditation, have empirically-demonstrated, directly positive impact on multidimensional well-being, including brain function, immune system function, and other physical and mental health symptoms (Jamil et al., 2023).

Okello and Quaye's (2018) four R's of radical imagination (rehearsal, [re]membering, recall, and [re]presentation), particularly recall (e.g., nearly every Collaborator described self-reflexively engaging in un/relearning processes as part of their commitment to this work) and (re)membering (e.g., Saiyare describing [re]connecting with the land; Kem describing [re]connecting with themselves through their art and this research process), surfaced in Collaborator's descriptions of RICC praxis as a continuously-engaged process. Findings also emphasized the role of rest, not only for sustainable self/community care but also as an important part of engaging iterative imagination and creativity processes. Therefore, a fifth R, *rest*, emerged as important to sustaining this work, with an understanding that rest is both a resistant act (Hersey, 2022) and important to RICC praxis because creativity requires incubation (Hulme et al., 2014), striving (hooks, 1994), and surrender (Lewis, 2014) to transgress and transcend.

Indigenizing/decolonizing, abolitionist, and queering themes emerged as Collaborators described the reciprocal actions of everyday creative, transgressive disruption and dismantling of the matrix of systemic oppression coupled with generative world building (A. Y. Davis, 2018) for intersectionally interdependent flourishing. la paperson (2017) asserted that everyday, critically creative transgressive acts can serve decolonizing purposes:

> Regardless of its colonial structure, because school is an assemblage of machines and not a monolithic institution, its machinery is always being subverted toward decolonizing purposes. The bits of machinery that make up a decolonizing university are driven by decolonial desires, with decolonizing dreamers who are subversively part of the machinery and part machine themselves. These subversive beings wreck, scavenge, retool, and reassemble the colonizing university into decolonizing contraptions. They are scyborgs with a decolonizing desire. You might choose to be one of them (p. xiii).

Benjamin (2022) noted small, transgressive actions, engaged both from within and beyond the university, disrupt dominant logics and can subvert the very technologies created for domination into those for liberation. As Luz identified, these actions can be

simultaneously mundane and risky; la paperson (2017) similarly said, "Figure out how technologies operate. Use a wrench. Technologies can be disrupted and reorganized. . . . . Ask how, and how otherwise, of the colonizing machines. Even when they are dangerous" (p. 24). Engaged courageously, small-scale, creatively transgressive acts can lead to large-scale systems transformation (Glăveanu, 2010): Like Rey's matchsticks, they become "not a small thing, but a real thing."

Implications

This multi-study qualitative research became greater than the sum of its parts by weaving together meta-findings to expand and evolve the RICC praxis conceptual framework into the *Becoming CRITICAL CREATIVES* model (see Figure 3). The acronym in the model's title is a call to action to become **C**ollective **R**adical **I**maginaries **T**ransforming **I**nterdisciplinary **C**reativity [to] **A**dvance **L**iberation [by] **C**o-constructing **R**eflexive **E**cologies for **A**bolitionist, **T**rans*/queering, [and] **I**ndigenizing **V**ocations **E**ngaged **S**ustainably. This section expounds the model's components and offers recommendations for utilizing the model as a guide for critically creative transformation at multiple system levels: individual, community, institutional, and ecological.

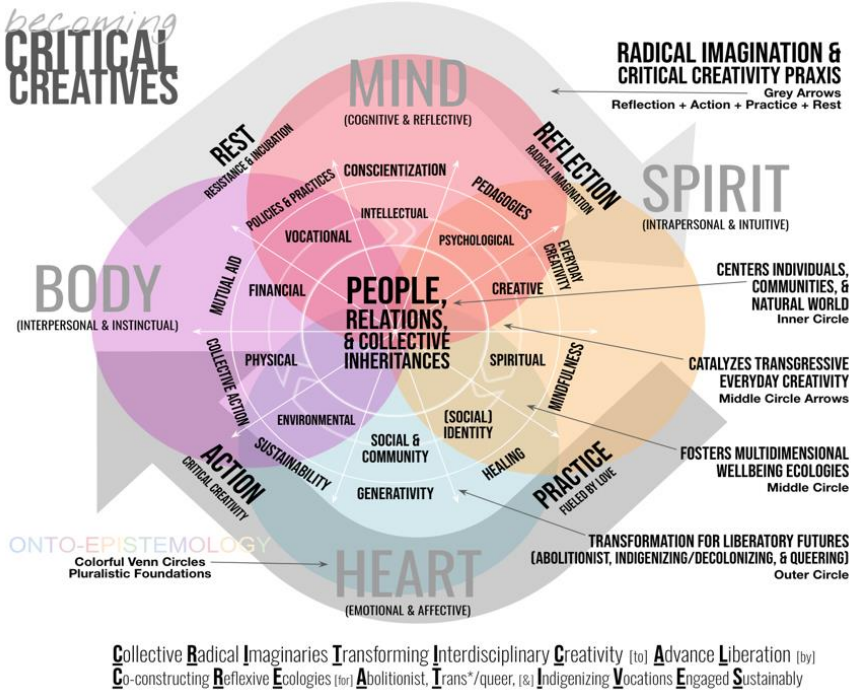

Figure 3. Becoming CRITICAL CREATIVES Model

Note: This model synthesizes findings from original qualitative research (Takla, 2023), dialectically weaving these together with concepts from theoretical frameworks and other empirical research, which both informed research design (e.g., literature review, conceptual framework) and supported meaning making of findings (e.g., discussion), including: holographic epistemology (Meyer, 2013), community cultural wealth (Pennell, 2016; Yosso, 2005), 4 P's of creativity (Collard & Looney, 2014; Cropley, 2006; Csíkszentmihályi, 1996; Hulme et al., 2014; Rhodes, 1961), everyday creativity (Richards, 2007), creativity ecosystems (Hulme et al., 2014), 4 R's of radical imagination (Okello & Quaye, 2018), rest as resistance (Hersey, 2022), and praxis (Freire, 1968/2005; hooks, 1994).

The foundation of the *Becoming CRITICAL CREATIVES* model, represented by multicolor intersecting circles, is a prismatic onto-epistemology that values pluralistic traditions and understands being (spirit), knowing (mind), feeling (heart), and doing (body) as intertwined and inseparable. This inextricably interwoven foundation extends throughout each aspect of the model: Inspired by Meyer's (2013) holographic epistemology, each part of the model co-in/forms each other part *and* likewise the wholeness of the model is contained *within* each part in inseparable measure. At the center of the model, pluralistically embodied individuals dialectically engage with their continua of longitudinal (i.e., ancestors to future generations) and intersectional (i.e., intertwined sociohistorical situational locations with intersecting relations) communities and ecologies, with an emphasis on centering those who have been marginalized by dominant systems for a trickle-up orientation to liberation. Writing from a Trans* abolitionist perspective, legal scholar, Spade (2015), argued orienting ourselves toward centering the experiences of the most vulnerable first (e.g., in our work; our priorities; and our pedagogies, policies, and practices) supports justice trickling up from grassroots loci of power (rather than waiting on trickle-down change from loci of legal, political, or other seats of power). Moving from the center to middle circles, empathetically striving to understand our own/others' lived experiences and amplifying our own/others' inheritances (e.g., CCW) is key to engaging in transgressive, everyday creativity, which, underpinned by a critical orientation toward liberatory purposes, can catalyze larger-scale transformative change through collective, coordinated small actions. In the middle circles, the model emphasizes trauma-informed care and healing for individuals, communities, and ecologies as we engage these transgressive, creative practices; with a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship between everyday creativity and well-being, this emphasis on care, healing, and multidimensional thriving is both supported by and sustains ongoing engagement in everyday, creative actions. The outer circle identifies potential outcomes of these actions, including conscientization, critical pedagogies, mindfulness and healing, generativity and sustainability, collective action and mutual aid, and policy and practice transformation; however, these are not intended to be specific "ends" or products, but rather "means" or strategies for engaging in the ongoing process-based nature of this collective work. The concept of vocation (i.e., "being called into relationship with others to promote human and ecological flourishing" [Pacific Lutheran University, n.d.-b, para. 1]) informs the relational and greater-than-self nature of these processes,

rooting this model in collective answerability (L. Patel, 2016) for and with other people and the natural world. The grey arrows surrounding the model signal the perpetual nature of RICC praxis, which dynamically intertwines reflective radical imagination, active critical creativity, ongoing practice fueled by love, and rest, both for sustaining this work and as a transgressive act in of itself.

Rather than offering didactic implications, which would quickly become outdated and/or may not be applicable for diverse contexts, the *Becoming CRITICAL CREATIVES* model outlines an *orientation toward* and *process for* being, knowing, doing, and becoming that is rooted in RICC praxis and fueled by love. Individuals (e.g., students, faculty, staff, community-members, and/or other educational stakeholders), with their communities and/or within their institutions, can engage the model through everyday actions that incrementally and transgressively disrupt, (re)construct, and transform systems over time. The following recommendations are an invitation to try-on RICC praxis strategies for trauma-informed healing and multidimensional well-being at any systems level: individual, community, institutional, and ecological. The following recommendations are not exhaustive, but rather the intent is to ignite curiosity that can spark creative exploration of iterative, small-scale actions that anyone can practice, utilizing the model as a guide for RICC praxis as an evidence-based process.

First, center people, our communities, and the natural world above profit (or bottom lines) by using RICC praxis to disrupt deficit narratives and (re)write asset-based (counter)narratives that honor lived experiences, respect the ways our communities/ecologies are mutually interdependent, and seek abundant solutions to zero-sum problems. Utilizing third things is helpful to begin deepening one's own critical consciousness, as well as beginning to author one's own counternarratives. For example, individuals or groups can use artist-created tools, such as poet Rupi Kaur's (2022) *Healing Through Words* or writer Glennon Doyle's (2021) *Get Untamed: The Journal (How to Stop Pleasing and How to Start Living)* reflective workbooks, to support trauma-healing journeys, including developing emotional intelligence, fortifying resilience (R. Patel et al., 2017), and building empathy (Shaffer et al., 2019).

Second, engage transgressive RICC praxis for everyday problem solving to disrupt and transform the matrix from any angle you are able given your position and sphere of influence. For example, perhaps you can use your position as a supervisor to disrupt cultures of overworking and prioritize rest like Sola, co-create co-curricular spaces with/for marginalized students to center their experiences like Luz, or humanize everyday interactions through attention to somatic well-being like Niki. Large-scale systems change can happen over time through everyday, creative transgressive actions (Benjamin 2022; Glăveanu, 2010; la paperson, 2017); to begin radically (re)imagining systems, *Becoming CRITICAL CREATIVES: A Three-Study Dissertation* (Takla, 2023) includes a heuristic, reflexive tool for interrogating institutional systems utilizing RICC praxis. Positive psychology empirical studies have established a reciprocal relationship between everyday creativity and well-being/thriving (Conner et al., 2016; Conner & Silvia, 2015; R. Patel et al., 2017); therefore, RICC praxis not only supports transformative systems change, but also sustains us as transformative change agents while we engage this "long haul" work.

Third, cultivate collectivistic, multidimensional flourishing (i.e., approach well-being and thriving as communal endeavors that encompass multiple dimensions, including physical, psychological, spiritual, social, environmental, financial, vocational, etc.). Because our existence is fractal, our well-being and flourishing is mutually and intersectionally interdependent. Like fractals (i.e., curved or geometric figures in which the whole comprises repeating patterns in progressively smaller iterations), systems are composed of infinitely complex, repeating patterns at various scales. Therefore, the well-being of the individual is related to the well-being of the whole (and vice-versa) and small-scale actions can reverberate, cumulatively effecting changes that can (re)shape whole systems (brown, 2017). Consider how all people and agents/relations in our natural world (e.g., animals, plants, land, ecologies) are multidimensionally thriving (or not). Practice trauma-informed harm reduction to disrupt present violent conditions and mitigate past/present harms through actively-healing reparations and restoration processes. To support healing primary- and secondary- trauma experiences, *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others* (van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2009) includes multidimensional reflective tools (that can be engaged individually or collectively), which channel the four elements (e.g., water, fire, earth, air) and corresponding directions (e.g. north, east, south, west) with a fifth direction, the inner dimension of centering ourselves.

Fourth, in this process, at every level (individual, community, institutional and ecological) attend to the means, which matter as much, if not more, than the ends, which in turn become new means. There is no one-size blueprint. RICC praxis is a cyclical process of radically imagining, critically co-creating, resting, and repeating. With each cycle, continue deepening your own critical consciousness and mutually supporting others in doing the same as they, in turn, support you. Make time for rest for sustaining resistance and for incubating innovations (Hersey, 2022; Hulme et al., 2014). At all stages of this ongoing process (i.e., iterative interrogation, [re]design, implementation, and assessment of educational policies, practices, and pedagogies) value and validate multiple onto-epistemologies (Meyer, 2013).

In conclusion, I invite *you* to join me in *Becoming CRITICAL CREATIVES*. Systems are created constructs that can be (re)created. Engendering liberation in higher education and beyond begins with individuals and communities engaging their collective agency as critically creative change makers from every positional vantage point. Said another way, each of us can critically and creatively effect change from where we are at, and together, by collectively leveraging our critical creativity, we become greater than the sum of our parts. Arthur Ashe, a groundbreaking Black tennis player, famously said, “Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.” Paraphrasing Ashe, if we start where we are (by catalyzing our lived experiences to become transformation agents), use what we have (our greater-than-self CCW, love for/with each other, and spheres of influence), and do what we can (by engaging RICC praxis as an everyday strategy for simultaneously changing systems meanwhile/by supporting trauma-informed healing and multidimensional well-being), we can live into liberatory, Indigenizing/decolonizing, abolitionist, and queering futures now, in this moment and the next one.

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