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Integrating Learning and Hummingbird Medicine to Heal Academic Harm

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Abstract: Schooling practices and institutions of schooling have harmed racialized K-12 students, teachers, undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty. How we define learning plays a significant role in understanding and ameliorating this harm. To envision a more hopeful future for education, in this article, we explore the relationship between learning, academic harm, and healing. To do so, we bring insights from Curanderismo—an oral healing and spiritual tradition—and sociocultural perspectives on learning into conversation to foreground the historical and cultural dimensions of learning in everyday practices. To breathe life into these connections, we share three stories inspired by hummingbird medicine, one form of wisdom found in Curanderismo. The stories illuminate the fluidity of time and space to support expansive views of learning and healing, the need to acknowledge the winding paths of learning and how they often grow through missteps and failures, and the need to offer ourselves and our students love as we try to heal ourselves from academic harms. Bringing learning and healing together intentionally can move us toward creating educational systems that allow for the flourishing of people in mind, body, spirit, and heart. We conclude with questions that can guide the design of learning environments characterized by healing and dignity.
Keywords: Healing, Learning, Academic Harm, Hummingbird Medicine, Reframing Failure, Dignity

> I tried to be the best like when I was younger, but now I just try to hide in the background. It is just easier that way...I try to be emotionless...I get sent to the principal's office when I get upset, I get sent to the principal's office when I get excited or happy or whatever because I am distracting the teacher. So it is just easier to not have emotions; it's like emotional chains are wrapped around my body - the tighter they get, the free-er I feel...I don't know if that makes sense to you, but that is how it feels. It's like a prison inside, but like I know the schools didn't do it intentionally. It is like I am a school drone...I am a slave to learning.

I borrow the words of a twelve-year-old student who provided a sharp and insightful critique of schooling. He was a brilliant and intuitive child who struggled in school often.

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Ironically, he had, for the most part, done well with the content, but his behavior—not being able to sit still, not looking at the teacher, and his need to fidget—often got him in trouble. As I listened to these words, I was amazed at his vivid descriptions and his keen ability to tap into his emotions with precision beyond his years.

As the mother of this intelligent, critical, and vulnerable child, who would often break down or shut down because of the harms of school, I (Elizabeth) wished the teachers, principals, and test makers could have appreciated him and seen his brilliance.

As a child, my son was one of the taller kids in his classroom, despite being one of the youngest, and walks in a brown body. As a woman of color, I can't help but wonder if the multiple attempts to "diagnose" him would have come back as behavioral issues if we were in different neighborhoods, schools, or bodies.

As a Mother Scholar and Educator, I Wonder: How Can We All Do Better By Our Kids?

Collectively, as authors, we have paused (Patel, 2012) to settle into a space where we have shared personal stories, our educational experiences, and those of the young people we love. We have witnessed our own and each other's transformations as we step into our beauty and power, and our ability to imagine and design in our schools and beyond what seems possible. As self-identifying women of color—three of Mexican heritage (Mendoza, Salazar, and Padilla Chavez) and one of Indian heritage (Jurow)—who work in the field of education, we had to grapple with our own experiences with academic harm and efforts to ameliorate them from our positions as public-school teachers, higher education staff and faculty, and students. In this space, we, too, had to sit with the reality and clarity that our unattended harms as educators working within the K-16 system had manifested into harm to others. Most of all, we struggled together to move beyond listing the harms that have happened, the harms we know too well, to think, in earnest: How can we do better by our kids?

As scholars of learning, we invited the wisdom of Curanderismo, in particular, hummingbird medicine, as a guide to help us imagine how we can weave theories of learning together with healing to ask: What is possible if we center wholeness, healing, and love as the north star of learning?

Curanderismo: Our Orientation to Healing

Our primary grounding and orientation to the symbolic and spiritual teachings of hummingbird medicine is through Curanderismo, which is primarily an oral "spiritual and healing tradition" (Cervantes, 2023 p. 275). Curanderismo origins are thousands of years old, and as with many traditions, it is complex and nuanced. Although practiced across the world, its origins trace back to the ancestral people of the Anahuac, in present-day Mexico. Inhabitants include the Mayans, Aztec, Chichimecas, and Olmecs, among others (Cervantes, 2023). Curanderismo, in its variations across communities, has survived external threats, including genocide and conquest, through mapping language and healing practices onto dominant religious beliefs (Cervantes, personal communication). Over time, Curanderismo has come to include indigenous and ancestral knowledge from across the Americas, Africa, and Europe (Avila & Parker, 1999).

In Curanderismo, it is believed that everyone has the responsibility to heal themselves, and the ability to do so. However, Curanderos/as/xs, have deep training and abilities to work on behalf of a client. The energy of healing, and the foundation of Curanderismo, is love. Although not necessarily distinct, categories of the different types of Curanderos include sobador (masseuse),

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huesero (chiropractor), partera (midwife), consejeras (counselors), and practitioners who work with other realities and energy (Chamanes or Nahuales) (Cervantes, 2023).

We build on oral tradition, trainings, and ceremonies grounded in Curanderismo to make connections to theories of learning. Additionally, our approach is enhanced by drawing on literature from Chicana feminisms (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981) and Third World feminisms (Lorde, 2012), which bring in spirituality broadly, including Curanderismo (Gonzalez et al., 2015; Lara, 2005). From this perspective and with the desire to heal the individual and community of social ills including, for example, racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other forms of social injustice, it is necessary to move between the material and spiritual (Facio & Lara, 2014; Keating, 2005). The material includes our bodies and the human world. Spirit, or spirituality, "is a conscious, self-reflective way of life and a way of relating to others, ourselves, and to 's/Spirit' in a manner that honors all life as an interconnected web" (Facio & Lara, 2014, p. 4). To be in balance, to move between the material and spiritual, it is required that we (re)learn our connection with spirit. As often in the social world, in particular in Western societies, we are pulled away from our intuition, and our connection with spirit (Cantú-Sánchez et al., 2020; Dillard, 2016; Rendón, 2009). Anzaldúa (2015), a scholar and Chamana who draws on the wisdom of Curanderismo, names the process of searching and moving toward a healing consciousness "conocimiento." She writes, "conocimiento pushes us into engaging the spirit in confronting our social sickness with new tools and practices whose goal is to effect a shift" (p. 19).

Drawing on these traditions and wisdom practices and knowing the need to move between the material and spiritual toward change, we define healing as a journey back to ourselves, our intuition, and our divine (Mendoza, 2022). As we move closer to our intuition, to our mind/body/spirit unification, we can see anew and align ourselves with our light. Through this process of healing, we can engage differently with practices, ideas, and our relationships with ourselves and others. In this way, healing supports learning new ways of being and becoming. Notably, as we grow in our journey back to ourselves, it is not about our individuality, but instead a of remembering our interconnectedness and sacredness toward liberation (Brown, 2017; Cajete, 2016; Facio & Lara, 2014; Lorde, 2012;).

Welcoming Hummingbird

To understand hummingbird medicine, and plant and animal medicine more generally requires careful observation that allows us to engage in "describing, interpreting, and reproducing what we see in the cosmos and nature to understand life, and to bring healing and harmony back when things are not going well for us" (Cervantes, 2023, p. 275). By observing hummingbird's physicality, capabilities, and functions in the ecosystem, we can understand its lessons for how we can live, and the medicine hummingbird offers (Cajete, 2016; Kimmerer, 2013; Simpson, 2014). The following traits inform our appreciation of hummingbird medicine (Andrews, 2002):

- Hummingbirds move in the shape of a sideways figure eight, the sign of infinity.
- The hummingbird, with its round body, short wings, and short legs, has been deemed anatomically impossible to fly. Yet, not only are they able to fly, but they can do what no other bird can do, which is fly backward and sustain hovering mid-air. With their agility, they can even fight off hawks.
- With their long beak, hummingbirds can pass the bitterness of the flowers to nourish themselves with sweet nectar.

Working to make the connection between healing and learning, we bonded over profound and seemingly serendipitous encounters with hummingbirds that reminded us that we were on the right path and where we needed to be. We sat with its wisdom and asked hummingbird to guide us.

- With its sign of infinity, we ask hummingbird medicine to help us honor the connections between the past, present, and future to remind us the present is pregnant with possibilities.
- With its anatomical shape and fierce ability to fly, we ask hummingbird medicine to help us break through the barriers of what may appear as an impossibility.
- With its long beak, we ask hummingbird medicine to remind us to open our hearts to the possibility of creating a system that recognizes the bitterness of life and that answers with love.

Susto and Academic Harm

Some of the ways in which we can fall out of balance are due to traumas. In Curanderismo, one of the terms used to describe trauma is susto. The literal translation of susto is scare or fright. In practice, however, susto is understood as part of the soul going into hiding to protect itself (Avila & Parker, 1999). The perceived size of the trauma does not dictate whether or not susto is caused. Susto can happen with a large-scale trauma, like war or domestic abuse. Susto can also be a more seemingly mundane everyday interaction, such as microaggressions or hurtful conflict with a peer or colleague.

We embrace susto as a point of entry to make explicit how schooling can cause harm. Some of the ways soul loss, or fragmentation, occurs is through the dehumanizing of bodies (Nakano Glenn, 2015), the perpetuation of false dichotomies (e.g., productive/not productive) (Shahjahan, 2014), privileging individuality over the community (Cajete, 2016), and the artificial separation of mind, body, and spirit (Facio & Lara, 2009). In other words, fragmentation is a source of colonizing trauma. Schooling practices and institutions of schooling have caused harm to racialized K-12 students (Dumas, 2014), teachers (Kohli, 2018), undergraduate students (Espino, 2020; McGee & Stovall, 2015), graduate students (Herrera & Gloria, 2023; Yosso, 2013), and faculty (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Jurow, 2022). These harms extend from systemic ideologies and are enacted through the "death of our will to participate and succeed in academia" (Tijerina Revilla, 2021, p. 41) or what has been called "spirit murder" (Williams, 1991; Love, 2019). They also shape whose knowledge matters based on one's race, gender, gender expression, sexuality, (un)documented status, and ability (Annamma & Booker, 2020; Archer et al., 2020; Bernal & Villalpondo, 2002; Cruz, 2017; Pérez-Huber, 2009). This partial list of harms points to the pervasive nature of harm and potential susto inflicted on everyone who participates in schooling. Moving to unify intent, terms, and theoretical orientations, we invoke the insights of Tatum's (2007) writing about the experiences of a young Black kindergartener. Initially, this student was excited to learn, but after not being called on for a series of days, he stopped raising his hand, and the "light from his eyes" faded. This is harm. This is pervasive. This can lead to susto, soul loss.

How we define and implement learning contributes to the harms mentioned above. When we view learning as an individual process, primarily centered inside our heads, and as something that leads us away from ourselves and our communities, we cause harm (González et al., 2005; Jurow, 2024; Lave, 1988). This is the dominant view of learning in Western schooling, which supports a reliance on ranking by grades, external markers of success, and movement away from intuition and internal forms of validation. This is academic harm. Academic harm is the

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fragmentation created by rigid school structures that causes insecurities and self-doubt in ways that are consequential to a person's holistic development.

The sociocultural learning theories that guide how we approach the healing of academic harm challenge this view. According to this perspective, learning occurs in moment-to-moment interactions and over our lifetimes; it is centrally a process of *becoming* through gaining knowledge and developing our identities in relation to the communities and practices in which we participate, and it extends across people, places, materials, and ideas (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016; Rogoff, 2014; Rosado-May et al., 2020; The Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017). Embracing an expansive view of learning in combination with hummingbird medicine can bring forth the design of learning environments, including schools, that can be a source of healing.

Our Invitation

We have gathered as a group of scholars and friends who have realized through this journey that we are soul family. Through testimonios, (Cruz, 2017) we exchanged stories and were able to witness and be witnessed in experiences that embraced bitterness and love, limiting beliefs, and our wildest dreams. Our process held space for non-sequiturs often not allowed in academic writing (Barrón & Gruber, 2020). Our conversations zipped forward, backward, and sometimes just hovered. These moments were necessary as we were learning to be in relation to each other and with this work. In quiet moments, we were learning to push our boundaries, honoring our lived experiences and transforming our understanding of academic writing. We were learning how to listen to hummingbird and receive their gift of medicine. Most of all, we were learning to trust a process that we could not fully see but felt would be revealed when it was meant to be. In the pauses, *we felt.*

We invite you, dear reader, to imagine yourself on this journey with us. Skip around, leave, and come back. Make connections to our experiences and with your own. Name and engage with what we missed; build on it. Begin or deepen your own relationship with hummingbird medicine and all the plant and animal medicine that surrounds you. *We invite you to fly with us.*

Structure of the Paper

To write this paper, we shared stories, finding shared patterns and making meaning of them to re-create our narrative toward our collective healing (Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022). As we shared our lived experiences, we brought them together with insights from hummingbird medicine and wove them into dialogue with our understanding of learning as an expansion of human potential. Below, we share three of the main threads in this tapestry, each highlighting elements of hummingbird medicine. In Elizabeth's story, we highlight the winding paths that learning takes when it involves integrating mind/body/spirit and imagining the present as pregnant with possibilities. In Beatriz's story, we illuminate the way that moving beyond impossibility requires that failure is embraced as part of learning. Through Adria's story, we center the need for love and responsiveness to children for the cultivation of healing and learning.

Elizabeth: Connection of Past, Present, and Future

In being able to see my son's harm, I (Elizabeth) was finally able to listen to mine. My son, to survive in school, tried "to become emotionless. For me, I tried to become bodiless. So many times, I prioritize my mind and allow my body to get sick just to meet the next deadline. This

fragmentation of the mind and body is pervasive in higher education and education broadly (Flores Carmona & Rosenberg, 2021; Lara, 2013). To come back to myself, I had to learn and unlearn. I had to learn who I was and how to uncouple my worth from my work. I had to learn what I wanted and release the "shoulds" that felt like chains. To learn to observe mother earth's rhythm and honor it in my own body. I had to unlearn messages about efficiency as smartness. In my healing journey, in many ways, my world fell apart.

Anzaldúa calls this necessary process of learning and unlearning the Coyolxauhqui imperative (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 20), where fragmentation or dismemberment of the spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental bodies start to come apart. In its simplest form, it is "an ongoing process of making and unmaking. There is never any resolution, just the process of healing" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 20). It is in this place of being broken into fragments that, with deep reflection, we can see where we have adopted the oppressors' views as our own and be intentional about moving forward. In this process, we can also find new tools and practices to enact change, possibility, and hope.

I first learned of the Coyolxauhqui imperative in Anzaldúa's book (2015), Light in the Dark, Luz en lo Ozcuro–which is a compilation post-mortem of her journal writings edited by her life partner, Ana Louise Keating. Excited to read the book, I got my cup of coffee, sat down on my couch, and snuggled in a blanket next to the window. About one page in, I fell asleep. I tried it again with the same results. Finally, I conceded and put the book to rest on my shelf, ashamed and even mad at myself for not being able to have enough discipline to stay awake and learn.

A few months after this defeat, I went to the park one night to have a personal ceremony for myself to shed and process my divorce. Under the moon, feet on the grass, I found a playlist on my phone that held ceremonial songs. I didn't remember this list, but I played it anyway. As I danced, a song dedicated to Coyolxauhqui came on. The vibration emanating from the song cocooned me. I danced to it on repeat until my last tear–at least for the evening–was shed. A few weeks later, I returned to the book. I didn't realize Anzaldúa and I were both working with the same Coyolxauhqui, Anzaldúa in her book and me in song. This time, instead of my eyes feeling heavy, they were full of tears of joy. Each of her words spoke truth to me and inspired me to see the possibility of how I could walk in the physical world, the spirit world, and the academy.

In connecting with the Coyolxauhqui, I could see differently the words in the book. For me, this illuminated the fact that in my first attempts of reading the book I wasn't ready for it. Even if I had persisted in reading the words, it would have been that, *reading* words, but not understanding the soul of them. Initially, despite multiple attempts, I was not yet ripe to receive this information. This served as a (re)minder and (re)learning, that the pace of deep learning cannot be predicted (Beach, 1999; Dreier, 2008; Shajahan, 2020). This is counter to the schoolified view of learning that expects learning to take place in a pre-set period, be it a semester, academic year, or 2-week unit. When it does not happen in this time frame, students are viewed–and often come to see themselves–as incapable, lazy, or worse.

In eventually being able to connect to the book, I was also able to connect differently to the idea of nepantla (Anzaldúa, 2015), which translates to in-betweenness in Nahuatl. Up to this point, I understood nepantla as occurring in the human world, in identities and borderlands. However, as I was able to engage with the wisdom of the book, I realized that Anzaldúa was engaging in the space between the physical world and the spiritual world. Previously I was not yet ready to receive all of it, or better yet, I was finally ready for the next level in my understanding.

In my healing journey back to myself, I am continuously reminded that I cannot be too much in spirit, or I will forget the realities and struggles of the body and the human world. I cannot live too much in the human world, or I can forget the beauty and possibility of who we are meant

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to be. My work in my healing journey is to find a balance between them, to walk in-between two worlds. Being fully in the present–not thinking of the future and its expectations nor solely of the past and stories that have previously defined me–helps me to notice the power of the in-between space. I have learned that being present eases the integration of my mind, body, and spirit. In (re)learning about nepantla, I realized that the present is what connects the past and future in both the spirit world and the human world.

The present is meaningful in both Curanderismo and sociocultural theories of learning, providing insight into its potentiality and how to intersect healing and learning. In Curanderismo, time and space do not exist in a rigid manner. Chamanas move between the past and the future energetically for healings; however, it is through the present that they can enter into this space. Similarly, in sociocultural theories of learning, the present moment and space are theorized as connecting the past and future (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016; Mendoza et al., 2023; Rogoff, 1995). The present is connected to the past through, for example, stories, relationships, and material artifacts (e.g., the physical layout of a classroom) that shape and give value to our actions (Cole, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). The present is also connected to the future in that each moment and its situatedness in material reality is viewed as an opportunity to change or actively maintain stories, relationships, and material artifacts. Understanding the present through these different traditions underscores its significance as a fulsome starting point to healing academic harms.

If we return to academic harm as ubiquitous and being caused by the harm of, for example, an externally driven form of success, how can we design spaces that hold the knowledge of mind/body/spirit? How can we design to hold space for who our students were, are, and are becoming? How can we design to allow for space to move in between the physical and spiritual world to create "another type of reality?" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 37).

Beatriz: Beyond Impossibility

Dear Hummingbird,

Did you know that your flight defies impossibility?

If you were consistently reminded of your limit,
Would you have stepped into your greatness and created your own validity?
Would you have pushed reality?
Would you have believed the limit, become timid?
Been complicit?
Believed yourself a failure, a triviality?
Your differentness placed a boundary,
Told a story about your reality.

You dared to retell it.
And defy impossibility.

I (Beatriz) grew up with a vivid imagination. I loved magic, energy, and dreaming up new worlds. Adventures with my brother and primo were my favorite pastimes. I believed that I could make the most powerful potions in the world; I just needed to dream up my magic. Sometimes, it would take multiple attempts to get the right combination of leaves, dirt, petals, and water into the powerful mixes that would help us get to the different worlds we dreamed of together. Without the

mix, there was no portal, no adventure: I couldn't give up. Our journeys allowed us to ride dragons, fight monsters, fly with hadas, and experience evolutions beyond the human form, all within the boundaries of our backyard in one of the inner-city areas of Denver. Together, we learned to re-imagine what was (i-m)possible[2]. We created worlds beyond the ones that our "at-risk" labels confined us to.

Far from our magical lands, I quickly learned that school was not a place for mistakes. I didn't have my brother and primo by my side to help me navigate the obstacles placed in my way by the education system. They weren't there to slay the evil creatures and labels that were quickly placed on me, on *us*. In school, I was not allowed to experience the magic of trying something, making missteps that led me to discover new paths, and then figuring out my own way to solve problems and create solutions. In school, these missteps were called "failures" and led to shame, judgment, and negative consequences. There were no do-overs like in my adventures with my brother and cousin. Perfection was rewarded. So, I learned to be "perfect" in my assessments. I began to equate perfection with learning and mistakes as being the emblematic of failure. If I was not perfect, then I was not worthy of learning. Instead of reveling in failure, I learned to forget the magic I had once found in my missteps. After years of being perfect, an F in my first college physics exam took me from *being* a learner to *being* a failure.

It was many years before I remembered to see the magic in failure and began to explore different worlds again. Only this time, my magic was fueled by my work with students who looked like me, my brother, and my cousin. Young people who had also been confined by the labels of "at-risk," "inner city" and the myriads of other categories used to describe those of us who were not meant to dream beyond the confines of our current reality. Students who had also learned that failure is something we become, not experience. With my students, I was reminded that every learning comes with the magic of failure, the bitter before the sweet. This brought me to graduate school.

In 2022, 3 years after I left my work with students for graduate school, I visited the Museo Nacional de Antropologia in Mexico City. For the first time in my life, I saw my ancestors being written about, talked about, and learned from. Their wisdom, consejos, were written across walls. Love letters meant for me that had taken a detour, or perhaps purposely misguided, at some point in history. I saw my present greeting my past, and together, they reminded me that I was a part of a future. A future *they* had imagined. I was their dream brought to life. A manifestation. I *was* the children they spoke about. My brownness, zip code, labels, and those of the students who look like me did not make us failures (Mask, 2020). We are dreamers reimagining our world and its systems. What would it be like to have our brilliance seen, to be told we are not and *cannot* be failures?

Failure was not an identity I, nor my students, learned alone. Identities are co-constructed, they are shaped by people's expectations in places like schools, and by the histories that produce activities like tests. Identities like "good" or "bad" student are ready and waiting to capture and contain students in classrooms (McDermott & Varenne, 1999).

What is often overlooked in education is the interconnectedness of learning and identity (Nasir et al., 2020). As we enter the education system, we face new expectations of how others see us and want us to act. Sometimes, this leads to developing identities that separate who we believe we are and want to be from what school demands. Identities that we might not have identified with or acknowledged before, yet ones we learn to adopt and adapt to (Ginwright, 2022). The labels

[2] We intentionally move to impossibility to (I-m)possible to see the way that possibility is embedded within the word itself, and within ourselves.

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placed on students affect how teachers perceive them and the limitations or high expectations that teachers place on students (Berry III et al., 2004).

The dance of what is inside of us, and what is outside of us meets at the skin and penetrates the soul. This perspective begins to show why the language we use to engage students, the everyday interactions that seem mundane, hold so much power. An example of this is embedded in the language of 'at risk'—an overused label students receive based on skin color, zip code, or other 'demographic' information—which rests on an ethos of inferiority (Rothstein, 2017). Within this sense of inferiority, the wiggle room to take risks diminishes because there is a possibility of *becoming* a failure, a statistic that is always so close to our hearts (Barrón & Gruber, 2020). Being deemed a failure limits our dreams, and our ability to hope ourselves into becoming the person we dream to be. It limits our ability to fly.

To understand how we *learn to become* these multiple identities, it is important to recognize that this learning happens in everyday, moment-to-moment interactions, not just in school content, or context (Nasir et al., 2020). This means we are learning and honing our definition of words, meaning, things (artifacts)—and our relation to them—with each sentence and each interaction. Being called 'at risk' is a point of entry for students to learn who they are in relation to a system that dictates who is smart, who is allowed to be smart, and who is not. Importantly, learning is also happening in the opportunities missed and the questions not asked (Tatum, 2007). Silence too is an interaction that leads to learning and can also be raced, gendered, and ableist, in particular for young girls of color who are expected to be passive learners (Annamma et al., 2020).

This more expansive view of learning that is tied to identity, community and is a lifelong process cultivated in everyday moments, often runs counter to the markers of smartness that are pervasive in education. This includes benchmarks that privilege white, middle-class norms, values, and ways of being. Learning is constrained by time, including a class period, grading period, and the expectation that the road to mastery is linear and smooth. Learning becomes limited to a task, the completion of it, and the "right answer." This standardization can limit learning and cause harm because it does not allow us to breathe. To make mistakes. To learn. To be human.

Mistakes are particularly unforgiving for students of color. In my own work with youth, mistakes meant loss of financial aid and scholarships, juvenile detention centers, and, in some instances, a lack of access to meals. It also meant harsher disciplinary outcomes, tracking in schools, and becoming disengaged from their educational experiences. Sometimes, the mistakes young people make are also up for interpretation. Black girls are often suspended at higher rates than their white peers for subjective reasons (Annamma et al., 2019). In contrast, white girls were suspended for objective reasons, typically involving the possession of drugs or alcohol. The ways in which their actions were perceived, and more specifically, the way race allowed their actions to be interpreted, shaped the experiences and identity of Black girls. Even through all of these restrictions, punishment and interpretations placed upon young people of color, young people of color find covert ways to exert their agency, ways that are often sanctioned by the school system, often through trial and error (Kelly, 2020).

Without the support of educators and mentors around me, I would have never known the sweetness of that failure in my first physics exam. I learned to *unbecome* a failure. *I had to unlearn and relearn.* For some, however, that magic of failure, the learning, never comes. It seems as if failures and imperfections are stains in the perfect world of education. Yet, without failure, we cannot spread our wings. I want us to know we are worthy of our wildest dreams; I want us to follow our heart's desires. In my journey of healing academic harm, I have stepped into my vulnerability of being seen as a failure because now I know nobody can *be* a failure. With the desire to move beyond the limitations of labels, beyond what we think is possible, I wonder: How can we

design to support the re-narrating of failure? How can we create moments to recognize failure as learning?

Adria: Practices of Love

"Podemos jugar, maestra?" This was a recurring question every afternoon from kindergartners when they grew tired from trying to control their little bodies inside carpet squares, suppressing any urge to speak out, to move, or to come into contact with the friend sitting beside them. For them play meant freedom: free to move their bodies, free to speak, laugh, build, and do what we as humans are meant to do, grow, and thrive in social environments that enable us to create and co-construct together. "*Podemos jugar, maestra*?" I now interpret it as, "*can we be free, maestra*?"

I (Adria) came into the classroom with a deep love for children. For me, when I walked into my classroom, I saw myself in my students' faces, I saw my brothers, my father, and my grandparents. I knew that how my students began to see themselves through everyday classroom practices was consequential not only to their own path in life but for generations to follow—consequential to the possibility to learn and teach self-love (hooks, 2000). Their desire to play was a desire to express themselves and follow their intrinsic curiosities. My love for them was found in the actions that affirmed their right to express themselves, to follow their curiosities, and by regarding them as free and capable beings. hooks explains that to love is to treat someone as a free being and to affirm their worth—their human dignity.

One warm afternoon, the sun rays beamed through our classroom windows which added extra warmth to their small kindergarten-aged bodies. It was our designated "instructional math time" according to the school schedule. Like most afternoons, upon returning from lunch recess, I gathered groups of five students at my table in the back of the class to teach the daily math lesson. This pedagogical move was contrary to the district directive to teach the math lesson to the whole group, all twenty-five children, on the carpet for twenty-five minutes. When we attempted to congregate on the carpet as a class in the afternoons, their bodies just five years from the womb gave way, rolling around on the carpet like the rolly-pollies they carried in from outside—rolling up to protect themselves as a form of resistance (Annamma & Handy, 2019; Rainio, 2008).

When I would organize my class to have just five students at my table, I found that the students were able to have a fluid dialogue without needing to raise their hands. It was a time to learn to listen to one another, waiting for a moment to enter the conversation to build off another's ideas. We engaged in dialogue about numbers, how we might represent them, how we might solve a problem, and what strategies could be used. These conversations were also linguistically fluid and translanguaging (Garcia, 2009; Poza, 2017) was a regular practice as our languages came into contact, like rivers merging into the ocean. Meanwhile, throughout the class, there was an infectious buzz: languages fluidly circulating the air through play, sense-making, and collaboration as children moved freely through various exploration stations. Foundationally, play is essential to learning (Vygotsky, 1978). In these moments, the ecology of the room was thriving and electric, filled with thick, warm air of play, joy, and curiosity. Children were free and joyful.

One afternoon, my evaluator came in unexpectedly to the infectious buzz of happiness as children squealed with excitement and joy throughout the room. She sat next to our table where I collaborated with five children. I was thrilled for her to witness how the children expressed their number sense, and how they arrived at certain solutions. We radiated with excitement as we shared our learning. However, based on her body language, I sensed that I was doing something wrong or

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that *we* were doing something wrong. I was approached later that afternoon with the following criticisms:

"*It felt chaotic*."
"*It was so loud*."
"*Are you encouraging them to speak English?*"
and finally
"*Where was the evidence of learning*?"

I was hurt and unable to explain that I had developed my capacities as a teacher to look and listen to how children's bodies and voices communicated their needs for learning (Erickson, 1982). What I understand and can articulate now, but didn't realize then, is that my evaluator had a different idea of what evidence of learning looked like. She adhered to a more traditional understanding of learning that was an individual endeavor of sitting quietly and producing work that meets the criteria of sterile formulaic rubrics (Cole, 2003; Nasir et al., 2020). A definition of learning that does not allow for the brilliance and creativity of minds in interaction. Here, I am reminded of the words of the developmental psychologist Barbara Rogoff (2014), who has worked alongside indigenous communities to understand the expansiveness of learning. She warns us about approaches to schooling that position children as controlled objects and learning as a transactional process that are not consistent with what human beings need to grow because knowledge is not fixed or reproduced.

When I first became a teacher in 2001, I was able to follow children's inquiries, interests, and ideas. Over time, the freedom I had as a teacher was constrained, consequently restricting the opportunities for play and freedom to chase curiosity. This intensified with the introduction of No Child Left Behind. The curriculum became more prescriptive and left little room for listening to children and allowing their ideas to guide our learning.

Throughout my years as a teacher, I experienced internal tensions and constant contradictions working in public schools. It became unbearable as I began to witness through my teaching the oppressive structures and practices that denied my ancestors, my family, and myself the opportunity to feel and experience our inherent worth as intellectual beings. I felt complicit with the structures that placed deficit labels on children and the historical practice of placing children in remedial tracking and hierarchical grouping that inevitably creates an insidious feeling of inferiority (Love, 2019).

In the Fall of 2019, I made the agonizing decision to leave my position as a public-school teacher after nineteen years. I left because I knew students had a right to be seen, valued, and nurtured as miraculous and sacred beings. I left because some days, I did not know if I was nurturing them or harming them. I left because I wanted to learn how to do better.

I entered my doctoral program focusing on how we can create learning environments that affirm and recognize human dignity and spaces for learning that can support healing and cultivate self-love. In my research, I returned to the same group of children I left in 2019. I have come back to them because I knew they were the ones to teach me what is possible. We co-created an out-of-school learning space in search of expressions of their human dignity through processes of learning (Espinoza et al., 2020; Padilla-Chavez, 2024). When I asked the children what they thought learning was, they shared multiple experiences of harm encountered in school. In the safety of our circle time discussion, a space for vulnerability opened through the sharing of stories of being yelled at and comparing school to prison. I realized that for the children, sharing experiences of harm was consequential to re-imagining and dreaming of something different. They naturally

processed the susto and integrated hummingbird medicine to re-imagine learning spaces where they felt free. This imaging honored their lived experiences and allowed them to articulate their dreams of feeling seen, heard, and loved—their expressions of dignity.

In seeing what is possible and also knowing the constraints, I ask: How can we tune ourselves to expressions of dignity? How do we design for them? How can we push on forms of evaluation that constrain bodies that desire to move and be free? Finally, how can hummingbird medicine enable children to heal and imagine liberatory futures?

Designing Learning and Healing with Hummingbird Medicine

We are grateful to hummingbird medicine, for its patience, and unwavering support through serendipitous appearances as we grappled, and continue to grapple, with the integration of healing and learning.

- With its sign of infinity, it has taught us the present is a space in between the past and future, the spirit and the physical, the bitter and the sweet.
- With its anatomical shape and fierce ability to fly, it has reminded us the path toward healing may seem insurmountable but is possible when we honor ourselves and our relationships in community.
- With its long beak, it has shown us to move beyond bitterness to the sweet; that learning and unlearning are painful processes that need to be met with love.

With these insights—and as we recognize academic harm as one form of susto—we continue to ask: How do we all do better by our kids? Although we arrive at an unfinished answer, we recognize that perhaps complete was not what was intended. We can, however, offer more questions that can be brought into the design of learning space toward centering healing and learning. These 'design questions' will hopefully lead to some answers, and with insight, curiosity, and some luck, we hope these questions lead to more questions that bring you closer to your way of integrating healing and learning that is in alignment with you and your students.

The Present is a Space in-between the Past and Future, the Spirit and the Physical, the Bitter and the Sweet

As Elizabeth's story helps us see if the present is understood *as* nepantla (Anzaldúa, 2015), it comes to life as a space of in-between. The present is in between material and spirit, past and future, and who we were and who we can become. In Curanderismo, the present is a point of entry into the past and future toward healing. In sociocultural theories of learning, the present is created through histories and is also a place of improvisation with an eye toward future change (Gutiérrez, 2008; Rajala et al., 2022). With this foundation, the present, each moment-to-moment interaction can transform into a space of curiosity. Elizabeth's narrative also centers that learning and unlearning are essential to healing and do not occur linearly. Given that learning is not only an acquisition of new information, but also a rupture of old information (Cole & Gajdamashko, 2009), designing for healing and learning includes asking questions about *what* is being measured as learning and when. Our designs can integrate this insight by being curious about the following questions:

- How is deep learning and unlearning, through time and space, being honored?
- Where are there opportunities to have students listen to their bodies as a source of wisdom and knowledge to facilitate learning?

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The Path Toward Healing May Seem Insurmountable but is Possible When We Honor Ourselves and Or Relationships in Community

In Beatriz's story, school structures distorted Beatriz's identity so that she became a "failure." In recognizing that learning and identity are interconnected since each moment of learning has the potential to contribute to our understanding of whom we can and cannot become (Nasir et al., 2020), designing for healing and learning must understand how we organize spaces has potential consequences to how students see themselves, their histories and their possibilities (Jurow, 2024; Jurow & Shea, 2015; Salazar et al., 2024). Beatriz's return to self involved remembering her value through working with, and learning the stories of, students who looked like her and had suffered similarly in school. She saw herself in her students, and through them, she unlearned *becoming* a failure. In our designs, we can move beyond (i-m)possibility by asking:

- How are we designing learning spaces and tending to interactions that allow students to reframe failure as necessary to bring their wildest dreams into reality?
- How are collective stories shared to allow participants to see each other in their suffering, healing, and learning?

Learning and Unlearning are Painful Processes that Need to be Met with Love

Adria's story shows the importance of centering relationships in classrooms with love—the kind of love that honors their full humanity, enabling the possibility for self-love (hooks, 1999). She created multiple points of entry into learning and sense-making relationships, including translanguaging, responsive listening, and play stations (Poza, 2017; Sengupta-Irving et al., 2022; Vossoughi et al., 2021). Play, with its capacity to allow us to tap into our creative energy, explore, and experiment, is central to learning (Price & Jurow, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978). Adria's story also illuminates the tension of being harmed and, at times, not knowing if we are helping or hurting our students. This tension eventually led her to the painful decision to step away from the classroom. Based on her love for her students and their families, Adria returned to co-create a space of learning with the students she once had in their kindergarten class. Together, they discovered expressions of dignity (Espinoza et al., 2020) that allowed her students to collectively process trauma from schooling in a space where their brilliance was honored, where they could be vulnerable and dream about the possibilities of learning differently. In our designs, we can embrace learning and unlearning by asking:

- How is love centered in design to facilitate children to be seen?
- How do we design spaces that replenish us as organizers, in ways that offer love to ourselves and our students?

An Offering

We have written through the pain caused by hyper-individualistic, time and space-bound, and narrow interpretations of learning. As we have shared, these pervasive views of learning, built into the structures, policies, and practices of many U.S. schools, are often weaponized against our children and our educators to devalue ancestral, intuitive, and everyday forms of knowledge. We have written through this pain to "...put order into the world, give it a handle so (we) can grasp it" (Anzaldúa, 2009, p. 169). We grasp it, offering our still in-process answer to the call put forth by the editors of this special issue to imagine "acts of radical self-love…as a form of activism and

revolution...[for] future generations." We brought together the insights of Curanderismo, hummingbird medicine, and sociocultural theories of learning to remember who we are and can become.

By suspending the linearity of time and examining the complexities in which we are embedded in each moment, we offer the possibility of imagining each moment as an in-betweenness of nepantla. Each moment that passes is a moment holding the in-betweenness of being and becoming, of embracing our explorations and experiments not as failures but as steps that are essential to learning. It is the in-betweenness of the material and spiritual—of allowing the love that is core to our oneness to help us see each other as fully human and spiritual beings. It holds the possibility of breaking apart, remembering, and making, and sometimes even all at the same time. With this offering, what we hope is that we can remain curious with ourselves about who we are and who we are becoming. Curious with our students, as we see them developing and changing in front of our eyes. Curious with how our actions can change the educational system toward embracing healing, toward honoring each body as a divine soul. Curious to how we can embrace moving past (i-m)possibility through failure. Curious about how we can center joy, play, and freedom in our practices of learning. Curious about how we can reorient our moments to hold space for students to embrace the journey back to themselves.

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Notes on Contributors

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Adria Padilla-Chávez is a doctoral candidate in Learning Sciences & Human Development, and an instructional coach in a newcomer center near the Denver metro area. She has been a public school teacher for more than twenty years and an advocate for children's right to their cultural and linguistic practices as part of their learning in public schools. Adria's research is centered on how to design learning experiences in pursuit of educational dignity.

Beatriz Salazar is a doctoral candidate in the Learning Sciences & Human Development. Beatriz's research is centered in failure and answering the question, "Who has the social capital to fail?" Throughout her time in graduate school, Beatriz has worked within community based research (CBR) and youth participatory action research (YPAR) to address social justice issues that face communities and youth of color.

A. Susan Jurow, Ph.D., is Professor of Learning Sciences & Human Development. In her research, she has studied learning as part of progressive social movements for justice and learning and "un-learning" related to organizing for equity in institutions of higher education. Her passion is working with students to develop their ideas.

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