

“IT’S NOT JUST FOR ME, IT’S ALSO FOR MY COMMUNITY”:  
TOWARD THE DECOMMODIFICATION OF SELF-CARE THROUGH RACIALIZED  
ACTIVISTS’ CARE PRACTICES

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## Abstract

To promote change, activists must confront the suffering of their communities, but this process can weigh heavily on them and contribute to burnout. The burden is even heavier for racial minority activists who combat additional stressors associated with discrimination. While many activist organizations promote community care, their conceptualization of community wellness competes with the individual wellness promised by luxury self-care products, inaccessible to those facing financial barriers. The present study challenges this buy-in model of self-care. Using participatory qualitative methods and grounded theory, I have examined how racialized activists in Saskatoon develop their own care practices. Driven by a desire to live their values, participants developed their care practices in five stages: Developing Activist Values, Belonging, Participating in Community Care, Protective Self-Care, and Restorative Self-Care. By the end of the process, participants were sustaining long-term wellness strategies by exercising their values with the support of their communities. The results present a conceptualization of personal wellness that resists commodification by being grounded in community, personal values, and political defiance. The work discusses the implications for conceptualizations of well-being, and directions for future research.

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**“It’s not just for me, it’s also for my community”: Toward the Decommodification of Self-Care Through Racialized Activists’ Care Practices**

**Prologue**

My relationship to race-based stress and activism is key to understanding the context of my thesis. My name is Sarah Shandie Mohammed. I was named after the biblical wife of Abraham, with a surname that reflects my Muslim heritage, and a middle name based on a Diné word meaning “rays of the morning sun” (although I’ve never been a morning person). I am a brown, immigrant woman living on Treaty 6 territory, a traditional homeland of the Métis, in Saskatoon, and I am a progressive activist.

The racializing label “brown,” is vague enough to encapsulate how my race has carried different meanings across multiple contexts. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, my ancestors were brought from India to the country now known as Trinidad and Tobago to work as indentured servants. I was born in New Mexico in the United States to Trinidadian migrants, making me not-really-Indian, not-really-Trinidadian, not-really-American. My brownness is a minority race in my parents’ country and in my country of citizenship, the United States. Being of Indian ancestry also left me vulnerable to systemic racism during my three formative years living in Kuwait, where people who look like me are heavily discriminated against and systemically shoved into poverty. I met South Asian women with engineering degrees who worked cleaning hotel rooms and needed to ask my parents for a spare bag of rice. My experiences with borders, displacement, and the precarity resulting from European colonialism has influenced my political orientation. Because I’ve seen the suffering colonialism can cause, I’ve joined the movements against it. My experiences inform my activist work with Saskatoon grassroots organizations working toward food sovereignty, women’s equity, anti-imperialism, and decolonization.

However, this kind of work is an uphill battle, and my need to do it has often left me feeling like a wrung-out washcloth. I have recognized my own activist burnout stemming from the pressure of doing morally “good work,” the overwhelming sense of doom from hunger, war, and pandemic, and the emotional toll of my ongoing experiences with discrimination. I knew that enduring these conditions was not sustainable, and I needed to dedicate time to take care of myself. In November 2021, I helped organize a town hall to hear the concerns of local activists with The Stand (a Saskatoon non-profit dedicated to supporting progressive grassroots groups). I realized I was not alone in my experience. Many attendees described the burnout they experience from perpetual activist work and lamented the heavy weight of the workload, as amplified by the pandemic. At the meeting, we found solace in the consensus that burnout was a problem, but we could not articulate what we could *do* to be okay. I looked toward fellow racialized activists for the answer. This research is for us, by us. I am thankful to be part of Dr. Jordan Cummings’ lab, which has been researching the values-based self-care strategies that provide the foundation for this study. The purpose of my thesis is to outline how activists of colour develop and successfully maintain care practices in Saskatoon. By focusing, first, on this frame of “what works?” we (that is, the participants and I) have built a grounded theory of the journey toward self-nurturing. We realized that care is not easy; in fact, it involves a lot of work and adjustment, but with the support of our communities we *can* live well while honoring our values. This work stands as a testament to this possibility, and I hope other activists draw inspiration from our experiences.

## **Introduction**

In the summer of 2020, activists across the Canadian prairies were moved to protest police brutality in solidarity with the North American Black Lives Matter movement. The



protestors believed the murder of George Floyd reflects the police brutality they witness at home. For example, Calgary activists pointed to the case of Dalia Kafi, a Black woman injured by Calgary police in 2017 (Latimer, 2021). Saskatoon activists cited the experience of Evan Penner, a Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation man who was tasered, punched, and pepper-sprayed by police for bathing with a garden hose (Latimer, 2021). Winnipeg activists remembered Machuar Madut, a refugee fatally shot by a Winnipeg officer (Latimer, 2021). The protests were described as “outpourings of grief and anger” (Latimer, 2021, para. 27) in the wake of these events and efforts to create tangible changes in policing. Yet, a year following the protests, another Black man, Amir Locke, was killed by police in the same city as George Floyd, leaving activists feeling hopeless.

As the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests showed, activists can create hopeful spaces of community empowerment, but they are also forced to deal with highly stressful experiences. Activists are people who necessarily confront the suffering of their communities, addressing it by building movements to produce social, economic, or political change. They are predisposed to invest high amounts of emotional labor into the work, as they have been described as “people whose passions and identities are wrapped up” in their causes (Gorski & Chen, 2015, p. 387). Referring to the murder of Amir Locke, Calgarian racism educator Adora Nwofor noted that “trauma weighs heavily on people as activists try to comprehend how this latest killing happened despite a concerted push for change” (Latimer, 2021, para. 26). In a sentiment that reflected the shifted tone of the racial justice movement, Nwofor disclosed “I’m really frustrated, I’m very angry and I’m so exhausted” (Latimer, 2021, para. 16). Like Nwofor, many activists were dealing with *burnout*, which has been defined as “a state or process of mental exhaustion”

(Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003, p. 381), describing the accumulated stress that prevents a person from persisting in their commitments.

Although activist burnout is prevalent, it is not new. In 1971, the Movement for a New Society became a national activist organization dedicated to supporting the resilience and sustainability of its members' lives and commitments (Lakey, 2020). Similarly, in 1994, the Audre Lorde Project was formed, and to this day works toward community wellness by building the capacity of its justice-seeking queer and racialized membership (The Audre Lorde Project, n.d.). This tradition of wellness-focused organizations continues today in groups such as Climate Critical Earth, who implement care at the individual and community level as a mandate for participating environmental activists (Climate Critical Earth, n.d.). Within psychology, the activist focus on wellness can also be found in anti-racist, anti-homophobic therapist organizations such as Healing in Colour, a Canadian organization that connects BIPOC to culturally safe therapists, (Healing in Colour, n.d.), and the Saskatoon-based mental health clinic Heartfire, which offers services specific to racialized and queer folks (Heartfire, n.d.).

However, these organizations' conception of wellness as grounded in community liberation contradicts many other common conceptualizations of wellness, especially those around self-care discussions. Many people encounter "wellness" in advertisements, being sold to them as "superpowder supplement" subscriptions (Goop Wellness, n.d.) and detoxes supported by bone broth lunches and trips to the sauna (Kato, 2023). Likewise, self-care is often presented as a checklist of activities (or even sold as a literal "self-care checklist") (V-Apothecary, n.d.). Further, these activities are geared toward achieving beauty (see "My favorite self care beauty products from Sephora"; Brusse, 2020) or workplace productivity (Hall, 2020). Such constructions of wellness inform how people take care of themselves as consumers, and have

thus been criticized as making self-care inaccessible to anyone facing financial barriers “connected to race, ability and gender” (Hadi, 2020, p. 37). Amidst these ubiquitous conceptualizations of wellness doused in consumerism and individual responsibility, how does socially and personally meaningful “care” take shape for racialized activists? Academic studies have not yet formulated a robust theory to explain how racialized activists meaningfully develop care practices.

Examining racialized activists’ journey toward wellness, my thesis presents a theory that dissects “self-care”<sup>1</sup> across layers of accessibility and community to describe how racialized activists develop care practices. Through individual interviews and group reflective sessions, I critically examine existing consumerist notions of personal wellness, ultimately arguing that products marketed for personal care are not necessary to cultivate and maintain wellness. Such products are often not marketed toward racialized people specifically, and class-conscious activists tend to deride luxury products. By grounding the analysis in the voices of racialized activists, the study provides much needed insight into how people circumvent hyper-individualized notions of wellness yet build the capacity to care for themselves and others. The study shows that racialized activists do not need to be sold wellness or be instructed how to achieve well-being, but through a critical examination and implementation of our values, “*We have what we need. We are who we need.*” (Meyer, 2001, p. 146).

## **Critical Literature Review**

When viewed as a whole, previous research on the relationship between activism and self-care has yielded insights into many dimensions of activist efforts to foster wellness,

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<sup>1</sup> This study uses the term “self-care” to connect with the broader literature, which focuses on personal care strategies. However, I conceptualize care as an interdependent practice, therefore, my definition of “self-care” goes beyond only care for the self, but further encompasses caring for others and being cared for by your community. Details of this conceptualization are explained in the “Conceptual Framework” section at length.

including dealing with burnout, coping with stress, and using activism to find purpose and direction in a politically unjust world. It must be noted, however, that research on this topic is scant. While approximately half of the research I reviewed ( $n = 32$ ) explores the empowering potential of activism to promote well-being, contrasting works investigate the more stressful aspects of activist work ( $n = 15$ ), while others reveal the complex relationships activists have with both burnout and wellness ( $n = 20$ ). In this section, I will synthesize and critically review each dimension of this topic as discussed in the psychology literature, and address limitations regarding previous researchers' exploration of care practices, approaches to identity, and conceptualizations of what constitutes activism.

Articles were retrieved through the PsycInfo database on September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Search terms included “self-care,” “wellness,” “burnout,” and “stress,” combined with “activist” or “activism,” resulting in 437 articles after duplicates ( $n = 3$ ) were removed. Through screening of titles and abstracts for relevance, 371 articles were excluded as non-empirical research, comprised of awards, editorials, biographies, and book reviews ( $n = 82$ ), for discussing activism and self-care separately, that is, not in relation to each other ( $n = 107$ ), for investigating activists working toward wellness promotion, but not the well-being of the activists themselves ( $n = 43$ ), for the only element of activism in the paper being the activist-oriented research approach ( $n = 41$ ), for being a dissertation ( $n = 92$ ) or for inaccessibility at the time of writing ( $n = 6$ ). The search, therefore, resulted in 66 articles for review. Although not retrieved through the database search, one article (Gorski & Erakat, 2019) was found via a colleague's suggestion and was included due to its relevance. A total of 67 articles are included in this review.

### ***Activism Promotes Well-Being***

A substantial proportion of past researchers have focused on the psychological benefits of activism, discussing its potential as a form of self-care in itself. In 48% of the articles I reviewed ( $n = 32$ ), social scientists explored how activists use their community work to promote wellness, and the situations that motivate activists' wellness work. These works provide a starting point for conceptualizing activism within a broader framework of wellness practice. They show strong connections between activism and wellness, but this effect is portrayed as passively coinciding with activist participation without investigation into the participants' pro-active wellness practices.

**Well-being Benefits of Activism.** Of these 32 articles, eight reported quantitative evidence of increased well-being as an outcome of activism, although their quantitative designs prohibit investigation into specific wellness practices. In these studies, allyship gave participants a chance to live in accordance with their values of justice and to be a knowledge resource for less informed allies. These qualities were associated with personal well-being for heterosexual activists for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) rights (Rostosky et al., 2015) and for white racial justice allies (Fingerhut & Hardy, 2020). Similarly, the empowering aspects of feminist activism were associated with higher well-being for adult American women (Conlin et al., 2020) and women in rural Nicaragua (Grabe, 2012).

While the previous researchers looked at a single group of activists, other researchers have combined cross-sectional designs and control groups in their work. These designs have allowed researchers to link well-being more conclusively to participants' activist work. Compared with nonactivists, activists had higher levels of well-being, including an increased sense of community and lower sense of powerlessness (Dutt, 2018), were more likely to be flourishing (Klar & Kasser, 2009), with evidence that activism mediates the relationship between

stress and empowerment (Geva & Werner, 2021). Although not cross-sectional, one study by Eiroa-Orosa and Lomascolo (2018) made strong connections between well-being and activism by using a pretest-posttest design to highlight how well-being improved after an activism training workshop. These studies provide generalizable evidence for the relationship between engaging in activist work and experiencing increased well-being in some form. However, while survey measures can highlight significant associations, they cannot explore the actual practices activists use to take control of their well-being and combat stress.

**Activism Used as Coping.** Seventeen articles I reviewed view activism as a coping response to the stress that emerges from specific political contexts. These studies focused on either minorities using activism to cope with discrimination, or activists coping with precarious living conditions.

**Coping with Discrimination.** According to findings from 12 articles, activism serves as a coping strategy against discrimination for people with marginalized identities. The minority stress theory, which states that people with a minority identity experience higher levels of identity-based stress (Brooks, 1981), provides a framework for researchers to conceptualize minority discrimination as a trigger for activism participation. Studies found that identity-based stress and experiences of discrimination motivated African American adults (Szymanski & Lewis, 2015; Watson-Singleton et al., 2021), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) people (Dunn & Szymanski, 2018; Fine et al., 2018), and parents of transgender children to become activists (Abreu et al., 2021b), which resulted in improved well-being. Same-sex couples in one study discussed marriage as an extension of their activism that offered a “positive coping strategy that many of these couples used to deal with the minority stress that they felt” (Rotosky et al., 2016, p. 1028). Along with racial and sexual orientation

marginalization, activism has also been conceptualized as a coping mechanism for people who become marginalized later in life, such as people who experience HIV stigma (Earnshaw et al., 2016; Ramirez-Valles et al., 2005) and ageism (Fox & Quinn, 2012). These works use the minority stress theory to reveal the catalyzing effect of discrimination on activism. However, the framework that emerges from these studies does not account for people's capacity to respond to discrimination with resilience as opposed to stress.

Other studies indicate that the coping benefits of activism for minorities stem from its primary byproduct: being part of group with a shared marginalized identity (Cronin et al., 2012; Foster, 2019; Ressler, 1997). That is, these studies find that activism and identity are intertwined: wellness is a benefit when activism *affirms* a person's identity. The positive well-being effects of identity affirmation were found in online activist spaces (Foster, 2019), Jewish activist organizations (Ressler, 1997), and organizing spaces of Latino college students (Cronin et al., 2012). Although these studies highlight the complex relationship between marginalization, identity, and stress that compose the activist experience, they suggest that identity affirmation is a passive process, thus neglecting what active work is done by the community to offer identity affirming support to its members.

***Coping with Precarious Conditions.*** In contrast to those that focus on psychological threats to identity, five studies I reviewed emphasized people using activism to cope with the *physically* threatening environments they lived in. Activist responses were generally found to protect against the stressful effects of precarious and dangerous environments. For example, activism buffered health problems associated with economic precarity for LGBTQ youth (Frost et al., 2019) and Palestinian children coped with living in refugee camps by reframing themselves as political agents (Veronese et al., 2017). Ecological activists engaged in political

resistance against local environmental destruction were found to report fewer mental health concerns long-term (Boehnke & Wong, 2011), sustained motivation for the work (Angelique & Culley, 2014), and a stronger sense of personal efficacy (Stone & Levine, 1985). The participants in these five studies faced conditions high in physical stress, but found diverse ways to persevere through political resistance. The studies recognize the significance of activism as a perseverance tool.

### **Promoting Well-Being through Community Care**

The studies I have discussed so far conceptualize wellness being promoted through one's own personal political resistance, connected to ideas of identity and health. In contrast, the following seven articles report that the individual wellness benefits of activism are inextricable from those of the community. These articles suggest that activism arises out of a need for community wellness, although participants' specific approaches to wellness promotion vary. In three articles, participants promoted their wellness by giving back to their community. A mindset toward "giving back" to the community was found to affirm a sense of purpose and community values for LGBTQ activists (Almario et al., 2013; Abreu et al., 2021a) and to lessen widespread stress among caregivers of persons with dementia (Anderson et al., 2019). Wellness has also been found to coincide with a less hierarchical distribution of care in the community, particularly when aimed at global empowerment. Activists around the world have been found to experience more positive psychological states from their efforts to mutually empower whole communities. Specifically, these effects were seen in activist communities trying to gain voting rights (Arce et al., 2020), responding to local needs (Gilster, 2021), and building a collective identity through social networks (Taurini et al., 2017; Vindhya, 2012). The mutual support exemplified by the activists in these studies illustrates the potential for community care to promote wellness.



### ***Activist Stress and Burnout***

Many previous researchers, as reviewed, have discussed the potential wellness benefits of organizing and activism, but what happens when organizing becomes a cause of stress? Of the 67 articles, 20% ( $n = 14$ ) investigated the stress of activist work and the factors that contribute to activist burnout.

**Stress variance across modes of activism.** In contrast to studies of well-being that abstractly reference activist practices, five studies outlined precisely how different kinds of practices have varying impacts on stress. Two studies juxtapose the well-being of participants in formalized institutional politics against those in grassroots, community-led activism, with discordant results. While formal electoral participation was associated with lower satisfaction in an Italian study (Mannarini & Talo, 2012), such traditional political engagement was associated with higher well-being than more expressive, grassroots forms of activism in an American study (Ballard et al., 2020). The discrepancy might be attributed to different levels of risk involved in different activities. Costabile et al. (2020) found low-risk, nonviolent activism (such as donating money) to be positively associated with well-being, whereas riskier forms of activism where participants are more susceptible to harm were negatively associated. For African Americans and LGB (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) people, evaluating the risk of activist practices means considering the likelihood of discriminatory violence, and navigating the resulting anxiety (Hope et al., 2020; Santos & VanDaalen, 2018). These quantitative studies reflect the complex relationship between risk-evaluation and cumulative stress in activism. As indicated by the two studies on marginalized peoples' risk-evaluation (Hope et al., 2020; Santos & VanDaalen, 2018), there is a need for further research about identity and social position influencing how activists account for their stress.

**Activist Burnout.** The previous studies established that activists often deal with stress. Other studies take this concept one step further, investigating the causes of activist burnout. The concept is often applied to the workplace, but nine articles I reviewed investigated it as a phenomenon in activist spaces.

The causes of activist burnout, including low morale, interpersonal dynamics, and identity issues were discussed in six of these articles. Burnout was attributed to low morale by two articles that found activists feeling hopelessness and disillusionment after not being able to tackle the overwhelming sociopolitical conditions they face ( Pines, 1994), and having a sense of not “doing enough” (Gorski & Chen, 2015, p. 397). Burnout was also attributed to interpersonal challenges within the activist space, such as ego clashes, in-fighting (Gorski, 2019), taking credit for others work, and racist behaviors (Gorski & Erakat, 2019). Two other studies attributed burnout to issues of identity. They found that for electoral campaigners, burnout was predicted by their level of identification with a losing candidate (Dwyer et al., 2019) and for queer activists of colour, burnout was predicted by participants questioning the authenticity of their experience at the crossroads of racial and sexual orientation marginalization (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011). These two articles cited participants engaged in feminist, racial justice, and queer rights organizing - three populations with a long history of global oppression and thriving activist communities. The articles recognize that marginalization contributes to burnout, but failed to ask how participants relate their individual stress to a history of community trauma and collective struggle for equity.

While these studies have focused on what causes activists to lose morale, researchers investigating the other side of such challenges ask what factors contribute to activists persisting in their roles. While one study attributes activist persistence to high internal motivation and

intrinsic enjoyment of the work (Sheldon et al., 2016), another study attributes persistence to the organization's available supports, such as childcare and transportation (Nepstad, 2004). Still, another study found that both individual level of commitment *and* group supports influenced activist persistence (Mannarini & Talo, 2011). These few studies set the stage for further research into activist persistence.

### ***Interplay between Activists' Exhaustion and Motivation***

So far, my review has been divided between studies that describe activism as a promoter of well-being and studies that describe activism as a contributor to stress. However, a third segment of the literature reviewed here challenges this division. Findings in the following thirteen studies suggest, rather, that the factors that motivate activists to continue their work *coexist* with those that drive activists to feelings of exhaustion or futility.

**Activism as a Double-edged Sword.** For many activists, their work functions as a double-edged sword, such that there are distinct ways they find meaning and purpose from their work but other ways it can cause stress. For participants in these eight studies, activism oscillates between being a fulfilling activity and a cumbersome chore. They describe many rewards of activism, including a sense of community and connectedness (Aceros et al., 2021; Bockting et al., 2020; Ollivier et al., 2006), a sense of purpose and agency (Aceros et al., 2021; Gaardner, 2008), increased self-confidence (Gaardner, 2008), heightened awareness of political issues (Gaardner, 2008; Sohr, 2001), and feelings of integrity and efficacy (Harré et al., 2009). At the same time, they describe the risks they experience, such as feelings of hopelessness and being overwhelmed (Aceros et al., 2021; Bockting et al., 2020; Ollivier et al., 2006; Sohr, 2001), high time investment (Aceros et al., 2021), interpersonal conflicts (Aceros et al., 2021; Harré et al., 2009), and exposure to harassment from counter-activists (Gaardner, 2008). Because of this

dualistic activist experience, minority groups cited both engaging and disengaging with activism as self-care measures. Racial, religious, and sexual orientation minority participants were found to cope with discrimination both by participating in political activism (such as attending rallies and meeting with likeminded people) and by avoiding politics altogether (Alsaïdi et al., 2021; Gabriele-Black et al., 2021). While these lists of coexisting risks and rewards add nuance to the sometimes paradoxical conversation about activism and wellness, further research can reveal practices that limit the risks, to ensure collectives can continue their work by minimizing obstacles.

**Moral Obligations.** Researchers of the previous eight studies compartmentalized aspects of activist experience as either stressful or satisfying. Yet, other researchers have interpreted these aspects as not distinct but intertwined. They propose that stress and burnout are achieved via activists' drive to improve the lives of others. Although they derive joy and fulfillment from it, this moral obligation to commit to the work can itself become a source of stress as one's responsibilities and time investments pile up. The following five articles reflect on this compounded experience, scratching the surface of an ongoing moral phenomenon in activist groups.

Studies as early as the 1990s hint that activists experience issues with a moral obligation to the work. Activists of the early 90s described their community of fellow activists and their efforts to live up to their moral ideals as simultaneously the most rewarding and most stressful aspects of their work (Gomes, 1992; Herzog, 1993). This ambiguous experience was more deeply explored by qualitative studies twenty years later. The effects of a moral obligation to activism are most clearly articulated by educational justice activists in a 2015 study, who described the group's tendency to view self-care as an indulgence and therefore discourage it,

calling this issue “martyr syndrome” (Gorski, 2015, p. 707). This syndrome was reflected in other educators’ drive to “do good” despite feelings of exhaustion (Winter et al., 2020). Similarly, women working in non-profit feminist organizations revealed that the “perceived meaningfulness of work and working for others was used to justify self-neglect and a lack of self-care” (p. 244), leaving women feeling undervalued and uncompensated for their work and emotional labor (Bandali, 2020). Although few in number, these studies lend valuable insights to the self-sacrificing norms in activist groups that shape understandings of care and identify a need for further research into activists’ values around care.

### ***Questioning the Well-being Mechanisms of Activism***

Some articles ( $n = 8$ ) indicated that the well-being of activists is more complicated than any direct relationship between organizing and well-being. These researchers’ findings suggest that the well-being effects of activism can be multifaceted, dependent on different contextual influences, or even that any influence activism has over well-being can be overshadowed by an unrelated factor. Although there is significantly more research that confirms the relationship between activism and well-being, these studies provide interesting insights to areas for further research that may address the apparent inconsistencies.

**Variations Across and Within Groups.** In contrast to previously mentioned studies that have made conclusive arguments about the mechanisms of stress and wellness in activists, three quantitative studies purport that these mechanisms are in fact heavily influenced by each activists’ specific context, and that such contextual variations make the workings of stress and wellness difficult to pin down. The researchers found opposite effects of activism occurring across groups, such as activism improving mental health implications for Latinx college students, but exacerbating mental health implications for Black students (Hope et al., 2018). Other

researchers found it difficult to generalize the effects of activism within a single group, finding that various social positions within the group, such as socio-economic status and disability (Goldberg et al., 2020) or gender (Zanbar & Itzhaky, 2018), created further barriers to participation and differently influenced wellness. These quantitative-based findings indicate the complexities that arise from each participant's unique social, cultural, and economic positions. The quantitative nature of these findings means they accounted for the relationship between wellness and activist practices, but call for further research into how this relationship is contextualized differently for different people within and across various groups. The studies confirm that wellness looks different for each individual depending on their situation and experiences, which could be better captured by rich qualitative data.

**Lack of Association Between Activism and Well-being.** Further challenging any conclusive claims about the relationship between activism and wellness are studies where researchers report finding no relationship between the two variables at all. Two studies looked specifically at the relationship between activism and stress, finding no significant health differences between politically active and inactive families in Toronto (Booth & Welch, 1978), nor any significant wellness improvements from group-level coping among German gay men (Sattler et al., 2016). Three studies examined additional layers of wellness, shedding light on the possibility that activism influences only some of the dimensions that construct wellness, such as income and community. For example, surveys of Black, college-educated, midlife women conducted in 2004 revealed their social activism was unrelated to overall well-being, but positively related to occupational attainment (Lee, 2004). Researchers also found that while activism was not necessarily related to wellness or stress, being aware and engaged in a community of similarly affected peers did improve mental health implications (Sawyer &

Gampa, 2020; Zhu et al., 2017). These five works are helpful tools to create critical dialogues with the trends of the literature toward rich qualitative data in future research.

### **Critique of the Literature: Who Cares, and How?**

Is care the responsibility of the individual or the community? Previous researchers seem to favor the former, yet there might be more to the story. The articles I reviewed tend to view each person's participation in activism as impacting their wellness by promoting well-being and/or stress. This view only considers wellness as being influenced in one direction: from the activist group to the participant. It fails to account for the participants' actions to care for themselves *and* the other people in their community. Mutual support within and between activist groups is left unexplored by most academic researchers, but activists might pay it more mind. Movements that are necessarily embedded in value frameworks such as solidarity, charity<sup>2</sup>, anti-violence, and care ethics, have a vested interest in unpacking how care is delivered, to whom, the effects of its absence, and its implications for healing. Therefore, activists involved in these movements might be more conscientious of the care they provide to each other and their community, especially if they are members of communities that have established their own care structures in response to systemic harms.

While elements of identity appear sporadically throughout the reviewed articles, the studies largely view the relationship between activism and minority well-being without considering how an activist's awareness of community trauma and healing may contribute to that stress or inform the practices that build resilience. Only ten of the 67 reviewed articles draw data specifically from racialized participants, so it is possible that systems of care are reflected in the

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<sup>2</sup> The charity model has been critiqued as paternalistic, ineffective toward systemic change, and a method for the state to sustain inequity. That being said, I've included it here as a value framework that activists may be intertwined in to recognize that activists may get their income from organizations that use the charity model, such as non-profit organizations, even if the model does not align with their personal goals for systemic change.

communities of racialized activists, but not articulated in the selected academic research. The academic body of research can benefit from work that is grounded in the first-person perspectives of racialized activists. Mostly absent, their voices may enrich the literature with insights into community care practices, thus bridging the intersubjective space between care practices aimed at individual replenishment and care practices oriented toward community-wide healing.

The literature also does not pay much attention to *how* activists navigate care practices. Previous researchers designed studies to collect data about stress and wellness from a snapshot of the participant's lives, using methodologies such as phenomenology and surveys. Thus, they have focused on well-being as an unmoving state. These research designs are less adept at viewing activists as agents of their own wellness, actively engaging in a moving and living process of developing care practices. There is less inquiry into what the participants are actually *doing* to achieve a state of well-being. Further, by not looking at diverse care strategies, the literature fails to attend to the issues around accessing care. For example, paid services and relaxation products are forms of care accessible only to those who can afford them. Research focusing on this element of movement and long-term transformation can gain a more nuanced portrait of the road map toward care practices, including the diverse care strategies activists engage in, and the challenges they encounter. A process-oriented theory can inform activists about what has worked for other communities, thus providing a foundation upon which activists can build their own care projects.

### **Current Project**



My thesis presents a grounded theory of care practice development for racialized<sup>3</sup> activists. The grounded theory outlines how racialized activists within Saskatoon forge a path toward sustainable care practices through the values and communities they hold in high regard. Therefore, the work addresses the issue of activist burnout in Saskatoon, but also provides fertile ground from which other activists across Canada can grow their own care practices. The work is rooted first and foremost in the experiences of racialized participants, thus giving voice to racialized activists in a way that the majority of academic literature has not yet achieved. The theoretical structure shows how activists arrive at burnout and push through it using different kinds of care practices, as well as the transformative processes involved in evaluating care amidst a backdrop of activist values. By reframing wellness within a values-based framework, the project exemplifies how using values to guide care practices can lead to sustainable and accessible wellness for racialized activists.

### **Research Question**

Despite thorough exploration of activist well-being, the academic literature thus far has not addressed activist conceptualizations of caring or the process of caring. To address these gaps and explore activist care experiences in novel ways, I asked “How do activists of colour develop care practices?” as my major, overarching research question. To investigate the process by which people develop care practices, sub-questions include “What activist values inform care strategies?”; “What provokes the implementation of care strategies?”; “What sustains the maintenance of care practices?”; and “What disrupts these practices?” Cumulatively, answers to

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<sup>3</sup> I use the word “racialized” because it attends to how the social construction of race is applied to non-white people to locate them within white supremacist hierarchies. The lack of English words to describe global “Indigenous, Black, Pan-African, Afro-descendent, Arab, Brown, Latinx, South American, and Asian communities” (Hadi, 2020, p. 29) *not* in relation to whiteness exemplifies how the language reflects these culturally embedded hierarchies. As English is my only language, I acknowledge this as a limitation.

these questions illustrate how activists move through their experiences with caring. The questions were deliberately open to account for the variety of experiences participants shared, thereby producing a less constrained grounded theory (a methodological decision that will be further explained later on).

### **Conceptual Framework: Politicization of Self-Preservation**

Our work builds upon *values-based self-care*, in which value-driven living underlies the development of self-care strategies (Campoli, 2022). Developing and understanding this grounded theory is a major research focus in my research supervisor, Dr. Cummings' lab. Thus far, this theory has been developed with trainees in health professional programs. My thesis is one part of this more extensive program of work aimed at moving toward a formal grounded theory (Glaser, 2007) of self-care development. Developing grounded theory arising from diverse personal narratives is one crucial step in formal grounded theory development. Thus, by focusing on activists, my thesis contributes to this larger program of work. It is important to note that while my work is *informed* by Campoli (2022), my thesis will “begin again” by deriving theory from the ground up – that is, I have not applied Dr. Campoli's work as a deductive influence on my data generation and analysis with participants.

Values are defined as “chosen qualities of purposive action that can never be obtained as an object but can be instantiated moment by moment” (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 9). In everyday life, people ideally orient their actions and behaviors toward their values. Although some populations might not consciously consider their values, activists necessarily strive for value-driven living toward social change. Activists critically challenge cultural norms in unique ways that align with their values, even when those values are not respected by the paradigms within which they live. Each person lives with their values differently, but each person draws upon the values of their

communities to construct their own definitions of “living well.” On the dangers of living without values, Black feminist author bell hooks (2000) compares unethical<sup>4</sup> living to eating junk food: “While it may taste good, in the end the body is never really adequately nourished and remains in a constant state of lack and longing. Our souls feel this lack when we act unethically, behaving in ways that diminish our spirits and dehumanize others” (p. 88). For hooks, living a values-rich life is tantamount to living well.

Within this wellness paradigm, values can also inform how a person engages in self-care. The term *self-care* originated in the medical field, where it is still used to describe patient behaviors associated with illness management (Knowles, 2020). Since its conception, the term now extends to coping strategies used by medical and mental health professionals (Knowles, 2020). In the 1970s, the concept of self-care was adopted as a pathway to Black community wellness by feminist leaders of the Black rights movement, including Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Angela Davis, and bell hooks, (Hadi, 2020). Since these early uses, self-care can now refer to “any activity designed to combat stress and generate feelings of pleasure” (Knowles, 2020, p. 4), and often refers to paid services toward these goals, such as yoga studio memberships or luxurious bath accessories (Hadi, 2020). In this study, *self-care* is defined as anything one does to replenish their professional and/or personal self (Campoli, 2022). The definition is deliberately open to encompass flexibility, allowing self-care practices to be created by the person according to their own values and communities.

Although it emphasizes idiosyncratic, rather than “cookie cutter” approaches to self-care, one limitation to the work of Campoli (2022) is its subscription to individual-level expectations

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<sup>4</sup> What constitutes “ethics” is a subject of study in and of itself. In this work, I use “ethics” to refer to the “question of how we ought to live within certain possible circumstances” (Mattingly, 2014, p. 28), which positions the term within a social constructionist framework to describe the implementation of moral beliefs in practical actions.

of self-care. Even in phases of Campoli's model where social support and loved ones are involved in participants' self-care, self-care is still conceptualized as an individualized experience. Much previous work on self-care subscribes to this narrative of individual responsibility (Barnett & Cooper, 2009; Gosnell et al., 2021; Isik et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2021; Myers et al., 2012; Pyles et al., 2021; Riley, 2003; Snyder, 2020). Conceptualizations of self-care are often "individualized, compartmentalized characterizations of self-care" (Jasmine et al., 2016, p. 19) which suggest a person occasionally remove themselves from their work to partake in a set list of wellness activities. This individualist representation requires that care work is done by a single person in isolation from others. It relies on a myth of independence, supposing that "somehow we can and should be able to do everything on our own without any help from anyone" (Mingus, 2010, para. 1). The "self" involved in this portrayal of self-care is radically independent, often consuming self-care as a commodity (Jasmine et al., 2016; Knowles & Cummings, under review).

This myth of independence can similarly be seen in the COVID-19 lockdown regulations throughout the West which relied on assumptions of independence to construct "households" and "bubbles" as isolated, autonomous units. These regulations prohibited families from leaving their homes, with some exceptions including travel for work, shopping for basic necessities, and providing voluntary or charitable services (Gulland, 2020). Yet, the regulations ignored the interdependency of care. By isolating households from each other, parents could no longer access the childcare provided by grandparents in a different household, and adults with disabilities were prohibited from meeting the people who provided the services they needed (Gulland, 2020). As a result, many mutual aid organizations and charities increased their services to fill these gaps (Gulland, 2020), resulting in worker burnout. The limitations of the lockdown's

individualized approach to care highlights the extent of interconnectedness people experience through the systems of care they create and access.

In light of this individualistic and independent conceptualization of self-care and care regimes, there is need for a definition of self-care that accounts for a *social* self; that is, one that accounts for people's capacity for relationality and willingness to take care of one another. Thus, *self-care* is linked to the concept of *community care*. *Community care* describes practices conducted between members of a community<sup>5</sup> to foster wellness and healing, including resource sharing, assisting with personal care, and companionship. For marginalized people, the meanings of healing and wellness are constructed within the bounds of their community's shared experience. Author bell hooks (2000) illustrates this point using the healing environment of Alcoholics Anonymous as an example, saying "This community offers to individuals, some for the first time ever in their lives, a taste of that acceptance, care, knowledge, and responsibility that is love in action. Rarely, if ever are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion." (p. 214). Community healing also calls attention to the politics underscoring shared experiences of stress and trauma. Around the end of her battle with cancer, Audre Lorde (1988) asserted, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare," (p. 131). Here, Lorde proclaimed her care practices as ways to embody political power accumulated in defiance of the structural barriers that block her wellness as a Black, lesbian woman. As these structures continue to oppress people of colour, ongoing care practices grounded in both the body and community continue to be necessary modes of healing.

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<sup>5</sup> I conceptualize "community" as any group of people who share a common experience, such as sharing a workspace, participating in the same group activities, or experiencing the same barriers. Notably, this definition recognizes that people occupy multiple communities at once and navigate relationships with these communities in complex ways.

To strike a balance between self- and community-care modes, I recognize care as an intersubjective process, wherein these modes are intertwined, and experiences of wellness occur between the people in a community who share a struggle. In this sense, each individual is interconnected with their collective, and their wellness will reflect that link. Importantly, these links between a person and their community are not simply passive. Racialized activists sustain these links as they gather around their common values and work toward manifesting these values on a broader scale. The efforts of each individual have powerful implications for the dynamics of the group and how they collectively respond to shared struggle. Therefore, research that speaks to such collective care dynamics must be primarily rooted in the first-person perspectives of the participants.

To develop an abstracted theory of care practice development, I use and invite first-person perspectives to give primacy to each participant's experience before engaging these experiences in reflective dialogue with other community members. First-person accounts produce dense data that speak to the intersubjective relationships that participants have with the world, and provide the lived basis that informs theoretical concepts (Mattingly, 2017). Rich, individual experiences underscore how care practices unfold as people respond to their community's conditions within a political context. The process-oriented focus concentrates analysis on movement, emphasizing how participants actively *move* through life, and recognizing that people are "not neutral observers of our lives but participants in them" (Mattingly, 2017, p. 251), and our movements result in our growth. Such personal transformation is an integral part of the collaborative research process, which emphasizes not only investigating the causes of community changes but creating space for the community to enact their

transformations throughout the research process. After rigorous iterations of integration and abstraction, the third-person grounded theory was generated from these first-person experiences.

It is additionally worth mentioning that I developed and analyzed this research through a social constructionist epistemological lens. In contrast to a positivist epistemology which requires “objectivity” and assumes that the researcher is detached from the data, a social constructionist epistemology emphasizes the intersubjective construction of reality through culturally-bound meanings and shared symbols (Schnegg, 2015). As such, in this work, I make no effort toward objectivity. Rather, reflexivity is a keystone part of the project; I engaged with how my own perceptions and experiences influence my interpretation of the data and, likewise, how my perceptions and attitudes were changed by the data. The interpretation also flows through my left-leaning, progressive political views. That these perspectives colour the analysis is not a limitation, but a feature of the research process. Through the social constructionist lens, I do not aim for the work to be universally generalizable. On the contrary, the prologue and epilogue situate the knowledge generated from this work as pertaining to racialized activists like me. I acknowledge that the interviews were co-constructed by the participants and myself, and that the data is therefore influenced by our relationships and the power dynamics therein. The first-person language does not exclude me, far from it. By recognizing the social construction of knowledge, I transparently produce this work through a particular lens of meanings, and aim to enrich the body of knowledge that other researchers (with other lenses) have built.

## **Methods**

To theorize the process by which activists develop care practices, this project utilized a transformational grounded theory approach (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015), which combines Participatory Action Research (PAR; Schensul, Schensul, et al., 2015) methods of data

generation with grounded theory methods of data analysis. Transformational grounded theory design ensured methodological coherence (Morse et al., 2002) to the research question by offering a bottom-up, process-oriented approach to analyze how care practices unfold over time, as well as engaging a critical research approach to “explore connections and interfaces between the individual and society” (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015, p. 4). In collaboration with The Stand Community Organizing Centre in Saskatoon, my work also addressed a local concern regarding activist burnout. It aimed to achieve change through conducting the research and implementing its results (Dick, 2016). The project cycled through two data generation and analysis phases, culminating in a third phase of sharing accessible results with the community.

### **Recruitment**

To ensure an appropriate participant sample (Morse et al., 2002), participants were self-identified activists in Saskatoon who identify as Black, Indigenous, or otherwise people of colour (BIPOC) who had to be 18 years of age or older. Participants were recruited initially through the Stand’s social media networks, then through snowball sampling, in which the sample is “built up through the networks of the researcher and other participants” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 57). After identifying potential participants and inviting them to describe their experiences with care practices, I asked them to invite others following the interview. This also contributed to the participants' trust by having someone they know vouch for the researcher. Snowball sampling aligns with the decolonizing aims of a transformative approach by disrupting the traditional power dynamics of a powerful researcher directly asking community members for participation, diminishing the pressure on the participant to accept (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015).

### ***Participant Demographics***



Using these recruitment methods, I interviewed seven total participants. Of these participants, six identified as women while one identified as a man. Three participants identified racially as Black, two as South Asian, one as Indigenous Latina, and one as brown. All participants were either engaged in activist organizing in Saskatoon or had recently (within the year) moved away after years of organizing in Saskatoon. Ages at time of interview ranged from 24 to 45 years, with an average age of 30.85 years. Employment situations were varied; four participants worked in highly qualified fields that required specific, formal education, two participants were self-employed, one participant worked in a field that did not require formal education (this participant additionally did self-employed work), and one participant was a graduate student. Although four participants were involved in the non-profit sector for at least part of their activist work, only one gained income from the non-profit.

Participants described being involved in decolonial feminist, environmental sustainability, and anti-racist social movements, however possibly due to the intersecting nature of these issues, participants also dedicated their organizing efforts across all three issues. The participants also expressed interest in organizing against class disparity, imperialism, and government corruption, although no specific collective efforts focused solely on these issues were mentioned in the interviews. All of the participants conducted activist work locally in Saskatoon, but two participants additionally did activist work in different cities across Canada, and three participants further conducted activist work internationally. Regarding their relationship to the Stand Community Organizing Centre, although all participants were all able to access the recruitment materials through the Stand's social media accounts, a poster at the Stand's affiliated bookstore Turning the Tide, or through word of mouth, none of the participants held individual memberships with the Stand at the time of interview.

## **Relationship with Participants and the Topic**

My positions as a woman of colour, as a member of the activist community in Saskatoon, and as a credible board member of the Stand at the time of interviews helped me build harmonious working relationships with the participants, as we had many shared interests. Indeed, I have also been “in their shoes” as someone who struggles with activist burnout myself. Therefore, my own experiences were relevant considerations for the data, and were included in reflexive memos I wrote to articulate what my experiences with activist burnout and self-care have been, and view them in the context of the experiences of the participants. By mindfully considering and recording my own experiences with the topic, I gained conscious control over how they influenced my interpretive lens. Although my positions give me insights into the experiences of activists of colour, the participants’ experiences also diverged from mine, as they described ways of being in the world that are unfamiliar to me along with experiences to which I could not relate directly. In fact, rather than my experiences overpowering my analytical interpretation, I noticed that many of my own care practices contrasted with those of the participants, causing me to re-evaluate how I have been interpreting my own experience. For example, I considered watching a particular comfort movie to be a self-care practice, but when media consumption did not resonate with the participant interviews, I reflected upon whether watching a movie was necessarily a care practice or something else. This contradiction between my experience and the data prompted me to re-evaluate how I was framing my own care, and I began to give more attention to my other (less consumptive) practices, such as making music. Additionally, the PAR mode of data generation partially compensated for the gaps between mine and the participants’ positionalities. The diverse community of participants in group reflective sessions (described in more detail below) offered complementary perspectives to guide my

analysis and enrich my interpretations for a more robust theory, and forced me not to give primacy to my own experience. The theory therefore does not discount or separate my own experiences from the data, but considers how all experiences are interconnected and builds upon these concepts using theoretical sensitivity.

## **Procedure**

For this study, I used in-depth, largely unstructured interviews to generate data. To foster a research relationship in which the participants feel comfortable sharing details of their experience, all interviews were conducted using a relational approach and framed within a decolonizing lens emphasizing reciprocity. The relational approach aims to understand the participant's experience through empathic listening and responses, applying techniques such as summarizing, paraphrasing, and mirroring to affirm understanding (Josselson, 2013). This also enables the interviewer to put themselves in the participant's shoes and ask questions that invite deeper reflection or continue the flow of the story (Josselson, 2013). Linked to relationality is reciprocity, the ethical starting point of a decolonizing approach that influences the entire research design (Kovach, 2009). For this project, reciprocity informs everything from how data is managed, how the results are disseminated, and who benefits from the research. The specifics of what this approach looks like are different for each phase of the research and described in the following sections.

### ***Phase 1: Individual Interviews***

The first phase of the project followed traditional grounded theory sampling and analysis. This phase utilized theoretical sampling, meaning the developing theory concepts are being sampled rather than the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The strategy relies on preliminary analysis of the first round of data collection, from which concepts crystallize and guide the

following interviews (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, my analysis began with the first round of interviews, from which concepts were generated, questions about those concepts emerged, and those questions were followed up by further data generation as the theory cumulatively built upon itself (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This can be done either by re-interviewing previous participants (with new questions to guide the interview) or interviewing new participants, although in this study, participants did not respond to invitations for second interviews. Theoretical sampling permits flexibility for the researcher to do several iterations of interviews throughout the cycles of phases to pursue concepts that need further development until they reach saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Data from all interviews were constantly compared to previous interviews as nebulous concepts began to form clearer shapes.

To establish reciprocity, I began all interviews with an introduction of myself, my background, my community membership, and my intentions with the research, thus allowing participants to “place” me, and I invited participants to introduce themselves as well (Kovach, 2009). Individual interviews were in-depth and unstructured but bounded by the parameters of the research question (Josselson, 2013). As the interviewer, I began with broad, experience-near questions, such as “How did you get started with activism?” as well as “What does “practicing care” mean to you?” and “What motivated you to begin your care practices?” These questions gradually approached the ideas within the larger question surrounding activist care practice development. Such micro-level questions invite the participant to frame the conversation in their language (Josselson, 2013) and describe ground-level experiences that I will build into a theory through layers of abstraction. Aligned with a decolonizing approach that recognizes personal narratives as gifts that carry knowledge (Kovach, 2009), these questions also made space for participants to share their stories if they chose. The movement and transformation essential to

stories helped illuminate the directionality, transitions, and flow of the care practice development process.

I conducted all interviews, which lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. They were conducted in person at an accessible and comfortable location for the participant or via web conferencing software, according to changing conditions and regulations associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and participant preference. Participants had the opportunity to pick their pseudonyms. In this research report, all participant names have been replaced with a pseudonym, except for one who specifically requested their name be attached clearly to their story. This request aligns with Indigenous paradigms of knowledge generation, such that “our stories are our truth and knowledge. It is about standing behind one’s words and recognizing collective protocol, that one is accountable for one’s words. It is difficult to honor this cultural tradition if it is disallowed” (Kovach, 2009, p. 148). As such, this request was honored.

All participants received a CAD\$20 honorarium for each interview. Interviews were recorded using Zoom web conferencing recording or a digital voice recorder. The audio files were transcribed using NVivo Transcription software. Through *member-checking* (a practice where participants confirm that there is a good fit between the researcher’s interpretations and the participant’s understandings of their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013), all participants were able to read through and validate their anonymized interview transcripts after our interview, confirming that the concepts being analyzed accurately reflect the participant’s intended meanings. After the interviewee validated each transcript, all audio files and transcripts of interviews were anonymized and stored in a secure, password-protected drive. Only Dr. Cummings and I had access to this data.

### ***Phase 2: Reflective Sessions***

Phase 2 engaged the participants in monthly reflective sessions to discuss and refine the developing concepts, reflect on the effectiveness of care practices, and create space for mutual education between all participants and researcher. Participatory Action Research is associated with reflection, such that researchers reflect upon what happened, why, and how to produce change (Dick, 2016). By dialoguing with the participants who opted to join the group reflective process, power over the data is more equitably shared, theoretical sensitivity is heightened by the diversity of perspectives, and the grounded theory generated is “socially, culturally, and historically relevant” (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015, p. 8).

Because the participants are people already dealing with issues of burnout and stress, interviews were not conditional on their investing time in monthly reflective sessions. Therefore, all participants had the option only to be interviewed or to be interviewed and additionally join the reflective sessions of Phase 2. By giving an individual interview before joining a reflective session, participants saw their own experiences with care reflected in the group discussion and could discuss their experiences with others in ways that respond specifically to the Phase 1 data. Five of the seven participants who gave individual interviews attended group sessions.

To establish relationality in the group, I opened the first meeting by introducing myself, my experiences with activist burnout and care practices, my background and participation in Saskatoon communities, and my intentions with my participation in the group. Then, I invited the participants to introduce themselves. Members thus located each other to help establish trust and identify the boundaries of the community and, therefore, around the knowledge that we will co-construct (Kovach, 2009). From this point, reciprocal relationships were in development through our aligned goals as the sessions continued.

During the sessions, I presented my analysis of the theory so far, opened the floor for critiques and comments, invited participants to share their own care practice development stories, including any changes since our last meeting, and asked any further questions arising from iterations of analysis. The participatory design benefits the research by ensuring both communicative and pragmatic validity; *communicative validity* means the emerging theory is repeatedly tested through dialogue, and *pragmatic validity* means the theory stays relevant to generating action (Teram et al., 2005). The sessions fostered theoretical sensitivity by iteratively verifying the ideas that are generated from the data and moving forward slowly with every verified idea (Morse et al. 2002). The design also interpersonally benefits participants and myself through *mutual education*, meaning that I learned from participants, and participants learned from other participants (Dick, 2016). Everyone involved drew upon the wisdom of their peers to guide them through the transformative process (Teram et al., 2005). In our case, this meant presenting various ideas and experiences around care practices (sometimes in agreement and sometimes contradictory) so that we could think about how to regard care in new ways and integrate mutual support into our activism.

Although we planned to host 2-hour-long reflective sessions once a month for six months, we ended up hosting three sessions over 4 months due to participant availability and reaching saturation earlier than expected. Because of COVID-19 and accessibility concerns, we could not host sessions in person and provide beverages. Instead, we hosted sessions over Zoom, asked participants to bring a snack or beverage to the session, and reimbursed their refreshments with a \$10 Starbucks gift card. Although the first session was a discussion amongst almost all participants, the second session had lower participation. Possibly due to participants being migrants or children of migrants and thus all having social connections outside of the city,

participants' various travel plans proved a barrier to meeting together. Additionally, by nature of the population, it is possible that participants were each too busy with other obligations or that they simply prioritized taking care of themselves and their community above participating in research. I decided not to push for further participation to ensure the research not disrupt these care practices or create more work for the participants. I recognize this as a practical limitation of participatory research on activist burnout and, more broadly, as a challenge inherent to transformational grounded theory (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015).

Each session was recorded and transcribed through NVivo software. After the first session, the transcript was made available to participants through a shared Google drive document, accessible only to the participants, and stored on the secure drive for analysis. This was done if participants felt revisiting the sessions between meetings would help them think about their care practices. However, it was not continued for the second and third meetings due to low attendance and not needing to analyze these following sessions in as much depth. The transcript will be removed from Google drive upon completion of the project. After each session, I cycled back to Phase 1 to conduct individual interviews and continue my independent analysis.

#### ***Cycle between Phases 1 and 2: Independent Analysis***

Between reflective sessions and individual interviews, I analyzed the data to bring the theoretical concepts together into a cohesive whole. This iterative process of analyzing the data, collecting more data from new interviews, and returning to analysis, continued until saturation was reached. Because the participants were already dealing with issues of burnout and exhaustion, I took on the brunt of the analytical and interview work. Participants were invited to inform, transform, and guide the data at reflective sessions and through member checking, without the burden of additional tasks or more hours of work. Additionally, this helped ensure



that the research process did not significantly interfere with the conditions in which participants typically practice care (that is, the research does not request so much time and energy that care practices become difficult to perform). I refined the theory by integrating participants' suggestions about the theoretical concepts from reflective sessions, and by following up on participants' suggestions about where to locate new concepts.

Data collected from interviews and reflective sessions were analyzed using grounded theory techniques including coding, memoing, axial analysis, and diagramming. I employed memoing during my immersion in the data to track my interpretive decisions, offer a reflexive space, and help extract meaning from the data (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). As I began to formulate ideas, I coded data using predominantly process codes to identify patterns of action, which showed how participants move through the care practice process (Saldaña, 2013). These codes were then collated into processes and subprocesses that depicted a robust portrait of each stage of the care practice process. I developed each process in congruence with patterns across the data and the research question for an interconnected analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Diagramming was also used throughout the analysis so that I can concretely illustrate the relationships between the concepts and clarify the directionality of the process (Charmaz, 2006), and eventually to show the movement from one stage of the process to the next. This technique was particularly useful when communicating the analysis to the participants during group sessions. Cycling between interviews, reflective sessions, and my own analysis helped me develop the theory; by moving back and forth between the micro perspective of participant experiences and the macro perspective of the abstracted theory, I ensured the theory was internally consistent and rigorously informed by the data (Morse et al. 2002). Data collection and analysis ended when saturation was reached, meaning that no new patterns were evident, the

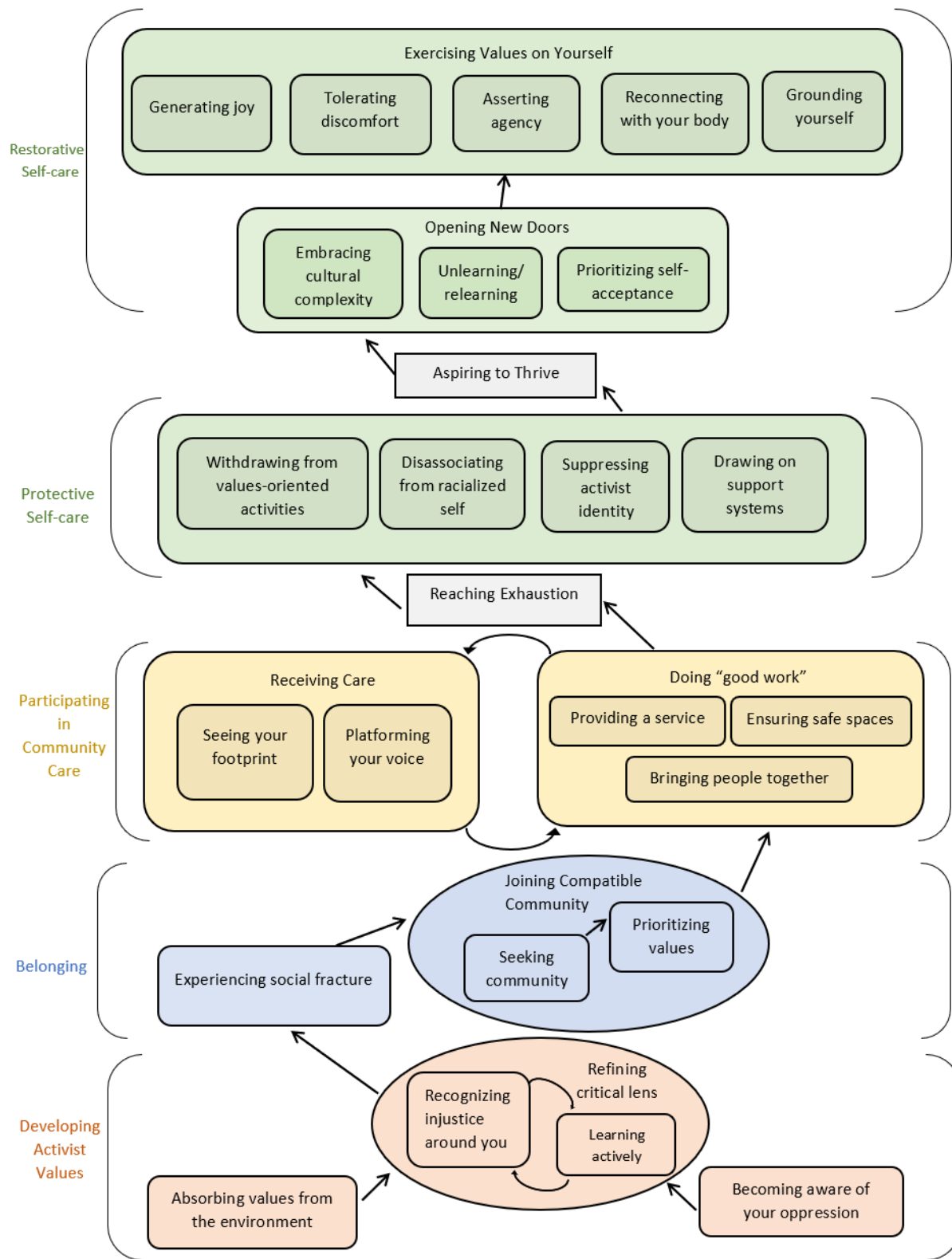
analysis had been refined to the point that all relevant concepts and negative cases were rigorously integrated (Charmaz, 2006) and there was consensus on a clear picture of how everything fits together.

### ***Phase 3: Sharing Findings with the Community***

The third and final phase of the research involved reporting the results of the study to the community in an accessible way and making recommendations for implementing the knowledge gained. Drawing upon decolonizing research approaches, the transformative grounded theory approach must benefit the community in some way. On the contrasting concept of knowledge “for knowledge’s sake” that is of no advantage to the community, Margaret Kovach (2009) writes that “[m]aybe someday we will have that luxury, but not right now” (p. 93). Phase 3 focuses entirely on the tangible benefit to the community. Once saturation has been reached, meaning there is a clear picture of how all parts of the data fit together, the participants convened to discuss ways to publicize the results that are accessible to the community members most interested and clearly connected to other community efforts in Saskatoon. The participants decided to build a community group where people can organize self-care efforts in online spaces, including holding supportive gatherings and sharing information about values-based care techniques. To build toward this effort, they determined that I will develop a workshop for relevant community groups and non-profits. Interested participants will sit on a panel to discuss their strategies and answer questions. The participants have brainstormed several groups who might be interested and will reach out to those groups once the workshop is developed. The workshop slides will live as a resource available to Saskatoon activists via the Stand’s support networks in online and in-person spaces.

## **Results of Analysis**

Analysis of the interviews was constructed into five major stages of care practice development (see Figure 1): *Developing Activist Values; Belonging; Participating in Community Care* (followed by the *Reaching Exhaustion* transition point); *Protective Self-care* (followed by the *Aspiring to Thrive* transition point); and *Restorative self-care*. A desire for valued living thrusts racialized activists through this process. After building and refining their progressive value frameworks, the activists implement these values in the community and finally begin reflecting these values on themselves for personal empowerment. Here I will dissect and explore each stage and its constituent elements.



**Figure 1.** Theory of racialized activist care practice development diagram (read from bottom to top)

## **Developing Activist Values**

My interviews began with participants telling the story of how they became activists by way of describing the development of the values that inform their activist work. While answering my question “how did you become an activist?” they also responded to the underlying question “how did these issues become important to you?” by recalling not only their involvement within activist movements, but their personal experiences seeing people suffering with issues outside of their immediate control. Through these experiences, they came to hold such core values as community, social justice, environmental protection, anti-racism, feminism, decolonization, equity, and mutual support. Although they focused on how these values developed in childhood or young adulthood, the participants continued to act upon them throughout their lives. In the context of new experiences, they may refine or re-examine the nuances of these values, although we did not discuss how these values are re-examined throughout the lifespan. Nevertheless, they spoke of these values as the solid foundations of their ethical praxis. Thus, this stage also constitutes the foundations of their care practice development. The process begins with activists absorbing values from their environment and becoming aware of their oppression.

## ***Becoming Aware of Your Oppression***

Participants recalled specific situations wherein the unequal nature of their identity was brought to the forefront by experiences of micro, macro, and systemic oppression. Often, these experiences described the crossroads of their intersecting identities. They described feeling different, ostracized, inferior, or pushed to the margins of society in some way. Norah recalled that she had “always been subjected to comments about why my lips are a certain size or why my skin tone is the way that is”. But these experiences were not always related to being a racial minority, especially for participants who were migrants and not racial minorities in their pre-

Canadian countries of origin. Long before moving to Canada, Camilla learned about the domestication of women through childhood experiences with her family:

Like "Oh, Camilla, go to do this" and then my two brothers didn't go and never were asked or like I can like, they tried to teach me to assume I should help my mom or I should cook, or I should clean the house or, you know [...] So I always fight that back from I was a little girl.

These personal experiences were conceptualized as separate from an abstract, intellectualized understanding of oppression. For example, Jebunnessa was intellectually aware of the marginalization associated with motherhood, but understood it on a more visceral level when she experienced it firsthand, saying:

[...] women's reproductive labour are not being valued. It's invisible, undermined, underappreciated, unrecognized. So I knew those, right? But I didn't know that how does it feel. But when I came, when I was into that position, I started to feel it, you know, double in a double way.

Even when participants knew about the systems that produce the inequities they were facing, the experiences provided a different *kind* of understanding; one which inspired reflection on personal values and enriched the generalized knowledge about the communities sharing their struggle.

### ***Absorbing Values from the Environment***

While participants were opening their eyes to the lived experience of their identities, they were also picking up on the values of the people and institutions around them. Through everyday interactions, they passively learned what their community considered important. These values helped inform their interpretations of their own marginalizations, including their causes and how they ought to be handled. They noted their proximity to justice-oriented people in their families

and communities. Shashi recalled growing up “in an environment where I got an opportunity to learn, observe, and just develop that empathy for people who weren’t like me”. Similarly, Rebecca attributed her respect for the natural land to the religious community she was raised in, noting that “...in our religion it’s more like you are, human beings are like [...] supposed to be like protectors as well”. After learning to hold values such as empathy and environmental consciousness, the participants built upon these ideas in the applied activist context by attending activist programming. Although they intended to “observe” and stay “in the background”, participants ended up drawing inspiration from the speakers. Recounting a Canada Day protest where Indigenous rights activists were speaking, Camilla said “when you start to listen that I also my heart pounds, I didn't mean like I needed like 100 people in there like, you know, like the story and emotion come to me and I feel it.” Here, Camilla emphasized the emotional impact of powerful storytelling, which solidified her sense that the struggles of Indigenous peoples are important to her and compelled her to act.

### ***Refining Critical Lens***

After the foundations of activist values were passively laid by their environment and experiences, participants then sought out information to help them make sense of which systems cause their marginalizations and how others are affected by intersecting systems of inequitable power. By undergoing this subprocess of refining their critical lens, participants were better able to connect their experiences to a broader social context. Refining the critical lens is a cycle in which participants actively learn about systems of oppression and apply that knowledge to recognize the injustices around them.

Participants expanded and shifted their perspectives of the world by immersing themselves in knowledge. They delved into the history of social and political movements,

decolonization, anti-racist education, and modern local issues using resources, including formal classes, news reports, and books by activists and scholars. Jebunnessa reflected on the effect of education on her perspective of her own history, saying “So actually, after taking that anti-racist education, I started to realize and I started to gain more deeper knowledge about the indigenous history and also my feminism. [...] And then I started to realize that I'm coming from a colonial land. I came from one colonial land to another.” Having had a similar educational experience, Ramona described this practice as “doing the work” of building allyship and recognizing injustice in the world around you.

The “work” Ramona mentions requires constantly seeking information and applying it to lived contexts. On the importance of learning, CoolGuy2022 discussed the radical shift in perspective it can produce:

So through learning, we become activists just because we now know that there's a problem, like the the world as it looks for many people may not necessarily look like there's anything wrong. Like the roof is not on fire. You wake up in a bed, you go to school or you go to work. You do what you need to do, you come back home. It seems relatively stable, like everything seems all right. But then when you learn that you know, the process by which power is generated in your house is going to lead to the eventual collapse of the entire world that you're living in. It just changes everything.

Indeed, the experience he describes was shared among the participants, who began questioning mainstream priorities and reinterpreting their personal experiences along more critical lines. Yet, tucked within the expressed admiration at the impact of education, his description also carries a foreboding message about the heavy burden that knowledge can carry.

## **Belonging**



Each participant held their activist values personally, but these values were also shaped by their interpersonal relationships in specific social contexts. When these relationships were interrupted, activist values were employed in forging new relationships from a new social position. In the second stage of care practice development, values manifest in community settings through the pursuit of belonging. After exploring a variety of communities, participants established a sense of “belonging” by becoming respected members of a group or community that aligns with their values.

I found that the participants’ experiences of belonging reflected Victor Turner’s (1991) theory of the ritual process, particularly in his three phases of moving up or down a social hierarchy: separation, liminality, and reintegration. His separation phase involved a person detaching from “an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions, or from both” (p. 94). The liminal phase refers to having ambiguous characteristics and no clear role while transitioning between positions. Turner’s (1991) conceptualization of the reintegration phase requires the transitioning person to achieve relief by re-entering the social system in a new position. This is where participants deviate from the theory, as relief from liminality is not achieved by partaking in the oppressive social structure but by solidifying their resistance to it (a notion that will be explored later). However, the concepts of separation from society and the ambiguity of a liminal position resonate with the participants’ experiences pursuing belonging in Saskatoon.

### ***Experiencing Social Fracture***

All participants experienced some form of social fracture. Reflecting the separation and liminality phases by Turner (1991), the participants found themselves in a social context that had drastically different cultural meanings, expectations, and conditions. Until they figured out how

they fit, they continued to clash with this context. For most participants, their social worlds were disrupted by moving to Saskatoon from another city or country. These activists described having to start “from zero” (Jebunnessa) in a new, unfamiliar setting. Ramona recalled “experiencing a lot of identity struggles” while navigating her “new reality.” Participants also experienced a sudden shift in social context when Saskatoon implemented the social distancing measures of the COVID-19 pandemic. Remembering March of 2020, Norah said that “what used to be my go-to to feel connected socially and culturally was salsa dancing [...] and then that shut down.” As expressed by Ramona’s identity struggles, the stress of navigating new social contexts was compounded by the ambiguity of their positionality in their new space.

Whether caused by migration or the lockdown, social fracture was accompanied by a sense of isolation, dislocation, loneliness, and generally not being accepted. In addition to being physically separated from familiar people, the ambiguity of their social position contributed to difficulties feeling like a part of the community. CoolGuy2022 illustrated this, saying “You are surrounded by people in a way that you are not necessarily isolated per se, but you can still feel so alone within the space.” As a backdrop to moments of racism, microaggressions, and pressures to assimilate, participants emphasized a pervasive sense of ostracization and cultural disconnection that followed them. Many felt the pressure of “being the only brown person in the room”, bringing with it questions about origins and history. Norah noticed the complexity of these questions, saying “It’s curiosity but there's an undertone of “you're different, and that's weird”.” Lacking a community that understood and accepted them weighed heavily on the participants. Jebunnessa described losing one form of her voice to the cultural discrepancy, saying “After coming here in Western country, I didn’t get the chance to sing anymore because I sing only [language of origin’s] song, and my language nobody understands.” Although

participants did maintain friendships from before social fracture using social media, they all eventually began the subprocess of joining a community within Saskatoon.

### *Joining Compatible Community*

In their transition out of the liminal stage of settlement and orientation to Saskatoon, participants begin a sub-process of joining an activist community wherein they play a fulfilling role. Participants knew they had become part of the community when they felt they had been embraced and respected by peer activists who shared their struggle. When I asked Norah how she joined her Saskatoon community, she downplayed the process as simply “trying to belong, trying to make friends.” Yet, she emphasized the unexpected confidence she gained after finding the right people, saying “but then it turned out to be empowerment [...] I'd find like-minded people and we'd share ideas, or I would invite them to cultural events and they would actually come and they would like it, which was reinforcing.” Finding a suitable community was thus a key part in establishing the intersubjective basis upon which care practices grew. This subprocess consisted of first seeking potential communities in broad strokes, then choosing the community with which their values most aligned.

Casting a wide net, participants began seeking out specific, interest-based communities. After exploring what groups exist in the city, participants began trying new activities, joining clubs, and attending events to meet new people. Coming out of their shells as newcomers required courage. Jebunnessa mustered the courage by reminding herself about the merits of community engagement: “I knew that how important it is to engage the community and and also how important it is to get to make yourself yourself, engage with the broader community, right?” For many participants, building new relationships was easiest with other folks of colour or people with whom they shared a religion or home country. Ramona discussed the events set up

by local groups, saying “We would have like barbecues and we'll have all of these different events in the community”. These groups were specifically oriented toward her intersecting identities, including gender and nationality.

Despite the attraction of these groups, participants still found themselves feeling out of place and stuck in liminality. After spending more time with certain communities, participants realized they needed to be more selective about the groups they joined and began prioritizing their values as criteria for who they spent time with. Many participants found that the values of their migrant communities and religious communities did not always align with their own. Jebunnessa noticed how the “politics of exclusion” at work in migrants’ home countries were carried over to Saskatoon. She expressed frustration at the replication of these divisions within their ethnic communities: “So many clusters are there that it's so hard to build a relationship.” By prioritizing the values of the groups they dedicated their efforts toward, the participants developed more fulfilling relationships. Rebecca described her evaluative process saying, “if there are like two different environmental organizations who wants me to volunteer for them, I would see which one would I more likely align [...] just in terms of my values.” For all participants, the groups that most aligned with their values were either existing activist organizations or friend groups that grew into activist organizations. Oriented around equity, sustainability, and justice-seeking, these relationships affirmed the participants’ worldviews and diminished their feelings of isolation. Ramona reflected that “Sometimes just having the realization that we're not alone in some of our feelings can kind of just even help us find solutions and find ways that we can continue to do that fight and continue to fight for, you know, what's right.” Continuing to fight is exactly what the participants proceeded to do with their newfound activist communities.

## **Participating in Community Care**

Bolstered by a supportive activist community, participants joined community care systems. Specifically, they described the cycle of providing and receiving care, in which they dedicated time and energy to serving the larger local community, then reciprocally received care from the local community and their activist peers.

### ***Doing “good work”***

Activists typically began participating in this cycle by performing “good work”. As defined by Bandali (2020), “good work” describes that done by people who find their work “morally fulfilling and contributing to a greater social good” (p. 237), which frames labour as a gift to society. This framing uses a nuanced lens of social responsibility to reconcile the stressful, high-stakes nature of community work with its rewarding, fulfilling aspects. Activists in this study described the things they do to uplift their community with excitement but also with an undercurrent of concern and fatigue, in line with a conceptualization of work that is driven by social responsibility. Participants described their “good work” in terms of providing services, bringing people together, and ensuring the safety of their spaces.

**Providing Services.** Activists proudly framed their work as a service to the community, discussing activities such as knowledge transmission services, offering resources, and administrative work to maintain the organization.

After going through the learning process to refine their critical lens and develop activist values, the participants were eager to share that knowledge while “trying to get people to understand why the world we live in is the way it is” (CoolGuy2022). By holding teach-ins, sharing environmental sustainability strategies with community leaders, and inviting anti-racist educators to their spaces, the activists increased awareness of inequalities. They gathered support

for grassroots movements to address these inequities. Knowledge-sharing practices took shape in formal presentations of empirical studies and academic histories or storytelling and sharing interpersonal experiences. Regardless of whether they held a post-secondary education, all participants emphasized that the community needs to be informed about the world around them and be empowered by the knowledge they hold.

Resource distribution was another source of pride for participants. After “noticing, I guess, resources that weren’t available” (Shashi) to many community members, including childcare, meals, transportation, baked goods, accessible art practice, and employment assistance, activists worked to redistribute these resources to those who needed them most. Stewardship of common land and gardens also provided produce to impoverished families. Resource sharing was often conducted through the activist organization’s mutual aid systems, but it could also be done through interpersonal agreements, whereby someone expressed a willingness to help someone else with whom they felt a kinship. Through their organizations and personal relationships, activists made a point to “pay back to the community” (Jebunnessa) by sharing resources.

Although less enjoyable than helping neighbours or holding teach-ins, administrative services performed by the participants were viewed as a necessary part of leadership in an organization. Such services included doing accounting, writing grants, attending meetings with other local leaders, fundraising, scheduling operations, and coordinating events. Norah, at times, felt “overwhelmed” by the sheer amount of administrative work needed to manage her organization, but was glad for support from her fellow organizers, saying, “I don’t think I would be able to do it alone.”

**Bringing People Together.** For a movement to gain momentum, people must unite around their shared interests; the activists I interviewed made a point of their efforts to spark this process. They united people in three ways: communing, outreach, and space-making.

Communing was often the first experience participants had with an activist organization, which involved sharing space, thoughts, and energy with peers to establish a connection upon which broader social action could be built. These activities included gathering with like-minded people, debriefing with a group after a local event, sharing meals, and talking in groups of fellow activists. Jebunnessa found it fulfilling to “mingle with knowledgeable community members and also community activists, those who really do understand the issue and those who really do care and work for it”. Even in non-activist spaces, being able to “meet as well and kind of chat about some of the issues that they were facing [...] to support one another” (Ramona) brought to life the foundational shared experiences on which direct actions were built. This kind of participation advanced to inviting people to commune with one another through outreach and space-making.

As participants gained leadership roles in activist organizations, the responsibility of outreach weighed heavier on their shoulders as they circulated posters, raised awareness of specific issues, invited people to events, and affectively encouraged people to join their movement. Ramona described making announcements to groups of people who may be interested in her event, while Jebunnessa expressed the tenacity she needed “pushing the people to come out from their own shell to make friendship”.

When participants were not inviting people to gathering spaces, they were taking the initiative to create those spaces themselves. Space-making, or “making a space for people to sit down and talk about issues that affect them” (CoolGuy2022), was a crucial step for intentional community building. With the larger community and their organizations, participants defined

dedicated spaces for gardening, discussion, anti-racist education, and revolutionary art. Thus, they provided access to resources like fresh produce, education, and artistic expressive platforms many community members would not otherwise have. Such spaces were typically created because the participant recognized local needs. Norah mentioned that the group she was involved in “came about because of a lack of community care spaces and not just self-care spaces, but just a lack of an environment that would facilitate connections among people of colour and facilitate discussions about anti-racism.” As Jebunnessa described, “all of these folks gave me a healing space,” indicating that community spaces additionally offered the activists a sense of peace and gratitude.

**Ensuring Safe Activist Spaces.** Although providing services and bringing people together required a lot of time and energy from the activists, no task was described as more taxing than acting as a security guard for the organization. While doing community work, participants recounted struggling to split attention between the needs of the community and hostility from local opposition. Looking into the future of her organization, Norah noted “We're going to get the trolls. [...] And there is a fear there [...] how will I manage that when it happens and safety? And how will I continue to promote our space as safe if that has happened?” Similarly, when evaluating the risks of their activism, stories of activists who had disappeared or been brutally assaulted informed their calculations. For example, while CoolGuy2022 was discussing his activism with a friend, his friend responded with a story about Ken Saro-Wiwa, a Nigerian environmental activist who was arrested and hanged for his pressure on oil industries in the 1990s.

In addition to concerns about hostility from right-wing Saskatoon locals, participants also wrestled with criticisms from within the progressive activist community. As organization



leaders, participants had to differentiate criticisms that were constructive and being made in good faith from criticisms that (whether intentional or not) served only to fracture the movement. For example, Shashi received several comments on the social media of her organization's page. Some of these comments criticized the accessibility of the content for the hearing impaired, which Shashi acted upon and worked with the organizers to improve. Other comments, however, criticized her personally for "not doing enough" for marginalized communities. As examples like these demonstrate, activist work entails varying levels of stress associated with decision making and risk assessment. However, these may be mitigated by the support of the community.

### ***Receiving Care***

While activists readily described the work they poured into serving their communities, the skills they used, and the stress that resulted, they were more reticent about how the community reciprocally provided for them. Building a movement was articulated in terms of acts of service and deliverables that quantified how much "activism" was produced. After they described the community care they saw in their organizations, I asked them if they were also cared for by the community. Most participants had unsure initial reactions, except for Rebecca, who declared "It goes like full circle. It's like you are giving back to the community. But this community has to give back to you something." Participants guided the conversation about care to their conceptualization of the most rewarding aspects of the work: platforming their voice, and seeing their footprint. The activists thus described receiving care through these rewarding aspects, which made them feel supported and encouraged.

**Platforming Your Voice.** One form of support provided to activists from their peers (including those within their organizations and within the larger local community) was an audience for their perspectives and experiences. The act of platforming one's thoughts and voice

was valued by the activists, who were able to make themselves visible to the community and speak back to power. At the city-wide level, activists found audiences by speaking at events, through blogs, or even on community radio. Within activist groups, the participants had conversations about injustice, and found supportive ears for their personal stories. Significantly, these group discussions lent themselves to venting. Venting involved participants meeting with other like-minded people to share their experiences authentically and emotionally with the expectation of affirmation. Camilla had an organized group for this, saying when they got together “we all get like, “Oh, well, you know what? I'm angry because these [unintelligible] didn't work because of money” or, you know, or “these guys say this””. Through venting, activists expelled their frustrations about the world with people whom they trusted to affirm their perspectives and empathize with their anger. They found care in the form of respect, empathy, and support when their voices were amplified.

**Seeing Your Footprint.** Another form of care provided to activists was appreciation for the impact they have made on the local community through their personal efforts. Like leaving footprints behind them, they saw that the landscape of the community was altered by their work, and that they had made a tangible difference. Participants recalled specific moments in which they recognized joy and uplift as a direct result of their work. For example, after completing a mural that reflected the lives of local workers, Camilla recalled the energy she felt watching people recognize themselves and elements of their community in the mural, making them feel represented. CoolGuy2022 even successfully changed regional policies through his organization’s work. But even when the changes to the community were not as significant as policy-level impacts, activists still highlighted the feeling of being appreciated. They note the general feeling of mutual appreciation and a sense that they had built networks of support from

which everyone benefitted. Jebunnessa discussed a running theme of appreciation and recognition she received during her time in Saskatoon activism, ranging from gestures of appreciation from community members such as “giving a smile, even that is also [care]” to awards given by local agencies. Through the recognition that they were making a tangible difference in the community, activists were encouraged to continue their work.

### **Transition Point: Reaching Exhaustion**

At some point after joining community care systems, each of the participants described burning out, which hindered their perseverance in activism and everyday living activities. Whether attributed to extensive community work, employed work, current events, accumulated everyday stressors, or a combination of all four, the participants each independently reached this point when, as Ramona stated, “something had to give”. An overarching sense of “surviving” (as opposed to “thriving”) loomed over participants, who found themselves feeling unwell and experiencing tearfulness as indicators of exhaustion. The exhaustion point was described as having two layers: paralysis and staying alert.

At times, participants felt paralyzed by the overwhelming systems they were fighting. Like all participants, Ramona felt helpless at times, saying “I just had this overwhelming feeling of like my people are dying. Just for existing.” Faced with resistance to their values in the political sphere, in their workplaces, or even within their families, the activists were overwhelmed by a lack of progress. They recognized that their fight was not new, but had been ongoing for “centuries and centuries” (Jebunnessa) and they worried their efforts were fruitless. Ramona expressed that “it seems like we're still always asking for more. Even though the ‘more’ we're getting, it's just a bare minimum to the things that need to change”. For every moment of

progress celebrated with their organizations, there were many more moments of trying to “make peace” (CoolGuy2022) with disappointment.

In addition to concerns about current events, such as the effects of climate change and a growing international fascist movement, activists were dealing with stressors in their personal lives that left them too tired to continue the activities that brought them joy. Some participants recognized the uncompensated energy they put into soothing their white colleagues’ discomfort around interracial issues<sup>6</sup>. Jebunnessa described her experience with motherhood, noting that she went without parenting support for the early years of her children’s development, which further contributed to her tiredness. Stress was also attributed to their activist work, particularly from low engagement. Several participants also attributed feelings of hopelessness to their struggle to garner community-wide interest. Further, despite a deep reverence for volunteer labor, their organizations had little labor to work with, which informed activists’ feelings of helplessness. Cumulatively, these factors left activists feeling hopeless and overwhelmed, resulting in many participants’ becoming paralyzed and unsure of which direction to pursue.

Interestingly, another dimension of the exhaustion point was a perpetual hypervigilance and struggle to relax. As a result of “fighting all the time” (Camilla), participants felt trapped in a mindset of never-ending activism, as though they were “surviving in a heightened state” (Ramona). Notably, their drive and sense of responsibility co-existed (and conflicted) with feelings of being paralyzed and directionless, which fed into their frustration. Faced with a mountain of disappointments from seemingly fruitless organizing efforts, activists felt as though they were not doing enough, or that stepping away from activism would mean “being a bad

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<sup>6</sup> Not all participants who expressed this issue were women, Shiloh Whitney (2018) explores how women of colour perform affective labor that supports white comfort in more depth in her work on byproductive labor.

[person of colour]” (Ramona). The defining feature of this anxiety was the participant’s inability to let go of their worries. They described holding onto their anger, having trouble relaxing enough to fall asleep, and ruminating on their experiences with discrimination. Reflecting on how he has changed, CoolGuy2022 noted that “these things would definitely get to me way more like they would weigh me down way more and I would think about them for, you know, much, much longer.” Some participants also carried concerns about the risks associated with their activism, including being targeted by right-wing groups or encountering police. The weight of these stressors made the activists’ daily activities feel meaningless and tiresome. In response to these feelings, they took defensive measures to prevent further harm, thus entering the next stage of the process toward self and mutual care.

### **Protective Self-Care**

The self-care strategies activists of colour use to combat burnout take two major forms. The first kind is protective self-care, wherein activists shield themselves from various stressors. By engaging in protective measures, they recognize they are too burnt out and overwhelmed to tackle further stressful situations. To move away from a position of “fighting all the time” and feeling hopeless, activists pull themselves out of the fight for a moment, allowing them to recoup with help from loved ones. I found this concept resonates with the concept of self-segregating described by bell hooks (2003), around which she noted that “it is a sign of positive self-care to remove oneself from any circumstance where there is danger of violation” (p. 165). From this headspace, they can reorient themselves toward restoring their wellness using self-care strategies in later stages of the process. Notably, these protective strategies do not always *feel good* for the participants; feeling good is not their goal with this form of self-care. Rather, these strategies are calculated (and, at times, difficult) decisions to decrease the amount of pressure they face.

### ***Withdrawing from Values-Oriented Activities***

Withdrawal from values-affirming activities was, ironically, the most frequently described method of dealing with burnout. Whether these activities were in the context of employed work, organizing, or personal hobbies, they shared a common factor; these were activities from which the participant derived a sense of meaning and purpose. Those with values-oriented employed work found themselves taking days off to get away from the stress of the job. This decision hinged on the idea that the participant would *return* to work feeling refreshed, similar to activists who “took a break” (Shashi) from organizing groups with the intention to come back. However, for those activists who stopped practicing their art due to stress, they did not speak of any intention of returning. On the contrary, two participants left behind their cultural artistic pursuits for fear of being ostracized in Saskatoon or lack of time. Although they recognized the benefits of doing art, these participants determined that the consumption of time, energy, and emotional labor to continue these activities was too much. Although values-based activities at work, home, and in the community aligned well with the activists’ goals, paradoxically, the fact that they felt so strongly about the work raised the stakes- and, thus, the associated level of stress. Whether or not they left with any intention of returning, the participants removed a set of stressors by removing themselves from these activities.

### ***Suppressing Activist Identity***

In the same vein as disconnecting from activist activities, participants also reported suppressing their activist identities, thereby hiding their justice-seeking proclivities in favor of a more unbothered persona. Notably, this approach was most frequently employed in the workplace. The activists described putting aside their concerns about the workplace’s values and just going with the flow of day-to-day operations. Norah described this “acquiescing” as being

“less inclined to put [your] ideas forth”. Similarly, Camilla dealt with an angry, prejudiced customer by politely thanking him for coming and letting him leave, saying “I was on fire like I was very angry but something in myself told me, like, just leave it”. Although the participants acknowledge how distressing the workplace can be, this strategy enabled them to compartmentalize the distress and prioritize their job in the moment.

Outside of the workplace, activist identity suppression was also helpful. Activists found that when their worries felt like too much handle, it was helpful to find distractions, such as talking about “real life [...] like the TV show” (Camilla) or “what you ate yesterday” (Camilla), referring to immediate lived experiences that are seemingly disconnected from politics. Significantly, suppressing an activist identity was useful in potentially harmful situations. For example, when CoolGuy2022 was called slurs on the street, he chose not to fight back or say anything, noting that “if someone treats me differently, I probably, my go to tendencies, probably just to ignore it”. He protected his own well-being in two ways by ignoring the man on the street: he de-escalated the situation, thereby preventing a physical fight, and he chose not to ruminate on the situation, thereby not allowing it to cause distress afterward. In contrast to stories about fighting the good fight and putting bigots in their place, these stories highlight the strength required to let bigotry roll off your back, instead prioritizing your wellness.

### ***Dissociating from Racialized Self***

As people of colour, the participants carry the weight of the racialization. In response, two participants avoided being racially “othered”. Norah recalled trying to increase her proximity to whiteness, saying “I remember also young when I was younger, engaging in behaviors and like to change my appearance to be as close to white as possible.” Although not intending to veer closer to whiteness, Shashi avoided being othered altogether by staying away

from situations ripe for racial discrimination. However, this ultimately meant avoiding many social opportunities. It should be noted that unlike the other protective self-care strategies, dissociating from a racialized self was not adopted by all participants. When Camilla was presented with the option, she even refused, saying "You know, a few people ask me, [...] 'What is your Canadian name?' and I'll be like, 'huh? I have just one name.'" Like any other evaluation of personal safety, this method depends on layers of factors which may include social context, racial identity, and personality.

### *Drawing on Support Systems*

Participants used the previous three avoidant measures to ensure they prevented further harm, but to repair and fortify their already damaged well-being, they called on the support of trusted peers. When drawing on their support systems, the activists reached out to people with whom they had previously built a relationship of trust and openness, including close friends, family, and even supervisors. The activists *confided* in these people, meaning they could share their challenges and express themselves authentically, wherein they could say "everything that's on [their] mind, no filter" (Shashi). Supportive confidantes helped participants feel their experiences were "seen or heard or validated" (Ramona), and became a source of motivation and reinvigoration. For example, Rebecca described her mother as "the person that keeps me going". Confiding in others also helped activists process their experiences, as Rebecca mentioned: "I feel light whenever I have a discussion with someone like this. Think from the other perspective as well, and I'm not like lost in my own thoughts, over-thinking something". Beyond emotional support, family could also offer financial support when needed. The participants felt less alone in their struggles through the comfort of their loved ones and trusted friends.



All participants, at one point, considered these protective strategies sufficient to pull them out of burnout and help them return to their community care work. Indeed, many did return to their work after taking a break, continued until they reached exhaustion again, then utilized the protective self-care strategies until they felt ready to return. However, eventually, hitting that exhaustion point time and time again grew tiresome, and the activists began searching for something more.

### **Transition Point: Aspiring to Thrive**

One of the defining features of the protective self-care strategies is that they were viewed as a necessary effort to prevent further harm, but they did not feel good or fulfilling. At a certain point, each participant began wanting to respond differently to burnout and practice behaviours that had more meaningful outcomes. It occurred to them that “if I could practice the measures in place to ensure that I continue to thrive, then I may not feel the need to want to survive all the time” (Ramona). Reaching this stage was a realization described as having two dimensions: dealing with a sense of loss or regret, and wanting to serve the community from a good space.

The most distressing aspect of entering this stage was a sense of loss or regret. Participants attributed a loss of health and well-being to the time they wasted on stress. Jebunnessa reflected on the wellness she lost to stress, saying “Now I curse myself that why I didn't stop myself and why I didn't do any self-care activities for myself.” Participants on highly professional career paths acknowledged that their work environments were not conducive to their well-being, noting that high-pressure work environments did not give them “enough space alone to sit down and think about what's going on” (CoolGuy2022). Despite starting these careers and community activities from a place of joy and enthusiasm, the participants were coming to terms with what they had sacrificed to continue the work; re-evaluating their self-interest underpinned

this transition. Upon reflection, participants realized their habits and behaviours did not align with the life they wanted to be living. For Rebecca, this realization was prompted by her family, who joked about how difficult it was to pull her away from her laptop, which she used for meetings with various activist groups. In contrast, after retreating from activist work for a time, Camilla needed to re-enter sustainably, declaring that “I want to be this because I have one life and I don't want to be like looking by my window how things happen and not be part.”

Nevertheless, this realization also came from a place of ambition and strong self-efficacy as participants were driven to serve their communities with joy. They recognized that their stress made it impossible to serve their community and help the people around them. When asked how they conceptualize self-care, participants framed their responses along these lines. For example, Shashi referenced airline safety protocols:

To me, practicing care means prioritizing yourself for at least a period of time to make sure that you are in a good space to be able to help others. I mean, you know, like in airplanes, they say you need to put the oxygen tank on yourself first before you can take care you know a child next to you. And I feel like to me, that's what self-care is.

Notably, Shashi framed self-care as needed for healing during a crisis, which resonates with other participants' definition of self-care, as Ramona also recognized that “if I'm not good, whether mentally, physically, emotionally, however I want to term it, then [my community] is going to suffer.”

Additionally, participants emphasized helping people in a joyful way that fosters relationship building and making meaningful connections, and found their stress to be an obstacle, noting that self-care was needed to ensure they could “do the work that [they] want to do and do it well” (Ramona). Although not everyone could pinpoint the exact moment they

wanted to pursue such rejuvenation, CoolGuy2022 explicitly identified it as the day he gained access to health benefits through his job, showing how material resource access influenced what activists considered possible for their wellness. However, it is important to note that while gaining access to paid care services was a gateway to prioritizing self-care for Coolguy2022, all participants engaged in self-care practices beyond those behind a paywall, many of which they even found to be fulfilling in novel ways.

### **Restorative Self-care**

The solution to continuous burnout lies in a restorative form of self-care that propels participants toward the life they want to be living and strengthens their ability to continue the good fight. This is the second form of self-care and the final stage of the self-care development process. These liberatory care practices showcase how the activists' values of justice and equity underpin their views of wellness. I refer to this as the "restorative" self-care stage because it restores a sense of well-being that has been taken from the participant's community through years of oppression. The participant is not returning to a state of wellness they have experienced before but actively developing a *new* mode of living while grappling with mainstream cultural meanings of equity and wellness<sup>7</sup>. These practices take shape in two substages: opening new doors and exercising values on yourself.

### ***Opening New Doors***

This first substage is a turning point in which participants developed transformative strategies that built a foundation for behavioral change. These strategies intervened at the level of

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<sup>7</sup> For a tangential exploration into the relationship between happiness and social oppression, see *The Promise of Happiness*. In this book, Sara Ahmed (2010) explores how attaining ideals of happiness requires conformity to oppression, as well as how those who exist in opposition to oppressive structures are so often portrayed as unhappy, evidenced by tropes such as "the angry black woman," the "melancholic migrant," and the "unhappy queer."

the participant's beliefs and attitudes, wherein they "developed a foundation of how [they] should thinking about problems" (Shashi). Re-interpretation of one's social position, what it means to be a *good* activist, and how one should regard the self were key steps to restoring a level of wellness viewed as equal to non-marginalized peers. Participants began viewing their past experiences in a new light, and re-assessing their values in context of these experiences. The substage includes perspective transformations concurrently happening in three areas: prioritizing self-acceptance, embracing cultural complexity, and unlearning/relearning.

**Prioritizing Self-Acceptance.** To ensure these new self-care practices centered on their own wellness, participants needed to learn how and when to put themselves first without guilt or discomfort. Learning to prioritize their own care, accept themselves graciously, and build their own confidence were viewed as necessary skills to support self-care. Recognizing that self-care can be "hard to prioritize when there's a sea of all these stressors" (Norah), participants conscientiously worked toward "empowerment and self-acceptance" (Norah). A sense of empowerment was achieved through positive self-talk (mindfully replacing negative or hateful thoughts about yourself with positive or kind thoughts), affirmations (stating aloud positive declarations about the self), and blocking out "me time" (Ramona) specifically for self-focused activities. Participants were motivated to move toward this place of self-acceptance through their values of equity, both in terms of seeing themselves as deserving the same as those they help, and diminishing the authority of those who minimize them. When discussing his motivation to take his self-worth seriously, CoolGuy2022 said:

So like, people come to me all the time to solve all kinds of problems. And I'm always like trying to take care of it and trying to calm people down and tell them it'll all work

out. Don't worry, blah blah blah. But you can do that and never do it for yourself. It's true.

You can. You can be taking care of everyone and never, ever take care of yourself.

The discrepancy he identifies in extending care to others but not himself is problematic because it enforces imbalanced relationships and therefore conflicts with his value of equity. This value of equity worked in the other direction for Camilla, who used it to esteem herself as equal to those who had previously held power over her, saying,

I feel we all have felt like have the experience when someone's tried to minimize like, I don't know, make you feel little. [...] And then I guess we all get into a point where we're aware like, "No", you know, like, no one has the right to take my power I have in myself.

By affirming their own importance, participants began to conceive of themselves as worthy recipients of their own care.

**Embracing Cultural Complexity.** Self-acceptance necessarily means accepting all dimensions of yourself, including marginalized ones. While the *Belonging* stage of the process reflected Turner's (1991) theory of the ritual process, the participants exit liminality in this stage not by rejoining their original structure in a new position (as Turner's theory assumes) but by affirming their resistance to the oppressive constructions of race and nationality. By embodying an identity that challenges the boundaries of racial and national identity, the participants viewed themselves in a new, more complex way that affirmed their social justice values.

During previous stages, some participants employed a dualistic cultural persona, treating their racial identity as something split from their Saskatchewan identity. However, by this point of the process, participants were reconciling these two identities into a single, nuanced personhood through retrospective examinations of their interpersonal experiences as well as of

their own self-perceptions. Norah recalled learning to celebrate the marginalized parts of herself, saying:

I've always felt like I've had two different personalities. My own true personality and then the personality I have played in society to be accepted and to be perceived as non-threatening, non non standing out, just a very submissive, passive person that doesn't draw attention to themselves and doesn't speak. And what I have been doing now is reconciling those two personalities and trying to be less of a facade.

While Norah embraced her identity by striving for a “true” synthesized self that embodied multiplicity, Jebunnessa asked more contextually dependent questions after moving to Saskatoon and beginning her decolonial education, such as “Who am I here in this land?” and “What is my social positionality here?” By staying securely connected to their heritage through cultural practices, visiting their home countries, or maintaining connections with family and friends, participants had a foundation on which to develop a contextually fluid positionality while still “knowing where [they] are from” (Camilla) and being comfortably “from two places” (Camilla).

The activists’ experiences in making intercultural relationships and participating in cultural events also supported their security in a culturally complex identity. Such diverse friendships and celebrations of cultural diversity affirmed the participants’ values of diversity and social justice in the community sphere. After having such positive intercultural experiences, participants realized that their own experiences of isolation and dislocation were shared with other newcomers who were “living the same experience” (Camilla), and that “our Indigenous brothers and sisters also face the similar kind of oppression” (Camilla). Helpfully, this realization aligned with their values of solidarity and the power of uniting over a “shared sense of goal” (Ramona). Jebunnessa recognized this relationality in the group sessions, saying,

Also the way you have created your conversation circle today. I mean, I'm super excited that I got connected with this fellow people and I honestly like you all of you are my people. Right? We belong to the same interest and same fight that we have been doing. Thus, the culturally complex identity developed at this stage of the process helped participants locate themselves within Saskatoon and establish a clear concept of self from which they built self-care practices.

**Unlearning/Relearning.** The meanings associated with their self-worth and cultural identity were not the only ones the participants redefined. They also reconceptualized their meanings of productivity and strength, especially how these concepts applied to their activist work. It is important to mention that the interviews did not explore how the participants came to hold these values or the social worlds from which they were constructed. Yet, the qualities the participants sought to adopt contradicted their ideas of productivity and strength. This involved unlearning the meanings on which their activism pivoted in the past, then relearning new meanings and ways of being a “good” activist. While unpacking “box[es] in the corner of my mind that I just never open up” (Norah), the activists welcomed new perspectives from trusted sources.

Although items like self-development books and education were mentioned, all participants showed a preference for consulting with therapists or confidantes “who sufficiently understand the issue ” (Ramona). Here, “consulting” emphasizes receiving an opinion or guidance suggestions from a trusted peer, as opposed to “confiding” outlined in previous stages, which emphasizes recounting experiences in an authentic, unfiltered way, with less expectation for help. While some participants found support with a therapist, others found support through peers and loved ones. I found the participant’s description of confidantes resonated with

Mattingly's (2014) conceptualization of the role of the friend in moral transformation. Mattingly (2014) describes friends as those who enable one's "reflective self-consideration" through conversation, and that "one encounters oneself and one's way of life in a questioning way through conversation" (p. 90).

Through consultation with these "friends", participants were challenged to think about their activism in new ways. They were tasked with thinking more creatively about their strategies, noting that activism requires one "to be a creative cook who needs to know how to create new, new recipes and new new food" (Jebunnessa). For example, Camilla recognized that the strategies she used in the past were risky, so rather than dealing with the anxiety associated with those strategies, she began to consider less risky direct actions. Participants also began thinking about their activist operations differently. As discussed in previous stages, the disappointment felt after not meeting goals was a large factor contributing to burnout. Participants addressed this disappointment by making peace with not meeting these goals. To combat productivity pressure, participants highlighted learning patience to temper their expectations that their efforts result in immediate social change. Several participants reconceptualized the scope of their efforts, deciding to focus on local needs where they could more directly intervene with positive outcomes rather than expecting broader, more systemic change.

To combat the pressure to be "strong" by not engaging in self-care, activists redefined the meaning of "strong" by allowing themselves vulnerability. Shashi noted that "learning how to be vulnerable" and not being expected to be "resilient all the time" was something she wanted to see more of in activism. Permission to be vulnerable paved the way for participants to evaluate and honor the limits of their own energy capacity. They were also able to extend this respect for



capacity to fellow activists; the lack of dedication they saw in other activists was now viewed empathetically as a need for rest. Interestingly, their views of strength were also enriched with ideas about resilience. While recognizing that the harm being done to her community needs to be addressed, Ramona also acknowledged strength in the face of adversity, saying:

At the same time, like in spite of all of this look at how I look at how we're doing, look at how we're thriving, look at how we're resisting. Yeah, look at the good that we're doing within our communities, for ourselves, y'all are not trying to help us so like we're trying to help ourselves too like and also kind of celebrate those successes.

By tempering the anger they felt at their community's treatment with the history of their community's resilience, the activists carved out a space where hopefulness could grow, thus combatting another source of burnout.

### *Exercising Values on Yourself*

After realizing that “you can be taking care of everyone and never, ever take care of yourself” (CoolGuy2022), the participants put caring for themselves into practice. Having built a foundation of attitudes and beliefs, the participants pursued restorative self-care behavioral practices, in which they reflected the values they held for their community onto themselves. I described this stage as “exercising” values on yourself because like strengthening a muscle, the practices were not always comfortable, and required consistency to make everyday life easier. Rebecca described the transition to these practices, saying “I’m making conscious efforts [...] So I’m still in a process where it's not coming to me naturally [...] I’m consciously making a new habit.” Despite the difficult adjustment, the participants did continue the practices, as they instilled feelings of joy, authority, confidence, and agency- all qualities they felt they needed to

reclaim. Jebunnessa summarized how determined activists were to persist in their passions despite obstacles, saying:

Actually, it's like, you know, if you ask me that, why do you write a poem? What would answer? So if you are a poet and if you get a pen and paper, it will keep writing. And if you're a singer, you will keep singing. If you cannot sing, it will feel suffocating. Right? So I mean, to come out from that suffocation, what do you do? You will just try to write again. And if someone, you know, grabs your pen and paper, and if they tell you that you cannot, you aren't allowed to write anymore, you wouldn't listen. You will try to find your pen and paper anyhow, and it will keep writing.

The activists' self-care practices fell into five categories: grounding yourself, asserting agency, tolerating discomfort, reconnecting with your body, and generating joy.

**Grounding Yourself.** Participants practiced strategies to help them process their experiences and take control of their distress through art and mindfulness, and they described these strategies as helping them feel “grounded” (CoolGuy2022). By centering themselves in the present moment, participants could honour their stressful reactions while making deliberate decisions about handling them. Expressive artistic practices, including journalling, writing poetry or blogs, painting, and photography, helped the participants “make sense of situations” (Rebecca) throughout the creative process. For example, acknowledging that “when you are an immigrant like you often feel dislocated, you often feel out of place”, CoolGuy2022 remembered “how much poetry and that sort of thing used to ground” him. Similarly, when Ramona struggled with the “right” way to express her feelings of marginalization, she used a blog post to articulate these feelings, thus giving her “permission” to be comfortable with complex and unresolved emotions.

Similarly, four participants also utilized mindfulness strategies that helped them become more aware of their thoughts and reactions. Mindfulness has been described as paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 2015), and has been adopted in psychology as “an approach for increasing awareness and responding skillfully to mental processes that contribute to emotional distress” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 230). Using this conceptualization, I found that participants adopted the principles of mindfulness practices, such as being present, being with their thoughts, and checking in with themselves. Camilla, for example, meditated, saying that it helped her “just observe” – rather than react to- the ”fog” of stressful thoughts that came to her. While Camilla explicitly sought out information about mindfulness techniques, other participants who were unaware of mindfulness (at least, as far as they mentioned in the interviews) used similar techniques. When taking time off from work and activism, Rebecca noticed herself still responding to communications. She had to learn to “take time off but properly so that you can actually spend time with yourself” and had to “consciously tell [her]self not to be a part of it. ‘You are present’.” Religion also offered Rebecca some reflective space, but she did not explore these experiences deeply in the interview. These mindfulness and artistic practices created dedicated time and space to process feelings of anger, ostracization, and stress. The grounding process did not necessarily diminish these emotions but put them in perspective. It enabled participants to appreciate these feelings as legitimate responses to a stressful world without ruminating on them.

**Asserting Agency.** A major part of self-care for the activists involved asserting that they were in control of their time and decisions. By adopting principles of intentionality and setting clear boundaries, participants had a sense that they were steering their own ship and had control over the direction of their life. In contrast to the acquiescing strategies used when suppressing

their activist identity, participants selectively participated only in activities that aligned with their values and contributed to their well-being. This meant establishing clear boundaries around employment and activist work expectations, such as declining projects. Participants described “recognizing that I need to not be there” (Ramona) and communicating to peers that “I’m not going to be committed to that time” (Rebecca) as ways to support their boundaries. Participants also re-evaluated where their energy was focused and made deliberate decisions to redistribute their energy toward more fulfilling interests, saying “you have to pick and choose what you want to be part of” (Rebecca). This mentality of *choosing your battles* also extended to arguing with people about politics, saying, “I have learned some time to don’t really speak up too, because some people also don’t want to listen to you” (Camilla). By diminishing their exposure to stressors, participants created space to actively sustain wellness practices. They described resisting the urge to “be a couch potato” (Ramona), opting instead to actively set up daily supports, stay organized, and complete their care rituals. By taking control of their lives this way, the participants blazed their trail and sustained the fight to live their lives on their terms.

**Tolerating Discomfort.** As a stage with liberatory undertones, restorative self-care required participants to be in uncomfortable situations that go against the grain of expectations. Participants had to come to terms with this discomfort to ensure their needs were met. Some discomfort arose around changing self-care habits as activists reflected on their efforts to make new habits, try new roles and activities, and get out of their comfort zone. However, navigating interpersonal discomfort rooted in the participants’ values and racialized identity was more complicated.

Therapist Resmaa Menakem (2017) describes trauma as “all about speed and reflexivity” (p.13), which is why it must be worked through gently and slowly over time. He says this

“requires building a tolerance for bodily and emotional discomfort, and learning to stay present with- rather than trying to flee- that discomfort” (Menakem, 2017, p. 14). Recognizing that they embodied an otherness that was not always welcome, the activists built this tolerance and practiced being present with these feelings in uncomfortable situations. Sometimes this discomfort was created by other people in the room, but activists pushed through it to affirm their values. For example, in her professional life, Ramona recognized that others’ comfort was not her responsibility, saying “I find that when I’m in certain spaces where you know, it’s not for me in the sense that it wasn’t created for me, but I still occupy said space and I can see the discomfort in people’s faces. I have realized that I don’t always have to carry that mental load. Just my being there. My existence in that space itself is resistance.”

Other times, the participants created discomfort when advocating for themselves. Despite the discomfort it brings, Norah begins sessions with a therapist by asking them about their experience working with people of colour. Despite this conversation potentially ending the professional relationship, she found it important to have a therapy space where racial discrimination could be processed, saying,

Part of being more yourself socially is being able to process the discomfort when someone doesn’t like you because that’s going to happen [...] and then actively on the day to day trying, feeling the urge to behave in a certain way that isn’t in keeping with me just to be approved and then dismissing that urge.

By being present with the discomfort that arose around their marginalized identity, the participants prioritized their values and themselves over the expectations of others.

**Reconnecting with Your Body.** Reclaiming mental health did not preclude reclaiming physical health. Participants framed physical activity as being interconnected with their mental

health. Resmaa Menakem (2017) discusses the importance of learning to settle the body to connect with those around you and foster compassion toward yourself. In a similar vein, participants described several ways they “learned to listen to [their] body” (Shashi) to find mental peace. Higher-intensity activities such as kickboxing, running, and strength exercising were explicitly used to process anger and intense emotions. Ramona reflected on the role of running in her mental health, saying, “I’m very I’m very grateful to my body because even when my mind sometimes doesn’t, always my heart doesn’t know what she wants. My body’s kind of like kind of almost has a mind of its own.” In contrast, slower, more relaxing activities such as going for a walk, practicing yoga, and getting a massage were used to slow down and find a sense of connection with the body. For CoolGuy2022, the mind and body were necessarily interconnected, as he reflected; “I’m not sure that I know so many ways of relaxing my mind without engaging my body.” Physically engaging the body thus enabled participants’ abstracted concerns to shrink behind the more immediate physical experience.

**Generating Joy.** Part of thriving for participants meant no longer being immobilized by hopelessness. Therefore, the restorative self-care stage needed to incorporate strategies to keep the participants from feeling like their fight was a lost cause and “keep the initiative alive” (Jebunnessa). Rebecca acknowledged that with environmental activism especially, “the part where it’s really important is to not get exhausted so because like not all the results come out right away.” To combat this hopelessness, participants deliberately generated joyful experiences. At a community level, these activities included putting together events that celebrated the accomplishments of the organization. In their private lives, the participants nurtured their passions by doing the activities they enjoy, ranging from spending time in nature, playing board games and video games with friends, enjoying music, or even simply savoring a beverage such

as tea or a cocktail. Notably, joyfulness was not used as a band-aid to soothe the effects of stress but as a consistent practice to prevent the hopelessness that contributed to burnout. Ramona noticed that when the everyday “rituals of taking care of yourself” were interrupted, burnout began to creep in: “When that happens, my body doesn’t feel good. I don’t feel good. So I’m like, OK, well, we know that this is not sustainable.” She interpreted “not feeling good” not as a need to seek temporary good feelings, but as an indicator that she needed a more constant approach to care. Such practices began from a place of pleasure, as Camilla notes she “just was doing it because it made [her] feel good”, but through mindfully recognizing how joy helped sustain their passions, the participants made intentional, long-term habits of their joyful practices.

## **Discussion**

### **Summary of Analysis**

My thesis theorizes how racialized activists employ notions of self-preservation and valued living to develop emotionally complex care practices. After initial iterations of refining their activist values (which include equity, social justice, environmental protection, decolonization, anti-racism, and feminism), participants employed these values to courageously find community on unfamiliar land or during unprecedented times. With their communities, they initiated projects aimed at empowering local underserved populations through gatherings, education, and service work, simultaneously receiving care from community members through recognition, appreciation, and support.

The participants brought their values to life in their social worlds, but at a cost. The stress of resisting such leviathan systems of power brought them to a breaking point; they were too burnt out to continue the fight. Rather than abandon valued living, participants exercised what

Audre Lorde (1988) might describe as “self-preservation,” using protective and restorative self-care strategies. Recognizing the limits of their capacity due to burnout, participants used protective self-care to intentionally avoid further harm, which included temporarily pulling away from the activities in which they were so deeply invested, thus making space to recoup. After regaining capacity, participants worked toward building long-term self-preservation in the form of restorative self-care. Grounded in self-acceptance, restorative self-care practices signalled a return to valued living in which participants exercised activist values on themselves, thereby embodying their resistance through self-preservation. Throughout this process, participants demonstrated a strong sense of self and the will to preserve that self in the face of adversity.

Our (my and the participants’) grounded theory builds upon previous literature on the relationship between activism and well-being by looking at how this relationship moves throughout time. While previous research has shown that well-being was promoted by activists living in accordance with their values (Conlin et al., 2020; Fingerhut & Hardy, 2020; Grabe, 2012; Rotosky et al., 2015), the present study expands upon how activists employ these values in the long-term promotion of well-being. The stage *Participating in Community Care* resonates with previous research showing the well-being promotion effects of being part of a community (Dutt, 2018) and of being involved in local empowerment groups (Arce et al., 2020; Gilster, 2021; Taurini et al., 2017; Vindhya, 2012), and further demonstrates how activists move between receiving and providing care to their communities. The *Reaching Exhaustion* stage reflects previous evidence that activist burnout is caused by anxiety (Hope et al., 2020; Santos & VanDaalen, 2018) and feelings of hopelessness and disillusionment (Gorski & Chen, 2015; Pines, 1994) while providing additional insights on how activists move beyond this stage. Despite consistencies with existing literature, the theory also diverges from previous findings by



considering care as a part of the relationship between activism and well-being. The insights provided by this process-oriented, qualitative study challenge existing consumerist conceptualizations of self-care and point toward a need for self-care to be reclaimed from the market.

### **Decommodifying Self-care to Promote Activist Wellness**

The insights from this analysis of racialized activist care practices support the redefinition of self-care from a neat package sold off a capitalist shelf to a self-constructed experience of value-based living. Previous studies have compartmentalized activism into stressful and joyful dimensions (Aceros et al., 2021; Bockting et al., 2020; Gaardner, 2008; Harré et al., 2009; Ollivier et al., 2006; Sohr, 2001), calling for mitigation of the stressful ones. In contrast, my thesis study found that activist work was *simultaneously* stressful (in that it required confronting suffering) and joyful (in that it addressed that suffering). Yet, the values-affirming quality of the work motivated activists to continue. To uphold this quality, activists also emphasized performing their work in a values-affirming (that is, ethical and just) way. However, when self-care is perceived as contradicting activist values, this philosophy can prevent self-care and contribute to stress. “Martyr syndrome” was identified as the “culture that leads activists to believe that self-care is an indulgence, a marker of privilege that thereby discourages activists from seeking ways to sustain themselves” (Gorski, 2015, p. 707). The self-care practiced by activists in the present study starkly contrasts the conceptualization of self-care as “indulgence.” Yet, it is essential to recognize that the view of self-care as a luxury accurately reflects its marketing as a commodity.

The associations between self-care and luxury, privilege, and extravagance are deliberately promoted by those who profit from selling self-care as a highly demanded product.

For example, self-care influencer vloggers on YouTube were found to present self-care as essential to wellness, but only attainable through the consumption of wellness products and the maintenance of an expensive lifestyle (Knowles, 2020). This construction of self-care contributes to the perception that self-care is barred by a paywall. For example, lack of money and time were the most frequently reported barriers to self-care by psychology graduate students (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012), notably both resources affected by low class status. Because progressive activists tend to be conscientious of class inequities, these perceived barriers additionally frame self-care as a practice of the immoral wealthy class. This assumption of self-care as a commodity produces the martyr syndrome that discourages activists from such “luxury”. However, the activists in the present study demonstrated an alternative, liberatory conceptualization of self-care that refuses commodification. Because of its inability to be standardized, the centrality of community, and its political contextualization, this decommodified self-care has the potential to counteract martyr syndrome by showcasing how self-care can align with activist values.

### ***Self-care is not standardized***

Activists can avoid the standardized approach to self-care by grounding their care practices in personal values. Despite many self-care suggestions being presented as a standard “shopping list” of activities (e.g., Pakenham, 2015, p. 407) around which people can orient their lifestyles, evidence suggests that there is no singular “right” way to do self-care. A meta-analysis of self-care studies found no specific type of self-care activity related to efficacy (Colman et al., 2016). Nonetheless, the standardized approach has similarly been adopted by self-care vendors because standardized products are easier to mass produce and lend themselves to higher profit margins. Self-care practices that advertise themselves as “one-size-fits-all” can thus be marketed to larger audiences.

The results of the present study, however, show that effective self-care strategies are personalized rather than standardized. Rather than reviewing a list of market-approved self-care activities, the present study used a process-oriented approach to theorize a path through which racialized activists can develop their own personalized care practices. This shows that values were an essential part of building meaningful care practices. Activists considered how their values aligned with their actions throughout the process, from *Prioritizing Values* when choosing people with whom they performed community-care to *Aspiring to Thrive* toward restorative self-care. The study's process-oriented approach also provided insights on how activist responses to burnout unfold over time. While previous studies warned of burnout causing activists to leave their movements (Mannarini & Talo, 2011; Nepstad, 2004; Sheldon et al., 2016), the present study found that activists only withdraw from movements *temporarily*. Motivated by a desire for valued living, participants withdrew from activism as part of a framework of protective solutions that allowed them to recover from burnout and return to activism later. This drive for valued living propelled participants through the stages of care toward self-care strategies that they found most acceptable and sustainable. The resulting theory shows how self-care is grounded in personal values, developed over time, and adjusted according to context changes, making self-care difficult to distill into a "shopping list" and advertise to a mass audience.

***Self-care is not for individual sale***

Participants expressed self-care through their personal values, but these values and associated practices were first grounded in community. In contrast, much of the research on self-care describes it as an individual responsibility (Barnett & Cooper, 2009; Gosnell et al., 2021; Isik et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2021; Myers et al., 2012; Pyles et al., 2021; Riley, 2003; Snyder, 2020). This perception contributes to the a view of self-care as a product for

individual consumption and an act performed independently from larger care networks. Such models of self-care promote extreme self-reliance and false perfectionisms, telling the consumer that she is the only one who can offer herself care. This may partially reflect her reality; most participants described the lack of institutional support for personal wellness, characterizing their workplaces as more extractive than beneficial to their well-being. However, the present study challenges the individualized self-care paradigm by exploring care dynamics at both community and individual levels.

For racialized activists in this study, community care proved to be the roots from which self-care blossomed. All participants took part in their communities' mutual care systems before establishing their own self-care practices. In fact, the fear of no longer having the energy to care for others or be cared for by others informed the *Aspiring to Thrive* stage and motivated participants to begin self-care. Individual care practices emerged from community care and were contextualized within frames of social responsibility. Participants needed to first see themselves as part of a larger movement toward a future they believed in. Then, self-care became an essential part of caring for the movement. When wellness is no longer disconnected from community and the consumer is no longer the only one who can offer herself care, self-care products are rendered obsolete.

### ***Self-care is not apolitical***

In an economy that encourages hyper-productivity at the expense of wellness, self-care (as self-preservation) is an act of resistance, and resisting the mainstream is, by definition, not easy (Lorde, 1988). In the present study, self-care practices were developed in relation to the activists' connection to power, to their value frameworks, and to community care systems that are also embedded in power hierarchies. Acutely aware of the politics of inequity and

assimilation they faced, the activists of this study considered how the care they performed positioned them in relation to these politics. They combatted unsustainable and unjust government decisions through community service, responded to the effects of inequities in their own lives with protective self-care, and resisted the harsh effects of marginalization through restorative self-care. Notably, these practices did not come easily.

The politicized self-care practices demonstrated by participants did not revolve around “feeling good” in the moment, which contradicts many academic definitions of well-being, and is consistent with recent claims that soothing and self-care are not interchangeable and that self-care is not always a pleasant practice (Campoli & Cummings, under review). Previous works measured activist well-being based on the presence of positive cognitions, high life satisfaction, positive emotions, or high positive affect combined with low negative affect, low depressive symptoms, or few negative experiences (Ballard et al., 2020; Conlin et al., 2020; Dwyer et al., 2019; Eiroa-Orosa & Lomascolo, 2018; Foster, 2019; Gilster, 2012). This conceptualization of well-being is momentary and ignores the process of reaching the positive emotions associated with living well.

The self-care practices not “feeling good” also contradict the idea behind many self-care products. Candles, bath accessories, sweet treats, skin care, and vitamins locate the universal body as the primary site of self-care. This conceptualization of self-care bypasses the various political realities that people inhabit and allows the product to be presented as universally applicable. Through the body, these products promise sensations of relaxation and pleasure for an immediate soothing effect. However, the path activists took to develop self-care practices was not a straight shortcut to pleasure (in fact, pleasure was not even the destination), but a longer series of arduous twists and turns.

Although reconnecting with the body was one dimension of restorative self-care, participants' overall self-care development focused more on the teleological self as it navigates a world of intersecting oppressions over time. Sustainable self-care practices pivoted on long-term, challenging, and calculated decisions. Activists weighed the risks and benefits to their own wellness, sometimes making demanding choices such as turning away from enjoyable activities, putting themselves in uncomfortable situations, mustering the courage to advocate for themselves, and resisting power dynamics. Although difficult in the moment, these decisions ultimately resulted in participating activists living the life they want to live by honoring their values. While the racialized activists interviewed for this study were adept at articulating how they performed care under hierarchies including white supremacy and citizenship regimes, political aspects of care apply to anyone under ubiquitous hierarchical systems such as patriarchy, class disparity, and heteronormativity, who must consider safety and risk of harm as part of their self-care development.

### **Future Directions and Recommendations**

Our theory shines a new light on self-care by using a process-oriented, qualitative approach to explore the impact of one's values, community, and political context on their care practices. I analyzed the data using constant comparison and theoretical sensitivity to ensure reliability and validity, and the participants verified the transcripts and analysis iteratively throughout the research process. Despite its contributions to the current psychological literature, the study has limitations that can be addressed by future research.

First, participatory research comes with its own limitations. Although the experiential distance between researcher and participants was minimized (Redman-McLaren & Mills, 2015) by my being part of the community, the study faced issues initiating community action.

Participation in later stages of the research lowered over time, and relationship-building processes were impeded by the barriers of virtual-conferencing due to concerns about COVID-19 safety. Additionally, grassroots activism and academic research operate at different speeds. By the time I finished analyzing and writing the thesis, the need for care-focused organizing and the spaces where it could thrive had changed in shape, leadership, and direction. Future efforts toward implementing care-focused actions from this work are possible, but will need to be adapted to the community's specific needs and how they have evolved since the beginning of this study.

Second, the study was limited by the amount of time allotted. A longer study would allow for the group sessions to be spaced further apart, which may work better for participants with busy schedules. More time could also be spent on recruiting. Third, during the research design phase, future studies can consider the difficulties participants experience with migration. While the focus of this study was broadly on people of colour, most participants were newcomers to Saskatoon, which was not accounted for in the design and was therefore not specifically addressed in interviews. Future studies can interpret self-care in the context of migration experiences more rigorously. Fourth, this study uses qualitative methods to deeply analyze the meanings underlying care practice development, but quantitative studies that utilize generalizable analysis can provide insights into the broad patterns of care practices among different populations of activists.

Finally, as a racialized, progressive activist, I hold a position that yields a specific interpretive lens. While situated perspectives are a critical feature of qualitative research, it is worth mentioning that future qualitative research conducted by somebody outside of the

racialized activist community, or with conservative or non-racialized activists might yield different interpretations that can enrich the current analysis.

Despite these limitations, this theory has deepened our understanding of how racialized activists develop care practices and has implications for progressive activist movements. The work outlines a path for integrating one's own activist values with their preferred self-care strategies. At the moment, through the analysis of this study, activists can use the theory to reposition self-care as an avenue toward personal and community empowerment. We plan to implement this recommendation in the Saskatoon community. In our most recent meeting, the participants of this study have decided the results should be shared and made public in activist circles. Together, we have laid out plans to first conduct a series of workshops sharing the theory, including a panel for the participants to field questions about their care practices. Then, we will create accessible groups in online spaces for the ongoing discussion of empowering self-care and for mutual support among progressive activists. We hope that our theory of care practice development will stimulate discussion and inspire fellow activists to build their own ways of caring for themselves.

### **Epilogue**

“What can we do to be okay?” was the question that thrust me into this project. Since then, I have spent hundreds of hours poring over the previous research, interviews, and lessons from civil rights leaders. But the answer feels like it's been sitting in front of us the entire time. To “be okay,” participants were simply and defiantly *themselves*. Through this work, I was struck by how bravely local activists fought for a brighter future. Yet, with graceful resilience, they grew a new kind of love for themselves and their people. As I continue into the community engagement portions of this project, I am inspired to do the same.



I define myself as a “diasporic” person, but that word has, for me, always been underpinned by “perpetual displacement.” No matter where I was in the world, from Trinidad, to the US, to Kuwait, I felt a sense of dislocation. It was this sense of not belonging that drove me to learn about culture, racism, and the history of colonialism. I learned that my ancestors faced the British colonization of India. With no opportunities in India and no intention of returning, they became indentured servants, working the sugar cane plantations in Trinidad under British rule. I regret never asking my great-grandparents what it was like to work on the plantations, but from the stories I’ve heard, they had hard lives. In Kuwait, I learned how many South Asian people, with no opportunities and no intention of returning, had migrated only to be underpaid for their work. They, too, had hard lives. I saw how displacement traumatizes and started working toward a future where my people could live well. Problems arose when I started thinking our wellness was *only* possible in the distant future.

This project has shown me that, although it takes practice and skill, wellness is possible right now. It grows from the richness of our heritage and the people who share our values. One participant talked about being cared for during childhood:

When you're a kid there's always someone asking, like, “Have you done this? Have you done that?” Like if you are sick, “are you taking your medication? Have you eaten yet?” But when you're an adult, that's a completely different thing. Like, you have to take care of yourself. (CoolGuy2022).

Thinking back to my childhood, I remember the strong Caribbean women that filled my belly with good food and my heart with a stern kind of love, and I know what care looks like. When my mother taught me to make curry chicken, or when my father taught me about cricket, they

saw the little girl that danced to every song in every Bollywood film we watched together. As an adult, it's now my responsibility to take care of that little girl and make sure she is still dancing.

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