2021

Cultivating calm and stillness at the doctoral level: A collaborative autoethnography

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Recommended Citation

Pentón Herrera, Luis; Trinh, Ethan; and Gómez Portillo, Manuel De Jesús, "Cultivating calm and stillness at the doctoral level: A collaborative autoethnography" (2021). *Middle and Secondary Education Faculty Publications*. 151.
doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2021.1947817

Cultivating calm and stillness at the doctoral level: A collaborative autoethnography

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Abstract

Academia is a stressful environment for students and professors alike. While pursuing a degree, students often experience emotional and psychological distress, which may affect their ability to balance their personal, financial, and professional lives. Similarly, faculty in higher education also experience undesired feelings and emotions such as burnout, stress, fear, insecurity, anxiety, depression, and burnout, connected to their job. Inspired by the work of Brown (2010, 2013), the authors of this article engage in a collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013) to explore the cultivation of calm and stillness as self-care practices at the doctoral level. In this article, we seek to answer the questions, *What does engaging in the practice of cultivating calm and stillness at the doctoral level look like?* and *What are its implications for doctoral students and faculty?* To do this, we first explain wholehearted living as the guiding framework of our inquiry, describe procedures in our method, followed by personal vignettes shedding light on our realities as students and faculty at the doctoral level. We conclude this piece with final thoughts on the lessons learned from our own experiences engaging in calm and stillness during and after writing this collaborative piece, and invite researchers to engage in autoethnographic works for further exploration.

Keywords: collaborative autoethnography, doctoral level, identity exploration, wholehearted living

Introduction

Academia is a stressful environment for professors and students alike. While pursuing a degree, students often experience emotional and psychological distress (Barry et al., 2018; Waight & Giordano, 2018), which may affect their ability to balance their personal, financial, and professional lives (Alexander & Iarovici, 2018). Similar to students, faculty members in higher education also experience "stress, fear, and insecurity as well as anxiety, depression, and burnout" (Lashuel, 2020, p. 2) due to high workloads and expectations of scholarly production. All of these stressors, individually and combined, could compromise faculty and students' life-work balance and make anxiety an inextricable constant of their careers. For this reason, self-care in academia is necessary to achieve inner harmony and remain proactive.

Inspired by the work of Brown (2010, 2013), the authors of this article employ collaborative autoethnography (CAE) (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013) to explore the cultivation of calm and stillness as self-care practices in these difficult times, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, two of us—Trinh and Gómez Portillo—are pursuing doctoral degrees, and one of us—Pentón Herrera—is experiencing burnout due to the increasing demands of his jobs as dissertation core faculty and adjunct faculty at two other higher education institutions. In this space, we come together to reflect on and connect our experiences of how cultivating calm and stillness gives us the strength to continue on the journey ahead.

The purpose of this article is to explore the cultivation of calm and stillness in academia, and more specifically, at the doctoral level[1]. Thus, in this collaborative autoethnography we seek to answer the questions, *What does engaging in the practice of cultivating calm and stillness at the doctoral level look like?* and *What are its implications for doctoral students and faculty?* To answer these questions, we divide

[1] In this article, we use the phrase *doctoral level* to refer uniformly to doctoral students, candidates, and doctoral faculty.

the manuscript into five main sections proceeding this introduction: (1) interpretive framework, (2) methods, (3) introducing ourselves, (4) engaging in calm and stillness, and (5) implications. By exploring these questions, (co)learning becomes a journey—an all-together lifetime journey—rather than separated events. In this wholehearted practice, mindfulness and reflection are essential in helping us make sense of everyday life experiences.

Wholehearted living as an interpretive framework

In this article, we employ wholehearted living (Brown, 2010, 2013) as an overarching interpretive framework (Willis, Jost, & Nilakanta, 2007), to explore our experiences as students and faculty at the doctoral level. More specifically, we focus on the guidepost of cultivating calm and stillness of wholehearted living in this collaboration. As explained by Brown (2010):

> Calm and stillness may sound like the same things, but I learned that they are different and that we need both…Calm [is] creating perspective and mindfulness while managing emotional reactivity… Stillness is…about creating a clearing. It's opening up an emotionally clutter-free space and allowing ourselves to feel and think and dream and question (pp. 106-108).

Calm. Emotions are driven by biological impulses and have a central role in people's lives. Emotions can produce positive thoughts such as calm and peace, or unwanted feelings such as anxiety and depression. As such, the ability to regulate emotions allows individuals to benefit from constructive self-awareness and/or redirect disruptive impulses. "Self-regulation, which is like an ongoing inner conversation" (Goleman, 2015, p. 11), is associated with having emotional intelligence and with being successful (Goleman, 2005). In academia, how students and faculty manage and react to their emotions has a direct impact on their performance, ability to complete tasks, and produce quality work. Therefore, we explore how we engage in mindfulness practices to recognize and self-regulate (Goleman, 2005, 2015) our emotions and work toward achieving calm in this manuscript.

Stillness. Academia is a high-intensity environment for students and professors alike. The combination of firm deadlines, rigorous expectations, and the constant requirement for high-quality academic production often leads to anxiety (Alexander & Iarovici, 2018; Barry et al., 2018; Waight & Giordano, 2018). For doctoral students and faculty, anxiety has been found to have a debilitating effect on overall academic performance (Macher et al., 2012) and can also compromise physical health (Lashuel, 2020). At the same time, at the doctoral level, students and faculty sometimes may feel that stopping, or engaging in stillness, is associated with procrastinating. Thus, students and faculty are often torn between this vicious cycle of feeling anxiety for keeping up with the fast-pace of academia or feeling guilt for choosing to stop and engage in stillness. From a wholehearted living perspective, engaging in different activities to quiet the body and mind is necessary to release unwanted feelings and combat anxiety. In this article, we explore how we negotiate and balance our feelings of anxiety and guilt while engaging in stillness.

Wholehearted living, and more specifically, the guidepost of cultivating calm and stillness (Brown 2010, 2013), offers an interpretive framework to analyze and co-construct the knowledge in our stories. Through our collaborative attempt to make sense of our experiences (Denzin, 1997, 2014), we approach our research questions from multiple perspectives acknowledging that human knowledge is co-constructed (Eisner, 1998) and that interpretive autoethnography is about the authors' life experiences and performances (Denzin, 2014).

Methods

Autoethnography is, in its simplest definition, a study of self—or a self-study (Yazan, 2019a). Reed-Danahay (1997) defines autoethnography as "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (p. 9). In the literature, the process of developing these self-narratives, or reflections, highlight "the process and product of autoethnography as a research method" (CohenMiller, 2020, p. 97) and as a "text" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9). In autoethnography, authors

become storytellers who weave intricate connections "among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation… and then [let] go, hoping … readers … will bring the same careful attention to their words in the context of their own lives" (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 765). Past and recent publications agree that autoethnography is a corrective movement to decolonize ethnography practices (Gannon, 2006), social inquiry (Yazan et al., 2021), and Western academic standards (Trinh, 2021; Trinh & Merino Méndez, 2021; Trinh & Pentón Herrera, 2021). However, critics argue that autoethnography may be narrow in scope because it only tells one story (Denzin, 2014).

With the vision of overcoming possible limitations present in autoethnography, we employ collaborative autoethnography as a method (Chang et al., 2013). The reason for choosing CAE as a method is to diversify the stories, experiences, and data shared as well as to explore the topics of calm and stillness from both individual and communal viewpoints. Through CAE, we collected autobiographical materials in the form of written stories and narratives, visuals, and conversations. Then, we reflected on, analyzed, and interpreted the data individually and collectively to gain a meaningful, deeper understanding of the topics we were exploring (Chang et al., 2013). Following this method, we engaged in critical and emotional self-inquiry, self-reflection, and continuous dialogues to allow ourselves to be inventive, creative, imaginative (Gannon, 2017), and to reflect on our past and present life experiences as an opportunity for self-study (Trinh, 2020; Yazan, 2019a).

Inspired by Hernandez et al. (2015), we divided our process of collecting and analyzing data into four phases. In Phase 1, we conducted continuous virtual conversations via text messages, emails, and meeting platforms such as Zoom and Skype. At this phase, we read the call for proposals for this special issue and explored our realities in academia while keeping in mind Brené Brown's guideposts for wholehearted living. Then, we agreed on focusing on the topic of self-care in academia and identified *cultivating calm and stillness* as the most appropriate guidepost for our collaboration. During Phase 2, we began the process of preliminary data collection by agreeing on a

template in Google Documents and assigned sections to write for each of us. We then began writing individually, shared with the group, and added probing questions in the form of comments or suggestions.

In Phase 3, we engaged in data analysis and interpretation after completing and polishing the sections of *Introducing ourselves* and *Engaging in calm and stillness*. At this phase, we continued to have virtual communication through text messages, emails, and virtual meetings where we talked about the data we had produced individually and analyzed all the data—first individually and then as a group. During the step of data analysis, we identified patterns through open coding and connected emerging themes with available literature. Once an initial draft of the manuscript was completed, in Phase 4, we reviewed our article multiple times individually and as a group until we were all satisfied with the final product.

Introducing ourselves

The three authors of this article are navigating academia in different spaces. Pentón Herrera (he/his/him) completed his Ph.D. in 2018 and currently serves as dissertation core faculty at one institution and as adjunct faculty at two, sometimes three, other institutions. Trinh (they/their/them) is currently a dissertation student at a university on the East coast of the U.S., navigating to balance multiple jobs and responsibilities while finishing a final step of their doctoral journey. Gómez Portillo (he/his/him) is a doctoral student at a medium-sized university in Virginia. He is currently drafting the first chapters of his dissertation and continues to work full-time as an English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) resource teacher in one of the largest school systems in the United States. In the section below, we share how each of us discovered anxiety in academia. We decided to include the section *Discovering anxiety in academia* as part of *Introducing ourselves* because we realized that anxiety was a common theme that connected our experiences at the beginning of our doctoral journeys.

Discovering Anxiety in Academia

Pentón Herrera. The first time I experienced anxiety I could not explain what I was feeling and could not make sense of how my body was reacting to this sensation. At the time, I was a doctoral student, a full-time high school ESOL teacher, and an adjunct professor at different universities. My first anxiety attack occurred while I was talking to a mentor-friend of mine about an article we were writing together (see Pentón Herrera & Toledo-López, 2017) and my body suddenly felt the need to sit down on the floor and I began hyperventilating. I did not have a word to explain what I was experiencing, but I do remember telling my mentor-friend "*this is too much!*". I continued to have similar episodes throughout my doctoral journey as I wrote my dissertation while simultaneously publishing peer-reviewed articles to "get my name out there," as professors would tell me. Sometimes I would try to stop and rest from writing my dissertation or articles, but the sense of guilt overwhelmed me and an inner voice would remind me that I was not producing or that I was not doing anything.

In 2018, I graduated with my Ph.D. and I thought my anxieties and guilt were going to magically disappear; I remember telling myself "*I do not have to worry about my dissertation or publishing anymore*." Soon, I learned that, although I did not have to worry about writing my dissertation, finding a job in higher education required an active publishing agenda at top-tier journals. I realized that, as a *newly-minted* Ph.D., I was competing for university positions with individuals who had graduated many years before me and who had time to get a few publications added to their curriculum vitae. "*How can I compete with them?*" I asked myself in panic; the only possible solution was to build up my curriculum vitae as fast as possible. Thus, I began writing and publishing as much as I possibly could: over 20 peer-reviewed articles, over 10 book chapters, three monographs, and over 12 professional magazine/newsletter articles in only two years. Looking back, I can say that I am proud of my accomplishments, but I do not think this pace of academic production and publication

was a healthy habit. My anxieties have continued to accompany me until this day, as I write this article, an eerie inner-scratching feeling in the lower part of my chest reminds me that all my teaching requirements as a dissertation core faculty, adjunct professor, and writer-researcher-scholar are taking a toll on my mental and physical well-being.

Trinh. I am currently experiencing the same feeling that Pentón Herrera describes above. I remember the first day of my doctoral journey, I took a course called "The philosophy of education." At the time, even though I had been living in the United States for a couple of years, I felt overwhelmed that I would not catch up to my peers. In our course, the professor and classmates were discussing in-depth content that I found myself struggling to understand. I spent multiple nights reading Aristotle, John Dewey, and other philosophers whom I had never heard of in my life. As I read and fell asleep while flipping through the pages, I had self-doubts and asked myself a simple, yet complicated, question, "*Why am I here?*". I was thinking academia was not a place for me—a Vietnamese, accented, immigrant ESOL teacher of color. *Who am I to argue philosophical and deeply-academic Western thoughts?* was another question I asked myself recognizing that I did not have Western background knowledge. Those inquiries continued to haunt me until the end of the course.

The very first time I experienced anxiety, it affected my sleeping habits tremendously. I could not sleep more than three hours per day because I was afraid I would fail the class. I was afraid to be kicked out of the Ph.D. program because I was jobless at the time. What was saving my family and I was a small stipend from a graduate research assistantship I was awarded, which was helping us pay the utility bills, internet, gas, and food. *"Why am I here?"* kept returning back to me over and over again, often pushing me to decide if academia was something I wanted to do in my life. The climax of my anxiety was that I stayed up a whole night and ran away to a mountain very early in the morning. I was climbing to the top of the mountain, trying to calm down my thoughts and anxiety by breathing the fresh and cold morning air while recording myself. I still keep the video

to remind myself of the anxiety I have experienced since I started this doctoral journey. Presently, I continue to suffer from anxiety and panic attacks as I deal with the pressure of publishing academic papers in top-tiered journals to land a faculty job after my Ph.D. graduation.

Gómez Portillo. As the first member of my family to attend college (see Gómez Portillo, 2021), gaining acceptance into a doctoral program was the most rewarding and frightful experience in my life. Although I was beyond excited to start a doctoral program, I had to balance a full-time job in a K-12 institution teaching ESOL, take care of my mother, and complete doctoral-level coursework. One memory that I always recall happened during the first month of my program. At that time, my schedule consisted of teaching during the day, reading assigned coursework for doctoral classes at night, attending classes, and doing homework all day during weekends. I was so busy and stressed that I remember a particular week when I had my first doctoral paper due and I only slept around 10 hours for the entire week. I quickly realized that this type of schedule was killing my morale and energy. Similar to Trinh's experience, one day I stopped and asked myself, *"What am I doing to myself?"* To be honest, I was quickly questioning my decision of working a full-time job while being enrolled in a doctoral program simultaneously. Although I have always dreamt of earning a doctoral degree, I knew that the lifestyle that I was living had to quickly change or I would have to either stop working or quit my doctoral program.

To develop a healthier lifestyle and a peaceful mind, I decided to create a schedule and to keep myself busy by helping around in my community. Although I was still balancing multiple duties throughout the week, volunteering in my community provided me with a sense of purpose in my busy schedule. I recognized that one could cultivate calm and stillness in such a busy and stressful lifestyle by partaking in meaningful experiences. Mentoring English learners (ELs) after school, volunteering during weekends at the local churches, and translating documents for immigrant families in my neighborhood motivated me to not give up and to keep striving for excellence in all

of my doctoral courses. Presently, although I am extremely busy writing my dissertation, I am staying calm and at peace by mentoring students and advocating for immigrant families in my community. The lesson I learned from the start of my doctoral program was that in order to cultivate calm and stillness in one's life, it is important to balance our busy schedules with purposeful experiences.

Engaging in calm and stillness

As we continued to communicate while co-writing this piece, we kept returning back to our interpretive framework and to the topics of calm and stillness in academia. *How do we engage in calm and stillness in academia?* and, *Why did we decide to engage in calm and stillness in the first place?* were two ruminative questions inspiring this next section. To shed more light on these two questions, each of us first starts our individual section with a brief overview of events leading to our engagement with calm and stillness in academia, in our personal lives, and in the community.

Pentón Herrera. *"Luis, that is insane!"*—These were the words of a fellow colleague back in 2018 when we met at a local conference. At the time, we had both recently graduated from our Ph.D. programs at different institutions and we decided to catch up on our experiences and the next steps for our careers. I shared with my colleague that I was doubting how sustainable academia was for me; in that year alone, I had published eight peer-reviewed articles, four professional papers at newsletters or magazines, and I had presented at nine different events. My colleague, shocked, shared with me that one or two peer-reviewed publications and presentations per year were enough. However, from personal experiences, even the "insane"—to quote my colleague—number of publications and presentations I had accomplished in one year was not enough to impress hiring committees at universities. For this reason, I continued to focus on publishing and presenting as much as possible to show hiring committees that I was a *good* candidate for the job—for me, being academically productive translated into never stopping.

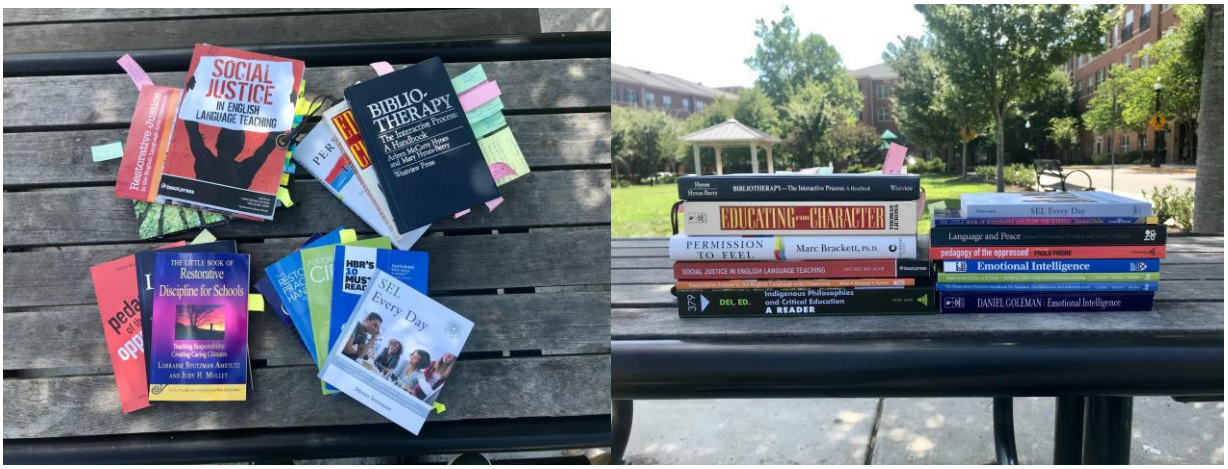
Since that story in 2018, I have been battling to redefine my internalized understanding of being *academically productive* into a healthier, more sustainable definition. Now as a dissertation core faculty and adjunct professor at different institutions, I understand my mental health and emotional well-being can directly affect my students' learning experience (ACE, 2020), my teaching performance (Ilaja & Reyes, 2016), and my physical health (Lashuel, 2020). As an individual, I am aware that being academically productive has taken a toll on my emotional and physical well-being. For this reason, I have begun to change my perspective on how I approach the topic of productivity in academia and how I treat myself as a professor and as a human being. When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the United States at the beginning of 2020, I began to implement daily practices to keep me calm, healthy, resilient, and focused. For example, I have implemented boundaries to control the negative energy, news, and messages coming into my personal space, I stay physically active by running 15-20 miles every week, and I exercise patience, kindness, and compassion toward others and myself.

In addition to daily practices of patience, mindfulness, and compassion, I have also implemented changes in my professional work as a scholar. My recent line of work focusing on social and emotional learning (SEL) (see Pentón Herrera, 2020), restorative practices (see Pentón Herrera & NcNair, 2020), and peace (see McNair & Pentón Herrera, forthcoming) are creating spaces for self-healing and meditation. In many ways, my scholarly works have become a form of bibliotherapy (McCarthy Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986) where I give myself the opportunity to confront, recognize, sort, and evaluate genuine feelings and emotions through reading and writing. Through this self-actualization journey, I have found that reading texts grounded in social justice and equity, as seen in Figure 1, has proven therapeutic and invigorating. At the same time, writing, specifically, has proven to have "a double catalytic effect" (McCarthy Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986, p. 175) involving the steps of "recognition, examination, juxtaposition, …self-application"

(McCarthy Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986, p. 175) and (self) re-evaluation. When I immerse in reading and writing, I give myself the opportunity to be still, mindful, and calm.

Figure 1

Pentón Herrera's Texts



As I continue to engage in these personal and professional practices to center myself, I often wonder, *Can reading and writing truly provide emotional and mental well-being?* I have yet to find a definite answer to this question; however, I can attest to the power that reading and writing are having on my personal and professional well-being. The more I involve myself in reading and writing as a mindful practice of restoration, I discover that the language I am surrounded by does, in fact, contribute to how I feel mentally and emotionally. Thus, immersing myself in texts filled with vocabulary on social justice and equity, and writing about similar topics has produced in me an ideology of growth, hope, and peace. What is more important, I do not feel as much pressure as I used to about writing for publication. I am learning that I am increasingly enjoying the journey (engaging in reading and writing) more so than the product (publishing and presenting). For me, enjoying the process of reading and writing, rather than focusing on the product, has allowed me to achieve a sense of calm.

I must confess, although engaging in bibliotherapy and other mindful practices have proved effective, I still have episodes of extreme mental and emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and stress. As I write this portion of the article, I realize I am struggling to find the right words to convey my message. I have not been able to sleep for a couple of days because of anxiety and mental exhaustion. I have been working my hardest to stay on target for all work-related duties (i.e., class preparation, reviewing doctoral students' dissertation chapters, teaching at various institutions, etc.) and writing engagements while neglecting that, at times, my brain needs a break. I had not thought about the criticality of stopping—of engaging in stillness—until recently. With every passing year, I am learning that finding balance and engaging in calm and stillness are critical practices every scholar should incorporate in their lives. For me, finding balance and engaging in calm and stillness have become part of my identity as a researcher and scholar in academia.

Trinh: *"Con khó thở quá Mẹ ơi!" (I cannot breathe, Mom!)* I am walking in nature with my mom, trying to find an open space to breathe. Today is another day where I find myself getting stuck in attending countless meetings, answering *needed* emails, and fulfilling the role of a *good* team player. The ever-growing list of being a *good* doctoral student, a *good* research assistant takes up so much energy, time, and sacrifice. The list continues to expand and add more items and bullet points into it. Gradually. Heavily. Until it is too heavy for me to breathe.

I, therefore, need a space to breathe.

Slowly.

Calmly.

To allow myself to let the heaviness go.

I am blending my body into the walk

in nature,

into the cold air,

with birds, trees, and chipmunks.

I need to take care of my body,

my mental health,

my breath.

I need to do justice,

think justice,

live justice

for me,

first and foremost.

Academia is a toxic place. I have said it in different places (Trinh, 2019a, 2019b; Trinh & Pentón Herrera, 2021) and I will continue to say it. I want to remind myself of listening to my body and their needs so that I know when I need to take a break in-between tasks, take a walk, have mundane conversations with mom, sit still and do nothing, or simply breathe deeply. I do this so that academia will not squeeze and exhaust me—bodily and mentally. So that I will be able to escape from it, so that I will be able to walk meditatively, think slowly, write carefully, and choose the word(s) carefully to convey my message. For example, I love using the word "body" and "bodily" in this piece, instead of "physical" and "physically". I do this simply because I can feel my body; I can touch them; I can have a dialogue with them so that I will be able to understand what they are trying to say to me. My body is sending me a message, "*Hey there, listen to me, I have a voice, too!"* I have not communicated with my body for too long. I completely ignore my body. Instead, I am chasing so-called 'opportunities,' 'projects,' 'conferences,' among other things. Consequently, I am completely exhausted. I am facing tiredness, frustration, and messiness in my head. I am getting stuck with the questions, *"Where am I headed right now in the doctoral program? What have I done to my body?"* I am bodily and mentally broken, scattered, and undecided. I am in a mess right now.

I ran into a thread on Twitter yesterday that discussed the competitiveness of the job market for graduate students after they finish their doctorate. The thread explored the topic of what is considered a "qualified" doctoral student during and after graduation. After reading the discussion, I asked myself, *"Am I good enough to land a job in academia after graduation?"* As I write these lines, I realize I am getting stuck with service work, with being in multiple places at once, and with attending countless meetings. I, thus, continue to ask myself, *"Whom do I do this work for? Where am I going with this?"* I prioritize work and completely ignore my well-being, mental health, and family issues. I completely ignore myself. Therefore, I need a space to breathe, to walk meditatively, to think slowly so I can continue writing this piece with Pentón Herrera and Gómez Portillo. I *need* to finish it.

……

It has been more than a month since Pentón Herrera provided me with the last comment on this piece. I was too scared to write. I made myself busy with meetings, emails, appointments, COVID-related matters, and work. I had excuses not to work on this article. "I am going to review this paragraph today" was written a month ago in the collaborative Google document we are working on and I never got back to the comment where Pentón Herrera asked me, "Ethan, is this the end of your section?". I do not think I wanted to end my section hanging and undecided, but I still could not find a way to stay calm to write. However, writing is like crafting one's fear into concrete ideas in a paper (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2009); you are facing your fears, you let others see yours so that they can face theirs. I am thus coming back to writing because as I face my fears and struggles, I can generate a dialogue with others. From then on, I hope to find balance, calm, and stillness within myself. However, to find balance, I need to see through imbalance first.

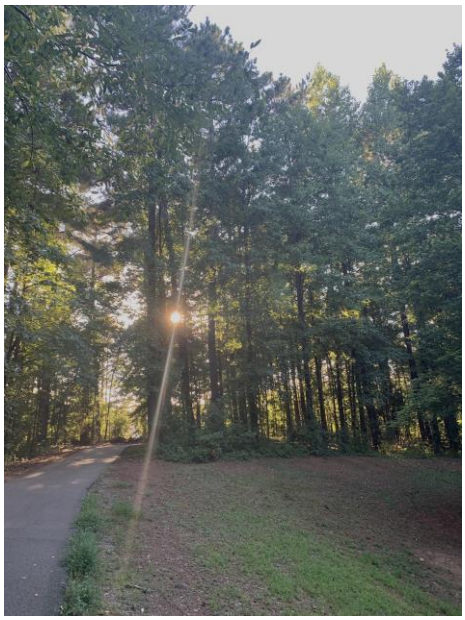
In order to see through imbalance, I "empty" myself (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2009, p. 34). The emptiness for me is to write out the realness of my life in the paper. My writing is reconciled with my life. My life emerges and travels through my writing. For me, the emptiness contains everything

that I consider important in my life and discard the toxicity that harms me bodily and mentally. The emptiness, for me, is support and love from my family; is laughter with Pentón Herrera and Gómez Portillo as we send cheerful memes to each other; is check-in messages with friends to tell them I was thinking about them while I was walking. The emptiness, for me, is leaving the so-called 'responsibilities,' 'academia,' and 'publications,' aside. The emptiness, for me, is pouring the fruitful, meaningful, genuine, important things into my messy life and making them worth living and loving. The emptiness, in stark contrast, contains the fullness of my life.

I am standing still, capturing a moment in the sky, continuing my walk in nature (see Figure 2). I am breathing the cold air, enjoying the freshness of the grass, embracing myself with the warmth of the sunset. I found peace in my heart because I am not walking alone. My friends and family are walking hand-in-hand with me; they are showing me love, courage, empathy, and needed support across spaces and times, which uplifts me to move forward in the doctoral program. For me, peace has been moving within and among friends, family, and nature, and so do my identities as a doctoral student.

Figure 2

Trinh's Walk in Nature



Gómez Portillo: As the first person to attend college in my family, not a single person warned me of the intensity and stress that a doctoral-level program would bring into my life. When I first started my doctoral coursework, I was tired, sleep-deprived, anxious, and overall lonely. House, Neal, and Kolb (2020) reported that first-generation college students tend to have "less support, preparation, and confidence" (p. 158). Indeed, I felt unsupported and ill-prepared when I started my doctoral program. Additionally, I felt a sense of guilt for being the first person to attend college in my family. Covarrubias, Romero, and Trivelli (2015) highlighted that first-generation college students often feel a sense of guilt when they have higher educational levels than their family members. My parents studied up to high school in El Salvador and when I started my doctoral degree, I often felt a sense of guilt. For instance, there was a time when I tried to have a conversation with my mother about how stressed I was feeling because of my doctoral-level course load, and my mother started telling me about how she never got an opportunity to even apply to college. For a while, I felt a deep sense of guilt after that conversation. Although it took time for me

to learn how to cope with the stress, guilt, and loneliness, I learned that volunteering my time around the community delivered me with a sense of calm and stillness.

In contrast to my initial experiences of feeling stressed and anxious when I first started my doctoral-level coursework, I am currently experiencing a better situation. As I am presently writing my dissertation, many would expect me to be experiencing a great deal of stress. Although I do feel the pressure to complete the many deadlines that accompany the crafting and implementation of a dissertation, I am at peace. Volunteering around my community with immigrant students and families has provided me with a sense of satisfaction, balance, and tranquility. Knowing that I am helping my community by volunteering provides me with a sense of gratification, pride, and wholeness to my heart. Balance has also been an important factor contributing to my current state of calm and stillness. At the start of my doctoral-level coursework, I spent every day focusing on my job as a teacher and on my duties as a doctoral student. I failed to find a balance between my duties as a teacher, a doctoral student, and inner peace. Once I started volunteering, there was a sense of balance in my life.

One of the most important volunteering experiences for me has been mentoring ELs after school. As a teacher, I noticed how ELs often needed mentoring and career readiness support. Taking the time to invite career speakers and plan field trips for my ELs provided me with a sense of pride. Figure 3 shows a time when I took after-school club members on their first trip to a local university. Most of the students in the club never planned to attend college and seeing their reactions as we walked around the college campus filled me with joy and inner peace. This feeling intensified after an EL approached me to tell me that as a result of the field trip, he was planning to attend college. Such feelings balanced the stress brought upon by my doctoral-level coursework.

Figure 3

Taking Students on a College Trip

Another volunteering activity that provides me with balance was volunteering on weekends at a local church. Spending time volunteering at the church provided me with a sense of humbleness. Figure 4 shows an occasion where I volunteered to pack books and hygienic supplies for immigrant families in the area. When I came to the United States as a child, my family was poor, and we heavily depended on the services provided by various organizations. I find it fulfilling to spend time during my adult years volunteering at and assisting such organizations that were the only source of food and comfort that my family and I had earlier in my life.

Figure 4

Volunteering at a Local Church

All in all, studying at the doctoral level can be an extremely stressful time for a student. This stress is often amplified for first-generation college students. Based on my personal experiences, it is important for doctoral-level students to find a balance between their personal hobbies and doctoral coursework, so that they engage in calm and stillness practices. When I first started my doctoral program, I was only focusing on coursework and was failing to acknowledge my personal needs and interests. Volunteering and giving back to my community while working on my dissertation has provided balance and a sense of calm and stillness. By finding balance, my identity as a doctoral student has been reshaped and reconstructed.

Implications

As read in the previous section, calm and stillness are situational and, thus, affected by the unique characteristics and conditions doctoral students and faculty are experiencing. The experiences highlighted by us in this paper invite further exploration of several topics; however, because of word limits, we chose to focus on the most salient themes we identified for this CAE at the micro, meso, and macro levels. At the micro level, the importance of self-exploration is emphasized. At the meso level, the unique identities of each individual at the doctoral level are important to consider. At the macro level, program design and individualization are both essential

factors to examine when looking at how doctoral students and faculty engage in calm and stillness throughout their unique journeys.

Micro Level

When looking at the micro level, we found that it is essential for doctoral scholars to engage in self-exploration. Yazan (2019b) highlighted that autoethnographies allow scholars to "construct and reconstruct their fluid understanding between their personal lived experiences and the social cultural structures" (p. 5). By engaging in self-exploration, we were able to explore our lived experiences as doctoral students and faculty and showcased how we engaged in calm and stillness. Pentón Herrera engaged in self-exploration by looking at how his academic production has taken a toll on his physical and mental well-being. By engaging in self-exploration, Pentón Herrera has begun to redefine his view of being *academically productive* into a healthier, more sustainable definition, which has also affected his recent line of research on SEL. Similar to Pentón Herrera, engaging in self-exploration allowed Trinh to discover how peacefulness, calm, and stillness are rooted in the interconnected relationship among friends, family, and nature, leading them to write to face anxiety and stress during the doctoral program. Last, by engaging in self-exploration, Gómez Portillo made a connection between his research interests around community engagement and ways to partake in calm and stillness by volunteering around the community. While engaging in self-exploration, we discovered how our interests affected our research, writing, and the ways in which we engage in calm and stillness at the doctoral level.

An important finding resulting from our extended discussions was the realization that engaging in self-exploration also meant, inadvertently, engaging in identity work. More specifically, we came to realize that our experiences and data contrasted identities as either *fixed* (i.e., already

decided) or *fluid* (i.e., undecided and/or exploring) at the doctoral level. For example, Gómez Portillo arrived at the doctoral level with an established career in K-12 and chose to pursue a doctoral degree as an opportunity for further specialization/advancement. In this sense, Gómez Portillo arrived at his doctoral program with a *fixed* identity of who he is as a professional and what he hopes to achieve after earning his doctoral degree. Conversely, Trinh arrived at the doctoral level undecided on their future professional trajectory and pursued a doctoral degree to start their career in academia. As such, Trinh is still finding their identities as both a scholar and a professional in academia; thus, their identities at the doctoral level remain *fluid*. The fluidity of Trinh's identities is further evidenced by their decision of pursuing a graduate certificate in women's studies during their second year of doctoral studies after becoming interested in the works of Gloria Anzaldúa, which is embedded throughout their work and in this piece.

Lastly, Pentón Herrera's experiences show us that, at the doctoral level, identities can change. For example, Pentón Herrera was an established high school ESOL teacher with a *fixed* identity when he decided to pursue a doctoral degree with the goal of further specializing/advancing in his practice (similar to Gómez Portillo). However, during the second year of his doctoral studies, Pentón Herrera became passionate about research and writing and decided to focus on pursuing a career in academia after earning his doctoral degree. At this point in his career, Pentón Herrera's professional identity shifted from *fixed* (i.e., established high school ESOL teacher seeking a doctoral degree to advance his practice) to *fluid* (i.e., began the process of exploring interests and goals as a researcher and scholar in academia). One last point on this topic is that, based on our experiences, doctoral students who arrive at their doctoral programs with fixed identities (i.e., Gómez Portillo) seem to experience less stress about their future career. On the other hand, doctoral students who

arrive at the doctoral program with fluid identities (i.e., Trinh), or move from fixed to fluid identities during the doctoral journey as Pentón Herrera did, experience added stress, anxiety, and tensions emanating from the uncertainty of career opportunities, and the arduous work associated with developing identities as scholars and professionals in academia.

Meso Level

At the meso level, acknowledging the uniqueness (and unique needs) of each doctoral student became a salient point in our conversations. The type of program a doctoral student is enrolled in has implications not only on their research interests, but also on their work and sources of stress. Gómez Portillo is enrolled in a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program, whereas Trinh is in a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) program and Pentón Herrera completed a Ph.D. For Gómez Portillo, the emphasis of his Ed.D. program is to think about how his research will impact the educational practice of K-12 public schools, whereas for Pentón Herrera and Trinh, the emphasis of their Ph.D. programs are to publish research and to gain employment in higher education.

After much conversation, it became apparent that the source of stress for each of us is directly linked to the type of doctoral degree we chose to pursue. For Pentón Herrera and Trinh, research and academic production for their present and future work are direct sources of stress and anxiety. For Gómez Portillo, there is less pressure to publish, but more stress on the applications and implications of policies and programs on various stakeholders in the educational community. Additionally, the attainment of a practical degree (i.e., Ed.D.) for Gómez Portillo is an almost guarantee of a secure salary and a pathway to a (higher) paying job in K-12. For Pentón Herrera and Trinh, however, the attainment of a Ph.D. degree marks only the beginning of their careers and not having a secure pathway to employment in higher education results in added stress and anxiety. All

in all, it is important to consider the unique characteristics of each doctoral student, including future career path (i.e., K-12 or higher education) as such a process can shed light into possible external sources of stress placed on each individual at the doctoral level.

Macro Level

The last implication highlighted in this paper is related to program design and individualization (i.e., macro level). For the three of us, how the doctoral programs we chose to pursue are designed, the demographics and interests of faculty members in those programs, and opportunities for individualizing our doctoral studies directly affected our experiences as doctoral students and contributed to our engagement in calm and stillness. For example, Gómez Portillo felt that his program allowed him to explore his own research interest and had faculty with similar interests who served as mentors. Such factors provided Gómez Portillo with a sense of belonging and feeling supported. In contrast, Pentón Herrera shared that during his doctoral program he did not receive much mentorship from his professors, and the only faculty member who was indirectly connected to his research interests belonged to a different department in that university. As a result, Pentón Herrera felt alone and unguided in his doctoral journey and in the following years as a new Ph.D.

Two additional salient themes emerging at the macro level are related to diversity and accommodation. On the topic of diversity, we, as immigrants, English learners, and first in our families to pursue a doctoral degree, felt that having faculty members in our doctoral programs who mirror who we are and our interests gives us a sense of inclusion and support. On the point of accommodation, we felt doctoral programs need to take the time to know and understand their students to reduce stress. For example, it is important for institutions to create opportunities in their

curriculum allowing doctoral students to engage in self-exploration throughout their doctoral journeys; to create positive experiences for their doctoral students and faculty during and after the program; and to provide individualized mentorship opportunities to help students during the process of identity exploration and development.

Conclusion

As reminded by Brené Brown, "wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating courage, compassion, and connection... It's going to bed at night and thinking… *I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging*" (2010, p. 1, emphasis in original). Through wholehearted living and, more specifically, through the practice of cultivating calm and stillness, students and faculty can find balance while navigating academia in tumultuous times. As we experience mental struggles in our doctoral programs and in the workplace, we keep in mind that we are brave and we are worthy of love and belonging because we found a community where we can bounce ideas, send support, and help each other grow. This collaborative autoethnography has exposed our vulnerabilities, strengths, and commitments in standing alongside one another, bringing the concept of wholehearted living into our everyday lives, extending support and love across spaces (i.e., we live in different states and work in different institutions, etc.), and exploring our identities as doctoral students and faculty, scholars, and professionals in our fields. Through this collaborative piece, we co-created a caring community where we could escape the heavy workload and responsibilities, and where we could just connect and explore our *selves*.

We would like to end this article by acknowledging that, through this CAE, we learned first-hand that self-exploration is, indeed, directly linked to identity work (Yazan, 2019a). The points we explored in our conversations such as balance, anxiety, and belonging, are very much connected to our personal and professional identities, and influence our (self) perceptions, present and future expectations, and the way we conceptualize our definition of finding balance and peace as doctoral

students and faculty (Yazan, 2018, 2019b; Yazan & Peercy, 2016). As such, our collaborative autoethnography responds to the idea of reconstructing identities (Yazan, 2019b) and of exploring the hidden stories (Pentón Herrera & Trinh, 2021; Trinh & Pentón Herrera, 2021) at the doctoral level. Thus, we invite researchers to continue engaging in collaborative autoethnographic works to further explore how identity affects the cultivation of calm and stillness as we realize that self-exploration is, within itself, an act of self-inquiry and identity development during/after the doctoral journey.

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