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If We Aren't Grieving, We Aren't Healing: A Testimonio on Grief as a Trauma-Informed Practice

Sharim Hannegan-Martinez
University of Michigan

ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore the multifaceted and politicized nature of grief, arguing that grief is a powerful practice for healing from trauma. To situate grief as a missing, yet necessary, ingredient in the trauma-healing nexus I turn to my own experiences, offering a testimonio of my own journey alongside grief, specifically from March to August 2020—the months leading up and in to my first semester as a tenure-track professor. In sharing this testimonio, I challenge the landscape of education which often pathologizes emotionality and decenters the body, particularly for People of Color, and instead offer an example of what learning to be in an embodied relationship to grief looked like for me as a Latina woman, educator, and scholar. I end with extrapolating the practices that nurtured my relationship to grief and how I incorporated them into my pedagogy in order to make space for grief in my classroom.

Keywords: grief, trauma, trauma-informed pedagogies, testimonio, faculty of color, COVID-19

> Grief work is a primary ingredient in the resolution of trauma.
> (Weller, 2015, p. 70)

Trauma, understood as a body's *protective* response to danger and harm (Haines, 2019; Menakem, 2017), is one of the most significant injustices experienced by Children of Color. Research indicates that two thirds of children have experienced a traumatic stressor by the age of 16 (National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative, 2023). While alarmingly high, this data does not account for the ways in which social toxicities such as racism, sexism, poverty, other forms of oppression, and subsequent

microaggressions constitute forms of trauma (e.g., Nadal, 2018), nor does it address that these injuries can also be historical and intergenerational (Duran, 2006; Leary, 2005). While those data for trauma are high, when we expand definitions of trauma to include the above toxins, the trauma young people in general, and young People of Color specifically, experience is much more ubiquitous. Further, research is profusely clear that though trauma is a protective mechanism, if unmetabolized, the trauma can become embedded and lead to long-term health outcomes (e.g., Burke Harris, 2018; van der Kolk, 2014) and contribute to the premature death of Black and Brown people (Marie & Watson, 2020).

In response to this health crisis, over the last decade there has been burgeoning research on social emotional learning and trauma-informed pedagogies and practices in schools (e.g., Alvarez, 2020; Camangian & Cariaga, 2022; Hannegan-Martinez, 2019; Shevrin Venet, 2021; Simmons, 2019). More recently, scholars have begun to also study grief, (e.g., Collins, 2021) as the staggering loss of life related to the global COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a long-necessary conversation about resources to process grief for both teachers and students (e.g., Cariaga, 2023; Everett & Dunn, 2021). While these bodies of scholarship have made important contributions to the field of education and to educational practice at large, they often address these phenomena separately and do little to interrogate the relationship between grief and trauma or to situate grief *as* a trauma-informed and healing practice. As Weller (2015) reminded us, "Trauma *always* carries grief. . . . Grief work is a primary ingredient in the resolution of trauma" (p. 70). Utilizing this framing, it is evident that supporting educators (current and future) to develop grief pedagogies is integral to healing grief *and* trauma, both of which are widely impacting the health and overall well-being of teachers and students. Yet, little to no research in education theorizes the utility of grief in the trauma-healing nexus.

The imminent need to address grief and trauma in classrooms through trauma-informed pedagogies and social emotional learning practices is further thwarted by what Garcia (2019) referred to as a healing gap, "a fissure that separates what we want to teach youth about how to heal and cope and the skills that teachers develop to do the same" (p. 66). Essentially, one of the major hindrances to the effective implementation of these pedagogical praxes is that many teachers are asking young people to do something they have not yet practiced in their own lives. Teachers are expected (and often want to) support the healing and well-being of children, but are themselves unsupported and unwell. I argue that this gap is further complicated and pronounced by the fact that many of the scholars conducting research and teaching on healing have also not engaged in nor embodied their own healing and are therefore insufficiently equipped to train and support teachers in this endeavor. This gap in practice, in embodiment, is one that I know well.

For the last 15 years as both a teacher and a scholar, I have been deeply immersed in trauma-informed education. I have been nationally recognized for my teaching and scholarship and have had documented success in supporting the healing and well-being of young people. Despite this, in 2020, as I was preparing for my first semester as a tenure-track professor, and, like so many others, navigating incalculable trauma and grief in the midst of a global pandemic, I was concerned about being able to meet the needs of my upcoming students. Feeling unprepared and unsupported, I began to

discuss these worries in therapy. It was in the middle of one of our weekly sessions that my therapist paused and asked a question that changed the trajectory of my teaching and scholarship: "Why are you so committed to centering the grief and healing of your students when you so often try to avoid your own grief?"

My therapist's question led me to embark on a journey towards being *in right relationship* to my grief (Cariaga, 2019; Weller, 2015), both for myself and my students. In this paper I share a testimonio of my own journey with grief in the months leading up to my first semester as a tenure-track professor. I return to this time specifically because this moment fundamentally shifted my relationship to grief and thus informed my pedagogy and praxis in ways that I believe are illuminating for other educators. In writing this, I "remember and dismember" my grief (Milstein, 2022, p. 9) as a practice of healing *through* grief to become more "trauma-wise" (Soriano, 2023) as becoming trauma-wise calls on us to create systems for addressing harm *and* to reorganize ourselves and each other towards collective prevention. Becoming more fluent in grief allows us to do both. I then extrapolate some of the lessons I learned about grief and healing that served as the impetus for shifting my pedagogy and practice in order to make space for grief in my classroom. Below, I draw on interdisciplinary scholarship to illuminate the profundity of loss and concretize the social, psychological, physical and spiritual imperative to create classroom spaces that can hold, address, and heal grief.

WHY GRIEF?

The catastrophic loss of life as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic initiated a widespread conversation about grief in education and what professional and pedagogical supports exist in schools, if any, to support educators and students. The data revealed not only staggering rates of loss, but the ways in which loss was experienced disproportionately—with People of Color bearing the burden (Hillis et al., 2021). The reverberations of this loss continue to permeate within schools and, alone, necessitate a focus on grief pedagogies. The alarming rates of grief being reported by children is echoed by teachers. According to the New York Life Foundation (2021), a high percentage of teachers (87%) say they have a student they need to support through loss, and a significant percentage (25%) have *six or more* students they need to support, while only 15% of teachers say they feel prepared to address grief in their classrooms.

While grief, and the above data, is most often understood and relegated to the loss of life, when we explore grief across interdisciplinary scholarship spanning the fields of public health, social epidemiology, education, Ethnic Studies, and Women of Color feminisms, grief becomes more nuanced and extends to account for the *myriad* of losses we experience (e.g., Anzaldúa, 2015; Maté & Maté, 2022; Moules, 1998; Wanganeen, 2014). When discussing grief, Moules (1998) articulated that loss changes people structurally, emotionally, cognitively, socially, and spiritually and that it creates a persistent, evolving, life-long relationship with that loss. Weller (2015) built on this understanding of grief, arguing that there are at least five types of loss we experience: everything we love, we will lose; the places that have not known love; the sorrows of the world; what we expected and did not receive; and ancestral

grief. These definitions and frameworks are instrumental in helping us nuance our understandings of grief, which is paramount given that the above data illuminate the rates of loss children are carrying to school. Further, it is important to note that students are not just bringing trauma and grief to schools, but rather something that schools are doing *to* children—particularly to Children of Color—through pervasive anti-Blackness, racism, and systemic disenfranchisement (Dumas, 2014; Marie & Watson, 2020; Stovall, 2018). All of this contributes to what Love (2016) referred to as *spirit-murdering*, a term that aligns with Wade's (2021) definition of grief as *spiritual death.* When considering these theoretical contributions for framing grief, it is evident that the current numbers accounting for grief are much larger than recorded, particularly for Children of Color who experience systematic multifaceted and multilayered historical and contemporary losses (e.g., Wanganeen, 2014).

There is a pressing need for researchers and educators to more robustly understand grief so that we may better support grieving students, because when grief is ignored or cannot be shared, it can make itself known through physiological and physical symptoms such as depression, anger, anxiety (Wade, 2021; Weller, 2015), and illness (Burke Harris, 2018). The complex multitude of losses—of safety, self, health, loved ones, land, normalcy—requires that teachers be able to facilitate a space or a "container" (Weller, 2015, p. 13), and a process for grieving. However, little education research addresses grief, while other research pathologizes emotion and pain, particularly in relationship to marginalized communities (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Moreover, scarce research exists that addresses the grief of teachers (e.g., Everett & Dunn, 2021), particularly the grief of Teachers of Color who navigate disproportionate forms of trauma and loss via bereavement, systemic racism, and structural violence (Ginwright, 2015) while also having to support their students. This produces a "healing gap" (Garcia, 2019) in which educators are expected to support students through grief and trauma despite not being equipped and supported to heal their own grief and trauma, much less that of their students.

While the above research already situates the urgency of understanding grief, when the aforementioned data on grief *and* trauma are seen in tandem, the need becomes more pronounced—it is then further amplified when understanding grief as a necessary practice for healing from trauma. Weller (2015) explained that we *need* grief in order to heal trauma, and this is because trauma carries the loss of our "essential wholeness" (pp. 69–70). Grief allows for the metabolization and release of trauma—it is an instrument for recognizing, honoring, and mourning loss in order to heal from trauma and work towards a renewed wholeness. In the next section, I share how and why I utilized testimonio to share my journey towards healing and wholeness.

METHODOLOGY

Testimonios are a method and methodology—a process, a pedagogy, and a product. While similar to oral histories or (auto)biographies in narrative (re)telling, they differ in that testimonios explicitly aim to center the subaltern, link personal narratives to larger communal and political landscapes, and are written and shared with the intent of social transformation (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Further, testimonios affirm

lived experience as a form of knowledge, situate the body as a space of wisdom and knowing (e.g., Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981), and seek to disrupt the western notion of the mind/body split. Many testimonio approaches rely on a method in which an activist/ally/community member serves as an interlocutor and records, edits, transcribes, and presents the testimonio of the testimonialista—the person whose narrative is being recorded. Another method of engaging in testimonio, which I utilize in this paper, is when the testimonialista is *both* researcher and participant, documenting their own narrative and situating it within a larger context and conversation (e.g., Burciaga & Tavares, 2006). For Chicanas/Latinas, testimonios have served to share how "our bodies are maps of oppression, of institutional violence and stress, of exclusion, objectification, and abuse" (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 12). Testimonios can also serve to share how our bodies are sites of resistance (Hannegan-Martinez et al., 2022) and healing.

Testimonio's political commitments to embodiment, to centering the subaltern and advocating for social change are aligned with sharing narratives of grief, given the ways in which emotions continue to remain marginalized and often pathologized (Tuck & Yang, 2014), particularly the emotions of People of Color. This becomes more pronounced when discussing the politicized nature of grief within Western and white supremacist cultures seen most evidently through debates around who is allowed to grieve, how we are allowed to grieve, and lastly, who we consider grievable (Butler, 2016). As a Latina scholar and educator sharing my own grief testimonio, I seek to disrupt the mind/body split by centering my bodymindspirit (Calderón et al., 2012) to address and minimize the healing hap (Garcia, 2019) in my own practice, and contribute to the trauma-healing nexus by centering and exploring the utility of grief. Writing about grief in this way both aligns with interdisciplinary scholarship that highlights the healing power of writing and remembrance (e.g., Herman, 1997) *and* by centering the body and emotions, heeds Harrod Buhner's (2022) warning that if we continue to write about grief without *actually* including it, we contribute to disembodiment and a grief-averse culture.

It is for these reasons that I choose to share a testimonio of my journey with grief specifically from March through August of 2020, as I was preparing for my first semester on the tenure-track while inarguably drowning in a sea of what felt like never-ending loss. I return to this period of time, one of the most difficult of my life, for several reasons: (a) This was the moment that I fully committed to studying grief, to understanding its webbed intricacies and connections to trauma; (b) This period of time highlights the nuance and complexity of taking an "apprenticeship with sorrow" (Weller, 2015); and (c) This period forever changed who I am as an educator and informed my pedagogy and praxis in ways that I believe are instructive for other educators.

LEARNING TO HEAL THROUGH GRIEF

I have never struggled to write anything the way that I have this paper—not even my dissertation, which I wrote in the throes of a global pandemic and insurmountable grief. I have done everything that I can to avoid beginning—read novels and poetry and articles, cleaned the kitchen, made cafecito, walked my dog, gone for runs, boxed,

cooked, cleaned my altar, gotten my nails done, answered emails, graded papers. All of these acts have been an attempt to delay the inevitable, or perhaps to buy myself more time to prepare for the inevitable: that this paper will require I pull up a chair and sit face-to-face with my grief, that I dialogue with it, that I visit the graveyard that lays beneath the concave of my chest and place cempasúchil at the foot of every tombstone, of every loss.

Even after years of studying grief, decades of living with it, generations of honoring it, I am still sometimes slow to turn towards it—weary of the ways it will stretch me and leave me untethered. More than that, in this moment I am *exhausted*, my bones brittle and my soul tattered with all that grief has demanded of me in the wake of all I have lost, that *we* have lost. I am utterly fatigued. Resentful. Angry that we must grieve in perpetuity. Still, I choose to engage in the practice of grieving, of honoring our losses because what I *know* about grief is that it is also a gift, a testament to love, and a pathway to healing.

For me, this testimonio begins the first week of March 2020, when I sat beside my glass coffee table—adorned with books, celebratory cigars, and shots of tequila—as I signed my first contract as a university professor. The university was thousands of miles away from everything and everybody I had ever known, in a predominantly white town I never thought I would step foot in. For weeks, I had weighed the decision, terrified of the potential isolation coupled with the demands of a tenure-track position, but ultimately, as a first-generation Latina student, I knew that it was a good opportunity. Moreover, I knew that it was a place I could do meaningful work preparing predominantly white educators to effectively teach a growing population of Black and Brown children. By the time I had gathered around my coffee table to sign the contract, I was excited and looking forward to starting this next chapter of my life. My partner at the time sat next to me while one of my closest friends video-recorded me scribbling my signature onto the momentous page. Little can be heard in the video over the sounds of my friend's (humble) attempt at trumpets, but there I sit in a Nike sweatsuit, with wild curls, gold hoops, and a beaming smile. In photos and videos, I have the unmistakable look of someone who is happy, and had *no* idea how much her life was about to change.

In committing to a tenure-track position, I also committed to finishing my dissertation in the three months left of the quarter. I was writing my dissertation on trauma, healing, and love—specifically looking at love as an intervention and protective barrier to traumatic stressors within the context of the classroom. I wanted to understand how my students and I understood, conceptualized, and practiced this love in the day-to-day. One of the major themes that kept coming up across the portraits I was working on was grief: the overwhelming presence of it, the importance of making space for it, and the role of grief in healing from trauma. Immediately, I began researching grief, marking it as one of the major implications of my dissertation, and the direction of my future work. Little did I know how embodied this research would become—how all-consuming, how utterly urgent and necessary.

One week after signing my contract, the COVID-19 pandemic became rampant and stay-at-home orders spread throughout Los Angeles County, California, and the rest of the country. Overnight, I was sheltering in place, alone, in my one-bedroom apartment, and the future I had just celebrated became tenuous. Like so many others,

in those first few weeks I clung to the idea that this would be a brief interruption to our lives. Even as I waited in hours-long lines to walk into Target, unsure of how close or far to stand from other people, even as I walked through the aisles to find them ransacked and barren—I kept gently reminding myself that it was okay, that it was just a matter of days or weeks before we would be "back to normal." But then one day became one week, became two weeks, became one month, and the cloud of fear and uncertainty was suffocating.

So many people were dying.

One month into sheltering in place, several of my former students texted me that my former student Gabby had died in a tragic car accident. I called her brother, another student of mine, and cried on the phone with him, offering what support I could from 500 miles away. Unsettled by the news and with nowhere to go, I ran my fastest mile and collapsed in an angry fit of tears on the curb of a random cul-de-sac. That week I scribbled furiously in my journal:

Five weeks ago they rang the warning bells
Four weeks ago they closed the border
It isn't a fire but how else do you say the world is on fire?
What other words capture what it means to watch the world you know die?

The world is on fire
or colliding
or crashing
ending
beginning
whatever you want to call it—
and I am alone.
and there is no pretty word for that.

-Excerpts from journal entry, April 2020

I share this excerpt because it serves as an example of how I was intuitively attempting to be in right relationship with my own grief: even immersed in uncertainty and navigating the indescribability of grief, I was seeking to articulate the way that it was impacting me, changing me. I was finding ways to grieve because of and through the aloneness.

In the midst of sorrow and uncertainty, I trudged along while continuing to work on my dissertation, which I was scheduled to turn in early-mid June prior to my dissertation defense. However, on May 25, 2020, the world shifted on its axis again as the country bore witness to the murder of George Floyd. The police—despite damning video evidence—were met largely with impunity. The grief and indignation were palpable, visible in the uprisings that took root. Across the country, thousands of Black people and allies ran to the streets—in the middle of a global pandemic—to

demand justice, to demand the right to live, to breathe, to walk down the street, to *exist*. Together, thousands of people wearing their masks chanted, cried, danced, spray painted, marched, burned sage, and some were even drawn to fire to make their point. These uprisings demanded an end to police brutality and yet, they were largely met with police brutality: with batons, tear gas, tazing, rubber bullets, and cars running over protesters.

On May 28th, mere days after we took to the streets, donning our masks, we found out that the United States had hit a new threshold: 100,000 COVID-19 related deaths (*New York Times*, 2020). The majority of those deaths were of Black and Brown people. In more ways than we could count or conceptualize, this was a moment of trauma. A collective one. A historical one. A racialized one. Everywhere you went, the corresponding rage and grief were palpable. As I struggled to write my dissertation and prepare for the upcoming semester, I could think of nothing else.

All the while, I was still working to support educators who had transitioned to online learning and were struggling to be there for their students in the midst of such trauma, in the midst of their own grief. Despite my research being on trauma and healing and the importance of love, every day the institution of schooling and the project of my dissertation felt less and less important. *How could this project be important in the face of our survival?* I was depressed and aimless, forgetting to eat and unable to sleep, but still, for almost a week after the uprisings began, I woke up, made a café, and sat at my computer at 8:00 A.M. to continue writing, to continue trying to make sense of everything I had learned about love from and alongside the young people I had been privileged enough to teach. And to love.

On June 7th, the loose hold I had on my routine became untenable when I received the news that another one of my former students—Erik—had been brutally murdered by the police the night before. He had been shot at over 60 times while his pregnant girlfriend sat in the car beside him. His execution came in the midst of the continued national uprisings that had been demanding justice for the murder of so many Black people at the hands of the police. That day the dam broke and I sobbed hysterically on the wooden floors of my apartment. In between the chasms of saltwater that escaped me, I called students, parents, former co-workers to tell them of the news, to check in on them, to ask if they needed anything. So many of my students were inaudible behind the wails of loss. I held them as best I could from hundreds of miles away, in the middle of a pandemic that made traveling to them dangerous. I was an endless pit of individual, collective, ancestral grief and rage.

My former co-worker and good friend sat on the phone with me for hours while I wailed. My friends coordinated a group FaceTime and watched me solemnly as I took shot after shot. By the time the sun had begun to prepare itself for rest, I had almost drowned myself in a bottle of tequila. I had still not gotten off my floor. Thus was the way of my father, my tios, and so many of my teachers and mentors—including those whom I was learning about trauma and healing from. So many of my teachers and mentors were wounded healers (Jung, 1951), profound at creating healing communities and classrooms, but who often avoided their own suffering at all costs. Through their lived pedagogies, I was taught to engage in what Menakem (2017) would refer to as a "dirty pain" which is the "pain of avoidance, blame, and denial. When people respond from their most wounded parts . . ." (p. 20).

The morning after Erik was killed, the last threads of my relationship with my partner at the time began to unravel. I was supposed to turn in my dissertation in a matter of days, expected to attend my online "graduation" within two weeks, and I was anything but okay. Everything I was holding was *too much.* I shut down. For days, I could barely eat or sleep under the unbearable weight of grief, of what felt like never-ending loss. What little I ate was only because my friends would send food then force me to eat it on FaceTime, watching me through their own tears. Each chew a labor I did not have enough energy for. In therapy, my therapist would lead me through grief rituals, guide me through practices to come back to the body I kept trying to abandon. Each night I would force myself to bed and toss around violently until the sun made itself known again.

All the while, I continued writing my dissertation and preparing for my graduation—the day that I was supposed to walk the stage and get "hooded" in front of my friends and familia. Instead, I sat on my balcony, and though less significant than all of the other losses, I was furious at *another* thing I felt like I was losing. My community showed up, dropping off posters and flowers, forcing me to put on my cap and gown and walk outside so they could take photos. In my journal, I noted:

> *Today is the day I was supposed to become a doctor, the day I would have graduated with my Ph.D., would have walked the stage and been hooded by my advisor. I have spent the last four years planning this day, envisioning the tacos and the mariachi, my mom crying proudly, my primas drinking, my homegirls and former students dancing. I took a selfie earlier, dressed in my cap and gown and a pair of white Cortez's, kneeling alongside my poster and flowers with my eyes closed—I couldn't stop crying long enough to look at the camera.*
>
> – Excerpt from journal entry, June 2020

Many of my former students also called, texted, sent flowers, asked for photos of me in my "harry potter outfit." One student, Sergio, my play sobrino who I had taught for four consecutive years and was friends with both Gabby and Erik, texted me after seeing a photo of me in my gown, saying the following: "Ohhh wahhhhw / congrats tia / [emoji of celebration] / u should be celebrating / don't cry" and then days later "keep ur head up tia / its gonna get better." My students, who had also experienced so much trauma and were currently in the throes of grief themselves, were sending me such loving celebratory messages. That text from Sergio, and so many others that day, served as transformative reminders of the power of loving community, and that grief and joy can exist. Though the grief and rage felt unbearable, I know now that I survived, that I healed, because of the community that showed up and loved me afloat, loved me back to living.

In the weeks between defending and submitting my dissertation, Sergio was brutally murdered and again/*still* I was distraught. Even now, there are not enough words to communicate the dismay I felt in that moment, that I continue to feel. Meanwhile, I was still expected to begin my faculty position, to begin teaching, in the middle of an ongoing pandemic . . . and it felt like nobody was talking about grief, despite it feeling like the biggest thing in any room (material or virtual) that I was a

part of. I knew that I had a responsibility to create a sacred container (Weller, 2015) for my students, and began fretting about how to do that. Again, my therapist reminded me that if I wanted to support students in their grief, I had to continue journeying alongside my own. And so I began to lean into grief in new and old ways—I made an altar, wrote, engaged in ceremony, spoke to loved ones, cooked, ate, walked to the beach, drank water, spoke to my ancestors, let myself feel *all* of my emotions—the sadness, the endless rage, the unyielding love. These practices did not take the pain away, but hour by hour, day by day, they helped me find enough space in my body for it. These practices, the practices of my ancestors, helped me to find a way to begin tending to my grief, to hold it, to honor it, to be in right relationship to it. This is what Menakem (2017) referred to as "clean pain," when you are able to sit with and learn from painful circumstances. I found that the practices that most tethered me were: naming and embracing my emotions, making space for embodiment, rituals, and being in loving relationship to myself and others. Below, I share the value of these practices and how I incorporated them into my teacher education classroom that first semester as a faculty member.

GRIEF PRACTICES FOR OURSELVES AND OUR STUDENTS

The need to engage in grief practices and create a classroom container strong enough to support grief was a priority given the context in which I would be teaching. I began my first semester as a tenure-track professor in the fall of 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and national uprisings. Many of my mentors have offered the advice that you cannot ask students to do something that you yourself are unwilling to do. Coincidentally, in some ways the "healing gap" (Garcia, 2019) reflects this adage, in which teachers are expected to support students healing through strategies they are often, for a myriad of reasons, not utilizing in their own life. For this reason, while there are *many* practices that can be utilized to center grief in the classroom, in my first semester (and in this paper) I chose to focus on the ones that I practiced in my own life and that were supporting my own healing journey at that time. It was and continues to be my hope that the embodied modeling of these practices serves as exemplars of what is possible in our classrooms.

Naming Grief

I began the semester by explicitly naming that though grief is often relegated to bereavement, that I was grieving, amongst many things, the loss of not being able to be with them [my students] face-to-face. Many students resonated with this sentiment; I shared that I hoped that this was a space where we could talk about our grief, where we could call it by its name, where we could name what we have lost, what we were missing, what we felt and longed for. Naming what we were missing (largely, though not solely, due to the pandemic) allowed us space to also name what we did *not* miss or want to return to (racist teachers, policing of student bodies, etc.). It also allowed us to identify what we did like (no dress code, more accessibility options, more connection and communication with families). What we learned was that communing with grief grants us space to (re)imagine new ways of doing and

being, that it provides us a liminal space to dream up new possibilities and new worlds.

Naming grief and the corresponding emotions (sadness, rage, etc.) also allowed us to practice what others refer to as radical emotional literacy in which we grew both more attuned and more accepting of the gambit of emotions we navigate. Further, it allowed us to stop policing and pathologizing our emotions under the auspices of "good" and "bad" and rather, make space for the information these emotions were teaching us (Wade, 2021). Grief subverts hegemonic inclinations towards pathologizing emotions and is instead a practice of cultivating our wholeness.

Lastly, naming grief also forced us to reckon with the ways that grief is intimately tied to power and privilege. For example, why were Students of Color and I coming to class holding a collective grief over state-sanctioned murders of Black people and People of Color while so many of the white students were coming in unaware and "feeling good?" What did this tell us about grief as a *systemic* phenomenon that required deep interrogation? Moreover, what did it mean to say you cared about/loved your (future) Students of Color and yet did not grieve alongside them? These questions that arose from naming our grief served as an important reminder that who and what we grieve and who is considered grievable is deeply political.

Making Space for Embodiment

Given that trauma happens in the body (Menakem, 2017), the body must also be centered for healing to occur. Epidemiologists explain embodiment as a literal multilevel phenomenon that accounts for the ways in which our bodies hold and tell stories that cannot be divorced from the conditions in which we exist (Krieger, 2005). Women of Color feminists have long critiqued the institution of schooling for separating us from our bodies (Calderón et al., 2012), contributing to what Lama Rad Owens (2020) referred to as "disembodiment," whereby we are conditioned (through institutions like schools) to ignore and pathologize the wisdom we carry in our bodies. Practicing embodiment helps us reorient our relationship to our body, understanding that "the body can become a roadmap to return to ourselves and gain clarity on not just what we are fighting against, but what we truly want" (Cariaga, 2021, p. 387). The body is where we make space for grief. The body is where we heal.

There are many ways to center embodiment in the classroom. We began the semester by drawing on Cariaga's (2021) work on identifying our feelings and subsequent needs to feel safe in class. We also started each class by checking in with ourselves, our bodies, and then each other. Sometimes this is a number, a meme, a reflection, but we always began and ended class with some version of: How is your mind/body/soul/spirit? How are you arriving into this space today? What are you holding/bringing with you? In line with naming our emotions, we asked, "What are you feeling and where are you feeling it?" This part of our routine, our ritual, allowed for a type of attunement (Weller, 2015) to ourselves, our bodies, and one another that was central for building community, self-awareness, and autonomy (Dunn, 2021). It was a practice of prioritizing and (re)connecting to ourselves—of healing something that the institution of schooling has stolen from so many of us, and that has fractured so much of our wholeness, of our ability to feel into grief.

Rituals

Naming grief and making space for embodiment through checking in were some examples of how we engaged in the process of co-creating rituals with one another. Weller (2015) shared: "Ritual is a maintenance practice that offers us the means of tending wounds and sorrows, for offering gratitude, and for reconciling conflicts, thereby allowing our psyche regular periods of release and renewal" (pp. 76–87). Each week, one of the students offered and modeled their individual, ancestral, communal rituals for grief, for celebration, for wellness. This array of practices reflected "our unique patterns of wounding" (Weller, 2015, p. 77). In addition to the previous practices shared, some other rituals we engaged in included breath work, movement, ceremony, art, and altar-making. Because I was working specifically with teacher education candidates who were preparing to teach English Language Arts, we also leaned into writing as ritual, as sacred practice. We utilized writing prompts and assignments to compost emotions (Moses, 2022), honor what we had lost and (re)imagine what was possible. Writing became a ritual of catharsis, release, and manifestation. Writing was part of a pedagogy of healing (Baker-Bell et al., 2017) and sharing our writing became another practice of ritualizing both our vulnerability and commitment to community.

Loving Community

Because we know that trauma and grief live in the body, that love is profoundly healing (e.g., Hannegan-Martinez, 2019, 2023) and healing is an act of communion (hooks, 2000), we sought to build a loving community where we practiced interdependence. As an example of one practice, each class we would make a commitment to love ourselves by tending to our body, to our spirit, to our well-being, to our communities. Some examples of some of the commitments that students shared included drinking water, getting 10 minutes of sun, walking, eating more vegetables, exercising, coloring. For some of us, the goal stayed the same week to week while for others it changed, but every class we committed to tending to ourselves so we could be present for others. Examples of community love commitments included building with the local community, attending community events, and participating in community organizing efforts. Students shared how powerful this closing ritual was, particularly for students whose grief was deeply tied to the way that schools had stolen their love of self.

At the end of our time together, students shared their reflections on our semester, offering comments like "For me, it was the importance of not silencing or muting emotions. About learning to feel them in the classroom. . . . If I don't center myself and my emotions, my grief, then how can I do that for my students?" and "Learning so much about grief taught us the importance of doing grief work with ourselves so that we could emulate those things in our classrooms." These comments not only reflect course evaluations and reflections across the board, but illustrate the importance of modeling for future teachers what it means to center grief work in the

classroom *as* a trauma-informed practice, and as an integral part of their teacher education program. By creating a classroom container for students to show up in their grief, in their utter wholeness, and to support them in developing a grief practice—students repeatedly shared they *felt* loved (Hannegan-Martinez, 2023). Grief, therefore, is not just a practice of love—it is a praxis to cultivate and sustain it.

CONCLUSION

In this testimonio I share my journey towards being in right relationship to my grief, understanding that grieving is a necessary practice to heal from trauma. Through testimoniando about grief, I speak to the political nature of grief and challenge the landscape of education, which often pathologizes emotionality and decenters the body, particularly for People of Color. While sharing this testimonio leaves me with trepidation that I might feel overexposed, I share because the rates of child trauma continue to catapult across the country and globe, and there is an imminent need that we become more "trauma-wise" (Soriano, 2023) by extending our theorization and application of trauma-informed pedagogies to include grief. In the years since this testimonio occurred, almost 10 more of my former students have died. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to run rampant. People of Color continue to be murdered with impunity. School shootings are at an all-time high. Presently, we are being forced to witness the genocide of Palestinian people. Each of these is a trauma. Given the detrimental impacts of trauma on the bodies and brains of young people, and conversely, the healing potential of integrating grief, there is a moral and pedagogical *imperative* that we, as scholars and practitioners, learn to grieve *now*.

I share this testimonio as an example of addressing the "healing gap" (Garcia, 2019) in my own life and practice to illuminate what learning to be in right relationship to grief looked like for me as a Latina woman, educator, scholar. I do this in hopes that other educators and scholars will heed the call and lean into grief. To that end, I offer some of the questions that supported both students and myself in the development of our grief practices:

- What are you grieving?
- What might your students/teachers be grieving?
- What scares you most about grief?
- How can you use grief to heal to support healing from trauma?
- What practices can you draw on to connect to grief?
- In what ways do you see grief as present in your school? Workplace?
- What is one thing you can do to make space for grief in your life? In your classroom?
- What is one self-love commitment you can make?
- What is one community-love commitment you can make?

These are far from all-encompassing and do not change most of the conditions causing our grief, but some of the things my students and I gained by creating a space for grief in our classroom container are our loving relationships to ourselves and to each other, as well as a renewed sense of purpose. In sharing our losses, we were

reminded that despite our grief, we are not alone; when we lean into our grief *together*, we can alchemize this sorrow towards our collective grieving, healing, organizing, love, learning, and liberation. Grief is instructive, teaching us about what we love and long for. In centering grief, we are directed towards considering the lives, classrooms, and world that we want. This challenges us to consider what our role is in creating those spaces, and what we might begin to offer today in service of that vision. In that way, grief is a form of alchemy that can guide us to transmute and transform sorrow and love towards different futurities—ones where we are healing and loved and well.

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SHARIM HANNEGAN-MARTINEZ, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in Educational Studies at the University of Michigan. Broadly, her research draws on Critical Race and Chicana Feminist theories and methods to explore trauma, healing, love, and wellness for Youth, Teachers, and Communities of Color. Email: sharimhm@umich.edu