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The Racial Melancholia of Un-grieved Endings: A Felt Understanding of Teachers of Color Who Leave the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The educational field is quick to intellectualize solutions to the teacher attrition problem without feeling what is in front of us and within us: overwhelming, unmetabolized grief. Blending online ethnography with somatic and critical understandings of grief and trauma, this study seeks to understand teacher attrition as a felt sense of loss and analyzes the trauma caused when educators of color are unable to fully mourn leaving the classroom. Focusing on the stories of four teachers of color, I use the concept of *racial melancholia* (Cheng, 2000; Grinage, 2019) to describe a liminal stage of grief and distinct form of racialized trauma, as participants wrestle with their internal landscapes, administrative responses to their departure, and decisions to bid farewell, or not, to their students. I describe the ways participants experience a loss or recovery of safety, belonging, and/or dignity as they leave their classrooms, highlighting how their embodied expressions and meaning-making work to disrupt disenfranchised grief and harmful school conditions. I conclude with ways for educators, researchers, and leaders to affirm the grief of teachers of color and speculate how doing so can disrupt teacher attrition and compounded racialized grief in schools.

Keywords: grief, racial melancholia, teacher attrition, teachers of color, trauma, education, ethnography

I have never enjoyed saying goodbye. When my own children have a hard time leaving family gatherings, I can empathize with their wordless resistance—the turning away of torsos and eye contact, the stomping feet angry at an abrupt ending,

the tears longing for more time. My empathy comes from yearning for such expressions to have been acknowledged by my own family as a child, as well as my disillusionment as an educator pushing up against school systems incapable of and uninterested in caring for grief.

Fortunately, I have practiced witnessing my own sorrows through four years of therapy. I recently recognized it was time to move on from this particular therapist, so we said our farewells during our last session. We took our time sharing our grief and gratitude, marking this transition with mutual love and reverence. It felt unsettling to accept the end of our relationship, but it also felt affirming to say goodbye on purpose.

A decade ago, I left the classroom after six years of teaching high school English and regrettably could not bring myself to say goodbye to my students. I still carry some shame around it. But I also understand that I didn't have the energy or support to facilitate any closing rituals at that time. Although my exit was a choice towards self-preservation, that choice was also shaped by conditions outside of my control, where I became one of many teachers of color impacted by compassion fatigue, racial battle fatigue, and the push-out of critical educators (Kohli, 2019; Ormiston et al., 2022).

These two distinct tales of grief—one where I intentionally said goodbye to my therapist and one where I was unable to do so with my students—can be described as what somatics therapist and writer Resmaa Menakem (2017) calls *clean pain* versus *dirty pain*. *Clean pain* happens when individuals and groups are able to be present with difficult circumstances and in doing so, make meaning and grow from them. With my therapist, I felt enough skilled support, trust, and safety to name the difficult words—"I'm ready to leave"—even amongst contradictory feelings of reluctance and certainty. With my students, I instead found myself engaging in the *dirty pain* of "avoidance, denial, and blame" (p. 20), where I was too immersed in toxic work conditions to face the truth of my own guilt and despair, nor face the responses of students I was leaving behind. *Dirty pain* can feel helpful and protective in the moment, but avoiding or projecting untended wounds can actually exacerbate trauma in the present and future; *clean pain* helps us build the capacity and skills to grieve, preventing further trauma from being embedded in our psyches, relationships, and learning spaces (Cariaga, 2023; Menakem, 2017).

Although districts across the nation are now working to recruit and retain teachers by increasing pay, benefits, and grow-your-own teacher programs, teachers of color are still leaving their classrooms to other school sites, into leadership or higher education, or leaving the field altogether (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023). In general, 55% of educators are considering leaving the profession, with 62% Black and 59% Latinx educators feeling compelled to leave (Walker, 2022). As research focuses on the causes of teacher of color attrition and the importance of retaining them, I am more curious about what we may learn by looking at this particular issue as a felt sense of loss and exploring what impact is made when educators are unable to fully mourn leaving the classroom.

The field of education often engages in *dirty pain* by automatically intellectualizing solutions to the teacher shortage problem without pausing to feel what is right in front of us and within us: overwhelming, unmetabolized grief. For

every teacher who leaves the classroom—whether by choice or not—there are losses to be felt by students, whole learning communities, and educators themselves. But because schools largely operate to disenfranchise grief (Doka, 2002; Rowling, 1995)—that is, they stigmatize grief as unprofessional and excessive – such losses are seldom recognized or acknowledged. Grief writer and organizer Malkia Devich-Cyril (2021) noted that "at every turn, we are persuaded that grief is a wild, unacceptable emotion that must be handled, managed, overwritten, and hidden" (p. 75). For teachers who leave their classrooms to work at other schools, become administrators, or enter teacher education, such unprocessed loss can become an added weight to their new endeavors as educators. For teachers of color in particular, "oppression forces individuals, communities, and generations to carry grief as a solitary burden" (Devich-Cyril, 2021, p. 67), which is antithetical to the humanizing, emotionally intelligent, and collective spaces critical educators hope to cultivate (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021). That is why Menakem (2017) calls it *dirty pain*: by suppressing grief, we potentially perpetuate more mess that needs healing—in our nervous systems, relationships, and learning spaces.

This piece is an attempt at disrupting the *dirty pain* of schools by holding space for educators of color to tell their stories about leaving the classroom. To that end, I explore the following questions:

- How do teachers of color describe their experience of leaving?
- What did they need during that transition?
- How might critical and embodied frameworks help us better understand & support the grieving process of teachers of color who leave?

Much of social emotional learning focuses on nurturing students' emotional intelligence without fully developing the competencies of educators to feel, express, and release their own emotions (Dunn & Antero, 2020; Lin et al., 2023). Drawing from critical, feminist, and somatic frameworks on grief, I focus on the stories of four women teachers of color to unravel the way racialized and gendered emotions become sites of repression and agency in schools. I use the concept of *racial melancholia* (Cheng, 2000; Grinage, 2019) to describe a liminal, seemingly irresolvable stage of grief, where participants must wrestle with their internal landscapes, administrative responses to their departure, and decisions to bid farewell, or not, to their students. Described as simultaneously emotionally-charged and emotionally-suppressed transitions, participants' stories expose schooling conditions that only entrench the feeling and impact of loss, while highlighting the difficult choices educators are forced to make within and against those conditions. Still, their insistence on leaving, and on feeling, grieving and honoring what once was, signals an assertion of self-determination and possibility in spite of and beyond the confines of schools.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, I utilized online ethnography (Hart, 2017), using social media to survey teachers of color about their experiences of leaving their classrooms. Online ethnography studies the content of digital platforms, while also using such platforms

to collect research data (Markham, 2005). To gather data for this study, I created a post on my public Instagram and Facebook accounts briefly comparing my experiences of saying goodbye to my therapist and being unable to say goodbye to students as a high school teacher. I then invited roughly 2000 followers across those accounts, a majority of whom are educators I know personally or through scholarly and activist engagement, to share their experiences and unresolved needs from leaving. Participants chose from commenting on the post or directly sending text messages or voice recordings. Using purposive sampling to answer my research questions, I focused on the responses of 15 educators of color, one of whom identified as male and the rest women. Two of the 15 participants left the field to become independent education consultants, six left K-12 classroom teaching to pursue higher education or educational leadership, and seven left to teach in another school or district. Two of the 15 participants reported having supportive experiences, while the rest commented on having difficult transitions. For the purposes of this article, I focus on four educators who provide a multifaceted lens on teacher attrition. Summary of participant backgrounds can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Participant Backgrounds

Participant	Identities	Subject and Location	Years of Teaching Before Exit	Reason for Leaving
Lena	Centro-Americana, mujer, mother	English teacher, Southern California	8	Wanted to transition from teaching middle to high school to follow former students and stay in the community
Francisca	Mexican, From the so called Tijuana-San Diego border on unceded Kumeyaay land, organizer	Ethnic studies teacher, Southern California	10	Burned out from teaching; transitioned to pursue doctoral degree in teacher education
Gabriela	Okinawan-Pinay, From the Bay Area	Ethnic Studies teacher, Northern California	4	Burned out from teaching, which included a recurring ocular

				migraine; took a year off to rest and physically and emotionally recover
Alice	Black, radical educator, born in Jamaica	English and Reading Intervention teacher, Southern California	5	Pushed out by administration and lack of structural support

I engaged in online ethnography for this study because I wanted to invite candid, qualitative reflections about teacher of color grief through the use of social media. Sharpe (2022) studied how social media can act as a counter-space for Black women to reclaim a collective sense of belonging when navigating other spaces of exclusion. Bessette (2015) explained the benefits of social media for critical scholars, commenting that "social media work involves a great deal of affect" and that "scholarly networks of trust and collaboration … rely on affect to be effective." For myself and participants, our Instagram and Facebook accounts serve as public counter-spaces of vulnerability and solidarity where we share personal experiences in and out of the classroom, as well as curricular and political resources, to counter the lack of and attacks on autonomy, criticality, and emotion found in our workplace environments. The willingness of women of color to share their stories in this study stems from a foundation of trust, mutual love for students, and critical ideologies nurtured through our pedagogical and personal engagement on and off-line. Hannegan-Martinez (2023) noted that communal and peer-based methodologies—intentionally built upon relationality and love—are better suited to enact healing and transformation. As a participant observer in this study, my goal was not to take emotion or personal experience out of my data collection and analysis, but to carefully co-construct meaning through the affective dimensions and lived realities of teacher attrition—in Menakem's (2017) words, to practice *clean pain* alongside participants.

With my use of social media data, I have also considered the ethical ramifications of online ethnography (Stevens et al., 2015). To ensure confidentiality, all participants' names are pseudonyms. I deleted my public social media posts so that participants' comments are not searchable online. I practiced informed consent by stating that comments on my social media posts may be used for a research article on the grief of teachers of color. I also utilized member checks to gather more context for participants' narratives and check for accuracy.

When I analyzed participant responses to my social media posts, I used open coding to track their descriptions of experiences and needs from leaving the classroom, then used focused coding to document similarities and differences across participants' comments (Esterberg, 2002), drawing upon literature about embodiment and racialized constructions and resistance in education to define emergent themes

about grief. This study employs an adaptation of Pham's (2022) embodied raciolinguistic analysis, which focuses on "making visible the key moments of micro-level contestations that are inextricably linked to macro-level contexts" (p. 83). Whereas Pham's (2022) article amplifies the affective, relational, counter-hegemonic moves of a Latina teacher leader, this study seeks to unveil expressions of sorrow and other visceral meaning-making that often gets punished and silenced within schools that reproduce domination and disembodiment (Cariaga, 2019).

One limitation is that this study focuses on teachers, even though counselors, social workers, principals, and other staff are also heavily considering leaving their professions (Walker, 2022). It is important to get a comprehensive look at attrition across the field, including narratives of students left behind, as well as the racialized and affective dimensions of such losses felt by various individuals and communities. I hope this study is a beginning to that conversation.

RACIALIZED AND EMBODIED UNDERSTANDINGS OF GRIEF

To understand how racialized grief operates within schools, we must first understand the deadening, spirit-murdering function of schooling in America (Love, 2019). As a classroom teacher, I wish I was more prepared to navigate several hard truths: that racial oppression is a permanent feature lodged in the structures of American society (Bell, 1991), including school systems rooted in subtractive, punitive, and dehumanizing ideologies predicated upon Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color (Stovall, 2018). As such, racial trauma and grief are harsh inevitabilities of teaching in schools. Acknowledging this reality is not meant to further pathologize communities of color; instead, it sharpens our energy towards recognizing, surviving, and uprooting the inherent violence of schooling that perpetuates loss and social death through anti-Blackness, historical erasure, and forced assimilation (Marie & Watson, 2020). This challenges much of the literature on post-traumatic growth (Little et al., 2011) that focuses on healing interventions in schools after traumatic events. While acute events of violence and trauma do happen and should be addressed in schools, it is worth noting that trauma and grief do not just *enter* school; trauma and grief are also pervasively and persistently *caused by* schools. Educational scholar Grinage (2019) therefore emphasized that "the permanence of racial trauma requires a development of methods for bereavement dedicated to living *with* loss, not escaping loss" (p. 232).

Within schools, however, grief is largely denied and suppressed, particularly for those at the margins of power in society. It is hard for educators to grieve when repressive policies, practices, and internalized dominant narratives coalesce to deny them the permission, time, and support to mourn in community (Wolf-Prusan, 2021). Grief is characterized by its unwieldy, yet alchemical energy that challenges people to re-organize their lives after and amidst loss (Weller, 2015). But schools, as a project of colonialism and racial capitalism, work to contain and conform all that is deemed disorderly and excessive, including racialized bodies and their methods of expression and meaning-making (Cruz, 2001; Valdez, 2020). Built upon control and containment, schools are therefore places where grief becomes embedded, but also seemingly impossible to be fully expressed.

Racialized Grief: Sites of Distortion and Refusal

Feminist scholars have studied how institutions use strategies to demean and distort emotions to control gendered and racialized subjects (Cooper, 2018; Jaggar, 2014). Korean American author Cathy Park Hong (2020) blended autobiographical narrative and cultural criticism to establish the concept of *minor feelings*, "built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed" (p. 55). According to Hong, such feelings are actually not minor but rather all-consuming, in that the constant dismissal of one's feelings leads to futile attempts at absorbing them and disappearing the self. In *Grieving While Black*, author Wade (2021) explained that grief is made up of various emotions: sadness, fear, anxiety, and anger; and that for Black people and Black women in particular, such feelings get mistaken as threats, when in actuality they are mainly indicators of unmet needs and longings for support.

Conversely, critical and radical feminist scholars have also long asserted that racialized emotions can be channeled towards necessary transformation. Black, Chicana, and Pinay feminist writers continue to theorize ways that collective grief can be used to refuse the cultural amnesia, isolation, and disembodiment imposed by imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, and racial capitalism (Anzaldúa, 2002; hooks, 2000; Strobel, 2016). Milstein (2017), in her introduction to the anthology *Rebellious Mourning,* described how the naturally disruptive nature of grief:

> *can open up cracks in the wall of the system. It can also pry up spaces of contestation and reconstruction, inter-vulnerability and strength, empathy and solidarity. It can discomfort stories told from above that would have us believe that we aren't human or deserving of life-affirming lives. (p. 9)*

I share these understandings of grief to suggest that the teacher of color grief I narrate below is not simply about one moment in time, but a co-mingling of historical, intergenerational grief that beckons to be felt, heard, and released.

Racial Melancholia: Wrestling with Internal and External Contradictions

To be immersed in emotions that are both heavily restricted yet incredibly powerful can be quite disorienting and draining. Cheng (2000) developed *racial melancholia* as a psycho-analytic concept to describe the state of oversaturated sadness that Asian Americans and African Americans experience as they contend with unresolved grief within systems of domination. Grinage (2019) applied *racial melancholia* to the educational field through his analysis of Black youth's resistance to racial harm, even as they navigate insurmountable loss in and beyond their school spaces. Cheng (2000) emphasized that *racial melancholia* is not just a description of collective emotions, but provides a critical framework to analyze how grief is both a *symptom* of racial oppression and a psychic *strategy* to disrupt such systems. In doing so, Cheng insists that political change must address both the internal and structural makings of racism. In this article, I use the concept of *racial melancholia* to examine

the contextualized grief of teachers of color caught between the contradictions of leaving and the prospects of starting anew elsewhere, highlighting the schooling conditions and liberatory possibilities that emerge as they both assert and lose agency in myriad ways.

Racial Melancholia as a Protective Trauma Response to Schools

I conceptualize the *racial melancholia* of teachers of color in this study as a distinct form of trauma. Throughout the field and in mainstream understandings, trauma is often described as events and conditions that overwhelm our nervous systems, relationships, and learning spaces, leaving individuals and/or communities with a sense of powerlessness (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.). Haines (2019) and Menakem (2017), however, clarified that trauma is better understood not as an event, but a wise, socially-situated, embodied response that seeks to protect individuals and groups from overwhelming events and conditions. Survival responses can become traumatic when there is no safe place to release and heal the embodied constrictions that emerge from unresolved grief (Herman, 2015). I therefore describe participants' *racial melancholia* as a form of trauma because (a) their in-expressable grief is felt as an ongoing state of powerlessness amidst a harmful work environment, and (b) such grief is an adaptive and protective response to such overwhelming conditions. Through this asset-based lens, I look at participants' grief processes and some of their propensity towards avoidance or anger as sensible and necessary responses to the violence and instability of schooling.

To support participants in the practice of *clean pain* (Menakem, 2017) and express racialized grief and trauma that has been previously deemed inexpressible, I focus below on what participants felt, needed, and lost as they chose to leave their classrooms. According to Haines (2019), "trauma and oppression leave safety, belonging, and dignity harmed or unmet. It splits safety, belonging, and dignity from each other, so that they are no longer co-supportive" (p. 134). In this way, Haines explains what is both lost through trauma and what needs to be reclaimed: *safety, belonging*, and *dignity.* I utilize these three trauma-informed tenets to unpack participants' stories, then theorize potential ways to better support and affirm the grieving process of participants. Through these understandings, teachers and educational leaders can potentially better navigate and disrupt the endless mourning (Grinage, 2019) found in schools.

FINDINGS: STORIES OF LOSS & POSSIBILITY

Grief is often associated with the loss of loved ones. For the teachers of color in this study, there was certainly sorrow from having to end sustained connection with their beloved students and school communities. In addition, I focus on the ways participants experience a loss or recovery of *safety*, *belonging*, and/or *dignity* as they leave their classrooms. Their felt expressions here, as well as their embodied meaning-making and affirmations of self and community, work together to disrupt practices and policies of disenfranchised grief in schools.

Loss of Safety

Lena identifies as Centro-Americana and taught middle school English in Los Angeles for eight years. In a detailed text message, Lena remarks that she spent boundless energy during that time as a department chair, leadership advisor, and more, while becoming a mother, earning more credentials, and enduring familial grief of her own. She came to a point where she wanted to teach high school so that she could follow her former students.

She described how an administrator treated her during her transition:

> *[My current principal] sent higher-ups an email that my soon-to-be new principal was "stealing talent," so I knew she was livid. She said that if I didn't have my transfer papers by the end of the week, she would not sign them. When I did give them to her, she grabbed the paper from my hands, scribbled her signature, threw them at me, and left. I was shaking. I picked them up and could barely contain the tears. I walked straight into the counseling office to cry and told a friend about what happened and that I was leaving. Once I felt somewhat put together, I went to my classroom and called my mom to vent.*
>
> *Suddenly, I heard keys in my lock, and [my current principal] swings the door open and walks in. Tells me to stop crying! I had to quickly end the conversation with my mom. She told me not to tell my colleagues—as it might be a reflection of her leadership. The next few months were really awkward as she would barely address me, stopped greeting me, and announced my departure at our last faculty meeting. She again told me that I better not start crying.*

When asked what she needed from her principal at that moment, Lena said, "I think her anger and dismissal felt like such a lack of appreciation for the many times she leaned on me. I would tell her that it diminished my desire to seek out a healthier work environment and deepen my teaching experience. I felt angry, shocked, and just sad that I could not transition out in a more meaningful way."

Lena's description of administrator behavior reflects an enactment of *dirty pain* (Menakem, 2017): the use of blame (throwing transfer papers), avoidance (actively avoiding interactions with her), and denial (repeatedly forbidding Lena from crying and not recognizing Lena's agency to choose her own professional pathway).

An educator's choice to leave a school site is an act of vulnerability and authenticity—it opens up potential feelings of abandonment or judgment from students and colleagues, while also expressing self-love and a deep yearning for reinvigorated purpose. For Lena, there was no institutional safe space to be vulnerable, nor authentic; instead, she was relegated to hiding and finding safe spaces of her own. Across the literature on trauma-informed care (Herman, 2015; Wolf-Prusan, 2021), safety is foundational to cultivating healing and wellness, as well as facilitating the grieving process for students and educators. Haines (2019) defined safety as "a state in which one is able to be both secure and vulnerable, authentic and without fear that this vulnerability will be used against them" (p. 136). Additionally, grief scholar and practitioner Weller (2015) stated, "Our ability to drop into this

interior world and do the difficult work of metabolizing sorrow is dependent on the community that surrounds us" (p. 90). But the principal's confrontational response and refusal of grief eroded all emotional safety and care that Lena so deeply needed during her transition.

Loss of Dignity and Belonging

Francisca identifies as a Mexican teacher from unceded Kumeyaay land. After a decade of teaching ethnic studies in immigrant communities across Southern California, Francisca felt burnt out and decided to pursue a doctoral degree in teacher education. Like Lena, Francisca felt a sense of betrayal from not being acknowledged by administrators for the love she poured into her community. In a voice recording, she began by saying:

> *My admin knew I was leaving, but they didn't provide any sort of recognition or anything for my 10 years of service. Everything felt very transactional. There was no conversation from anyone in administration, or anyone at the district level, about like… just at least, a thank you for your years of service. It was just so devastating for me.*

Francisca speaks with a slow, quiet, reflective tone. In the second to last sentence above, she pauses multiple times with hesitance and disbelief. The last sentence is punctuated with an audible sigh, signaling the heaviness of being left without any expressed gratitude.

Francisca's description of her exit reflects a larger critique of schools for their prioritization of productivity over care. Schools are designed to extract labor from critical educators while disregarding the emotionally-charged love and courage that engenders such work (Darder, 2017). This constant process of extraction and decompartmentalization leaves critical educators with a profound loss of meaning and dignity in their lives and professions. As Haines (2019) explained, dignity comes from an inherent sense of worth and wanting to "be known to have skills, presence, and worth that contributes to others" (p. 145). At the core of Francisca's grief is a longing to know and hear from others that she had an impact and that her work actually mattered. To have her exit treated as "transactional" by school and district leaders—devoid of emotion, significance, or recognition—left her feeling not an integral member of her learning community, but a disposable one.

Francisca also lost a sense of self and community as she transitioned from teaching to higher education. She explained:

> *When I went to sign my resignation at the district, I remember so much of my identity is tied to me being a teacher. I remember just crying in the car, and I turned in the form to the district … and … that was it! (laughs)…*
> *Not only did I lose my teacher identity, but also my organizer identity. I didn't know where I fit anymore in the world. It was so hard to jump into academia. I needed a break, I was burnt out, but didn't realize how competitive and*

aggressive academia would be. I'm so far removed from teaching kids right now—it's been already four years. But it feels… It still hurts.

Francisca laughs because her last day of teaching was unceremoniously disproportionate to the sacred energy she engaged with schools for a decade of her life. Francisca's sense of belonging was ruptured when she left her teacher/organizer communities and entered the academy as a doctoral student. Navarro et al. (2020) document the journeys of educators of color, like Francisca, who lament leaving their K-12 classrooms but continue their fight towards social justice in teacher education. Francisca's narrative demonstrates how the *racial melancholia* of BIPOC educators continues, and perhaps intensifies, for educators of color who expect a reprieve from burnout in academia but experience heightened spirit-murdering and isolation instead (Reynolds et al., 2021). Whether banishing oneself to cry alone in a car or sensing the disembodiment of higher education, "the refusal to feel [can] take a heavy toll … The energy expended in pushing down despair is diverted from more creative uses, depleting the resilience and imagination needed for fresh visions and strategies" (Macy, as cited in hooks, 2006, p. 292)—strategies that can disrupt the racialized burden of grief on educators of color at all stages of the field.

Regenerating Safety, Belonging, and Dignity

Gabriela is an Okinawan-Pinay ethnic studies educator from the Bay Area. After experiencing both physical and emotional burnout from teaching, she decided to leave and take time to rest. She described a different kind of exit, one that came as a surprise to her. She noted in an Instagram comment response:

It was really weird for me to think of drawing attention to myself by messaging all my students and colleagues about leaving. I did it at the last minute, as an act of honoring myself.

It was a really emotionally and physically taxing year so I was honest: I needed to leave because I was burnt out and needed to take care of myself. I thanked my students for being open and vulnerable with me during my hardest year of teaching. I thanked my colleagues because so many of them were at our school for 10-20 years and rode for all of us.

Before doing it, I had all this guilt about leaving. But I was met with so much gratitude and well wishes from my students and stories from my colleagues about the impact I had on our community and their well wishes too. I cried because it was all the affirmation I struggled to give myself, and it was actually the most beautiful exit I could have asked for.

A safe and dignified exit, for Gabriela, did not necessarily mean a comfortable one. In this case, it meant "a safe place to fall, to descend into the depths of both known and unknown layers of sorrow" (Weller, 2015, p. 72)—and a safe place that she initiated alongside her trusted community. A reciprocal expression of gratitude

became a pathway for Gabriela and her community to reclaim a sense of dignity amidst the fatigue and disillusionment felt from teaching during an unexpected global pandemic and four years of unspoken tension. Before her exit, Gabriela noted that throughout her teaching experience, "there was this undercurrent of anger and frustration amongst the faculty at not being seen as whole human beings by our leadership." Together, Gabriela, her students, and colleagues demonstrated the "embodied ability to reconnect safety, belonging, and dignity and have them serve one another, rather than be at odds with one another" and in effect, reclaim wholeness together (Haines, 2019, p. 134).

Racial Melancholia Amidst Two Exits

Alice, who identifies as a Black radical educator, is now a graduate researcher who develops curriculum with and for communities of color. She was once a founding member of a new urban charter high school, where she served as an English and reading intervention teacher. After a few years, Alice began experiencing workplace policing, which Williams (2023) defined as "the physical, metaphorical, and/or emotional manipulation of Black women's actions to better align with white supremacist notions of professionalism" (p. 69). Despite Alice's reputation across the school community as an empowering and caring teacher, administrators took steps to undermine Alice's credential clearing process and eventually tried to terminate her three months before the end of school year. Given the option of leaving with or without saying goodbye to students, Alice chose the former. Through a voice recording, she explained that the school community had already endured several losses, including the recent unexplained exit of another trusted adult at the school. She then said:

> *Whenever you're a part of a child's life, you're a part of the matrix of their world, and it's extraordinarily destabilizing just to disappear. So I told [the administrator], "No, I'll start to pack up my classroom tonight, and I'll tell the kids goodbye." I didn't sleep that night. The following day, I dressed myself in an African outfit, one that I really liked. I packed up all my personal stuff and a plant that had grown alongside my students, and I designed a send-off to each of my classes.*

Alice said goodbye to her students, held space for students' sadness and confusion, and expressed her continued faith in them and their futures. But the emotions could only be one-sided, as Alice was careful to keep hidden any details or personal grief associated with her termination.

Students, however, began to express anger over Alice's leaving and without Alice's prompting, brought their questions and indignation to faculty and leadership. Students and adults initiated a protest over Alice's exit and with unyielding strategy and solidarity, won her back. Alice explained further:

> *My plan, which was to reduce the trauma, shock, and potential distress about my disappearing, actually ended up backfiring (laughs) because the children*

> *reacted strongly and figured it out [that I was getting fired]. Courtesy of the students', teachers' and staffs' reactions, I decided to stay and fight. And I was victorious—quote unquote.*

Alice used air quotes around the word "victorious" because her stay was short-lived. Within three years, workplace policing, compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, and lack of adequate support at the charter school soon proved too much for multiple teachers of color at Alice's school site, all of whom somberly chose to find employment elsewhere at the end of the academic year.

Alice joined them, but this time did not say goodbye publicly. She explained why:

> *The messiness of admin made it neither possible nor sensible. At that point, it felt like a foregone conclusion. All of my colleagues were gone. The students I had known the longest were graduated. I had encoded goodbyes into my students' end of classroom projects and end of year parties.*
>
> *This time, I chose how I wanted to end. So it was more of a natural release. I wasn't going to risk what I had done before. I just came in one day, had already packed up my classroom, dropped off my laptop, turned around, and left.*

Alice's description of both exits captures the *racial melancholia* (Grinage, 2019) of teachers of color, and Black women in particular, who find themselves constantly negotiating between surrender and self-determination. Whereas Lena and Francisca expected more from their school leadership when they left teaching, Alice's clarity and acceptance over her school's troubled conditions allowed her to (a) leave on her own terms and with her dignity intact, and (b) subversively and effectively say goodbye to her students. Still, Alice's and her colleagues' untimely exits, and the work environment that caused them, did not come without cost to the stability, connection, and consistency necessary for students who were left behind.

Messages for Young People

I asked all participants what they would have liked to say to their former students. Most participants' responses expressed a sense of regret and apology. For example, one elementary school teacher who transitioned to doctoral studies said, "It wasn't you or me. It was both our dehumanization on a daily basis that was killing my/our spirits." A Spanish teacher who left for another school site said, "I wish we had more mental/emotional support for you. It's not your fault!" Alice, however, took a different approach, focusing more on her resolute trust in young people:

> *I would say [to students] that endings are also beginnings. I absolutely believe that each of you then and now are infinitely capable of success. Do not ever allow fear of change to prevent you from doing anything. In the words of Octavia Butler, "God is change." Lean in.*

Taken together, these educators' words for their students capture the layered *racial melancholia* (Grinage, 2019) of working within schools and having to leave them. As hard as many of these educators of color tried to fight against injustices in their school sites, many remained unable to control the larger forces of dehumanization that pushed them out. And yet, the agency found in a teacher's choice to leave does not necessarily compromise the agency of students left behind. Alice draws from science fiction novelist Octavia Butler to show that even in dystopian worlds and toxic schools, our collective power resides in the ways we respond to and shape change on an ongoing basis. Alice's expression of unyielding faith in her students underscores two important ideas. First, although teacher attrition can have severe impacts on students, we must make sure to disrupt teacher-as-savior narratives by not obscuring the agency that students still possess amidst inequitable school conditions. Secondly, though many of these teachers of color yearned for more time to build with their students and communities, the impact on and love they have for students is enduringly felt well beyond their goodbyes and classroom walls.

IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

This study examined the embodied meaning-making and socially-situated differences amongst teachers of color who left their classrooms: some ungrieved endings, one held with loving witness, and one characterized by melancholic hope (Winters, 2016) and subversive refusal. For many of the participants, a particular form of *racial melancholia* (Grinage, 2019) emerged after having to choose their own safety and dignity over a sense of belonging and longevity with students. The *racial melancholia* for many participants reflected a double-edged grief, where a lack of institutional safety prevented them from acknowledging their years of service and the significant relationships and memories they were leaving behind. Put simply, most participants were in grief that they couldn't properly grieve.

Framing the ungrieved endings in this study as a distinct form of racialized trauma underscores the overwhelming heaviness felt by many teachers of color whose exits from their classrooms felt "too much, too fast, or too soon" (Menakem, 2017, p. 7). Trauma experts talk about making meaning *after* loss (Herman, 2015), but *racial melancholia* reminds us that by virtue of navigating systems of oppression on a daily basis we are *always inside* of loss. Future studies should seek student voices to speak to the felt impact of teacher attrition on young peoples' wellness and learning, as well as administrative perspectives on their felt experiences of and responses to loss across the field. Embodied frameworks like Menakem's (2017) distinction between *dirty pain* and *clean pain* can help educational leaders and researchers assess how varied teacher and administrator responses to loss can result in exacerbating trauma, disrupting it, or somewhere in between.

Most participants in this study developed a protective hardening in body, mind, and spirit against the seemingly endless violence of schooling. But the expression and release of grief requires a kind of softening, surrendering, and opening, as evidenced by Gabriela's and Alice's narratives of leaving their classrooms. Critical frameworks like *racial melancholia* (Cheng, 2000; Grinage, 2019) can give critical educators the

ideological clarity that schools, in their current colonizing form, are incompatible containers to hold the wild, counter-hegemonic, and fertile power of grief (Weller, 2015). All educators, whether they leave the classroom or choose to stay, deserve ample time to unravel from the toxicity and violence of schooling and find refuge for themselves and each other. Critical researchers interested in focusing on racialized grief and healing can draw from counter-space methodologies like the online ethnography I employed here, that purposefully build upon relationality and reciprocity to invite truth-feeling and truth-telling from voices that are often silenced in schools and educational research.

This study can also help administrators and educational leaders understand that all transitions—whether to a new classroom, school, district, or outside of the field—deserve skilled witness and care. Resources should be leveraged towards time, training, and skilled support to help educational leaders build their capacity to listen and be present inside the discomfort of varied grief. Moments of losing a colleague can be an opportunity for leaders to assess their own practices and policies that either honor or suppress grief, as well as their own histories with loss and abandonment, and how such policies, practices, and histories are potentially intertwined. Similarly, Menakem (2017) explained that moments of *dirty pain*—when there are big reactions that do not necessarily match or support the present moment—can signal an important time to pause and consider how old wounds are impacting the present. Doing so can help leaders facilitate their own grief journeys and build stronger empathy for grief around them. In general, educators who have left the classroom deserve safe spaces where they can express their full range of emotions, acknowledge the depth of what they have accomplished and survived, and release any residual feelings of heaviness, so that they may enter their new professions more free to be themselves and more fortified to serve their communities. Any deeply felt ending can be an opportunity to practice core values that are integral to healing and wellness—namely safety, belonging, dignity, and presence—and cultivate conditions of humanization that could have prevented some individuals from leaving in the first place. By looking at teacher of color attrition through the lens of racialized grief and racial melancholia, I hope that educational leaders can see the value in feeling our way towards solutions instead of simply intellectualizing them.

Listening to the grief of teachers of color has helped me uncover components of a *good*-bye: an expression of gratitude, an honoring of lineage and impact, an assertion of what is important in our lives. If we can learn to embrace endings, perhaps we can learn to build better beginnings. May we learn to harness the fertile power of grief as an opportunity, an embodied skill, and political strategy to dismantle the deadening function of schooling. May we enduringly re-commit to creating life-honoring conditions in which everyone can learn, teach, grieve, and transition with dignity.

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