Endless Mourning: Racial Melancholia, Black Grief, and the Transformative Possibilities for Racial Justice in Education

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In this article, Justin Grinage investigates how black youth experience and contest racial trauma using racial melancholia, a psychoanalytic conception of grief, as a framework for understanding the nonpathologized endurance of black resistance to racism. Examining data from a yearlong ethnographic study, Grinage engages the notion that melancholia is needed for mourning to take place, a crucial distinction that engenders agency in relation to the constant (re)production of racial oppression in the lives of five black twelfth-grade students at a multiracial suburban US high school. Grinage illustrates how racial melancholia structures racial trauma and analyzes its effects on black identity, dismissing pathologizing definitions of racial injury while centralizing the importance of asset-based, healing-centered approaches for enacting racial justice in education.

> This isn't black anger; this is black grief!
> —*Danny Givens*

Danny Givens, a black pastor and community organizer, yells into a megaphone as he addresses the crowd during a Black Lives Matter protest in St. Paul, Minnesota. The rally was organized after it was announced that the two police officers who shot and killed Jamar Clark were not going to be charged. Just a week before, Philando Castile was shot and killed by a police officer in a neighborhood close to where Clark was murdered. The local community was reeling from these traumas, and the protest served as an outlet for its grief.

Can this protest function as a collective form of mourning that will enable this community in despair to "get over" its losses? In search of answers to this question, I consider how the existence of racial violence, and resulting loss, emerges as a ceaseless component of racism. When black people attempt to mourn, new losses often emerge before they can process the old ones. This example of collective grief illustrates the intricacies of mourning as a method for naming the pain produced from racism and for finding empowering spaces for enacting racial justice in the context of the United States, where racial discrimination is endemic.[1]

For black youth traumatized by racial oppression in schools, a similarly structured formation of grief exists through the haunting remnants of centuries of racialized loss produced by the enduring legacy of white supremacy (Eng, 2000). Michael Dumas's (2014) study on black suffering in schools attempts to symbolize this racial trauma by referencing a passage from Octavia Butler's (2004) science fiction time-travel novel, *Kindred*. The main character, Dana Franklin, a young black woman, is transported back in time from present-day Los Angeles to pre–Civil War Maryland, where she has to protect Rufus Weylin, her abusive, slave-owning white ancestor. She is summoned back in time whenever Rufus's life is in danger, and she is forced to make sure that he lives to ensure her own existence in the present. During one of these trips back in time, Dana loses her arm as Rufus holds her down in an attempt to rape her. When she returns to the present, her severed arm is forever left in the past with Rufus.

Dumas (2014) uses this example to illustrate the interaction between the history of white supremacist education policy, which has created deeply ingrained structural inequalities for black youth in schools, and the unmeasurable social loss that has transpired as a result of these policies. Just like Dana losing an arm in the past yet surviving in the present, "there is no way for black people to have survived education policy and practice in the past several decades and not have lost something" (p. 25). How, then, do black youth make sense of the racial traumas that afflict them? Are these losses able to be mourned within schools, the very same structures that often perpetuate racial subjugation?

Using the concept of racial melancholia (Cheng, 2001)—a psychoanalytic interpretation of unresolved grief stemming from racial oppression—as an entry point, in this article I make connections between mourning and melancholia in relation to black students and their experiences with racism at Sumner High School, a large multiracial school located in the midwestern United States.[2] Using critical ethnography, I illustrate instances where black youth both endured and resisted racism at Sumner to underscore how racial melancholia helps name the psychological effects of racism in the lives of people of color and shapes the ways in which the emergence of grief as a result of experiencing racism is processed within the mind and body. This process involves the methods by which the intersections of mourning and melancholia contrib-

ute to how racialized populations endure racial trauma in a white supremacist society.

The adoption of racial melancholia as a means for understanding the complexities of racial trauma is of particular significance because mourning and melancholia are often imagined as binary concepts—the former healthy and the latter unhealthy (Freud, 1957). This good/bad binary often (re)produces what Eve Tuck (2009) calls "damage-centered research" (p. 413) that positions racialized forms of trauma as pathologizing to communities of color (solely melancholic but rarely mournful), effectively trapping them within constant states of injury and rendering them fundamentally broken. Yet, racial melancholia offers a pathway out of this trap through the distinction that racial trauma is not a "*condition* of grief, but is, rather, a *legislation* of grief" (Cheng, 2001, p. 8). A condition of grief places a form of permanence onto suffering, a type of paralysis that produces an obstinately damaged identity where racial trauma engenders an entirely pathologizing existence. However, Cheng's elucidation that grief can be legislated transforms what it means to experience racial trauma by dismantling the notion that communities of color are incessantly damaged. Instead, legislation emphasizes movement, where grieving animates the flexibility between paralysis and agency, enabling space to conceptualize mourning. I argue that we should think of the infliction of racial trauma and resistance to this trauma as not either melancholia or mourning but as negotiations between the two—as a legislation of grief.

For black youth specifically, researchers have noted that racial melancholia can signify institutional forms of grief in the context of education (Vaught, 2012) as well as function to engender agency within school spaces (Dumas, 2014). Sabina Vaught (2012) uses racial melancholia to identify how institutions, in this case a juvenile prison school, shape dominant white narratives that objectify black youth in ways that position them as responsible for their failure or success in school. Racial melancholia appears in this space as a type of irreconcilable grief, since the ideal of upward mobility stands in stark contrast to the racist institutional school barriers that often prevent this mobility. Dumas (2014) theorizes racial melancholia through an awareness of how decades of white supremacist education policy has formed traumas for black youth that manifest within their everyday school experiences. This awareness, exhibited by black educational leaders and activists in Seattle's public schools, positions racial traumas as ongoing. Yet, because of their acceptance of this reality, a type of "purposeful suffering" (Dumas, 2014, p. 20) illuminated their motivations for maintaining a steadfast commitment to resisting white supremacy in their schools.

Taken together, these studies represent the dynamic nature of racial melancholia as the seemingly dichotomous relationship between paralysis and action, survival and resiliency, harm and healing structures how black students often are forced to navigate schools, locations where trauma and possibility coexist. However, an added layer of grief subsisted for black students at Sumner.

Like Pastor Givens struggling to deal with racial violence in his community, these students were also witness to, and haunted by, police violence committed against black males, publicly displayed across national television screens and social media outlets with the tragic deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice over the span of five months. With these public instances of black suffering acting as the backdrop for the research I conducted at Sumner during the 2014–2015 school year, I examine the generative possibilities for transformative formations of racial melancholia.

Mourning, Melancholia, and Racial Trauma

In his foundational 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud (1957) established melancholia as a fundamentally pathological response to loss. He believed the work of mourning led to a completion of one's attachment to the loss by freeing one's ego from pain and displeasure, whereas melancholia led to an impoverished and worthless ego. Conversely, he defined mourning as diametrically opposed to melancholia, with the function of mourning as a healthy process of overcoming the loss of a person, object, or ideal. The popularity of this essay helped establish the notion that melancholia was a debilitating condition (Clewell, 2004).

What is sometimes overlooked is Freud's (1923) revision of his theory on mourning and melancholia. This later account of grief (and the culmination of his thinking on the topic) suggests that the pathological failure of mourning, which he originally defined as melancholia, is actually necessary for mourning to be able to take place. Tammy Clewell (2004) notes, "Freud collapses the strict opposition between mourning and melancholia, making melancholy identification integral to the work of mourning. As a result, his work substantially revises our understanding of what it means to work through loss" (p. 61). This theoretical shift positions melancholia as a necessary aspect of mourning. In other words, Freud came to believe that maintaining an identification with melancholia by embracing loss rather than rejecting loss can cultivate the healthy process of mourning. Therefore, "working through" loss to successfully mourn someone or something does not require the goal of mourning to be a relinquishing of the lost object since it is needed for mourning to take place. Instead, the work of addressing loss involves a process of negotiation between mourning and melancholia which indicates that the practice of mourning can never be completed (Clewell, 2004). Darian Leader (2008) insightfully states, "The cliché that losses need to be worked through so that we can move beyond them suggests that mourning is something that can be done and dusted. Living with loss is what matters" (p. 99).

Pastor Givens's rage surrounding racial violence embodies what it means to accumulate losses. Over the previous eight years, he had attended and presided over ten funerals of immediate and extended family members, not

including Philando Castile, who happened to be his brother's best friend (Rosario, 2016). Although not all these deaths were due to racially motivated incidents, it does illustrate Givens's willingness to persevere in the face of constant grief. In yelling to the crowd of protesters, he was articulating a distinct mode of mourning by clarifying that the anger black people feel about racial violence is an expression of grieving.

Pastor Givens learned to exist with death in a nation that has been built on racial loss and that continues to function through racial violence (Martinot, 2010). Building on Freud's acknowledgment that melancholia is an indispensable component of mourning, Anne Cheng (2001) defines racial melancholia as the presence of racial trauma, its effects on the racially marginalized, and the methods by which these populations survive and cope, not as a process of "getting over" but instead as a struggle for survival that involves a constant negotiation between melancholia and mourning. Racial melancholia provides a framework for investigating the role trauma plays in the process of racialization (the social practice of ascribing race to populations) and subject formation (the development of identity in relation to this ascription of race), where vacillations between mourning and melancholia are clarified.

Similarly, David Eng (2000) challenges the idea that melancholia is harmful by stating that it is a normative construct—an ordinary psychic attribute that engenders racial identity. Establishing melancholia as an agentic psychic mechanism does not mean that unhealthy psychic and/or social effects are not present; to call melancholia a solely damaging formation of subjectivity causes us to lose sight of productive measures for mourning that can enable agency in the face of racial subjugation. In fact, both Cheng's (2001) and Eng's (2000) principal argument is that because racially oppressed populations in the US are more susceptible to melancholia (as violence and the loss stemming from this violence becomes a core characteristic of racism), there is a social component of melancholia for these groups, where shared histories of loss can provide spaces for mourning to take place. This theory of mourning and melancholia enables a reconceptualization of "what it means for the suffering racial body to heal" (Cheng, 2001, p. 94).

Cheng's and Eng's work theorizing racial melancholia extends Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation of trauma beyond the social component of racism that Freud did not address in his research. Yet, retaining the psychoanalytic foundations of these concepts emphasizes the internalization of racism as integral to accounting for how trauma functions within the mind and body. Cheng (2001) reasons that psychoanalysis is helpful for understanding racial trauma: "Since there is no external structure to house the painful effects of racism, its complex legacies of anger, shame, and guilt can only be internalized" (p.172). Although racial trauma has no external structure to relocate its harmful effects, the forming of social bonds based on shared pain can mitigate the internal damage inflicted by racism. The absorption of racial trauma

suggests that psychic and social factors intersect in processes of racialization (Mills, 1997), therefore psychoanalysis should not be ignored when analyzing the effects of racism (Lane, 1998).

Theoretical Framework: Endless Mourning

Racial suffering and the possibilities for healing must be contextualized in relation to the dominant role that race plays in American society. Racial trauma in the US contains a static quality related to the enduring legacy of racism and the fact that the nation was founded on the bodies of black, brown, and Indigenous peoples. This has created a "social machinery" (Martinot, 2010) of white supremacy incapable of ever completely breaking down. Derrick Bell's (1992) notion of the permanence of racism as an enduring aspect of American life suggests that racial trauma resulting from this fixed element may also be interminable. Thus, in structuring a framework for racial melancholia and in understanding mourning's place within this framework, there must be an acknowledgment of the unrelenting production of trauma for the racially oppressed.

Within this framework, the individual or group experiencing racial trauma cannot hope to entirely shed themselves of this trauma, since new traumas emerge and accumulate. This means that mourning is *endless.* Seth Moglen (2005) states, "Analyses of socially induced loss must account for processes of grieving which the bereaved sustain ongoing relations to the objects they are persistently losing and to the social pressures that are persistently injuring them" (p. 160). The suffering racial body may never fully heal because it is repeatedly being reinjured. Yet, completely healing (or relinquishing loss) may not be the goal in the first place. If melancholia is needed for mourning to take place, then the relationship between the two must be one of negotiation, since the permanence of racial trauma requires a development of methods for bereavement dedicated to living with loss, not escaping loss.

To what extent does the negotiation between mourning and melancholia help frame the construction, production, and resistance of trauma in the lives of black students at Sumner High School? This is a vital question, considering the often-used racist discourse of determining black student underachievement using "deficit thinking" (Valencia, 1997), where racial trauma is defined in the pathological sense, blaming students for various perceived cultural and racial deficiencies instead of holding accountable the schools and classrooms that often exacerbate this trauma. Popular frameworks for addressing trauma in education, social emotional programs such as "mindfulness" (e.g., Mindful Schools) and "trauma-informed" (e.g., Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative) schooling, often either neglect how racism induces trauma or engage in deficit-based solutions by teaching youth to acquiesce in the face of oppression rather than how to actively challenge discrimination.[3]

Racial melancholia can function to shift education from deficit- to asset-based explanations for trauma by considering the occurrence of persistent racial injury alongside emancipatory practices for addressing this injury. Bell's (1992) concept of the permanence of racism applies to education according to a critical race theory analysis of racism's impact on black students which argues that if racism is an invariable feature of psychological, social, and political domains in the US, including education, then racial trauma must also be defined as an enduring aspect of schools and classrooms (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

In this article, I position the notion of endless mourning as a theoretical frame for illuminating the various methods black students use to negotiate mourning and melancholia. That is, endless mourning names how black students resist racial traumas that occur in schools by adopting practices of mourning that challenge racism despite the unceasing permanence of these traumas. Endless mourning emphasizes how practices of mourning must also be present within the context of racial melancholia to create asset-based conceptions of black agency poised against the harmful effects of racial trauma. I use the concept to position racial melancholia as the mechanism for discerning these negotiations, because *racial melancholia* is defined "as a theoretical model of identity that provides a critical framework for analyzing the constitutive role that grief plays in racial/ethnic subject-formation" (Cheng, 2001, p. xi).

From this analytic vantage point, I identify occurrences of racial grief, or the trauma continuously produced from decades of white supremacist education policy and practices, through student experiences with racism at Sumner. Within these experiences exist the harmful dimensions of trauma (melancholia) intersecting with instances of resistance to this trauma (mourning). However, the interplay between melancholia and mourning is not a seamless intersectional process; it represents a constant give and take, it vacillates between the two. At times there may be paralysis, and at other times, agency. Without these negotiations between mourning and melancholia, pathways for recognizing resistance in the context of trauma may never be exposed.

Methodology, Context, and Data

This study draws from a critical ethnographic research project I conducted at Sumner High School over the course of the 2014–2015 school year. Critical ethnography (Madison, 2005) is an emancipatory research approach that strives to identify, elucidate, and ultimately interrupt oppression. As such, my central aim was to understand the complexities of racial trauma, its effects on black identity, and the ways black youth resisted.

I chose to do my research at Sumner and to work with students in a twelfth-grade English language arts (ELA) course because of my intimate knowledge

of this setting. My positionality as a black male researcher familiar with both my participants and the research setting was advantageous in two distinct ways. First, for nine years I was an ELA teacher at Sumner, and during that time, starting with my very first day of teaching, I navigated racial obstacles (Grinage, 2011). My insider knowledge of Sumner afforded me insights into how racism functioned within the school culture. Second, the twelfth-grade participants had been my students when they were in the ninth and tenth grades. This degree of familiarity with both the school and the participants enhanced my ability to analyze the nuances of racism and heightened my responsiveness to student experiences with racial trauma.

It can be valuable for the researcher to be the same race as their participants when focusing on issues of racism, since the researcher can draw from their experiential knowledge on the subject (Milner, 2007). What I call *black racial bonding* best characterizes these relationships, where shared racial identities enable the researcher and participants—or teacher and students—to collaboratively traverse hostile racial environments. This type of bonding occurs in contradistinction to practices of "white racial bonding" (DiAngelo, 2018) that serve to uphold white supremacy, since our connections sought to understand and disrupt racism. Black racial bonding took place, for example, when Monica, a black student, approached me when she was in my ninth-grade ELA class to tell me about witnessing her white teacher exhibit racially biased behavior. She and I had a conversation about what it meant to hold biases. Over time, she frequently came to me to discuss racial issues, and I would give her advice based on my own past racial experiences. I developed similar relationships with all the black students I reference in this article.

Black racial bonding was especially critical as I transitioned into my role as researcher. Sumner, a large suburban school with close to three thousand students, had experienced changing demographics; over a decade, the students-of-color population grew from around 10 percent to over 40 percent, with half of this segment identifying as black. Throughout this shift, the teaching staff remained overwhelmingly white, and some of these teachers were ill-equipped to meet the educational needs of their students of color. Add to this societal tension surrounding police violence in black communities across the nation, and Sumner High became a place in which racial trauma was prevalent. With only one black teacher at Sumner, my return as a researcher was important to my black student research participants, who were struggling with racism inside and outside of school.

Trust was a critical factor in our black racial bonding, since my participants knew that when we discussed racism, they would be able to share their experiences without fear of being minimized or ignored. Also, we could communicate with empathy and compassion because of the bonds we had formed while coping with racism together when I was teaching at Sumner. As a result, many black students were eager to share their experiences with racism because they knew my response would be nonjudgmental and affirming.

Knowing me as their former black teacher who was attempting to understand how race functioned in their lives also contributed to their willingness to discuss racism. For one, there were not many adults in the school who openly welcomed and supported such conversations, especially other black adults. In addition to the one black teacher, there were only three other teachers of color at the school, and they all identified as Asian American. Overall, 7 percent of staff identified as people of color, 4 percent of those as black, making Sumner's adult population overwhelmingly white. They also trusted that our conversations would remain confidential; they knew I would not put them in a position where they would face any sort of retribution or backlash from staff members who they named as exhibiting racist behavior. But perhaps most important, the creation of spaces through interviews and informal conversations allowed them to identify and comprehend the racial trauma they were feeling and served as a process for healing. Students often expressed gratitude with a simple "thank you" or an admission that they felt better about certain situations after engaging in these conversations. These expressions, along with their eagerness to continue to discuss race with me, indicated that there was a degree of comfort and healing in these moments.

I collected data from the entire ELA class of thirty-three students (nine of whom identified as black), but I relied on previously established connections with a core group of five black students for a significant portion of the data. I employed a purposeful sampling technique based on these past connections since these five students were the individuals who I had most often collaborated with while navigating racial obstacles as their former teacher. This relationship continued in my role as researcher; these five students were the most enthusiastic about continuing our racial bonding and discussing the racism they were experiencing. A potential limitation for this purposeful sampling technique is a degree of researcher bias where certain phenomena occurring outside of the core sample group could go unnoticed. Also, power dynamics were present, considering my authoritative position as researcher and their former teacher, which may have influenced what students felt compelled to share. Yet, this technique afforded me with distinctive opportunities to deeply engage with participants about their racial experiences.

Data collection consisted of semistructured interviews, observations in the ELA classroom, and the examination of ELA curriculum and student writing that took place during the 2014–2015 school year and reflected the ways in which my participants had interacted with me when I was their teacher. For instance, I attempted to capture how our process of black racial bonding occurred by audio-recording classroom observations and transcribing interviews we had concerning their encounters with racism. My approach to data analysis also developed from these relationships. As I reflected on the collaborative aspects of racial bonding, I sought to recognize occurrences of racial trauma as students navigated their senior year of high school.

The trusting connections I had formed with this core group of participants served to enrich data collection, yet a primary challenge surfaced as a result of our history of black racial bonding and my insider knowledge of the research setting. Namely, participants began to share only stories of racism with me, rather than communicating other experiences in their lives unrelated to race. We fell back into old patterns of interaction; they were practiced at confessing their racial grief, and I was adept at assuaging their grief and providing advice.

I was aware of these dynamics in the field and sought to mitigate them by having informal conversations unrelated to race. This strategy worked from time to time, but conversations always seemed to circle back to race since it was the source of our reciprocity: black adults at the school were not always readily available to discuss these issues, but I was always in close proximity as the participant observer collecting data, and they were incentivized to share these stories because our relationship was dedicated to healing from racism. It was not until I began data analysis that I realized their eagerness to share their pain was connected to how black people often become skilled at conveying melancholia but not necessarily self-reflective on how they navigate and survive their racial trauma, or how they mourn while suffering melancholia. The overreliance on this type of conveyance amounts to identifying and yielding to the harmful effects of trauma while minimizing or failing to notice the ongoing agency to "work through" the trauma—becoming adept at only naming racial injuries rather than speaking out against those injuries.

My initial attempts to analyze the data involved illustrating how black students experienced racism inside Sumner High and how these experiences became a perpetual source of racial trauma in their lives. For example, I labeled students' expressions of frustration, sadness, and defeat after continuously enduring racism as visible forms of racial grief, as affective communications of racial trauma. However, two lingering questions emerged from my data that challenged my initial analyses of the experiences of black students at Sumner: How does racial grief function beyond demonstrative verbal, emotive, and/or affective expressions? And despite the continual presence of racial trauma, how were students simultaneously resisting and thriving within school spaces? In search of answers to these questions I realized that my conception of racial trauma relied exclusively on pathologizing descriptions of racial grief by only focusing on the harmful visible aspects of racism that created barriers to understanding the complexities of racial trauma. I, too, caught myself falling victim to the damage-centered research paradigmatic trap.

Through an engagement with racial melancholia as a framework for interpreting how trauma and resilience often coexist, I was able to make visible the nuances surrounding how students were harmed by racism but also reveal how in this injury there were moments of healing. What emerged were individual and collective experiences of racial grief that I define as melancholia. And alongside melancholia were individual and collective practices of resistance,

signifying mourning. The presence of both grief and resistance is representative of complex negotiations between mourning and melancholia.

Findings

Silencing Race at Sumner High

At Sumner, black students were subjected to various occurrences of racism, including inappropriate teacher behavior, racial incidents in the hallways, and a Eurocentric curriculum. However, perhaps the most flagrant disregard for black students and their ability to confront their traumas was educators' refusal to teach, discuss, or even mention the topic of race in their courses.

All five of my participants described various moments when they were ignored or denied the opportunity to discuss racial issues. Monica, whose passion for social justice motivated her to often ask critical questions, discussed an incident in which she posed a question concerning racial inequities and felt the teacher chastised her for doing so:

> I asked my [white male] geography teacher, I said, "Why do you think that our state has some of the best test scores in the nation, but we are leading the nation for the biggest racial achievement gap?" You know, he kind of got offended by that and asked me why I think it's the teacher's fault.

Monica's attempt to understand how racism functions in society—in this case asking about racial disparities in education—was not only thoroughly denied by the teacher but was treated as an inappropriate question. The way she felt about this interaction illustrates the prohibitive nature of racial discourse in classrooms at Sumner: "I didn't feel shocked because it was something that I kind of expected, but I did feel angry because he's a teacher, and him being in his position, I feel like he should have created more of a relationship there with that question."

The way the teacher silenced Monica's curiosity about race is not uncommon. As education researchers have identified, this form of avoidance perpetuates white hegemonic ideologies within school and classroom spaces (Castagno, 2008; Pollock, 2004). Monica's anger, but certainly not surprise, at the teacher's response echoed how many black students felt about how teachers viewed the importance of race at Sumner—that is, insignificant and, at times, inappropriate.

Monica's admission about the way she felt when her question was rebuffed also contained a reference to the power dynamics of the interaction, the teacher being in a position to cut off communication with her. This emphasizes the authority the teacher had to silence race dialogue in the classroom. The teacher's refusal to answer the question and subsequent admonishment of Monica for attempting to ask the question signaled a "social etiquette of the dominant culture, which includes knowing where and when to raise a particular issue" (Castagno, 2008, p. 325). Monica, along with other students in the

geography class, was being taught that not only should race not be discussed, but it is actually impolite to do so. Her lack of surprise when the teacher "got offended" suggests that these forms of social etiquette are entrenched institutional procedures.

James also noted the authoritative position that teachers held when silencing race dialogue. When I asked him why his teachers never discussed race in their classrooms, he immediately responded:

> Straight up because white people are not comfortable talking about that stuff. Why do they have to worry about race? They are in a privileged position. They are white, male so they don't realize it is an issue for other people, so it doesn't get talked about in class.

The ways that Monica's and James's teachers silenced racial issues in their classrooms restricted access to learning about racism's impact on society.

The exclusion of racial issues in classrooms is certainly a pedagogical concern, but there are curricular implications at work here as well. It is one thing to not discuss race, but it is quite another to conceal the racial history of a nation. This type of curricular omission was evident to Carla, a student who was interested in issues related to the local black community and had a strong desire to learn about black history. I asked Carla how she reacted to witnessing racist incidents in the school, and she shared a story about a white teacher who removed her from class:

> I had this little African scarf on that I wear around my neck. And the [history] teacher said that wasn't appropriate and I notice some of the white kids in class have things like inappropriate shirts and what not, but that was not a problem. And I got kicked out.

I then asked her how she felt about how the teacher responded to her wearing the scarf, and she said:

> I feel like wearing the scarf can represent my culture to support diversity. I should be able to do that . . . People may not see this as being racism, and this is one of the unseen things, but the fact that there's not enough talk about black stuff that went on. All my years studying being in school since third grade, it's always been the Holocaust. Yes, that's good to talk about, but okay. It's always been certain types of topics and then Black History Month. They don't really tell you things. At the same time, how come I don't see anyone in a textbook that looks like me, and how am I supposed to excel when I don't know about these [historical] figures, when I don't have teachers talking to the class about these things?

When I asked Carla if incidents like this changed the way she thought about school, she replied, "No, because at the end of the day I still have to come here. I feel a lot of ways about the school, but what can I do? Either way I still have to come here!" She was resigned to the fact that she had to be exposed to racial trauma at school.

These depictions of students' frustrations with their white teachers demonstrate how silencing race at Sumner exacerbated students' racial trauma by denying outlets for them to make sense of racism and address their grief. These struggles with racial grief came out of their repeatedly discouraged responses to racial silence as they were enduring traumas that were unrecognized and discredited by their teachers.

Confronting Racial Trauma Inside the ELA Classroom

Outside the ELA classroom, students lamented the restrictions placed on discussing race because most of their teachers avoided the topic in their courses. However, inside the ELA classroom there were opportunities to discuss racism because Mr. Turner, a veteran white teacher, believed it was important to do so. In particular, Mr. Turner recognized that racial violence was a critical topic to examine in the classroom. Despite Mr. Turner's attempts to create opportunities for students to talk about racism, trauma was still present for black students in the class. The source of this trauma originated most prominently through white classmates' indifference to or dismissal of black student assertions of the reality of racism and the existence of racial violence within communities of color.

For instance, racial trauma emerged for Monica when Mr. Turner facilitated a dialogue with the class concerning police violence in black communities. When a white student stated that police officers shooting black people did not prove that racism still exists, Monica vigorously shook her head in disagreement. She hesitated to speak at first, holding in her anger, but after pausing to take a deep breathe, she calmly replied.

> How can you say it doesn't exist? What proof do you need? They killed Tamir Rice and he was innocent because he had a toy gun. Other people they killed and there are videos of it happening. I don't get how people keep saying this isn't happening. It's like right in front of your face.

Before anyone could respond, she grabbed the bathroom pass and rushed out of the classroom. Later, after class, I asked her how she was feeling, and she cast her gaze to the floor and, with a sigh, responded, "I'm fine. It's just—I'm getting annoyed at white people not believing there's racism. It's just gets to be too much sometimes." Monica's response demonstrates the harmful effects of racial trauma and the suffering that takes place for black youth; her declaration that white denials of racism are "too much" highlights the production of melancholia within schools and shows an outward display of racial grief.

In another, similar incident Richard became frustrated during a class activity where students positioned their bodies on an imaginary continuum between 1, no racial progress, and 10, full racial equity; this was designed to foster dialogue around how much racial progress the US has achieved since the 1930s. When Richard positioned himself on the low end of the continuum, around

2, and a white student stood around 8, Richard confronted racial trauma (Grinage, 2019). After disengaging from the activity by putting his head down on his desk in response to heightened tensions created by the white student's position on the high end of the continuum, Richard felt a sense of despair. He explained his disengagement after class to Mr. Turner and me:

> I can't do this anymore. I don't know what to do . . . I was in the car for the Trayvon Martin verdict and I didn't know what to do. During Michael Brown and Eric Garner, those verdicts, I was in the car too. This keeps happening again and again, and again . . . I feel hopeless.

Richard's direct reference to victims of police violence echoed the concerns other black students had with racism occurring outside Sumner and the racial trauma they experienced inside Sumner.

Struggles with Racial Violence and the Police

Richard's trauma surrounding the deaths of black men/boys who were victims of police brutality was shared by James and Fredrick. All three of these students were concerned with these public displays of racial violence because they often thought about the possibility of suffering the same fate. This reality emerged for James after he listened to his father, concerned for his safety, explain the appropriate way to act if he is confronted by a police officer.

After this conversation, James was driving, with his father in the passenger seat, and was pulled over by a police officer:

> A cop pulled us over, my dad and I over, right after we had the conversation about how to deal with racist cops. And the feeling I had is that my heart sunk. I didn't know what was going on with my body. I had control over my body, but at the same time I don't know what my body was doing. I know I rolled down the window. I got out my license and stuff, but I actually don't know what I could have—like what my body was doing. It was just so many emotions, so many things running through my head at that one time. Like so, what is going to happen?

Even though the police officer let James go with a warning for expired tags, the encounter profoundly frightened James. He believed that his life was in danger.

Fredrick also named racial violence as a source for his racial trauma. I asked Fredrick how he felt when witnessing racism, and he said:

> Depending on what it is. Sometimes things won't affect me really. It will kind of just fly over my head. I will notice it, but as far as my emotions, it won't really trigger anything. And then there are some times with people, and it keeps happening. It will have an effect on you. So, for instance, when Trayvon Martin was killed, that was like I seen it, and I was like, "That is kind of messed up." When it happened with Eric Garner and Michael Brown and then Tamir Rice, that is when I started taking it kind of hard.

These depictions of the ways in which racial violence and death adversely affected these black students underscores the added layer of grief present when considering how racial trauma accumulates.

Collaborative Resistance

When black students shared with me the ways in which they endured racism at Sumner, I interpreted their experiences as deeply traumatizing. I label these black students' expressions of pain as melancholic in nature. However, in the context of endless mourning, these forms of racial trauma come out of the centuries-old legacy of white supremacy in the US. This requires new ways of thinking about agency that provides space for mourning in relation to melancholia. Here I identify instances when black students collaboratively resisted racism and found ways to mourn as they worked through their racial trauma.

The best illustration of resistance to trauma was exhibited by Fredrick, Richard, and James, three students who shared a struggle to contest racism both inside and outside of Sumner High. Although each of these students identified themself slightly differently along racial and ethnic lines, it was their double-conscious (Du Bois, 1903) awareness of their blackness that unified them. James explained:

> They [white people and police officers] don't see Fredrick [African American and white] as white, he's black; they don't see Richard [African American] as light skinned, he's black; they don't see me [Cambodian and African American] as half-Asian, I'm black. And that is the reality that we have to face, and it kind of sucks when people don't get that. And I have to face the consequences. I don't even like *saying* the consequences. Like, I can't walk outside without watching out for a cop. I have to turn my music down when I am in front of a cop, beside a cop. I see a cop three cars in front of me, I turn my music down. I shouldn't have to do that.

James shows a critical awareness of his blackness and how he and his friends are viewed through the eyes of whiteness. This awareness, exhibited by all three students, represents the social dimensions of racial melancholia where negotiations between mourning and melancholia are mobilized as a unifying force, where the "we," the collective, jointly battles racism and "works through" the various traumas they experienced. The trauma experienced in schools and the complexities of black suffering in general were mitigated through the solidarity forged by the relationship between Fredrick, Richard, and James, which was strengthened over the course of their four years together at Sumner. It is important to note that all three of them were honors students, took the most rigorous courses, and were highly active within the school community, serving as leaders of various clubs and organizations. Monica and Carla can be described in the same way, which demonstrates how their experiences with racial trauma did not disable them from achieving a certain amount of aca-

demic success. Yet, in sharp contrast to their embrace of school culture was their incisive critique of how systems and institutions are racialized.

For instance, on several different occasions, I observed each of these students reading and discussing books like *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (Alexander, 2010) and *Between the World and Me* (Coates, 2015). Many of our conversations involved them sharing insights they learned from these books and asking me for names of "more good books about race." Their out-of-school literacy practices reflected an interest in learning about racism since most of their classes did not incorporate racial topics in the curriculum. This type of learning can illuminate the ways in which those experiencing racial trauma make sense of how these traumas function and where they originate. Moglen (2005) sees this process as a crucial part of learning to mourn social injury: "As victims gain consciousness of the injuries they have endured (and their causes), the task of 'working through' will become, increasingly, the task of mourning" (p. 161).

Reading about race did help Fredrick, Richard, and James gain a deeper understanding of how racism functions in society. For example, talking about the impact of structural racism, Frederick said:

> From some of the stuff I've been reading, I know that institutional racism is, in a way, parallel to covert racism in that you don't really notice it as much. Especially now, since the laws have been in place for such a long time and as generations go on, we kind of just accept the laws that are in place when we were born and the laws we have grown up into.

This intellectual comprehension of race characterizes the level of understanding these three students exhibited about the deployment of racism. Fredrick's ability to articulate how racism has been covertly inscribed into laws and institutions for generations showed a sophisticated grasp of racism that allowed for a deeper knowledge of his racially subordinate position in society. The act of raising critical consciousness, then, became a necessary aspect of learning to mourn racial loss as the students attempted to comprehend the social structures that perpetuate their trauma.

Reading books about race to better comprehend racism, Fredrick, Richard, and James consumed these texts also as a means of survival. Their awareness of police violence committed against black bodies motivated them to deliberately and collaboratively read texts like *The New Jim Crow* and *Between the World and Me* out of concern for their own well-being. These books in particular were likely important to them because Alexander and Coates focus their analyses on the plight of black youth in America by exposing and critiquing racial violence. I interpret their engagement with these texts as connected to the explicit violence they witnessed in society and in their own lives. For instance, a week or two after James, with his father, was pulled over by the police officer, I observed that James, Fredrick, and Richard had all checked out copies of *The New Jim Crow* from the public library. They also sought to keep each other

interested and accountable for reading. For example, one day before the start of class, I heard Fredrick discussing *The New Jim Crow* with James, asking, "Did you get to the part talking about prison and schools? You got to read that part." This commitment to reading and discussing race together resembles the transformative power of racial melancholia where social bonding over shared traumas can create spaces for resistance and mourning.

In addition to their support for each other in reading about racism, Fredrick, Richard, and James dealt with racial trauma inside classrooms at Sumner in a similarly collaborative manner. Their entrance into honors-level courses enhanced the traumas they experienced; placement in these accelerated courses was traditionally reserved for white students, and, as a result, black students in these classes were often subjected to racial microaggressions (Sue, 2010). Teachers often maintained low expectations for the black students and implemented disciplinary policies unfairly to punish students of color. In describing these microaggressions, James said about a teacher that "it was obvious to us [James, Fredrick, and Richard] that she was only going to help the white students. We gave up asking for help after a while and just started trying to help each other."

A specific illustration of the support they provided each other was how they together resisted the racial transgressions from an honors teacher that blatantly favored white students over students of color. During the first semester of the course, each of them happened to be in separate classes. After enduring various racial incidents, they requested to be placed in the same class for the second semester. This request was granted, and they were able to provide each other with emotional support and shield one another from the traumatic classroom experiences that hurt them. Fredrick said, "That teacher didn't like us at all, but it was easier to deal with it when we were all in the class together. We supported each other. I think we felt more comfortable in there too just knowing, like, 'I got your back.'"

Yet, perhaps the most telling indication of the importance of the social bonds formed by this group of students was when their support for one another was absent. For example, in speaking about the exchange with his white classmate who positioned himself on the high end of the continuum, and of how he disengaged by putting his head down on his desk, Richard revealed why he was so angry after the incident:

> Me and James and Fredrick, we usually talk to each other about certain things that happen. They weren't there at the time, so I didn't really get a chance to do that. I didn't really get a chance to, I guess, talk about it, so that's another reason why I kind of expressed so much anger to you and Mr. Turner. Because I couldn't express it to Fredrick and James.

This represents the importance of social formations when working to mourn, which, in the context of racial melancholia, denotes a legislation of one's racial grief.

Discussion

Disarticulated Grief

For black students, schools and classrooms can act as spaces for learning methods for diagnosing and resisting the traumas that afflict them by increasing their racial literacy and subsequently expanding their capacity to gain influence over the forces that oppress them. Unfortunately, education often worsens the racial traumas that youth of color face through policies and practices that uphold white dominance (Leonardo, 2009).

The consequences of silencing race at Sumner High School had an insidious effect on black students in the context of their racial grief. At an institutional level, Sumner exhibited a particular kind of "systemic melancholia" that structures institutions with dominant white values (Vaught, 2012). What Vaught (2012) labels "institutional racist melancholia" calls attention to an organization's ability to shape psychic and affective foundations of grief. At Sumner, the formation of this grief emerged through the racial silence exhibited by the teachers at the school as well as through the ways in which white students denied the existence of racism when the topic was discussed in the ELA classroom. The institution perpetuated a melancholic narrative of equal access for all, despite the ingrained nationwide and local racial disparities related to the educational opportunity gap (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Vaught (2012) indicates that this dominant mode of discourse establishes an environment where racial injury is denied recognition and, in the process, becomes naturalized.

The denials of racial injury surfaced repeatedly for my black participants in Sumner. However, when considering the prevalence of racial violence enacted on black communities outside of Sumner, these denials became more significant. When James was stopped by a police officer, the racial trauma did not recede and disappear the next day as James walks into history class. This trauma is a kind of racial baggage that always remains. Sumner's institutional melancholia rendered James's encounter with the police insignificant in relation to the daily lesson plan. James told me that he did not discuss the incident with any of his teachers at Sumner and even though he was anxious all day, he had to pretend nothing was wrong. The injurious effects of racism on the body and psyche are not recognized by the school, which conceals how the school itself produces racial traumas that impact the lives of black students attending Sumner.

The production and ensuing obfuscation of racial trauma stemming from Sumner's institutional melancholia fosters what Cheng (2001) refers to as "disarticulated grief"—a form of sorrow where the cause of one's grief becomes disconnected from the original loss. In other words, one may understand that they have incurred racial injury but cannot clearly identify how and why they were (and continue to be) injured. The silencing of race within classrooms, the racial trauma experienced by students, and the psychosocial consequences of these interactions disable opportunities for mourning. Moglen (2005) theo-

rizes that socially induced forms of trauma cross over into psychic boundaries, and, as a result, injuries are seldom understood or identifiable since these traumas are often experienced in a vague manner where the legacy of past violent atrocities (e.g., chattel slavery, the Holocaust) become the source for traumas in the present. However, the linkages between how these past atrocities manifest psychically in the present are not always clearly discernable. In the case of the racial melancholic, the lost object—loss experienced as a result of past and present forms of racial violence (e.g., US slavery, colonialism, mass incarceration)—becomes ambiguous due to disarticulated grief. Moglen (2005) explains the psychosocial impact of this trauma:

> People experience structural social injuries as traumas when they do not possess adequate analyses of the processes or formations that have harmed them. In the absence of such social or historical accounts, they will experience these processes not merely as injurious, but as mysteriously and inexplicably so. It is the lack of adequately explanatory social narratives that makes these catastrophic experiences not only painful but psychically unassimilable. (p. 161)

Most classrooms at Sumner prevented black students from mourning by disabling their ability to discern the various forms of racial violence that have been committed by the US.

"Double" Consciousness, Suffering, and Loss

The depictions of racist experiences in classrooms can be understood as a profound type of suffering requiring black students to endure traumas elicited by school policies and practices. This pain was apparent when I asked Carla if experiencing racist incidents at Sumner changed the way she thought about Sumner; her response was to express indifference because she felt obligated to attend school. Her acquiescence points to the exacerbation of racial melancholia that Dumas (2014) characterizes as being connected to the elusiveness of educational equity and upward social mobility for black students. The fallacy of education as a way for black students to achieve and improve their life chances leads Dumas (2014) to call schooling a "site for black suffering," believing the intensification of racial melancholia is attached to black students who display an increased awareness of the myth of educational equity. This suffering is manifested through collective historical memories that are psychically linked to the nation's pattern of racial exclusion, one that has existed since slavery and still haunts us in the present. However, together with the presence of suffering, the amplification of melancholia also unlocks pathways for agency through the collective awareness of these adverse circumstances, as demonstrated by Fredrick, James, and Richard's approaches to contesting racism as a method for mourning when faced with melancholia.

To illustrate the complexities of experiencing racism in black life, various scholars have used the signifier "double," referencing the psychosocial aspects of racial trauma. One of the most prominent examples of the "double" sig-

nifier is Du Bois's (1903) use of "double consciousness" to describe a black self-consciousness split between the way blacks view themselves and the way they are viewed by the white world surrounding them. Double consciousness underscores the psychosocial splitting of black identity as a feeling of "two-ness"—"two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 9). These "unreconciled" and "warring ideals" indicate an expression of America's melancholic relationship with race: the belief in equality poised against the ubiquitous evidence of racial oppression (Cheng, 2001) and the internalization of these hypocritical values within the black body.

Du Bois (1903) recognized a key attribute of a nonpathologized conception of racial melancholia when referring to the "dogged strength" of blackness to be able to survive trauma. The persistence and endurance of black strength when faced with centuries of racial discrimination is a generative characteristic of both racial melancholia and double consciousness. For example, James, and other black students at Sumner, had to balance an identity split between enduring racial oppression and succeeding in a space that denied this oppression. James believed his life was in danger when he was confronted by a police officer, but the next day at school his traumatic experience had to be set to the side.

Liz Frost and Paul Hoggett's (2008) term "double suffering" and Cheng's (2001) notion of "double loss" are further conceptualizations of doubling that engage psychosocial theories of trauma. Frost and Hoggett (2008) define double suffering as circumstances where people face experiences "as powerless objects rather than as active agents" (p. 449). They refer to the double in this scenario as the existence of both conscious and unconscious forms of suffering, where unconscious pain is eaten, becomes indigestible, and then remains stuck in the system as psychic toxins (Bion, 1962), which take the form of "traumatic repetitions" (Freud, 1920). Hence, Frost and Hoggett write, "the individual's response to suffering causes further suffering . . . this is why we call it 'double suffering'" (p. 449).

Cheng (2001) similarly frames double loss as the consumption of racial injury, where the racialized subject is forced to take in the loss and then reidentify with the loss. Since the loss cannot be projected onto others, it remains entrenched within the self. Therefore, "The racially melancholic minority is doubly versed in the art of losing" (p. 175). Symbolizations of the double signify suffering that is embodied by the racialized subject and becomes central to the survival of the subject within a white supremacist society.

Within the context of education, Dumas (2014) describes trauma as a type of doubling: "Marginalized groups suffer doubly in relation to schooling: First, the drudgery and futility of the school experience itself, and second, through the loss of hope for oneself individually, and for the group, collectively" (p. 8). It is important to highlight the idea of a collective loss of hope within a

framework of suffering in schools. Pointing more specifically to the presence of resiliency and agency in relation to the development of a double consciousness, racial melancholia's most important attribute for black student survival and progress in education is the *shared* histories of trauma that enable students to practice collective mourning. Dumas (2014) identifies "the key element in social suffering [as] a *group's* consciousness of its own pain, which inspires a collective imagination of a 'we' who suffer, a 'we' whose identity is under attack" (p. 6). For black students who experience the trauma of schooling and its doubling effects, collective mourning represents a communal effort to resist racism through material and psychic negotiations between mourning and melancholia. This practice of collective mourning was exhibited through Fredrick, Richard, and James's shared bonds—the "we" that resists in the face of trauma.

Collective Mourning

Collective mourning as a method for resistance represents the social dimension of melancholia where bonds surrounding shared traumas are formed to contest racism. The embodiment of racial injury is shifted from an individualized form of grief to a collective acknowledgment of similar racial wounds. An added layer to Dumas's (2014) framework for black suffering in schools, in addition to a lack of upward mobility, was the uptick in public displays of police brutality against black, brown, and Indigenous populations in the US. This racism was especially traumatic for Fredrick, Richard, and James because of the overt police violence committed against numerous black males within the span of five months. The deaths of these black males had an adverse effect on Fredrick, Richard, and James in their daily lives at school. Within classroom spaces at Sumner, their attempts at mourning were discouraged and prohibited. As a result, they were restricted to processing their grief in the hallways and during lunch.

The social bonds they forged demonstrate the nonpathological core of racial melancholia through the agentic pathways they constructed despite the presence of racial trauma. The forging of these bonds illustrates the actionable components of double consciousness and racial melancholia. The shared knowledge of how their blackness was dangerous when viewed through the lens of a white supremacist society where young black men perish at the hands of police officers and where schools deny and silence this truth underscores their conscious recognition of a "we" that suffers and a "we" that is under attack. Yet, arising from this shared pain were collective forms of resistance. Working together to thrive in spite of enduring racial trauma became a central focus of Fredrick, Richard, and James's existence inside and outside of school.

This form of collective resistance can be framed as a critical antiracist intervention that functions on a psychosocial level, where social connections can lead toward psychic opportunities for mourning racial injury through what David Eng and Shinhee Han (2000) refer to as "psychic citizenship":

> Indeed, it is our belief that the refusal to view identities under social erasure as individual pathology and permanent damage lies in the communal appropriation of melancholia, it refunctioning as a structure of everyday life that annuls the multitude of losses an unforgiving social world continually demands. (p. 697)

Communal efforts to resist racism and cope with racial trauma engender negotiations between mourning and melancholia. These negotiations create the possibilities for social change.

Similar to Pastor Givens and the surrounding community gathering to mourn the death of Jamar Clark at a Black Lives Matter protest, reframing melancholia as a productive process for engaging with racial loss enables social groups to coalesce around the shared historical traumas that continue to plague the present, a process that can lead to future social transformation.

Conclusion

Racial melancholia structures the process of negotiation between mourning and melancholia that constitutes black agency in a white supremacist society. There is nothing simple about how racial grief is processed and how racial trauma is endured. Nevertheless, attempting to translate the productive aspects of mourning and melancholia into generative possibilities for black youth in education is a meaningful enterprise considering the permanence of racism in America. Therefore, racial trauma should be theorized to challenge pathological conceptions of the black psyche as perpetually damaged. Instead of racial trauma signaling a flaw or a weakness, it needs to be recognized as a highly effective tool for survival and resilience (Menakem, 2017).

In this article, I have used racial melancholia as a framework to illustrate how trauma functioned in the lives of black students who were affected by racism inside and outside of Sumner High School. Their experiences reinforce the importance of using racial melancholia as a method for actualizing racial justice in education. The use of racial melancholia operates to show how enduring racial trauma does not simply pathologize and damage black youth but can unify them and help them thrive. Theorizing racial trauma from this standpoint counteracts centuries-old deficit narratives of blackness in education research and illuminates the myriad assets black students possess within schools and classrooms. This type of emancipatory education is strengthened by Moglen's (2005) conception of mourning social injury:

> For those that are experiencing social processes as traumas, the psychic task of "working through" must involve not only the painful therapeutic project of raising their injuries to consciousness—but also the work of developing explanatory social narratives that will make the ongoing causes of suffering cognitively intelligible. (p. 161)

Finding pathways for endlessly mourning the unrelenting production of racial trauma centralizes the vital shift "from suffering injury to speaking

out against that injury" (Cheng, 2001, p. 3). This movement from damage-centered to healing-centered practices situates racial melancholia as a potentially powerful theoretical approach to reframing racial trauma in education. Further critical engagements with racial melancholia by educational scholars and researchers can bolster racial justice efforts by diminishing deficit-based orientations of trauma. Reframing educational approaches using racial melancholia situates the work of agency as the nonpathologized endurance of blackness in the face of persistent traumas inflicted by white supremacy. This "dogged strength" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 9) and determination engenders the fluidity between mourning and melancholia.

Notes

1. I define *blackness* as communities descended from the African Diaspora. I acknowledge that black identity and black trauma are not monolithic; however, populations emerging from the Diaspora have shared *sources* of trauma that can unite and bond them.
2. To ensure confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for the names of research participants and the research setting.
3. See http://www.mindfulschools; http://www.traumasensistiveschools.org.

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