Article

"I Stopped Sleeping": Teachers of Color and the Impact of Racial Battle Fatigue

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Abstract
Racial battle fatigue (RBF) has been operationalized as the psychological, emotional, and physiological toll of confronting racism. In this article, RBF is used to analyze the toll of racism on teachers of Color who work within a predominantly White profession. We present counterstories of justice-oriented, urban, teachers of Color who demonstrate racism in their professional contexts as a cumulative and ongoing experience that has a detrimental impact on their well-being and retention in the field. We also share their strategies of resilience and resistance, as they rely on a critical community to persist and transform their schools.

Animated and upbeat, positive energy follows Ms. Sunshine Shakur,[1] an African American teacher from Baltimore. Loved by her students, parents, and the largely Black community she serves, Ms. Shakur has a wonderful

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reputation among the families as an engaging, caring, and critically conscious teacher. We met after she had flown across the country to attend a 3-day racial justice professional development (PD) for teachers of Color that we were facilitating. On Day 3, as part of our research on the racialization of teachers of Color, Ms. Shakur sat down to record a digital counterstory—a qualitative research method where marginalized people retell, reframe, and/or respond to the dominant narrative (Yosso, 2006).

She described the racism she had endured over the previous 6 years working alongside a predominantly White staff. She shared numerous moments of facing stereotypes, as well as having her abilities questioned and her insights and expertise challenged by her peers. She had been told she was "too Black" by several teachers, and had repeatedly been called "gurl" by White colleagues trying to "connect." She had been stared at for wearing her hair naturally and put under the microscope by a room full of teachers when asked her opinion of the film *Twelve Years a Slave*. A mother of three, she was asked during an evaluation by her administrator how many children she had, after which it was suggested that her family life had a negative impact on her professional responsibilities and abilities.

Ms. Shakur shared a specific story: One day, she was engaged in a lively conversation with a Black female student outside her classroom. A White colleague approached and asked her if there was a problem, insinuating that she needed help "handling" this student who, in reality, she was just connecting with. She explained, "I guess to him, it looked as if there was some kind of argument going on, but we were just telling each other about what happened." This "misunderstanding" did not sit well with Ms. Shakur. She explained,

> If there was a problem, then *I* would address it. You [the questioning teacher] need to pump your brakes professionally, take a step back and trust me that I'm gonna do what I need to do if there is a conflict. And trust the student. I always have strong relationships with my students, and it's just a cultural thing that we oftentimes get animated when we speak. I speak very loudly and I speak with my hands . . . But the fact that he [the teacher] did that said a lot.

Misread and mistrusted, Ms. Shakur constantly found that her peers thought she needed to be watched and handled, rather than seen as an in-control professional.

In addition, despite her many strengths and deep connection to the community, the administration never positioned her as a resource or a potential leader in the school. After years in her job, she applied to be a lead teacher. She left the interview confident that she had proven herself to be the best candidate and that her experience in the school was incomparable. Even so,

the position was offered to a White teacher who was new to the district and had been publicly demeaning to students of Color.

The racialized experiences Ms. Shakur shared ranged from overt racialization to more covert examples of racism called racial microaggressions (Pierce, 1970; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Although draining, Ms. Shakur explained that she does not just sit back and take racial assaults from her peers, no matter how subtle. She always takes the time to "call them out," set them straight, and explain why it is hurtful. However, the cumulative nature of confronting racism in schools can take its toll (Solórzano et al., 2000). As Ms. Shakur described example after example of everyday racism experienced over 6 years, her cheerful demeanor shifted. Toward the end of this narrative, she shared with a heavy heart that she was leaving her school and the students she loved because she could not take the disrespect anymore.

Through tears, she explained, "It has been an honor to teach in this school, but it has not been a place where I felt valued, appreciated or respected. And it hurts because I am going to miss the students a lot." Emotionally and professionally affected by repeatedly standing against racism that she and her students experienced, Ms. Shakur eventually left a community that she cherished, and who also cherished her.

The taxing impact of racism has been documented by many researchers, scholars, and activists. Be it micro or macro, racism is not confined to a specific moment in time. Those who endure it carry it with them; and those who challenge it expend a great deal of personal energy, often throughout their professional lives. This constant experience with racism and its ongoing toll can foster doubt, produce anxiety, and be exhausting; something Smith (2009) has labeled racial battle fatigue (RBF): "the psychological, emotional, physiological, energy, and time-related cost of fighting against racism" (p. 298). In this article, we build upon critical race theory (CRT) to operationalize RBF with urban teachers of Color, who, although teaching at schools serving majority students of Color, work as racial minorities in a predominantly White profession. To conceptualize RBF for this population, in addition to the narrative of Ms. Shakur that we share above, we present three counterstories of justice-oriented teachers of Color who work, or were training to work, in California-based urban schools—schools situated in or near cities that serve working-class communities of Color. Spanning the teaching pipeline from preservice to novice to veteran teachers, we illuminate racism's cumulative and ongoing impact throughout the profession. The teachers highlighted here share evidence of the psychological and physiological impacts of racism. Despite their resilience through these struggles that

came from finding like-minded professional communities, this article calls for a greater attention to the racial climate in schools, and a focus on racial literacy development of teacher educators, teachers, and school administrators in confronting educational racism.

Theoretical Framing: CRT

CRT was built out of critical legal studies, Ethnic Studies, and women's studies in the 1970s to demonstrate how racism works as a permanent fixture in U.S. institutions (Bell, 1992, 2004). CRT challenges individualized explanations for racial inequality, such as color blindness and meritocracy, by pointing to structural causes for racial hierarchies. Starting with the seizure of indigenous land and the appropriation of the bodies and labor of enslaved people, CRT scholars argue that this nation's laws were constructed to protect White property interests (Harris, 1993), acknowledging the intertwined relationship of race and class oppression. In addition, CRT weaves its analysis with other factors of subordination such as sexism (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano, 1998), nativism (Perez Huber, 2010), and ableism (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013). The theory was adapted into education research in the late-1990s, drawing attention to racial inequity in K-16 school contexts (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano, 1997), and since has become a widely used framework to expose the role of racism in various aspects of education (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015).

Literature Review

Racism in K-12 Schools

Guided by CRT, this article is built on the understanding that racism is prevalent in schools. Racism is the creation or maintenance of a racial hierarchy, supported through institutional power (Solórzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002), and U.S. public schooling has a history driven by racialization and racism, serving to uphold and center whiteness (Dumas, 2016). From Americanization and Native American boarding schools (Spring, 1994), to the socialization of inferiority in segregated schools (Aoki, 1998; Du Bois, 1935; Irons, 2002), and the racial disparities of academic opportunities today, communities of Color have been subjected to dehumanizing schooling conditions throughout U.S. history.

While research on racism within education has primarily focused on the experiences of students of Color, much less attention has been paid to the overall racial climate of schools or racism's impact on K-12 teachers of

Color (Jay, 2009; Kohli, 2016; Kohli, Pizarro, & Nevárez, 2017); as they too have a history of enduring racism. In 1954, when the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* called for de jure desegregation, Black children left schools in their segregated communities for historically White schools. Because racist ideologies remained in tact and White families did not want their children educated by Black teachers, many were forced out of the profession. By 1964, over 45% of African American teachers had lost their jobs (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). Today, we have a large demographic divide, with almost half of enrollees in public schools being students of Color, and only 18% of the teaching force being teachers of Color (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Teachers of Color have also been found to leave the field at a rate 24% higher than their White colleagues (Ingersoll & May, 2012). In teacher education programs, teacher candidates of Color often report feeling silenced, invisibilized, and marginalized (Amos, 2010; Gist, 2017; Montecinos, 2004; Sheets & Chew, 2002). In schools, teachers of Color express feeling equally isolated and overlooked as potential leaders (Kohli, 2016), often forced to serve as racial experts or in stereotypically defined roles that are not related to academics (Amos, 2016; Jay, 2009; Pabon, 2016).

We argue that the macro and microaggressions that teachers of Color experience occur on multiple levels simultaneously. Institutional racism is embedded into the structures, policies, and functions of schooling. Layered on top of this is the racism that teachers experience directly, such as when Ms. Shakur was deemed incapable of handling a conflict with a student. In addition, when teachers of Color witness racism targeted at students, families, and communities of Color, we argue that this also takes a toll on their well-being, even when they are not the direct or intended target. While witnessing racism can be hurtful and emotionally taxing for any caring teacher, racism can be particularly impactful for teachers of Color who have suffered parallel experiences with racism (Hesse, 2002), and/or feel a racial or cultural connection and commitment to students. For example, when colleagues talk in staff meetings or over lunch about how "Latino parents don't care about education" (Valencia & Black, 2002), or Black students are going to "end up flipping burgers" because they do not have the potential for college (student teacher, personal communication, February 21, 2017), if teachers of Color see themselves as part of these communities or have endured similar forms of racialization in their own education, it can heighten the negative impact. The cumulative nature, and the multiple layers and manifestations of racism are detrimental to teachers of Color in many ways, one of which, we argue, is RBF.

RBF

Very little attention has been paid to the psychological and physiological impacts of long-term exposure to racism among people of Color within education, and in particular in K-12 schooling. The concept of RBF was introduced by William Smith (2004) in an effort to theoretically frame and analyze the profound effect of racism on African Americans in predominantly White institutions of higher education. Comparing these experiences with the combat fatigue of soldiers, Smith (2004) defined RBF as,

> a response to the distressing mental/emotional conditions that result from facing racism daily (e.g., racial slights, recurrent indignities and irritations, unfair treatments, including contentious classrooms, and potential threats or dangers under tough to violent and even life-threatening conditions). (p. 180)

Although Smith was the first to conceptualize RBF, he was not the first to talk about the psychological and emotional toll of racism on people of Color. In 1970, Chester Pierce coined the term *Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress* (MEES) to name how the habitual and pervasive experience of dealing with extreme forms of covert racism negatively affects the psyche of African Americans (Pierce, 1970, 1974, 1995). Key CRT scholars built upon Pierce's MEES research, bringing light to everyday racism in education by using his concept of racial microaggressions (Carroll, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000). Smith also built upon this work, marrying racial microaggressions and racism to a growing body of research on diseases that African Americans experience due to constant, racially charged, high-stress situations from which there is no relief; that he then conceptualized as RBF.

Since this preliminary definition, Smith and colleagues have expanded the construct of RBF. Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2006) explain,

> The stress of unavoidable front-line racial battles in historically white spaces leads to people of color feeling mentally, emotionally, and physically drained. The stress from racial microaggressions can become lethal when the accumulation of physiological symptoms of racial battle fatigue are untreated, unnoticed, misdiagnosed, or personally dismissed. (p. 301)

Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) have tied RBF to physiological symptoms (including issues like fatigue and elevated blood pressure) and psychological symptoms (including anger, loss of self-confidence, and hypervigilance) that African American male students experience in historically White institutions of higher education.

RBF has since been integrated into a number of different areas of research on racism (sociological, psychological, epidemiological, and historical) and its impacts on people of Color. Researchers have also applied Smith's frameworks to the experiences of other communities of Color, segments within these communities, and multiple racial groups, including Latinxs[2] (Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009), Aboriginals (Currie, Wild, Schopflocher, Laing, & Veugelers, 2012), and multiracial groups among people of Color, which included Asian Americans (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011; Hubain, Allen, Harris, & Linder, 2016).

RBF research by key scholars (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Jay, 2009; Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2007) has demonstrated that people of Color in traditionally White spaces can experience (a) hypervigilance, (b) hyper-visibility and hyper-invisibility, (c) social withdrawal from colleagues, (d) self-censorship in school settings, (e) loss of self-confidence and questioning ability or worth, (f) giving up personal goals for professional acknowledgment and advancement, and (g) adopting the dominant paradigm, practices, rules, norms, and roles for teachers of Color. Any of these experiences can lead to a severe sense of isolation and an exorbitant investment of time and energy into confronting racism. Furthermore, the RBF research reveals the significant psychosocial and emotional impacts of RBF on people of Color: (a) anxiety, (b) frustration, (c) anger and anger-suppression, (d) helplessness, (e) hopelessness, and (f) depression. These and other impacts can lead to physiological impacts including (a) loss of or increase in appetite, (b) extreme fatigue, (c) hypertension, (d) sleeplessness, and other effects.

Research on RBF adds to our understanding of the way in which racism, in its many different forms, affects people of Color in education. In this study, we apply the concept of RBF to qualitatively unpack the physiological, emotional, and psychological impacts of ongoing and cumulative racism on teachers of Color in K-12 schools. In doing so, we aim to draw attention to school racial climate and its significant role in supporting or undermining the possibilities of a critical and diverse teaching force.

Method

Data presented in this article were both gathered and presented using the qualitative method of counterstorytelling. Theorized within the scholarly tradition of CRT, counterstorytelling is a process in which marginalized people share narratives that challenge accepted views, myths, values, and norms that are steeped in historical and contemporary stereotypes and racism (Yosso, 2006). A tool of critical race legal scholars to (re)present reality through the

vantage point of those who are minoritized, education scholars have adapted the concept to collect and convey empirical research (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002). In this study, counterstories weave participants' narratives with theory as a means to deindividualize the impact of racism on their personal and professional lives. Presenting their experiences together, using a critical race analysis, we highlight the role of institutional racism and school racial climate in the challenges faced by teachers of Color.

The first author of this article is a Chicano professor in an ethnic studies department; the second author is a South Asian woman who primarily researches and teaches future teachers and teacher educators. We are both former K-12 teachers of Color in urban communities, are co-coordinators of a racial justice PD for teachers of Color, and have served as coresearchers for this project. Our positionalities have afforded us personal understanding at a number of levels of the phenomenon of RBF that we study here. In addition, our roles have placed us in community with the participants, heightening their trust and candidness, as well as our responsibility to convey their stories in complex, nuanced ways.

The data presented here were collected within a larger study on the racialization of teachers of Color in schools. That study began with a qualitative questionnaire administered to 441 K-12 teachers from 2011 to 2017, all of whom applied to participate in the PD and self-selected into the study. This PD is designed to support teachers of Color with an explicit and clear commitment to racial justice. Participants are provided a racial justice tool kit that includes insights from practitioners (learned through workshops), scholars (shared in keynotes), co-coordinators (providing lessons from our ongoing research and work in the PD), and then develop action plans that will put these insights into practice.

The participants were all educators who self-identified as justice oriented; 48% identified as Latinx, 20% as Black, 20% as Asian American or Pacific Islander, and 12% as mixed race. Seventy-eight percent of participants were women and 22% were men; 68% of participants were beginning teachers, having taught less than 5 years, and 14% were veteran teachers having taught more than 10 years. The teachers ranged in age from their early 20s to late 50s and represented the teaching spectrum of elementary through high school. They came from communities across the country and the vast majority taught in urban schools and predominantly served students of Color.

The questionnaire asked about (a) the ways in which they work, or wish they could work for racial justice; (b) barriers they experience as teachers of Color; and (c) what they hope to gain from a racial justice focused PD for teachers of Color. Several nuances in how teachers of Color were being racialized emerged: They experienced racial microaggressions, felt isolated,

were overlooked for leadership opportunities, or simply devalued relative to their White peers. It also became evident from the data that these experiences with racism were impinging on the emotional, psychological, and even physiological well-being of these teachers of Color. Although not prompted for these topics, 43 responses referenced lowered self-esteem, anxiety, exhaustion, sleeplessness, or depression in relation to their racialization in their workplaces.

Recognizing that these findings needed deeper qualitative attention for a more comprehensive understanding, we developed the *Teacher of Color Counterstorytelling Project* in 2014. Bridging digital approaches to qualitative research (Dicks, 2011) with critical race methodologies of counterstorytelling, we structured our research so teachers of Color could self-initiate narratives to explain their experiences with racialization in schools using video and audio recordings.

As part of the PD, the teachers were exposed to critical theory and critical race concepts used to frame racialized experiences revealed in the questionnaire. Along with a description about the counterstorytelling project, they were given a packet with prompts about related constructs such as racial microaggressions, internalized racism, RBF, commodification, community cultural wealth, cultural intuition, as well as a prompt to respond to anything else of importance in their experiences as teachers of Color. They were invited to record a 1- to 10-min video response with iPads that could be checked out during the PD. From 2014 to 2016, 47 teachers self-selected into this project and submitted digital recordings. Eight of these teachers specifically responded to the prompt, "In what ways have you experienced racial battle fatigue related to your job as a teacher of Color? What experiences have led to racial battle fatigue? What coping and/or healing strategies have you engaged with for your retention?"

All of the digital recordings were transcribed. We went through a process of axial coding, where we analyzed narratives by the prompts they were in response to. We then went back and engaged in open coding, searching for emergent patterns or connected themes across all the narratives. Through this process, we identified nine narratives that demonstrated RBF (Ms. Shakur's narrative was included in this data). We reanalyzed those transcripts alongside the related 43 questionnaire responses to develop the findings expressed here. Because, in this article, we wanted to present teacher experiences with RBF in depth, only three counterstories are shared. These three (introduced below) were selected because they (a) most thoroughly and effectively conveyed the themes expressed across the nine videos and (b) represent different stages across the teacher pipeline, which highlights the ongoing and pervasive nature of RBF for teachers of Color. Finally, we member checked the

data with participants during data analysis to be clear that our interpretations of their experiences reflected their own.

Counterstories of Teachers of Color in a Predominantly White Profession

The narratives of teachers of Color from the data tell a collective story of racism woven throughout their professional experiences in K-12 schools. Despite their demographic and geographic diversity, they shared a deep commitment to supporting students of Color and to confronting injustice through their work in urban schools. They also shared the detrimental impact of racism that targets them, their students, and the communities they serve. This ongoing and cumulative experience with racial subordination was exhausting and debilitating, and often led to a pushout from the profession (Ingersoll & May, 2012; Kohli, 2016). We share three counterstories that illuminate experiences with RBF and its incredible toll: (a) Bartolina, a Latina[3] preservice teacher who was attending an elite, private university in Northern California; (b) Bayani, a Pilipino[4] teacher from the central valley of California, who had returned to teach at the high school he attended and had just completed his first year; and (c) Liza, a Chicana veteran teacher who worked at a school for students transitioning out of juvenile hall. Their stories highlight struggles with systemic racism, as well as strategies of coping, resilience, and healing that teachers of Color engage in to persist in work they care so deeply about.

Bartolina: Preservice Teacher

Bartolina grew up on the east coast as a Latina in a mostly White suburb. She struggled finding her place in that environment, so when she entered college, she sought connections to her community and culture. Living in ethnic-themed dorms and majoring in comparative studies in race and ethnicity as an undergraduate, she consciously surrounded herself with people of Color who affirmed her experiences and fostered her commitment to racial justice. Immediately after graduating, she transitioned into an elite and acclaimed teacher education program in California and was struck by the overwhelming lack of diversity. The racial isolation she felt in this predominantly White program, as she explained, brought back her own challenging K-12 experiences:

> I am in this heavily, heavily White space and it was just like a flashback to my sixth- through twelfth-grade experience and just being in a room and solely

being the only Latina there. I don't know what it did to me, but it just hurt on the daily.

Many experiences in her program felt marginalizing to Bartolina as a teacher of Color, as they paralleled racialized experiences she had as a K-12 student. She expressed enduring repeated racial microaggressions in her field placements and feeling invisible and isolated during her coursework. One such moment occurred in her classroom management and leadership class. Bartolina shared,

> It was the last day of the class and our professor decided to put on a panel of experienced teachers to give us some of their wisdom . . . The people on the panel are these three older White women who all worked in the Loma Prieta School District [that was suburban and mostly White] . . . I was triggered. I couldn't believe that, again, there was no representation of teachers of Color on this panel, let alone representation of people who worked in a diverse school setting.

Having struggled throughout the program, and this class specifically, with the lack of attention to race or her experiences as a woman of Color, Bartolina was frustrated. She continued with palpable anger and emotion in her voice:

> This class was meant for White teachers. All of our readings were directed to White teachers who want to get to know [how to] get along and be better able to teach students of Color. My voice was not represented in the curriculum. Just like my voice and my history and my past were never represented in my k-12 schooling experience.

Like many credential programs across the nation, Bartolina's teacher education ignored the contributions of teachers of Color (Gist, 2017; Montecinos, 2004; Pabon, 2016). The omission was a reflection of the racism endemic to institutions designed to serve White interests (Amos, 2010). While it was never made explicit, the curriculum, the faculty, the guiding teachers, and the demographics of teacher candidates made it clear that her program's focus was to support the development of a White teaching force complicit in maintaining the status quo, leaving Bartolina out of place and struggling to have her needs met: to be prepared to provide transformative educational experiences in an urban school serving students of Color.

The accumulation of the racism was too much for Bartolina. She continued, sharing the effect that this culminating moment of Whiteness had on her:

> I was fuming when I saw these ladies on the panel and I had this visceral reaction where I could not speak. I could not look up. I felt like crying. I was shaking on the inside and no one around me noticed. I had no one to look up to in the room and at least make eye contact and just roll my eyes with. There was no one who I could just, you know, feel like we were in that together. I wanted to just yell out and scream and cry and be like, "I can't believe that this is your panel of experienced teachers here to share their wisdom with us!" I'm tired of hearing from the White lady or the White man telling me how to teach in an oppressive system.

The literature on RBF explains that experiences with racism, as they accumulate, can have significant physiological impacts on people of Color (Smith et al., 2007). Smith (2009) breaks down this process, "The body responds to insults like it is under a physical attack. Therefore, racial microaggressions found in the campuswide racial climate is physiologically coded as a violent attack, racial terrorism, an act of aggression" (p. 303). Reflecting on her teacher education program, Bartolina felt frustrated and angry and also physically overwhelmed: common responses for many teacher candidates of Color in predominantly White institutions (Amos, 2010). She expended a significant amount of time and energy coping with racialized realities that had little to do with becoming a better teacher. These experiences even led her to contemplate leaving the program and the profession, despite her deep commitment to teaching. In addition, the interaction of her past and present, the cumulative toll of racialization throughout her K-12 schooling and then in her teacher education, caused both an emotional and physiological reaction that is important to note as we consider the sustainability of teachers of Color in a predominantly White profession.

Bayani: Novice Teacher

Bayani, a first-year Pilipino teacher, worked at the same urban high school he had attended in the San Joaquin Valley of California. The school served mostly students of Color and many Pilipina/o students. Prior to returning home, he attended college in the San Francisco Bay Area and participated in a program in which he was trained to teach ethnic studies to high school students. Returning to his former high school as one of the few teachers of Color and the only justice-oriented teacher on his campus, he felt incredibly isolated. He shared a brief description of the climate at his school:

> I worked in a space that assumed things about me and who I am, and on the regular from my coworkers. I heard things like, for example, "What's up

homie?," talking to me [a certain way] because of my age as well as race. A blonde woman with blue eyes . . . one of her students [of Color] had curly hair and [the teacher] was pulling the student's hair and touching her saying, "Wow, I love the feeling of your hair." Doing things like that, that make you feel, "What's going on? Is this the St. Louis World Fair? What are we, on show for you guys?"

Bayani articulated frequent, racialized encounters in his workplace that align with Perez Huber and Solórzano's (2014) definition of racial micro-aggressions: "verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color, often carried out in subtle, automatic or unconscious forms" (p. 6). Often perceived as innocuous statements by his colleagues, his and his students' identities were repeatedly met with racialized curiosity and othering, an experience that cumulatively, can take its toll (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012).

In addition to the racial microaggressions that targeted him and his students, he also felt that the restrictive school climate invalidated and suppressed his contributions to his students and community. Bayani shared,

> At my school I often feel like people are making assumptions about me or who I am and don't take what I have to say seriously . . . I had all these radical ideas I wanted to contribute to an extremely conservative space, an extremely close-minded space . . . There's so much stress in being forced to work with a scripted curriculum, being forced to silence myself and the language I wanted to use and what I wanted to speak on.

The increasingly prescriptive curriculum and depoliticized nature of teacher development (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Pabon, 2016) result in environments that work against the needs and success of students of Color. And although teachers of Color are often recruited for their ability to reach students of Color (Eddy & Easton-Brooks, 2011; Pabon, 2016), many teachers of Color report that they are made to feel like outsiders in their own schools and communities (Bristol, 2018; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). Bayani came into the profession well trained. He had participated in a K-12 ethnic studies program during his undergraduate education that is acclaimed for its success in engaging students of Color, and he attended a top social justice focused teacher education program. Despite his strong ties and understanding of students, cutting edge pedagogical strategies, and extensive experience in the classroom, his ideas on how best to engage students were ignored. Still, Bayani maintained his commitment although he describes how hard this became for him:

The stress was intense 'cause I find myself at this school later than everyone else, earlier than everyone else. During the first winter break I was there every single day for the first half of that break. And what it eventually led to was, in the spring I lost it. I experienced that battle fatigue. I exploded! I hit something and it led to me going to the emergency room . . . I had to come to school with my hand wrapped for a few months and I could only use my left hand and I had to rely on the students doing some things for me. So it created this awareness that, "Yeah, this is serious."

As he explained in his narrative, in the face of the educational disregard of his colleagues, Bayani felt compelled to be a "superhero" for his community and overworked himself, which took both an emotional and physical toll. Smith et al. (2007) highlight hypervigilance as one of the symptoms of RBF and, for teachers of Color, this is often exhibited in their feeling that they hold the weight of their community on their shoulders in the face of racism. This is a draining experience and a common manifestation of RBF.

Bayani was able to articulate that much of his stress stemmed from his racial and ideological isolation. He said, "There are definitely other ways that I could have dealt with the problem, but in the situation, because I had no community I could rely on at that moment, I felt so isolated." Unfortunately, the racial stress of his school site was ongoing and experienced cumulatively. In a follow-up conversation, he explained that "Once a month I would hear an offensive comment, see teachers engage in an offensive activity, or just feel alone. After 3 years, I eventually left the school."

Bayani's experiences demonstrate how the cumulative impact of racism can be overwhelming and even debilitating to teachers of Color in a matter of months. In his case, RBF led to him leaving his alma mater, a school and community he very much wanted to serve.

Liza: Veteran Teacher

Liza was a 14-year veteran teacher in the San Francisco Bay Area at a school that served students who had been in the criminal justice system. A Chicana who attended a predominantly White private elementary school and a racially mixed public high school, she often endured racial stereotypes and deficit thinking. Many teachers and counselors in her own K-12 education did not believe that Mexican students could or should go to college.

Although now serving as a teacher, she continued to witness and endure racism in schools, which was reminiscent of her own educational experiences. As one of the only Latinx and Spanish-speaking teachers at her school, she developed close relationships with her predominantly Latinx students

and often served as an advocate for their and their families' needs. Despite Liza's close connections to the community, however, she often felt simultaneously isolated and hyper-visible among her predominantly White colleagues. She did not feel like she had friends or allies among the staff as they would often engage with her in racialized ways. They asked her how she got rid of her accent, questioned why she was so tall as "Mexicans are short and dark," and was told she was, "intelligent for a Mexican." One administrator went so far as to suggest that she was part of a gang:

> I was pulled into his office and questioned about my choice of jeans and then reminded that the symbol on the pocket [the fleur de lis, which was stitched to represent the brand name] was a gang sign and that I should not be "encouraging gang attire" by wearing those kinds of pants. It felt really intrusive. It felt like, woah, I was being questioned ethically as to where I stood, like they were questioning if I was standing in solidarity with a gang, rather than just wearing clothes on a casual Friday.

Liza highlighted a variety of racialized experiences that reflected stereotypes staff had about her and her students. The microaggressions she found most hurtful, however, were from staff questioning her relationship to the students. They would inquire why she was invited to confirmations or family baptisms, and asked, "Do you know them outside of school? Are you guys related?" Although her cultural, personal, and familial connection to students was natural and something that all teachers should strive for, it was used to "other" her throughout her tenure at the school.

At the time, Liza did not have the frameworks to unpack or name what was happening to her in her professional context. She shared,

> I knew I was experiencing something different. I knew that I felt different. I knew that I couldn't explain why the way principals addressed me felt uneasy. It was so subtle and people would just dismiss it as, "Oh, you're just being paranoid. There was nothing wrong with what he said."

After years of feeling undervalued and demeaned by colleagues and supervisors, the cumulative effect of racism began to take its toll. Liza described some of the emotional and physiological impacts:

> I felt like every time I spoke up and every time I said something about our students, nobody was listening. I spoke too much, so they just tuned me out and it led to a lot of depression. It led to that angry, "gun-shyness." I stopped sleeping. I was eating a lot more than I should, like emotional eating.

Not only was Liza hyper-visible in select racializing moments, she was also hyper-invisible to her colleagues, dismissed, and shut down in times of advocacy, despite her success in engaging students. These experiences led to withdrawal, depression, insomnia, and emotional eating, key symptoms of RBF described by Smith (2009).

The cumulative experience of racism was taxing, and then a specific incident pushed Liza to the brink, emotionally and physically. It was the day her 27th student had passed away. Although they recently had a memorial for a White student who had been hit by a car, because this student had passed away from gun violence, they did nothing to honor his life. Liza was not only hurt by the loss of her student, but also devastated by the differential value placed on the lives of her students of Color. When she asked her administrators for time off to grieve, they were, as she described, "unapologetically callous." They felt she was taking it too personally and needed to just accept that this was the nature of the work. She explained,

> When I said I needed time, I would get a guilt trip or I would get a dismissal of like, "There's nothing wrong with you. All of us here are working with the same kids. You're just taking it too personal. You need to distance yourself. You need to find a balance or if you can't handle this, this is the job, then maybe you should find another job." And I had to literally have a mental breakdown—an emotional breakdown where I could not even get out of bed and I went into triage in crisis at the hospital for mental health, completely falling apart and had to get medical notes—for them to take me seriously that I could not continue this work without support or resources or feeling that my words were important or that my experiences were important.

Shortly after this experience, Liza ended up leaving this school. Several studies have confirmed that for teachers of Color, navigating a predominantly White profession where they are questioned, overlooked, and ignored can lead to pushout (Amos, 2016; Bristol, 2018; Ingersoll & May, 2012; Kohli, 2016; Pabon, 2016). What must also be explored are the psychological processes related to this pushout, as the emotional and physiological toll of racism can be debilitating to teachers of Color who endure layers of racism within the hostile racial climates of schools. While Liza's position exposed her to an extreme amount of trauma, her narrative sheds light on the impact of racism that so many teachers of Color endure. In addition to being witness to the racism students experience, for teachers of Color, their voices are silenced, their experiences are devalued, and their strengths in building connections with students are unacknowledged and ignored.

Coping, Resilience, and Healing From RBF

As Bartolina, Bayani, and Liza demonstrate, the pipeline of teaching is riddled with racism that serves as a barrier to the success and retention of teachers of Color. From credential programs to being a new teacher to serving as a veteran in the field, teachers of Color are neglected, racialized, undervalued, and isolated. Despite the toll that this racism takes and the ways in which teachers of Color are pushed out of their schools and the profession, all three of these teachers in this study remained steadfast in their goals and resilient in the face of RBF.

These teachers each had communities that sustained them through their experiences. They expressed that their resilience came from spaces in which they felt affirmed and developed language and strategies to confront racism in a healthy way. Bayani described the importance of finding a community that remained hopeful, while doing the challenging work of transforming schools: "I think it's important that we continue to reach out, we find ways of coping, ways of healing, ways of liberating yourself, ways of finding hope in spaces that are not as supportive."

As Bartolina affirmed, and many teachers in the broader study articulated, one of the most dangerous effects of ongoing interactions with racism in schools is that teachers are led to feel like their sense of reality is skewed, or that they have no place as teachers within their own communities. For her, participating in PD for teachers of Color, which was geared toward building community, strengthening racial analysis, and developing leadership capacities, helped her hold onto her truth. As she reflected again on the panel in her credential program,

> Moments like those, I feel crazy[5] and I feel bad that I have no one to go to in a predominantly White space because no one understands. And that's why I'm extremely thankful for spaces like [this PD] where I know that I'm not crazy.

Liza also found strength in the PD, allowing her to feel affirmed and resilient through community. She explained that it was helpful to find other justice-oriented teachers of Color to connect with:

> Even just texting or facebooking with them, just a quick check in like, "How are you doing? . . . Are you sleeping?" That has been really beautiful and it's definitely been a coping and a healing strategy for me . . . That has been huge for me in terms of my healing, just knowing that there are our people in my contacts that know how it is out there, what life is like and what our situations are like and have had similar experiences . . .

Liza affirmed that talking it through, reading books and blogs, and having access to academic language was foundational to her survival in this racialized professional work. She explained that it "has been very healing, cathartic in terms of like, you know, that I'm not paranoid and that I'm not crazy." Liza described the impacts of engaging in these practices of community and critical literacy:

> I feel a lot healthier, I feel a lot happier; having cut out a lot of the negativity and the poison that I was experiencing in my work environment. This community [of the PD] has been super loving and warm, helping me piece myself back together, and acknowledging that even though I have these scars, it doesn't make me less of a person. It doesn't make me any weaker. I am still the warrior that I have always been.

In these counterstories, teachers of Color expose their racial trauma and ongoing struggles in the workplace; what Liza describes as scars. As she points out, PD that consciously addresses RBF is essential for teachers of Color to move forward in a healthy way; feeling affirmed, powerful, and remembering how much schools and communities need them. With a sharpened racial analysis, teachers of Color also have the conceptual clarity to understand their experiences. With tools for confronting these racialized realities, they have the ability to effectively take on the multiple forms of racism and racialization that they, their students, and their communities face. With a community of support, they have a network to confide in and with which they can develop strategies for not only surviving but also thriving in the racialized contexts in which they work.

Discussion

From racial microaggressions directed at teachers of Color to the dehumanization of students of Color, U.S. public schools often operate as an alienating force to teachers of Color. Through counterstories of RBF at different stages along the teaching pipeline, we see the chronic, layered manifestations of institutionalized racism that teachers of Color experience. Their narratives illuminate the struggles of navigating a predominantly White profession, even in urban schools that serve communities of Color. As they shared, their peers and supervisors often devalue them, overlook them for leadership opportunities, and disregard their concerns or suggestions to employ culturally responsive and sustaining schooling strategies (Kohli, 2016).

As shown in Bartolina's, Bayani's and Liza's counterstories, struggling for racial justice in highly racialized contexts can be emotionally and

psychologically taxing, particularly because there is often no escape from the racism and no acknowledgment of its existence. These teachers of Color shared that they felt immense responsibility to create educational environments where students of Color could thrive. This often meant confronting, challenging, and even striving to replace dominant paradigms alone, feeling pressure to be school "superheroes." They also simultaneously expressed feeling on high alert for the next racist encounter with a colleague or supervisor, and pressure to be hypervigilant in their work to protect both themselves from unwarranted critique and their students from psychic assaults. These constant stresses and demands lead teachers of Color to question themselves, to lose confidence, to lower their aspirations in the profession, and, as many teachers in our study mentioned, to end up leaving their schools.

As Smith et al. (2007) demonstrated, these kinds of emotional and professional impacts are directly tied to psychological and physiological problems experienced among people of Color. When constantly confronted with racism, teachers can become hopeless, depressed, and begin to shut down emotionally, as we saw with Liza. This can lead to physiological effects such as problems eating and sleeping, hypertension, and other impacts. In the end, Liza had a nervous breakdown and had to quit her job. It took her several years to heal and get to a place where she felt emotionally strong enough to thrive in the profession where she had been making powerful contributions for years. At early stages of their careers, both Bayani and Bartolina showed effects of RBF that could lead to the longer term effects Liza experienced.

There were several mechanisms of resilience and resistance that these teachers of Color engaged in to survive within toxic environments. One tool that cut across the counterstories was enhanced racial literacy—having the language and conceptual frameworks to analyze their racialization (Guinier, 2004). With an increased ability to explain daily experiences with racism, such as RBF, which are often shrouded in a cloak of normalized school practice, they were able to disrupt narratives that framed their racialized struggles as being "weak," "overly emotional," or "not cut out for the job." With a strengthened critical racial analysis, they were able to challenge notions that their feelings, experiences, and ways of being were irrational and unprofessional. Another important component of their resilience and resistance that emerged was finding a like-minded community. To combat the isolation and alienation they felt, the teachers in this study all found that having friends and colleagues committed to racial justice with whom they could connect, plan, and organize, was foundational to persisting and succeeding in the hostile racial climates of K-12 schools. They each mentioned that the

critical PD they attended was psychologically and emotionally healing as it affirmed their strengths as justice-oriented teachers of Color serving urban communities of Color. In a people of Color affinity space that nurtured a collective sharing of experiences and resources, they were able to refocus their energy toward transformative and transcendent approaches to the schooling of students of Color.

The severity of RBF among teachers of Color noted in the data demonstrates the urgency to decipher and confront racism in K-12 schools today. The policies, beliefs, and practices that have led to a predominantly White, monolingual teaching force are also creating emotional and psychological trauma for teachers of Color that can push them out of the profession. In efforts for educational justice, teachers of Color, who are vital to the success of communities of Color and education at large, must be supported and affirmed in multiple ways. As teacher education programs, districts, and schools aim to diversify the teaching force, they must also take on the work of centering the expertise and strengths of teachers of Color and prepare them with tools to navigate the often hostile racial climate of schools in ways that maintain their well-being. This begins with centering racial justice–oriented teachers/educators of Color in these programs. In addition, while the teachers in our study persisted and continued to work for justice, not all teachers of Color can professionally survive the racial toxicity they endure in K-12 schools without support. Creating affinity spaces that increase teachers' racial literacy and decrease their isolation is a powerful tool to help them navigate the racialized terrain of U.S. schools, but this still leaves the responsibility on people of Color to solve racism and districts must do more. It is simultaneously necessary for school and district administrators to improve the racial climate of schools and to center the experiences, expertise, and wisdom of the people of Color who engage in those spaces—students, parents, *and* teachers. This should involve increasing teacher diversity, prioritizing racial literacy development for all teachers and staff, and framing racial equity as a shared and collective responsibility that is supported with material resources (i.e., PD time, release time, stipends for race-based campus work). This also requires administrative teams that include and center the professional expertise of school leaders of Color with a commitment to racial justice in schools. Finally, educational research must pay better attention to the impact of racism on people of Color (Kohli et al., 2017). A deeper understanding of how racism is manifested in schools, its impact, and effective strategies for confronting it can help to move teachers of Color from trauma and pain toward healing, as they work to create powerful educational possibilities for students and communities of Color.

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Notes

1. All names have been changed to offer anonymity to the participants. Participants selected their own pseudonyms.
2. The term Latinx is gender neutral. It is used to disrupt gender binaries and promote gender inclusive frameworks for discussing identity.
3. The race and/or ethnic identifiers used in this article were self-designated by the participants.
4. We use the term *Pilipino* to reference people with heritage or roots in the Philippines. The term is written with a "p" because the sound "f" is not part of any native language in the Philippines and was imposed by colonial rule.
5. We honor the narratives of participants by representing their language accurately, and we understand how difficult it can be to put emotions into words. We also feel a responsibility to complicate the use of the term *crazy*, which was repeatedly used by teachers of Color in our data to express how they are made to feel in predominantly White spaces. An ableist word, it can create harm for people with mental illness. In the case of Liza, who experienced mental health concerns, we feel this word may hold a different meaning, but in many cases, there is a more precise word to describe the feeling, such as "irrational," "illogical," "unintelligent," or "not making sense" (Betacandy, 2011).

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