"Nobody's Mule": Black Womanist Caring-Agency, Urban Charters, and the Choice to (Not) Teach

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"Nobody's Mule": Black Womanist Caring-Agency, Urban Charters, and the Choice to (Not) Teach

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ABSTRACT

Urban charter schools targeting Black communities struggle to recruit Black teachers and even more to retain them. At the same time that scholarship has begun to recenter Black and Brown teachers' lives, the narrated perspectives of Black women teachers are often drowned out in urban educational reform's Hollywoodization. In this article, we story Nina Sinclair's 7-year teaching trajectory across five urban charters in two states to examine her layered Black womanist caring-agency. As our analysis demonstrates, for Sinclair, it was not enough just to teach. She wanted the autonomy to create motivating and engaging instruction to inspire her students and herself to do and be more. She wanted to be in a place where she could grow professionally; where she would be mentored, supported, and challenged; and where she could enjoy being Nina Sinclair with like-minded people. All of these things mattered because she mattered. Organizing Sinclair's pivots in and out of the charter school classroom through a quare framework, we theorize her shifting professional movements for being whole. Our findings frame Sinclair's self-care—her freedom to choose what she wanted to do, to be, to stop, to slow down, to picture what if and what else—as the legacy her ancestors had bequeathed her and as an underexamined but no less important dimension of her agentive caring.

I think about my ancestors and what it looks like to live their dreams, and I think that there's this part of me that understands that they worked really, really hard—really hard. And I should exercise the same fervor and work as hard to forward Black people, which is important—and which I do think I abide by. But I also feel my ancestors worked really, really hard and never got a break. They were, you know, bending down picking cotton in the blazing sun, working in domestic positions, working in people's homes, taking care of white people's children to the point that they couldn't take care of their own. So, who am I not to deserve to do what I want? Who am I not to deserve to stop when it's time for me to stop? Who am I not to deserve to slow down?

In December 2018, Nina Sinclair[1] explained in a series of in-depth interviews her choice to leave the urban charter classroom and, more broadly, teaching. A Black woman in her late 20s, Sinclair's professional entry into K-12 education had been fueled by a fervor to "forward Black people"—an intensity that her maternal grandparents, both career District of Columbia public school educators, had instilled within her. It was her grandparents' life force and their collective ancestors' sacrifices that ignited Sinclair's professional trajectory that began and ended in charter schools with a range of experiences in between. However, Sinclair's decision to leave teaching—some 7 years after she began—was, as she explained that winter morning, grounded in her commitment to herself. She too was one of those Black children for whom previous generations had struggled. She too had choices. Walking away from it all was her inheritance.

Black teachers consistently see themselves as agents of social change committed to naming and redressing inequalities in schools and society (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; McArthur & Lane, 2019; Tafari, 2018). Accordingly, Black teachers focus, among other things, on student engagement through in-sync-

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ness, belonging, and connection-making between academic content and the lives their students dream of having (Gershenson et al., 2016; Grissom et al., 2015). Furthermore, in contrast to deficit-based perspectives that steer many of their non-Black teacher counterparts, Black teachers are much more inclined to take an asset-based stance in regard to the children they serve (Mawhinney et al., 2012).

Charter schools in urban Black communities tend to hire more white teachers than Black teachers (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015). Those urban charters that succeed in recruiting Black teachers often fall short in retaining them because of institutionalized disregard for Black knowledge, identity expressions, and performance (Marsh & Noguera, 2018; T. White, 2018) and the associated physical and mental exhaustion, anxiety, and routine feelings of dejection that Black teachers experience in anti-Black environments (Geiger, 2018; Pizarro & Kohli, 2018). Even as scholarship has begun to recenter Black and Brown teachers' lives (Dillard, 2019), the narrated perspectives of Black and Brown urban charter schoolteachers are often lost in the hollywoodization (Goering et al., 2015) of educational reform. To that end, radical listening to the experience of teachers, such as Nina Sinclair, is a rare opportunity to make sense of the layered and complex dimensions of Black womanist caring-agency (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005) in a charter school context. Theorizing Sinclair's pivots in and out of the classroom through quareness (Lewis, 2018), we argue in this article that Sinclair's search for physical and emotional spaces for being, existing, and dreaming is agentive self-care.

Literature review

Urban schools and the neoliberal marketplace

The industrialization of charter schools in the K-12 marketplace is one potential explanation for the devastation of the Black K-12 workforce in US urban centers. Twenty years of "color-blind manage-rialism" (Turner, 2020, p. 1) has resulted in the de facto exodus of scores of Black teachers working in low-income communities, which traditionally have large enrollments of students of color. In media discourse, (Black) career teachers have been characterized as barriers to data-driven student achieve-ment (Buras, 2014). Between 2007 and 2012—in Boston, Massachusetts; Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—new charter schools consistently displaced seasoned Black teachers by hiring scores of white rookies year after year (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015). In post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, charter schools eliminated entire tranches of the Black K-12 workforce with mostly (white) Teach for America and teachNOLA-trained novices (Henry & Dixson, 2016). Systems of accountability grounded in white saviorism, color blindness, and regimented teaching and learning signaled a charter school reset (T. C. White, 2016; Sondel et al., 2019).

Notably, urban charter school governance is such that Black teachers are routinely exploited as cultural brokers between their white colleagues and Black students or just as plain enforcers of rigid instructional and behavioral regimens (Bristol & Mentor, 2018; T. White, 2018). Teachers' divergent approach to the education of Black children can stem from subjectivities surrounding race. For example, analyzing the experiences of Teach for America volunteers, T. C. White (2016) revealed that Black teachers repeatedly took a social justice orientation for developing students' understanding of the dynamics of societal oppression and strategies for navigating race-related barriers to success. In contrast, white colleagues routinely underestimated systemic anti-Blackness and readily embraced the data-driven, color-blind science of teaching and learning.

Anti-blackness and the charter school industry

Nationally, urban charter schools have been commonly located in Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities with higher than average numbers of low-income families (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2012). The human geography of urban charters has been furthermore

characterized by racial segregation whereby "on average [Black students] attend charter schools that are 73% black in the 4th grade and 63% black in the 10th grade, compared to 56% and 51% in non-charter schools" (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2016, p. 333). The racialization of urban charter schools is one visible consequence of a national trend where white parents resist sending their children to schools with visible BIPOC enrollment. Capitalizing on the toxic public imagination that predominantly Black schools are inherently inferior to predominantly white schools, urban charter advocates have positioned themselves heroically with no-excuses regimens, intense preparation for standardized tests, extended school days, and full-throttle assimilation into middle-class norms (see Goodman, 2013; Sondel et al., 2019).

Beyond oppressive pedagogies (Patel, 2016) and test-centric curricula (S. C. Johnson, 2020), urban charter schools regularly have employed spirit-murdering protocols for how students talk, act, and move about the classroom and school (Kershen et al., 2018; Love, 2016). There is, of course, no evidence that unyielding control leads to improved academic or lifetime outcomes for Black students. Nevertheless, urban charter school governance has rationalized intense surveillance, public humiliation, and non-negotiable consequences as bitter medicine for Black dysfunctionality (Golann, 2015). When urban schools have attempted to enact culturally responsive, trauma-sensitive, and humanizing pedagogies, such efforts often have been tainted by residual projections of racialized pathology (Hulgin et al., 2020).

Caring-agency and quare dreaming

Alongside the aforementioned literatures surrounding the moral and ethical contradictions of urban charters, we located Nina Sinclair's circuitous teaching trajectory in a genealogy of Black womanist educators' struggle, survival, creation, political clarity, and soul (see, e.g., McKinney de Royston et al., 2021; Todd-Breland, 2018; Watson, 2018). It is beyond the scope of this article to historicize Black women's K-12 legacies of emancipatory racial uplift in rural Southern schoolhouses, grassroots activism for equal pay, and righteous certainty of civil and human rights (see, e.g., Fairclough, 2007; K. A. Johnson et al., 2014; McCluskey, 2014). What is certain is that contemporary Black womanist pedagogy is grounded in relentless motherwork centering Black lives (Baker-Bell, 2020; Kinloch, 2015; Love, 2019) and caring-agency: "to treat others as our own . . . to understand as fully as we can the world around us . . . to make sure that our actions contribute to the larger human goal of freedom for all" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 84). A less considered dimension of caring-agency, we argue, is freedom for one's own self. To that end, we turn to notions of quareness to access Nina Sinclair's nontraditional choice making. Allow us to explain.

In a tribute to his grandmother, E. P. Johnson (2001) theorized *quare* as a distinctly Black Southern womanist variation of *queer*, as in (to quote the Johnson matriarch) "That sho'll is a quare Chile" (p. 2). Johnson explained,

> On the one hand, my grandmother uses "quare" to denote something or someone who is odd, irregular, or slightly off kilter—definitions in keeping with traditional understandings and uses of "queer." On the other hand, she also deploys "quare" to connote something excessive—something that might philosophically translate into an excess of discursive and epistemological meanings grounded in African American cultural rituals and lived experience. (p. 2)

Juxtaposing quareness with 19th-, 20th-, and 21st-century Black women's narratives, Lewis (2018) elaborated the category to encompass the uniqueness of Black girls' dreams of being and of existing:

> There are Isie Watts and Janie Crawford of Zora Neale Hurston's imagination, who want to travel the world and escape bounds of girlhood and domesticity. There is Toni Morrison's Nel Wright, who sees a future beyond her mother's domination, and Pecola Breedlove, whose eyes finally become blue enough (if only in her own mind) to escape what she has seen. There is Sapphire's Claireece Precious Jones. . . . They are lost and unwanted, trapped in systems of social welfare and foster care. But they are also representatives of Afro-futuristic visions of Black girlhood, of the "quare" routes and pathways of existence. (p. 97)

Following Lewis, quareness approaches the simultaneity of Black women's dreams of unfettered emotional, physical, spiritual, and psychological movement across and beyond gendered and racialized territories and boundaries. As such, "quare encompasses the whole being (or being whole) while the individual self (or who society imagines or demands that Black girls be) remains just a part" (Lewis, 2018, p. 97).

As our analysis shall demonstrate, for Sinclair, it was not enough to simply teach. She wanted the autonomy to create motivating and engaging instruction that would inspire her students and herself to do and be more. She wanted to be in a place where she could grow professionally; where she would be mentored, supported, and challenged; and where she could enjoy being Nina Sinclair with like-minded people—and with a salary that reflected her value. She wanted to be in a place where she mattered because she mattered.

The study

The participant and the researchers

Sinclair was born in the Deanwood neighborhood of Washington, DC, in the fall of 1989, at the height, she explained, of the Reagan Administration's war on drugs. Sinclair's grandparents, both career District of Columbia public school educators and, in the case of her grandfather, an administrator, cocooned Sinclair in love and security. After her graduation from Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School, Sinclair was courted by multiple colleges, finally settling on Catholic University of America. With an undergraduate degree in theology and unsure of her next steps, in 2011, she accepted a teaching fellowship at an all-Black male charter school in West Philadelphia, and so began her teaching trajectory.

Our collaboration with Sinclair was a project in humanizing research (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017) that brought together Sinclair and us as part of a larger inquiry into the lived experiences of BIPOC teachers in New South spaces (Benson et al., 2021; Salas, Acosta et al., 2021; Salas, Lewis et al., 2021). As is typical in qualitative research, our professional subjectivities as engaged BIPOC researchers were the lens through which we gathered, compressed, analyzed, and circled the data. Benson (first author), an urban educator and Black male, and Salas (second author), an urban educator and Chamorro male, proposed the collaboration with Dolet and Jones (third and fourth authors), both Black women and urban educators. Dolet and Jones had been undergraduate colleagues with Sinclair at Catholic University. Across the years, the three women had stayed in close contact, creating a familiar intimacy such that in the space of a text message, Sinclair agreed to participate in our interview study.

Data generation

We approached Sinclair's story as a synecdoche for the experiences of other young BIPOC professionals interacting with urban charter schools. As previously mentioned, Sinclair was the close friend of two of the four authors of this analytic narrative. Over the years, she had spoken of her multiple interactions in a handful of charter schools around the country. Each had aggressively recruited her to teach, and she taught in one school to the next before deciding, as she put it, that she deserved better. To that end, sharing Sinclair's story—and in much of her own words—is in and of itself an affirmation that Black teachers' lives matter. Or, as Dillard (2021) exhorted, "deep listening to the young is absolutely essential to imagining a future that is *worthy* of Black engagement and brilliance" (p. 19).

Our conversations with Nina Sinclair took the form of three 90-minute interviews closely following Seidman's (2019) protocol, with the first interview establishing a life story (i.e., journey into teaching), the second building elaboration on critical incidents from the initial interview, and the final session making sense of specific and combined events previously narrated. The three interviews were held via WebEx video conferencing from a cubicle in a large urban university in the US South, with Sinclair logging in on her laptop from Philadelphia.

Analytic method

Our crafting of the interview data included close (re)readings of the combined transcript records combined with in-process analytic writing, and initial and integrative memo writing (Wolcott, 1994). After multiple passes through the complete transcripts, the authors met for a series of analytic conversations. We first constructed an annotated timeline of Sinclair's trajectory. We then, individually, reviewed the entire transcript record, bracketing segments of the data record with the comment function in Microsoft Word. Bracketed segments such as "I think about my ancestors and what it looks like to live their dreams" and "We can teach about those who resisted" were initial prompts that formed the basis of the initial and integrative memos. Thinking about agency and quareness, we focused and refocused our attention on Sinclair's understandings of the critical incidents that shaped her professional decisions, including her abandonment of the urban charter school classroom. Finally, Sinclair read the entire manuscript before submission and brought her thoughts, revisions, and edits to multiple drafts.

Findings: Nina Sinclair's choice (not) to teach

To channel E. P. Johnson's (2001) grandmother, Sinclair sho'll was a quare teacher, and as the interview sequence progressed, she described how her initial choice to teach at a West Philly charter school was followed by more choices. Sinclair yearned for liberation, but the urban charters she passed through afforded her not much more than a tiny plot of grass to grow a metaphorical garden of diasporic Blackness (Dixson & Dingus, 2008). Teaching, changing schools, leaving teaching, returning to teaching, and leaving again were driven by Sinclair's mind's eye of what Black education could be. In the sections that follow, we argue that Sinclair's quare pivots in and out of urban charter schools were movements of "leaving one's own prescribed space for somewhere better and more beautiful" (Lewis, 2018, p. 107) because she was convinced that she deserved it.

Quare pivot 1: Sinclair's choice to teach and then to change schools

To reiterate, Sinclair entered Catholic University with aspirations to continue to law school. At the advice of a professor, she settled on a major in theology. Our word count prevents us from detailing the entirety of Sinclair's undergraduate career, one that included a study abroad semester in South Africa and multiple internships at a summer camp in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Suffice it to say that she became a visible activist on campus who created a network of kindred BIPOC spirits. These seminal adult friendships continued to support and inspire her for more than a decade.

As graduation approached, Sinclair tabled law school, and through a friend, she heard of a Philadelphia charter school centered on Black male adolescent character development and college and life readiness. For Sinclair, the very thought of being in a Black environment (as opposed to Catholic University or Georgetown Visitation) was exciting in and of itself. She remembered, "I just felt it was going to be a truly empowering Black environment, and that's what I wanted after Catholic University. I didn't want anything else." What also helped was that during her weekend interview at the school, an old friend showed her the town: "Yeah, it was really cool. Wow, Philadelphia!" In August 2011, Sinclair began teaching at Lift.

The Lift Fellows Program brought recent college graduates to the school to serve as tutor-mentors for Black boys. Sinclair taught critical media literacy, a ninth-grade elective centered on deconstructing racialized and gendered stereotypes. Sinclair and her students

> did a lot of dissecting … different books, a lot of songs. And then a lot of times, it was just helping them academically because it was kind of the first time they were being challenged, you know, on their own.

Sinclair was happy in her new job, with her new friends, and with Philadelphia: "It was kind of like having your freshman year of college again, all these new folks in a new city."

In June 2012, the fellowship ended. There was the possibility of staying on, but because of Lift's male orientation, Sinclair could not see building a long-term career at the school as either a teacher or an administrator. Plus, Lift's Harry Potteresque approach to school culture was, as far as she was concerned, an anachronistic tool lacking criticality. Sinclair considered returning to Washington, DC. However, her grandfather resisted the idea, wanting Sinclair to begin her adult life on her own. So, she planned a move to Orlando, Florida, where she intended to live with extended family and figure out her next steps.

In the meantime, a Lift colleague shared the tip that Rainbow, a new bilingual (Spanish-English) K-1 charter school in Phoenix, Arizona, was hiring. Sinclair applied. Within days, she was flown out for a visit and demonstration lesson and was hired: "So I said, I'm going to go for it. I'm going to go." She packed her things and moved to Phoenix, where she would remain for the 2012–2013 school year.

At Rainbow, Sinclair taught physical education, art, and guided reading. It was a good fit:

> I'd do it again. I did PE, and then I did half of the art classes, which I also thought was a lot of fun. We were making up the curriculum ourselves but just loving how the children were creative. They're so instantly creative and so good! You're only talked out of it: "I'm not a good artist." That settles in somewhere, and then you lose it. The same with math. . . . I taught one wellness class. We did a lot of social emotional learning: taking belly breaths, and this is how you calm down; and this is how we deal with this; and these are "go foods" and those are "whoa foods." Yeah, it was cute.

Sinclair found a room in a house on Craigslist for $550 a month all-inclusive and hit it off with her housemates. Things went smoothly enough for her at Rainbow. She was especially glad to be in a bilingual environment, something new and exciting for her. Yet, notwithstanding the very good things Rainbow had to offer, Sinclair missed Philadelphia. She had only just begun to scratch the surface of what life there could be.

To sum up this first professional pivot, although Sinclair never explicitly described herself as a Black womanist educator, her first steps into teaching illustrated a lucidity. Her descriptions of her college and postcollege experiences were windows into how she honed that vision. In college, Sinclair's activism was buttressed by a network of like-minded colleagues. Shortly after graduation, she joined Lift. Then, she joined Rainbow. However, she imagined something better.

Quare pivot 2: Sinclair's choice to leave teaching

After Rainbow, Sinclair easily secured a job as a first-grade teacher at a brand-new Philadelphia charter, City School. She wanted to be the affirming Black teacher for which she had yearned as a child. Her tenure at City School was short-lived. Red flags appeared as early as the new teacher orientation.

As the teachers trickled in, the City School principal shouted to everyone but no one in particular, "If you're not on time, you're late. I'll lock the door, and you wait, and you sit there, and we look at you until I'm ready to open the door." After the door-locking episode, the administrator articulated a litany of strategies for refocusing off-task BIPOC children:

> In the moment, you don't want to waste time saying every name. You want to be able to move quickly through things and skip along so that we can maximize instructional time. So, one of those—so one way that you can get students' attention was a clap-type thing, and then everyone claps back. That was one way. You can have a call-and-response, and we can also do a snap, a quick snap right here or right near one. And you don't need to waste the time to say their names.

Shortly thereafter, Sinclair was working with the group on counting off in sequence. A 6-year-old (Spanish-dominant) boy struggled to articulate the number that had fallen to him, 25. The administrator, who happened to be passing by the classroom at that moment, cut Sinclair off and began snapping in the child's face: "The number is 25! It is 25! Say 25! 25! Let's go! The next time we get to you, you are number 25! If you don't say 25, you will lose your color!" That afternoon, Sinclair handed in her a letter of resignation.

To recapitulate, as Sinclair made her way through a chain of urban charter schools (Lift, Rainbow, and City School), she honed her lucidity about where, what, and how long to teach. At her first placement at Lift, an urban charter school for Black boys, teaching critical media literacy was initially satisfying. But by the year's end, she had grown uncomfortable with Lift's subdued social justice orientation. She then took up and resigned from her next two charter school placements. Neither Phoenix nor Rainbow School were "Black enough" for her, but Philadelphia and City School were. Yet, the City School principal's patrolling was impossible. Sinclair imagined something far better.

Quare pivot 3: Sinclair's choice to return to teaching and then to leave again

In September 2013, Sinclair swiveled to a tiny preschool in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, that paid the bills and was only half-time. Her new colleagues were all very nice, but "there was no community there for me. I was definitely the only Black woman. I don't even think they had any Black children. And then, um, it just wasn't intellectually stimulating."

After a stint at the preschool, Sinclair worked temporarily at FedEx and then as a docent at the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts, where she serendipitously met the principal of a K-8 charter school, Excellence. Impressed with how Sinclair moderated a discussion for a seventh-grade tour, he asked for her résumé. Sinclair joined Excellence, where she taught for three full years, from 2013 to 2015.

At Excellence, Sinclair focused her energies on a social studies course entitled "Project Citizen," an eighth-grade applied social justice capstone where the students collectively identified a compelling issue, researched it, and then strategized and implemented a plan of civic engagement. Project Citizen defined the culture at Excellence and was something that rising eighth graders thought about all summer: "What are we going to do this year? What's it going to be?"

In Sinclair's first year with the course, the campaign theme was police brutality and culminated in student-generated "Know Your Rights" training for multiple institutions. In her second year, the eighth-grade administrators identified the need for comprehensive sex education at the school: "So, they were like, 'What are we doing about it?'" Sinclair reached out to her network and contracted a professional from the Pennsylvania adolescent health caucus to deliver a middle-grades program. The students raised funds to bring the professional to the school. In her third year, the grade level campaigned to rename a community park memorializing a notorious segregationist. The students mobilized community support, organized protests, and met with high-ranking city officials to state their case. This effort garnered national media attention.

Sinclair was proud of the student activism she had cultivated. By her third year, however, she was worn out. Grading papers and planning for her classes was about all she could handle. She had stopped seeing friends. She was juggling four distinct planning periods for her literacy and Project Citizen Capstone classes. She was also the Student Council faculty sponsor. Yet, her meager salary did not grow. "It just became a lot. I was feeling too young to be as tired as I was all of the time." Sinclair resigned.

Later that summer, Sinclair had second thoughts about leaving teaching. Her citywide reputation had roused interest in several rival charter schools. Enticed by a salary boost, premium health benefits, promises of professional development, and a stable teaching assignment, she accepted an offer from the Challenge School to teach social studies. Two months later, she resigned again.

Compared with the dynamism of Project Citizen, teaching short, decontextualized reading comprehension passages at Challenge was a disappointing compromise: "OK, we have Colin Kaepernick, then we have the Puritans, and I remember there was a person's name nobody needed to know. Nothing stuck. Nothing was engaging." Her Challenge School administrator tried to convince Sinclair to stay by offering to consolidate her course load, but she was disappointed. She had been recruited because of her record of activism at Excellence. Instead, she was teaching a nonsensical curriculum. She talked to her students about leaving:

They wrote little notes for me on the board: "I'm sad to see you go, but I want you to do whatever you want to do. "You should live your best life." "We're gonna miss you, but do what you want to do." I told them, "You know what, y'all? This isn't for me anymore. I don't want to—I don't want to manage a bunch of young folks. I want to try something different." I was completely honest, and you know what? They got it, and they wished me well.

Sinclair began bartending in the city. She was happy.

By the time we drafted this manuscript in the summer of 2019, Sinclair had returned to Washington, DC, to take care of her aging grandfather. It was hard to leave Philadelphia, but she knew she belonged at home with him. Sinclair was thinking about teaching again and sent out résumés. Whatever job she took would need to be just right. Sinclair mattered.

Discussion and conclusion

As Lewis (2018) explained, "quare narratives are narratives beyond the ordinary" (p. 96), and quareness allowed us to access the multi-dimensional agency that Sinclair exercised in her unusual 7-year career across five different charter schools in two states—and, in between, a preschool, an industrial warehouse, and a downtown bar. Sinclair laughingly speculated that were her grandmother still alive, she would probably be urging her granddaughter to stick with something. But Sinclair had options. She was eminently hirable, even without a teaching license. Her charisma was palpable, and during the interviews, she filled the screen with her brilliance.

Sinclair was able to glide from one job to another quickly. Whether and how long she stayed depended on the extent to which the work jibed with her ideas of what schools should be doing for Black children and also for Black teachers. She wanted something akin to the fugitive teaching and learning spaces that Camangian (2021) described: "emancipatory, abolitionist approaches to educating one's own ... to transform their relationships to White supremacy, colonialism, and the carceral state in their collective consciousness and communities" (p. 33). Because her gaze was profoundly caring, Sinclair was fiercely intentional about taking on and staying in a teaching gig where she might marvel with Black youth. If and when a charter school encroached on what could be, she left in search of better, more beautiful territories because, as she put it bluntly, she was "nobody's mule."

As we conclude this article, the conventions of academic writing would normally compel us to punctuate Sinclair's narrative with a list of concrete recommendations. Ours are less tangible, more elusive, and even quare. First, Sinclair's narrative speaks to the need to bring a young generation of Black womanist educators to the proverbial urban charter school kitchen table (Lyiscott et al., 2021), where we might listen closely, hear, and receive their stories.

The go-to urban charter modus operandi is a spirit-murdering (Love, 2016) behaviorist model such as the kind Sinclair witnessed as she hopped from charter to charter. Teachers such as Sinclair historically have mobilized their positionalities and humanizing pedagogies to challenge the tropes of dysfunction that perpetually caricature Black and Brown children. In so doing, Black educators may struggle as they are afforded less influence on school policy than their white colleagues (Bristol, 2018), as they face retaliation for naming and pushing back against anti-Blackness (Amos, 2016), and as they absorb shock waves of racialized pain (Benson et al., 2021). Moreover, when white colleagues dehumanize BIPOC youth, Black teachers are expected to make it nice again.

Because Black womanist teachers also are subject to professional spirit murdering, we understood Sinclair's willingness to quit as agentive self-care, of being whole. Sinclair's happiness mattered to Sinclair, and her self-care was the legacy her ancestors had bequeathed her: the freedom to choose what she wanted to do, to be, to stop, to slow down, to picture what if and what else. We heard Sinclair's self-care as kin to Kirkland's (2021) articulation of self-love/simply loving: "an exercise of naming, of unmasking that which has been rendered invisible—the Black self—so as to recover it to cared [sic] for it" (p. 61). In terms of future research, Sinclair's narrative asks us to document and theorize the range of agency available to BIPOC, including walking away from it all.

Yet (and second), across teacher colleges, there is a collective sadness when a BIPOC teacher leaves the profession. Habitually, such departures are framed as a teacher's failure or the failure of the teacher preparation program. What we want to emphasize here is that a young Black educator's willingness to place her own happiness and dreams at the center of her decision-making takes great courage because such choices are still seen as selfish. Consequently, we believe Sinclair's final exit from teaching to be something close to what Warren (2021) named in his mediation on possibility in Black education as a state of mourning: "reckoning with the long-term, residual impacts of chattel slavery and settler colonialism *and* actively gazing upon blackness with deep affection as an active counter to manifestations of antiblackness in education" (p. 94).

Finally, we hope that by amplifying Nina Sinclair's story that other BIPOC teachers who continue to imagine something better and more beautiful for their professional selves might hear their voices therein. Sinclair's quare "notions of freedom on an ordinary day look like something extraordinary and even excessive to most people" (Lewis, 2018, p. 107). Yet maybe, just maybe, one story at a time, this young, gifted, Black schoolteacher's journey will come to appear less excessive and less extraordinary and, instead, commensurate to the birthright that she claims as her own.

Note

1. For confidentiality, we adjusted or fictionalized the names of people, places, and institutions across this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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