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Safe rebellious places: the value of informal spaces in schools to counter the emotional silencing of youth of color

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ABSTRACT
Drawing on qualitative research with adolescent youth of color, this paper imagines the power and potential of informal youth-driven spaces in schools as sites of emotional safety and rebellion. Calling upon Hochshild’s (1979) conceptualization of the social regulation of emotions, we examine the racialized and gendered feeling rules that govern the social worlds of adolescents of color, particularly within educational institutions. Additionally, we theorize how the presence of informal youth-driven spaces inside schools, but outside of the traditional classroom or club structure, provide a place where young people can safely express their emotions, experience emotional understanding from their peers, and freely critique the institutional and systemic injustices they experience.

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In our current sociopolitical moment, youth of color in the U.S. are contending with a number of threats to their academic and personal trajectories. They are enduring an amplified national rhetoric that denigrates and targets people of color. In 2016, for example, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported an alarming and rising level of ‘fear and anxiety among children of color and inflaming racial and ethnic tensions in the classroom’ (Costello, 2015). These current dynamics layer on top of long-lasting forms of marginalization for youth of color: they are more likely to attend under-resourced schools, experience severe disciplinary consequences for subjective actions, and endure discrimination in their peer group, schools, and neighborhoods (Evans-Winters & Girls for Gender Equity, 2017; Masta, 2018; Morris, 2016; Noguera, 2003). Historical legacies of residential segregation and education racism, structural inequalities baked into school systems, and stubborn implicit biases held by adults who lead schools and classrooms can turn schools serving racially minoritized students into sites of ‘othering,’ ‘abuse,’ and ‘suffering’ – even when there are ‘the best intentions’ (Dumas, 2014; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; McKenzie, 2009; Zirkel et al., 2011).

Between 2012 and 2018, the authors of this paper collectively spent six years working with adolescents of color, qualitatively exploring their lived experiences and perspectives on many of the stressors described above. The students that we worked with reported that despite needing a space to process the academic, social, and emotional precarity they experienced, their schools were regimented and emotionally restrictive places; their emotions were regularly silenced for the sake of rationality, utility and efficiency (Boler, 1999). In this paper we will first demonstrate...
how youth of color, across four different school sites, were required to abide by oppressive, institutional feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979). Second, we will analyze the negative consequences of these feeling rules and how youth coped with them in different ways. Finally, we will explore how youth created informal group spaces, where they could find emotional understanding among their peers and select adults. We theorize these types of group contexts as safe, rebellious spaces. Safe, in that they provide for emotional expression and understanding, trust, and support. Rebellious, in that they offer youth the freedom to traverse feeling rules and resist injustices in their schools and communities.

Institutional feeling rules and their consequences

Literature on emotions in education generally emphasizes the relation between emotions and academic outcomes, the development of emotional intelligence, social and emotional learning, and/or teachers’ emotions (Kuby, 2014; McKenzie, 2009; Schutz et al., 2007). Emotions are often theorized as private, individual experiences that should be controlled in educational spaces or explicitly directed to further educational ends (Boler, 1999; Jaggar, 1997). Educational institutions and their leaders often conceptualize emotions as disruptive to learning, efficacy, and utility or as intrusions in the classroom (Hargreaves, 2000).

In this article, we strive to understand the emotional phenomena that are often ignored in schools but are central to students’ experiences of schooling. First, it is important that we differentiate between feelings, emotions, and affect. Eric Shouse (2005) explains that ‘feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social, and affects are prepersonal’ (p. 1). To Shouse, emotions are social, projections or displays of feelings, which can be either genuine or feigned: ‘we broadcast emotion to the world; sometimes that broadcast is an expression of our internal state and other times it is contrived in order to fulfill social expectations’ (p. 1).

Hochschild (1979; 2002) explored how emotions come to be contrived to fulfill social expectations in her theorization of ‘feeling rules’: feeling rules require individuals to control the ‘publicly observable facial and bodily display’ of their emotions (2002, p. 7). According to Hochschild, this intentional emotion management, with the goal of adhering to social norms and expectations, contributes to the maintenance of social order and structure. Feeling rules not only vary by social context, but also function differently for different groups of people because ‘feeling rules reflect patterns of social membership’ (Hochschild, 1979, p. 566).

Many scholars have examined the ways in which feeling rules are gendered and racialized. The sociology of emotion literature describes the gendered emotion work that women engage in at home (Rao, 2017) and in the workplace (Kang, 2003). Harlow (2003) explored how Black professors experience emotional exhaustion and manage frustrations resulting from their devalued racial status in society and student resistance to their intellectual authority. Wingfield (2010) examined how African American professionals encounter two types of specifically racialized feeling rules: 1) rules that are generally applied to all workers but that are particularly difficult for them to follow, and 2) rules that differ from the rules applied to their white colleagues. Wingfield’s participants described having to restrain emotions more than their white colleagues (to avoid representing negative, emotional and racialized stereotypes) and to remain silent when they felt frustrations or concerns related to the pressure to restrain their emotions. Wilkins’ (2012) work with a college-aged cohort confirmed these findings: she found that her African American male participants distanced themselves from the controlling image of the ‘angry Black man’ by displaying emotional restraint. Wilkins argues that maintaining a system of inequality requires that those who are marginalized restrain and manage their emotions in institutional contexts.

The literature on feeling rules in educational institutions often foregrounds adults’ experiences (i.e. Hargreaves, 2000; Zembylas, 2003) and overlooks youth. McKenzie (2009) argues that
understanding these emotional phenomena, with students of color specifically, is ‘a necessity in creating conditions for their school success’ (p. 129). As youth grow up within school systems, they begin to learn the feeling rules that are ingrained in those systems. Adults often serve as ‘emotional socializers [and] gatekeepers,’ redirecting students’ emotional displays to fit institutional norms (Cox, 2016; Gilmore, 1985). When youth manage their emotions, they work to induce or inhibit the display of feelings in order to make them appropriate for a situation and the feeling rules embedded in that social or institutional context (Hochschild, 1979). As a result, youth engage in constant monitoring and adjusting of their emotional expression, and for youth of color this task is more arduous because of the racialized feeling rules by which they also must abide (Cox, 2016; Dance, 2002; Flores-González, 2002; Morris, 2007).

The literature on youth of color, education, and emotions has emphasized intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991) nuance. While educational research has not explicitly focused on institutional feeling rules, a consistent theme in the literature on Black girls’ experiences in schools is how they are often viewed by their teachers and school administrators as being ‘too loud’ (Morris, 2007), aggressive, and disrespectful of authority when attempting to communicate or manage emotions of frustration, fear, or sadness (Evans-Winters & Girls for Gender Equity, 2017; Morris, 2016). In schools, girls of color have to negotiate others’ assumptions about them based on their race or ethnicity, and contend with the expectation that they align their emotional expression with dominant white feminine norms of deference, quietness, and respect of authority, or have their emotional expression ignored or disciplined (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Gibson, 2015; Morris, 2007). Research on boys’ experiences in schools reflects how boys’ emotional expression is tightly governed by strict rules surrounding notions of masculinity and manhood (Kimmel, 2004, 2017; Reichert et al., 2012; Way et al., 2014). For Black boys, this is further compounded by racialized expectations to enact a ‘cool pose’ to maintain dignity in the face of oppression (Majors & Billson, 1992) or follow a ‘code of the street’ which requires a posture of preparedness to fight at any sign of disrespect or encroachment on personal territory (Anderson, 1999).

Based on the literature surveyed, we have identified five specific feeling rules which dictate the expressions and experiences of youth of color. Youth of color in school contexts:

1. Must manage frustrations resulting from their devalued racial or gender status in society.
2. Are upheld to feeling rules that are applied to all, but which are particularly difficult for them to follow.
3. Are forced to comply with feeling rules that differ from feeling rules applied to white individuals.
4. Must restrain emotions in order to not appear to be fitting in with a stereotype related to their race, gender, or intersectional identity.
5. Are expected to align emotions with white norms for emotional performances of femininity and masculinity.

In this paper, we connect the experiences of our participants to these five restrictive feeling rules. Because youth of color engage in unique emotional management and restraint, particularly in schools, we argue that providing youth of color with safe spaces where they can challenge racialized and gendered feeling rules, express their emotions, and find emotional understanding is critical for the creation of humanizing (Tuck & Yang, 2018) and justice-oriented educational institutions.

Homeplaces for youth of color in schools

Homeplaces have been theorized by bell Hooks (1990) and adopted by educational and developmental scholars (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Pastor et al., 2007; Ward, 1996) as sites of rejuvenation
and resistance. Ward (1996) proposes that homeplaces provide youth of color with the space to adopt strategies of resistance to ‘the realities of an oppressive, demeaning, and judgmental sociopolitical environment’ (95). We theorize that these types of spaces help all youth to ‘experience constructive, critical affirmation of the individual and the collective by encouraging [them] to think critically about [themselves] and [their] place in the world around [them]’ (95). While the research on homeplaces has primarily focused on girls of color, studies of adolescent boys similarly find that boys long for relationships, and friendships in particular, in which they can be intimate and vulnerable, and freely share their feelings outside of the confines and expectations of masculinity (Way, 2013). By developing relationships within such homeplaces that are characterized by trust, respect, and support, youth can cultivate environments where they can explore their frustrations with the social world, society’s values and ambitions, and direct their energies towards liberating resistance and social justice within their communities (Banister & Leadbeater, 2007). In this paper, we call upon scholarship on homeplaces to theorize how safe, rebellious spaces allow youth to engage in the promotion of more humanizing educational spaces.

Materials and methods

This paper brings into conversation three qualitative studies conducted at four different school sites in the Mid-Atlantic U.S. Clonan-Roy conducted a multi-year ethnographic study with Latina, immigrant girls at Marshall Middle School (hereafter, MMS) in a ‘New’ Latinx Diaspora community (Wortham et al., 2002). Gross conducted a multi-year ethnographic study with Black boys in an inner-city all-boys public charter high school, Boys’ Preparatory Charter School (hereafter, Boys’ Prep). Jacobs conducted a qualitative study with Black girls in two elite predominantly white suburban independent high schools: The Olympia School (all-girls; hereafter, Olympia) and Grace School (co-ed; hereafter, Grace). Table 1 summarizes demographic details about these four school sites and the research studies.

At each school site, authors observed and participated in informal, student-centered groups, which were sanctioned by the school, but not an official part of the school day. Although the bulk of our data come from observations in the student groups, we also conducted participant observation throughout the four school sites (in/during hallways, classrooms, lunch, recess) (Emerson et al., 1995), and semi-structured interviews (Galletta, 2013) with the participants of the student groups. Both Clonan-Roy and Gross conducted virtual participant observation with student participants on social media platforms (Boellstorff et al., 2012).

Through dialogic engagement we discovered meaningful overlaps across our individual datasets. Ravitch and Mittenfelner Carl (2016) use the term dialogic engagement to refer to collaborative, dialogue-based processes used in qualitative research, which support criticality and the production of rigorous, reflexive research. Through early conversations about our datasets and themes in common across datasets, we worked to challenge each other’s biases and interpretations, and we documented this preliminary analysis with memos (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After this preliminary stage of analysis, we began collective systematic qualitative coding of subsets of the data from our three projects focused on emotions, schooling, and the informal group dynamics (Saldaña, 2016). Our approach has some limitations in that this paper emerges from three studies with quite different research questions, goals, and methods; however, we believe the limits are outweighed by the benefits of being able to look across quite different research sites and find common threads in student experiences. In our analysis, we describe the three major findings that emerged as a result of our analysis: 1) the presence of restrictive feeling rules in different school contexts, 2) the coping strategies that youth used and the consequences of feeling rules, and 3) the positive influence of informal spaces on the emotional lives of youth of color.
In this section, we explore the intersections of societal, cultural, and institutional expectations for emotional expression which contributed to the implementation of feeling rules in our four school sites. As we discuss emotional situations that youth navigated, we analyze the presence of the five types of feeling rules that we referred to in our review of relevant literature.
The students we worked with, like many students in urban school environments in the U.S. (Nolan, 2011), felt strictly monitored and policed by their institution. This hyper-regulation of students’ academic and social lives compounded with institutional feeling rules often contributed to a sense of emotional silencing for students. For example, for many students at Boys’ Prep and MMS, the strict school uniform restricted the ways they could express their full selves in school. Boys at Boys’ Prep were required to wear ties and blazers, and were also limited in adding accessories, jewelry, or even colorful socks or unique hairstyles. In the hallways, between classes, students were constantly chastised for untucked shirts or unbuttoned top buttons, and two seniors in the FTS group were specifically disciplined for wearing a necklace with a wooden carving of the continent of Africa. In response to this discipline, they silenced their frustration with the regulation of their stylistic expression to avoid harsher consequences and they removed the necklaces. But later that day, in their FTS meeting, junior Siah complained:

We need to embrace our culture. We don’t ever get to [in this school] … I don’t see why I gotta dress like the Europeans told our ancestors to dress just to be successful. We should be able to wear dashikis or something if we want to.

Though the school uniform policies were likely not put in place with the intention of regulating students’ emotions, because many Boys’ Prep students interpreted the restrictive clothing policies as affronts to their culture and personal identity, emotion work was often a part of the process of complying with these rules.

Similarly, girls at MMS often lamented the policing of Latinx students’ race-class performances of identity (Bettie, 2003) in school, and having to silence and manage their frustrations in such moments. For example, Julia, a 7th grader at MMS said that she often received negative comments from teachers or got in trouble for dressing like a ‘Chola’ at school: wearing skinny jeans and a baggy shirt. She often told Clonan-Roy that she felt like she had to manage her anger regarding her white teachers’ devaluations of her race-class performance of femininity, and she often used after-school time with Clonan-Roy to make various pieces of art that affirmed her Mexican identity and self-proclaimed Chola style. Julia’s classmate, Kelly, once critiqued how a white teacher had told her brother (a high schooler) that he could not wear a rosary because it made him look like a gang member. In discussing this event during a girls’ group meeting, the girls agreed that dealing with their frustrations and pain on their own was more effective than going to school administrators with complaints, because the administrators did not seem to take their complaints seriously.

In adolescence, emerging stylistic and cultural expression is important to students’ identity development and sense of self (Bettie, 2003). Being disciplined for expressing one’s identity and ethnic heritage functioned as an emotional and social injury that these youth had to cope with. In this example of emotional silencing, we detect the presence of two of the types of feeling rules we previously discussed: 1) requiring the students to manage their frustrations resulting from their devalued racial status in society (and their race-class performance of femininity or masculinity), and; 2) requiring the boys to abide by rules applied to all students, but which are particularly difficult for them to follow. Black boys and Latina girls felt that their identities and stylistic representation of themselves were devalued by their school’s white normative frames (Bettie, 2003), and they did not feel like they could defend themselves or express their frustrations. These rules were uniquely difficult for Black boys and Latina girls to follow at Boys Prep and MMS (and schools like them across the country (DaCosta, 2006)) because predominantly White educators enforced dress codes in discriminatory ways, which had specific emotional impacts.

Other youth viewed the intense regulation and disciplining of their actions, speech, and emotions at school as a source of confinement. For example, on the first day back from a holiday vacation, one student at Boys’ Prep posted to Instagram a picture of his school notebook with
the caption ‘Back in Jail.’ Other students equated the emotional restrictions with the pressures of school:

School is really hard on us. We’re here from 8:00–5:00 or 8:00–4:00. It’s an entire work day. … and the outside problems that we don’t really get to share is just an add on to everything … I guess we just try to smile so that we don’t seem like we’re suicidal or seem as if we’re, not emotional per se, but that we’re going through something.

In this quote, Justin (a senior) expresses that he and his peers feel overwhelmed with the length of the school day, the intensity of the school work they receive, outside problems (which, for many students at Boys’ Prep related to traumatic loss, experiences of violence, and family instability), compounded by the lack of an opportunity to share their feelings. As a result, Justin smiles to hide the fact that he is ‘going through something.’ At schools, all students are expected to control their emotions for the sake of academic focus (Boler, 1999), but this was particularly difficult for many Black boys at Boys’ Prep to do because of: 1) the intensity of the regulation and disciplining of their school day, and; 2) the outside trauma that they were processing. There are cultural and gender-based norms for emotional expression which also shape this student’s comments. Justin struggles to admit being ‘emotional,’ since being emotional may be conceptualized as weak within the confines of Black masculine norms (Jackson, 2018). Overall, the Black male adolescents at Boys’ Prep experienced restrictions around emotional displays because of both broader cultural expectations of Black masculinity and their school’s academic and disciplinary practices.

In some cases, emotional silencing for our participants stemmed from their marginalization and experiences of unequal treatment in school. The Black girls at Olympia and Grace often experienced a double standard when it came to the regulation of their behavior compared to white female students. Andrea, a 12th grader at Olympia, reported that her senior speech (which focused on the experiences of Black students in independent schools) had to be edited three times before she could share it, while a white peer was able to publish a piece in the school newspaper about the protests in Ferguson and Baltimore, which in her view promoted biased and damaging perspectives, without school staff reviewing or editing it. In this case, Andrea felt like she had to manage her own frustrations resulting from her devalued racial status in school and society. Again, while all students at Olympia were expected to control their emotions, this was particularly difficult for Black girls like Andrea to follow, when they felt censored and discriminated against, particularly in contrast to white students.

Black girls at Olympia also lamented how their school approached handling incidents involving students’ use of the N-word on social media. Black girls often received harsher disciplinary consequences than white girls for using the N-word. In the example below, Kendra, an 11th grader, describes her experience:

How I feel here, is that we are treated so differently … I think we’re kind of held to a higher standard in some things, like, we should be more understanding of the white students if they don’t understand something about race. Or, if a white student tweets something ignorant … or the N-word or something, it’s like we have to be the ones that are understanding and like, “They didn’t know better, and this or that.” But if something happens to us … if like, one of us tweets the N-word it’s like World War III and someone was taken in front of [the disciplinary board] and it’s called, like, “Black supremacy” … like, what are you talking about because there’s like, 2 percent of us in this entire school?

If a student at Olympia was called before the disciplinary board, that disciplinary action would be recorded on her school transcript, which could affect her chances of college acceptance. Consequently, the Black girls at Olympia (as well as Mexican girls at MMS and Black boys at Boys’ Prep) felt like they had to hold their tongue and not express their full range of emotions in order to protect themselves from disciplinary action or excessive surveillance, which might have longer-term academic consequences.
The transmission of feeling rules from institutions to peer groups

The schools that our participants attended intensely regulated youth; academically, socially, and emotionally. This institutional socialization shaped peer group cultures, and we often observed the transmission of institutional feeling rules into peer group social media spaces. Social media is a new data source which offers a valuable window into adolescents’ inner lives and relationships, and the norms which dictate their behavior (Lane, 2018; Stevens et al., 2017). The participants’ social media posts simultaneously reinforced institutional feeling rules and lamented their restrictiveness. The consistency and regularity that boys at Boys’ Prep and girls at MMS posted content which parroted the management and restriction of their emotional expression (even though they were bemoaning it) instilled emotional management and silencing as a peer group norm (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Some online posts, like those from senior Anton from Boys’ Prep and Irene from MMS (Figures 1 and 2) acknowledged the fact that many of their feelings went unexpressed. These posts indicate that youth are often hiding their ‘true’ feelings, or keeping feelings inside.

The students sometimes attributed this emotional silence to a lack of caring on the part of others, like Rosa’s (6th grade at MMS) post (Figure 3) explaining that ‘no one gives [a] fuck about’ her emotions. However, most of the time, they simply bemoaned a lack of outlets for discussing their feelings. Silvia (7th grade) from MMS shared a post (Figure 4) saying that she ‘really wants to talk to someone about [her] thoughts and feelings… but [she]
can’t.’ Similarly, when discussing the death of his close friend to gun violence on the one-year anniversary of the shooting, Herc, a sophomore at Boys’ Prep, admitted that he had ‘nobody to talk to’ (Figure 5). Latina girls at MMS often said that they did not feel like they could discuss their emotions or mental health with adults at school or in their families, and that only sometimes would they talk with their close friends about their most intimate emotions. Interestingly, it seemed that the imagined distance and simultaneous safety that social media platforms offer created a more comfortable context for expressing abstract emotions.

For the boys in particular, we saw that when they experienced extreme emotional ruptures, such as the death of a close friend and classmate – which tragically occurred at Boys’ Prep three times during the two years of research – they remained mostly silent within their peer group. Sophomore Denzel shared that he and his friends did not verbalize their grief to each other despite their experience of shared loss:

We just don’t mention it. We know that [our friend] is gone but we just don’t ever talk about it between us. …It be times where we just see each other [and] I can see that [my friends are] feeling some type of way, but I won’t just bring it up or nothing because it’s all good vibes around us, so I don’t want to bring nothing negative up to bring us down…That’s just going to make us all feel sad…That’s not what we’re trying to do.

The institutional feeling rules of controlling emotions and the peer group expectation that they maintain ‘good vibes’ prevented boys from opening up about loss and other heavier emotional experiences. Our participants faced severe challenges in and outside of school: poverty, racism, violence, fear of deportation, among others. However, the adults and institutions in their lives socialized them towards feeling rules which mandated that they control their emotions for the sake of academic productivity and manage their frustrations in relation to these aforementioned challenges and their devalued status in society. On social media, we saw the transmission
of institutional feeling rules into peer groups' social media discourses. The transmission of these rules proved to be damaging; feeling rules for these youth had unique consequences and youth coped with these rules in a variety of ways.

Coping strategies for and consequences of feeling rules in schools

In response to the racialized and gendered feeling rules enforced by their schools and peer groups, the youth in our studies developed everyday strategies for coping with the restrictions placed on their emotional expression. Youth often utilized the coping mechanism of strategically smiling to mask their authentic feelings. In social media posts, some of the participants shared this sentiment: Herc acknowledged smiling through the bullshit (Figure 6), Sophomore Hazeem used a smile ‘to hide the pain’ (Figure 7), and Juana (7th grade) from MMS claimed she smiles ‘to hide [her] real emotions’ (Figure 8). In the FTS group, students often shared updates on their day or week with a smile, even if their updates were less than positive. During one particular group meeting, a senior offered his ‘check-in’: ‘Life sucks. We have [baseball] games every day, no time for homework, got kicked out of my house, living with my grandma now.’ With each additional burden he shared, he beat the table with his fist dramatically, but kept a smile on his face throughout. His list represented the layering of everyday challenges of adolescence (i.e. stress from managing sports and homework) and the deeper traumas and instabilities that result from the poverty that our participants experienced (i.e. being

Figure 3. Instagram post from Rosa, an 8th grader at MMS.
kicked out of one’s home). When he finished, a teacher present in the group asked, ‘How can you say all that with a smile?’ Someone from across the table piped up, ‘we have to mask how we feel,’ and the first student nodded in agreement.

Other students coped with restrictive feeling rules by more actively resisting them. For example, Black girls at Grace discussed the stereotype they often encountered that they are ‘angry Black girls.’ Rather than strategizing how they might avoid the stereotype, some of them focused on unpacking it and acknowledging the reasons that they legitimately have to be angry. Tanya, a 12th grader from Grace, said:

I just think that is a stereotype that we’re angry … and not that we have a reason to be angry, but we do [because] I guess we are the low – like, the lowest of the lowest … and I feel like we have a reason to be angry because we are not low. Like, we’re no worse than anything, like, anyone else. I just feel like there’s white men, white women, Black men. Like, we’re just the bottom. Who wants to be the bottom? We have a reason to be upset because people will think that we’re just – not nothing, but like, basically nothing, when we are so much more than that.

Though the girls believed they had a right to be angry or frustrated especially in response to encounters where they felt they were being treated differently than Black boys or white students, they also knew that displaying those emotions in their elite, predominantly white school context could result in negative disciplinary consequences, and so they often chose to strategically express
their emotions in safe and supportive spaces rather than express them in all areas of their school lives.

In contrast, other youth took on more active resistance strategies to counter the emotional silence that was expected of them. For example, we previously mentioned that Julia was often disciplined for her Chola stylistic expression at MMS. On one occasion, a teacher told her that she could not dress like she did, because she was a girl. In recounting this episode to Clonan-Roy, Julia said, ‘They were only sayin’ that because I’m Mexican.’ Rather than manage her frustrations with the racialized and gendered regulation of her style yet again, she turned around to her teacher and said, ‘Fuck you.’ She then received a detention and had to go to the principal’s office. When Julia authentically engaged her emotions in response to the discipline she experienced, in contrast to other times when she suppressed her anger, she received further punishment as a result of the institutional rules at her school.

Like in this instance with Julia, sometimes the coping strategies the youth in our studies employed had detrimental consequences. Black girls at Olympia and Grace described developing a ‘hypervigilant’ mindset in response to the simultaneous discrimination and emotional silencing they experienced. In describing the experiences of Black students at Grace, Krystal, a 12th grader, commented how ‘We definitely stand out more because we’re a minority obviously. So, you know, everything we do is being watched more than, you know, the other kids.’ Due to the fact that Black girls at Olympia and Grace often felt like their behaviors were being scrutinized in more detail than other students, they sometimes did not respond the way they wanted to in various situations because they were afraid of aligning with or confirming the image of the ‘angry Black girl’ in other people’s minds. They described moments where they experienced
microaggressions from their peers and teachers, and rather than respond, they would either laugh uncomfortably, look to catch the eye of another Black girl who might be around in order to have their feelings validated, or simply walk away. The girls talked about engaging in these behaviors rather than confronting the person in the encounter because they did not want to be seen as ‘aggressive,’ or suffer the ‘repercussions of being a Black person and being seen as X, Y, Z.’

For the girls at Grace and Olympia, hypervigilance not only resulted in a heightened awareness or sensitivity to raced and gendered interactions, but also led to feelings of prolonged frustration, which often took the form of resignation and exhaustion. The girls described how the experience of and responding to microaggressions, invasive questions, or dismissal of their ideas on a regular basis without any signs of positive change from their peers and teachers made them want to give up. In her interview, Lauren, an 11th grader at Olympia, describes the situation in this way:

… by this point it’s almost like, what’s the point? Because we keep trying, and … obviously something’s not getting through … if … like we’re going to try to keep like – “educating” you on certain things, but if you’re not going to get it, like at this point I’m like fine, that’s your own problem… it’s like, all right fine, if you don’t want to learn then – when you said something ignorant and somebody who doesn’t want to teach you retaliates on it, that’s your own problem because we tried to say something and you didn’t want to listen.

Other girls at Olympia described ‘making peace’ with and ‘becoming accustomed to this type of stuff,’ demonstrating a fatigue with having to be advocates for themselves and educators of others with no results. As a part of their frustration, the girls also talked about their active
Figure 7. Instagram post from Hazeem, Boys’ Prep sophomore.

Figure 8. Instagram post from Juana, a 7th grader at MMS.
disengagement with certain people or in particular situations where they simply got ‘fed up’ or were ‘over it.’ The girls’ coping responses are aligned with the symptoms of ‘racial battle fatigue’ (Smith et al., 2011).

Racial battle fatigue, a psychophysiological condition, occurs as a result of the stress that people of color experience when having to encounter daily racist and discriminatory behaviors of others (Smith et al., 2011). Though the symptoms of racial battle fatigue vary, the symptoms most closely connected to what the girls at Olympia and Grace described were ‘difficulty thinking or speaking coherently, and emotional and social withdrawal in response to racial microaggressions or while in environments of mundane racial stressors’ (p. 301). The participants’ statements that they had made peace with the hurtful or frustrating situations, or had become accustomed to always having to take on the role of fighting for themselves, represents a psychological distancing from their experiences as a way to further protect themselves. Such hypervigilance and the experiences of toxic and persistent gendered and racialized microaggressions that occur in predominantly white spaces, can produce stress responses of frustration, sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, helplessness, irritability, defensiveness, shock, and anger (Corbin et al., 2018, p. 630).

Similarly, for the Latina girls at MMS, the convergence of adolescent stress, discrimination, and migration and family related traumas often produced emotional responses that hovered around grief, distress, anger, or fear. The feeling rules in their school, families, and peer groups encouraged the girls to keep their emotions to themselves and left them feeling emotionally isolated. Of the Latina girls that Clonan-Roy worked with at MMS, 24% engaged in self-harm and reported doing so to alleviate the distress they experienced.

Suffering in silence also had distressing outcomes for the boys in our study. Some boys admitted (sometimes quite publicly as Hazeem does on Instagram (Figure 9)) to using drugs ‘just to ease the pain.’ Many boys smoked marijuana regularly and openly shared with Gross that they often did so in order to cope with strong emotions they did not want to directly confront or allow themselves to fully feel.

One senior at Boys’ Prep explained in an interview that he perceived that most boys in the school have difficulty being ‘okay with themselves,’ meaning that they do not feel comfortable sharing their true selves and feelings with others. He continued by telling the story of a very well-liked Boys’ Prep alumnus who recently died by suicide, ‘but no one knew that, no one knew that he … had suicidal thoughts, or he had that type of emotion because he couldn’t express it.’ Although mental illness and/or other factors may have also contributed to this tragedy (Walker, 2016), this student used his peer’s suicide to critique and emphasize the high stakes and profound consequences of restrictive feeling rules for adolescents in his peer group who may not feel free to share their worries about finances or family instability, for example, and therefore are unable to receive support in time.

**Homeplaces: safe, rebellious spaces in schools**

As we have shown, youth in the four school contexts had to abide by and cope with institutional feeling rules, which were shaped by broader societal feeling rules. These school restrictions, in turn, influenced the rules that governed their peer groups. While the schools we worked in purported to support and affirm their students of color, they did not challenge or help their students to resist damaging feeling rules. Instead, students took on the work of creating spaces which provided them with the opportunity to find emotional authenticity and safety, and to practice rebelling against these rules. In this section, we discuss these unique spaces and the power they held for youth.
Informal youth-driven spaces offered students emotional safety and opportunities for rebellion against injustice, but the groups were formed in different ways. FTS was a group initiated by a senior at Boys’ Prep who identified a need among his peers for developing the skills to better express themselves. In an interview, Xavier explained that in his view, restrictive, institutional feeling rules required that he and his friends turn ‘all of our emotions into acceptable emotions… [for example,] if you were afraid, it’s not acceptable to be afraid. You have to convert that to anger.’ He was concerned about the implications of this for young Black men:

I started thinking about the fact that the school doesn’t offer a position for you to be able to openly express yourself. I wanted to create an environment here, where you start to understand yourself [and] be able to accept that other emotions are acceptable, and actually start learning how to deal with them before you get into the real world and those consequences would be 10 times worse … I really wanted to just develop a safe space, mainly for people to start being able to express themselves with their peers and their teachers … Freedom to Speak was, in a sense, a kind of environment that I thought would be a safe rebellious place.
Xavier’s vision of ‘a safe rebellious place’ where he and his peers could practice feeling and expressing a fuller range of emotions offered its participants a respite from the emotional restrictions of school, similar to what was created at MMS, Olympia, and Grace.

Clonan-Roy and Jacobs initiated the creation of the girls’ groups at MMS, Olympia and Grace respectively. Clonan-Roy was asked by staff members to create a group specifically for Latina girls who were experiencing academic and developmental challenges, while Jacobs initiated the creation of the girls’ groups at Olympia and Grace for research purposes. Different from the broader school environment, these informal spaces allowed youth to authentically express themselves and their frustrations with the social world and to find emotional understanding. These spaces were marked by many similar characteristics: youth-centered climates, informality, a supportive adult presence, and affinity groupings.

Each of the groups was student-centered and -led, and the youth set the thematic agenda. At the beginning of each semester, Latina girls at MMS and Black girls at Olympia and Grace would brainstorm a list of topics that they wanted to address for the semester, such as drama, dating, harassment, family issues, and loss. Clonan-Roy and Jacobs would keep track of these topics, and create activities related to those topics. While Clonan-Roy and Jacobs created activities for their respective groups, they followed the girls’ lead during meetings: if girls did not want to engage in an activity, or needed to use the group meeting time to process something, these authors shifted the focus of the meeting accordingly.

At Boys’ Prep, many FTS meetings centered around ‘check-ins’ where each student would have a few minutes to share whatever was on his mind about how his day or week was going, and other students would listen and chime in with questions, support, or advice. On other days, the meetings would involve a group discussion on a particular topic that often emerged organically from conversations in classes earlier in the day or current events. Over the course of the year the group discussed a range of themes including norms of masculinity, therapy and mental illness in the Black community, racism in institutional spaces, violence, spirituality, loss, financial stressors, and politics.

Additionally, each of the spaces offered informal, relaxed environments, where youth could be themselves and express themselves authentically. The spaces did not feel like traditional, confining classroom environments: there were no penalties for lateness, youth could use their own language (whether that be curse words, ‘Spanglish,’ or African American Vernacular English), and groups often met in a circle. Youth were not asked to raise their hands, or abide by other formal classroom expectations. Youth were the leaders of the groups: they did not defer to the adult facilitators to make major decisions or give them permission to speak, go to the bathroom, etc.

**What made these spaces safe?**

We argue that these spaces served as homeplaces (Hooks, 1990) and fostered rejuvenation and resistance. The next few sections illustrate how the characteristics of homeplaces took shape in these youth-driven spaces to nurture a sense of emotional safety.

**Trusting, affirmative relationships with adults**

Each of these groups had facilitator-youth relationships that were described by youth as mutually trusting and respectful. One Latina girl at MMS mentioned that typically, ‘girls don’t really trust adults enough,’ but that Clonan-Roy’s facilitation made it feel like she was ‘a girl, too.’ In an interview, Louisa reported that the demonstration of reliability, care, and interest in girls’ lives, made the girls trust in Clonan-Roy and tell her things in ways that they would not with other adults:

Clonan-Roy: Do you think it’s important for schools to have girls’ groups?

Louisa: Yeah … Because it brought people together. An adult and girls. Usually, the girls don’t really trust adults enough. But since that person actually cares and they always meet up, yeah … You’re like a girl, too.
We know what to tell you. We know that you won’t actually tell everything, like another… like another adult, stuff that we told you.

Here, Louisa emphasized the importance of safety and privacy: that trust is built when one knows that they can confide in adults about their emotional experiences, without expectations for how youth should manage and restrain their emotions and without the risk of consequences or that the information would travel.

**Trusting, affirmative relationships with peers**

Across the groups, youth mentioned the importance of affirmation from peers. Girls at MMS, Olympia, and Grace especially appreciated that the groups were specifically for Latina and Black girls, respectively, and functioned as racial/ethnic affinity groups. In an interview, Clonan-Roy asked Louisa to reflect on if she thought that the MMS girls’ group should have also included girls who were not Latina. Louisa said no and added that she felt like because the group was exclusively Latina girls, they could more comfortably, emotionally, and honestly talk about a broader range of topics, than if non-Latina girls had been included. Louisa expanded and said that one of the purposes of the girls’ group was ‘to learn about the good things about being a Latino. That you don’t have to hide the fact that you’re Mexican and express it and I guess be proud of it.’ In school, a space that typically endangered Latina girls’ emotional and psychological well-being, the group space provided them with the unique opportunity to be proud of their identities. The space to affirm their identities, and resist pressures to assimilate to school environments that valued whiteness (Bettie, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999), also helped these students push back against the kind of detachment from self that Hochschild (2002) warned was a danger of ongoing submission to institutional feeling rules.

The girls at Grace and Olympia created spaces for themselves that were positive, empowering, and honest. The community norms established an environment in which a student like Candace, at the conclusion of the four months of group meetings, wrote a reflection explaining that it was really hard for her to talk about race ‘unless I’m in a group like this.’ Renée wrote how she felt ‘timid’ and ‘shy’ when the group first started meeting, but that seeing other girls share made her more confident in wanting to share her thoughts. Cheryl reflected on how being in a room with other Black girls made her feel ‘very comfortable’ and ‘at peace – something I seldom feel in the Grace School environment,’ and Tanya wrote that she ‘noticed that [she] was able express certain things that [she] can’t express every day in my classes,’ due to the presence of restrictive feeling rules.

**The ability to express emotions freely and authentically**

As Tanya described, the group at Grace provided her with unique opportunities to express certain parts of herself – her identity, emotions, sense of injustice – that she did not feel like she could express in other spaces. Latina girls at MMS echoed this sentiment and appreciated that they could talk to adults and peers about sensitive issues, or have an outburst of anger or cry, without fear of being disciplined or shamed. The boys who participated in FTS made similar comments about their group. Mohamed called it a ‘worry-free zone.’ Jalen, describing the first meeting he attended, shared, ‘I saw how everyone got a chance to express how they felt, and I was like, I should keep coming here just in case I’m not feeling that good that day, and just a chance to hear about how other people feel, that they don’t [usually] share with us.’ He further added that he hopes to find or create a group like this once he gets to college.

Other boys acknowledged that the group encouraged them to be more emotionally expressive than they would otherwise, which was a skill that they knew they had to improve. Frank, a senior, explained,
I tend not to talk about my feelings and I tend to bottle it up until I hit my breaking point and just cry all day. And I don’t like having those days. I’ve come to realize that when you talk about your feelings regularly, you feel better. That group is a great option because if you don’t want to go see a therapist, you know you can go around your friends and they won’t judge you based off what you’re saying. They’ll talk to you about it, they’ll encourage you. That’s what I feel like we need.

As Frank acknowledged, these spaces offered youth the opportunity to reach diverse realizations: about themselves, their schools (and the feeling rules in them), and the social world. In this way, these spaces were educational: they shaped the ways that youth managed and expressed their emotions, practiced self-care, built relationships with others, and learned to critique the covert feeling rules that influenced their experiences.

**Feeling like home**

In line with the conceptualization of homeplaces (Hooks, 1990), many youth emphasized that they appreciated these spaces because they felt like home, where they were safe, supported, and uplifted. In response to the girl-centered structure of the discussion group, Krystal, a 12th grader at Grace remarked, ‘I felt like I was home. Once a week coming in there I was able to talk about what’s been going on for the past few days.’

The closeness, trust, and reciprocity in the relationships in these groups allowed the participants to feel like family members. Xavier, the founding member of FTS, explained that one of his main reasons for coming to school (amidst ‘senioritis’ and preparing to transition to college) was being able to attend group meetings: he was motivated to come to school because these group meetings gave him a space to ‘be able to express or to hear, or to be able to connect with my brothers, and actually call them my brothers and mean it’. Another member of the group, Shaun, emphasized how rare it was to have people at school who check-in with you regularly and ask, ‘Oh, how was your day?’ and to have the space for emotional expression that was not restricted. These unique relationships and opportunities to check-in with others, like family would, encouraged Shaun to describe FTS as ‘a little group that you can escape to.’ The girls at Grace and Olympia practiced ‘hearing people out’: this group practice allowed the girls to really get to know each other, like family, and to feel more comfortable talking about emotionally charged topics (like race), which they might feel uncomfortable, censored, or restrained in talking about in other spaces.

**What made these spaces rebellious?**

Xavier at Boys’ Prep explained that he wanted to develop ‘a safe rebellious place.’ Like homeplaces (Hooks, 1990), these spaces provided an opportunity to critique their social context, practice resistance to oppressive forces, and imagine social change. We emphasize that these homeplaces allowed the youth with whom we worked to transgress feeling rules in their school communities.

The safety of these spaces allowed for rebellion, which took on many forms. One way was through affirming one’s identity in direct resistance to others’ devaluing of it. As we previously mentioned, Louisa, a Latina girl at MMS, commented that in the group, ‘you don’t have to hide the fact that you’re Mexican,’ and that you could ‘express it and … be proud of it.’ Latina girls at MMS were often expected to restrain and manage their frustrations resulting from their devalued racial status in their communities. This affirmation provided opportunities for honest expression of their frustrations, resisted the devaluation of their identities, and rejuvenated their spirits.

Youth across these spaces often appreciated the opportunity to express anger and frustration about their social world, and feel understood in those expressions. Tanya, a student at Grace, commented on how she and her peers were angry, and had a reason to be angry. The girls’
group gave Tanya and her peers the space to express anger and frustration, outside of their ongoing fears of fulfilling the ‘angry Black girl’ stereotype.

The groups were also rebellious in that our participants were able to practice the expression of outlaw emotions (Jaggar, 1989) through pointing out social injustices that they experienced while at school. Latina girls at MMS expressed anger at teachers’ inactions in response to a student saying that ‘all Mexicans should die,’ and Xavier at Boys’ Prep expressed frustration with a teacher whom he believed was insensitive in her treatment of racist history. He said, ‘I think that [my teacher] was inconsiderate for giving us a test after we watched Roots, because I never really had a chance to feel a certain way about the things that I saw in that film. That’s not really a thing that you can say in a classroom, because it’s just…you’re being rebellious.’ The group spaces gave students the opportunity to rebel against feeling rules which told them to bury or alter their emotional expressions, allowed them to feel understood in their authentic emotions, and nurtured their ability to detect injustices in their communities by listening to their emotional reactions towards things that felt wrong.

**Conclusions**

Our exploration into the experiences of youth of color in four different contexts revealed that their emotional and social worlds were dominated by restrictive, institutional feeling rules, which were racialized and gendered in various ways. Drawing from scholarly literature and our empirical data, we have analyzed how institutional feeling rules direct youth of color to: 1) manage frustrations resulting from their devalued racial or gender status in society; 2) abide by feeling rules that are applied to all, but which are particularly difficult for them to follow; 3) comply with feeling rules that differ from feeling rules applied to white individuals; 4) restrain emotions in order to not appear to be fitting in with a stereotype related to their race, gender, or intersectional identity, and; 5) align emotions with white norms for emotional performances of femininity and masculinity. Due to these restrictive feeling rules, youth in these four contexts simultaneously felt that their abilities to self-express were edited or regulated, that their mistakes were more harshly disciplined than their white counterparts, and that they could not respond to or resist such moments because they did not want to align themselves with the stereotypes or face disciplinary consequences. These types of experiences left youth at MMS, Boys’ Prep, Olympia, and Grace feeling silenced and emotionally unsupported.

We join other scholars (Pastor et al., 2007; Stauber, 2017; Sulé et al., 2018; Tokunaga, 2016) in arguing that it is critical to provide youth with homeplaces that are both safe and rebellious: this combination of characteristics allows youth to find emotional understanding and support while also imagining action that is oriented towards social change. Student-centered, informal, relaxed climates, trusting and affirming relationships, and autonomy of expression allowed these spaces to ‘feel like home’ and encouraged youth to express themselves, their emotions, and their responses to injustice authentically. These spaces were informal, but also educational. By practicing the act of resisting restrictive feeling rules and calling out injustice in these spaces, the youth that we worked with became stronger in using their voices and resisting problematic issues and dynamics in their schools and communities. Providing such spaces for youth allows them to transform their emotions into social critique and places them in a position to promote change in their schools and larger social worlds.

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