

White Girls, Schooling, and the White Heteropatriarchal State: A thesis in two parts

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Abstract

Chapter one of this thesis draws on Castagno's (2016) conception of "Niceness" as a process that protects and normalizes racialized oppression. We articulate an understanding of structural Niceness central to intra-White practices of structural dominance, particularly in the intersections of White supremacy and heteropatriarchy. Specifically we look at this practice through the experiences of four White girls who experience school-based state Niceness, which adheres to institutional practices of benevolence.

In chapter two, I offer a theory to articulate state abuse: institutional gaslighting, which explains the coercive production of girls' self-doubt within schools. I articulate this theory in part by telling a story about a White, bisexual girl named River, who experienced internal school push-out from the Trade programs of Autoshop to Cosmetology. I draw upon feminist theorists who have situated heteropatriarchy within the state and have articulated theories of state violence and consider the endemic nature of systemic oppression. I articulate institutional gaslighting as a tactic of state abuse at the structural level. Rather than pushing students out of school, institutional gaslighting strengthens a coercive relationship between girls and the state through preserving the connection to school and bolstering its benevolent function.

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Introduction

This thesis began before I knew it had, before I designed and wrote my proposal last year. My first class, before I even applied to the Educational Studies program, Professor Sabina Vaught assigned us the final project of exploring a moment from our own schooling using the theories we had learned that semester. I chose to examine my experiences with Saturday school as a high school student and engage the benevolent state projects of school discipline and punishment. My early paper and nascent theorizing seem now underdeveloped in contrast to this body of work, but at the time I had felt my mind buzzing with new ideas and possibilities; the world as I knew it having been dramatically altered through new lenses—social reproduction, meritocracy, paternalism. This class had equipped me with the language to understand what I had been observing in my experiences, and well as to dig deeper and unlearn the frameworks of dominant ideologies. My own experiences in high school informed my interests and areas of inquiry—so really, this project began even earlier than that class. Working on that early project catalyzed my research interests into mapping multiple tactics of state discipline, which grew over my time in the program as I learned about new conceptual frameworks and radical possibilities of liberation. I carried my burgeoning theories with me as a student, learner, researcher, and teacher to university, prison, and high school classrooms, where they grew in dialogue with classmates and scholars.

When it came time to design my thesis for the program, I had a long list of ideas of sites and processes I wanted to study, but Saturday school was at the top of my list. When I approached the high school that would become my research site with my plans to study Saturday school, the administrators opened up the possibility of summer school to me. I graciously and eagerly accepted, excited by the possibility of the resonances across these sites, already

articulated through their twinned offering. These two sites share the features of being both disciplinary and instructional sites, framed through institutional narratives of individual behavioral and academic failure as well as state-sponsored benevolent redemption. Through this project, I hoped to map these sites as part of larger state projects of social control and analyze the paternalistic projects that mystify state culpability.

My broad initial questions were about how girls experience multiple features of school discipline. Back in that first class, we had read the “Black Girls Matter Report” (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015), which highlighted the dire need for attending to race and gender dynamics with intersectional specificity in how Black girls experience school discipline and punishment. These dynamics remain obscured both through single-identity framing and a gaping dearth of research on girls and discipline. Having encountered this report in the very beginning of my graduate experience, the spotlight on dire need for scholarship concerning girls’ experiences with school discipline shaped my scholarly inquiry around overt and covert disciplinary mechanisms. I chose to focus on girls broadly in the hopes that nuanced dynamics of state paternalism would come to the fore. Before writing I asked: What are the features of school discipline and instruction? How do girls across race, gender, class, and sexuality understand and narrate these experiences? How do these narratives map larger state stories of gendered-racism? During my research, I found that redemptive state projects kept some White girls connected to schools in subordinated positions, which was used to further discipline all girls of Color

These papers are meant to stand-alone but share obvious and intentional overlaps. Drawing on an ethnographic case study of a New England, urban rim comprehensive high school, this thesis explores imbricate facets of state disciplinary practices of White girls. My research is situated within critical feminist ethnographic traditions that take up gender as

intersectional and focus on normalized sites of power. In both chapters, I explore disciplinary mechanisms internal to Whiteness to ask questions about the ideological and social reproduction of White femininity, and the protection of state institutions through benevolence and subordinated inclusion.

The first paper, “Schooling, Structural Niceness, and Not-nice White Girls”, I co-authored with Sabina. In it, we draw on Castagno’s (2016) conception of “Niceness” as a process that protects and normalizes racialized oppression. We articulate an understanding of structural Niceness central to intra-White practices of structural dominance, particularly in the intersections of White supremacy and heteropatriarchy. Specifically we look at this practice through the experiences of four White girls who experience school-based state Niceness, which adheres to institutional practices of benevolence.

In my second paper, “Institutional Gaslighting: White Girls, Self-Doubt, and the Structural Maintenance of the Paternal State”, I propose a theory to articulate state abuse: institutional gaslighting, which explains the coercive production of girls’ self-doubt within schools. I articulate this theory in part by telling a story about a White, bisexual girl named River, who experienced internal school push-out from the trade programs of Autosshop to Cosmetology. Rather than pushing students out of school, institutional gaslighting strengthens a coercive relationship between girls and the state through preserving the connection to school and bolstering its benevolent function. This paper asks, what do the varying ways White girls are “kept in” rather than pushed out of schools reveal about White heteropatriarchy? How does the state undermine dissent and bolster institutional logics in resistant White girls?

These two papers highlight interknit practices of state benevolence that mask structural dominance, specifically through the protection of White femininity and inclusion of White girls

in schools. To understand how White supremacy works in complicated manner, I considered hierarchical inclusion in Whiteness as a multi-dimensional feature of White heteropatriarchy. The isolation of socially deviant White girls highlights some of the ways in which inclusion in Whiteness is at times characterized by suffering and subordination. The keeping-in and making-of unfit White girls in schools demonstrates how the paternal state sustains their presence while repressing autonomy, redeeming itself in the process. Together these papers ask: What can the processes of maintenance and subordination of White girls reveal about the White supremacist heteropatriarchal arrangements of the state?

Schooling, Structural Niceness, and Not-nice White Girls

Sabina Vaught and Deirdre Ilene Judge

Niceness breaks down when it can be framed as telling “hard truths” about the deficiencies of *other people*. Niceness obfuscates power, and it absolves individuals from needing to address what are actually deficiencies in the system. While the norms of niceness are acceptably broken in these cases, the influence of niceness to protect one’s in-group and one’s institution is unwavering. In other words...the actions and beliefs are always nice in relation to institutional and structural power because niceness masks structural dominance (Castagno, 2014, p. 167).

Castagno offers “Niceness” as a complex practice of Whiteness and theorizes the ways it works to *mask* supremacist *structural dominance*, protecting and normalizing a system of racialized inequity or repression. In this chapter, we take up a small portion of her framework to consider how the *unwavering* feature of Niceness—its commitment to *group* and *institution*—is central to the intra-White practice of structural dominance. Specifically, we observe this intra-White practice at sites where White supremacy and heteropatriarchy are interknit: through Niceness they co-construct and mutually shore up. We explore here how school-based treatment of White girls is one window onto the ways in which state educational institutions hone a racialized Niceness contingent on and reified by paternalism. In line with Castagno’s conceptualization, we suggest that state Niceness does not necessarily follow the interpersonal norms of Niceness, but rather facilitates and adheres to the patterned institutional protection of benevolence.

Drawing on brief ethnographic vignettes from Judge’s study of a comprehensive public high school’s summer school, we theorize how the disciplining of four White girls by White teachers, policies, practices, and institutional organization reflects state Niceness in relation to its own race and gender domination. We argue that the state exerts Niceness to discipline White girls who are perceived as outside dominant White femininity and girlhood, largely through combined class and gender presentation. This discipline is both a means of bolstering what nice Whiteness is and should be, and is a means of entangling White misogyny and control with racial supremacy. While we recognize the ample evidence of Niceness inflicted on girls across race and sexual/gender identity, our specific attention here is an effort to understand a cluster of power constructions internal to Whiteness. In this chapter, we look at how the state school uses White girls to draw boundaries around Whiteness and to silently *demark the deficiencies of other people*—a fundamental task of state benevolence.

The State, Benevolence, and Niceness

We approach “public” schooling as the state’s most extensive compulsory apparatus (Vaught, 2017). Along with Wendy Brown (1992), we understand the state as a “paradox that...is at once an incoherent, multifaceted ensemble of power relations and an apparent vehicle if not agent of massive domination” (p. 12). Moreover, the state is featured by its imbricate colonizing mechanisms (Brayboy, 2005; Jung, 2011), racialist organizations (Bell, 2004; Bonilla-Silva & Mayorga, 2001; Bracey, 2015), capitalist marketizations (Robinson, 2000; Somers, 2008), and heteropatriarchal structures (Bettie, 2003; Canaday, 2009), among others, that are endemic to its founding (Bell, 1992; Fraser, 1990; Guinier, 2004; Harris, 1993) and enmeshed in its ongoing project of hierarchy and domination. Moving fluidly among these mechanisms, state paternal

protection operates as a benevolent feature of the social contract (Brown, 1992; A. Harris, 2006; Hill Collins, 2009).

Benevolence is a capacious state rubric, a defining characteristic of its self-imagined magnanimity. Specifically, we conceptualize state benevolence here as both the ideologies and mechanizations of the liberal, western state as it reproduces its original violent authority to make contractual, protective laws and systems that it presents as neutral and democratic (Agamben, 2005; Anderson, 2006; Robinson, 2000). Differentiating among those who should be variously included and excluded is axial to its function. Benevolence is the endemic deep structure of the U.S. state.

Castagno encourages us to consider a feature of this paternal benevolence: Niceness. Niceness, we argue, is a fixture of that defining characteristic, a distinct mechanism by which just one part of the state's malignantly benevolent capacity is realized. Niceness functions as and offers an analytically precise relational or transactional instrument. As transactional, Niceness can be understood as a semiotics of benevolence—an articulation, conveyance, or narration that has reifying and reproducing functions. Niceness bridges the vast and often shrouded apparatuses of benevolence to the daily, mundane exertions of state authority. It tells the structural “‘hard truths’ about the deficiencies of *other people*” (Castagno, 2014, p. 167). Such structural forms of Niceness create the ongoing foundational narrative for state benevolence. In light of this, we ask: What is the relationship between state Niceness and nice individual interactions in the context of state schools? And how does that relationship help us to understand how heteropatriarchal Whiteness makes and masks power?

Niceness offers a mechanistic and conceptual view of the ways in which state heteropatriarchal Whiteness internally recreates itself. Here we take up a feminist approach to the

state¹. Countering Foucault's suggestion that the state's centrality is diminished in the disciplinary age, Brown (1992) argues that "male social power and the production of female subjects appears to be increasingly concentrated in the state" (p. 29). As Brown (1992) writes, "Domination, dependence, discipline, and protection, the terms marking the itinerary of women's subordination in vastly different cultures and epochs, are also characteristic effects of state power" (p. 12). These effects of state power are particularly evident in compulsory state schooling, where youth are conditioned or coerced into various future citizenships or non-citizenships—inclusions and exclusions—through the gatekeeping practice of belonging and unbelonging fundamental to state paternalism (Harris, 1993; Somers, 2008; Williams, 1991).

School's characteristic as a benevolent paternal institution serves to camouflage the brute race-gender power differentials it helps to discipline and produce. As Erica Meiners (2015) points out, "The category child masks the transactions that ultimately decide who has access to innocence, sentience, and full humanity" (p.124; see also, Berlant, 1997). In this chapter, it is through the transactions of structural Niceness that we see state paternal benevolence work out its ongoing heteropatriarchal Whiteness against a group of White girls the school treated as deficient and in need of protection through within-school exclusion and unbelonging.

"Niceness," writes Castagno (2014), "compels us to reframe potentially disruptive or uncomfortable things in ways that are more soothing, pleasant, and comfortable" (p. 9). That state schooling is in part an uncomfortable site in which heteropatriarchal Whiteness carries out intra-racial gender discipline through structural Niceness and in service of benevolence is not evidenced only via the disciplining expectation that women and girls be nice in interpersonal contexts. Rather, it can be observed in the dexterity of heteropatriarchal Niceness as it organizes

¹ In this chapter, we touch on rich theoretical traditions of the state. For further reading on feminist analyses of state, please see authors including: Sara Ahmed, Wendy Brown, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Nancy Fraser, Inderpal Grewal, Angela Harris, Joy James, Chandra Mohanty, and Patricia Williams, among many others.

around the enforcement of race-specific gender roles and conduct. In some cases, adult women are unjust, unfair, or unkind to effectuate structural Niceness. As Castagno (2014) writes of Niceness, “the actions and beliefs are always nice in relation to institutional and structural power because Niceness masks structural dominance” (p. 167). While on the surface school most overtly carries out this gender-race protection in relation to White girls by discursively and structurally pretending to protect them from girls of Color and from all boys, we look here at the ways in which school produces and protects Niceness by creating and disciplining deficient White girls. This maneuver protects the school itself.

Our examination of Niceness thus moves among several of its interlocking features and functions: the overt practice of smoothing over or being paternalistic; quiet disciplining of some White students in order to maintain the facade of Niceness; micro-enactments of Niceness—by teachers, principals, counselors, and others—that protect the macro-instantiations of Niceness; compulsory schooling and state claims to democracy, through punishment. Therefore individuals, schools, and the state constantly co-produce and protect White Niceness, masking the fact that membership in Whiteness is exclusive—even to its own possible members. Whiteness is not inclusive and inviting to all Whites, but rather structurally Nice through its relations to them, including marginalization, captivity, or exclusion. Whiteness sacrifices some Whites, in part through Niceness, in order to make Whiteness itself—as the state, as culture, as norm, and so on—benevolent.

We recognize at least two limitations of this chapter: the state is not consistently present or forceful in people’s lives, and people as individuals and collectives resist and/or negotiate the state in a variety of strategic, agentive ways. Our effort here is to consider just one race-gender

function of state Niceness within schooling and so to map that very particular but fundamentally partial terrain.

Methodology and Context

This chapter draws data from Judge's larger qualitative study of school-year Saturday school and summer school, both of which took place at the same urban rim, New England, comprehensive public high school. Saturday school ran from 8:00-10:00 a.m. one or two Saturdays each month—during which time students were required to remain completely silent—and was housed in a math classroom on the second floor of the high school. Situated in the back wing of the school, summer school ran for six weeks, from 8:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Summer school students had to use a back entrance to enter the school and were prohibited from entering other areas of the school.

According to state categories, the high school student body of approximately 1,500 students was 61% White, 17% African American, 10% Asian, 9% Hispanic, and about 3% multi-racial. While the school did not keep demographic data on Saturday and summer school, Judge made observations both based on student identification of race and ethnicity as well as her own assumptions. These assumptions and self-definitions at times conflicted and were far more complex than state categories. Judge approximated that during summer and Saturday schools over 40% of students were White, over 20% were Black, around 30% Latinx, and a small number multiracial. The administrator in charge of summer school confirmed that: of the one administrator and six summer school teachers and the four administrators monitoring Saturday school, all but one were White; one was Asian American. Of the teachers, four were male and two were female; of the administrators, two were male and two were female. The school police officer on staff for the summer was a White male.

An assistant principal explained that students were “referred to” Saturday school by grade-level administrators for a variety of behavioral infractions, including: excessive tardiness (more than five in a row), missing a detention, swearing at a teacher. Students who received a course grade below 70% and above 50% were identified for summer school and were informed of their ability to self-enroll for the summer session, the fee for which was \$250 per course. Students who had received below a 50% were ineligible for summer school and forced to repeat the course the following year. In order to pass summer school, students were required to receive a grade of a 70% or above. These sites articulated: part of Saturday school was to “avoid” summer school. Administrators in Saturday school told Judge she would see many of the same students in summer school, which proved to be true.

Judge’s study was motivated by questions about the convergence of alternative instructional contexts with disciplinary practices as they shape the schooling experiences of girls. She situated her research within critical feminist qualitative traditions, which take up gender as an intersectional phenomenon and examine its multidimensional mechanisms (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Davis & Craven, 2016; Fine, et. al, 2003; Mohanty, 1988; Narayan, 1993; Pillow & Mayo, 2012). With particular attention to the daily sites of mundane power, she mobilized feminist practices of listening and reflexivity that disrupt dominant and individualistic narratives of power. Specifically, she attended to the ways in which both her institutional position as a White woman and as one who grew up and went to public schools in the same region impacted the way that participants interacted with her. These positions both potentially forged and ruptured communication. Despite Judge’s clearly communicated purpose in the school as a researcher, she was often characterized by staff as a “teacher in training” or “future teacher,” fitting into the institutional narrative about White women in schools. However, this alignment was uneven. For

instance, one administrator at summer school sarcastically remarked of Judge, “I didn’t know we let tattooed women work here.” At times she shared her own challenging experiences with school discipline and was deliberate about how those shaped her lines of questioning and understandings of school events. She interviewed and observed teachers, administrative staff, and students around questions of gender, race, class, and other functions of school and social organization. Her primary interview population was students, whom she interviewed individually and in groups. The stories of the four young women below emerge from a constellation of stories of state disciplinary practices.

Feeding the Hungry

Saturday and summer school were sites of structural Niceness that did not have to internally abide by the interpersonal norms of Niceness (Castagno, 2014). Their Niceness was produced through their structural purpose and externally narrated. Administrative and teaching staff described summer school as a “second chance” or an “opportunity” for students who individually failed to take advantage of the school year. This opportunity was imagined against the backdrop of student and family deficit. In describing Saturday school, one White female senior administrator, Ms. Hunter, said,

I’ll never forget this. I used to work at [high school with majority low-income students of Color]. I started my career there. The principal of the school taught me a lot and he told me, you know, “These kids crave structure.” I’ll never forget it. They do. They have these chaotic home lives, and they won’t say it but these kids actually like the discipline and structure we provide because they don’t get it at home...they need it, it helps them.

Here, Ms. Hunter discursively narrated state structural Niceness by describing “structure” as responsive and generous. Through the transactions of Niceness, she laid the ongoing narrative foundation for state benevolence. As Castagno (2014) writes, “These types of discursive strategies are nice ways to talk about the sorting and selecting mechanisms in schools. The Niceness serves to deflect attention and responsibility away from the fact that schools and teachers are engaged in such processes” (p. 69). Discursively positioning students as “craving” the sorting and selecting that Saturday school bolsters was nice. Moreover, her nice and deflecting narration of schools as fulfilling this craving positioned the disciplinary structures of Saturday schooling as benevolently paternalistic. To that end, she hinged the benevolence of disciplinary schooling to deficient home lives and more specifically pathologically deficient families. Niceness tells and retells the ongoing fiction of deficiency to reproduce the foundation for state benevolence—deficient subjects who require paternal protection and from whom fit subjects require protection.

This supremacist undergirding of individual inadequacy and home deficiency, and the production of school as nice, was structured into the official discourse of Saturday and summer schooling. Summer school itself was designated “credit recovery” in policy and institutional discourse. Specifically, students were informed about the ways in which they could “recover” their “credits”—as if they individually had lost them, failed to keep track of them, been incompetent to earn them on time, discarded them, or mishandled them. Summer school was a site for students to recover what home had not supported during the academic year. Ms. Hunter described Saturday school as an “opportunity” for students to be doing homework when they would not otherwise be doing so on a Saturday morning at home or had not done so at home during the week, when required. Home as the “hard truth” counterpart to school was degraded

and unfit. School was the state institutional iteration and expression of state Niceness, providing a space for “good” student behavior. The nice discourse of recovery bolstered the larger discourse of benevolent paternalism.

This structural Niceness buttressed the construction of the broken subject required to maintain the fiction of a benevolent state (A. Harris, 2006; Hill Collins, 2009; Smith et al., 2004; Stein, 2004). The broken, unfit subject needs correction, but must undertake this correction outside the calendar and context of the fit subject. This separation of the unfit subject highlights the punitive aspect of this state service and physically and temporally sequesters the unfit student from the fit student who is understood to need the breaks of weekends and summers that come with good future citizenship. The unfit student is expected to pay a debt of gratitude by accepting the loss of these times (which are used for labor, family care and support, relaxation, health, social engagement, artistic projects, among others) as part of their debt owed for failing. This feature of debt of gratitude to state Niceness was compounded by the fact that neither Saturday nor summer school were designed for or make possible academic acceleration or excellence but rather signaled deceleration or mediocrity at best. The contexts of Saturday and summer school were therefore also the context of state semantic, transactional, and structural organizations of belonging and not belonging, inclusion and exclusion. Our context is these two school sites, where we consider how unfitness gets specifically structured in intra-White race-gender practices.

Not-nice Girls

The state use of Niceness to construct certain White girls as deviant or deficient is a mechanism we can access by looking at the institutional experiences of such girls: not-Nice girls.

Discomfort and Nice White Guys

We start with Mareena who told Judge she was in summer school for complex reasons stemming from difficult interactions with school staff. During summer school class times, Mareena often sat quietly in the back of the room, part of the social interactions of other students but not animatedly engaged in their conversations; yet during class discussions about race, gender, and sexuality, Mareena was confidently outspoken. She described herself as “a little harsh” and was often brash, sarcastic, and seemingly sure of her righteous defense of marginalized people. Mareena frequently wore an oversized sweatshirt and jeans, with her cropped hair feathered out in careful layers. She told Judge that her appearance and her interest in Metal Shop consistently led people to see her as a lesbian, but she identified herself as straight.

In a hot, cramped guidance counselor’s office nestled in the corner of the summer school wing of the high school, Judge and Mareena sat together with two other girls, good friends of Mareena. The girls began talking about why they thought they were in summer school. One girl talked about not doing her homework. Then Mareena began talking. She was suddenly seemingly unsure. Her voice rising in question at the end of her sentence, she said, “Well I was put in a class where I told the teacher, well not even the teacher, I couldn’t really talk to the teacher because I wasn’t like comfortable with him.” Trying to understand, Judge followed, “Why weren’t you comfortable with the teacher?” Mareena struggled to characterize the situation and her feelings: “The classroom made me really anxious, like I don’t know the set up and where I was put, and like I had asked ‘im if I could move my seat and he said ‘No’—just a flat out ‘no’ ...And that really never got fixed until like fourth quarter.” The other two girls were captivated, listening quietly and nodding as if *that’s the way this works*.

Unable to get support from her teacher, Mareena went to her guidance counselor. With sudden clarity, Mareena said, “I talked to my guidance counselor at the beginning of the year and

I said like ‘I’m not comfortable in the class’ and I didn’t really know how to explain it.” With a mocking tone of flippancy, Mareena said, “and so she was like, ‘Well I can’t really do anything for you.’” The guidance counselor illustrates Castagno’s suggestion that Niceness protects the institution and obfuscates power. In this instance, the guidance counselor was interpersonally not nice—perhaps even rude. But as Mareena’s story unfolds, we see this instance as part of the counselor’s “telling ‘hard truths’” (Castagno, 2014, p. 167) to and about Mareena and the White male teachers in the building.

Mareena began to fall behind in the class. She said to the group, “I wasn’t understanding things so I wasn’t even doing the homework ‘cause I didn’t know what to do.... I don’t really like staying after *alone* with a teacher it—I ‘on’t know—it makes me uncomfortable.... so I like didn’t feel like I could.” While Mareena shared with Judge in another conversation that she had always felt comfortable around boys, because she has older brothers, she consistently stood far away from male teachers—especially one who was considered a “favorite” and “nice” teacher at summer school.

Mareena’s brief story illustrates one exercise of state Niceness in schooling, highlighting its narratives and their reproduction of exclusion or unbelonging. Unable to articulate a reason that fit the state’s narrative of why a student would need to be switched out of a class—particularly away from a teacher—Mareena was denied the ability to make a decision that would support her academic efforts. First in this interaction was the message that Mareena could not simply dislike her class. This reasoning sits within a larger logic that high school students are assigned to and do not choose most of their classes. Yet exceptions to this logic are made across students all the time. The logic itself masks the reasons adults in a building choose to follow or not follow the logic. In this case, Mareena’s discomfort with a White male teacher was stalled in

part by paternalistic notions of White male teachers as good guys, notions that place them outside the fray of heteropatriarchal power. White male teachers' institutional role as benevolent state agents in the large, "democratic" project of schooling generally protects them from scrutiny around powered gendered interactions that might be recognized elsewhere between an adult male and a minor female, and makes the standard for legitimate discomfort in an already excluded or marked-deficient girl impossibly high. Such men are often understood to have sacrificed more lucrative, status-rich careers in order to altruistically serve in a White female dominated profession, marking the paternal state as noble by proxy.

In this instance, Mareena felt she was sanctioned for being a not-nice girl. According to Castagno (2014), "A nice person is not someone who creates a lot of disturbance, conflict, controversy, or discomfort. Nice people avoid potentially uncomfortable or upsetting experiences, knowledge, and interactions" (p. 9). Mareena was punished for creating a "controversy" or "disturbance": being not-nice. Specifically, she was not nice for privileging her upsetting interactions with a White male teacher, and for seeking redress or remedy. Any doubt of White male teachers' Niceness—particularly by White girls who do not possess dominant gender-race capital, are positioned as natural wards or daughters, and in the logics of heteropatriarchy expected to be grateful for the attentions of men in the "caring professions"—is suspicious and not-nice: nice White girls do not complain about nice White men who are serving the greater good. Mareena did not possess or perform a White female gender identity that accrued greater institutional status, value, or empathic qualities (Bettie, 2003). Not-nice White girls are often compelled into structural quietness, a core feature of structural Niceness.

Second in Mareena's interaction with the guidance counselor was that if her reason to leave the class was that she was "anxious," she was faced with the decision of whether or not to

state that her discomfort stemmed from her own, very individual difficulties—namely, anxiety and mental health. This pathologization of Mareena, even if narrated by her, was a function of the state protecting its own Niceness. White girls' discomfort with nice White men can be nicely attributed to the girls' psychological or behavioral deficiencies, again: their unfitness, or unbelonging. Moreover, anxiety retells the hard truth about some White girls in that it plots out their imagined gendered, psychological conditions of frailty and eclipses any view of school-based patriarchal violences that might be seen through the lens of very real anxiety. In this narrative of structural Niceness, Mareena would have had to present herself as someone in need of repair, correction, or treatment in order to escape a negative classroom situation. School-based treatment furthers the state's confidence in its Niceness. Specifically, the state can offer to support, treat, or accommodate a girl by converting her anxiety produced by a male teacher into a pathology in need of some repair. The repair may entail the girl going back and being appropriately, submissively nice in relation to the White male teacher, or accepting heteropatriarchal structures and practices of predation and subordination that uphold Whiteness. Mareena's Whiteness matters especially here, as White male state benevolence hinges on the quiet, even if coerced, acquiescence of White girls.

Judge learned that a third feature of this interaction was that several of the girls who identified themselves as struggling with mental health faced the coerced relinquishment of privacy at school. Mareena did not use her very real anxiety as a strategy, because like many of the other girls in summer and Saturday school she had learned from her own experience and others' that the consequence would be school invasion into her private life. She said she was unwilling to surrender what privacy she had.

State Concern: The Nice Invasion of Privacy

In a separate conversation, another White female student, River, described this invasive ruse of care: “I think that my *therapist* and my *mom* should be worrying about me, and myself. I don’t think like they [school staff] *care*... they jus’ like want me to get good grades and get outta high school. That’s it.” River captured the material irony of this nice, invasive uncaring. River said “the school,” especially the counselors, consistently insisted on talking to her therapist. When she responded to this insistence with anger, counselors then told her that her anger was an individual problem by which she was impairing her own ability to succeed. The school weaponized River’s real struggles in order to accomplish its nice and unsupportive goals of grades and graduation for White girls.

For Mareena, protecting her privacy meant in part removing herself from the uncomfortable classroom situation, given that she was unwilling to submit to it. The consequence of structural Niceness was that Mareena stopped going to that class. As a result, she was issued a non-credit bearing grade and referred to summer school. Her protection of her own privacy against the nice state made her seem an unfit subject who was not afforded inclusion, largely because of her failure to accept the gendered hierarchies of Whiteness.

In discussing these negotiations of privacy, another White girl in the group, Morgan, jumped in and described a White, female teacher who would get on her case about missing class. Morgan, an impeccably dressed young woman who was quiet in class but very outspoken outside of class, said,

If I didn’t show up or like I was absent, the next day she would be like ‘Oh you’re here’. And she would kinda like make me feel bad about like not being there. Like certain days, I know last year I had a lot of days I was like out because doctor’s office visits and stuff. So uhm, like I’d bring in like the note and I had her during second period, so during

second period I'd asked to go to the office to give them the note. Uhm so I would ask her to like go, and she's like 'oh your note's not real'. She would just kinda say, I shouldn't have been out, even if I had a note.

Then, her voice trailing off, Morgan said, as if in resignation, "And it was like 'Okay'." "Okay" stood in sharp contrast to Morgan's very agentic personality. In fact, in her conversations with Judge, she referenced events, times, and school practices most often through nonchalant descriptions of physical altercations she had—specifically those she engaged to stand up for herself or others. She was seemingly fearless. As she said "Okay," she shook her head, and gestured defeat.

Morgan's truancy and unabashed confidence marked her as non-compliant and so not grateful for the Niceness of the school. Therefore, her private medical needs--those rights of belonging through bodily health that denote future citizenship—were dismissed. Her teacher was able to deny the legitimacy of the physician's notes and put Morgan in a situation without recourse: further unexcused truancy, this time without a physician's note. Therefore the teacher's protection of the integrity of the school—a place that should not be manipulated or mistreated by false claims--produced a condition for Morgan in which she could make no claim except for the unrecognized claim of discomfort.

When Morgan finished telling this story, Mareena turned to her and said,

In that situation, that's none of her business how long you're there and how long you're not. That's something to put up with like, the office, and like the principals and stuff. I feel like teachers are very nosey like they like to stick their nose in everything. And, like, they do notice a lot.

Mareena distinguished for Morgan who should have the institutional purview over truancy. She also challenged one feature of the nice White heteropatriarchal state: White maternalism and the quiet ability for White female teachers to socialize White girls into White womanhood. Those girls who do not want that socialization were automatically suspicious, cast as deceitful and liars. Nice White girls took their illnesses to the school, for support. Again, nice White girlness required the abdication of privacy and the invitation of state intervention and parental usurpation. Not-nice White girls did not have believable medical needs. They lacked the right to belonging to the community of people who deserve bodily care. The rhetorical positioning conveyed not-nice White girls as in need of more care (but only through school-sanctioned treatment apparatuses) that at once bolstered the structural Niceness of the school and further reproduced the not-Niceness of the White girls who refused this benevolent invasion.

Trade and the Vocation of Niceness

The quiet disciplining Niceness of parental usurpation, violation of privacy, and the slow unbelonging of White girls was amplified by the structures of schooling. These four White girls, sent to summer school, were also enrolled in the school's Trade School, which shared a building and some core content curriculum with the comprehensive school. Trade (as students and teachers called it) students were 12% Whiter, 12% more low-income, and 21% more often labeled with a disability than students at the comprehensive high school. The gender demographics at Trade were skewed 65% male and 35% female and the programs in Cosmetology, Nursing, and Childcare were more heavily female; while the programs in Autobody, Metal Shop, Automotive Technology, Engineering, Carpentry & Construction, Robotics, and Electrical, among others, were heavily male. As with most institutions in the state, the school did not keep demographic data broken down by race *and* gender, nor did it keep track

of data for tracks. River sat on the edge of her seat leaning her body forward emphatically as she expressed frustration about the skewed racial dimensions of the Cosmetology program. She explained that while Cosmetology was entirely female, only a very small number of students were girls of Color. “It focused more on the White—the White people,” she explained. “It was a bunch of bull,” she said as she explained how they only learned how to do “White hair.” The state failure to keep such records in a school disproportionately male causes us to wonder why. What could these records reveal about the race and gender organization of the school?

Students enrolled at Trade did rotation weeks as a required elective that was the only time the gender sorting of the school was disrupted. This elective rotation highlighted the rigid gender boundaries the school organization produced, as one student’s story illustrates. Brooke’s experience was a small window onto the gender boundaries of Trade, and the function of Niceness in producing such rigid organization. Brooke looked and sounded tired all summer. Her deep brown eyes were generally fixated on something in the distance and she rarely made direct eye contact. In class, she was often a few seconds behind everyone else, seemingly off in her own world disengaged from the interactions around her. She spoke with a strong accent attached to regional White working class cultures. In reflecting on her school experiences, Brooke described herself to Judge as having struggled with depression and anxiety for some time, but she also highlighted her class status in thinking through her gendered experiences: “I feel like between like the rich people and the *not* so rich people—and they get like, treated better and we don’t. Cause like if you don’t have money then yur like *nobody*. If yur not pretty yur nobody. That’s how like society is nowadays and it sucks.” Even though it “sucks” she tried to perform the nice girl—a girl inherently not poor, not depressed or anxious, not unpretty, and not failing.

Brooke said calmly to Judge, “Every year I try my hahdest to be like one of those [teachers’ favorites], but it never happens.”

“What do you do to try?” asked Judge.

“Like I do all my work. And like I even help. I don’t go to lunch, cause like the people, so I stay in like classrooms and like clean their rooms. I still don’t be their favorite.” Brooke paused. Dismayed, she said “But like, one kid, like the smahtest kid gets the favorite and he doesn’t do nothin.”

Brooke saw herself as categorically poor and responded in part by trying to be a good girl—a helper. However, she was not able to actually do the work of school, only the helping on the side. Poor helpers are imagined as fit to be assistants, custodians, lunch ladies, and so on, but not future citizens of the professions or the wives thereof, and therefore not-nice White girls. Moreover, her location as a Trade student signaled her deficiency and not-Niceness. Nice girls, or what some administrators called “good girls,” were in the aspirational, honors academic tracks, regardless of their future relationship to heteropatriarchal structures. The Trade school was not preparing people for the upper echelons of White supremacy, but was rather a more explicit social reproduction, tracking mechanism, perhaps pipelining students into employment, but not further education and not high-status employment. The Whiteness of Trade helped to mask this sorting and excluding function, only further evident in Trade’s predominance of low-income, disability-labeled students. It was a structural site of the making of Other Whites, Whites whose blue-collar success undergirded dominant White heteropatriarchal power, in part by producing rigid gender tracks and punishments.

Brooke’s experience in Trade further integrated White male freedom from scrutiny and school structural Niceness. In the same guidance counselor’s office where Judge interviewed

Morgan, Mareena, and another girl, Brooke and Judge met one morning with two other students. The three students were not close friends, but rather classmates for the summer. Brooke sat in the middle, her hands resting gently on a floral-patterned tank-top dress, rarely leaving her lap except to occasionally tuck a stray hair behind her ear. The group was talking about students reporting racist incidents to one of the assistant principals, and how he did not respond to these complaints but rather seemed to protect teachers who had been there “for a long time.” Brooke talked about reporting a teacher at the Trade for what we identify as sexual harassment.

“There’s this autobody teacher,” said Brooke. “We were doin’ rotations [required electives] and I remember goin’ up to [the Trade assistant principal, a White woman] cause he would not stop looking at me and I felt so uncomftahble.” As she spoke, her voice faltered and trailed off. Like Mareena, Brooke expressed being uncomfortable with a White male teacher. Discomfort was a necessary condition of these girls’ schooling, because it was something the school could produce but refuse to recognize or ameliorate. It placed the girls in a constant state of distress and partial self-doubt that negatively mediated their learning. As one girl said, capturing the expressions of many others, “So, I didn’t really like him, I wasn’t comfortable and I couldn’t focus.” All four girls shared experiences of stopping attending stressful classes with obvious impact on their grades.

Brooke said, “Like I tried to get switched out of that rotation...He [the teacher] would keep staring at me. And like I would wear--like, not low but like you could see like the line [pointing to her bra line] and he would stare and I was like ‘Oh no...’” She said “Oh no” not with aggression, but instead with a mixture of fear, anticipation, and despair.

Brooke went on, “Like I’d be doin’ this every second [holding her dress neckline up to her collarbone] and when we would like—I ‘on’t know for the cahs, you hadda like clean the

cahs. And I would be doin' that, and he would still be looking and I'm like uhhh" she said, visibly disgusted to recount his actions, but also talking freely with the group as if this was so commonplace and such common knowledge that there was no secrecy or privacy about it among students.

"So I asked to go—every day I think I asked to go to the bathroom but I would just skip that period. I would like—I would still go but I would like—once I got one look and I would like leave. He's *still theyah*, and like he sees me in the hall, but I 'on't think he remembers my name. Which is good." While Brooke was glad to be anonymous to the predatory teacher, her sense that this was "good" revealed something about the discipline of not-nice White girls: the opposite of objectification and harassment was anonymity and namelessness, not agency, protection, retribution, or remediation. Judge heard this from all the White girls she interviewed. The desire for anonymity, for just wanting it to stop, for wanting to be recognized for good deeds—cleaning up, helping out—for not wanting to drop out, tells us something about Brooke and her peers, but also about state conditioning of certain White girls. Schooling conditions such girls to move just under the radar, to make no waves, but gain no benefit; to just function. Their quietly and systematically produced discomfort is a repressive feature of Niceness, one that hinges on their staying present bodily but without agency.

Brooke went on to describe the conditions at the Trade school:

Even the culinary teacher, he's so weiyahd. Like he comes in Cosmo and looks at all the girls. All the girls in cosmo like talks like 'Oh he's so weiyahd.' Even the teachahs, we like talk to the teachahs about him. And like he would like take pictchuhs of people without like permission.

In spite of her having reported this to the assistant principal and many students having complained to teachers, nothing ever came of the complaints.

This pattern of school non-response to these girls' discomfort with White male teacher behavior echoed the pattern in the main school, where Mareena complained. However, it was exaggerated by the structure of the Trade school itself, where students were funneled into school-identified gender-appropriate tracks. As River explained to Judge during a different one-on-one interview, "I honestly don't think the people that are in non-traditional shops, like the girls in the guy shop and the guys in the girl shops, I don't think that Trade wants that to happen, because they always try to stop it." Niceness at Trade was built into gender separation along dominant notions of appropriate learning and vocation. Future labor belonging and citizenship was delineated along traditional skill lines. Any disruption of that was seen as not nice to a state offering the generous, free preparation for blue collar belonging.

Brooke's experience of harassment went unacknowledged by the school because she was not meant to be a permanent member of the class. She was temporarily in the wrong place, a brief elective that was a sort of nice gesture toward exposure to other tracks. The teacher's sexual harassment was school-based instruction to Brooke, teaching her where she should and should not be learning. The auto shop was a White man's space and White men's spaces are only imagined unsafe to women if women "wrongly" choose to enter them--survivors of sexual assault, for instance, being blamed for going to the party where they were assaulted. So, nice White working class girls take up Niceness in schooling by staying in appropriate skill-based tracks, such as Cosmetology.

Additionally, according to Brooke, the Cosmetology teachers, who were White women, were involved in conversation with students about the predatory Auto teacher. While they

listened to the girls and did not defend the Auto teacher, Brooke said they did not report the teacher's behavior. This, too, was instructive. We wonder here about their institutional location as female teachers of Cosmetology. What is the expectation for race and gender Niceness in state schooling in this track of the Trade school? In relation to other teachers? In relation to the administration? In comparison to White female teachers in the main school certified to teach in the core content, or "academic," areas? We are curious about how their institutional location models and constructs a subordinate White female identity featured by quiet discomfort in students. How does the absolute absence of female teachers on the male side of the Trade teach young women about the gendered power relations of Whiteness?

Moreover, we see resonances with White hair salons and auto shops in the world of private business. The former is imagined in popular culture as a site where women—as customers and hairdressers—might join to talk and complain about bad male behavior in order to get and give confidential advice, but perhaps not to collectively take action. The auto shop is imagined as a site of White male dominion, depicted as decorated with centerfold calendars and lewd jokes, maybe a beer can or two in the trash—not a domain to be regulated by *anyone*. We wonder then if there were pedagogical and curricular matches between society, the Trade, and the main school that resulted in a disproportionate number of the girls in summer school coming from the Trade side. Judge observed that the Trade girls were particularly conditioned into the excuse of Niceness leveraged in favor of White male teachers.

As we consider excuse as a feature of the structural Niceness, we turn to Castagno's (2014) suggestion that, "Niceness functions to at once neutralize dominance and maintain it. Dominance, inequity, and fundamentally whiteness are neutralized through Niceness" (p. 174). This neutralization of dominance was evident in the excuse-laden protection of White male

administrators and teachers. In summer school, students from both the main school and Trade complained repeatedly in particular about one White male administrator. Summer school students described him as “the worst,” “harsh,” and “unfair.” In a group with Brooke, one student said many students had complained to this administrator about racism and he “didn’t do anything.” A White male summer school teacher said that the students think there is no follow up to their complaints, but they do not know what “goes on behind the scenes.” This teacher struggled to be structurally nice, both to the students and this administrator. He said the administrator was just trying to “protect confidentiality” and that the students did not understand the complexity of the follow up to their complaints. He said, “He’s a nice guy.” The teacher’s mobilization of the “nice guy” trope also animated state Niceness. As Castagno (2014) writes, nice people

do not point out failures or shortcomings in others but rather emphasize the good, the promise, and the improvement we see... This avoidance and reframing are done with the best intentions, and having good intentions is a critical component of Niceness. In fact, as long as one means well, the actual impact of one’s behavior, discourse, or action is often meaningless. (p. 9)

Here, the administrator’s nice-guyness made the hidden and mysterious policies and practices of the school nice, it made lack of transparency nice, it made failure to follow up nice, and positioned students as ungrateful and naive not just to the administrator but more-so to the benevolent state. It also aligned the White male teacher with the structure and practice of the school.

While Brooke, River, Morgan, and Mareena were critical of the practices and alignments of structural Niceness, they were variously conditioned by their punishments for not behaving

nicely in the context of Trade, and so were generally resigned. Detailing the previous school year's exhausting struggle over her schedule and curriculum with the administration, River said of the administrator's unfairness, "I'm too tired to fight. It's tiring."

Exhaustion

River's tiredness came from constantly battling her location outside nice White girlness. Standing at 5' at most, River regularly wore t-shirts and sweatshirts adorned with metal bands and zombie faces that swallowed her frame. She effected a nervous half-smile, that was disjointed from her sometimes-shaved, sometimes-blue or -orange hair and bold confidence.

River started out high school in Autoshop as the only girl in that track, and described it as a "passion." During summer school, both Mareena and River spoke about the difficulty navigating the male spaces of the Trade shops--there was "a lot of goofing around," "jokes about other girls in the school," and teachers and boys consistently underestimating the girls' abilities. River switched to Cosmetology in part because of these structural issues that made the environment not serious enough and overtly hostile.

River said to Judge, "No matter how many times I would talk to [the shop teacher] about me doing on-field work, he—he would say yes but then he would give it to the high school kids and the other Trade kids that were guys, and I would be—and I would get stuck doing like the computer work. Which is like uhm putting the bills in and stuff like that. So I know the whole system but—" She was frustrated. She was tired. And she was sad. Disappointment characterized her descriptions. As Brown (1992) states, "Male power, like state power, is real but largely intangible except for the occasions when it is expressed as violence, physical coercion, or outright discrimination" (p. 15). We suggest that Niceness highlights the structurally powered

White male characteristics of interpersonal interactions that might otherwise go undetected as benevolent state power.

Conclusion

The quiet marginalization but maintenance of certain White girls allows the ongoing construction of female instability and reconstitutes the school's role as care provider through gendered control and subordination. Such paternalist White maneuvers draw from the benevolent "protection codes," that Brown (1992) identifies as "key technologies in regulating privileged women as well as in intensifying the vulnerability and degradation of those on the unprotected side of the constructed divide between light and dark, wives and prostitutes, good girls and bad ones" (p. 9). And, in the internal state construction of Whiteness, we would add: nice and not-nice. Schools exercise an intraracial gendered Niceness that quietly degrades some White girls, building the unbelonging necessary for the fortification of the nice White heteropatriarchal state. We imagine a rich investigation into this very specific exercise of Niceness as part of a critical project in understanding and so disrupting supremacist race and gender organizations of power. "Neither state power nor male dominance are unitary or systematic," argues Brown (1992), so a "feminist theory of state will be less a linear argument than a mapping of an intricate grid of often conflicting strategies, technologies, and discourses of power" (p. 14).

Structural Niceness in schooling is a semiotics of intra-White narratives that reproduce the materiality of state race-gender domination. These narratives are mechanized transactions that undergird and convey paternal benevolence. Further study of structural Niceness might aid in mapping the perniciously mundane and evasive stories of how benevolence works itself out through the making of deficient Whites through class and gender *failures* at nice Whiteness—

not-Niceness. This state structured storytelling of the imagined inherent unbelonging of certain White girls is one site of the spectacular normalization of White heteropatriarchal dominance.

Institutional Gaslighting:

White girls, Self-Doubt, and the Structural Maintenance of the Paternal State

Deirdre Ilene Judge

“And I really don’t like that. Like that—that gets me like, my blood like pumpin’ and everything. Like it gets me super mad. But like... I try to like keep it in, because like, if I said if I really wanted to say, I would get like suspended or something.”

– River, high school student

“If anger is a legitimate response to an oppressive political state, who has the agency and the political power to be able to name their anger *as* anger?”

– (Meiners, 2007, p.29)

River was frustrated. She sat at the edge of her seat on the long side of a rectangular table in a conference room in the main office of the high school. It was during one of our follow up interviews from summer school during the regular school year. She had changed her hair, again, with a freshly shaved undercut and flaming orange tresses tied back in a messy bun. Her hair, her copious piercings, inflected her pale skin and hazel eyes so that she took on an almost iridescent quality. She stood out and was simultaneously tucked into herself, swallowed by her oversized zombie sweatshirt, her hands resting together close to her body. I had asked to meet with her to continue our discussion about her experiences around gender in the high school and more specifically in the high school’s partner Trade school. Over the summer during a discussion in English about gender roles, River had told the class that she switched out of Trade’s Autoshop in the middle of the previous year due to a complexly hostile, sexist shop environment where she had been the only girl; instead she enrolled in Trade’s all-female Cosmetology program.

During our interview that day, River wrestled with a desire to return to Autoshop despite the overt hostility. She discussed a thriving multi-generation passion in her family for working on cars, and had even looked into options after graduation even though it was only the start of

her junior year. She had already spoken to the school about returning, but the school had said that all of the spots in the shop had been filled, and River felt unsure of how to proceed. The more we discussed, it became clear that the reasons why River felt confusion around Auto were far more complex than too few spots in the shop. In fact, the school told River they were concerned about her mental stability. During the previous school year, River had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder and the school was invasively invested in her progress. Though she felt stable, the school continued to express concern about her mental health should she choose to return to Auto. They even repeatedly asked to speak to her private therapist, which River again and again refused. Administrators left the choice up to her, expressing benevolent worry and outlining significant doubt. She spoke, oscillating between her own thoughts and the ideologies outlined by the school. River wondered if she was paranoid, if her protection of her inner world was justified, and most importantly, if she knew how to decide this for herself. The school was gaslighting her.

In this paper I propose a new theory for articulating abusive state practices: institutional gaslighting. I engage the ways that gaslighting— a psychoanalytic theory of abusive manipulation— can be used to understand and map a function of the state’s ideological maintenance through the production of self-doubt. River’s story is illustrative of other stories from summer school where the paternalistic state is abusive in part through benevolent state stories that position the school as caring, while masking its structural dominance. I will offer a new conceptual framework within feminist traditions of institutional violence and do so by applying it to the case of River, a White bisexual girl. Through River’s story, I map how institutional gaslighting operates as a feature of the internal practices of Whiteness through state discipline. What do the varying ways White girls are “kept in” rather than pushed out of schools

reveal about White heteropatriarchy? How does the state undermine dissent and bolster institutional logics in resistant White girls?

This paper considers a feature of the internal mechanizations of Whiteness in service of hierarchical maintenance. Whiteness unevenly affords power and protection; it is not compendious but rather exclusionary and mercurial, fractured along powered lines of class, gender, ability, and sexuality (Bettie, 2003; Canaday, 2009; Castagno, 2016; Harris, 1993; Meiners, 2002; Vaught & Judge, forthcoming). White women are afforded subordinated and varying membership in Whiteness; queer White women insofar as they attend to heteronormativity afforded through marriage, nuclear families, and acceptable femininity (Brown, 1992; Richardson, 2012). Institutional gaslighting offers a framework through which to consider the ideological and structural reproduction of subordinated White femininity through dissuasion. This paper is narrated in multiple parts, explained primarily through River's story of non-conforming practices and dissent.

First, I explain the larger critical ethnographic case study within which River's story is situated. Then, I frame my understandings of her narrative within larger critical feminist traditions. Here, I offer a definition of an emerging conceptual framework to be explored: institutional gaslighting. Finally, through River's story, I narrate the complex mechanisms of an abusive state that produces self-doubt in girls in order to secure enduring structures of heteropatriarchal subordination. I conclude by offering further potential areas for exploration.

Data and Context

The story at the center of this article comes from my larger ethnographic case study of Saturday and summer school, which share features of being both instructional and disciplinary sites. This study took place in one comprehensive high school in a mid-size, urban rim New

England town. Like most state institutions, the school used state-defined² categories to keep demographic records, and did not keep data broken down by race and gender. The documented racial make-up of the student body of about 1,500 students was 61% White, 17% African American, 10% Asian, 9% Hispanic, and about 3% multi-racial. The partner Trade School (called Trade by students and teachers) historically shared some core content curriculum with the comprehensive school and a building, and was in the process of a merger during my research. Students in Trade were 12% Whiter, 12% more low-income, and 21% more often labeled with a disability than students at the comprehensive high school. For Saturday and summer school, the school did not document student demographics, so I recorded the demographics of these spaces by student self-identification over time as well as my own assumptions about race and ethnicity: approximately 40% of students were White, over 20% were Black, 30% were Latinx, and a small number multiracial. These identifications did not always map neatly onto state categories, as students distinguished among and formed kinship across geographic regions, countries of family origin, and ethnic backgrounds. Four administrators, two of whom alternated weeks supervising summer school, monitored Saturday detention. Two of these administrators were male and two were female; all four were White. Summer school was taught by six teachers; four male, two female. All but one of the staff who worked at Saturday and summer school were White; one of the teachers was Asian American.

As explained by an administrator, students received Saturday school—called “Saturday” by students—when they were referred by a grade-level administrator for behavioral misconduct. I observed that behaviors deemed warranting of a Saturday included a range of behaviors such as skipping a weekday detention, swearing at a teacher, being in the hallway during lunch, and,

² Racial categories are fraught; however since I am interested in institutional responses and processes, what is important in the context of the school is how students were raced by the state and how that shapes mechanisms of state power (see Vaught, 2012, 2017).

most commonly, “excessive tardiness” (more than five consecutive). Students who skipped a Saturday were suspended the following Monday.

Students were required to self-enroll for summer school after they had been informed of their eligibility by the school: receiving a grade below 70% but no less than 50%. Students and their families were required to pay the fee of \$250 per course. When a student received a grade below 50%, they were deemed ineligible for summer school and required to repeat the class the following year in order to receive credit. A 70% or above was considered a passing grade in summer school; students who received a grade below 70% were required to take the class a third time the following year.

These two sites—Saturday school and Summer school—are deeply connected by their very function: Saturday school is positioned as the primary site of redemption for school-year “misbehavior”, while in between school years summer school serves similar ideological functions organized around meritocratic failure. In fact, administrators told me before the study even began that many of the same students would be at both sites, which proved to be true. Both Saturday and summer school present students an “opportunity” for benevolent redemption, primarily for truancy and missing school work—consistent patterns of behavior present at both sites.

Saturday school took place during a predetermined one or two Saturdays each month in a second-floor math classroom. Students were required to remain completely silent from 8am-10am and were only allowed to eat or drink at a mid-point break. Summer school ran for six weeks from 8am-12pm Monday through Friday. Classes took place in a back wing of the high school, where students could only enter from a back entrance that was monitored by a school police officer, and they were forbidden from accessing any other parts of the school.

Focusing on school and social organization I interviewed and observed teachers, staff, administrators around questions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. I primarily interviewed students, both individually and in groups. My focus was on how girls articulated disciplinary practices and how their stories are connected to larger state practices. River's story emerges from these interviews and observations. Her story, while a case study, is illustrative of what I heard and observed across White girls in these two sites and tells a collective story of many girls' experiences with school discipline and state abuse.

Theoretical Framework: the State as Abuser

In this section I will offer a definition of institutional gaslighting, beginning with a theoretical grounding across disciplines of psychology, philosophy, and feminist theories. At its core, institutional gaslighting considers the endemic nature of systemic oppression in the US. I use institutional gaslighting to articulate a tactic of state abuse at the structural level where interpersonal actions speak to the mechanization of institutional ideologies.

To define institutional gaslighting, I enter into a long discussion where feminist theorists who have situated the state as heteropatriarchal and have articulated theories of state violence and abuse (see Brown, 1992; Crenshaw, 1991; A. Davis, 1983, 2003, 2016; Fraser, 1990, 1997, 1998; Gilmore, 2007; Harris, 1993; James, 2005; Richie, 2012; Ritchie, 2017; Vaught, 2014, 2017; Williams, 1995). Alongside Wendy Brown (1992), I understand the state to be “a significantly unbounded terrain of powers and techniques, an ensemble of discourses, rules, and practices, cohabiting in limited, tension-ridden, often contradictory relation with one another” (p.12). Scholars have identified the state as abusive through various conceptual frameworks that locate the endemicity and co-constitutiveness of White supremacy, heteropatriarchy, property rights, and colonialism embedded in state structures (Augustin, 1997; Bell, 1992, 2004; Bracey,

2015; Brayboy, 2005; Brown, 1992; Canaday, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Harris, 1993; Jung et al., 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leonardo, 2004; Meiners, 2007, 2016; Mills, 1997; Richie, 2012; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Sojoyner, 2016; Vaught, 2011, 2017; Williams, 1988). I will gesture towards other traditions and take them up more thoroughly in the analysis.

In this paper, I consider how mundane interpersonal interactions reveal something about the state, which metes out violence and abuse through the normalization of abusive power arrangements (Augustin, 1997; Bettie, 2003; Ferguson, 2001; Fine, 1991; Luttrell, 2003; Morris, 2016; Sojoyner, 2016; Vaught, 2011, 2017; Vaught & Judge, forthcoming; Wun, 2016). In other words, rather than demonstrating something about personal choices or behaviors, how individuals operate speaks to the abusive features of male power embedded in the structures of the state itself.

Central to my engagement with state abuse is locating hegemonic masculinist power within the state, namely through practices masked in magnanimity. Through paternalism the state assumes, or attempts to assume, a distinctly masculine “protective” role in order to usurp individual power and recast state violence through false generosity and benevolence (Augustin, 1997; Brown, 1992; Harris, 1993; Williams, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; Vaught, 2017; Vaught & Judge, forthcoming). As Brown (1992) elucidates, “Operating simultaneously to link ‘femininity’ to the privileged races and classes.... protection codes are thus key technologies in regulating privileged women as well as in intensifying the vulnerability and degradation of those on the unprotected side of the constructed divide” (p.9). Through institutional gaslighting, I am interested in developing a theory of how White girls’ regulated inclusion and protection by the

state contributes to the reproduction of internal hierarchies within White heteropatriarchy and entrenches all male violence.

In this article, I explore one particular feature of state paternalism: the role of an abusive partner. While schools are often conceptualized as mobilizing paternalism to fulfill a substitute parental role, institutional gaslighting highlights the state's insidious shifting role of father/husband, particularly for White girls like River. As Brown (1992) articulates, "to be 'protected' by the very power whose violation one fears" (p. 10), creates the conditions for powerlessness and dependence. This dynamic maps the interpersonal forces of an abusive relationship. As the state's largest compulsory apparatus (Vaught, 2017), schools are uniquely positioned to cultivate the ideologies of individualism, meritocracy, and false generosity that work in tandem to bolster the state's abusive control and mystify structural inequity (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2007; Guinier, 2015; Oakes, 2005; Macleod, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2006). These ideologies comprise a major component of institutional gaslighting, which manufactures and secures an enduring coerced dependence on schools through dissolving agentive dissent in place of institutional logics. Before outlining the emerging conceptual framework of institutional gaslighting, I contextualize how the primary conceptualization of gaslighting is used within interpersonal relationships, particularly intimate partnerships.

Gaslighting as an abusive tactic

Psychologists and domestic violence advocates delineate gaslighting as a process characterized by repeated, episodic manipulation of a partner that undermines their ability to make decisions for themselves and trust their instincts (Abramson, 2015; Calef & Weinshel, 1981; Stern, 2018). The term coined by Calef and Weinshel is derived from the 1944 film

“Gaslight” (Hornblow & Cukor, 1944) where a woman’s husband undermines her sense of reality in order to have her committed to an institution and take her inheritance. However, gaslighting is understood to sometimes be a less conscious and more insidious form of manipulation. It is specific in that it masks other unhealthy or abusive components of the relationship by locating fault within the abused partner. When that power balance is upset, by being named or more covertly transgressed, gaslighters experience a sense of anxiety and resolve this by manipulating their partner so that they adapt their behavior to the projections of their abusive partner (Calef & Weinshel, 1981, p.52).

Importantly, the abusive partner *produces a distressed emotion*, typically anger or anxiety, and then *blames the individual* for their inability to control these emotions and/or *expresses concern* for their mental health. Notably, gaslighting is often socially reinforced by friends and family from whom the roots of the distress is hidden or normalized— abusers are notoriously charming. The culmination of many episodes of manipulation causes a victim to question themselves and to increasingly default to their partner’s perspective. Gaslighting functions to *maintain* the abusive relationship through relations of control and subordination. I will outline these features of production of distress, blame and individualism, and expression of care in more detail below through a demonstrative example of heteropatriarchal patterns of gaslighting³. My aim here is not to take up or offer a clinical approach or remedy, but rather to extend the framework at the institutional level. Later, through River’s story, I trace these features

³ While gaslighting can affect people of all genders and sexualities, I use this particularly salient and ubiquitous example in part because I am interested in attending to the power relations between the heteropatriarchal state and girls. While I am conscious not to reify gender binaries nor one dimensional depictions of intimate partner violence, I am acutely aware of the ways the state systematically inscribes binaries and thus I theorize into the institutional structural arrangements of gender and sexuality to make visible these mechanisms.

as they emerge across school-based relationships and school structures that maintain girls' connection to school.

Producing distress & individual blame.

Consider an example that appears across literature: A man engages an overly flirtatious relationship with a coworker and repeatedly lies to cover it up. He acts shady (hiding texts on his phone, working late, etc.), which causes his partner to experience anger and anxiety, and to question his fidelity. However, in response he tells her she is overreacting, calls her jealous. In fact, he says *he* is hurt that his fidelity would be questioned, and calls his partner paranoid and distrustful. She talks to some of her friends and family about it who say things like “that’s just how men are” or “oh he’s just charming with everyone” or “don’t be naggy, you don’t want to lose him.” Gaslighting comes into play when she questions whether she was reading the situation correctly—whether her intuition is to be trusted—because he so seamlessly turned the tables on her. She even ends up feeling guilty that she ever questioned her partner; she worries that she is the one who has caused a rift in the relationship and upset the balance of trust.

The man refuses to take seriously the concerns of his partner and examine his own behavior. Instead he locates the problem in the woman’s emotional reaction. His dismissiveness and the established expectation of trust work in tandem to manipulate the source of distress. A similar phenomenon occurs structurally in schools. There, students are unevenly ideologically set up to trust schools as an arm of the state; in turn, schools produce emotions such as anger and anxiety in students who are then punished by the state for those emotional expressions. School prohibition of “disruptive” or “disturbed” emotions and emphases on behavioral management individualizes students reactions and hinges on the state’s ability to make meaning, masking structural productions of distress.

Expressions of care.

In the above example, the same shady behavior comes up repeatedly, and the man expresses concern about her anxiety and jealousy. He tells her that if she wants to make this relationship work, she needs to find mental health support; he offers to help her make an appointment with a therapist. Strikingly, many psychologists have found that gaslighters believe that their partners' expressions of "emotional instability" are in fact individual problems that they are morally obligated to point out and ameliorate (Stern, 2018). Lowering self-esteem and self-trust increasingly leads to a deferral to the abusive partner, particularly when they offer support and guidance through this produced "overreaction" or anxiety. Meanwhile, the victim is made out to be individually and wholly responsible for their emotional "overreaction," which is in actuality produced by the partner. Mirroring gaslighting in interpersonal relationships, the liberal ideologies of meritocracy and individualism produce in institutions and state agents the seeming 'moral obligation' to point out individual failures and rectify them through magnanimous state 'help,' which in my study take the form of Saturday and summer school, among other institutional practices.

Heteropatriarchal ideologies.

The friends and family who reinforce gaslighting unwittingly rely on dominant ideologies to describe normalized behavior as acceptable. This is a particularly significant feature, as gaslighting is largely understood to be a gendered phenomenon, disproportionately affecting women regardless of the gender of their partner (Abramson, 2015; Calef & Weinshel, 1981; Stern, 2018). The undergirding of gaslighting, the belief in the inability to make decisions for oneself, is wrapped tightly into and bolstered by heteropatriarchal ideologies and structural

practices which position women as dependent and subordinated, among other structurally desired characteristics that undermine agency.

Abramson (2014) writes that gaslighters are, consciously or not, “appealing to norms of sexism... they work because this is a sexist society, and the sexist norms to which gaslighters appeal are, to some extent, in us all. Gaslighters are using internalized sexism as weapons against their targets” (p. 22). It is no surprise then that this tactic disproportionately impacts women, as it fits neatly into controlling ideologies of heterosexism that mark the itineraries of women’s daily lives. However, the literature on gaslighting is largely silent around race, class, and sexuality, marking gaslighting as seemingly neutral when applied to gender violence. Due to this silence, specificity is needed around White women’s experience with heterosexism. They are historically constructed and structurally positioned as vulnerable, chaste, weak, and helpless, and in need of the protection and support of White men, particularly as a justification for violence against people of Color. These norms of sexism place White women and girls in tension-ridden terrain with the state, as simultaneously deserving of care and resources yet deemed so through their imagined incapability (Brown, 1992). Further, sexism renders all women into caretaking roles at the behest and service of men at the direct expense of women’s own needs. Women are conditioned to find these roles desirable and fulfilling, “keeping her alienated from herself, her own needs, and rendering her a stranger to other women” (Radicalesbians, 1970, p.3). This social conditioning marks them ripe for gaslighting.

Within heteropatriarchal vectors of power, bisexual women experience staggeringly higher rates of intimate partner violence and rape as compared to any demographic (Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013; Movement Advancement Project, 2016)⁴. Bisexuality is largely

⁴ The surveys for these studies collapse non-monosexual identities (bisexuality, pansexuality, polysexual, queer, etc.) in the category of “bisexuality.” The discussion of the merits and limitations of grouping different

constructed as mythical; it is liminal not only in the inbetweenness of straight/lesbian but also conceptualized as a crossing ground— an identity of experimentation or a stop on the path to finding “true” queerness or straightness. Bisexual women are constructed as greedy, promiscuous, *indecisive*. And also widely regarded as not knowing themselves, their sexuality a ruse for voyeuristic male pleasure or otherwise a heteronormative lie. These ideologies serve as further deep context for gaslighting embedded within schools. For example, River’s personal self-definition as bisexual was always in tension with binaried state mappings of gender and sexuality through tracking (explained in greater detail below). Bisexual women in particular report their “threatening sexuality”— queer, liminal, unneatly feminine— as a reason partners perpetuated violence (MAP, 2016). In Auto, her structural relationship with the school was queer; in Cosmo she was structurally straight. *Both* structural locations mapped onto her individual identity and denied her personal definition of her bisexuality; her self-definition was erased. The binaried configurations of gendered tracking in Trade institutionally erased River’s personal identification and instructed multiple modes of institutionally produced self-doubt.

My use of gaslighting considers interpersonal dynamics as demonstrative of the abusive power differentials of schooling and racist heteropatriarchal social organizations writ large. Just as Critical Race Theory scholars suggest racism is not an individual pathology but rather an outcrop of state structures (Crenshaw et al., 2005)—though certainly individuals enact and mobilize racism—I suggest gaslighting is an institutional level tactic produced by abusive arrangements of power. While I am not suggesting that institutional gaslighting operates in the same way or shares similar features, I enter through scholarly movements such as CRT and

liminal identity categories and the potential secondary erasure through this collapse is outside of the scope of this paper. Moreover, I will use the term “bierasure” to refer to the erasure of bi+ identities, knowing that this potentially adds a secondary erasure, in part because it is colloquially and analytically taken up by pansexual and polysexual folks in describing the same phenomena (pan-erasure is untermmed).

cultural studies which use psychological frameworks to map state power (see for example: Vaught, 2012). This state pathology manifests in various individual and institutional practices, which I trace through River's story in order to converge on a theory of institutional gaslighting.

Institutional Gaslighting: Emerging Conceptual Framework

Just as gaslighting in relationships is featured by socially reinforced patterned behavior, institutional gaslighting occurs through the repetition of normalized state ideologies, practices, and structures. Institutional gaslighting is a mechanization of state paternalistic benevolence used to maintain White supremacist heteropatriarchy through patterned forced dependence. It is but one feature of the vast technologies of discipline that reproduce social orders and belonging (Casella, 2003; Foucault, 1995). Where gaslighters in abusive relationships experience an anxiety, over the disruption or unmasking of power imbalances of the relationship, institutional gaslighting explains a feature of the state's maintenance of hegemonic logics and functions in moments of structural crisis. The Whiteness supremacist state enjoys the exclusive right to make meaning (Harris, 1993). This authorship wields significant power and control in the context of gaslighting. The specificity of institutional gaslighting allows us to understand the produced condition of self-doubt in favor of acquiescence to dominant ideologies as a feature of abusive state paternalism. Ever the charming abuser, the state masks the abusive functions of schooling through assertions of benevolence and institutional gaslighting is a mechanization of that masking.

Rather than pushing students out of school, institutional gaslighting maintains a coercive relationship with the state through preserving the connection to school and bolstering its benevolent function. River's pushout into Cosmo was coercively produced by the hostile environment of the shop, yet the school used her individually pathologized mental health as

reasoning to provide further support that dissuaded her self-trust. In the story that follows, I will be elaborating on this definition as I use it analytically in relation to River's stories of state abuse.

Methodologies

My research draws upon critical feminist ethnographic traditions that focus on normalized sites of power through intersectional understandings of gender (Abu-Lughod, 1993; D. Davis, 2014; Fine, et. al, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Mohanty, 1988; Narayan, 1993; Pillow & Mayo, 2012). Critical feminist ethnography emphasizes the activist role of research, highlighting the ways in which terrains of power may be critically, materially altered through scholarly interventions exposing heteropatriarchy. Employing reflexivity (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Mohanty, 1988; Narayan, 1993; Pillow & Mayo, 2012), I continually evaluated my own assumptions based on my own experiences and reflected on my internalization and mobilization of institutional logics in my research. As a queer White woman from the same geographic region of the school, I was cognizant of how my identities and experiences had the potential to forge and rupture connection as well as influence my areas of inquiry. I was intentional of how my lines of questioning and understandings of school events were shaped by my own challenging experiences with school discipline.

I took note of how students, teachers, and administrators made sense of my presence in the environment of the school. In particular, despite my clearly stated intentions as a researcher, school staff repeatedly referred me as a "future teacher," fitting my White womanhood into the material structures of schooling. This conflation variously elevated and diminished my position, whose effects are largely unknown and I saw only in moments that surfaced such as when I was made into a momentary tutor or when I was brought into a disciplinary moment and referred to

as someone inexperienced (and not to be trusted over the state). This was also fickle: I noticed students of Color silence each other in my presence when critiquing or talking explicitly about Whiteness, but seemingly engage with me deeply about their own lived experiences of racism.

While I made no effort to hide my sexual identity in the school, no one inquired; perhaps because I was assumed straight, as often happens, and perhaps because women in schools are by and large institutionally stripped of their sexuality (Meiners, 2002, 2007; Boas, 2012). My own experiences with pansexuality and bi-erasure in the school informed my understandings of multiple modes of institutional erasure and doubt.

In part, I co-constructed knowledge with participants (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Mohanty, 1988; Narayan, 1993; Pillow & Mayo, 2012). Rather than attempting at something as ethereal and unproductively dangerous neutrality, I shared portions of my nascent analysis and theoretical underpinnings with participants, and at times shared my own experiences with school discipline. This allowed for an engagement between lived theory and scholarship as well as for the opportunity for institutional logics to both rupture and reify in conversation.

The research and writing for this project was emotionally grueling and I find it imperative in a paper about the institutional production of emotions, as well as their structural prohibition, to engage this aspect of my methodologies. Elizabeth Spelman (1989) writes, “certain situations not only justify but cry out for anger and other emotions in response” (p. 272). I felt anxious in classrooms, sat in awed silence on the ride home, cried through book chapters, vented cryptically to friends and advisors. I was/am emotionally, intellectually entangled with the work, which in part produces its urgency. Anger fueled my writing, and sharing my writing and research allowed for a partial outlet, particularly as others voiced their personal resonances with the theories.

Tessellations

This paper is a collection of stories as institutional gaslighting is a process featured by repeated incidents that reinforce underlying vulnerabilities. These moments seemingly span time but culminate, building on one another in a circular crescendo, calling back to historic structural legacies and forward to imagined future possibilities. This is not a new argument about time, but rather about gaslighting's effect on time. Other scholars have engaged the multitude of ways that time is cumulative, redundant, contemporaneous, simultaneous, and ruptured by institutions (Bell, 1992; Deleuze, 1994; Martin & Mohanty, 1986; Morrison, 1987; Vaught, 2017; Winnubst, 2010; among others). In moments where River has to make decisions about her schooling that seemingly occur in a fixed moment, she carries with her layered, non-linear temporality produced by gaslighting.

There are multiple through-lines in these stories, including the frustration that River felt at the school's actions alongside her unfulfilled aspirations. This frustration—variously expressed in different iterations as anger, sadness, hopelessness—was both structurally produced and prohibited, and ultimately resulted in doubt. As Erica Meiners (2007) writes, “Failing to listen to anger or not interpreting anger as a critical commentary, risks missing fundamentally important critical perspectives on the world” (p.29). Where River's anger and other distressed emotions were systematically denied (Jaggar, 1989; Spelman, 1989), her critical perspectives were lost, even to herself.

It tessellates; a single episode of gaslighting on its own is but one tile in a vast mosaic of experiences that decorate women's complex lives. Together these moments are a sad masterpiece of revisionary tiles, patterned construction of self-doubt.

Production of Distress: a place not made for girls

In the incestual kinship of White supremacist state schooling, state is both father and future husband to White girls; abusive controlling by its very structure. As pre-citizens (Harris, 1993; Somers, 2008; Vaught, 2017; Williams, 1991), White girls are not only the natural wards or daughters of the state, but also the future wives and mothers. River was out of place in the Autoshop according to traditional roles not only for girls generally but especially for future wives. Her autonomy and passion in a male dominated field placed her outside of the home of the school, something that produced within the state a heteropatriarchal, masculine anxiety. In descriptions of gaslighting in abusive relationships, husbands often exercise or heighten gaslighting when wives shirk their heteronormative wifely duties to pursue something individually fulfilling, particularly something that ruptures gender roles and/or emasculates the husband by comparative success (Abramson, 2014; Calef & Weinshel, 1981; Stern, 2018). This anxiety, this state masculinity in crisis (Connell, 1995/2005), must be resolved by undermining the desire to defy state prescriptions of gender. In order to maintain the codified, but toothless, school equality, River could not be outright forbidden from pursuing Autoshop. This would have too explicitly exposed the abusive gendered practices of the state. Instead, the school had to somehow convince River herself that she was unfit, that she didn't belong, that she couldn't even decide for herself if she did or didn't. If she made that decision for herself, the state would absolve itself of meddling and be made more benevolent through its "help". The structures of Trade and the hostility of the shop served to instruct River that she did not belong and plant the seeds for her desire to withdraw.

Gendered Tracking: "men with men and women with women"

River started off as the only girl in Autoshop, and this was by no means an anomaly in the school. While the school did not keep demographic data on the tracks of Trade, students

reported severe gender tracking through these programs. Not only was Trade as an institution comprised demographically as 65% male and 35% female, the programs of Cosmetology, Nursing, and Childcare were predominantly female, the first of which was entirely female and almost entirely White. The programs of Electrical, Carpentry & Construction, Autobody, Automotive Technology, Robotics, and Metalshop were almost entirely male, apart from the rare one or two girls per shop. The tracking of the school marked clear divisions around what spaces and programs of the school were designated for whom. These spaces mirrored gendered social structures; the female-dominated programs overwhelmingly mirrored women's connected domesticity and domestic labor while the male-dominated shops reflected men's working class work. Trade's overwhelming Whiteness and function as training for working class labor contextualized these binaried gender arrangements as disciplinary mechanisms reproducing gender dynamics within Whiteness (Bettie, 2003; MacLeod, 2008). Gendered tracking was the structural expression of the school boundaries of home. River was outside of the school's domestic sphere and she was trespassing.

Alongside the gendered structural arrangements, River reflected that the administrators of Trade seemed to have a vested interest in ensuring that the gender dynamics of shop remained as they were, which harkens back to a perpetrator needing gender roles to remain rigidly in place to effect control and subordination. River similarly reported her transgressions of gender roles as threatening to her relationship to the school. River shook her head and spoke holding back frustration, "I honestly don't think... the people that are in non-traditional shops, like the girls in the guy shop and the guys in the girl shops, I don't think that Trade wants that to happen, because they always try to stop it. I don't know, I just don't think that they want, I think they want it to be like..." She sighed out through her nose with her lips pressed together, "men with

men and women with women.” Students who traversed these gendered spaces defied static mappings of gender and sexuality, producing an anxious masculine crisis that needed to be quelled. In abusive relationships, gaslighting is deployed to maintain and mask power imbalances when “he feels weak and powerless. To feel powerful and safe, he *has* to prove that he is right, and he *has* to get you to agree with him.” (Stern, 2018, p. 5, emphasis in original). In order to maintain these gender differentials and power balances within the school, River *had* to be convinced of her own unbelonging, to *agree* with the state.

Material Unbelonging: “I just felt weird”

River indicated just how ill equipped the school was for her presence in Auto: they had no uniforms for girls. She scrunched her face as she described the boys’ uniform that she was required not only to wear, but also to pay for out of pocket in order to participate in shop.

I’m very small and the—the Dickies pants are usually for men, and men are a lot bigger, and I had to find one that had to fit my waist, and my legs are really short so they would go all the way down to the bottom of the floor and I would trip over them. And they would look like really poofy and big on me, and I didn’t like it. And I don’t know I just felt weird. I wasn’t comfortable in it.

The pants presented both a safety issue and a gender issue. The uniform demanded a compulsory masculinity required to operate in the shop where her embodiment ruptured gender roles and she was made unable to maintain a comfortable gender presentation within the forced masculine space. On top of that, her uniform just simply did not fit; a safety issue generally but particularly in a shop with heavy machinery that partially provides the context for requiring a uniform in the first place. She had requested many times for Trade administrators to search for equivalent girls’ uniforms, but was ignored.

A uniform typically serves many purposes; to build camaraderie, provide safety, imbue with power/embodiment of the profession, and, at minimum to fade away as non-existent. For River, none of these things were true and the ill-fitting clothing drew constant negative attention to demarcate her daily difference in the shop and did so wielding the power of heterosexism. Quite frankly, the uniform made her look sloppy, unprofessional, and therefore visibly ill equipped. The neutrality of the uniform was structured around masculinity—only masculine presenting people were able to experience congruence with the material belonging of the shop. What was important here was that River did not want to wear the uniform and her complaints were silenced, presented as her problem alone.

While I am not concerned with interrogating River's individual desire to express femininity, she was simply unable to do so evenly remotely in the Autoshop: femininity was structurally disallowed. Through the simultaneous state produced idealized femininity and Auto compulsory masculinity, River was individually made to feel that she is not living up to gender expectations within heteropatriarchy. River could not reasonably reflect ideologies of White femininity or her comfortable expression with her gender. This internal, affective othering at the institutional ideological level maps abusive partners' discouragement from pursuing masculine activities. Rather than outright discouraging River from pursuing Autoshop, the material marker of belonging and camaraderie—in this case a uniform—was not made for her participation. Her slouching pants served as a constant reminder that she was not only out of place in the shop, but dangerously so, both for herself and the state. Its poofiness and comically absurd length reinforced and instructed her unbelonging. The state both produced the expectations of gender and then made them impossible for River to fulfill in the shop. Like an abusive partner who violates trust but also requires unconditional trust from a partner, the competing structures of

compulsory femininity and shop uniforms redirected blame and responsibility onto River.

River's very presence in Auto revealed the structural expectation for who would be in that shop and what professional materials would be needed for participation. The lack of urgency for Trade to rectify the uniform issue demonstrated a lack of seriousness in response to her requests. The dismissiveness of Trade mirrors abusers who redirect the source of distress by minimizing or belittling a partner's attempted discussions of relationship issues, thereby masking and making imbalances of power.

Hostile environment: “the school doesn't do anything about it”

Overt sexism was not isolated to Autoshop or to River's experience. She outlined a pattern of abuse that characterized Trade as an institution. River mulled over a nagging and unformed thought, “I just, I don't know. I think girls are having a problem like being comfortable in their shop.” When I asked for more details, she outlined that male-dominated shops presented threatening environments. River explained, “My friend Sydney she's in electrical, and all the guys do is like harass her and everything. Like they throw tools at her and stuff. She's gotten out of there like with scratches on her face.” As the only girl in electrical, Sydney experienced physical and verbal harassment from her peers which instructed her unbelonging.

River continued with sharp anger and despair, “The school doesn't do anything about it. The most the school will do is like switch the shop week... or.... give a detention.”

Administrators responded as though these issues were gender-neutral, as though the antecedents and causes of the violence were unrelated to Sydney's gender rupturing the masculine shop environment. Trade punished the boys individually for their actions, as they would any act of violence or harassment in shop. Speaking on the abstractness of male domination through the

state, Brown (1992) asks, “how might the... ostensible neutrality... help to disguise these processes, inhibiting or diluting women's consciousness of their situation *qua* women, thereby circumscribing prospects of substantive feminist political change?” (Brown, 1992, p. 11-12, emphasis in original). Through the gender-neutrality of the school’s intervention, subjection to violence was constructed as an expectation for transgressing gender roles, a punishment to be endured. Just as gaslighters mask the root of relationship issues through diversion, Trade’s palliative punishments masked the gender components of the boys’ violence and disguised possibility for larger structural critique.

Sydney had discussed dropping out due to the violence she faced, but ultimately did not in part because of the insistence of Trade’s administrators. As a student in compulsory state schooling, Sydney’s continued involvement with the school had material life consequences: high school credentials, certification in her field, access to community. The structures of schooling held these as bargaining chips regardless of the rhetorical devices or individual actions of state agents. A false and impossible “choice” was presented, leaving students like Sydney and River in a bind; dire consequences for leaving, but being forced to endure hostile violence for staying. Constraining structural power arrangements both trap women in abusive relationships and mask the source of the abuse, presenting false choices that locate blame in women who “chose” to stay.

The collective experiences of River and her peers signaled that these instances were abusive patterns of institutional culture that prevented safety and belonging in male-dominated shops. River was forced to sit by and watch her best friend endure repeated institutional violence. Her desire and inability to protect her best friend produced a sense of helplessness. River felt somewhat responsible for not being able to speak up against the power of the state, but knew that

speaking up would at best not be heard and at worst only make things worse. River was left frustrated and angry, and also immobilized by Trade.

Diminishment of aspirations: “stuck doing like the computer work”

River voiced that one of her main concerns was that when she had been enrolled in the Auto trade track, the shop teacher would promise her hands-on experience working on cars, and yet she was consistently assigned billing and paper processing work. River lamented, “No matter how many times I would talk to him about me doing on-field work, he—he would say yes but then he would give it to the high school kids and the other Trade kids that were guys, and I would be—and I would get stuck doing like the computer work. Which is like uhm putting the bills in and stuff like that... So I know the whole system but...” her voice trailing off in forlorn resignation. The only girl in the shop, she had been made into the secretary.

This is significant as some of the boys in the shop were not enrolled in the Trade school, but were taking this class as an elective through Trade’s agreement with the combined high school. River inhaled sharply, “A lot of the high school boys came into the shop and... they only came into the shop because they didn’t want to do another like academic class or like a music class or something like that, so they were there to be there, they didn’t want—they weren’t there to like, learn or anything.” This environment was in fact created by Trade’s merger with the high school, permitting easier cross-registration for students and ultimately creating a less rigorous shop environment for River. Other boys were able to work on cars as a hobby while River was denied the ability to work on cars as a profession.

While River occupied an institutional placement in Auto, her actual function within the shop was administrative work. This designation as secretary not only placed River in a position of administrative support, but also signaled to the boys in the shop that their desire to work on

cars, even non-professionally, was more important than River's academic and professional needs. This mirrors White women's embodiment of a legacy of supporting White men's intellectual and skilled physical labor. If White women are not housewives and mothers supporting their husband's labor from afar (Della Costa in Davis, 1981), they are institutionally positioned to support masculinized institutional labor writ large through devalued and thusly underpaid administrative labor (Martin, 2012; Kurtz, 2013). White women overwhelmingly make up the secretary and administrative assistant labor force in the US (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017; United State Department of Labor Women's Bureau, 2015)⁵. Locally reproducing this arrangement in the school, the shop teacher placed River into an acceptable role for a White girl.

River knew that she was not getting the education that she required to build a career working on cars and had sought out alternative options. "After high school, I wanna—I wanna try to find like an autoschool and like continue doing that.... And like learn more, more than I can learn here. Obviously." River identified a genuine passion for working on cars, unlike her peers from the high school. She was denied the opportunity to get both the education she wanted and the one specifically laid out by the supposed purpose of Auto. Reflecting on the future possibility of an administrative career, River said, "I don't want to do that, that's boring." Her forced curricular projects manufactured boredom for River that produced disaffection with Auto shop generally. Other girls reported different ways sexism manifested in their shops: shop teachers taking over projects, boys offering to help or carry things— nice gestures which masked the denial of educational opportunities from the girls (Castagno, 2016; Vaught & Judge, forthcoming). For River, the specificities of her denial of working on cars were that she was

⁵ These statistics were not broken down by race and gender. BLS reported the occupation to be 85% White while the Women's Bureau reported the occupation to be 94.5% women.

singled out and placed into a separated and supportive feminized role within the shop. Moreover, Calef & Weinshel (1981) engage how “vicarious participation” to the detriment of one’s own interests contributes to gaslighting: “She had immersed herself in her husband's life and work. Her sense of self-esteem was dependent on ... her husband's personality and activity” (Calef & Weinshel, 1981, p.51). River’s sympathetic observation in Auto was not only boring, but pedagogically constructed her role as supporter. She was meant to substitute her interests and labor to the benefit of the boys’ and to derive self-worth from this position.

Importantly, the repeated actions of her teacher alone may not have convinced River that she didn’t belong in the field, at least not permanently, but it did convince her that the shop was not a place she wanted to be. The produced boredom of the curriculum, along with being within reach of her passion but not being able to access it frustrated River. The school did not support her complaints, and River saw this as non-anomalous. She watched over and over as other girls were pushed out of male-dominated shops into “acceptable” shops for girls like Nursing and Childcare, where the curricula are caretaking and domestic, in line with what wives and mothers would do. She watched as her best friend was repeatedly assaulted by classmates who were individually punished for “acting out” and who retaliated against her for complaining. She was angry, sad, frustrated, desperate. River decided to escape the sexist environment of the Autoshop. She enrolled in Trade’s all-female Cosmetology program.

Blame and Individualism: disallowed emotional dissent

River was angry about what had happened in the shop, and this was dangerous to the school status quo. Anger can be a key tool to naming and thereby dismantling structural inequity, therefore anger is dangerous to the vested state interest in maintaining hierarchy (Ayers, 1988; Jaggar, 1989; Lorde, 1981/1997; Meiners, 2007; Olayiwola, 2014; Spelman, 1989). Audre Lorde

(1981/1997) writes, “Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and *institutional*, which brought that anger into being” (p.280, emphasis added). The state fears such useful energy and has a vested interest in undermining such emotional responses to structural oppression. Ayers (1988) writes, “because the status quo, with its attendant power relations and structural inequities, is always the common-sense starting point, opposition is characterized as unreasonable, impolite, shrill, and aggressive, regardless of specific behavior” (Ayers, 1988, p.48). Where the status quo in Trade reflected and served to maintain larger social structural inequity, River’s frustration was structurally denied.

The ways that anger is undermined in service of hierarchy is outside of the purview of this paper, as my focus is on how institutional gaslighting undermines this anger and other distressed emotions through producing *self-doubt* over the *validity* of emotional structural critiques. However, the ubiquity and dynamism with which women’s anger is devalued deserves attention, as this is the social context in which gaslighting flourishes. After all, “bitching” is one of the more common colloquial words for complaining about something; the words “nagging,” “whining,” and “shrill” are gendered. Women are not allowed to issue complaints, lest they be the angry Black woman, the hysterical White woman, the fiery Latina, the nagging wife, the needy girlfriend, the overprotective mother, the Tiger mom, la chingona, the feminazi, the sassy bitch, and so on. These stereotypes construct women who are expressing their emotions as out of control and irrational, and therefore their complaints invalid. As a White girl angry about her experiences in Trade, River was not only constructed as hysterical through heteropatriarchal ideologies but also in the structural arrangements of schooling. River’s anger as insubordinate was embedded into the institutional logics of schools that state agents mobilized to construct her critiques as individual and produce doubt over the validity of her claims to anger.

Behavioral codes: “inside of school I gotta be calm and happy and smile”

Though the structures of Trade and the hostility of the shop were infuriating to River, she was not allowed to be angry in school. River struggled with being able to express her anger and bumped up against disciplinary logics deployed to quell her dissent. “I want to like tell them everything that they’re doing wrong, or like tell them what I’m thinking. But the way I, the way I say things kinda comes out like *really rude* and sarcastic, but that’s just like my voice. So... it.... Plus like me being mad and my attitude will add on to that... and I like, I could get in trouble for it and I don’t want to.” River worried that any critique of the school or expression of her thoughts on school practices would land her in trouble because of her characterizations as a “rude” girl with an “attitude.” She struggled against how school ideologies constructed dissent as disrespectful and insubordinate and what she articulated as *just her voice*, an incongruence with race-gender expectations for White girl docility.

River’s anger was undercut not by rogue individuals but by state agents acting within the ideological framework of schooling. Schools have a vested interest in controlling emotional deviance in the classroom. Meiners (2007) argues that schools produce anger and simultaneously outlaw that anger through ideologies of self-discipline emphasized through punishment structures. “A failure to *control oneself, to keep that anger in check, to act and learn appropriately*, in particular for those in any way marginalized, might mean school expulsion, criminalization, or pathologization” (Meiners, 2007, p.30, emphasis in original). Power demands deference and graciousness in articulating critiques; these codes of power are inscribed for their very reproduction. The structure of schooling prohibited River from being angry, and placed the onus of emotional regulation on her individual capabilities of self-control.

Just as gaslighters will undermine the emotional component of their partner's critique in order to chip away at the validity of their claims, the school logics were attached to the River's composure when experiencing structural inequity. Her complaints were invalidated by the emotional characterization of her response. Spelman (1989) argues that within a "politics of emotion" where anger of marginalized people is systematically denied, "the existence and expression of anger [is seen] as an act of insubordination" (Spelman, 1989, p.270). Both disciplinary codes and rising trends in social-emotional learning instruct students that emotional responses need to be "appropriately controlled" in order to be able to function in school. For River, fear of disciplinary action from the school produced the sensation that her anger was demonstrative of White girl hysteria and emotional unwieldiness rather than reasoned critique. This mirrors gaslighters redirecting the source of relationship woes to their partners' inner overreaction, masking other abusive functions of the relationship by making critique of the relationship invalid through manipulation. Quelling River's dissenting voice maintained and masked unequal power relations in the school.

During my interview with River, I engaged this entrapment and mocked the logic of the infuriating cycle of school produced anger and subsequent individualization of that anger: "Mmmhmm so you're not allowed to be angry basically, even though all these things are going on that are making you *really angry*." River laughed and smiled as she said, "I can be angry *outside* of school, but inside of school I gotta be calm and happy and smile. So that's what I do." This need to be happy inside of school, to satisfy the state's raced-gendered expectations of docility and avoid punishment, in part produced River's inability to make sense of her competing self-perceptions and institutional logics.

It was not just the undermining of these critiques that matters, but the sense of *validity* of these critiques to River. The structural prohibition of anger dissuaded her sense of righteousness and her perceptions of injustice (Ahmed, 2015; Jaggar, 1989; Spelman, 1989). While gaslighters may acknowledge that a situation produced anger, the constant redirection of the reaction internally, especially as reinforced socially, instructs the partner that they are “overreacting” rather than simply “reacting”. The internal self-regulation in response is a denial of one’s own emotional reactions, contributing to self-doubt. When external sources continually deny the validity of a reaction, what response is correct? Whose assessment is to be trusted? Which responses are overreactions and which are just reactions?

Escalating punishments: “But I only go when I feel like I deserve a detention”

River recounted a history of receiving detentions and Saturdays as backlash for her “rude” behavior in school the previous school year. She noted that this punishment structure in part deterred her from voicing her concerns about the school. However, River simultaneously believed these punishments to be unfair but had no “legitimate” outlet at the school for issuing complaints, which revealed a deeper structure of the escalation techniques of the school. “Like if I get a detention, I gotta go to detention. But I only go when I feel like I deserve a detention.” She smirked, “Which is not a lot of the time.” We both laughed at her sheer disregard for the school’s punishment of her attitude. I asked, “So if you don’t feel like you deserve a detention, you just don’t go to it?” River shook her head once saying, “Nope. And then I get...” —she tilted her head down for emphasis— “another detention. If I don’t go to that: Saturday. If I don’t go to that: I get suspended.” Her decision to skip a Saturday had in fact resulted in her suspension the following Monday, *as per school guidelines*. Highlighting the lack of importance of the events leading up to her detention and subsequent suspension, River said, “I can’t remember the reason,

but it was for the *stupidest* reason ever.” River’s agentive judgement over whether or not she deserved the punishment outlined by school resulted in deepening punishments.

This escalation mirrors the escalation of abusive relationships. When abusers fail to gain control using one tactic, they intensify their actions to exert heightened control. The school punishment code was constructed around the idea that questioning the authority and punishment structure of the school deserves increased consequential punishment. Part of the function of this policy was to teach River conformity to the codes of Whiteness through obedience (hooks, 2009; Oakes, 2005). Deviance from these policies signals to the state a dangerous resistance that must be handled through subduing the threat. River refusing to go to a detention ultimately resulted in her suspension, demonstrating the sheer power that the school had to wield when she exerted momentary bodily autonomy over where and when she was in school. For River, the punishment policies of the school instructed that she was uniquely responsible for avoiding this escalation of state punishment through controlling her emotional critique of the school. Importantly, River was not being punished for doing anything harmful to herself or other students, but rather for not being the good little White girl that the state needed her to be. This escalation of punishment quelled opposition into quietness for fear of deeper threat. Moreover, it instructed that River’s perceptions of unequal power relations were invalid because of the delivery method.

Through state constructed processes, the school structures legitimated only certain ways of issuing complaints, placing blame back on River for not following these “proper” channels. Just as gaslighters delegitimize critiques of the relationship by attacking the emotion response, the way in which the response is issued, the school ignored River’s critiques of the legitimacy of school punishment structures because of the way she objected.

Isolation from collective anger: “but I can’t be in it anymore so...”

River retreated to a gendered space of Cosmetology where she no longer had to deal with the experience of being the only girl in shop. Many bisexual women also report that a survival mechanism in response to this violence has been to “go back in the closet” (MAP, 2016), to disguise their sexuality as to remove the liminally queer threat to their relationship. River’s “going back into the closet”, and many other girls’ solutions to the hostility of shops, was to retreat towards traditional feminine roles as a solution to the violence. To perform what was expected, *to gain approval*. In River’s heteropatriarchal schooling relationship, to go back in the closet would be to perform structural straightness through Cosmo, to perform an additional femininity in line with state power arrangements of gender to mask her previous transgressions that had provoked state abuse. While the space was free from some of the overt sexism she experienced in Auto, mainly denial from participating in class and harassment, the institutional arrangements of Auto and Cosmo as gendered spaces was part of a larger pattern of isolation of girls.

The gender tracking in Trade was so severe that students had formed a student group, “Non-Trad” (Non-traditional), for students enrolled in shops outside of the prescriptive gender roles for society. Together they met and collectively discussed patterns that arose in their shops and organized around solutions to what they saw as problems in the school, as well as participated in regional conferences. Jaggar (1989) writes, “Emotions become feminist when they incorporate feminist perceptions and values... Anger becomes feminist anger when it involves the *perception* that the persistent importuning endured by one woman is a *single instance of a widespread pattern* of sexual harassment” (p.160, emphasis mine; see also Ahmed, 2015). The isolation of girls across shops structurally splintered feminist anger and potential resistance, which they tried to remedy through the Non-Trad club. Non-Trad club allowed for

girls to access the *perception* that their experiences were part of a larger *pattern* of institutional abuse. Having switched into Cosmo, River was cut off from her ability to participate in Non-Trad, and thereby creating her uneven ability to access feminist anger. River lamented no longer being able to be a part of this group since she had switched into Cosmo, “They fight against [gender issues in the school] and stuff. But I can’t be in it anymore so...” She sighed, scrunched her mouth and nose to the side in disappointment, “Kinda sad.” Not only had leaving shop removed River from her passion, but also from her support system and outlet around her genuine anger and frustration with the way the shop was set up and the structural gendering in the school.

Importantly, Non-Trad was not an ad hoc group of students resisting gender norms (for example, “Feminist Club”) but rather organized around the structural arrangements of Trade; it reinforced as it resisted. A sad outcome of the school’s structuring, this well meaning effort to create support was created with only a partial insight into heteropatriarchal structures and further demonstrated mystification of state abuse (MacLeod, 1987). The state produced specificity of Non-Trad resisting the visible gender tracking of the school secondarily isolated their collective organizing from larger structural critiques. Girls like River did not have access to critical community because their placement in traditional gendered spaces rendered their critiques mute, their organizing too feminine. River’s state coerced movement into Cosmo by extension removed her access to Non-Trad. As in-between the gendered structures of schools marked by spatial arrangements, River’s access critical support and collective organizing was severely limited, and so was the scope of her feminist anger.

Moreover, her disconnection embroiled a sense of isolation for River, mirroring the isolation tactics of abusers. When a person in an abusive relationship is able to discuss with

friends what is “acceptable” or healthy in relationship⁶ and to see the patterns of behavior of their partner as abusive, they are not only able to gain an external perspective, but have critical access to validation and support. Where River had access to Non-Trad, she was able to connect her experiences to those of her peers and to witness the sexism she experienced as a pattern of state abuse. This access to her peers was paramount where River and the other girls were often the only girls in their shop. By rupturing a partner’s support system, an abuser is able to gain control over that partner’s external perspective. After having to leave Non-Trad, River was left without the external perspective and the rhetoric of the school had more space to permeate River’s thinking. Cut off from that community she was made to believe that her anger was internal and hers alone; the institutional arrangements of Trade blocked her access to feminist anger. Her increasing and inconsistent isolation both produced her anger and masked her anger as divorced from school structural production. Moreover, in Cosmo, River was surrounded by girls who (unevenly) conformed to the state expectations of gender, thus reproducing her divergence as further individual. Undermining River’s anger undermined her critique of the school’s structures.

Jaggar (1989) writes that when people in isolation experience emotions in response to oppression they “may be confused, unable to name their experiences; they may even doubt their own sanity. Women may come to believe that they are ‘emotionally disturbed’ and that the embarrassment or fear aroused in them... is... paranoia” (p.160). The production of River’s anger as individual and severing of River from collective anger served as further context for the

⁶ External validation is complicated, particularly with gaslighting. As discussed above, heterosexist ideologies are socially reinforced and bolster gaslighting (think of the opening example where friends said “that’s just how men are”). While external support is paramount in allowing someone to leave an abusive relationship, gaslighters often “recruit” the support of friends and family, unbeknownst to them (Stern, 2018).

pathologization of her anger. For not only was River insubordinate, but she was also, in the school's imaginary, sick and in need of state care and correction.

Ruse of Care: weaponization of mental health

Around the time when River was pushed-out of Auto, she had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. During summer school, she opened up to the class about how she had grown from knowing about her mental health and expressed feeling grounded in who she was. She brought this renewed sense of purpose with her to the school in the fall and expressed a desire to switch back into Autoshop from Cosmetology. Put quite frankly, River expressed of Cosmo, "it's just not a career I want." River described a thriving, multigenerational "passion" for working on cars that she couldn't shake: "it just got stuck in me."

She was met with resistance and was hesitant to fight to switch back. As mentioned above, the school denied her assertions of returning to Auto, and it became clear that this was not only because there were too few spots in the shop. After all, couldn't the school make an exception for the only girl in the face of such severe gender tracking, especially one with who had already spent two years in the shop? Instead of supporting her passion, the school focused on a concern about her mental stability.

The school connected River's *emotional* stability—the manifestation of her emotional regulations and expressions—to her *mental* stability. Not only did the school demand masking her emotions as a component of school functioning, but also anger and other expressions of distress became demonstrative to the school as mental unwellness rather than momentary or reactionary. The collapse of these two categories is mirrored where White women are constructed as unstable when they exhibit any emotion—it becomes a characterization rather

than an emotional response. This trope deployed in gaslighting to undermine one's sense of themselves as mentally stable and as capable of making assessments.

When the school found out about her diagnosis, the school mobilized protective mechanisms of care. River as a White girl was seen of in need of more school support, particularly in the form of her guidance counselor taking on additional role as stand-in therapist. River chronicled the seeds of self-doubt planted through the school's weaponization of her mental health, which engaged the caring function of gaslighting. The school claimed that they knew her better than she knew herself, and therefore knew better *for* her, because she was unstable. Absent of the implication of the state, River was made to be an individually angry, unstable person who was thus incapable of making decisions about herself and dependent on the state's meaning making.

Annamma (2018) argues that part of pathologization is pedagogical, meant to instruct a source of internal deficiency as part of larger state projects to mask structural inequalities. The state not only absolved itself from contending with distressed produced by school structures, but also was made more benevolent through providing (limited and uneven) support for the conditions created through hierarchies of power. River ability to be the authority on herself and her experiences was put into question and the school produced a need to defer to the partner who knew better— this usurpation of self-knowledge was made possible through the repeated denigration of River's emotional stability. Within this logic, emotion discredited River's self-knowledge, represented an inability to be stable and therefore to lack reason (Spelman, 1989). The school—stable, steadfast, domineering—stepped in as an abusive partner would to recommend what was right, better fit, easier. Rather than punishment or intimidation, caring manipulation protected the abusive state's image.

Intervening on privacy: “she acts like she’s an actual therapist”

River’s guidance counselor regularly requested to speak directly with her private therapist, which she refused many times over. River articulated “But I—I—I—just don’t like people bein’ in my business. But I *especially* don’t like my counselor here. She—she acts like she’s an actual therapist.” The guidance counselor attempted to increase state control through gaining information both from the private therapist and from employing therapeutic techniques with River during advising sessions.

The state exhibited concern over this outside support system, an unknown variable. When River had gone to therapy the previous year, it allowed for her to know herself better and feel confident in returning to Auto. This unknown element was outside of the school’s control, which elicited a structural anxiety. The school’s interest in River receiving care for her individually pathologized mental health issues demonstrated state interests of bolstering state magnanimity through protecting White girls. River was deemed deserving of saving, something not extended to all but reserved for some White potential citizens. This saving not only marked River as subordinate within Whiteness but also redeemed the state through displays of benevolent care that did not grapple with structural inequality. The school could not forbid River from seeing her therapist, or even react negatively, but they could gain control through wearing down River’s resolve over whether she deserved this semblance of privacy and play on the way students are set up to trust schools. What follows is an example of my frustration and attempted rupture of what I was seeing as gaslighting:

Me: And I think it’s interesting like you said like, she’s always tryna rush you and pretend to be a therapist, but like, you *have* a therapist and also, like she’s attached to the

school... so... she has a completely ulterior motive which is like trying to like get you to... I don't know...

River: Talk.

Me: Yeah.

River: Know things. And she's asking me like, "have you changed your mind about letting me and your therapist talk?", and I'm like "I'm not going to let you talk to her. I'm not going to let you know things about me that you don't need to know.... Well, that I don't—that *I* don't think you need to know."

The state's attempted usurpation of River's privacy, of private thoughts, exhibited both the fear of external intervention and the desire for complete control. Just as gaslighters hinge controlling care to expectations of trust and support in relationships, the school made these requests relying on the benevolent narratives of schooling as well as notions of White girl fragility and desertion of protection. Further, due to constant questioning by multiple school agents, River was unsure whether what she discussed with her therapist were things the school needed to know or not and, most importantly, whose assessment mattered most or was the most credible. What happens when the one producing distress frames and helps someone through it? What about when that person has an official title of counselor?

Protection from failure: "they're afraid that that's going to affect my shop work"

Expressing a narrative of fear for her mental health and stability, administrators were concerned for what would happen were River to switch back into Auto. This external justification for the state's anxiety over her placement in shop masked the violent maintenance of gender roles through the normalization of caring functions of schooling. River bought into some of this logic and explained,

My mood's affecting a big part of everything, like my mood, is switching on and off. So it affects my schoolwork. And they're afraid that that's going to affect my shop work, cause—because of that, last year, I didn't have the best academic work and I didn't have the best shop grade and stuff, so they think that I'm perfect where I am. Cause I'm getting good grades right now.

Because the previous year her schoolwork had been rocked by her mental health diagnosis and the institutionally produced conditions of hostility in shop, River's grades had fallen. (I also wonder, how was she graded in shop while being denied the ability to work on cars? Was she evaluated on her mastery of the computer system?) Though she was now "stable", the school coopted and distorted her progress to attribute it to the environment of Cosmetology, thereby presenting the state as redemptive. *They thought she was perfect where she was.* The school was worried about her, "*afraid*" for what would happen to her if she pursued Autoshop, protecting her from her dangerous passion through false benevolence under the auspices of care and stability. This paternalistic state fear for her failure, constructed as inevitable, questioned her ability to make decisions for herself and undermined her expressions of her needs for her education.

Within meritocracy, the school's barometer for River's success was her grades. River mused frustratingly, "But I—I—understand that they need to know what's going on but... I don't think that like they *care*... they just like want me to get good grades and get out of high school. That's it." Her 'stability' and whether she was successful in school were measured based on how she performed according to the state standards structured around meritocracy and individualism (Brayboy, et al., 2007; Guinier, 2015; Oakes, 2005; Macleod, 1995). As a White girl who had experienced disciplinary actions through punishment and academic failure, River

was not meant to excel or thrive, but rather to exist as a placeholder in the social order and to represent a redemptive project for state benevolence. She was meant to get passable grades and move on out of high school, regardless of the material properties of her education.

Further, the school located the problem within River: the reason she wasn't performing well in Autoshop was something innate in River that made her unable to handle the environment. This ideology and rhetoric removed the blame from Auto's toxicity and into River's inability to remain "calm" and "control" her anger in the face of structural violence. Not only did this mask the state's culpability in producing psychological distress in River, which in turn removed the responsibility of the school from restructuring Auto—as the problem was not the shop but rather River's inability to handle that environment; it is a judgement of her mental fortitude structured through emotion. Just as gaslighters produce an emotional response and undermine the critique through redirection of blame, the result is dissolution of responsibility on the part of the gaslighter to remedy or even engage the source of distress. The structures of schooling mapped on to River's label as bipolar and provided an entry point for the ideologies of the school to permeate River's thinking. Gaslighters express doubt over the abilities of their partners and do so in order to manufacture an increasing dependence on the abusive partner. This questioning coming from someone who is supposed to provide care, love, support is especially pernicious. *If this partner who I am supposed to trust doubts me, maybe I am not capable?*

Emotional tracking: “you have a better fit in *that* shop”

The suggestion that River was *perfect where she was* in Cosmetology reflected larger structural practices of student performance and fit. River identified a pattern of institutional maintenance of gender roles within the school based on administrators recommendations of what fields would be appropriate for students. “There’s me. There’s my friend Maya. She switched

into Nursing, same thing happened to her. My best friend Sydney, she's in electrical now, but they were, they were like 'this shop isn't for you, you, you need to go in *that* shop' or 'you have a better fit in *that* shop.'"

While I do not know the "official" reasons that administrators recommended that girls switch out of the male-dominated shops, these moves maintained the gender imbalance. Further, the exodus of girls from "guy shops" signaled to River Trade's lack of support for girls to be in programs outside of traditional gender roles and an institutional desire to actively maintain rigid gender binaries in the school. The ideological prescriptions of "best fit" by administrators were told to girls who seemingly struggled in male dominated shops. For whatever reason, they were falling behind; maybe they were excluded from doing work, maybe they were too distressed to function well in class. Administrators in the school sought to remedy this through removing the failing students from the "challenging" environment. This caring gesture seemed to be about the school expressing the best interests of girls, but did so through undermining their desires and denying the structural root of their "failures."

The implication that Cosmo would be a more stable environment for River further collapsed rigor and gender through emotion. CRT and Dis/ability Critical Race Theories (DisCrit) scholars engage the way that pathologization and treatment rhetoric within schools track students based on powered ableist logics (Adams & Erevelles, 2015; Annamma, 2017; Blanchett, 2006). Particularly, engagement with the disproportionate tracking of Black and Brown students, especially boys, into special education programs highlights hegemonic discourses around raced-gendered appropriate behavior as connected to structural oppression. Institutional gaslighting highlights another feature of hegemonic tracking: a raced-gendered tracking centered on emotional stability. While River was not placed into an alternative program,

given an IEP, or forced out of her traditional academic classes, she was forced out of pursuing a professional track of classes because of her supposed mental instability divorced from the context.

The construction of women's emotional unwieldiness was reflected in the school's desire to move girls from challenging male shop environments to acceptable "girls' shops." The paternalistic protection of River reflects dialectics of race-gendered infantilization and the material benefits of Whiteness, which also constructed a dependence on the state through subordinated belonging. The school administrators' suggestions of best fit were broken down along gender lines, reflecting that the sexist ideologies were embedded in the school and reinforced existing conditions— these were not outlandish or wayward claims but rather the result of watching individual students suffer or struggle and locating the deficiency within them rather than the structures of the shop. The state reframed this violent gendering through rhetoric of "best fit", as gaslighters espouse care with the partners' "best interest" at heart—saving them from shame, embarrassment, or struggle and simultaneously attaching rigor and dedication to masculinity. Where the school connected River's emotional regulation to her mental stability, she was unstable to be in the male space of Auto where emotional toughness was seen as demonstrative of ability to perform the more challenging male professions. Boys' shops, like men's workspaces, were constructed as devoid of emotion and the ability to perform well there was maintained only through "emotional regulation"—or the lack of negative emotions denigrated through femininity, like sadness or anxiety. River's school-produced anger and anxiety mapped onto her existing diagnosis and resulted in her being tracked her out of Auto around the rhetoric of care.

I posited to River, “Yeah it’s like they’re trying ta... take on this... extra role... but... they’re trying to step in, but then making decisions for you and not actually supporting you.” River responded by articulating how the school’s expression of care further infuriated her, “And I *really* don’t like that. Like that—that gets me like”— she scrunched lips and nose together— “my blood like pumpin’ and everything. Like it gets me super mad. But like... I try to like keep it in, because like, if I said if I really wanted to say, I would get like suspended or something.” Even though this was not the help that River needed or wanted, the school insisted that its ministrations were helpful. She was left in a bind: the school’s superficial expression of care infuriated her, which fulfilled the characterization of her as unstable, providing more opportunities for state “care”. She tried to minimize the expression of her feelings because she would be punished for expressing her anger. River was made to seem unreasonable— after all, the school is only trying to help. River’s doubt was not spontaneous, but was manufactured by sustained, ongoing experiences with school agents. This is how gaslighters produce doubt over the dissent: the abuser is being helpful, the victim unreasonable.

Self-doubt: oscillations/questioning self, questioning the state

Spelman (1989) discusses how the mystification of power produces difficulty in locating an “object of anger” when experiencing systemic oppression:

finding a clearly defined object may be a *source of confusion*, especially in the case under consideration, i.e., where a subordinate group is oppressed by a dominant one. For the success of such domination often depends, among other things, on *making the mechanism of that subordination invisible*— is it your boss? your husband? a parent? the ‘system’? that is responsible and blameworthy? If I can’t be clear about the *appropriate object* of my anger, it makes having the anger all the more difficult to deal with. It might then

appear to be simpler to regard the anger as an unwanted *internal* event... something due to *failing on my part*. (p.267, emphasis mine)

Controlling the narrative on distress is how gaslighting works; to be unable to locate the object of distress— to find it within oneself or to find no object at all, thus to feel unable to trust one's own assessments of the situation.

The school's benevolent ruse of care centered River's individual mental health as cause for concern, which in turn located the problem within River rather than the school's structural production of distress. This repeated questioning and expression of care chipped away at River's assertions of her desires for her future. Here, where River tried to re-enter Auto and disrupt the school's status quo is where institutional gaslighting visibly manifested as a process. While this move is demonstrative of the form and function of normal state practices, the logics were deployed in such a way that doubted River's newfound ability to thrive. This caused River to doubt herself.

Stern (2018) writes of gaslighting, "When someone we trust, respect, or love speaks with great certainty—especially if there's a grain of truth in his words, or if he's hit on one of our pet anxieties— it can be very difficult not to believe him" (p.5). While the school did not concoct another reality, they distorted the one that existed by controlling the narrative around it and exploiting River's anxieties about both her health and her belonging. As River struggled about her decision to switch back into Autoshop or not, she returned to institutional logics. Though she knew she wanted to work on cars and be in Autoshop, when asked about why she might not switch back, River cited the guidance counselors' concerns about her mental health and the previous hostility of the shop environment. The layering of structures and ideologies of

schooling onto her identities, experiences, aspirations, and the social context produced River's doubts.

Questioning perceptions of the state: "I—I don't know it's not gonna seem right when I say it"

River, in part, saw through this ruse of care, yet simultaneously questioned whether she was able to have this critique, "Yeah they think it might be like a BIG impact on like what's goin' on with me and stuff. But... I don't know I—I kinda..." She struggled to articulate her feelings for almost a minute:

"mmmmmm it's like I know that they hafta... they're..."

(sighing in and out deeply)

"I—I—I—come to this school, they hafta like know what's going on"

(searching for the words)

"but at the same time I—I don't think that... I—I don't know it's not gonna seem right when I say it but I don't think that they should be worrying about me. I think that my *therapist* and my *mom* should be worrying about me, and *myself*."

River described wanting to protect her internal life and safeguard her struggles from the school's invasive "support," but also doubted her assessments of privacy against the state's assertions of care.

She regularly said "I don't know" about things she *did* know. Not as a deferral or an attempt at minimizing her desires, but in a genuine wrestling against institutional logics. The idea that River would question whether she wanted to return to Autoshop was insightful not only for a young person questioning her world, her future, and making sense of the institution, but also in the face of considerable sexism. However the school attempted to convince her that she was a

“flighty girl” unable to make up her mind about what she wanted to do: hair or cars. The school questioned her about whether she was sure she wanted to switch back. After all, she had switched out before, was she sure she wouldn’t want to switch out again? For River, the choice was always cars— but Autoshop for River was not about working on cars; it was about filing papers, surrounded by boys goofing off, cracking jokes about sex and girls, not taking the environment seriously.

I asked River to return to something she had mentioned offhand about the school trying to collect information on her and intervene in her private therapy, “something you said at the beginning was interesting too... like... you said, uhm... like they they try to use this information to try to like help you or something, but then they actually like—“

River interrupted, and while rolling her eyes marked the air with finger quotes, ““Help.”” I agreed and continued, “Yeah, but then they—it seems like they’re kind of using it against you more than to help you.” River let out a short, low laugh that seemed to rise out of her belly, where her deepest intuition lay in waiting. She leaned forward and cocked her head, as if revealing a deeply held and rarely spoken belief, saying, “That’s *exactly* what I think. I think they want to know about people just to know about people so that... they can like, discriminate you or something. I don’t know... just like, put you down even more than you are.”

She felt overpowered. And though at times she felt the injustice, the righteous anger bubble up inside, she was constantly bombarded with external doubts, minimizations, belittling, and institutional barriers that caused vast internal conflict. She spoke as if she were paranoid, a deep sense of inner distrust having been concocted through the school’s repetition of benevolent doubt, which was reinforced through larger social ideologies. Moreover, she had been disconnected from her support systems of Non-Trad girls. She had no formal institutional entry

point to issue complaints. Without a specific target for her anger, and with her issues individualized, River felt alone against the state.

Questioning self-perceptions: “I don’t even know if I can tell”

While talking about school-produced anger, River’s tone shifted to a still seriousness and she was puzzled. “In school I don’t even know if I can tell like if I’m actually like laughing or not, or like smiling. I—I—I can’t tell if it’s real or not anymore. Like I fake it so much... that I don’t know anymore.” Profound self-doubt not only permeated River’s convictions about her comportment, but also of her discretionary capabilities. This language is typical of that of someone experiencing gaslighting; “It’s language that speaks to a *sense of having lost* one’s independent standing as deliberator and moral agent...her ability to get facts right, to deliberate, her *basic evaluative competencies* and ability to *react appropriately*” (Abramson, p.8, emphasis added). River portrayed a doubt in herself and a doubt in her ability to make sense of the world produced by the school’s questioning of her decisions and weaponization of her mental health.

River described a loss of her own reality, “And it’s like hard. Like I’ll give like awkward laughs, or something like that, but I can’t comprehend what’s real and what’s not.” River tried to play into the roles and ideologies set forth by heteropatriarchy and the school, but lost her sense of herself. This institutionally-produced condition manifested itself physically in River; she was tucked into herself as if unsure of what her hands would do if she let them free; her smile awkward and unsure of what a real smile should feel like. I asked, “Cause it’s like, you’ve—you’ve had to like pretend for so long?” And River smiled a heartbreakingly awkward smile that betrayed her words, and said, “Yeah... that’s why I can’t wait to get out of here.” River was at least somewhat aware that the school conditioning was affecting her ability to understand and trust herself; she was biding her time for when it would be safe to leave her compulsive, abusive

relationship with the school. She knew she had to get out; much like she did when confronted with the overt toxicity of Autoshop. Yet leaving Autoshop had brought her into another sphere of the school's control, she was playing the role the state outline for White women, and instead of gaining a stronger sense of self, she was bombarded with dominant state ideologies and lost her sense of inner voice.

Conclusion: Patterns

River saw herself and her experiences in shop mirrored in her mother's career track. "[The shop teacher] made me into my mom basically cause that's what my mom does. She gets so frustrated; I don't want to be like that. I mean she did—she did the same thing, but she was in Auto-collision, but she's now stuck doing bills and I don't want to do that." Her mother had gone to the same high school and worked in the same shop, and was now in charge of billing at the Automotive Repair Shop where she had been employed. Heteropatriarchal labor arrangements undermined her mother's professional training and produced frustration—a path River wanted to avoid. Not only did the state pattern self-doubt through River's *own* experiences, but also her mother's trajectory. The school's gaslighting, in other words, was not new or isolated, but part of a larger structural pattern harming River's mother, and now River.

River lamented, weariness characterized her descriptions, "That's another thing I'm afraid of. Like... what if the same thing keeps happening over and over again and nothing changes? That—that's what I'm like af—I want to, but I'm still like kind of afraid." Part of her indecision about switching back into Auto was not knowing if she would face the same sexism that had pushed her out in the first place. River was anxious and exhausted. She wanted to return to the shop, but pictured herself as she once was and could be again. River looked through a specter mirror to her mother and wondered what she should do.

And this is where my part in River’s story ends—without resolution. Any ending would be false, a futile exercise of fiction. River is living out those moments day by day; River’s story is so many girls’ story, is her mom’s story; is really a state story. As Vaught (2017) urgently reminds us, “stories about the state do not conclude” (p.319). A forced linearity or sense of resolution may satisfy an individual curiosity, but both denies the circularity and repetition of the state and also mirrors state individualization. In other words, the tessellations River encounters are synecdoche for ongoing institutional and structural patterns; a pattern within a pattern.

The school appealed to existing potential insecurities in River, for which sexism already provided the framework. Her very placement in the Autosshop ruptured the structure of schooling itself, and her isolation there cultivated a growing sense of anger and disaffection, against which the school deployed institutional gaslighting to suppress and redirect internally. This redirection produced self-doubt and reinforced both the structural location and the normalcy of her subordinated Whiteness. The school’s very function as a paternalistic, compulsory institution contributed to the production of self-doubt in service of White supremacist heteropatriarchy. Girls disappear into themselves.

Implications: Tangibility

Dominant ideologies are deployed not to hide state violence from view, but rather to *normalize* abusive structural inequity. The Combahee River Collective (1983/2002) write of “feelings of craziness” that they as Black women experienced (and that Black women and girls continue to experience) when they “had no way of conceptualizing what was so apparent to us, what we *knew* was really happening” (p.266, emphasis in original). While here I engage the specific ways that White girls are kept in schools to produce and maintain Whiteness, further exploration is needed to map the specificities of other vectors of powers and how self-doubt is

utilized to maintain other desired structural positions. What transgressions produce hegemonic state anxiety? As race, class, and sexuality are largely silent in gaslighting literature, attention to the ideological construction around other interlocking oppressive forces is urgently needed to map multiple modes of state-produced self-doubt. What doubts does the state create, exacerbate, and exploit? Certainly, the state works in uneven, haphazard, and overlapping ways to produce particular belonging and unbelonging. As abusive state paternalism is not limited to the school context, but rather weaves throughout our lives, what does institutional gaslighting look like in prisons, welfare programs, or public universities?

The Combahee River Collective also posit coming into critical feminist consciousness as an antidote to those feelings, a sort of sense making through collectively naming their reality and tracing threads of structural oppression. As Sarah Ahmed (2015) writes, “Making sexism and racism tangible is also a way of making them appear outside of oneself, as something that can be spoken of and addressed by and with others. It can be a relief to have something to point to, or a word to allow us to point to something that otherwise can make you feel alone or lost” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 8-9). This tangibility through collectivity, this feminist anger (Jaggar, 1989), presents a possible antidote to gaslighting; to resist the individualization and internalization of anger that begets self-doubt.

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