
Book Review

YOUNG

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Nora Gross, *Brothers in Grief: The Hidden Toll of Gun Violence on Black Boys and Their Schools*, 2024, 256 pp., \$27.50, Chicago University Press. ISBN: 9780226820873 (Paperback).

DOI: 10.1177/11033088261460725

Nora Gross's prize-winning book *Brothers in Grief* is a major contribution to the sociology of gun violence and race among American youth. Based on 2 years of immersive ethnographic fieldwork at Boys' Prep, an all-boys charter school in Philadelphia, the book examines how black adolescent boys live with, interpret and mourn the recurrent deaths of peers caused by gun violence. Gross asks how young people grieve in institutions that are not always able to recognize their emotional needs and how schools simultaneously provide refuge, discipline, care and constraint. The book's central argument is that black boys' grief is not merely an individual psychological reaction, but a racialized, collective and institutionally mediated social process. Repeated exposure to death produces what Gross calls 'long-term social injury' (p. 131): an accumulated form of harm that reshapes boys' relationships, educational trajectories, sense of safety and imagination of the future. She also reveals that black boys' grief is systematically marginalized and rendered invisible by institutional pressures to 'return to normal', revealing their grief as a patterned, unequal, deeply social process.

Beginning with Chapter 2, the book is especially strong in showing how grief unfolds through time. After the murder of a student (p. 30), Boys' Prep temporarily becomes a space of shared mourning: classrooms fall silent, teachers suspend ordinary routines and students are allowed to express shock, sadness and attachment. Yet this openness is fragile. As the school returns to its usual emphasis on behavioural discipline and academic rigour, mourning is gradually individualized and regulated. Gross's distinction between the 'easy hard' (p. 51) and the 'hard hard' (p. 69) captures this transition effectively. Initially, grief is publicly acknowledged; later, students must manage their pain while continuing to perform respectability, resilience and academic progress.



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The institutional narrowing of grief is developed further through the book's discussion of the 'hidden hard' (p. 96). Gross shows that loss does not disappear once school routines resume. Instead, it moves into quieter and less officially recognized spaces: memorial walls, locker tributes, classroom silences, private conversations and social media posts. Her attention to Instagram mourning is particularly valuable, because it shows how boys articulate vulnerability, loyalty and continuing bonds in digital spaces that are often more emotionally permissive than school (pp. 113–115). These practices complicate stereotypes of black boys as emotionally inexpressive or naturally resilient. They also show that mourning is relational: young people distinguish between 'real' grievers and outsiders, negotiate the legitimacy of different attachments and use grief to sustain peer belonging. Through these dynamics, Gross develops the concept of 'long-term social injury' (p. 131) to capture the cumulative emotional harm produced by recurrent exposure to violence. Rather than episodic disruption, grief becomes an enduring condition that reshapes how these boys imagine the future.

As the narrative moves forward, repeated deaths emerge as a structuring feature of adolescence at Boys' Prep, shaping educational trajectories, peer relations and political horizons. Teachers, likewise, absorb this emotional burden, leading to burnout and institutional instability. Yet, the school's classical curriculum and strict disciplinary regime provide limited room for critical reflection or civic engagement, constraining students' capacity to transform grief into collective critique. In this context, Gross highlights a racialized asymmetry in public mourning: while white suburban youth are often recognized as legitimate political actors in the aftermath of mass shootings, Black boys' grief remains marginalized and depoliticized. Ultimately, grief is not confined to moments of loss but persists as a formative condition of youth, carried into early adulthood through ongoing negotiations with trauma, care and survival.

Brothers in Grief offers a powerful account of youth under conditions of racialized insecurity and segregation. Its contribution lies in rethinking youth itself as a life stage shaped by repeated violence, premature death, institutional regulation and unequal public recognition. Violence is not merely a temporary interruption to youth socialization but an organizing force that shapes young people's worldviews of violence, schooling and peer relations, everyday practices of emotional enactment, relational work and expectations of survival. Gross shows that the boys' orientation to education, adulthood and the future cannot be understood apart from the recurrent possibility that friends may die young and themselves could be victims of gun violence. In this context, furthermore, not all young people are equally able to mourn, speak or become political subjects. Structural inequalities determine which forms of suffering are publicly acknowledged and which remain marginalized. In this sense, the book speaks directly to youth studies' debates on racialized youth culture and transitions to adulthood, enriching the understanding of how repeated violent encounters and emotional disruption become integral to the lasting structural effects of racial segregation, socio-economic inequalities and racialized discipline (Armstrong & Carlson, 2019).

These contributions come with limitations. Boys' Prep's racially homogeneous, all-black and all-boys composition illuminates intra-racial dynamics of mourning but remains less generalizable. The book does not address how grief operates in racially mixed schools or how interracial dynamics shape grievability. Nor, given its single-gender setting, does it directly examine gendered vulnerability or black girls' grief. Also, the charter-school context—defined by strict discipline and classical curriculum—may limit generalizability to other institutional settings. A more explicit engagement with gender variation and institutional comparison would have strengthened the broader claims. These limits, however, point to the value of the book as a foundation for future youth studies research on emotions, violence and racial inequality.

Overall, *Brothers in Grief* is a rich study of how black boys carry loss through school and into imagined futures. It should be read by scholars of youth studies, education, race and violence. Its most important lesson is that youth grief is not private residue after violence; it is a social fact, produced and patterned by unequal institutions, and deserving of sustained sociological attention.

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- Armstrong, M., & Carlson, J. (2019). Speaking of trauma: The race talk, the gun violence talk, and the racialization of gun trauma. *Palgrave Communications*, 5, 112.

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