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‘You aren’t from around here’: race, masculinity, and rural transgender men

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ABSTRACT
Both scholarly and everyday understandings of transgender people tend to assume that they can only live well in urban places, yet there is little research on the transgender people actually living in rural communities. This article uses an intersectional analysis of 45 interviews conducted between 2010 and 2013 with transgender men living in the Southeast and Midwest United States to understand how some rural transgender people may not necessarily and automatically fare worse than those in cities. Indeed, these data demonstrate that a more productive question might be, which transgender people integrate into rural communities? The reported experiences of trans men suggest that the claims to sameness that are crucial to inclusion in rural communities are articulated centrally through whiteness and enacting appropriate rural working-class heterosexual masculinities. The claim to sameness allows for a measure of acceptance in rural communities under economic and demographic strain in the twenty-first century.

‘No eres de por aquí’: raza, masculinidad y hombres transgénero en áreas rurales

RESUMEN
Las formas de entender a las personas transgénero tanto desde la academia como en el día a día tienden a asumir que ellas sólo pueden vivir bien en los espacios urbanos, si bien existe escasa investigación sobre las personas transgénero viviendo realmente en comunidades rurales. Este artículo utiliza un análisis interseccional de 45 entrevistas llevadas a cabo entre 2010 y 2013 con hombres transgénero viviendo en el Sureste y el Oeste Medio de los Estados Unidos para comprender cómo algunas personas transgénero que viven en áreas rurales no la pasan necesaria y automáticamente peor que aquellas en las ciudades. De hecho, estos datos demuestran que una pregunta más productiva sería: ¿cuáles personas transgénero se integran a las comunidades rurales? Las experiencias expuestas de hombres trans sugieren que las afirmaciones de similitud que son cruciales para su inclusión en las comunidades rurales están articuladas centralmente a través de la blancura y la representación de las adecuadas masculinidades heterosexuales de la clase obrera rural. La afirmación de similitud permite una medida de aceptación en las comunidades rurales bajo tensión económica y demográfica en el siglo XXI.
Introduction

Rural transgender lives are often represented as impossible, most notably through the example of the much publicized brutal killing of Brandon Teena in rural Nebraska in 1993 (Halberstam 2005). Yet, research on gays and lesbians in rural spaces suggests that some gender and sexual minorities do live, and even thrive, in rural settings without much desire to live in ‘queer friendly’ cities (Gray 2009). The idea of rural danger lives on in the popular imagination despite scholars challenging the narrative that rural spaces are the primary site of homophobic and transphobic violence. In my interviews with trans men, who were assigned female at birth and transitioned to live as men, in the U.S. Southeast and Midwest in the years 2010 to 2013, most interviewees who lived in rural places had relatively peaceful lives. This suggests that the actual lives of rural transgender people are more complex and varied than the common notion that links extreme violence and exclusion of transgender people to rural spaces.

This article examines the complexity of rural transgender lives and the dynamics of rural communities that allow some transgender people to live comfortably in these spaces. The analysis is part of the effort, in recent years, to challenge the urban bias of queer and transgender research through scholarship on the lives of gender and sexual minorities in non-metropolitan locations. As Gorman-Murray, Pini, and Bryant (2013) note, most of this research focuses on lesbian and gay people, but neglects the specificity of transgender experiences of the rural. Rather than simply showing that transgender people live in rural places, these data demonstrate that a more productive question might be, which transgender people can find belonging in rural communities?

In this article I argue that, for trans men, normative rural identity and rural sameness are articulated through the performance of rural working-class masculinities and whiteness. Trans men who can access these claims to sameness find a measure of acceptance, especially in rural communities that are vulnerable due to economic and social strain in the twenty-first century. I argue for three possible explanations as to how and why this acceptance happens in some cases: (1) They are not identifiable as transgender in most settings. (2) When trans men can make other claims to rural sameness, their transgender identity is accepted or at least tolerated. (3) The possibility of trans men is unbelievable to some rural people even when right in front of them. Building on the insights of transgender geographies and transgender studies more broadly (Stryker 2006), this article centers the stories of transgender people themselves to better understand their experiences of the rural.

United States rural context

The rural is often seen as a relatively unchanging relic of a bygone era, yet the twenty-first-century rural is a place of great change and conflict, where traditional ideals of what constitutes rural life are under threat (Brown and Swanson 2003; Cloke 2006b). The rural United States, like many rural places across the globe, has undergone tremendous economic changes in the last three decades with the ascendancy of factory farming and the shuttering of traditional manufacturing. These economic and social changes
have heightened out-migration and the ‘hollowing out’ of rural places, especially of the most educated young people. While the rural U.S. is not homogenous in terms of economic conditions, many rural communities are in crisis and their long-term survival is in question, along with the notion of traditional rural life (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Duncan 2014; Lichter and Brown 2011; Smith and Tickamyer 2011).

These social and economic changes have produced well-documented effects on rural men and rural masculinities (Brandth and Haugen 2005; Kimmel and Ferber 2000). Rural men tend to be represented as ‘real men’ and rural masculinities, based on attributes such as strength, toughness, and bravery, are symbolically tied to the local labor market and traditional rural occupations in agriculture and natural resource extraction (Cloke 2005). Thus, when local economies are devastated, rural men have difficulty achieving rural masculine ideals of self-sufficiency and hard work, which can even lead to higher suicide rates (Bryant and Garnham 2014). These economic shifts can lead to increased flexibility in regard to gender norms and the reinterpretation of what is acceptably masculine (Sherman 2009). This article contributes further understanding to shifts in rural masculinities and gender norms in the changing economic climate of the twenty-first-century rural U.S.

Rural community and othering

Belonging in rural communities is often related to the ability to claim sameness – of place, origin, values, and lifestyle. Claiming at least some part of this sameness can be a particularly effective strategy for sexual minorities to establish belonging in rural communities (Gray 2009; Kazyak 2011; Stein 2001). The rural is often characterized by social solidarity in the form of interdependent tight-knit communities, even as rural people often outwardly value independence and individualism (Campbell, Bell, and Finney 2006). In this climate of community interdependence, and with a lack of government and community services, establishing membership in the local community through claims to sameness is crucial for survival (Stein 2001).

As Philo (1992) argues, hegemonic constructions of the rural idyll are limited to white middle-class men, and those that fall outside of the hegemonic standard in terms of gender, race, class, and age become rural ‘others.’ Race is a key element of rural exclusion that varies based on local histories and social conditions, which supports the idea of rural spaces as repositories for core nationalist values (Sibley 2006). While not all white rural residents express overt racist sentiments, there is evidence of heightened racism in rural spaces, especially as they become more racially diverse (Lichter and Brown 2011). These demographic changes coupled with competition for scarce economic resources often solidify racial boundaries drawn by white rural residents and lead to further closure of white communities to racial outsiders. Thus, whiteness is often a key component of claiming sameness in predominately white rural places (Cloke 2006b).

With these dynamics of rural places in mind, centering the interconnections of whiteness, masculinity, and rurality is crucial to understand the experiences of rural trans men and the landscape of the rural U.S. Constructions of whiteness and masculinity are linked historically to economic and social conditions (Kimmel and Ferber 2000; Roediger 1999). Lipsitz’s (2006) concept of the possessive investment in whiteness illustrates that white people actively work to preserve white racial privilege; this concept demonstrates how the process of othering is part of ensuring white dominance in the contemporary U.S.

Metronormativity and trans geographies

Despite the common belief that rural spaces are essentially unlivable for gender and sexual minorities due to violence and social exclusion, there has been a growing body of research since the 1990s that documents queer life that exists outside of urban centers. Early works such as Bell and Valentine (1995), Howard (1999), and Stein (2001) demonstrated that while many rural queer people may have taken part in the ‘Great Gay Migration’ (Weston 1995) from the country to cities, some gender and sexual minorities do remain in rural areas. These works challenge dominant accounts in sexuality studies that suggest rural queer life – including transgender life – is centered on a ‘metronormative’ (Halberstam 2005) migration...
narrative from rural to urban, with the general charge for gender and sexual minorities to ‘get thee to the city’ in order to express queer and transgender selves (Weston 1995). This predominant urban migration narrative supports a dichotomy that positions rural and ‘uncivilized’ in opposition to urban and ‘modern’ (Taylor 2013). This narrative also reinforces the common idea of the rural U.S. as a cultural and social backwater (Lichter and Brown 2011), but does not necessarily give an accurate portrayal of rural life for gender and sexual minorities. While there is an overall pattern of rural to urban migration for queer and transgender people, this migration is likely both an act of resistance to the gender and sexual politics of rural communities (Campbell, Bell, and Finney 2006), and prompted by the many economic factors that drive rural to urban migration in general (Carr and Kefalas 2009).

An emergent field of transgender geography centers the specificity of transgender experience in space and place and questions the ways in which queer geographies often implicitly center sexuality and gay and lesbian lives and spaces (Doan 2007; Nash 2010). This growing work illustrates how transgender people experience urban spaces differently than cisgender gay and lesbian people, such as experiencing higher incidence of harassment (Doan 2010). It also demonstrates that trans peoples’ experiences differ between cities (Browne, Nash, and Hines 2010). This work lays a strong foundation for further empirical and theoretical scholarship situated in the embodied experiences of trans people, but as a whole has not yet engaged closely with trans experiences of rural space. Most important, transgender geographies demonstrate that queer and transgender lives may overlap at moments, but that transgender people's experiences of space cannot be properly understood as parallel to sexual minorities and that a queer or sexualities framework is not adequate to theorize these experiences.

The growing scholarship that challenges the metronormative narrative, such as Mary Gray's (2009) work on LGBT youth in rural Eastern Kentucky, shows that not only do queer and transgender people live rurally, they also thrive there. Rural gays and lesbians construct identities that reconcile sexual and rural identities, and they demonstrate that not all queer or trans people fit in urban spaces, in part because some prefer a rural lifestyle (Kazyak 2011). Rural queer research demonstrates the host of queer utopian possibilities in the rural sanctuaries of radical faeries and lesbian separatist intentional communities (Herring 2010; Morgensen 2009). At the same time, these rural utopian projects are not always welcoming of transgender individuals, most famously illustrated through the exclusion of transgender women from the Michigan Women’s Music Festival (Browne 2011). Class, too, is central in shaping experiences both urban and rural spaces, where rural space is often positioned as working class (Taylor 2013). Overall, this literature challenges urban biases to better understand rural queer lives on their own terms, but is limited either by the lack of attention to the specificity of transgender experiences or is solely rooted in queer and sexualities frameworks.

When one decenters the urban as the heart of queer life, it becomes clear that there may actually be advantages to rural living for some gender and sexual minorities. Indeed, moving to the country can be a way to be less visible as a queer person. Differing gender expectations and lack of knowledge – or at least a pretense of ignorance – of sexual and gender variance offer invisibility in some rural places (Howard 1999). Further, when some rural people see sexual and gender variance as a problem only of deviant cities, it seems impossible that it could exist where they live. Transgender identities may be even less identifiable and more easily accommodated in rural spaces, as some transgender people are not necessarily legible as transgender after transition. At the same time, being known in the community from childhood can present problems for rural trans people when visible signs of gender transition make their transgender identities apparent.

An intersectional lens takes us beyond a binary understanding of acceptance and ‘othering’ to a more finely shaded understanding or how race, gender, sexuality, and class work together to offer different possibilities for limited acceptance or exclusion in rural life for rural trans people. This article employs an intersectional perspective on race, class, sexuality, and gender that elucidates the complex relations to oppression and power for individuals that varies across spaces (Brown 2012; Cohen 1997; Collins 2000; Valentine 2007). This framework offers tools to investigate how one can simultaneously experience subordination while participating in the domination of others (Smith 2006). Race is a particularly important aspect of rural othering that has been understudied in the rural literature and a critical
attention to whiteness through Lipsitz’s ‘possessive investment in whiteness’ is particularly important in this intersectional approach, along with attention to sexuality, class, and gender.

**Methods**

This article draws on 45 semi-structured in-depth interviews with trans men from the U.S. Midwest and Southeast living in rural, suburban, and urban locales; they were completed between 2010 and 2013, and the sample was gathered using a snowball method with multiple starts. The interviews used a modified life history approach focusing on respondents’ time living socially as men, starting with gender transition. The interview protocol included questions about family, work, and interactions in public space, along with the experience of transition and living as a man more generally.

Interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 49 years and had started a gender transition between less than one year to 20 years prior to the interview. Seventy-six percent identified as white and 24% as men of color. Approximately half of the interviewees earned less than $20,000 per year and half had obtained a college degree or higher. Though interviewees understood their transgender identities in a range of ways, all of them had accessed some aspect of a medical, legal, or social transition to live as a man, which likely sets this group apart from those who have not transitioned.

I coded interviews through a modified grounded theory approach, with analytic themes emerging from the data (Charmaz 2006). Approximately 20% of this sample lived in a rural setting, 34% suburban, and 47% urban at the time of their interview. Some urban or suburban participants had lived in rural places at some point in their lives, and the other way around. The themes presented below emerged from interviewees’ discussions of their experiences of and ideas about rural spaces across the full sample. To elucidate these themes I draw on the stories of men who do or have lived rurally to illustrate how some trans men found a measure of belonging in rural communities. Notably, these interviewees were circulating in and largely discussing predominately white rural contexts. While the analysis draws themes across interviews, no two trans men’s experiences of space or their views were exactly the same. The quotes and illustrative examples below serve to show broader workings of race, gender, sexuality, and class in rural U.S. communities.

**Trans men’s experiences of the rural**

A common belief central to the metronormative narrative is that transgender people are more likely to experience violence in rural rather than urban places. Yet, few of the interviewees had actually experienced problems when visiting or living in rural communities and rural interviewees did not report a higher incidence of violence than urban trans men. In fact, a number of the urban interviewees expressed a desire for a rural life. Their reported experiences in rural areas suggest that while some rural places are perceived as particularly dangerous for transgender people, some trans men can gain enough acceptance to live relatively peacefully by making claims to sameness in rural places. This sameness relies on shared rural cultural values and lifestyle, rural masculinities, and whiteness. Certainly men who could not claim sameness in these ways – such as men of color – avoided rural spaces altogether. This analysis, however, focuses on the men who do find a measure of acceptance in rural communities.

**Challenging the metronormative narrative**

Trans men’s experiences on the whole mirror those from research on rural gays and lesbians. Rural life appeals to trans men for some of the same reasons that it might be attractive to the wider population: a slower pace of life, knowing your neighbors, or being independent. In order to embrace rural living, however, trans men must also resist the active pressure of the metronormative imperative. Sean, a 34-year-old white working-class man, had spent his whole life in the same rural region of his Midwestern state and felt pressure to move to the closest major city. He bristled against this and said, ‘Why should I live in the city? Isn’t the point that I should be able to do what I want?’ To him, city life did not represent
freedom even though it was supposedly the only option to live fully as a trans person. Instead, the slower and quieter way of life offered the time and space to achieve a sense of independence. In contrast to the metronormative narrative, it was the country that offered freedom.

At the same time that independence was a central appeal of rural life for trans men, a sense of community and knowing your neighbors provided feelings of security. Men equated the anonymity of cities with a lack of social support, whereas the mutual support of neighbors was important in isolated rural locations. This lack of a sense of support in urban spaces could be due to the lack of services that properly serve transgender individuals or a sense of not belonging in the urban lesbian communities that some men participated in prior to transition (Nash 2010). The rural lifestyle these men value may still be a reality in many rural places, but these desires also betray a sense of nostalgia for rural life that may not now, or have ever been, fully accessible to rural ‘others’.

Claims to sameness

Due to the interdependent nature of rural communities, survival is difficult without some community integration. Trans men, like other rural people, can find integration most centrally by making claims to sameness and belonging. In interviews, the primary claims to sameness for rural trans men came through being read by others as cisgender, white, and performing appropriate working-class heterosexual rural masculinities.

Being recognized by others solely as a man and not necessarily as transgender was the most common reason given by trans men to explain their relatively peaceful rural lives. For some interviewees, this mirrored how they saw themselves as they were further along in their transition; first as men and only second as transgender. As I illustrate below, their transgender identity was especially salient while they transitioned, but became less important afterward. Yet, for those that still maintained a strong transgender identity, muting that identity in their local communities became a necessary compromise. While some trans men were known as transgender because they had remained in their rural communities during and after transition, these men were able to make claims to sameness through other means.

Cities may serve some trans men well at the beginning of their transition due to access to a wider range of services and an anonymity that made their transition less noticeable among relative strangers. Notably, nearly every trans man that left the rural area where he grew up but wanted to return to a rural life, said that he would have to move to a new rural location. It was not rural life they feared per se, but that they would be vulnerable where people knew them before transition. Aidan, a 21-year-old middle-class white man who had grown up in the rural Southeast and lived in the suburbs of a large southeastern city at the time of the interview, explains:

I knew that my lifestyle was not gonna work out in the towns I was in and so I moved. And I don’t regret it at all. Like, do I think that I’ll ever live in a small town again? Yeah, but later on.

For men like Aidan, the anonymity and increased access to resources become less important over time as they become more interested in just living as men and not necessarily being recognized as transgender. At this point in their transition, most of the men were consistently recognized as men by others and would blend into a new rural community where people did not know their history. In fact, some men moved away from large cities because people there were more likely to see them as transgender, due to greater knowledge of transgender people and issues. In leaving their place of origin to become ‘just another guy’ in another rural community, trans men traded an important claim to belonging in one rural area, but this alone did not exclude them from a future rural life.

A few men stayed in their places of origin. They often had relatively supportive families and believed their rural area to be safer than others. Gray (2009) argues that the notion of ‘family’ is a way for rural LGBT people to affirm status as a local, as opposed to a queer stranger in rural communities. In line with this, family was a particularly important claim to belonging for the men who stayed or returned to their rural areas of origin. Some found the accepting attitudes of people around them surprising, as it challenged their own preconceived notions of rural intolerance. For example, Sean happened to
move in next door to his grandmother’s cousin. When she heard his last name, she became confused and thought he was lying because she could not place him in the family. His grandmother, who he had not seen in many years, confirmed who he was to the cousin. When he saw the cousin a few days later she was friendly and welcoming:

My transition didn’t matter. It was just that the fact that I didn’t lie about my grandma. My last name and my family made more difference to her than that. She told me that she had a daughter that converted to Lutheranism (laugh), so she understood the black sheep thing, I guess. I don’t know. She was super cool.

Sean found acceptance through family connection with this particular relative. Sean’s cousin seeing him as a local is an illustration of the importance of Gray’s understanding of the power of ‘family.’ It is also likely that Sean’s gender presentation smoothed this acceptance. These kinds of claims to belonging through gender presentation and family could lead to relative acceptance for trans men, even when their transgender status was known.

This acceptance could signal a lack of transphobia, but could also illustrate that due to his absolute presentation as a normative rural man, his gender was naturalized in the eyes of his grandmother’s cousin. Despite knowing that Sean was assigned female at birth, the evidence in front of her of a stout bearded construction worker in a heterosexual marriage, and with the distinctive local accent of the area, may have shored up his identity as a man in her eyes. In other words, the evidence she saw of his belonging likely overpowered the potential of him as a stigmatized transgender other. There is also the possibility that his status as a transgender person did not necessarily create a conflict or otherwise discredit his status as a man. In any of these senses, Sean was likely seen as an insider who, if accepted into the fold, would help to continue the community’s way of life.

Racism in constructing rural others

Jack was a 49-year-old white working-class man who grew up on a farm in the rural Midwest. He spent most of his adult life in a city in the Southwest, and had moved with his wife to a small town in the Southeast two years before the interview. He felt his first sense of inclusion in his town when he gathered with other local men in front of the local store. He explained that the men were very respectful of women who walked by, whether they knew the woman or not. Based on his characterization of racial bigotry in the area, I asked if the same would be true for Black women. He said:

You know what? I don’t know about that, because I haven’t seen that. I have not seen, either at a restaurant, or anywhere, a black person and I have not witnessed that interaction. You know, as soon as you said that and I was like, ‘Whew, I don’t know,’ ‘cause I have, truly have never seen that encounter … And, probably the way things are around here, I think a black woman would be thought less of. ‘Because you’re not one of us. You aren’t from around here.’

Jack’s characterization of the absence of people of color signals the stark racial segregation of his area. It is clear he believes being read as white allows him to join in the conversation and find some acceptance, but the same would not be possible for a person of color. According to Jack’s understanding of the local area, whiteness is being ‘one of us,’ whereas Blackness is ‘other.’ While otherwise reporting that he fit with the culture of his town, he was appalled at the racism evident in the community that this question made him confront. What was left unexamined by Jack in this moment was the ways that this racism formed the basis for his own inclusion. In fact, the most important aspect of making claims to sameness for rural trans men was not just recognition as men but being white men in predominately white rural communities.

Interestingly, interviewee’s accounts of rural racism emerged alongside discussions of homophobia and transphobia. In the quote below, Jack explains the greater threat he anticipates in rural places due to narrow expectations for gender and sexual conformity:

They’re not as accepting here … You know, crossdressers and drag queens or whatever. Coming from the [Southwest City] area, you see that all the time. But, here? You’ll get shot and thrown in a holler. I think it’s a little bit more accepting in the city. I think the lesbian/gay, transgender … as you get further into rural, it’s definitely not. I mean you still see KKK signs. Uh, no, they don’t take kindly to Hispanics or blacks or any of that.
Like other interviewees, he went from talking about potential violence for sexual or gender transgression to racist violence against people of color. This slippage from homophobia and transphobia to racism in their stories could reflect that all forms of hatred were lumped together in their assessment of other rural people. At the same time, this conflation also demonstrates a particular salience of racism and racial exclusion coming from their experiences in predominantly white rural communities.

This also shows the ways that white trans men distance themselves from the possessive investment in whiteness. Through these narratives they maintain a sense of innocence in the face of knowledge of the ways in which racism harms both cisgender and transgender people of color. Some described engaging in antiracist practice, while others perpetuated varied forms of racial and ethnic exclusion in their communities, from complicity in the racial order to more overt sentiments. For example, some men claimed not to hold racial prejudices, but shared racist opinions. Cooper, a white 26-year-old middle-class man in a rural Midwestern town, complained of the loss of traditional farming and the influx of Latinos working in a local processing plant. He said, ‘[If] you’re gonna be in this country learn our language. Speak English. If you’re gonna talk to me, speak English. You’re in my country.’ Though an extreme example not matched in the rest of the interviews, Cooper’s sentiment illustrates how a rural trans man can attempt to distance himself from racism, but still reproduce racist rhetoric.

Racist rural family members often served as the most direct evidence of the role of whiteness in claiming rural belonging and constructing rural others. Bobby was a 31-year-old white working-class man from a rural area in the Southeast who was temporarily living just outside a small southeastern city at the time of the interview. He characterized his hometown as racially segregated and most white people there as overt racists. There was plenty of evidence of this in his own family – from his grandfather who was a grand wizard of the Klu Klux Klan (still active in the area), to other family and community members employing racial epithets in everyday talk. For example, his father was relieved when he came out as a lesbian because, ‘at least he was dating a white girl.’ He condemned this racism but was surprised that some of the most overtly racist people in his family were more accepting of him being a lesbian:

   Grandma was the first person to ever figure out I was a lesbian and ask me about it. I don’t understand. She hated black people, but never had a problem with me, or my girlfriends, never.

Though his family acceptance of his identity as a lesbian or as a trans man was uneven, it seems that racial transgressions would have been even less acceptable. From interviewees’ own experiences, their sexual and gender transgression were often, even grudgingly, accepted, whereas crossing racial lines was too far.

Whiteness does not lead to absolute inclusion in Sean’s rural community, but offers a partial inroad that can be particularly important when there are already limited economic opportunities. He remarked that whiteness was key to his inclusion in his small town, where white business owners would only hire people of color for menial labor:

   If you’re of another race, you’re not going to fit in here. The people that have money and power are white around here and if you can’t figure out how to get in with that you’re not going to get anywhere. I mean, I don’t feel like I have a lot in common with most people in this town, but I feel like I can pass. I do what I can with that, but I realize that it’s a gift I’ve been given. Race makes a huge difference because it’s so obvious that you’re an outsider.

Sean’s story further illustrates the centrality of whiteness in making the claims to sameness that can make life better for a rural trans man and offer a clear economic advantage, even if they are individually opposed to this racism. It is possible that one could be a person of color whose family has long lived in the community and make this claim to belonging, but none of the interviewees shared an example of this.

These examples offer clear evidence of the workings of the possessive investment in whiteness in rural communities. It is not just racism against people of color, but the literal and figurative investment into the economic and social well-being of whites. Whiteness in this case, seems to be a particularly salient category for trans men who are most often read as cisgender to make claims to sameness. It is the perception that they are ‘from around here’ that may even make for tolerance of their transgender identity among their families and some of their rural neighbors.
**One of the good old boys**

Most of the men who lived rurally entered their community as strangers, but found a degree of community inclusion. Being seen by others as cisgender white men was an important claim to belonging for trans men, but this was not enough to find inclusion in rural communities; it was also based on their masculine presentation. The men that reported living with relative ease in rural communities were all white and embodied place-specific masculine ideals. Rural masculinities furthered some men's claim to sameness and showed that they were 'from around here.'

The masculine presentations of men like Jack, Sean, Aidan, Cooper, and Bobby fostered inclusion because they fit with local rural ideals of masculinity that were suffused with markers of socioeconomic class and sexuality. These men held jobs working in construction, agriculture, and other typically masculine working-class rural professions. Their clothing fit with normative aesthetics of other rural men – adhering to a no-frills dress of denim jeans, t-shirts or plaid shirts, and baseball caps. This comportment conveyed a working-class and heterosexual status to other rural people, in contrast to a more metrosexual or professional urban man. Inclusion in informal talk with other men provided a sense of belonging to trans men new to rural communities, such as when Jack joined the group of men store in his small town for conversation about work, crops, and the difficulties of local economic conditions brought on by the shut down of large manufacturers and a drought. Conveying a rural masculinity was a means for inclusion through his shared knowledge of rural problems, as well as his presentation as a proper white rural man.

This is not to say that these men felt that they were purposefully putting on an act in order to gain acceptance. Instead, the ways that felt most authentic to embody gender for them also lined up with masculine rural ideals. This may be a crucial difference from gay and lesbian rural experiences. The interviewees who wanted to, or did, live rurally were men who embodied rural masculinities in a way that they reported as feeling authentic, and were in long-term committed relationships with normatively gendered women. It may be that in a time when the survival of rural communities is threatened, these are the key elements of inclusion that make a transgender identity less important. Being seen as typical rural men in these contexts, which relies heavily on performing heterosexuality and working-class aesthetics, was key for trans men to belong in rural communities.

**Conclusion**

The threat to rural life posed by the economic forces and demographic changes of the twenty-first century offers one explanation as to why trans men, as relative strangers – whether new to a rural area or because of their transgender history – can find inclusion in rural communities. When the survival of white rural communities is threatened, one response is for white rural people to broaden the boundary of belonging by accepting some transgender people if they can make a solid claim to sameness through whiteness and working-class rural masculinities – leading to further marginalization of people of color. The possessive investment in whiteness is heightened as rural communities face economic peril and demographic change. These data suggest that in the twenty-first century, race continues to be, or has become, a stronger boundary marker for constructing rural ‘others,’ while some gender boundaries have become weaker. Whiteness is a key constitutive element of rural sameness. In other words, being ‘from around here’ is often articulated through whiteness, marking people of color as ‘others.’

The elements of why someone would want to live in a rural place, such as a sense of community and being known, are salient for rural trans people who do not see transgender and rural as at odds with each other, very much like rural gays and lesbians (Kazyak 2011). In fact, rural spaces offer some advantages for trans men who can move to places where they are unknown and integrate into rural life simply as men. Yet, race limits the possibility of finding acceptance in racially homogenous white communities, as whiteness allows for economic and social inclusion not necessarily available to trans people of color.

This article builds on the growing field of scholarship on rural transgender people and transgender geographies. Future research should include interviews with a broader range of rural transgender
people, including trans women, gender-nonconforming people, and trans people of color. It would be particularly instructive to compare the realities of trans people of color in rural places to white trans men’s characterizations of racial bigotry. Ethnographic studies of transgender lives in rural communities would contribute further depth to this understanding, particularly given the importance of community to rural survival. The rural U.S. Midwest and Southeast present different contemporary dynamics of race and class, each based on the particular social and economic histories of the region, though this difference did not emerge here relative to rural community inclusion. A larger sample of trans men in each region might illuminate potential differences.

The common narrative of rural violence may actually mask transphobia in urban spaces, even in supposedly safer urban queer communities, and obscure other pressing problems transgender people face. For example, transgender people face heightened medical problems if they are unable to find proper care in the local medical institutions where their transgender status is likely to become apparent during a physical exam or when giving their medical history. All trans men can be vulnerable to this form of abuse in both urban and rural communities, though rural trans men are likely to have fewer options for local medical care. Yet, the combination of racism and transphobia is likely to make life particularly difficult for transgender people of color in rural communities where the ideal of community itself is premised on whiteness. In the end, the notion that rural spaces are unlivable for transgender people obscures both the ways that whiteness and heterosexual rural masculinities shape rural communities, as well as the problems of trans people across urban and rural spaces.

Note
1. This classification relies on interviewee’s own varied definitions of what constitutes a rural space. While there are multiple and contested ways to define rural (Cloke 2006a), respondent’s designations corresponded with the rural definitions under Rural–Urban Commuting Area Codes 2.0 (WWAMI Rural Health Research Center 2014).

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