

Crip Theory and Country Boys:
Masculinity, Dis/Ability, and Place in Rural Southeast Kansas

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Abstract

This article examines the discursive and material practices of rural masculinity in Southeast Kansas by foregrounding ability and place as essential in understanding gender. It draws upon empirical data gathered from auto-ethnographic, participant-observer research conducted in the region. I begin with a synopsis of critical studies on masculinity in the field of Human Geography and proceed by offering a summary of research specifically addressing rural masculinities. I then illustrate contrasting perspectives surrounding dis/ability as a concept and also provide an in-depth overview of crip theory. I next describe the research context and methods utilized during the project, as well as how men use their bodies as conduits through which cultural norms pertaining to “manhood” are expressed, affirmed, and reproduced. My results demonstrate how situated assertions of masculinity are inextricably linked to ability, (hetero)sexuality, and socio-spatial context, as well as how the pervasive yet veiled pressures of heteronormativity and compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness impose banal and strictly policed social boundaries in regard to belonging and inclusion. The piece is thus a “cripping” of hegemonic notions of manhood in rural Southeast Kansas suggesting that both ability and place are necessary constituent elements for any critical analysis of masculinity.

Keywords

crip theory; critical disability studies; health geography; masculinity; rural geography

Introduction

For well over half a century now, feminist, queer, anti-racist, and poststructuralist scholars have been examining the social construction of gender through critical perspectives on power and discourse (Ahmed 2006; Butler 2002; Davis 1990; de Beauvoir 1949; Foucault 1978; Rich 1980). Theorists with these non-essentialist viewpoints have also been increasingly employing the use of intersectionality, resulting in an expanding body of literature recognizing the relational dynamics involved in processes of identity formation (Butler 2004; Collins 2002; Crenshaw 1991; Lorde 2012). Accordingly, critical theorists have jettisoned prescriptive, dualistic definitions of identity in favour of more nuanced, fluid understandings of social being (Christensen and Jensen 2014; Halberstam 2012). In this way, conceptualizations of gender, sexuality, and ability are now focusing on the continuums and variegations of social identities (Butler 2004), while also looking at how interdependent and ever-transitioning subject positions are negotiated across personal, cultural, and institutional levels of society (Bannerji 2001; Mullaly 2010; Pease 2010).

More recently, there has been a growing niche of research applying intersectional frameworks to masculinity, which has provided rich insight into the spatial processes involved in the social formation of gender (Bondi 1990; Brandth 2015; Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014; Hopkins and Noble 2009; McDowell 2003; Sothorn 2007). Akin to this, critical disability theorists have been on the leading edge of demonstrating the co-constructed and co-constitutive natures of disability, sexuality, and masculinity (Ostrander 2008; Shuttleworth; Wedgeworth and Wilson 2012; Smith and Hutchinson 2004). Scholars grappling with these issues are reshaping and expanding notions of dis/ability¹, heteronormativity, and compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness by exploring the personal experiences, systemic factors, and epistemological implications involved in what it means to be “disabled” (Gershick 2000; Herther 2015). Work in this area has led to the emergence of crip theory as a critical lens through which to analyze the politics of both identity and alterity (McRuer 2006). Despite these intellectual developments, geographers have been slow to take up crip theory as a theoretical tool in teasing out the complexities that ability plays in the production of subjects, cultures, and places.

It is with a direct focus on disability and spatiality, then, that I will critically evaluate the assertion of rural masculinity in Southeast Kansas (ancestral Osage Territory). I do so by analyzing qualitative data from 60 interviews and focus groups conducted with working-class, primarily white “men”² during nine-months of participant observation research.³ My exact intent with this piece is to use crip theory to contribute to, as well as advance, the diverse and varying issues that geographers are studying in regard to issues of gender and place. More specifically, this article will illustrate the utility of crip theory by exhibiting how heteronormative able-bodiedness/able-mindedness is an essential component enmeshed in the hegemonic practices of masculinity of Southeast Kansas, as well as how ability is intimately linked to notions of rurality in the region.

¹ I use the term “dis/ability” throughout the article in order to prompt readers to think about “disability” and “ability” simultaneously, as well as indicate the socially constructed natures, fluid boundaries, blurred continuums, varying notions, and inseparability of both—particularly in relation to each other.

² All informants have been given aliases. The descriptor “men” appears not to perpetuate gendered essentialisms, but rather, because it is how participants self-identified.

³ Ethics approval for this research was issued on behalf of the University of British Columbia’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board.

Masculinities and Place, in Geography

Raewyn Connell's (2005, 44) neo-Gramscian analysis of gender notes that masculinities are pluralistic, defining them as "configurations of practice structured by gendered relations" influenced by "bodily experience, personality, and culture." In expanding upon the elements of power, consent, and hierarchy woven into social formations of masculinity, Connell (2005) has put forth the notion of "hegemonic masculinity," which constitutes the practices denoting the most acceptable ways of engendering "manhood." Connell's (2005) thoughts on hegemonic masculinity have reshaped understandings of gender by signifying not only that multiple forms of masculinity exist, but that amongst these variations certain ideals associated with "being a man" are granted ascendancy over others. Masculinities can therefore be more precisely theorized as being socially policed/legitimized, internally regulated, and in constant states of flux. It should also be pointed out that fully embodying hegemonic masculinity is impossible due to the fact that "masculinity" itself is an illusory construct functioning in a perpetual state of redefinition and instability.

More recently, Connell and other gender theorists note that in addition to being fluid, masculinities are contextualized and constituted by the *places* in which they operating (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Hopkins and Nobel 2009; Mac an Ghail 2006). Notably, upon arriving in rural Southeast Kansas I encountered these place-centric dynamics quite regularly with participants (even during my first conversation) through the seemingly prosaic, and inherently geographical, qualifying clause: "'Round here," which was typically followed by a normative testimonial about able-bodied masculinity. For example:

- 'Round here, men know how to work (discussion pertaining to manual/"blue collar" labour).
- 'Round here, most fellas won't go to a doctor unless their knocked out or missing a limb [*laughs*] (conversation about seeking health care).
- 'Round here, that shit don't fly (a reference to receiving unemployment/welfare benefits for disabilities that are deemed suspect).
- 'Round here, our boys come from "good stock" ...not scared of a weight room (referring to the local high school football team).

Given both this mounting body of literature and empirical evidence, masculinities can be more accurately posited to be discursive and material practices that are asserted and *situated* in relational assemblages, rather than encoded behavioural characteristics and static personality traits that are divorced from geography (Cresswell 2013; Massey 2013; Mac an Ghail 2006). Poststructuralist stances such as these recognize that masculinities are socio-spatial driven processes of gender formation resulting from multifaceted relationships mutually produced by individual practices, emotions, cultural norms, and societal structures (Andersen 2009; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Nunn 2016).

Correspondingly, conceptualizing masculinities as contingent upon *place* proves to be effective in understanding how gendered power-relations shift across social, political, and economic sites and situations (Lusher and Robbins 2009; Jackson 1991). Given these significant movements in theorizing masculinities as dynamic and oft-fleeting socio-spatial formations, new dimensions of critical research on men and masculinities are continually opening up (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Gibson 2013). In particular, studies exploring non-hegemonic masculinities, diverse sexual orientations, transgender identities, mental health, drug/alcohol consumption, and disabled masculinities have been pushing prevailing discourses in more inclusive directions (Barratt 2014; Brown and Knopp 2015; DeBoer 2015; Jayne, Holloway, and Valentine 2008; Keppel 2014; Thien and Del Casino 2012; Wilton and Moreno 2012). These developments have uncovered a host of concerns pertaining to how issues of power and privilege arise due to

contrasting, yet interlocking, social axes of identification (race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age, citizenship, nationality, body type, religion, ethnicity, etc.) (Acker 2014; Ní Laoire 2005).

Poststructural, queer, anti-racist, and feminist geographers have been at the forefront of these endeavours as they proceed with a keen awareness of the role that place has in the production of masculinity (Gorman-Murray 2009; Hopkins and Noble 2009; Brandth 2015; van Hoven and Hörshelmann 2005). This is evident in the growing amount of literature being applied to disability and spatiality (Moss and Dyck 2003; Sandberg 2013), as well as how avowals of hegemonic notions of “manhood” are simultaneously emplaced and mutable, as well as operate in relation to other subject positions (Anderson 2001; Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014). Despite the progress being made in the area of anti-foundationalist research, critical interrogations into masculinity, dis/ability, and rurality largely remain on the margin of public discourse (as well as academic journal database searches) regarding the broad topics of gender, society, and space (Bryant and Pini 2011; Jones and Pugh 2005; Morell and Brandth 2007; Sandberg 2013; Soldatic 2013).

The relegation of dis/ability to the fringes of scholarly dialogue parallels what I encountered in rural Kansas, in that, when explaining to participants some of my interests as “dis/ability studies, able-bodiedness, and disabled masculinities” I was generally met with looks of curiosity or confusion. The majority of the informants expressed bemusement, and typically followed up with responses like: “Oh jeez, I have never really heard of those,” or “Yeah... okay, that’s pretty neat – don’t think about that stuff like that much,” as well as even “So those are things you university-types study nowadays, huh? [*laughs*].” What these peripheralizations suggest is that the nexus of dis/ability, masculinity, and place is rarely discussed in arenas of both civil society and academia. In light of this, social and critical geographers are well positioned to contribute to the exigent efforts that are needed in centering dis/ability and place as fundamental in understanding gender and culture (Chouinard 1997).

Settler Colonialism, the Rural “Frontier,” and Representation

Representations of (able-bodied) rural masculinity in contemporary settler societies are both pervasive and banal (Brandth 2015; Bryant and Garhham 2015; Campbell, Mayerfield Bell and Finney 2006; Gibson 2013; Kimmel 2011). Due to the romanticization of the “pioneer” as a gendered archetype, as well as the rural landscape historically being viewed as “frontier” territory and *terra nullius* (“empty land”), settler masculinity and rurality have both become revered symbols of nationalistic American pride. Within Southeast Kansas, rural masculinity was habitually exalted by participants via repurposed historical narratives positing white settlers as “explorers” and “discoverers” who, “seeking freedom,” bravely “conquered” untamed lands to “spread civilization,” which critical scholars have shown are widespread sentiments echoing across the North America (Blomley 2003; Veracini 2014). These distorted accounts of history are iteratively endorsed via the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny, individual liberty, self-preservation, and as several informants I spoke to reported: “Defending what’s yours” (Mills 1996; McClintock 2013). Consequently, images of hardened frontiersmen “protecting” their (hetero-nuclear) families while “making their way” (i.e. exemplifying able-bodiedness) over perilous rural terrains are extolled and still resonant in many contemporary settler colonial geographies (Little 2000).

These representations remain evident through valorizations granted to “pioneers” and “cowboys” of the countryside who are thought to engender what are often described as the qualities that “America” was built upon (e.g. self reliance, assertiveness, rugged individualism). Depictions of rural (hetero)masculinity, and more imperceptibly–able-bodiedness, thereby continue to permeate a wide array of social spaces as references to such qualities can be still seen

and heard within business settings, military environments, sporting events, and even classroom lectures (Gibson 2013). Everyday life in Southeast Kansas is no exception. Many of the participants I visited had cattle drive paintings hanging in living rooms, bookshelves scattered with Louis L'Amour ("Westerns") novels, garage walls adorned with faded beer posters prominently featuring bikini-clad women, and gun cabinets that doubled as decorative home furnishings, which were occasionally explained to me as being repositories for "heirlooms," "hobbies," "toys," "tools," and a means for men to "stand their ground."

And while perhaps not every member of a settler state is directly exposed to the same quotidian degree of heteronormative able-bodied "manhood" that Kansas is, civil society does remain heavily subjected to representations of similar rural masculinities through tales of pioneer history, as well as media tropes and advertisements. More specifically, it is readily apparent that wide swaths of the general public are fed images of the quintessential "hard working man" or "rugged (white settler) cowboy" by way of a variety of broadcasting channels averring men as "protectors" and "providers." Commercials utilizing rural masculinity to sell products ranging from beer and cigarettes, to trucks, jeans, and technology solutions, and even perfume and cleaning products can be seen on a regular basis (Campbell, Mayerfeld Bell, and Finney 2006; Gibson 2013). The ostensible trustworthiness of rural masculinity has thereby become engrained in the cultural milieu of white settler societies and remains an influential token of capitalist consumption and neoliberal self-making.

Despite the powerful influence heteronormativity has on constructions of rurality and masculinity in how both are signified as rough and untamed, impressions of rural landscapes/masculinities as rigid and uncompromising are not without contestation. Queer studies on geography have explored instances in which rurality is a liberating space providing a serene setting where non-conformist sexualities can be practiced freely and gender variant/creative people may find sanctuary and respite (Bell 2000). Research of this nature exposes the paradox resulting from framing "the rural" as an aggressively heterosexual, harsh place, because in fact, it can be also be a quite tender, sensitive, and placid setting (Bell 2007; Halberstam 2005; Little 2003). Further skewing traditional notions of the masculine rural as domineering, coarse, and monolithic, poststructuralist and queer research is subverting time-honoured beliefs surrounding what it means to be a "man" by highlighting that male bodies in the countryside can be nonthreatening, humorous, deferential, self-deprecating, and even silly (Campbell, Mayerfeld Bell, and Finney 2006; Morell and Brandth 2007). And while the assertion of rural masculinity continues to instantiate American hetero-nationalism in a myriad of contexts, there is a considerable amount of research troubling conventional standards of masculinity coming from poststructuralist, queer, and feminist geographers alike (Elder 2003; Knopp and Brown 2003; Nast 2003; Oswin 2004; Sothern 2004; Waitt 2003). It is with the prospect of further destabilizing orthodox representations, depictions, and practices of 'manhood' in mind, then, that I proceed in situating dis/ability in the discussion of rural masculinity that follows.

Situating Dis/Ability and Crip Theory

Disabled people comprise one of the most diverse and active social groups in the world (Peters, Gabel, and Symeonidou 2009, Gabel and Peters 2004). Despite this, they remain one of the most acutely marginalized heterogeneous groups—facing oppression on personal, cultural, and institutional levels of society (Butler and Parr 1999; Park, Radford, and Vickers 1998; Mullaly 2010; Davis 2006). Oppression on the personal level can take the form of sympathy, irritation,

discomfort, and annoyance as expressed by *enabled*⁴ people in the face of those they deem to be disabled. At the cultural level, oppressions for disabled people are made manifest through disparaging stereotypes, hurtful attempts at humour, or omissions from popular culture altogether. Institutionally, oppression is evidenced by the de facto segregation, discrimination, and inequality found within the political, social, and economic systems of a society (Campbell 2009; Park, Radford, and Vickers 1998). Research has shown these structural injustices are due in part to the entrenchment of the medical model of disability, which negatively labels disabilities as “flaws” or “defects” (Garland-Thomson 2002). The primary demeaning aspect of the medical model is that it locates “dysfunction” within individuals, thereby erasing the socio-spatial and systemic processes largely responsible for creating the hardships experienced by those who are disabled.

Dating back to the 1960s, and over the past thirty years in particular, a growing movement has challenged the discrimination that arises from the individual pathologization of disabled people by the medical model (Campbell 2009; Oliver 2013). This counter-perspective is known as the social model of disability, which argues that the problems associated with “being disabled” stem from built environments, institutional structures, and cultural norms (Davis 2006; Swain and French 2000; Garland-Thomson 2002). The social model thus attempts to bring rights and dignity to the fore so that disabled people are not rendered socially invisible, approached with parochial hyper-attentiveness, offered patronizing notions of liberal “tolerance,” or fawned over and condescendingly praised as a result of overcoming their perceived helplessness (Brown 2009). In this way, the social model contests stigmatizing “disability-as-tragedy” discourses and “hero”-narrative fetishes by disrupting the oppressive reifications disabled people face in being signified as broken objects that need to be pitied, repaired, constantly monitored, or obsequiously applauded.

Despite the favour granted to the social model over the medical model, more recently, the social model has come under critique (Dewbury, Clarke, Randall, Rouncefield, and Sommerville 2004; Shakespeare 2006). These criticisms come from scholars suggesting the social model privileges philosophizing disability over more pragmatic medical and psychiatric expertise being applied to the obstacles, as well as suffering and anguish, that disabled people experience and must navigate (Dewbury, Clarke, Randall, Rouncefield, and Sommerville 2004). Critiques of the social model insist granting precedence to radical theorizings of disability as a social construct does not always actually recognize that impairment or disability exists. Literature in this area also insinuates that the social model compels people to spend too much time in the intellectual domain of disability, rather than on the immediate day-to-day alleviation of pain that disabled people have to manage (Shakespeare 2006).

⁴ I deploy the term of “enabled” here, as well as throughout the rest of the article for two reasons: 1) To destabilize the normative status afforded to what are typically perceived to be (yet often neither critically, nor consciously scrutinized) “able” bodies, and 2) To signify that people are “disabled” not necessarily because the characteristics they engender are lacking or abject, but rather, because the (material and discursive) conditions in which they are placed are restrictive, repressive, and disabling. Put differently, using “enabled” draws attention to the fact that people who are deemed to be “normal,” “able-bodied,” “of sound mind,” etc. generally, quite simply, have much easier and less taxing daily lives in relation to the built environments, cultural norms, political processes, and economic prospects they experience. i.e. “Non-disabled” people can readily be thought of as *enabled* because their way of being is oft-unwittingly catered to in terms of more comfortably navigating life, accessing services, and having their needs and even desires fulfilled.

The argument from voices critiquing the social model is not that cultural norms are not a problem, rather, they allege there is too much time spent on conceptualizing the ontological nature of disability. What manifests as a consequence are dismissals of disabled people who are seeking assistance with the daily afflictions they face, as well as non-acknowledgements of the taxing and conflicted relationships they frequently have when they do seek out medical/therapeutic interventions. Further diversifying conversations taking place concerning the social and medical models, as well as the lived experiences of disabled people, is research being completed on embodiment, which highlights the impossibility of separating the material from the discursive (Delueze and Harrison 2000; Mol 2002). This work has been key in enlightening and reminding scholars that disability is neither lived, nor thought of, as a dichotomy between the physical and abstract.

Broadening the complexities surrounding disability, embodiment, and the indissoluble confluence of the material and the discursive, as well as complicating both the social and medical models, some groups commonly labeled as “disabled” reject the terms “disability” and “disabled” altogether (Ladd 2003). This refusal is often a personal and political decision many have made in order to move away from disabled-centric narratives, as is the case for people who identify as culturally “Deaf” (Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg 2010). What we can gather from these ongoing discussions are that there remain a plethora of intricacies and thresholds, as well as opinions and debates, emerging from the theories, practices, and discourses being applied to ability/disability. Consequently, the intractability of disability as a concept thereby underscores how it is neither purely a biological nor sociological classification, but instead, is a social and political category highly contingent upon the convergence of a variety of personal, cultural, institutional, and even geographical factors (Abrahamsson and Simpson 2011; Anderson 2001; Hall 2014; Moss and Dyck 2003).

Building upon critical discussions surrounding embodiment and disability, crip theorist Robert McRuer (2006,1) states: “able-bodiedness, like heterosexuality, still largely masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things.” McRuer (2006) contends that able-bodiedness is compulsory because it is a culturally expected, assumed standard. McRuer (2006) also notes that despite the ubiquity of able-bodiedness, it remains unseen and disembodied yet is covertly, oftentimes unintentionally, enforced through hegemonic discourses and the social production of what being “normal” means. In arguing this, McRuer (2006) compares compulsory able-bodiedness to Rich’s (1980) theory of compulsory heterosexuality by noting that in many contemporary settings, both heterosexuality and able-bodiedness are believed to be natural and innate. For McRuer, then, compulsory able-bodiedness functions as an immaterial apparatus of societal regulation demanding people be able-bodied, much in the same way society tacitly understands people to be heterosexual unless they provide evidence to the contrary. McRuer (2006), like other critical disability theorists, states that when such a theoretical perspective is actively applied to ableist social relations for analytical, subversive, or transformative purposes it constitutes a “cripping” of normalized notions of ability (Cohen 2005; La Fountain-Stokes 2009; Sandahl 2003).

McRuer’s “cripping” of ability, much like Connell’s perspectives on hegemonic masculinity, formulates able-bodiedness as an invented social construct that can never be fully achieved. The word “crip” is a hearkening back to the colloquial label “cripple” (a deprecating epithet once widely used to describe physically disabled people). However, for critical disability/crip theorists, the moniker “crip” is not being adopted for pejorative reasons. Rather, it is employed as the reclamation of an insult that can be used to signify shared experience and mutual struggle, similar to how the word “queer” has been recuperated (Kafer 2013; Löfgren-Mårtenson 2013; McRuer 2006; Puar 2009). When articulated in this manner, “crip” is not a slur

but is conceptualized as a fluid and inclusive category, encompassing a wide spectrum of disabilities (i.e. people diagnosed with any physical, mental, psychological, emotional, disability) that is offered as a way to build solidarity amongst disabled people, as well as function as a counter-signifier much like the term “queer” does.

Notably, in addition to serving as a way to establish a diverse constituency amongst those disabled people who choose to use it, the term “crip” also proves to be conceptually powerful because it is effective in marking and sundering particular the hegemony of ableism. “Crip,” thenceforth, is not only operationalized to constitute “disabled” as unifying cultural identifier, but additionally, it connotes an active attempt to call attention to the practices of othering inherent in the maintenance of compulsory able-bodiedness. In this way, “crip,” like “queer,” not only names power-relations but also signifies an approach to the politics of their deconstruction, subversion, and transformation. It is also important to note that contestations of the term do exist—thus, use of the term “crip” is neither universally embraced, nor without debate.

Expanding upon the notion of compulsory able-bodiedness, Alison Kafer (2013), drawing upon feminist, queer, and crip theories herself, suggests many social assemblages are partially founded upon de facto cultural mandates of compulsory able-bodiedness/*able-mindedness*. In proposing this, Kafer (2003) notes compulsory able-bodiedness/*able-mindedness* is a relational, yet obscured, cultural ideal governing society and serving as a mechanism of classification that disciplines subjects who fall outside a given society’s arbitrarily constructed norms pertaining to both physical ability and mental health. It is imperative here to clarify Kafer’s use of “able-bodiedness/*able-mindedness*” is not meant to reaffirm the separation of the body and mind into binary categories. Instead, she purposely uses the dualist label to highlight the tensions, limitations, and dilemmas that modernist dichotomies have given rise to.

Kafer (2013) also utilizes the terms “able-bodiedness” and “able-mindedness” in conjunction with one another to ensure that no realm of disability is excluded, and to signify that all abilities/disabilities exist along continuums (Kafer 2013). Kafer goes on to indicate that if for some reason a person does not fit into culturally normative expectations surrounding ability they are regularly hailed as abject, pitied, or seen as deficient. What can be gathered from crip theorizations concerning dis/ability is that compulsory able-bodiedness/*able-mindedness* is a (omni)panoptic apparatus generated and maintained by social processes that remains an unnoticed, yet powerfully influential and often punitive, socio-spatialized arbiter of (non)belonging.

“There’s No (liminal) Place Like Home”: Methods and Positionality

In order to revisit the cultural politics of masculinity in Southeast Kansas, as well as get a sense of the broader social relations of the region, I moved “home” to rural Kansas to live in the field for nearly ten months. For the project, I took up employment as a farmhand and traveled across several counties in order to speak with men about their day-to-day lives, as well as get a sense of their perspectives on masculinity, ability, and bodily practice. In total, I conducted 60 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, held eight focus groups (each with five informants), and kept field notes during my daily work, leisure activities, and social outings. To initially recruit informants, I discussed the project with friends and family and asked them to spread word amongst their acquaintances. I also posted flyers in local businesses, post offices, and on community bulletin boards expressing an interest in interviewing community members who

identified as “men,” were “from the country,” and would be willing to participate in research being conducted on “masculinity and place.”⁵

Participants who volunteered for the project were all United States citizens between the ages of 18 and 77 who self-identified as “American,” “male/men,” “heterosexual/straight,” and “working or middle class.” Of the 60 participants interviewed, 54 were “white/Caucasian” four were “Latino/Mexican,” and two were “Black/African American.” The homogeneity of the sample reflects the predominantly white settler (98%) racial demographics of the region. The majority of the participants described the area as having a “slow pace of life” with “traditional” and “conservative” values. As Southeast Kansas is situated in what is largely an economically depressed section of the central United States, participant incomes ranged from \$10,000 - \$77,000 (average \$25,400) and were primarily earned through blue-collar employment in the manufacturing, agriculture, livestock, oil and natural gas, construction, and trucking and transportation sectors. After completing my fieldwork, I transcribed all the digital audio, coded the data thematically, and examined the material through an interlocking framework. In defining my analysis as interlocking, I am not arguing identities are fixed classifications that intermittently intersect, rather, I suggest that identities are more accurately conceptualized as relational, transitory subject positions, which vary across-and-within the places where they are emerge. Thus, in scrutinizing the empirical evidence I was critically analyzing the discourse of masculinity by investigating its link to both place and ability.

In addressing positionality, my age, race, gender, citizenship, presumed sexuality and religion, as well as ability (i.e. a white, able-bodied, cis male, U.S. citizen, with no visible mental disabilities, assumed to be heterosexual, in my late 20s, with a Catholic background) allowed me to navigate day-to-day interactions quite easily. My “localness” (i.e. having been born and raised in the region) also mattered a great deal. This came to surface because several people viewed me as a “prodigal son returning home,” or more simply, as a long-time resident who had “roots” (i.e. kinship) in the area who was coming back to visit friends and family. As I was relatively young compared to many participants, and given many had known me for years, several of the men I interviewed took somewhat of a paternalistic, yet sociable and neighbourly orientation towards me. In this way, my interviews could be more appropriately called “visits,” as many of the men labeled them as such. The personal contacts I had in the area allowed me to easily connect with other informants for both purposive selection and chain-referrals, which unfolded into a process best described as “vouching.” More precisely, several of the visits I had in surrounding towns and across county lines were the result of participants stating “I got a buddy of mine you should talk to,” followed by them contacting friends-of-friends, briefly introducing me as a “good guy” or “kid from around the area,” and allowing me to “take it from there.” Consequently, as a “local boy” who had “earned his stripes” it was relatively easy for me to fit in. This meant I could then participate in the common local past-times (i.e. hunting, fishing, camping, golfing, drinking at pubs, horse-riding, shooting guns, gambling at casinos, vehicle maintenance, carpentry projects, etc.) of the area quite readily.

As a result of having lived in the area for more than 25 years, I wavered in a liminal insider-outsider researcher positionality depending upon the people I found myself with. Doing autoethnographic research and being marked as a “local” is imbued with complexities and

⁵ In a concerted effort to ensure that I did not exclude anyone from the project who was gender variant or non-conforming, I used the phrase “identifies as a man” throughout recruitment. Despite the deployment of this inclusive phrasing that would have allowed for a range of people of differing genders to participate, all of those who volunteered were normative, cisgender “men.”

tensions, oftentimes producing both pros and cons in regard to navigating relationships with participants (Butz and Besio 2009). As the majority of the informants I spoke with considered me “local,” I was granted a certain degree of immediate inclusion. Throughout the project, participants sometimes mentioned that responding to inquiries about relationships, emotion, and sexuality seemed a bit “weird” and (as was noted a handful of times) “kind of gay.” There were also a few very intense conversations about the topics of race/whiteness, sexuality, colonialism, and migration with some of the participants I knew closely, which highlights how researchers can never maintain objective, disconnected positions when conducting fieldwork (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Occupying tenuous “insiderness,” as well as carrying widely contrasting political perspectives, thus can be quite an unpredictable and capricious experience as it lends itself to seemingly random and unintentional provocations and hesitations in regard to the amount of self-disclosure participants offer. This illuminates how notions of place not only affect the conceptualization of research topics, but also, the practice of research itself.

Hence, my status as a “local boy” was both a catalyst and hindrance when it came to the process of asking rural men to open up about their lives. This was particularly stark when juxtaposing the experiences I had during individual interviews compared to focus groups. During one-on-one conversations participants engendered a far more contemplative and forthright, yet also vulnerable, disposition towards my queries. The intimacy of personal dialogue led to more candor, rapport, and nuance on the part of the participants, as well as myself. Men in focus groups, contrastingly, were more demonstrably assertive and fraternal, yet measured surrounding emotion (unless expressing anger or disagreement), in tone and tenor. The vast majority of my group interviews also saw participants engaging in more homosocial bonding and masculinist performativity (e.g. “good-natured ribbing”/joking, cursing, oppressive language, posturing) than the individual interactions. It was with all of these tensions, trappings, and trepidations, as well as occasional strange looks and intermittent head-shakings of disapproval (usually on the part of the participants), that I set about examining the convergence of ability, “manhood,” and rurality in Southeast Kansas.

“God, Family, Country”: A Social Geography of Rural Southeast Kansas

In discussing the cultural landscape of Southeast Kansas it seems fitting to begin with two of the most noticeable, yet ordinary aspects of the region’s social geography: whiteness and religion. Upon traveling around the countryside and while conducting interviews within differing towns it became quite clear, via both the optics and discourses, that two of the most powerful influences in the area are Christian values and nationalistic “American” pride. Critical research on the rural United States shows that conservative Christian perspectives have the tendency to heavily inform what politics individuals have, what moral codes they deem acceptable, as well as even how they behave (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2014). This was reflected numerous times in my research as many of the participants noted: “If Jesus were alive, he’d vote Republican.” What regularly followed this statement were heteronormative assertions explaining that “being gay was a cross to bear,” there is nothing “more sacred than (nuclear) family,” and “God made Adam and Eve – not Adam and Steve.”

Further to these declarations, one 52-year-old participant named Rick offered his cultural overview of the area by characterizing it as:

...nothing but fields and farms, with an occasional outpost that has the three things all good American towns should have: a church, a bar, and a fried chicken joint – and the church should be Catholic, and the beer cold [*laughs*].

The implications of these conservative religious beliefs can also be seen via compliance offered to colonial institutions across large sections of white settler societies like the United States

(Veracini 2014). Routinely, oppressive and exclusionary dogmas go unquestioned and become hegemonic simply because they are disseminated by privileged white settlers in positions of authority (Razack 2002). I found this to be the case amongst many of the participants, as their most highly-respected individuals were frequently white (heterosexual) men heading Christian churches, the majority of whom will only endorse a relationship as “natural” if it is between a (cisgender) man and woman. Mike, a 37-year-old mill worker, performed the duty of policing heterosexuality that numerous feminist and queer scholars have identified in their research (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Little 2003) by explaining the importance of his church’s perspective on sexuality when he stated:

I’d rather listen to someone who knows what they’re [his pastor] talking about tell us the rules [about sexuality] ...not some confused fag on youtube [referencing a video he had seen on youtube featuring a transgender woman discussing anti-oppressive practice].

Mike later jokingly went on to explain he and his wife had a “good” marriage because “she paid attention to the part of the [wedding] ceremony when the priest said women have to submit to their husbands.” Mike continued by noting the three most important things in life were “God, family, and country,” that “the United States is going to hell in a hand-basket because of liberals and gays,” and the current state of the nation is “not what what the ‘Founding Fathers’ would have wanted.” Sentiments similar to these came up in several, but not all, of my interviews and focus groups. They demonstrate how certain interpretations of Christian doctrine pathologize homosexuality and transgender people, mandate acquiescence to a social system based upon heteropatriarchal and cisnormative ideals, and also glorify a settler colonial past/present.

I note here not all members, nor denominations of Christianity adhere to inflexible understandings of gender and sexuality. Some Christian assemblages are indeed quite progressive, understanding, and accepting of people who are gay, lesbian, transgender, gender creative, queer, and non-conforming. But for the particular social geography of Southeast Kansas, rigid heteronormative perspectives emerged as hegemonic. And in the interest of avoiding reductionist framings of Christianity as a homogenous group solely espousing intolerance across the research site, it is also important to acknowledge that adherents to Christianity in the region practice their faith along a continuum of inclusion and acceptance. One participant named Nick, a 29-year-old Catholic hydraulic fracturing crewmember, diverged from the majority of participants in his opinion on sexuality by stating:

I remember growing up thinking gay marriage was wrong and being taught in religion class they [gay people] were sinning because they were giving into “pleasure of the flesh” [laughs] ...we were taught it was sinning, “unnatural,” and God would judge those who did immoral things. Seems a bit ridiculous now, but priests and teachers and parents and even coaches have a lot of pull with young kids growing up. When it comes down to it, I think people are people, plus, everyone does weird shit behind closed doors [laughs], not sure why we have to condemn everyone to hell for being different. It actually makes me mad at the adults we kids were around, feel like they misled us a bit, and were ignorant themselves. Even seems like they were not even in control, almost like something bigger was making people think in certain ways. Who knows? ...but I do know most people around here still think like that though. I just kind of keep my views to myself ...catch less hell that way. I actually like it here for the most part, despite the bullshit – it’s home.

Nick’s comments reflect the complexities arising from encountering “difference” and accepting it, while simultaneously navigating a conservative rural community largely governed by

repressive heteronormative views that he considers “home.” His statement also emphasizes how hegemonic discourses backed by church leaders in Southeast Kansas are based upon the principle that non-conforming sexualities are immoral and sinful. Moreover, he appears to be reflecting upon, just as many feminist geographers do, how societal institutions (e.g. churches, schools, and family) and structural forces (“something bigger”) remain influential in shaping the ideals of communities through discursive reaffirmations of heteropatriarchal regimes of truth (Little and Leyson 2003; Mills 1996; Morell and Brandth 2007; Ní Laoire 2005). Finally, what Nick also touches upon, which radical and poststructuralist theorists have been pointing to for decades, is how people with dissenting opinions regarding the status quo are socially scrutinized and rendered silent in certain spaces for their contrarian views (Ahmed 2006; Crenshaw 1991; Davis 1990; Foucault 1978, 1977; Kafer 2013; Lorde 2012).

Gatekeeping Masculinity

Gendered Binaries, Bodies, and Heteronormativity

Upon analyzing what is produced in Southeast Kansas as a result of the constellation of “God, Family, and Country” noted above, it became evident that the region is culturally governed by both heteronormativity and ableist expectations, and that gendered binaries are simultaneously fashioning, as well as being fashioned by, normative ideals of health, ability, and bodies. The vast majority of the participants I spoke to believed that biological sex should fall into only one of two categories (male or female) and that heterosexuality is “natural and normal.” Based on my interviews, the assertion of heteronormative discourses begins early in life and continues throughout it. Frank, a 34-year-old welder, touches upon these dynamics, as well as their ties to rurality, when he states:

...country folks like to keep it simple [*laughs*]. Growing up, boys played with G.I. Joes and He-Man, and girls played My Little Pony or Barbie. We [boys] took woodshop, they took home ec (economics). We played football, they played volleyball and cheered [*cheerleading*]. Guys liked girls, girls liked guys, it was as simple as that – and it worked out fine for everybody. Don’t know why people can’t understand that these days.

This demonstrates how the imposition of traditionalist gender rituals is initiated upon being labeled a “boy” or “girl” and intensifies, often innocuously, throughout childhood and into adolescence while also being ascribed to place. Likewise, such social conventions generally come with presumptions about sexuality attached, meaning that the underlying supposition is that heterosexuality is natural (Kafer 2003; Rich 1980). Queer, feminist, and poststructural theorists have been stressing for years that gender, sexuality, and even biological sex are socially constructed themselves, but despite this evidence, cultural assumptions surrounding the innateness of sex/gender/sexuality, as well as the expectation they align, follows people throughout their entire lifecourse (Butler 2002; Krenshaw 1991; Rich 1980; Schlit and Westbrook 2009).

For the participants I spoke to, heteronormative viewpoints were commonplace and partially attributable to rurality. Doug, a 58-year-old carpenter, noted:

I didn’t demand she [*his wife*] stay at home and take care of the kids, I had to run the farm and was better cut out for ...it was basically my job as a man, and hers as a woman.

Alan, a 45-year-old construction “foreman” also stated:

That’s the way it is for people out in the “boonies” [*countryside*], men do most the heavy lifting, women do most the cleaning ...it works out real nice for both.

The statements from Doug and Alan overtly reproduce binary sex/gender systems, frame women as both weaker and less capable, and more subtly, erase intersex and transgender people. Consequently, the normalized routines of rural domestic life the participants spoke of ordain heterosexuality as compulsory, further perpetuate heteronormative discourses, and shore up a taken-for-granted hierarchical gender regime across the countryside.

In order to further investigate ideals surrounding the body and masculinity in rural Kansas, I also probed participants for their perspectives on what fell outside of prescriptive male/female binaries by asking them to elaborate upon their notions of bodily alterity. The discussions that ensued, which were prompted by participants themselves simply responding what they considered as “unnatural” and “not normal,” sheds light upon how bodies that are intersex, queer, or vary from cisgender norms widely remain subordinated and pushed to the social periphery (i.e. described as “strange” and “weird”), or are reacted to with abjection and panic (i.e. occasionally labelled as “freaks”). Walter, a 22-year-old factory worker, summed up the general perspective of men in a focus group (who became preoccupied with intersex people during what was an abrasive and jolting discussion) pertaining to whom they thought were most “recognizably different,” when he noted:

It’s weird to think about, I understand some people are hermaphrodites, and I feel bad they are that way, but they have ways to fix it now. I know if I were that way I would feel like I was not man enough, you know? I mean seriously, I just don’t think you could work as hard, or take a hit, and what girl is going to want a guy like that? I mean, everyone is gonna know you either have no dick, or a small dick – seems like it would be embarrassing.

When asking Walter to elaborate on what “taking a hit” meant, he clarified that it applied to playing (American) football, and in more generally, fighting and physical strength. He also suggested being born “abnormal, and having woman parts” was “creepy and everyone would notice,” and it “probably means their body is not as strong as a regular guy’s body.” Aaron, a 28-year-old sales representative for a tool company, then explained football was an important part of growing up in the area and one had to have a “good work ethic and be willing to bust your ass” in order to succeed in it. When queried why someone who was intersex would not “fit in” Aaron said it was because “‘he-shes’ are so different.” Henry, a 31-year-old construction worker, then explained:

I don’t think most guys around these parts would be violent or hurt someone like that, but they would definitely get made fun of a lot... They’d have to take a lot of shit you know. Probably get called a fag or queer, especially at work or out at the bar. They’d have their manhood questioned you know? ...and I don’t think they get much ass either.

Through belittling and oppressive statements such as these we can speak back to the research of several feminist theorists who have noted that the body’s corporality becomes directly tied to conceptions of gender, as well as socio-psychological exercises of ableist boundary-making (Butler 2004, Deleuze and Harrison 2000, Gorman-Murray 2009, Longhurst 1995, Schlit and Westbrook 2009). These comments also demonstrate how men in this particular rural assemblage discursively patrol masculinity, sexuality, and able-bodiedness, which is made startling evident in how women were objectified, as well as how intersex people were deemed spectacle and immediately placed under the (hetero)sexuality microscope regarding how (un)likely intercourse was for them.

What can be inferred from this empirical data in rural Southeast Kansas is that gender, sex, and bodies are both culturally assembled and socially surveilled through deeply-entrenched heteronormative and ableist patterns of thought and practice. The discussions also expose how

notions of rural hegemonic masculinity are intimately linked to long-established discourses that define biological sex, gender, sexuality, and ability as innate, absolute categories. Consequently, people who are non-conforming, variant, emotional, intersex, disabled, or who are simply signified as “different” are often dismissed, excluded, and denigrated in both overt and subtle ways by normative men who have taken it upon themselves to serve as gatekeepers of masculinity.

Compulsory Able-bodiedness/Able-mindedness

One of the most indirectly touched upon topics of conversation present in my interviews with participants was ability and able-bodiedness/able-mindedness. More specifically, many men I spoke with discussed at length the ways in which they used their enabled bodies, in some cases referring to them as “weapons,” “tools,” and “machines.” While doing so, they largely omitted any discussions of physical, mental, and intellectual disabilities, other than using oppressive terms as pejorative epithets (e.g. “retarded,” “lame,” “crazy,” “psycho,” “spaz,” “gimp,” “nutcase,” “loony,” etc.). In discussing disabled people, whether mental or physical disabilities, the participants recurrently stated feeling sorry for “the handicapped,” “the crippled,” and “retards” while also noting doing their best “to help them.” The hegemonic discursive practices of the area thereby situate conditions of impairment and experiences of disability as aspects of life that are pitied and pathologized, a dynamic that numerous disability scholars have pointed to as well (McRuer 2006; Pease 2010; Peters, Gabel, and Symeondiou 2009; Sothern 2007; Soldatic 2013; Swain and French 2000). This emerged throughout my research in several instances, as participants underscored how it is not uncommon for disabled people to be cast as dependent, weak, powerless, asexual, incapable, and having a lower quality of life. As critical theorists using crip theory have pointed out, these ableist discourses have significant implications for intellectually, physically, and mentally disabled people, particularly within rapidly neoliberalizing capitalist societies, because they reinforce false ideas that disabled people are less capable of being “productive” or able to “contribute,” thereby rendering their existences less valuable (De Boer 2015; Kafer 2013; Löfgren-Mårtenson 2013; McRuer 2006; Sandahl 2003).

For the participants I spoke to, another significant yet regularly overlooked aspect of their sense of “manhood” is compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness. Most of the men I spoke to noted that “how a guy uses his body” commonly determines how much of a “man” he actually is. The central uses of the male body they spoke of included, “playing sports” (mostly North American Football), hunting and fishing, lifting weights, doing chores, drinking beer, working construction, running mechanical equipment, working on cars, fighting with other men, playing with their children, performing physical labour, and having sex (all expressly clarified with women). These activities were recurrently employed as the primary gauges of how masculinity could be achieved, many of which are non-emotive. In several interviews, participants wryly smiled when asked about their emotions and bodies, with the vast majority agreeing with the following statement offered by Dusty, a 36-year-old mechanic, who explained:

The most important thing you need to know when asking country boys about their emotions and bodies – is that country boys don’t like to talk about their emotions and bodies.

If participants did elaborate upon bodily practice it was typically to describe the high-risk activities they engaged in, how they refused to see doctors for injuries and illness, or if they did seek medical assistance it was primarily so they could “keep working and supporting the family.” What was omitted from these conversations was the fact they all centered upon performing enabled (i.e. abled-bodied/able-minded) masculinity, which invisibilizes disabled masculinities via non-recognition or omission, as well as perpetuates notions of toxic masculinity

that exposes enabled men themselves to more harm and danger because seeking health care, ironically, is considered a sign of weakness (Shuttleworth, Wedgwood, and Wilson 2012).

There were also more aggressive ways in which men talked about their bodies. Justin, a 33-year-old electrician originally from Oklahoma who is now living in Kansas, noted being a “fishing, fighting, and fucking machine.” This prompted a round of laughter by the other participants, as well as a quip from his friend Dan, also 36-years-old but “born and raised” in Kansas, who retorted:

Yeah right, Rick, the only thing your retarded ‘Okie’ ass could catch is a left hook [punch], we know you ain’t getting any pussy, or catching any fish. We ought to drop you off down at the “nut hut” for saying shit like that [chuckles]. (“nut hut” was the term given to a former facility in the local area that housed and cared for people diagnosed with intellectual or developmental disabilities).

This interchange prompted more laughter and the focus group explained that such statements were “no big deal” because they were “just giving each other shit.” While seemingly mundane amongst the group, the perspectives shared in circumstances like this neglects the fact that using disabilities as epithets results in socio-cultural exclusion and peripheralizes people who fall outside of socially arrived at conceptions of normal (Kafer 2003, Pease 2010). In further analyzing the body, it was also not uncommon for participants to be proud of their scars, compare their injuries with other men, and venerate the notion of using their bodies for conquest and control. Daryl, a 49-year-old factory supervisor touched upon these dynamics when he stated:

I pretty well think my body is a weapon [laughs]. I got these [pointing to scars on his knuckles] from fighting when I was younger. We used to go out after football games, do some drinking and start shit with guys from the other team. It was part of the routine, we kicked a lot of ass back in those days, and then would chase tail (women). I think a girl likes a guy who can fight, you know, “chicks dig scars.” I got a bunch [scars] from working out on the farm when I was younger, you don’t get to have soft hands from working out in the fields, and you usually end up coming home with a few bruises and scrapes. It’s good though, lets you know you did a hard day’s work. I also got some from a couple of motorcycle wrecks I’ve been in, and the rest have been from fighting and such. Each one’s got its own little story... and as you can tell, I got a lot of scars—so I got a lot of pussy [laughs].

Daryl’s words reaffirm what many critical scholars studying embodiment and masculinity have noted in how violence, heterosexuality, and able-bodiedness all carry a high degree of social currency for men (Anderson 2009; Connell 2005; Kimmel 2011; Mac an Ghail 1996). Such sentiments were expressed throughout many conversations I had with participants, which saw many men mentioning that both having scars, as well as inflicting them upon others, was tied to perceived intensifications in heterosexual prowess, fearlessness, and beliefs about being more desirable to women. When such masculinist ideals surrounding the body are embedded within particular places it produces serious implications for individuals who do not have the ability to use their bodies in similar enabled and heteronormative ways. Amongst the participants in Southeast Kansas, those who were consistently tapped (both explicitly and implicitly) as preeminent models of masculinity were white, heterosexual, cisgender, and able-bodied, assumed to be able-minded, men. Consequently, this group is the standard against which all other people are measured, thereby making able-bodiedness/able-mindedness and heterosexuality compulsory.

Notably, while participants' perspectives on able-bodied "manhood," violence, and heterosexual conquest reinforce devaluations of those who do not embody these characteristics, they possibly also constitute both an expression of participants' anxieties, as well as a veiled avowal of the fragility of their own relationships with masculinity. In other words, while the statements of the participants may very well be expressions of privilege and attempts to assert dominance, in some cases, they may also be interpreted as defense mechanisms stemming from feelings of waning self-efficacy, precarious employment status, and diminishing earning power. This remains a possibility because nearly all of the men involved in the project were working class/poor who were trying to make a living in an economically stagnant region of the U.S., which for nearly half a century has seen significant rural flight, a financial recession that negatively impacted the manufacturing industry, and a shift towards more women performing trades and service work (Bauer 2013; Frank 2007). Thus, while none of the participants explicitly stated that the importance of embodying "manhood" was due to feelings of disempowerment or vulnerability, the structural changes in the neoliberalizing economic system within which they exist could very well be an influencing factor in the production of their rurally-situated and class specific masculinities, in addition to the heteronormative and ableist cultural politics operating in the region.

Conclusion

In this article, I have highlighted how the interlocking social identities of gender and ability in Southeast Kansas are mediated by heteronormativity, compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness, and rural masculinity. The qualitative data/analysis underscores how normative attitudes surrounding "manhood," ability, and sexuality in the region often go unnoticed, yet remain ever-present and are mutually constituted by place. My interrogation of masculinity, drawing largely from crip theory, suggests that while men in Southeast Kansas do not regularly talk about the ways in which they are enabled, the fact that they fit into conformist definitions of able-bodiedness/able-mindedness factors into their notions of "manhood" quite significantly.

What this paper contributes to geographers, then, is a theoretically-driven, empirically-based example of an oft-overlooked foregrounding of gender, place, and ability. It attempts to move critical research being completed on social and cultural geographies forward by recommending that ability and crip theory be centered in future work, while also proposing that scholarship in critical disability studies emphasize spatiality and place. In addition, this glimpse into rural Kansas sheds light on how discursive and non-discursive practices of masculinity are inextricably linked to both geography and compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness. The piece also demonstrates how the practice and performance of masculinity is socially regulated, as well as pursued, across the interlocking constructions of ability, sexuality, and place.

To this end, my analysis constitutes a "cripping" of the hegemonic discourses and dominant practices of enabled masculinity in Southeast Kansas. It suggests that both place and ability are necessary aspects to be included in any attempt to understand, describe, and theorize gender. The article will thereby be of use for future intersectional/interlocking research and critical discourse analyses being conducted on dis/ability, identity/ies, subject positioning, and place-based interrogations of "manhood." In sum, while this research most directly relates to critical perspectives on masculinities and rural studies, it can also be taken forward to see what is produced when ableist social relations of other geographies are taken to task and "cripped."

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