

Gun Rites: Hegemonic Masculinity and Neoliberal Ideology in Rural Kansas

Drawing upon empirical data from a qualitative research project in Southeast Kansas, this paper employs feminist and decolonial theories to analyze the interlocking relationality of hegemonic masculinity, neoliberal ideology, social conservatism, rurality, and gun culture. The first goal is to shed light on the subordinating and marginalizing tendencies that arise as a result of gendered conceptions of gun use. The second aim is to illustrate how gun culture is normalized, and often valorized, through individualistic narratives of self-reliance, security, protection, and defense. The third objective is to interrogate the ways in which particular material practices and gendered discourses regarding gun use are reinforced by settler colonialism, whiteness, heteronormativity, enabledness, and nationalism. Finally, the paper critically examines the social hierarchies that are reaffirmed as a result of culturally embedded patriarchal, white supremacist, neoliberal ideologies and how rurality mediates the masculinist subjectivities that are produced in such spaces.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity, neoliberalism, rural, feminist geography, gun culture, interlocking analysis, settler colonialism

Introduction

You want to know when a gun becomes dangerous?

...when someone tries to take it from me.

-Ryan, 34-year-old Kansan-

It is impossible to dismiss the impact that guns have upon society in the United States. The body of literature on gun use, and its relationship with masculinity, has steadily been increasing over the past 15 years as media attention focuses on incidents involving shootings, violence, and death: The Columbine High School Massacre; The Virginia Tech Shootings; The West Nickel Mines School Shooting in Lancaster County; Fort Hood, Texas; the death of Trayvon Martin; The Aurora (Colorado) Theatre Shooting; Sandy Hook Elementary School; and more recently, the Isla Vista Killings to name only a few (Muschert 2013, Kellner 2012).

Recent work in this area points to the association that firearm possession has with cultural formations of masculinity and how the gun as a symbol has become increasingly gendered (Stroud 2012, Leonard 2010). Scholars also highlight how hegemonic masculinity is often implicated with the gun and how politico-economic conditions of particular places often create the perception that gun ownership is a sign of authority and self-reliance (Felson and Pare 2010). In this regard, the symbolic value of a gun is tied to the performance of hegemonic masculinity because the characteristics of both are associated with power, control, and dominance.

In this paper, I explore how gun culture influences the subjectivities of 'men'¹ and shores up notions of spatialized hegemonic masculinities. I also highlight how gun ownership is linked to widely accepted masculine practices and discourses, and how

these relationships are intimately tied to place. My research suggests that the interlocking nature of hegemonic masculinity, social conservatism, neoliberal ideology, and colonialism reinforce masculinist white supremacy and normalize gun possession. More specifically, I investigate the widespread support of gun culture in Southeast Kansas² and how gun use is endorsed in the narratives men use when expressing their desire to uphold traditional family values, defend individual freedom, and protect what is 'rightfully' theirs. In addition, I seek to underscore the significance that rural space has in the formation of local hegemonic masculinities, and how discourses tied to masculinity and gun use are materialized through the quotidian practices of men.

Hegemonic Masculinity

I approach the construction of masculinities using Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. Connell, borrowing from Gramsci's theories of hegemony and consent (1971), examines how displays of masculinity become the prevailing representation of what a 'man' is, and does (Connell 2005). Several scholars have written about the plurality of masculinity and how acts perceived to be masculine give rise to hierarchal social relations across local, regional, and global scales (Messerschmidt 2012, Hopkins and Noble 2009, Datta 2004, Berg and Longhurst 2003, Jackson 1991). This work has contributed to the growing recognition that certain gendered practices and ideals are legitimized and venerated, whilst others are marginalized.

In approaching masculinity as contingent upon spatiality, feminist geographers have also been influential in emphasizing that masculinity can take many forms, particularly in regard to place (Hopkins 2009, Datta 2008, Bell 2006, Gorman Murray 2008, Berg and Longhurst 2003). They suggest that hegemonic masculinity is not a static archetype, but that *masculinities* are contradictory and dependent upon the spaces within which they exist. It is from this body of work that my examination of localised hegemonic masculinity in rural Kansas seeks to illustrate how space produces gendered hierarchies through material and discursive practices of manhood in relation to gun use.

Gender and 'the rural'

Several scholars note the significance that rural spaces have upon the geography of gender and the construction of masculinity (Bryant and Garnham 2014, Olson, Hopkins and Kong 2013, Woods 2009, Hopkins 2007, Cloke 2005, Little 2002, Curry 2000). The research I conducted sought to explore these relationships as well as how gun culture is implicated. Such an investigation naturally led to the question: 'What is the rural?' From a practical perspective 'the rural' is most often defined by what it is not, or rather, it is identified against something, typically that which is 'urban.' Or, in the terms of what the majority of participants I interviewed stated as being 'outside the city' or 'in the country.' Geographers studying rurality have noted

vague definitions similar to these, but whilst doing so they are careful to point out that such descriptions carry significant meaning for the people who use them (Bryant and Garnham 2014, Woods 2012, Cloke 2005, Saugeres 2002).

In determining cultural formations of what the 'rural' is, it becomes evident that the concept is fluid and relational. Consequently, definitions of rurality are most readily available through personal experience and by gathering accounts of spaces that are marked as 'rural' (Pratt 1996). A growing amount of literature has put forth perspectives that steer away from reliance upon an urban-rural dichotomy (Heley and Jones 2012, Bell 2006, Little and Panelli 2003). This body of work suggests that current discourses surrounding binary conceptualizations must take note of the ever-changing meanings of both 'urban' and 'rural'. My analysis argues that the complexity of defining 'rural' in Southeast Kansas is heavily influenced by, and interlocks with, hegemonic masculinity, neoliberal ideology, and gun culture. The empirical data that follows highlights how rural masculinity is practiced in multiple ways, and how its shifting nature is intimately bound to local places.

Locating oneself

Taking into consideration the literature surrounding writing qualitatively in geography, I emphasize that the position from which I write is influenced by my own politics (Richardson 2014, Mansvelt and Berg 2005, Bondi 1997). As the analysis focuses on a community in Southeast Kansas where I was, as we would say back home, 'born and bred,' and due to the fact that I have personal relationships with several of the participants, it is evident that the research is somewhat autobiographical. I note this because despite the fact that throughout the paper I describe the participants and community in a manner that may seem to suggest I am outsider, the fact remains that I am a part of the analysis that is offered. Most of the quotations, values, beliefs, and actions of the participants are practices that I have been exposed to, and at one point in time, may have engaged in during my childhood, adolescent years, and young adulthood.

As an author providing one representation of what exists in Southeast Kansas, it is important for me not to caricature the participants or overgeneralize their perspectives. I have done my best to accurately report what I experienced, and should note that not all men in the area engage in the activities and language that follows (some actively resist). The practices mentioned in this piece are performed by men for a variety of reasons, all dependent upon their subject positions in regard to personal, cultural, and institutional influences. I underscore these dynamics because it is not uncommon to hear a researcher disaffiliate from participants, their standpoints, and the empirical evidence that is acquired in the field. As I still consider the research area 'home,' and given that I was a part of the community for twenty-five years, I must acknowledge that I am nonetheless implicated in the cultural norms that exist in area. I remain greatly conflicted by this, as my socio-political perspectives have shifted

significantly since moving away. Nonetheless, I do remain close to many of the participants that were a part of the research project, despite the fact that I am quite defiantly opposed to some of underlying sexist, racist, heterosexist, ableist, and colonial overtones that surfaced.

It is with this positionality in mind that I would like readers to approach the content of this article. While in critically analyzing the empirical evidence I may sound as if I am detached, I do want to draw attention to the fact that I remain very much a part of my own investigation, and am not innocent. At one point in time (and place), many of the actions discussed in this paper could have very much been performed by myself. Accordingly, any mistakes, misrepresentations, or errors, are of course, my own.

Methods

This analysis touches upon three elements of qualitative methods: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups.³ For the project, I moved to Southeast Kansas to conduct research in a community that is anchored by a small town with a population of 630 (98% white). The town was founded as a Catholic Mission in 1847, remains predominantly Catholic, and as several participants noted 'is not big enough to have a stop light.' Employment in region is primarily dependent upon industrial labour in the agricultural, transportation, manufacturing, construction, and resource extraction (hydraulic fracturing for natural gas and drilling for petroleum) sectors of the economy. Upon moving back, I lived in the community for nine months and obtained work as a farmhand.

As I am originally from the area I was able to obtain work from a local farmer, coincidentally, known by the nickname 'Boss,' who I was acquainted with from my early childhood. The majority of my duties included fixing barbed-wire and electric fences, cutting hedge-posts, feeding cattle, mowing pastures, baling hay, spraying chemicals, and helping out with the fertilizing, planting, and harvesting of crops (wheat, corn, and soybeans). Participant observation and performing such labour aided my project, as the work one is willing to do serves to legitimize their contribution to the community, and economy. Consequently, as a 'local boy' and 'worker,' it was uncomplicated for me to participate in the recreational activities (hunting, fishing, camping, golfing, meeting at bars, horse-riding, shooting guns, gambling at casinos, working on cars, home-building/carpentry projects, etc.) and routines (religious services, 'fathering' duties, daily chores non-related to paid employment, etc.) that many of the participants regularly practiced.

Due to my background in the area, I held blurred insider-outsider positions depending upon the people with whom I was interacting. The ambiguous position of being a 'former local' comes with both positives and negatives (Butz and Besio 2009, Dwyer and Buckle 2009, Chavez 2008). Appadurai (1996: 179) writes about the 'production of locality' that is maintained by differing communities due to place being

contextual and relational. For many participants I was considered 'local,' which gave me an immediate connection to the community. As scholars in the field of qualitative research note, the status of being a local affords one more acceptance and access, which can benefit a research project as it leads to greater openness, familiarity, and candidness with community members (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, Campbell 2006).

This is a double-edged sword however, because in some cases being seen as a local creates disadvantages. Occupying the insider position can be quite unstable, particularly when conducting research, because being a 'researcher' positions one as a cultural outsider to some degree (Butz and Besio 2009, Mullings 1999). In my circumstance, the drawback of knowing participants quite well sometimes led to trepidation on their part, as they were worried about 'not letting too much out.' Despite this apprehension, it was also noticeable that the self-disclosure participants offered, simply as a result of my status as local, often led to more forthright, and blunt, discussions than I anticipated.

In regard to my position as a researcher I should also note that it is not my intent to exercise epistemic privilege by making claims of having an exclusive and permanent insider status (as opposed to outsider). Positing such a binary framework is both incomplete and misleading (Richardson 2014, Mannay 2010). Rather, I am attempting to transparently situate my place within the project (and analysis) so as to highlight the often contradictory, hierarchical, and sometimes, exploitative positions that researchers find themselves when 'producing knowledge' (Naples and Gurr 2013, Mannay 2010).

During my time in the field, I conducted a total of 30 individual interviews and eight focus groups (each with five participants) specifically regarding gun ownership. Interviews and focus groups commonly took place after the workday was over while driving home on dusty gravel roads, relaxing in pastures, or sitting in old rustic barns and car garages that often doubled as workshops. Several interviews were also held during evening suppers at local restaurants, pubs, bars, and participant homes. All 30 participants self-identified as white, heterosexual, Christian, men with ages ranging from 19 to 77. All owned at least one gun, and all described themselves as being from the 'country' in some regard. Incomes of the participants ranged from \$10,000 to \$70,000 per year, with an average of approximately \$26,000. Most participants (22) had a high school degree, four had undergraduate degrees from university, two had vocational/trade school degrees, and two had dropped out of high school. Of the 30 participants, 22 self-identified as 'middle class,' six noted being 'working class,' and two (who were unemployed) replied: 'poor.'

After recording the interviews and focus groups, I coded the conversations thematically and critically examined the content utilizing discourse analysis. For my interpretation of the material, I drew upon Foucauldian notions that suggest discourses inform members of society what they can (and cannot) say, and do, at given times in particular places (Foucault 1980). Foucault (1991) notes that discourses

produce truth effects that can be viewed as the tacit understandings, unspoken rules, and general conventions that govern society. And because discourses permeate all social relations, it is evident that they are influential in what is perceived to be valid knowledge and acceptable practice. Thus, in my attempt to see what is legitimated in terms of the ideals and practices of masculinity and gun ownership, I investigated the discourses operating in Southeast Kansas.

One of the major themes that arose upon analyzing the data pertained to place, particularly 'the country' (rurality), and its relationship with guns. More specifically, that of gun use, gun rights, and gun ownership. Guns were silently ubiquitous in the area, and they were mentioned in numerous conversations pertaining to recreation, history, politics, fathering, self-defense, protection, as well as individual rights. It is with these topics in mind that the following sections concentrate on the discourse of gun ownership, and how the influence of neoliberal ideology, social conservatism, and hegemonic masculinity influence the lives of rural men. More specifically, my research regarding gun culture found that the primary discursive archetypes identified by men in the area fell into the configurations of being a 'Good Family Man' and 'Good Guys versus Bad Guys'

'Good Family Man'

Being considered a 'Good Family Man' was a major theme in many of the interviews and focus groups. The emphasis for men to be in a (heterosexual) relationship and accomplish the task of providing for the family is well researched in current literature (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009, Pascoe 2005, Butler 1999). As such, heterosexuality is the compulsory standard for men in the area, often producing what critical scholars refer to as compelled masculine heterosexualities (Sweeney 2013, Richardson, D 2010). Heterosexuality is presumed to be 'natural' and is perceived to be necessary in order for males to fulfil their role as men. Richard, a 68-year-old participant, articulates such notions:

I'm a man, it's my duty to make sure that my family comes first ...there is a certain job that I have to do, and there are certain jobs that my wife has to do. God designed us that way, it's just the way it is. Men can't get pregnant, and women are not as strong as men ...it's like we were designed to be able to do different things. I'm not saying one is worse than the other, it's natural... I can work harder, I don't have to miss work to raise a baby, I can support the family by bringing home a paycheck, and I can make sure they are safe. Maybe its just the way I was raised, but that's the way I see it...

As the area is predominantly Christian (a former Catholic Mission), the cultural norms governing the population overwhelmingly stem from conservative interpretations that

Christian doctrine maintains in regard to marriage and sexuality (i.e. it should be between a 'man and woman,' is monogamous and recognized by God, and is for procreation and raising a nuclear family). Thus, it is from a heteronormative colonial pulpit that some of the most taken-for-granted patriarchal influences are derived. The authority that religiously endorsed gendered binaries carry for men in the area reinforces sex roles that a 'man and his wife' must adhere to. As a result, men (and women) in Southeast Kansas, often sustain traditional gender roles based upon illusory static dualisms.

As a consequence, a reductionist gender order is formed in which women are often described as having 'womanly qualities' (e.g. emotional, nurturing, irrational, fragile), and men, on the contrary, were typically described as tough, rational, aggressive, and strong. Based upon this reasoning, supported by the pervasive conservative principles in the area, the underlying message is that men are, and should be, 'providers and protectors.' Conversely, women are situated as bodies or things to be owned, are in need of protection, and are deficient or lacking if not partnered with a man. Andrew, a 34-year-old father of two, highlights these discursive formations:

...if owning a gun helps me protect my wife and kids and provide for the family - then I'm surer than shit going to have one. Don't get me wrong, I know guns can be dangerous and all, but I respect the hell out of them. I keep them around just in case I ever need to use them, cause you never know when a criminal may be on the loose and all drugged up, or when a pervert may come sneaking around. It's times like that when a guy has to 'man up' and protect what's his. And if that requires shooting some nutcase then that's what he's got to do.

One outcome of these discourses of (conservative) Christianity and masculinity is that in order to safeguard their families men often own guns as a way to fulfil the role of protector. Guns are viewed as one of the most appropriate means of quickly and effectively defending oneself, or one's family. Several of the participants not only noted that they have guns 'just in case,' but also because they were living 'out in the country.' Statements such as these highlight how residing in rural places allows for the justification of owning firearms. The rationale behind these justifications are that men need to protect 'what is theirs' not only from possible criminals, but also from other outside threats such as wild animals or stray vermin that may be rabid, diseased, or simply hungry, as these all pose risks to their livestock, garden, and crops.

In contrast to the use of guns for protection and provision, recent research in surrounding both disability and masculinity has suggested that at times the underlying reasons men own guns is because of the disillusionment, powerlessness, and despair they may face due to their current socio-economic situations or aging bodies (Cukier and Sheptycki 2012, Kellner 2012, Stroud 2012). Despite this, from the perspectives of

the participants, gun use is not an attempt to compensate for feelings of helplessness, insecurity, or vulnerability that arise from being compromised by an exploitative capitalist labour market, disabling society, or as Faludi (2011) points out, cultural norms surrounding masculinity itself, rather, owning a gun serves a purpose. Oftentimes, the stated purpose for owning a gun is that it is necessary to have a 'tool' in order to defend their family, possessions, and 'way of life.' It should also be noted that due to the complex nature of conducting research with participants in itself, there is no way to entirely confirm or deny that the primary motivations for gun ownership by participants is due to feelings of fear and helplessness, rather I point to such potentialities simply because they are possibilities that do remain.

Woven into the fabric of masculine subjectivities in Southeast Kansas is a set of guiding principles that grant men social status, or 'respect,' as a result of their involvement in the paid workforce, their adherence to economically productive self-discipline ('earning a paycheck'), and by through their maintenance of a 'competition-improves-us-all' mentality. These perspectives ultimately produce everyday existences that promote material production, rugged individualism, and (neo)liberal subjectivities. Such characteristics have been attributed to 'Self-Made Men' in the United States since before the 19th Century, and continue to intensify in contemporary times (Kimmel 1996: 26). Several geographers have also noted how waged labour and capitalistic production is tied to masculinity (McDowell 2011, Brandth and Haugen 2005, Longhurst 2000). Thus, to further explain the masculinist norms governing Southeast Kansas, it is necessary to look at the proliferation of neoliberal ideology within the United States, as well as how it has been fused with local Christian beliefs that the region is ritually subjected to.

For many of the participants, the tenets of neoliberalism (privatization, deregulation, free enterprise, cuts to social welfare, etc.) have fused with conservative Christianity to manufacture individualistic subjectivities that hold fast to the conviction that what one does in life (or does not do) in relation to Christian dogma, work ethic, and self-reliance, determines their social standing, as well as what happens to them in the afterlife. As a result, many participants expressed a desire to be 'successful,' 'good,' and 'respectable.' Several men noted that achieving those goals is solely a matter of personal responsibility based upon the decisions they make, which are often closely linked to religious practice. Consequently, these liberal subjectivities leave little room for factoring in larger socio-political structures that influence the decisions people are allowed to make. As such, the interlocking influences of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age, and nationality often go unnoticed, remain invisible, or are dismissed altogether in favour of blaming or praising individual choices.

Accordingly, the role of being 'head of the household' typically becomes the duty of the man, and his ability to protect and defend is often seen as an extension of his dedication to his loved ones. The propagation of such patriarchal beliefs is a direct result of the indoctrination that community members receive from socially

conservative clergy-members, a colonial education system, and corporatized media/marketing that endorses heteronormative social relationships. The result is the reification of an increasingly atomized mind-set in which individuals believe they are solely responsible for their own social position in life. For men in rural Southeast Kansas, this is made manifest in the belief that they are in exclusive control of their own ability to succeed. As the well-being of the family is a core value for many men in the area, the subsequent safeguarding of their wife and children is paramount. In turn, owning a gun is thus reaffirmed as a symbol of masculine conviction and commitment to the family.

Various research has also noted that gun ownership is closely tied to the role a man has in providing for his family, bonding with his children, and passing down technical expertise to future generations (Stroud 2012, Cox 2007). The role of the gun for many young children has become a prominent rite of passage and nostalgic symbol of time spent with their father. In Southeast Kansas these narratives of father-son (and sometimes daughter) bonding are usually couched with qualifiers noting that 'safety and respect' are first and foremost when handling guns. Several participants mentioned being taught to 'respect' guns, learning that firearms are to be used primarily for sport/hunting/protection, and that caution should always be taken in order to ensure safety.

At times, these narratives of safety and respect serve to distance guns from their associations as weapons by suggesting they are simply ancestral heirlooms. This rhetorical act of removing violence from guns and framing them as objects used in rites of passage is highlighted by James, a 32-year-old father, when asked about his thoughts on whether guns led to violence:

They are just tools, they can be used for good or bad. I have been around guns most of my life, we mainly use them for shooting clay pigeons, target practice, or hunting. Growing up, we took a hunter's safety course and learned to always treat guns with respect. My granddad and uncle were the ones who got me into hunting and shooting... It's just something that has been passed down through the generations. When we go out hunting we're on land that's been in the family since the 1800s ...so hunting keeps that connection going. I still have a rifle that's been in the family for decades. Its something I'll pass on to my son, or my daughter if she's interested, and it's probably something my kids will pass down as well.

As can be indicted from the quote above, the ownership and use of guns signifies a tie to family history, a connection to past ancestors, a relationship with the land, and a bond to the pioneer spirit of relatives who settled the area. These bucolic, sentimental connotations of guns being tied to the initial stages of colonialism of the area effectively negate the imperialistic genocide that was enacted upon Indigenous people

during the time of white settlement. Consequently, such narratives effectively create what Foucault (Rabinow 1991:74) refers to as a 'regime of truth.' For men in Southeast Kansas, the existing regime of truth codifies their local history as one in which settler-missionaries tamed a chaotic and wild landscape into tranquil agrarian homesteads.

The glorification of the settler past the participants emphasized when speaking of the community's 'frontier' history also functions as a veil that whitewashes the underlying colonial violence that eventually displaced the Indigenous people (Osage Nation) of the area. The Osage lived in the Ohio River Valley until the mid 1600s and later moved into what is now known as Missouri and Arkansas as a result of white settlement and compulsory dislocations. During the early 1800s (a time of intense land dispossession and ethnic cleansing that included the Indian Removal Act and the Trail of Tears) they were forced into Southeast Kansas. The Osage resided in the region until 1865, when they were again pressured into signing a treaty that ceded their lands and forcibly displaced them into current day Oklahoma (Osage County) where they are currently based (Warrior 2005, Rollins 1995). Several participants spoke fondly of how far back their ancestry was dated in the area, what land has stayed in the family, and how a 'rugged pioneer mentality' is still retained and passed on as a set of traditional practices and beliefs.

'Good Guys versus Bad Guys'

The justification for gun ownership in the United States is often directly linked to the 2nd Amendment, which states: 'A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.' The interpretation of this clause has spurred widespread debate, as well as a plethora of analysis and research (Tweedy 2011, Burkett 2008). From a decolonial perspective, the 2nd Amendment has been used as a juridico-discursive act that justifies a violent imperial project steeped in racist rhetoric and false conceptions of survival-of-the-fittest that was partially used to carry out the mass eradication of Indigenous people (Brown 2008, Cornell 2006). The idea of the Wild West, the United States as a Frontier Nation, and the mytho-poetic narrative of pioneers arriving to subdue nature, conquer the wilderness, accumulate territory from 'uncivilized' populations, bestow Christianity upon 'savages,' and ultimately control the area through moral codes of honour and self-reliance (largely through use of the gun) has been extensively written about (Hao 2012, Tweedy 2011, Melzner 2009, Wright 2001, Slotkin 1992, 1985).

This valorization of the gun, and its association with exerting control over the rural frontier and 'nation' still resonates within the many men in Southeast Kansas. Over the span of a few generations, owning guns has produced a shared national identity that extols the virtues of defending individualism, freedom, property, and religion - and has thus become labelled 'American.' Such discourses, while appearing noble and well intentioned, have paradoxically been used to carry out brutal assimilation projects and acts of war. In turn, the community members I spoke to in

Southeast Kansas often noted that 'doing the right thing' and being a 'good American' was attained by making individual decisions that followed paternalistic moral traditions and adhered to market-based notions of personal work ethic in a fictive nation that is perceived to be meritorious.

Over the course of several interviews it became clear that the notion of being a 'good American' is a powerful influence for men in Southeast Kansas. From a feminist perspective, it is evident that these narratives are rife with patriarchal overtones; however, these hierarchical discourses often go unnoticed. Several participants performed their 'American Pride' by noting an acute distrust of the government. They often pointed to gun control laws, paying taxes, welfare programs, and restrictions placed on Christian teaching in schools as 'unfair,' 'not right,' and being 'discrimination against good, hardworking, Americans.'

A review of past literature shows that notions of white male victimization are quite prevalent when men seek to justify the oppressive and marginalizing practices they engage in (McIntosh 2003, Kimmel and Ferber 2000). These allegations of persecution, while simultaneously claiming innocence from the privileges that interlocking systems of masculinist white supremacy afford white men in settler nations, have been noted by many critical scholars and were present in many conversations that I had in Kansas (Collins 2005, Razack 1998). Harold, a 68-year-old participant, aptly summed up the widespread disillusionment and sense of victimization some men feel:

...I pay my fair share of taxes, and that is my hard earned money. I busted my ass for it and I need to feed my family with it. I don't think it should be given to some lazy freeloaders on welfare who are working the system and looking for a handout. ...and the same people taking our money are the ones saying we shouldn't have guns. Its in our Constitution, we have the right to bear arms, its what the Founding Fathers wanted... They were looking to freely practice their Christian beliefs. That's why they came over here. And now you see 'under God' being taken out of the Pledge of Allegiance, you see the Ten Commandments being removed from schools, you see abortion, what I would call murder, being no big deal, and you see the government trying to take our guns - its communist ...and don't get me wrong, I love my country, but I don't trust the government.

The emphasis on being a liberal subject, or being 'individuals who are free to fail or succeed' as described by one participant, thus serves as a guiding ideal for many men in the community. Such neoliberal subjectivities do not come without repercussions. As Foucault emphasized in his comprehensive analysis of technologies of the self and biopower, nothing is more suited to be subjected to power than extreme individualism (Foucault 1998, 1977). As a result, the productive capacities of the United States'

historical pillars of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchal nationalism, (that continue to be maintained predominantly by white, heterosexual, enabled, Christian, male, citizens) create 'individuals' who in perceiving themselves as such, are paradoxically much more likely to unknowingly submit, conform, and obey. Such accounts can readily be seen in the comments of David, a 30-year-old single male, who when asked to describe his thoughts on the history of gun use in the area stated:

Well, the priests came here to help people – they built the church, started educating people, and shared their way of life. I'm sure the guns they had were mainly for protection and hunting. And its still like that to this day ...we have a safe, tight-knit community. It's a great place to raise kids and have a family. Its what our country was founded on. The pioneers that came over here were not being treated too well, they were looking for freedom, and they needed guns to protect themselves from some of the Indians and criminals that would attack them. And I know not all the Indians were dangerous, but you cannot say that some innocent Caucasian people were not attacked. Our ancestors were looking for a place to be free, work hard, and own some land to live off of. You can't fault a guy for that.

...and when we got here its not like the Indians were all living peacefully with each other anyway ...it's a fact. There were tribes stealing and attacking other tribes, and if you look at how big the country is I think they could have done a better job of living with each other. It wasn't like it was some paradise before our Founding Fathers got here. In the end, pioneers were protecting their families and defending what they believed in.

Several scholars have noted how the symbol of the gun is prominently woven into the United States' historical tapestry (Brown 2008, Wright 2001, Slotkin 1992). The perceived threat of aggression from Indigenous people on the open plains meant that from its genesis, America was a society that depended upon a populace that was heavily armed (Cornell 2006). Recently, scholars have written how the conception of 'frontier masculinity' as a gendered narrative reinforces constructions of American nationalism by emphasizing the gun as a signifier of manhood (Via 2010, Melzner 2009). This point is particularly salient in Southeast Kansas as it was not uncommon to hear participants speak of playing 'Cowboys and Indians,' or pretending to be admirable heroes from war movies and Westerns they watched growing up. Currently, there is an increase in research noting how the image of the gun is tied to power, security, and independence, and how such representations serve to perpetuate misleading historical accounts of white settlers conquering the frontier (Carrington, McIntosh, and Scott 2010, Via 2010, Melzner 2009).

Critical research also points out that the white settler myths of defending property, carrying out Manifest Destiny, and 'civilizing Indians' via homesteading, establishing churches and schools, and assimilation projects still permeates much of the cultural landscape of the Great Plains (Smith 2012, 2006, Via 2010, Smith 2006). Additionally, recent discussions have suggested that the rationale behind promoting guns for community safety contradictorily erodes away a population's sense of security (Cornell 2006). This is due to the fact that as gun possession rates increase it creates a more defensive, heavily armed, and fractured populace that is governed by fear and suspicion, rather than by the free will it claims (Cornell 2006).

Despite the semantics that many participants used as being part of a 'safe' community, countervailing perspectives regarding the history of area suggests otherwise. The benevolent Christian narratives that dominate Southeast Kansas' historical record, when viewed through a decolonial lens, shows that 'safe' may not necessarily be the most accurate descriptor of the region. This can be recognized due to the lack of Osage Nation's accounts of the region's past, the chronological attempts at cultural assimilation that took place locally, and the fact that less than .03 percent of the county population identified as Native American (U.S. Census Bureau). Given this information, it is apparent that the local community has been primarily exposed to masculinist narratives of colonial white supremacy at both institutional and cultural levels. Consequently, the practices and ideals that exist in the region reproduce hierarchies along lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, age, and nationality; which serve to covertly, and oftentimes unintentionally, shore up imperialistic discourses of dispossession, enclosure, and violence.

In looking at the gender regimes that are produced in Southeast Kansas, I borrow from Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity that suggests that the discourses surrounding manhood in local contexts produce marginalized, subordinated, and complicit masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Given the particular (local) version of hegemonic masculinity that permeates most spaces in the area (white, heterosexual, Christian, enabled, citizens) such marginalizing and subordinating processes can be readily observed in routine interactions.

Several scholars have noted that the processes of 'othering' that exist in settler societies serve to reinforce structural white supremacy and predominantly take place along lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality (de Leeuw, Greenwood, and Lindsay 2013, Pease 2010, Razack 2002, Tuhiwai Smith 1999, hooks 1989, Mohanty 1984). Consequently, discursive formations of who are defined as 'bad' guys, and who are marked as 'criminals,' operate as regulatory measures that allow certain men to attain hegemonic status while prohibiting others from doing so. This policing of masculine status can readily be seen in the statements made by Jeffrey, a 22-year-old participant, when asked about news stories pertaining to gun violence:

I mean hell, look at all these crazy people doing all these shootings here lately. The ones I hear about are done by guys from the city, you don't see a bunch of farmers murdering each other. Most of the people doing the killing are psychopaths or terrorists who hate America. You can't tell me they had good Christian upbringings. The guns ain't the problem, it's the criminals who get them that fuck things up. And think about it, if guns were outlawed, those crazy assholes would still find a way...

One interesting discursive formation to note in the statement above that is particularly salient to geographers is the positioning of violence being perpetuated by 'guys in the city' (Smith 2013, Walmer 2012). Jeffrey suggests being 'from the city' is in direct opposition to what many participants referred to as 'being from the country.' Several critical scholars have noted how the way in which 'difference' is constructed can lead to oppressive effects (Kobayashi 2013, Berg 2012, Goldberg 2009, Sibley 2002). While not explicitly stated outright, the connotation of what being 'from the country' versus being 'from the city' means is often times loaded with racialized undertones. This subordinating rhetoric is further highlighted by a follow-up statement Jeffrey made when asked to elaborate upon what type of people he thought were responsible for gun violence:

Its not that I'm a racist, but most those guys are niggers. The others are fucked up in the head, or Mexican drug dealers, or gang bangers from the ghetto. Probably grew up on welfare, came from broken homes, and were never really taught how to treat a gun... And when I say nigger I don't mean all black guys, I've worked with some good black guys, so when I say nigger I mean that anyone can be a nigger. It's more of how someone acts, you know? A white guy can be a nigger, a Mexican can be nigger, an Asian can be a nigger, its not just skin colour ...its like when you hear the word faggot or bitch - those are not always about homos or women, they are just ways to describe how a guy goes about the way he acts.

Stroud (2012: 22) notes the significance that race, class, gender, and sexuality have upon masculinities and gun use when she states that the gun can be 'a symbol that at once signifies violence and protection.' She also suggests that the meaning attributed to gun use can be interpreted differently depending on who is holding the gun, the place in which it is being held, and subsequently, by who is allowed to assign meaning to the context in which it is being used (Stroud 2012). Noting the fluid and flexible nature of giving meaning to gun violence based upon social axes of identification is key in the understanding how white supremacist discourses come to dominate local understandings of gun use.

Ferber (2007) has also researched the feelings of threat that white men experience when encountering visible minorities, particularly black men. She, as well as other scholars, contends that the increase in fear and anxiety that white people feel often causes them to brand racialized people as criminal, threatening, animalistic, hypersexual, and aggressive (Feagin 2009, Ferber 2007, Collins 2005). In analyzing Jeffrey's statement above it can be noted that the process of subordinating other men based upon the bigoted epithets of 'nigger,' 'fucked up in the head,' 'Mexican drug dealers,' 'gang bangers from the ghetto,' 'faggot,' and 'bitch' creates direct associations between Black, Latino gay, queer, and disabled men as being flawed or more prone to criminality and violence.

Such oppressive discourses underscore the power of whiteness and how it is allowed to remain invisible while simultaneously attacking other social identities from a position of privilege. From this seat of power, white masculinity thus enjoys the luxury of being unnoticed, is seen as the normalized standard, and remains free from criticism because of its ubiquity. Consequently, the influence that discourses of white masculinity have in certain local spaces effectively forbids 'othered' men from acceptance and inclusion.

Concluding reflections

Upon leaving Southeast Kansas and analyzing the empirical data it seemed that in critically looking at what neoliberal ideology and rural masculinities produce, there remain more questions than answers. Ultimately, what this project adds to feminist geography is a nuanced perspective of the interlocking relationships that hegemonic masculinity, neoliberal ideology, social conservatism, rurality, and gun culture have upon each other. In addition, it underscores the powerful influence that settler colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, and conservative Christianity have on the subjectivities and emotions of men, as well as how the practices and actions of men become gendered and self-policed.

What can be taken from the research is an awareness of how men's subject positions are influenced by spatiality, neoliberalism, hegemonic masculinity, and gun use. In turn, we can see that guns in rural Southeast Kansas are not typically used in overt, domineering displays of hostility. Rather, the presence of the gun is mundane, ordinary, and silently produces an often-unnoticed banal weaponization of the rural. Consequently, what remains is a masculinist space that is defended not only by the material firearms that exist in the area, but also by discourses of whiteness, homophobia, colonialism, and enabledness that reaffirm the hegemonic status of patriarchal, white, 'hetero-settler' subjectivities.

What remains unanswered is a seemingly untenable debate surrounding the gun. Gun rights, gun control, gun culture, and gun politics are all common topics that make their way into the everyday experiences of people at all levels of society. In paying attention to the media; the international, national, regional, and local news, it

is not difficult to find mention of the gun being discussed in regard to government legislation, police reports, domestic violence, mass shootings, suicide, jury trials, as well as stories of war, sport, adventure, and leisure. Guns also find their way into pop culture through movies, books, video games, websites, chatrooms, and advertising. They permeate many of the images we come across, both historical and contemporary, on a daily basis. Guns are ubiquitous; they are present in conversations ranging from international arms trafficking to small town personal quarrels. And while consensus has yet to be reached as to what the correct solutions are regarding gun use, gun control, and gun rights; what remains is the fact that violence, death, and suffering all linger as part of the conversation.

Little progress has been made in the way of curtailing such violence. Seemingly, there will never be agreement as to what can be done to prevent it. I do not claim to have failsafe solutions to debates surrounding gun use, but what I can give account of, is that based on my experience in rural Southeast Kansas, what needs to be added to the conversation is a more comprehensive, thorough, and critical interrogation of masculinity, neoliberal ideology, and settler colonialism. Until these taken-for-granted pillars of exploitation, oppression, and enablement are taken to task, what will remain is simply the status quo.

Acknowledgments

My warmest thoughts of appreciation to both Neil Nunn and Angelita Marie for their careful readings of this article, as well as their insightful perspectives on earlier drafts. I also remain tremendously grateful to Lawrence Berg for aiding me in articulating how this piece fits into existing bodies of knowledge, as well as for his guidance throughout the research project. In addition, I offer my most sincere thanks to the three anonymous referees for their perceptive, constructive, and gentle comments and suggestions during the review process. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge Jenny Lloyd and Peter Hopkins for their helpful communication and timely responses in preparing the manuscript for release.

Notes

1. I rely upon the socially constructed identifier 'men' throughout this paper not with the intent of perpetuating gendered binaries, but rather, because it is how several participants self-identified.
2. Southeast Kansas has been made a proper noun because locally it is referred to as a place and region.
3. All participants have been given aliases.

Notes on contributor

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