

Gender, Neoliberalism, and Embodiment: A Social Geography of Rural, Working-Class Masculinity in Southeast Kansas

Abstract:

In this chapter I apply a critical discourse analysis to the broad topics of gender, geography, and neoliberalism. I do so by drawing upon empirical data gathered in Southeast Kansas to examine the ways in which rural, working-class masculinity is discursively and materially practiced and reproduced. I begin with an overview of the literature pertaining to masculinity, place, and embodiment, and then move into a discussion of how neoliberalism is being theorized not only as a set of economic policies driving global capitalism, but also as a logic and discourse. I proceed by highlighting how hegemonic notions of masculinity in rural Southeast Kansas are being mediated by increasingly market-oriented definitions of competition and success. I illustrate these dynamics by underscoring how the neoliberal self-making practices of responsibilization, entrepreneurialism, self-commodification, and fragmentation are subtly reshaping long-established, culturally produced perceptions of ‘manhood’ for working-class men in rural Kansas.

Keywords:

masculinity; neoliberalism; embodiment; critical discourse analysis; rural geography

Introduction

We don't have time to fuck around...

...time to get to work.

Rick, 27-year-old Kansan

I received this brusque comment in jest (along with a firm pat on the back) from a smiling, long-time friend of mine as we prepared to start work for the day.¹ After being away for nearly seven years, I had just returned to my home community in Southeast Kansas to conduct participant observation research on rural masculinity. The statement caught me off guard (much to the delight of both my friend and co-workers), as I had not been exposed to such directives in quite some time. It caused me to falter a bit in my thoughts as I was still in somewhat of a 'researcher' frame of mind, or what was referred to several times by my friends as 'being up in my head too much.' After abruptly redirecting my behavior so I was not 'standing around and thinking so much', I began the actual process of physically moving, and started loading up the truck with fencing supplies. As we finished tossing the dull, dented, and grime-caked tools into the back of the truck, my boss and long-time acquaintance started-up the sputtering, sun-faded tan, 1987 Ford F-150 while the rest of us jumped into the back, took our respective seats along the truck bed, gripped the rusty bedrail tightly with our worn, beaten cowhide gloves, and headed down a dusty gravel road towards one of the many sprawling wheat fields and enclosed cattle pastures that lay ahead. It was during this moment (and what would prove to be several to follow) that I began to further ponder just how powerful (yet oft-banal) of a relationship that 'manhood' has with working-class sentiments in the area.

I realized the comment, while highly laden with gendered power dynamics, hierarchical subject positioning, and masculinist framings of capitalist production, did very much resonate with me. I had grown up amidst such assertions, they had become normalized over the course of my childhood, teenage years, and early twenties; and up until my introductions to feminist praxis, decolonial thought, and critical discourse studies, served as the edifice upon which my ideological perspectives were built. As it was my first week of work back in Southeast Kansas, I quickly realized the discursive and non-discursive practices of masculinity associated with ‘working in the country’ were loaded with gendered complexities, some of which reinforce both overt and veiled displays of power, control, and dominance. What follows, then, is an examination of these dynamics, as well as an articulation of how working-class masculinity in rural Southeast Kansas is being transformed and embodied in everyday life through the logic and discourse of neoliberalism.

Masculinity and Place

In her theorizations on masculinity, R.W. Connell (1995) suggests we take into account the culturally produced nature of gender by recognizing that masculinity takes multiple forms and consequently can be best understood as *masculinities*. Connell (1995:44) thus defines masculinities as ‘configurations of practice structured by gendered relations’ that are influenced by ‘bodily experience, personality, and culture.’ From this perspective, masculinity can be most accurately conceptualized as relational, pluralistic, and context-dependent. This standpoint argues that masculinity is not a static archetype, but rather, that masculinities are social constructs iteratively produced by the actors seeking to embody them, as well as by the discourses, spaces, and flows of power within which they operate (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

In elaborating upon the power relations inherent in practices of masculinity, Connell (1995) has also developed the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity,’ which can be thought of

as the normative ideals operating across differing cultures that define the most socially acceptable ways of being a ‘man.’ Her notion of hegemonic masculinity stresses that within given circumstances certain masculinities are granted superiority over ‘others’, which become subordinated or marginalized (Connell 1995). In recognizing masculinities as fluid and relational, it should be noted that wholly embodying hegemonic masculinity is impossible because it is an imagined ideal that forever remains in a constant state of flux and redefinition, largely due to its spatiality and mutable nature (Hopkins and Noble 2009, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, van Hoven and Horschelmann 2005).

The unstable and variegating nature of masculinity, as well as its inextricable link with space and place, has thus become an intriguing topic of study, particularly in regard to marginalized, subordinated, and complicit masculinities (Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014, Ní Laoirse 2005, Longhurst 1997, Jackson 1991). This has been reflected in the increase in literature pertaining to the relationship of geography with non-hegemonic (e.g. queer, transgender, non-citizen, racialized, disabled, aged) masculinities over the past few decades (Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014, Little 2006, van Hoven and Horschelmann 2005, Ní Laoire 2002, Knopp 1992). As a result of these analyses, there is now greater acknowledgment that masculinity is neither innate nor inert, but instead, is the gendered product of socio-spatial relationships operating across personal, cultural, and institutional levels of society. Researchers focusing on this area of study have thus carved out more room for critical scholarship exploring how gendered subjects/subjectivities are (re)fashioned by place, as well as how masculinity is (re)produced and (re)asserted across space (Gorman-Murray 2014, Hoven and Horschelmann 2005, McDowell 2003, Connell 1995).

It must be noted that while theorizations of hegemonic masculinity have been instrumental in advancing critical research on men, ‘manhood’, and masculinities, numerous academics have indeed taken the term to task (Beasley 2008, Collier 1998, Hearn 2004).

Thus, notwithstanding the fact that the general premise of hegemonic masculinity is widely accepted, contestations have argued that the concept is monolithic, immaterial, structuralist, and even contradictorily, does the work of instantiating masculinist practices as normative, despite its emergence being prompted by scholars recognizing the exigency of exposing, unsettling, and destabilizing what is considered 'normal' (McInnes 1998, Whitehead 1998, Demetriou, 2001, Beasley 2008).

Critiques also contend that foregrounding hegemonic masculinity fails to address the experiences and occurrences comprising day-to-day life, unwittingly reifies and categorizes static ideals of what manhood is, and does not account for the socio-psychological complexities permeating processes of masculinist subjectification that do not necessarily reproduce hegemony (Anderson 2009, Edley and Wetherall 1996). While many of these appraisals certainly have merit, many can be read as calls for the concept to be further clarified, expanded upon, and reconfigured (rather than jettisoned completely) so as to center and grapple with the complexities, nuances, anomalies, and paradoxes involved in the contexts, assertions (as well as non-assertions), and emplacements of both masculinities and power. It is with the aim of expanding upon critical interrogations of situated, particular, and localized forms of masculinity, then, that I call back to the concept of hegemonic masculinity throughout the chapter.

Embodiment and Space

I follow a line of thought suggesting masculinity is partially produced through the material performances and actions of the body. In this way, any efforts made in analyzing masculinities need to take into account the 'norms and assumptions that surround the body' by recognizing that the body is culturally constructed and reflects many of society's expectations itself (Little 2006: 183). From this perspective, I also suggest that material actions are spatialized, meaning that place is an essential part of the mutual constitution of

gendered practices. With this in mind, it is essential to note the body itself is a place that becomes a representation of identities and is inscribed with socially produced meanings and values.

In taking this stance regarding the production of masculinity and its relationship to the body, I want to be clear to note that the body is not simply one side of a dualistic mind/body dichotomy, nor is it simply a passive receptacle that becomes unknowingly marked by shared norms. It is important to steer away from reductionist and biologically deterministic standpoints that suggest the body is imbued with predetermined characteristics causing particular behaviours and actions. It is also crucial to realize the body is not merely a blank canvas upon which cultural values are written. Rather, I adhere to a non-essentialist and relational perspective, as promoted by numerous poststructuralist and feminist theorists, that the body matters because it plays a key part in the spatialized reproduction of masculinities and femininities (Nunn 2013, Lawler 2008, Hopkins and Pain 2007, Grosz 1994, Butler 1990, Foucault 1977). More precisely, bodies matter not because they are the origin or genesis of masculinity and femininity, but rather, they matter because they are sites upon which masculinity and femininity are signified and implied to exist (Abrahamsson and Simpson 2011, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Butler 2004).

This theoretical framework similarly echoes Judith Butler's (1990) conceptualization of performativity. Butler suggests bodies are not merely objects blanketed by gender; rather, gender is 'a continuing performance between bodies and discourses' (Brook 1999: 14). As such, the gendered body is the product of both structural interpellation and individual agency that becomes discursively and materially fashioned by the complex interlocking relationships of power, personality, and differing subject positions (i.e. race, class, gender, age, citizenship, nationality, religion, sexuality, ability, etc). More recently, one area of research critical theorists have been particularly exceptional at investigating involves the recursive dynamics

operating between gender, place, and the body. (Simonsen 2013, Ní Laoire 2005, Longhurst 2000, Gregson and Rose 2000, Rose 1993). In doing so, current intersectional research on embodiment and space has focused on how power, identity formation, and heteronormativity influence notions of masculinity across urban and rural settings (Pini 2008, Pollard 2013, Cowen and Siciliano 2011, Pease 2010, Dixon and Grimes 2004, Little and Leyshon 2003). This area of work has proven to be diverse, wide-ranging, and nuanced, as well as explicitly geographical, primarily because of the prominence it has granted to *place* as a key factor operating in the construction of masculinities (Gorman-Murray 2014, Hopkins and Noble 2009, van Hoven and Horschelmann 2005).

Thus, for scholars researching gender, the emphasis on multiple masculinities, interlocking social identities, and the production of space has become a rich area of inquiry. This can be seen in a wide variety of studies ranging from corporate, academic, rural, military, gay, disabled, Latino, and Black masculinities, to the ways in which masculinity is implicated in advertising, home life, suicide, addiction, health, aging, and fathering (Bryant and Garnham 2015, Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014, Aitken 2012, Bryant 2006, Day 2006, Ní Laoire 2005, Hubbard 2004, McDowell 2003, Herod 2000, Jackson 1994). This growing area of place-centric research can be further expanded upon through empirical investigations into how masculinities are being mediated and slowly transformed by neoliberalism and the ideals it promotes.

Neoliberalism and Geography

Academic research pertaining to neoliberalism has increased over the past 20 years, which can be seen given the amount of studies focusing on the escalating roles that free enterprise and global market forces play in shaping society (Carroll 2011, Peck 2011, Samson 2010, Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 2004, Larner 2003, Mac an Ghail 1996, Jackson 1991). Neoliberalism, broadly, is the term typically ascribed to the constellation of socio-economic

and politico-cultural relations that have become the status quo during the post-Keynesian era. This period has largely been marked by the intensification of economic liberalism, along with a rise in pro-capitalist, socio-political theories that largely promote privatization, deregulation, and a purported ‘opening up’ of markets (Peck 2011, Smith and Stenning 2010, Hubbard 2004, Herod 2000, Larner 2000). Neoliberalism can be therefore explained as a philosophy purporting to promote ‘free trade, open borders, and less government,’ which argues ‘the marketplace’ will expand citizen-consumer sovereignty.

More recent studies critiquing neoliberalism are now suggesting that its rationales, in addition to generating a multifaceted web of highly managed international economic policies, is also a governing logic shaping cultural norms, assembling new ‘regimes-of-truths’, and establishing its own hegemonic discourses (Springer 2012, Lemke 2001). Feminist, poststructuralist, queer, crip, and critical race theorists have also applied the notion of neoliberal discourse to the politics of identity, alterity, and recognition, as well as processes of subjectifications, by interrogating the influence of neoliberalism in relation to the spatialized reproduction of racial hierarchies, capitalist exploitation, heteronormative gender orders, ableist exclusions, and structural violence (Springer 2012, Roberts and Mahtani 2012, Van Hoven and Horschelmann 2005). In focusing on the spatiality of these relationships, critical scholars are making important contributions to theories of gender by highlighting how the impacts of neoliberalism are emplaced, situated, and inherently geographical, in addition to being embodied (Pain 2014, Joronen 2013, Roberts and Mahtani 2012, Peck 2011).

Thus, for critical social theorists looking at neoliberalism as a ‘technology of power’ (Foucault 2010), we are confronted with the question: ‘What, then, is produced by the interlocking relationship of neoliberal discourse, gender, and place?’ In many cases, there is evidence suggesting that neoliberal governmentality disciplines subjects into consenting to more acute forms of surveillance and control that covertly exacerbate already-existing

arrangements of oppression, exclusion, and privilege (Springer 2012, Roberts and Mahtani 2010, Smith and Stenning 2010, Dean 2008, Marcos 2001). Concurring with this perspective, my chapter thus takes up the task of illustrating how neoliberal discourse is accelerating market-centric notions of ‘manhood’ in rural Southeast Kansas, as well as magnifying the seemingly prosaic configurations of exploitation and privilege that working-class men are at once complicit with, compromised by, benefitting from, and subordinated in.

In stating this, I should be clear to say I am not arguing that hard work and rugged individualism are new signifiers of hegemonic masculinity being brought on by neoliberalism. There exists a great deal of literature underscoring how these characteristics have been attributed to masculinity in colonial and capitalist societies dating well back into the 19th and 20th Centuries (Campbell, Bell, and Finney 2006, Connell, Hearn, Kimmel 2004, Kimmel 1996, Mac an Ghail 1996). Rather, I am suggesting neoliberal discourse is pushing the prevailing ideals surrounding rural, working-class masculinities in distinctively market-oriented directions. In this way, my study adds to the niche of critical scholarship addressing masculinity and embodiment by articulating how the practice of neoliberal self-making is reshaping the assertion of manhood for working-class men in rural Southeast Kansas.

Context, Methods, Data Collection

For the project, I moved back to Southeast Kansas to live near my former hometown of approximately 600 people and once again experience the rhythms of everyday life in rural America. The community where the research was located is set amongst a sprawling agrarian countryside and maintains, as several participants noted, a stereotypical ‘slow pace of life.’ The area is situated in an economically depressed region of the central United States lying just outside the western cusp of the Ozark Mountains. The majority of the participant’s incomes were dependent upon large-scale industrial agriculture and livestock production, as well as employment in the hydraulic fracturing, construction, manufacturing, and

transportation sectors of the economy. During my nine months in the field, I conducted 60 in-depth interviews, held eight focus groups (each with five informants), and recorded daily field notes as a participant observer (i.e. farmhand).[#] In responding to specific questions I developed for demographic information during individual interviews, participants all noted being ‘local/from the country,’ as well as ‘white/Caucasian’, ‘heterosexual’, ‘Catholic’ or ‘Christian’, and ‘working’ or ‘middle’ class, with their ages ranging from 19 to 77.

As I was raised in the area, obtaining access simply consisted of a few upfront conversations with friends-of-friends about the nature of my project, after which, I found myself regularly, yet informally, working for a local farmer. The arrangement we made was that I could conduct research in the way of participant-observer (i.e. ‘hanging out and pitching in here and there’) in exchange for a bit of manual labour, which primarily consisted of day-to-day physical upkeep of his farming/cattle operation. He had agreed to let me ‘tag-along’ regardless of whether I worked or not, but I felt it more appropriate to offer and contribute. The chores I was tasked with included the necessary maintenance needed to keep his ‘small rural enterprise running like a well oiled machine.’ The bulk of my activities consisted of mending fence (electric and barbed-wire), feeding cattle, bush-hogging (mowing pastures), bucking hay, applying chemicals to unwanted weeds/shrubs/bushes/trees/etc., burning brush/trash, as well as planting, fertilizing, and harvesting fields of wheat, corn, and soybeans. As the nature of the work was primarily manual, and not overly technical, I received little other than quick hands-on trainings and refreshers of how to use tools and equipment, most of which I had used during my youth, teenage years, and early twenties while living in the area (e.g. driving tractors and loaders/forklifts, using chainsaws, pump-action/pressurized sprayers, air compressors, ‘crimpers’ [to fix fence], mixing chemicals, etc.).

I was not paid a formal wage, rather, I was allowed to be present during the day-to-day regularities, movements, and conversations that took place on his, as well as other, farms and local meeting places (e.g. hardware stores, banks, bars, butcher shops, pharmacies, sale barns (cattle), churches, ‘mom and pop’/‘greasy spoon’ restaurants, gas stations, convenience stores, cafes, etc.). I was also compensated through what essentially unfolded as mutual aid, which meant that in several instances I was quite generously offered ‘fresh, homegrown beef’ (e.g. cuts of meat, steaks, ground hamburger, ribs, etc.) to share with my family, purchased lunch nearly every Friday (generally at a Mexican restaurant in a slightly more populated neighboring town [‘big enough to have stoplights’]), and occasionally handed ten to twenty dollars for ‘fuel’, ‘my trouble’, or ‘the hassle’ (i.e. gas money for the time it took to get from place to place as I was traveling across the countryside for several miles everyday). In essence, the arrangement was one of reciprocal support, gift exchange, and equal benefit, in addition to being a sharing of knowledge, conversation, and rapport as I got to know more about my ‘boss’ and his community network (‘all the local folks’), and he got to know more about me, the nature of my curiosities, and even had a ‘helping hand to kick around with.’

Over the course of my time in the field, I occupied a liminal insider-outsider position, meaning I held differing degrees of “insiderness” or “outsiderness” depending upon the places I was in, as well as who I was around (Butz and Besio 2009). More precisely, there were several instances in which my status as a ‘local boy’ was blurred due to my role as a researcher. This dynamic meant my standing with participants was in a constant state of flux, as was evidenced in the fact that some of the interviews I conducted elicited forthright and blunt statements due to participants’ familiarity with me, but in other circumstances our conversations were tentative and hesitant because many of the informants also realized I knew several people within the community. Despite the inevitable murkiness that ensued as a result of my indistinct role as a researcher returning home, I was able to tease out a host of

tendencies and aberrations about masculinity from the empirical data I gathered. Some of the major themes that arose upon analyzing my transcriptions and field notes pertained to being ‘guys from the country’, a label also largely tied to participants’ perceived notions of being a ‘hard worker’, ‘competitive,’ and worthy of ‘respect’. Socially conservative viewpoints were also espoused quite extensively, as participants widely cited ‘traditional values’ and a generational work ethic as a source of pride. This dynamic is similar to other studies on masculinity suggesting the ability to be a ‘hard worker’ within the realms of labour, athletics, history, politics, fathering, and family all carry significant meaning for men (Pease 2010, Pini 2008, Little 2006, Ní Laoire 2005, Parr, Philo, Burns 2004, Kimmel 1996).

While the research I conducted in rural Southeast Kansas echoes similar findings, one unassuming yet ubiquitous factor attributed to working-class masculinity that emerged was the emphasis placed upon the link that masculinity has with ‘succeeding in the market.’ The men I spoke with intimated that being a ‘hard worker’ in-and-of itself is no longer enough. Rather, they noted ‘hard work’ must now be coupled with innovation and entrepreneurialism, which in turn, was evaluated by being able to ‘turn a profit,’ ‘reduce company costs’, and ‘help the bottom line.’ Put differently, what surfaced in my interviews is that, despite being exposed to the socially conservative views I expected, I also ran into the fact that rural working-class masculinity in the area is being *neoliberalized*. The sections that ensue will thus examine the social construction of masculinity in rural Southeast Kansas and how notions of ‘manhood’ are gradually being re-forged by neoliberalism. The chapter proceeds by interrogating the ways in which men embody, both materially and discursively, masculinity in the face of the neoliberal self-making practices of entrepreneurialization, self-commodification, fragmentation, and responsabilization.

Entrepreneurialization and Self-commodification

Entrepreneurialization relates to the pressures people face to monetize their

capabilities, passions, and desires for the goal of financial self-capitalization and the accumulation of profit and individual recognition (Sparke 2012). In rural Kansas, one's status as a 'man' is intimately tied to the practice of personal 'work ethic', particularly in regard to being a 'provider.' While this is neither unique, nor new to many conceptualizations of hegemonic masculinity, what is interesting about this phenomenon in contemporary settings is how entrepreneurship is increasingly being attached to notions of both work ethic and manhood. Throughout my conversations with participants, common characteristics all the men stressed as being important in terms of 'being a man' as well as having a 'good work ethic' included having a 'bootstraps' mentality, 'not freeloading', 'not taking hand-outs', 'being the earner of the family', and 'contributing to the economy.' This focus on market-centered breadwinning is largely tied to attaining waged labour, capitalist production, and what many of the participants noted as 'earning a paycheck'. Again, while these statements are not pathbreaking in regard to gender theory, what is uniquely emergent is that most of the working-class men I interviewed also quite readily discussed the importance of 'staying on top of the market', being seen as a 'financial asset', and striving to become more 'innovative/productive' in the workplace. In short, the conversations we had surrounding 'work ethic' were emblematic of time-honored notions surrounding hegemonic masculinities; however, they also provide novel insight into how working-class masculinities are being neoliberalized because of the focus the participants had regarding entrepreneurial self-commodification, as well as their continual references to a (perceived-to-be) naturally existing, inescapable 'market'.

Accordingly, as the vast majority of all participants I interviewed had spent at least some of their childhood or adolescent years in the country 'working fields/cattle/hogs/etc.' (e.g. on farms, bucking hay, fixing fences, tending to/castrating livestock, or doing maintenance on farm equipment), they maintained that 'hard work' was cultivated in the

rural, was part of the community's tradition, and more tellingly in terms of neoliberal logic, was something that served them well when 'entering the market.' This was evident in a variety of the statements of most participants, and summed up aptly by Bruce, a 46-year-old who noted:

Growing up out in the country you learn what hard work is when you are young. Hell, we were probably doing chores from the time we could walk. When we got to junior high and high school we would go help out in the fields ...it was backbreaking work, but I will tell you what - we were all better for it. It kept our priorities straight, we learned the value of a dollar, and we could go to sleep at night knowing we were earning our keep. 'Round here, guys know how to 'man-up' and put in a good days work. It pays off for them in the end too. I don't think it's a coincidence that the fellas who worked the hardest growing up end up owning land, knowing how manage their money, and can turn a profit. Something to be said for that given how the world, and market, operates nowadays.

Bruce's account sheds light on how long-standing disciplinary capitalist exercises of 'learning the value of a dollar,' 'earning one's keep', managing money, and owning land have become and continue to remain normalized rites of passage for men in Southeast Kansas. More revealingly, though, is his statement about accumulating profit in relation to global processes and the 'market', which subtly, yet distinctively, exposes a neoliberalizing tendency in masculine subjectification, particularly in how it is intimately linked to the practices that male bodies perform in rural spaces and how such actions are reaffirmed as being an inherent part of 'growing up out in the country.' This 'growing up' in the rural is

subsequently applied to how the lessons learned from working in the countryside serve as a foundation and catalyst for later (neoliberal) success in an ever intensifying global economy.

In defining ‘neoliberal’ I am proposing that neoliberalism is not only an arrangement of free trade economic policies regulating finance and industry, but rather, that it produces ways of thinking, doing, and being that condition people to understand social relations as discrete, individual choices that exist in an omnipresent global market (Fraser 2013, Peck 2011, Dean 2008, Lemke 2001, Marcos 2001). This contrasts with classical liberalism, which suggests that while the world does indeed contain markets, that operating outside of non-monetized social interaction (e.g. being involved in family life, getting an education, participating in government, practicing religion, engaging in leisure activities, etc.) can also constitute life, albeit one in which people are reified as *Homo Oeconomicus* (‘economic man’). In other words, classical liberalism posits that life is comprised of individual, economically rational choices, some of which involve making the decision to participate (i.e. ‘succeed’ or ‘fail’) in markets. Neoliberalism’s regime-of-truth, on the other hand, argues that life is essentially a series of transitioning from one economic transaction to the next, that the world itself is nothing more than a market, and that the only choices individuals have in regard to life are how they respond to the incentives and disincentives of said world/market. Strictly speaking, then, since there is no escaping the world/market, people must *entrepreneurialize* themselves and commodify their talents and passions in order to survive in it.

This imposition of capitalist social relations can be seen in the most banal of everyday interactions. This is because neoliberal metaphors seep into commonplace occurrences on a day-to-day basis (e.g. ‘pulling yourself up by your bootstraps’, ‘business as usual’, ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’, ‘competing to win’, ‘letting the market decide’, etc.). Statements such as these are hallmarks of neoliberal discourse and entrench individualistic notions of what life’s

goals should, as well as *can* be. Comments of this nature made their way into the vast majority of the conversations I had as several participants noted that ‘success/profit,’ ‘achievement,’ ‘competition,’ ‘pride of ownership,’ and having an ‘entrepreneurial spirit’ were important qualities to have. They also avowed that these characteristics were part of being a ‘man’, and ultimately, were ways in which one could ‘earn respect’. An instance of this is reflected by Gary, a 52-year-old rancher, who upon driving me around the countryside and showing me the land and cattle he owned, stated:

These (cattle) are basically my bank account. Running a farm and owning property is the same as managing any other business. I work hard at it, and it takes a lot of smarts to make it in today’s economy. I actually think it’s a little more work for a guy to make a profit running a farm than it is for a paper-pusher in a business suit [laughs]. We don’t quite get the credit they do, but I’m basically running a successful commercial enterprise out here in the countryside... I know how to make money, and I get to live the American Dream while doing it. I also know how to put my land to use. Nowadays a guy’s got to learn to do that. Hell, some of it I use for ranching, some of it I plant on, some of it I lease, and some of it I even rent out to rich city guys who want to come down here and play ‘hunter’ on their vacations. They pay a pretty penny to do that shit, and I’m more than willing to let them. You see, I had to diversify my land... I got pretty innovative with it and now it’s turning a profit for me.

The neoliberal ambitions expressed in this comment, and ultimately the link they have with settler colonialism, masculinity, capitalism, and nationalism, are distinctly entrepreneurial and illustrate how the work performed in rural settings is deeply meaningful, yet mediated by market-oriented notions of success and intelligence.

In addition to his nationalistic sentiments regarding the ‘American Dream’, what is particularly telling about Gary’s testimony is just how neoliberalized discourses in the area have become. This is highlighted in his description of colonially appropriated rural land and how he is ‘managing it as a business,’ ‘diversifying it,’ has gotten ‘innovative with it’, and how he has transformed it into a ‘commercial enterprise’ that is ‘turning a profit.’ Assertions such as this were not uncommon amongst the participants, whether about land, or themselves (i.e. self-commodification). This is underscored by the several instances in which the participants also stated they regularly thought about, and discussed, ways in which they could ‘capitalize’ on the hard work they did, as well as the land and possessions they owned.

Market subjectivities such as the ones above were observable in the statements of many of the men I spoke with, which in addition to exposing how masculinity is being neoliberalized, also elicits understandings of how rural, working-class masculinity remains tied to ongoing colonialism and settler nationalism. This was evident in how the occupations of many of the men (e.g. hydraulic fracturing, heavy equipment operation, highway/bridge/building construction, auto-mechanical, trucking and transportation, factory work, logging, carpentry, and farming) were described on several occasions as the type of work that ‘the country (United States) was founded upon,’ as ‘what keeps the economy going,’ and as what ‘is good for all Americans.’

Fragmentation and Responsibilization

Fragmentation involves the withholding of one’s thoughts, time, and even presence for the purpose of eventually selling them at a given rate. It also involves drawing boundaries around and marketing personal skills and assets (i.e. ‘branding of the self’) for the intended purpose of ‘separating yourself from the pack’ in order to attain profit, status, or recognition (Sparke 2012). In describing their jobs, many participants pointed out that the labour they performed was ‘not for everyone,’ that it ‘separates the men from the boys,’ and being in

their line of work meant one should ‘not be afraid to get their hands dirty’. They often followed up by describing their mentalities as ‘blue-collar, ‘lunch pail,’ and ‘roll-up-your-sleeves’, and all argued the jobs they performed demanded someone who ‘took pride in what they did.’ In making these statements many often specified that there was underappreciated economic value in their efforts, acumen, and skills, which is reflected by the fact that several stated that other people, and even co-workers, ‘can’t do what I do.’ In this regard, the participants’ perspectives surrounding their status as exploited labourers having surplus value extracted from them was readily acknowledged, however, their general disposition in regard to workplace relationships was not oriented towards class/race/gender solidarity and common struggle. Rather, much of what was spoken about in terms of the working environments the participants found themselves in was dominated by reflections about the pressures and anxieties they felt to prove that they were productive individuals who, as many stated, ‘were worth keeping around.’

Many, but not all, of the participants also confessed to being less inclined to take time out of their shift to support a co-worker because it disrupted their own productivity and they needed to prove to the ‘bossman’ (or ‘brass’) that they were distinctly a ‘hard worker’, as well as irreplaceable. Several disclosed ‘just not having the time to worry about everyone else.’ This dynamic, that of becoming competitive, anxiety-riddled, and making sure to ‘cover my own ass’, was iterated countless times and often elevated above the practice of mutuality, interdependence, and camaraderie, despite the fact that collaboration and cooperation amongst workers might otherwise benefit the whole company through overall productivity, as well as a more healthy workforce. This contradiction was not lost on several of the participants, as numerous noted that it was ‘bullshit’ their bosses told them that ‘teamwork’ was essential because when it came down to it, as one participant affirmed, ‘you

know god damn well that you're being watched individually ...and they'll find ways to "can your ass" [fire] if you start missing days 'cause you're hurt or sick.'

This is not to say that every instance of the participants' lives were dictated by alienating, market-centric, survival-of-the-fittest practices, as there was a great deal of affinity, friendship, and fraternal bonds expressed by the men, particularly in regard to leisure (e.g. sports, cars, hunting, fishing, and even commiserating about their jobs), as well as family (e.g. fathering, religious practices, home renovation projects, yard maintenance, rites of passage). What neoliberal notions of work ethic and efficiency often produce for working-class men, then, is a fragmented sense of being in which 'pulling your weight' and embodying competitive self-reliance is given precedence over collective unity, mutual aid, and even personal/community wellbeing. This occurs despite the paradoxical fact that an environment of cooperation may actually lead to potential boosts in efficiency and output, as well as health. As a consequence, many of the participants reproduced social fragmentation by complaining about, and negatively critiquing, their co-workers more often than their bosses, managers, or even capitalist economic systems as a whole.

These fractured social relations disconcertingly mirror the infamous neoliberal decree of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who stated '...there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women...' (Margaret Thatcher Foundation 2014). This interpretation of society (or rather, entire dismissal of it) negates any recognition of underlying systemic relationships by omitting the exploitative forces of capitalism that marginalize multitudes of people at both cultural and institutional levels, in favour of blaming victims and *responsibilizing* individuals for the hardships they endure. Responsibilization is the process of framing the social conditions that individuals or groups face as the accumulative result of their individual choices, which negates recognition of systemic forces at play (Ong 2006). Sentiments such as these were also carried forward by men in Southeast

Kansas who readily made statements about poor, often racialized (but also other white, working-class) people needing to ‘quit being so lazy’, ‘stop expecting handouts’, and ‘stop blaming everyone else for the problems they have’. Perspectives like these erase any structural analysis that may be offered for the institutional barriers that others are facing, further divide the working class via lateral hostility and claims to racial superiority, thereby entrenching individualistic behaviours as necessary and natural.

The liberal ambitions mentioned by the participants in relation to work ethic also shed light on how masculine subject positions have become linked to capitalist economies. While I would like to steer away from archetypes and generalizations in terms of theorizing masculinity in the area, it became conspicuously clear that in Southeast Kansas work ethic and paid employment provide opportunities for men to define themselves as competitive, skilled, independent, and even entrepreneurial. As reflected above, of the many values stressed by participants, ‘being competitive’ and ‘preparing yourself for the market’ featured prominently. One 34-year-old participant named George believed his financial stability and ‘success’ in life were attributable to being raised in a competitive household, which he illustrates by pronouncing:

Everything we did was competitive ...we were taught to win, we were taught to push hard, we were taught to be better than the other guy. I mean, everybody likes to win, it’s in our blood. I know I work hard in all I do, and if a guy sticks with it long enough, eventually all that hard work will pay off. Learning to compete prepared me to make it. Competition is an important life lesson to learn, especially when it comes to surviving in today’s economy.

When asked whether he thought any form of privilege (race, class, gender, able-bodiedness, religion, citizenship, etc.) was a factor in any of his success, George responded by declaring:

‘No one gave me shit, I worked my ass off for all I have ...never complained, never was on welfare, never asked for a damned handout.’ These narratives, which exalt the capacity to work hard as an individual in order to attain success in the arena of free enterprise, whilst concurrently denying the systemic exclusions and privileges that result from capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchal social relations further reinforce neoliberal logic by depoliticizing social relations and reducing human interaction to disintegrated individual acts and isolated personal decisions.

Conclusion

In returning to the question posed at the beginning of the chapter pertaining to what is produced by the nexus of neoliberal discourse, gender, and place, my research in Southeast Kansas sheds light upon how notions and practices of hegemonic masculinity, neoliberal self-making, and rurality are recursive and mutually constitute one another, as well as normalize individualistic and hierarchical social orders. The empirical evidence I draw upon also demonstrates that trying to tease out what working-class masculinity in rural Southeast Kansas determinedly is – remains a dubious, indeterminate, and context-dependent task. Nonetheless, what is readily apparent from this data is that neoliberal logics are affecting working-class men not only in terms of the privilege and enablement they have been historically and still are socially afforded, but that the participants are also experiencing intensifications in political alienation and economic exploitation at the same time.

From one vantage point, they are facing subordination in new ways due to how they are situated within ever-liberalizing, capitalist class relations; meaning their earning power, livelihoods, and traditionalist-granted cultural notions of masculine currency are being destabilized due to declines in industrial production and a rise in the service and technology sector, which desires workers from the formally educated/credentialed and professional-managerial class. From another vantage point, neoliberal policies and practices are

refashioning masculinity in ways that further entrench the material and symbolic dividends afforded to (normative) men over other social groups (e.g. women, migrant labour, racialized workers, queer folks, transgender people, disabled people, etc.) through the continued propagation of the idea that 'men' are more equipped to, and must, be individualistic, hard-working, and self-reliant. The expectation that is presently emerging is a demand that these characteristics now be embodied in more entrepreneurial, capitalocentric, and profit-oriented ways.

To end, the realities this research points to indicates that there are indeed neoliberalizing tendencies operating in rural Southeast Kansas, which are simultaneously reasserting rigidly hierarchical gender orders and promoting market-anchored subjectivities that both compromise and enable men. The situation rural working-class men in particular currently face with regard to masculinity and geography, hence, is one in which they are reaping both the luxuries and anxieties that neoliberal reason has sown. And while many aspects of the status quo in rural Kansas are explained away as 'natural' (consequently allowing interlocking oppressions to continue in unfettered and unchecked manners), there also remains room for confronting and contesting these marginalizing and exploitative forces, principally through resisting the discourses and practices of neoliberalism. In light of what this research exposes, then, it becomes evident that struggling against and abandoning neoliberal logic will not only to create more harmonious social relations with others, but also contribute to the overall well-being of working-class men themselves.

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ⁱ ‘Southeast Kansas’ is the colonial name of a region found within the ancestral territories of the Osage Nation. ‘Southeast Kansas’ is used throughout this chapter because it is the commonly referred to vernacular region of the area, as well as chosen descriptor of all the people who were part of the research project.

ⁱⁱ Participants have been given aliases. Ethics for this project was issued on behalf of the University of British Columbia’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board: H11-02552.