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The Stories We Tell: Colorblind Racism, Classblindness, and Narrative Framing in the Rural Midwest[☆]

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ABSTRACT The stories we tell about ourselves and our communities have the power to impact perceptions of marginalized communities, both positively and negatively. Narratives affect how people view themselves, their town, and other members of their community and thus shape personal interactions, local culture, social situations, and even decisions about allocation of resources. When those stories are rooted in discursive frames—what we can understand as the links between ideology and narrative—they can also perpetuate and reify power inequities. Within rural America, local elites and residents alike use narratives and discursive framing to erase or exclude communities of color and, at times, poor whites in unique ways. This happens through explicit and willful ignorance of narratives of difference that could both complicate normative assumptions and highlight histories of dispossession within rural towns. Drawing on 30 interviews and 12 months of ethnography in the midwestern town of Moses, we provide a case study that demonstrates how narratives perpetuated by both decision makers and residents, across racial and class backgrounds, are rooted in colorblind racism and classblindness regarding African Americans, Mexican Americans, and poor whites. These narratives frame perceptions of residents and neighborhoods, influence town-level decisions, and erase local histories.

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Introduction

Popular images of rural America continue to perpetuate a narrative of these spaces as mostly white, idyllic towns that lack diversity. These images and narratives, at their core, shape feelings of belonging within small towns, operate to inform local decisions, and, also, preserve colorblind racism and classblindness. As Carrillo, Quisumbing King and Schafft (2021) highlight in a recent special issue on race and rurality, “popular imaginings of racialized spaces, and in particular rural America as a primarily ‘white space’ ..., have consistently ignored the dynamics of race, space, and rurality ... Native American, Latinx, and African American communities have long maintained an active and vital presence in rural America, despite enduring patterns of exclusion, displacement, and disenfranchisement.” As we argue in this paper, these “popular imaginings” are maintained and perpetuated by the stories we tell about ourselves and each other. They, in turn, impact feelings of exclusion, interpersonal experiences, and local decisions, and also contribute to an erasure of complex and ethnically and racially diverse histories existent within rural towns.

Stories of rural America often craftily link race, class, and place in ways that erase or exclude communities of color and poor whites, while being simultaneously devoid of explicit discussions of racial, ethnic, or class-based difference. The difficulty in assessing colorblind racism and classblindness in these narratives is rooted in its explicit and overt absence in town-level discussions, both by decision-makers and locals. Rather coded language regarding class background, neighborhood, or deservingness act as stand-ins for “undesirable” often poor, Black, or Brown populations. By ignoring discussions of class and race, town-level officials can easily absolve themselves of engaging in classist or racist decision-making, and simultaneously uphold an individualistic status quo, where people are fully culpable for their inability to access social mobility. Conversely, when discussing local tensions, some residents often highlight race and class differences while others embrace classblind and colorblind narratives of uplift. Willful ignorance can hide inequities, but if we scratch at the cracks of those silences, we can better understand how colorblind racism and classblindness impact interpersonal relationships and indicate who is offered a seat at the decision-making table, and, relatedly, access to local resources.

Moses¹

To understand the impact of local narratives in perpetuating colorblind racism and classblindness, we focus on the midwestern town of Moses.

Located in the heart of the Midwest, Moses' access to the interstate dominated the town's economy, as highways both connected the town to major cities and attracted a variety of nearby employers. The interstate, along with burgeoning industries, made Moses home to historic African American and Mexican American communities. Residents of Moses are mostly non-Hispanic white (74 percent), although the town has both historic and growing Black (13.3 percent) and Latina/o/x (8 percent) populations. Its 32,000 residents have a median income of \$37,073, with 22.5 percent below the poverty line. Black (59 percent) and Latina/o/x (35.1 percent) poverty vastly exceeds that of non-Hispanic white residents (16.7 percent). During the time of this study, most public administrators were upper-middle-class, white, and male, and the town had an ongoing case against it regarding race- and sex-based discrimination.

Locals often divide the town using directional markers, with primary focus centered on the north end and the south end. The north end is often viewed as the wealthier part of town, with large-homes, well-maintained tree-lined streets and cul-de-sacs, and easy access to big-box shopping and large parks. Most town-officials and local decision-makers live on the north end. Conversely, the south end has historically been home to working-class, white, African American and Mexican American populations. Given the neighborhood's linkages to racialized others and low-income populations, city officials and locals often view the south end and those that live there as unsavory, low-class and, thus, unimportant and undeserving of social services. For instance, Moses officials shuttered the local school and allowed the closest grocery to move to the town's outskirts along the interstate. Although Moses has a small public bus line that runs six days a week during mornings and afternoons, public transportation remained limited in the south end. Social issues, however, extend beyond this neighborhood. Many residents, especially Black, Latina/o/x, and poor white populations, regardless of where they live in the city, have been locked out of the formal labor market while others struggle to earn a living wage. Additionally, the town contends with rising drug addiction (mostly crystal meth), but we heard law enforcement, town officials, and nonprofit leaders all relegate a problem of poverty and addiction to the south end. Discussions of this neighborhood and its residents, thus, becomes important for understanding how residents and town officials, alike, use narrative and discursive framing to perpetuate inequities.

During our time in Moses, we often asked ourselves, how do town-level narratives both perpetuate marginalization and influence local decisions? How might the ways that narratives are connected to discursive frames limit the ability to address ongoing class- and race-based

inequality? Drawing on 30 interviews and 12 months of ethnography in the town of Moses, we provide a community study that analyzes how narratives rooted in colorblind racism and classblindness regarding African American, Mexican American, and poor whites framed perceptions of the town and its residents, influenced local decisions regarding employment and education, and erased the town's rich African American and Mexican American histories.

We spoke with residents and town decision-makers at their homes, in their offices, in cafes and restaurants, in churches, and after meetings. Local elites, who were all exclusively white, male, and upper-middle-class, included community development professionals and town officials. The residents we spoke to were from a diverse cross-section of Moses. They ranged in age, educational attainment, racial and ethnic background, and socio-economic status.

During interviews, informal conversations, and at public meetings, town-level elites often articulated frustration with the lack of “local talent” and an inability for low-income residents to dig themselves out of poverty. These same elites also refused to explicitly mention race or class in discussions regarding town decisions. In these elites' conversations of Moses, a certain narrative was emerging. One that decried local workers, ignored existing classism and racism, and, simultaneously, saw the potential of Moses once the right kind of person arrived. These narratives regarding the town and its people are rooted in both colorblind racism and classblindness. In explicitly silencing discussions on racial or class-based difference, town-level elites could claim fairness and equal access to local opportunities, thus placing the burden on individuals for their failures to dig themselves out of poverty, while also maintaining the status quo of existing—mostly white and mostly male—elites as the town decision makers. These narratives that linked poverty, race, and place impacted both how town-level elites and others perceived residents of color and poor whites, and local decisions regarding employment and educational opportunities.

Town elites' desire to craft a particular narrative about Moses framed many of our discussions with locals regarding town-level decisions. We can understand narratives as the stories or statements that link our understandings of groups of people, places, and social structures to our daily interactions (Ewick and Sibley 1995; Reissman 1993; Todd and Fisher 1988). While colloquially stories may be viewed as benign attempts to both make sense of the world and craft a particular image of, in this case, a small, rural town, they can also serve to perpetuate and reify power inequities. Discussions with Moses residents further illuminate the ways that narrative and, what social movement scholars

refer to as, discursive frames—these are the ways that people turn ideological narratives, or understandings of their surroundings, into local stories—operate to exclude marginalized populations and perpetuate marginalization.

In speaking with locals about the town, there was a tension between how communities of color and poor whites viewed Moses, versus the mostly white town-level decision makers. These groups all highlighted the town's rich history, yet there were differences in how they understood that history and the divisiveness they observed. For instance, some African American and Mexican American residents mentioned ongoing tensions between white elites, communities of color, and poor whites. These residents talked about the lack of recognition of the rich African American and Mexican American history in the town, the dearth of resources for poor communities, and the explicit linkages between perceptions of poverty, race, and neighborhood, where being poor was inherently linked to being nonwhite and living in the south end—regardless of racial identity, class background, or neighborhood. Narratives, they highlighted, perpetuated harmful stereotypes. Other residents, including those of Mexican and African American heritage, adopted a colorblind and classblind understanding of the town; they asserted that a focus on self-improvement and the benefits Moses had to offer was key to success. However, they also understood the ways that local narratives impeded both interpersonal interactions and important town decisions.

These kinds of tensions between town-level elites and residents happen all over the country, in both rural and urban areas. Several rural studies focus on addressing these tensions and the importance of civic engagement in rural decision-making. Few studies, however, identify how local narratives combined with a lack of representation frame local decisions, impact interpersonal relationships, and contribute to the erasure of communities of color from the rural landscape.

Barriers to Thriving Rural Communities

Populations in rural towns are racially, politically, economically, and culturally diverse, but popular perceptions continue to present rural areas as homogenous, thus obscuring complicated realities, and reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Although these narratives are oftentimes framed at the national level, they play out locally through interpersonal interactions and town-level decisions. For instance, in their discussion of belongingness and hegemonic whiteness in rural Britain, Cloke and Little (1997) argue that representations of rural towns continue to promote myths of homogeneity, which further marginalize “unwanted individuals” and

prevent them from experiencing “a sense of belonging to, and in, the rural.” They go on to state that “if rurality is bound up by nationalistic ideas of [whiteness] then resultant cultural attitudes about who does and does not belong in the countryside serve as discriminating mechanisms of exclusion. Power is thereby bound up discursively in the very socio-cultural constraints which have characterized rurality.” Although written nearly three decades ago and across the Atlantic, their assertion that the myth of uniform rural whiteness drives ongoing marginalization continues to resonate in the United States today (Carrillo et al. 2021).

Narratives on rurality in the United States tend to center on racial homogeneity, patriotism, and nostalgic claims to a simple life and the “good old days” (Duina 2017; Hochschild 2016; Hughes 2018). In the Midwest and elsewhere, such narratives implicitly privilege the white middle-class and maintain romantic visions of the rural, as idyllic landscapes, filled with wholesome, hard-working, *white* individuals (Agyeman and Spooner 1997; Hughes 2018; Sherman 2021). These ideological myths continue despite significant evidence to the contrary. First, as mentioned at the outset, rural areas are not exclusively white, and second, they continue to experience economic challenges tied to deindustrialization and changes to labor.

Scholars have highlighted the positive impact of ethnic and racial diversity, noting an expanded local workforce, new small business, and innovative development (Bloem 2014; Lichter 2012; Lichter and Crowley 2009). The increase in racial diversity is overwhelmingly driven by Latinas/os/xs who are moving to rural areas rather than settling in larger cities (Lichter 2012; Polakit and Schomberg 2012; Sandoval 2012). Together with white flight from rural areas to suburban and urban ones and the presence of long-standing African American populations, this trend is leading rural areas to become more diverse (Jones 2019; Lichter and Crowley 2009; Sandoval 2012). Growing rates of racial diversity have had many positive effects, such as a measurable decrease in crime (Lichter and Crowley 2009). Additionally, small towns that attract and embrace diverse populations often do better economically than those perceived to be unwelcoming to outsiders (Norman 2013).

Despite such evidence of positive outcomes, however, harmful narratives regarding both African American and Latina/o/x populations continue to drive negative narratives that influence local decisions within many rural spaces. To maintain the status quo, local white elites often use preconceived ideas, that are both raced and classed, surrounding rurality and rural places to rationalize decisions that may not benefit most of the local population—neither those of color nor those who are white. Such decisions can lead to increased social isolation, and

disengagement. As rural, urban, and race scholars argue, these tense and restrictive narratives are rooted in the stories we tell ourselves and come to believe about space and who belongs in it. These stories thus drive an ongoing cycle of marginalization and restricted resources.

The Power of Narrative

Narratives help us make sense of the world around us, reify power relations, and can mask social inequities. Scholars have long analyzed narratives in, for instance, social movements, in perpetuating racial inequality, and in policy making (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis and Embrick 2004; Nolan 2002; Polletta et al. 2011). Narratives may be stories or statements about, for example, what drives poverty, who commits crimes, whose needs matter, what it means to have a certain identity, or who deserves government support. Even when such narratives are false, they often come to *feel* true to those who hold them, and they create a second history that counters people's lived experiences. This false history then affects how local issues are framed. As Bonilla-Silva et al. (2004) argue, "*we tell stories, and these stories, in turn, make us.*"

In the context of a rural community, narratives affect how residents' view themselves, their town, and other members of the community and thus shapes their personal interactions, local culture, social situations, and even decisions about allocation of resources (Bonilla-Silva et al. 2004; Herrera 2016). Drawing from Baldwin (1979), language, and words, in particular are "a political instrument, means, and proof of power ... [it] connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger public or communal identity." The words we choose and the stories we tell are done to both describe and control our circumstances. In other words, narratives, and the words we use to craft those narratives, socialize us into believing certain ideas about ourselves, our towns, our nation, and others—even (and especially) when we aren't aware of them. These ideas thus "surround us, envelop us, and shape us, but do so in ways that we seldom discern" (Hughes 2018).

Narratives of this kind can obscure inequities, and when entrenched, they can also define collective aspirations and influence local culture. One such narrative that is baked into U.S. society is the ideology of white supremacy—the belief that white people are a "superior race" and should therefore dominate society. As Hughes (2018:3) explains, "Notions of white supremacy are so embedded into our common culture that most whites take them for granted, seldom reflecting on their pervasive presence or assessing them for what they are." Given the pervasiveness of this ideology, people of color may not only experience racism directed toward them from others but may internalize it as well; that is they can

come to believe the denigrative narratives and stereotypes regarding Black and Brown populations (Bonilla-Silva et al. 2004). In their work on rural racism, Agyeman and Spooner (1997) argue that these beliefs have a negative impact on self-identity and social cohesion.

A related narrative is that of colorblind racism, the belief that race can (and should) be ignored, and, that when it is, racism is no longer a problem. This kind of racism supports the implicit discrimination faced by communities of color through racial gaslighting. Covert and hidden forms of racial discrimination are swept aside and ignored as misunderstandings or *not really about race*. It is increasingly difficult to feel a sense of belonging in the face of both kinds of racism.

As insidious as these narratives are, however, our findings suggest that within rural spaces, a second narrative parallels (and in some cases reveals the extent of) colorblind racism: classblindness. Here, poverty is either viewed through a lens of “deserving white poverty”—that is, believing that poor white people are impoverished due to failing or transitioning economies and because they are being displaced by non-white newcomers—or is viewed as linked solely to communities of color, thus erasing the presence of white poverty altogether. Neither frame is aligned with reality, but they are used to make decisions, nonetheless. Thus, as narratives shape cultural understandings, they also both implicitly (through ingrained ideological beliefs regarding people of color or the poor) and explicitly (through strategic use of narrative to frame towns in specific ways) affect town-level decisions regarding racial and class-based inequalities.

Examining such narratives can both reveal local truths and processes, and, also, disrupt normative power structures (Bonilla-Silva et al. 2004; Ewick and Sibley 1995; Fraser 1990; hooks 2015). For example, in her study of community activism in Chicago, Gonzales (2021) highlights the efforts of activists from a low-income and African American neighborhood to transform negative narratives of their community as violent and unruly. The activists highlighted local efforts to address systemic failures, such as a lack of political representation and an abundance of vacant city-owned land. Through creating counternarratives, the activists improved social cohesion and were able to attract additional resources from the city to improve local conditions. As Ewick and Sibley (1995) claim, these dual capabilities—“to reveal truth and to unsettle power”—are interlinked. They both reflect local culture and serve as a mechanism by which to change that culture (for instance, to be more inclusive, or less inclusive).

To be more specific, understanding narratives allows us to uncover entrenched social divisions within rural spaces, and elsewhere, and also

untangle the knotted ways that white supremacy, race, class, and rurality have become linked within the American imaginary. For example, as Duncan (2014) establishes, rural communities evidence clear class divides, with high poverty rates at least partially influenced by federal and municipal policies. These policies can trap individuals in cycles of generational poverty. These cycles are then exacerbated by moral codes regarding deservingness and narratives about race, with poor Black and Latina/o/x populations further denigrated by their wealthier counterparts as lazy and uncivilized (Duncan 2014; Sandoval 2012). Narratives regarding race and class (what we can also understand as stereotypes) thus support social divisions by framing the poor as choosing government subsidies over paid work, which reflect beliefs that appear in the media and are repeated in many rural areas.

Popular narratives of small towns are also informed by emotions and may seem to be in tension with residents' lived experiences, as identified by Hochschild (2016) in her work in rural Louisiana. While there, she found white rural residents engaged in emotional (but not economic or physical) self-interest. They seemed to experience "a giddy release from the feeling of being a stranger in one's own land" by engaging principally with those who echoed their sentiments regarding the white working-class (228). This response helped compensate for feeling left behind in national conversations regarding cultural and economic issues. Duina (2017) similarly found white rural residents to be hopeful and firmly believing in narratives of opportunity for those willing to work, despite their own experiences to the contrary. Narratives, these studies show, engage emotions to draw people in and frame their experiences.

These and other kinds of narratives regarding small towns create shared cultures and histories that inform local struggles. They can also support systems of white supremacy that support racial and class-based discrimination. Common narratives center white, middle-class practices, defining them as normative and, explicitly or implicitly, vilifying African American, immigrant, and Latina/o/x cultures as strange, different, and inherently lower-class (Muñoz 2006; Winkler 2010). We see this in accepted norms of dress, speech, and comportment. For instance, in references to Black culture as "urban" or "inner city" regardless of geographic location. When normative whiteness becomes central to local culture, it perpetuates colorblind racism by excluding communities of color from the rural landscape (Agyeman and Spooner 1997; Muñoz 2006). Additionally, through classblindness, it can serve to equate poverty with Blackness and Brownness, thus situating poverty within moral and racist frameworks and erasing the prevalence of white poverty.

As can be seen, there is a rich and growing literature on the role of narrative in framing and sustaining systems of inequality. We expand upon the work of these scholars to also consider the linkages between narratives and discursive frames. Frames serve to highlight relevance, meaning, and connections between various social phenomenon (Snow, Vliegthart and Ketelaars 2018). The use of words to create normative narratives of racial and class-based difference leads to the development of discursive frames. These frames work in conjunction with narratives to support collective goals and affect local and national policies (Keck and Sikkink 1998). As Steinberg (1998) argues, words provide “the structure by which actors fashion frames into narratives.” In small rural towns, discursive frames promoting racial neutrality promise access to the American Dream through hard work and sacrifice (Clope and Little 1997; Sherman 2021). Thus, we get the belief that: if someone is poor it is because she is lazy and/or unwilling to sacrifice to better herself or her family. This frame then sets boundaries for decision making by obscuring racism and classism. Frames, like narratives, however, are not static and are not necessarily harmful. People adjust, expand, and transform them over time, and groups can actually use framing and narrative to *disrupt* colorblind racism and classblindness, and reveal structures and attitudes that maintain racial and class inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Gonzales 2022).

Despite such possible interventions, however, beliefs about race and class endure, and colorblind racism and classblindness continue to perpetuate norms of middle-class white culture and white supremacy. By upholding a racial order that centers both whiteness and middle-class norms, discursive frames that center particular kinds of narratives forge an ideological framework that operates subtly to inform public decisions (Polletta et al. 2011). As Polletta (2006), highlights, the power of these narratives is that they exist in a web of multiple stories that uphold a particular version of reality. For example, white people’s desire to not “feel like a stranger in their own land” and “regain” their country from the poor and communities of color highlights a framing of changing demographics that simultaneously blames *perceived* newcomers² for a variety of social ills and undermines equality and inclusion. Such framing, particularly of Latinas/os/xs, and African Americans, promotes narratives that support physical violence and seek to restrict political and cultural citizenship. The power of these enduring narratives lies in what *feels true* for those with decision-making power and can, ultimately, impact resident engagement and reify normative reflections of rural spaces. As we asked at the outset, given the power of narrative and discursive frames in perpetuating

colorblind racism and classblindness, how might these stories and words impede efforts for social equality in rural spaces?

Methods

The research team includes a multiracial sociology professor of Mexican American descent, from a working-class background, and with familial ties to both the rural and urban Midwest. A South Asian graduate anthropology student from a lower-middle-class background, and a white undergraduate sociology student from a middle-class background are also on the team. We draw on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork and on thirty interviews with nonprofit staff, residents, community development professionals, and town officials to analyze the impact of narrative in perpetuating discrimination based on class and race.

Interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observations were conducted by the graduate student and the professor between 2018 and 2019. The undergraduate student assisted with data analysis and coding (she highlighted the importance of narrative in many of the interviews) and the literature review. Prior to beginning the study, the professor and graduate student had for two years been members of a community engagement committee in the town of Moses. Both our backgrounds and our involvement on this committee provided us with insider/outsider perspective that allowed for an established rapport with interlocutors and entre into hard-to-reach populations. It also provided background understanding on the ways that narratives frame town-level decisions. We left the committee in May of 2017 and did not begin data collection on the project until August of 2018.

Beginning in the summer of 2018, we applied focused ethnography, in which a researcher is on site for a minimum of three-months. Recognizing that prolonged ethnographic immersion allows for deeper connections with interlocutors, we continued to develop relationships with key residents as we collected observational data. Seeking to remain “semi-insiders,” we attended thirty, two-hour meetings and five public events, which informed open-ended interview questions. After eight months of ethnographic data collection, the professor and graduate student coded the fieldnotes for emergent themes and co-developed the interview schedule. We began interviewing ten months into the study, developing a purposive sample with a snowball technique to recruit interlocutors. Residents were compensated with a \$50 gift card to a local grocery store.

Because our interlocutors were experts in a variety of fields—planning, government, philanthropy, small business, education, and daily life—we implemented an expert-as-informant protocol, in which researchers ask

interlocutors to guide them through social processes and understandings of social practices (Dexter 2006). We interviewed five town leaders and 25 residents, of which 10 were in leadership positions (nonprofit staff, small business owners), and 15 were non-elite residents—we view them as experts on daily life in Moses—from a variety of class and racial backgrounds. Town leaders were all exclusively white, and residents in leadership positions were almost equally split along racial and ethnic lines (3 Black, 4 Latina/o/x, 3 white). Non-elite residents ranged in age from 20–85 years old, 7 identified as white, 5 as Black, 2 as Latina/o/x, and 1 as Indigenous. Most self-identified as lower middle-class (7 white) to low income (6 Black, Latina/o/x, and Indigenous). The protocol used, combined with semi-structured interview questions, allowed interlocutors the space and time to narrate their own experiences and guide the conversation in a way that made sense to them.

Semi-structured interviews occurred in interlocutors' homes, their business offices, local cafés and restaurants, and reserved rooms at a local college or community center. Because some residents felt more comfortable in a group setting, we provided the option to join a focus group with no more than five people. We conducted eight focus group sessions and eight individual interviews, with a total of thirty respondents. Individual interviews averaged one hour; focus groups lasted two hours. In addition to formal interviews, we also engaged in informal conversations with fourteen residents during the course of data collection at meetings and public events. In addition to building rapport, these conversations shed light on residents' sense of belonging to the town.

Interviews and fieldnotes were recorded using the Echo SmartPen, which allows for audio and textual recording. Audio recording was used for interviews, while textual recording of fieldnotes allowed us to easily transfer maps, drawings, and text from our fieldnotes to the computer for analysis. Given that analysis occurred between researchers with various experiences with qualitative research (faculty member, graduate student, undergraduate student) and with a diversity of backgrounds and experiences, all interview responses and fieldnotes were then uploaded and coded in Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software package, by one researcher and at different stages of the coding process reliability checks were made by the second and third investigator. To ensure intercoder consistency, or what we can understand as *trustworthiness* in the data, we discussed any differences in coding decisions until consensus was reached and/or adjustments were made to the codes or definitions (O'Connor and Joffe 2020). It should be noted, we were aiming for consistency in understanding the codebook and in our analysis of the data, and not a reliability score. From these initial codes, we co-developed analytical

themes for the data (Corbin & Strauss 2015; Thomas & Harden 2008). For this paper, those themes centered on (1) narratives regarding the town and certain neighborhoods, (2) race and racial inequity, and (3) class. As can be seen in Table 1, there were 105 instances of narratives, 76 instances of class, and 486 instances of race or racial inequity. The quotes used below are representative of comments made during interviews, focus groups, and informal conversations with the researchers.

“Maybe It’s a Myth”: Narratives of Race and Class in Moses

During our many conversations, residents of Moses overwhelmingly highlighted race, class, and related inequalities in narratives of their town (see Table 1). Most were concerned with growing poverty, lack of racial representation, and apathy regarding the economy. Still, even with these frustrations, many also highlighted their love of the community and commitment to the town. As we observed local interactions and spoke with residents both formally during interviews and informally at town events, we came to relate many of their hopes and frustrations to specific narratives rooted in colorblind racism and classblindness that framed both interpersonal interactions and local decisions.

Moses is What You Make It: Discursive Framing of Individual Experiences

Most of the people we spoke with had lived their whole lives in Moses and had nearby family ties. Others had decided to move there. When

Table 1. Coding Themes

MetaCodes and Subcodes	# of Instances	# of Responders
<i>Race and racial inequity</i>		
Race	157	21
Discrimination	140	21
Marginalized voices	115	19
Racialization of class	12	6
Racialization of poverty	14	7
Racialization of place/ space	36	9
Assimilation	12	5
Total	486	
<i>Narratives</i>		
Narratives	82	22
Nostalgia	23	11
Total	105	
<i>Class</i>		
Class	76	21
Total	76	

we asked what attracted them, all highlighted safety, peace of mind, and desire to live in a small place. In conversation with a group of women after their church meeting, Mary, a white, elderly resident from the lower middle-class, explained,

I knew that a smaller community is what was going to be right for my family lifestyle. I wanted my children to have the experiences that I had growing up in another small town, which was getting on my bike and riding a couple of blocks next to my best friend's house, um, walking to the ice cream shop.

Other residents echoed this sentiment: “I’m happy about the situation. It’s much better and peaceful here. It’s more convenient being out here doing what I need to do. I get a peace of mind. I don’t have a lot of people getting on my nerves and stuff” and “I love, love, love my town, and I love my community. I’m committed to making this the best place so people will want to live here. [Moses] has had its ups and downs ... But goodness and happiness is what you make it.”

Regina, a young, single African American mother who had recently arrived from the nearby city, Leertown, cited residents’ generosity, access to social services, a reasonable cost of living, and a greater sense of safety and security, although this was limited. Regina did report challenges in the town when compared to the city she was accustomed to—she lamented the lack of adequate public transportation and nearby safe places for her children to play. Much of Moses was inaccessible by bus, which had limited service at night and on weekends, so she regularly walked two miles from the factory where she worked the night shift to her home in public housing on the northwest end of town. The lack of transportation meant that she was also unable to attend downtown GED courses or take her children to many of the large public parks. Despite these challenges, Regina maintained that she preferred Moses because she was grateful for the opportunities it provided her children regarding safety, education, and “an easier life.” She was adamant that it was a peaceful place compared to Leertown, saying that she could walk in the town—even late at night—without fear of physical harm. When asked about residents’ negative views of the town, she stated, “I think that’s just a [Moses] attitude. I think [Moses] is just a very negative [place, residents view it negatively], I don’t know why. Yeah, there’s shitty things about [Moses], but there’s shitty things everywhere ... You have to bring peace amongst things of everything that you’re doing.” Regina was adamant that people who complain or only focus on the “bad things” will never find their peace

Not all residents were as enthusiastic about living in Moses. Some discussed the good old boys' network that prevented younger populations, women, and people of color from successfully operating small businesses. Others highlighted histories of sexism and racism. During our conversation with Regina, another young, African American woman by the name of Sonya and her teenage daughter joined us for about 45 minutes. Similar to Regina, Sonya had also moved from Leertown in search of a better life. Unlike Regina, however, she was vocal about the level of anti-Black racism in the town that both she and her daughter experience and highlighted several instances of it, including issues with neighbors and local police. For example, prior to moving into public housing, Sonya had lived in a small house on the south end of town. Soon after she moved in, she noticed that her neighbor, a middle-aged, white male, hung up a very large confederate flag—a symbol that is often used to both assert white dominance and intimidate communities of color, particularly African Americans. Rather than allow this flag to terrorize her, Sonya decided to remove some of its power by hanging her own confederate flag. This resulted in an encounter with the local police, who asked her and her neighbor to remove their flags.

As Sonya recounted this story, she simultaneously laughed and became frustrated. She astutely noted that the flag had not been an issue for local authorities until she decided to co-opt it and disrupt the meaning of what it symbolized. Yet, she was amused by her neighbor's reaction of disbelief and annoyance that she would dare diminish his attempt to frighten her. Sonya used narrative—through story telling—to both highlight ongoing racial tensions in the town and to assert her ability to counteract these injustices. She attempted to disrupt the discursive frame surrounding the confederate flag—as a symbol of whiteness and white heritage used to exclude and intimidate unwanted African American residents—by asserting that a Black woman could co-opt and fly it, thus negating its power over her. However, her neighbor's ability to invoke the state—through the police department—to force a removal of the flags (albeit from both houses) served to rebalance the temporary disruption Sonya caused to this dominant narrative. Her efforts ultimately led to her eviction from the rental house, which was why she had moved to public housing.

Soon after Sonya and her daughter left the conversation, Regina leaned in and whispered that Sonya has problems precisely because she brings negative energy to herself. Rather than acknowledging or resisting the impact of racism and racist symbols, Regina believed that one should ignore issues of interpersonal racism and focus on bettering themselves. For Regina, Moses's amenities and cost of living, together

with a desire to view the town as giving and loving, outweighed structural inequalities, interpersonal racism, and limited access to public goods. Here, Regina is asserting a colorblind discursive frame that dismisses Sonya's experiences and understandable anger as solely negative energy. This narrative indicates that if Sonya, like Regina, would only focus on the positive things in Moses, her life would improve and she would not experience, or be affected by, acts of racism.

Regina's and Sonya's views on the town reveal tensions between hoping for a better or peaceful life by ignoring injustices and acknowledging and fighting against instances of racial violence. They also reveal the impact of both storytelling and discursive frames in managing race and class-based discrimination. These tensions were evident in other conversations as well, particularly for those who, unlike Regina and Sonya, lived on the south end and had deep historic ties to the town.

The South End: Space, Class, Race and the Discursive Framing of Leadership & Local Decisions

Narratives regarding what it meant to live in different parts of town served to perpetuate a harmful racialized status quo as well. This was most evident in narratives of the south end that were rooted in histories of oppression and dispossession. These narratives contributed to the disenfranchisement of the poor and segregated populations of color and perpetuated norms of middle-class whiteness. Since the late 1800s, the south end had housed the white working-class alongside a historic population of African American and Mexican American residents, many tied to local industries. Maribel, a life-long resident of Moses whose family immigrated to the town from Mexico in the 1930s, recounted how her racialized ethnicity was oftentimes linked to her neighborhood: "I know what it was like in the south end, I know what it's like to be labeled. Um, because you live on the south end, you may not be as smart; you might be loose if you're a woman. It was obviously evident growing up. When I dated, boys would say they liked me but couldn't introduce me to their families because I'm a Mexican ... and they would call us names, like 'sweat treats' like we were playthings." Because she lived on the south end, Maribel had been labeled unworthy, unintelligent, and immoral. Spatial markers that linked one's neighborhood and ethnoracial background with class provided a discursive framework to define poverty as a moral failing rooted in racial difference. In meetings, at events, and in conversations, residents and town officials alike would interchangeably talk about poverty, the conditions of poverty (for instance, low education levels, long-term unemployment, drug use), the Mexican and African

American communities, and the south end as one and the same. So that the south end served as a stand-in for undesirable and unredeemable low-income communities of color.

Lucia, a mid-thirties, Mexican American volunteer with a local nonprofit organization noted the different treatment she received in a more affluent part of town:

When I lived on the south end of town, nobody [at the city or in the nonprofit sector] asked me questions about how I felt about the town or to serve on committees or on nonprofit boards. But now that I'm on the northern end of town, it's completely different. I think when you're on the northern end of town, you're typically asked questions right away. You're considered sooner than other people.

Similar to Maribel, Lucia highlights the spatialized narratives of race and class. As Lucia suggests, town leaders view the south end and its residents as unable to provide legitimate feedback regarding local decisions. Once Lucia moved to a more affluent area and became embedded within community initiatives, only then was she asked for insights into local issues. As a Mexican American woman, although one with indigenous features (medium-tan skin-tone, wide-set face, jet black hair), Lucia was able to enter into spaces of whiteness with greater ease due to her spatial location and supposed class-background. This ability, however, often came at a price. With her alliances questioned and her opinions, though asked, often ignored in meetings. For instance, at a community meeting regarding a local church Lucia regularly tried to interject with feedback and suggestions. However, we watched as meeting leaders consistently dismissed her ideas and ignored her comments. Throughout the meeting, Lucia became quieter and quieter, as her shoulders hunched, her head lowered, and she disengaged by checking her smartphone.

Narratives regarding poverty and race not only influenced perceptions of residents, but also impacted town elites' decisions on local policies. As interviews and focus groups revealed, town elites deemed certain voices, including those in the south end, less legitimate, as we saw with Maribel and Lucia to an extent, and residents, also, feared this part of town. One interlocutor elaborated, "They [the local decision makers] think that's where all the drugs and, and people that literally have no money. So the city doesn't want to invest there." Another stated, "Well [the south end] is a poor area, you know; because it's a poor area, we see obvious issues like crime, drugs. So, we're not going to pay attention to it." And, yet another highlighted

“maybe it’s a myth because maybe it is a myth. Right? Maybe we just tell ourselves that [about the south end]? Because it’s like the bootstrap myth, maybe it became so ingrained that that’s all we say. *If you tell yourself you’re going to see this, that’s what you’re going to see*” [emphasis added]. Regardless of background and ability, south end residents were viewed negatively, with Black and Mexican identity equated with poverty and deviance.

Established frames rendered only certain narratives visible. Perceptions of a racialized area thus affect both interpersonal relationships and municipal decisions. As Andrea, an African American woman in her late 20s, explained,

In regards [sic] to mindset, there’s a way of thinking about that area. When people talk about reaching out to the Black community, they immediately say, “Oh we have to go to the south.” Which yes, there are people of color in those neighborhoods, and, yes, it is lower income. But I’m uncomfortable linking the two ... Like if you’re poor, you have to be Black. Um, and not recognizing that there are a lot of people who are not people of color who are poor, and there are some people of color who are not poor at all.

As Andrea, notes, narratives regarding poverty, race, and class both frame interpersonal interactions and town-level decisions. Poverty is linked to communities of color, which then translates to all people of color are poor. Relatedly, wealth is therefore linked to whiteness, which results in the erasure of white poverty.

Emma, a lifelong Mexican American resident and local leader that is in her mid-sixties attempted to counter these kinds of narratives by noting the link between drug use and both race and class in the town’s discursive frame:

Um, the rich kids have the money to buy their drugs and things. But the people at the top, you know the people who make decisions, they want to believe it’s the kids on the south end that [use drugs]. But I can tell you, there’s a lot of kids who don’t live on the south end who use. But we don’t want to talk about them; they aren’t the problem.

As Emma described the presence of drug use beyond the south end it became apparent that she was also using shorthand descriptions to conflate race, class, and space. For Emma, “the rich kids” were the wealthier, white kids who mostly lived on the north end. Here we see Emma challenging narratives of the south end, while simultaneously replicating narratives—to be wealthy means to be white—and creating new ones—drug use also occurs in places of wealth and status and among the more privileged.

Over the course of our time in Moses, community outreach to low-income Latina/o/x and Black areas outside of the south end and poor white areas was limited, and issues raised by poor white residents, particularly housing, jobs with a living wage and drug abuse, were often ignored by decision makers. For instance, in our conversation with the local County Commissioner Joseph Andrews, a middle-aged white man, we asked about ongoing issues in the town. Sitting in his pristine office housed in a renovated factory in downtown Moses, he highlighted many positive ways that Moses was progressing, but then went on to say that negative narratives of the town prevented its residents from moving into the future. When pressed about what he meant by that statement, Joseph talked about how many residents overly focused on local issues, such as loss of industry, presence of low-wage jobs, lack of entertainment, and perceived classism and racism.

Joseph went on to provide an example, “for instance, we have a large long-term unemployed population who, frankly, I don’t see us finding any solutions for. I’m focused on growing local talent in the school system and in attracting young professionals.” We highlighted the links between long-term unemployment, poverty, and racial divides in the town. However, when pressed, Joseph sidestepped the question and, instead, went on to state that local officials were working to attract employable “talent” by transforming the local culture and changing the local narrative to a more aspirational one. Joseph highlighted that programming focused on the south end or targeted at long-term unemployed workers was a money-pit, with few gains showed. Instead, he asserted that local nonprofits could shoulder that problem, he was more interested in “being forward thinking,” and instead focused on events targeted at young professionals—like a happy hour at a local, organic restaurant, or casino nights with hefty entrance fees. Joseph’s adamant—and at times quite frustrated—refusal to discuss long-term poverty or to think through programming that might successfully address these issues, similarly, echoed his refusal to discuss issues of race or racial inequality. He simply would not talk about it. This refusal and visible frustration echoed other elites’ responses when asked about poverty and race in Moses. This, precisely, is the insidious impact of colorblind racism and classblindness. It is not only the idea that we are all equal and have access to the same outcomes, but also by ignoring the presence of these problems, they will somehow just go away.

Limited outreach to low-income workers and the long-term unemployed served to perpetuate the elite narrative regarding a lack of skilled workforce. For instance, in response to locals concerns at public events regarding a lack of living wage jobs, we heard dismissive statements from

local, white, middle-aged, male business owners and elected officials such as, “we have plenty of available jobs, but no one here [has the skills to] fill them” and “workers here first have to learn to be on time and pass a drug test.” These statements were always followed up by more aspirational proclamations regarding how much the town of Moses had to offer to the right kind of worker. During these conversations there was a tension between workers’ articulated realities of long-term unemployment and experiences with racial and class discrimination, and the hopeful desire of local elites to attract wealthier individuals who could help to revitalize the town.

In our conversation regarding this narrative, Andrea frustratingly stated, “I keep hearing this over and over again ... the major complaint of all the employers ... is ‘I need a workforce that has soft skills. I need them to be able to pass a drug test. I just need them to be able to pass a drug test and look me in my eye. Or like shake hands or whatever the case may be.’” She proceeded to discuss this disconnect between local employers, town decision-makers and residents, and its roots in racism,

So, let’s take some steps back and ask, why aren’t they tapping into the Black community? Because they don’t see value in lifetime workers like they say that they do. Because if they did, they would have already tapped into that ... and had an ingrained Black population that had more than a livable wage. A lot of people, if they live here and are Black, don’t work here. Instead, people are working out at John Deere, which is in [the city], people working with Caterpillar, which is in [another city]. They [local employers] don’t want to pay people and they don’t want long-term hard workers, but instead of saying that, they say that they can’t find quality people.

As indicated above, these narratives result in town decision makers ignoring local issues and, inherently, washing their hands of structural inequalities that lead to long-term unemployment and high rates of poverty among Black and Latina/o/x populations, with growing poverty among whites as well. Requirements to pass a drug test, shake someone’s hand, and arrive to work on time are seemingly reasonable requests. Yet, the discursive framing of an unskilled workforce as unable to pass basic requirements absolves city officials and employers from addressing these long-term problems. This narrative—that Moses lacks local talent—also ignores histories of racism and classism that locked African American and Mexican American populations out of the local workforce. The effects of which are evident in the high rates of poverty in these groups and felt by newcomers,

like Regina, and also poor whites who were equally lumped into the unemployable population.

When asked about how the city was attempting to address issues among poor whites, Alan, a white small business owner in his mid-30s who was involved with the town council reflected, “I wish we would have [reached out to] like the trailer park or with other impoverished white people. I might be wrong, but I don’t remember us specifically thinking to ask poor white people about [their thoughts].” Joseph, the County Commissioner, had a similar assessment of community outreach to white populations in the south end: “I think we did better than most things in this city, because the city honestly sucks at reaching out to the southern end of town,” he said. “I mean it’s just standard city issue. And I don’t know why. I think there’s just that block in terms of who matters and who doesn’t.” As Joseph realized, narratives regarding who matters, who is impoverished, and who requires access to resources were so ingrained in local culture that residents and leaders were often surprised when the researchers asked about specific groups. For Alan, Joseph, and others in the town, the inability to even consider white poverty renders poor whites invisible to local decision makers, thus negating broader social issues in the town.

Narratives regarding racialized poverty serve to frame policies that lead to further marginalization of various groups. Town-elites were unwilling to entertain poverty reduction policies—as we saw with Joseph and his thoughts on the long-term unemployed—unless they explicitly saw data that indicated whites would also benefit. Laura, a white woman in her sixties, sat on a local board of education and had advocated for scholarships. Asked about perceptions of Black and Latino/a/x residents, she became agitated. “I often advocate for different kinds of scholarships for our students,” she replied,

So many of them can’t afford to go to college, and we should really want them to succeed. But when I push for more scholarship money, the other board members hem and haw and don’t want to allocate more money. Some have said, “Well, they [meaning Black and Mexican kids] already get so many handouts, and we just don’t have the budget.” So, in the last meeting I showed them demographic information about our students and student poverty, and they saw that there’s also poor white students who would benefit. Then! Ugh! Then they say, ‘Oh well, there’s some quality people here, so yeah we should increase the scholarship money.’ They automatically assume poverty means Black or Brown kids, and they automatically assume that they aren’t worthy of scholarship money. It makes me angry.

As Laura also recognized, ideas about race, culture, and poverty frame decisions that determine access to power and resources. Moral narratives regarding racialized poverty erase white poverty while maintaining that poor whites are “quality people” deserving of additional resources. White poverty, in this sense, oftentimes goes unseen by power elites and, unless attention is forced and it is directly linked to some kind of success (as is the case with students and high grades), poor whites are then viewed as either not really white or not white enough. This perpetuates a national myth of persistent, and exclusive, Black and Brown poverty—and by extension other social issues such as high crime, drug use, teen pregnancy, among others—while also either racializing poor whites as, explicitly, non-white or erasing the presence of white poverty altogether (Gilens 1999; Gonzalez Van Cleve 2016).

While white poverty may go unseen by local elites, when it is explicitly highlighted that *deserving* poor, white populations could also benefit from social services, only then are resources increased to everyone. This phenomenon is not unique to Moses. Other scholars, such as Gilens (1999) and Fox (2004), found similar connections linking race, space, and poverty. Narratives of poverty, deservingness, and the right kind of Moses resident also resulted in the erasure of Mexican and African American residents from local history.

Welcome to Moses: Erasure of Racial Difference and History Through Discursive Framing

Discursive narratives within Moses served to frame interpersonal experiences with racism, local decisions regarding employment and education, and resulted in the erasure of white poverty. This framing also rendered African American and Mexican American history, contributions, and cultures as absent from the town narrative. When asked about their experiences in Moses, African American and Mexican American residents often cited lack of representation in both town narratives and in positions of power. Annie, a young African American professional who had returned to Moses to be closer to family, highlighted ongoing frustrations: factionalism, lack of community engagement, and absence from the town narrative. Throwing up her arms, she leaned back in her chair and exclaimed,

When people, like the city, the department of tourism, whoever, talk about the history of the town, they conveniently leave out our history of racism. Like [Moses Park, a large green area, with a lake, beachfront, bike and walk paths, and fishing areas, located

on the north end of town]. It used to have a Black side [that was also reserved for Mexicans] and the north side [for whites]. Black people [and Mexicans] couldn't go to the theater. We conveniently leave that out. The [history of Mexican Americans in this community], I didn't know about that until I was a full-fledged adult. Like, wait, what happened? So, we have all these festivals that celebrate our history, but really whose history and heritage are we talking about here? Like you want to talk about the celebratory pieces of white history but not what was also a problem?

Annie raises issues of a nostalgic past that ignores histories of racism, dispossession, and segregation. This erasure conveniently negates the contributions and deep roots of its African American and Mexican American populations. Thus, it not only presents the town in a specific, *white*, light, it also robs both history and cultural belonging from communities of color. As very few people learn of the town's historic and diverse populations, this erasure situates Mexican American and African American populations as recent in-movers.

In a focus group meeting at a local community center, Nathan, a retired Black man who has been active in a variety of Moses initiatives, noted that he never sees people of color in the town's promotional literature. For instance, in 2012 the local tourism agency released a ninety-second ad, *Moses: A historic town*, to highlight scenic areas, with a focus on the downtown shops and restaurants. Throughout the video, one views images and footage of seemingly, white, middle-class couples and families enjoying what Moses has to offer. Referencing this ad, Nathan stated, "You watch that [Moses' tourism] commercial, and there is not one person of color in that whole video. And I've eaten at the restaurants they show, and I've shopped at, you know, those places in our historic district. It's not just white people. There's other people here." In a similar focus group meeting with Mexican American residents, several mentioned erasure of people of color with comments like, "they had the Mexicans living in [shantytowns], and a lot of people didn't know about it." Or "I make sure to tell my grandkids this history, that we aren't newcomers, my parents came in the 1930s! We've contributed to the town, and we aren't what they [town-level elites] say we are." Narratives, these residents suggest, inform feelings of exclusion, local policy, and contribute to an erasure of the town's complex and ethnically and racially diverse history.

Members of the town council and other local leaders expressed little concern about the absence of people of color from the town's media, literature, and discussions. Similar to Joseph and Regina, they lamented criticisms of the town as "sour grapes." For these elites, the town was presenting its relevant history and noting its cultural amenities. Collective

erasure of the town's communities of color and its history of racial exclusion, however, perpetuated colorblind racism and classblindness. A narrative of unmarked whiteness centered only uplifting stories of white middle-class residents and their desires.

Stories that valorize only the histories, cultures and contributions of middle-class white people also devalue the cultures, histories, and accomplishments of other groups. These stories shape the outlook of all residents, including ethnic and racial insiders who may not be included in notions of whiteness. Narratives not only impact local decisions but also contribute to apathy and disenfranchisement among local populations. As one interlocutor noted, "If I [a white person] am supposed to be on top, then why am I at the bottom? Everyone keeps telling me I'm privileged but I don't *feel* it." Feelings of disenfranchisement compel people to support their perceived self-interests (Gilens 1999; Hochschild 2016). If poor whites—even those receiving resources—feel neglected in conversations about alleviating poverty, they are less likely to make common cause with Black and Latina/o/x populations. Yet, as McGhee (2021) argues, the inherent racism and classism that frames social policy and broader narratives of deservingness and undeservingness impacts everyone, from African Americans, to Latinas/os/xs, to whites, and beyond.

Conclusion

Narratives regarding race and poverty influenced both the ways Moses residents navigated town life and the local decisions regarding funding and outreach to communities of color and poor whites. Discursive frames that link class, race, place, and behavior negatively influence opportunities and perceptions of the south end and communities of color, in the same way that they impact positive feelings of the town overall. Personal bias impedes local decision makers ability to view broader social issues in the town through a complex lens. Examining the ways that narratives—through discursive frames—influence local perceptions and decisions revealed both the presence of colorblindness and classblindness. Discursive framing and narrative, used by residents, including communities of color, and decision-makers, perpetuated perceptions of the town's south end as both an undesirable location and home to undesirable and racialized populations. As a result, town leaders often linked poverty and the south end with communities of color and, as a result, overlooked concerns of these residents and the issues that affected them.

Narratives regarding race and deservingness undergirded perceptions of place and poverty. With African American and Mexican American populations viewed as undeserving, problem populations that were always low-income. Concurrently, white poverty, and its related issues of

job insecurity, educational access, and drug addiction, to name a few, was erased and ignored unless directly challenged with clear, deserving examples of low-income whites. Relying on colorblind racism and class-blind discursive frames, the town's decision makers explicitly overlooked racial discrimination and allowed beliefs regarding race and class to inform local decisions.

Tensions between small town elites and marginalized populations are not unique to Moses. Nationally, narratives of small-town America continue to frame rural residents' views of themselves, their communities, and their towns, regardless of local realities. As indicated at the outset, popular imaginings of *rural spaces* as *white spaces* erases both the historic and growing presence of communities of color and their contributions to small towns. Related ideas regarding race and class can also continue to promote negative perceptions of African American and Mexican American residents. These combined narratives—of space, class, and race—impacts feelings of belonging, and informs both town-level decisions and interpersonal relationships, across racial and class lines. For example, we've shown how marginalized communities, in response to various forms of marginalization, may invoke narratives to lift themselves up. However, this can be at the expense of amplifying or creating new forms of micro-hierarchy, where, for instance, racialized and/or classed minorities create further systems of stratification among themselves, as we see with Sonya and Regina. Or, conversely, where new homogenizing narratives emerge that link deviant behavior with more privileged populations, as we see with Emma. Concurrently, narratives serve to impact local decisions regarding resources, who to include in town-level decisions, and, ultimately, who matters when thinking about rural towns. In both interpersonal and town-level decisions, understanding narratives that are linked to colorblind racism and classblindness reveal not only racial and class-based tensions in small, rural towns, but also contributes to our understandings of place and belonging.

We, also, see these kinds of discursive frames emerging in areas outside of rural America. As towns, suburbs, and small cities diversify and we continue to see rising rates of poverty across ethnic and racial backgrounds, locals will increasingly wrestle with competing narratives. This raises questions for rural and urban scholars interested in social cohesion and belonging, community development, poverty (including the suburbanization of poverty and growing rural poverty), civic engagement, and governance. This also raises questions regarding potential coalition building between poor whites, Latinas/os/xs, and African Americans, and others, to address ongoing social inequities.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Given ongoing tensions, together with the small size of the town, we use pseudonyms for the town, organizations, and all interlocutors. To protect the identities of individuals, we have also changed identifying characteristics. Although we have not changed anyone's self-reported race or ethnicity, we have, at times, changed gender, occupation, or age.

² This framing also serves to situate white Europeans as the “original” peoples of the Americas and erases a history of forced displacement and genocide of indigenous nations.

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