

BOOK REVIEW

Men in Place: Trans Masculinity, Race, and Sexuality in America

Miriam J. Abelson, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2019 (ISBN: 978-15179-0351-0)

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Framed by queer theory, critical race theory, and feminist theory, Miriam J. Abelson's analysis of the interview-based research she conducted with sixty-six trans men residing in thirteen states across the western, midwestern, and southern regions of the US addresses both the underrepresentation of these regions and contributes to the deeper understandings of the particularities shaping normative or ideal masculinity governing rural, urban, and suburban spaces in these regions (5). Committed to critical feminist scholarly praxis, Abelson elevates the voices of participants whose ages range between nineteen and fifty-five, a little over half dwelling in urban areas and a quarter in the suburbs or in rented housing in rural areas. The bulk of these trans men are white, with one-fifth being men of color. Some men were just beginning to transition whereas others transitioned as long as twenty-two years prior to their interviews (20). Privileging the narratives of trans men also enables Abelson to contribute to discussions concerning masculinities in critical masculinity studies (CMS) and transgender studies. Concentrating on gender as her "primary category of analysis" (7), Abelson focuses on how "becoming a man"—a material process occurring via social interaction—is mediated through the ways that race, sexuality, and class lend themselves to specific characteristics shaping places in the South, Midwest, and West.

Written during a time of rising conservative backlash against trans people, and the slow uptick of trans men and masculinities in CMS, Abelson asserts that trans men are men (195). While attentive to the specificity of trans men and masculinities, the differences between trans men's experiences of masculinity, and the insight that transitioning offers to better grasp the complexities of masculinity as an always shifting governing process within particular places (4), Abelson integrates key concepts developed by CMS scholars (for example, Raewyn Connell's masculinities as "patterns of practice" [14]) to emphasize that all men must continuously become men—a performance that varies situationally and differs across space (48). Abelson focuses on trans men's experiences and transition as a vantage point to unpack the relational and situational dynamics shaping normative masculinity. Trans men provide much insight into social expectations and the politics of recognition underlining one's acceptance as a "regular" or "good guy."

Abelson employs "Goldilocks masculinity" (28) as the key concept to analyze the hybrid masculinity that trans men and nonbinary masculine subjects reproduce actively through negotiating the dynamics of place and space. Men are classified according to collectively held social meanings that exist along a continuum comprised of

hypermasculinity—>regular guys—>progressive men—>faggy men (26). Attentive to feminist geography, Abelson emphasizes that this continuum operates in tandem with a continuum of place and space. The West is understood as being more open; therefore, it produces and is home to progressive men. The Midwest produces more regular guys, whereas the South contains the most restricted spaces, thereby producing hypermasculinity (26). Trans men’s understanding of self, situational behaviors, and everyday interactions reflects how these controlling categorical cultural images of masculinity reinforce inequality and create opportunities for resistance.

Abelson argues that Goldilocks masculinity, as a hybrid masculinity, is a type of gender performance that reflects a receptivity to feminist, queer, and antiracist critiques yet “reinscribe[s] gender, racial and sexual inequality” (24, 51). Goldilocks masculinity is a middle ground on the continuum of masculinity between hypermasculinity (for example, the redneck of rural regions and the South and the urban-based thug) and progressive men (for example, social-justice-oriented men residing in larger urban areas) as two opposing poles. The specter of the “faggy man” rooted in misogyny is not tied to a particular region, but each space eschews gender expression tied to femininity and related to women.

Abelson is meticulously attentive to the ways that each representational category of masculinity is anchored to the operations of systemic power relations, including settler-colonialism, slavery and anti-black racism, white supremacy and nation-building, heteronormativity, and neoliberalism as the current regime of capitalist accumulation. Throughout the book, Abelson’s analysis of the primacy of Goldilocks masculinity, or hybrid masculinity, among trans men and nonbinary participants intersects with the ways that whiteness, middle class as ideal social location, and masculinity defined as the negation of the feminine is manifest in the specific places they reside.

The “spatial dimensions of hybrid masculinity” determining trans men’s ability to be recognized as men “in place” (148, 182) vary across regions and are particular to specific rural areas, suburbs, and cities. Nevertheless, the ways that participants spoke of their masculinity, their medical and social transitions, intimate relationships, and navigating institutional and public spaces reflect a similar thread running through their relationships to gender and to their everyday experiences. Regardless of its expression in the West, Midwest, or South, Goldilocks masculinity appears only as enlightened and non-threatening. Abelson demonstrates a stark similarity underneath diverse, place-related expressions of this hybrid masculinity. There is an absence of “substantive change” to dominant social relations. For example, trans men will seek to retain “control of the patriarchal home, reproduce the nuclear family, distance themselves from women and effeminacy while reinforcing white middle class suburban normality” (51–52). Although in-depth discussions of resistance are beyond the scope of the book, Abelson asserts the necessity of pinpointing how normative masculinity is manifested differently across regions to offer any sustainable challenge to gender, racial, and sexual inequality.

Abelson also creates space to strategize to fight for equity and social justice through focusing on how specific institutional sites are organized around the fear of, and the actual occurrence of genderphobic, homophobic, and racist violence (155). Abelson elevates participants’ voices to address their specific experiences while emphasizing that masculinity is not an individual matter. Focusing her analysis on washrooms and medical institutions—two key sites frequently discussed by participants—Abelson expands the concept “tyranny of gendered spaces” (155) and employs the concept of “amplified sites” (156) where the reinforcement of norms related to sexuality, gender, and race are

heightened. The fear and anxieties produced due to washrooms and medical settings being organized around policing and punishing gender-nonconforming bodies and behavior (155, 156) cause trans men to deviate from more hybrid or Goldilocks masculinities toward performing masculinity that reinforces homophobia (169) and obscures whiteness (163–64). She suggests that reorganizing public washrooms and medical settings to address the ways they reinforce class, race, and gender norms through violence (155) is key to equity-based struggles in the West, Midwest, and South.

Men in Place contributes significantly to critical masculinity and transgender studies through Abelson's interrogation of whiteness, her attentiveness to the ways that masculinities reproduce misogyny (that is, manifest in sexism and homophobia), as well as the centrality of class analysis. Abelson pierces the definitive silence of whiteness and demonstrates how white supremacy is operationalized throughout the West, Midwest, and South. White trans men were silent concerning whiteness and being white. "Race talk" (42) for white men involved a "discursive distancing" (43) from the redneck and the urban thug (42), the two cultural images of hypermasculinity against which they produced their hybrid masculinity.

Abelson emphasizes that rednecks exist as a "racial project" (34) by assigning negative aspects of whiteness to rural areas and the South, as well as to the poor and working class. White trans men discursively distanced themselves from racism, misogyny, and homophobia by continuously referencing rednecks and their twenty-first-century conservative Christian counterparts. White men performing more hybrid masculinities scapegoated rednecks by rendering them "explicitly marked white subjects" (34). Assigning racism to rednecks enables more implicit racism to go unchecked, given the widely understood conceptualization of the cultural image of the rebellious redneck who is historically rooted in settler-colonial genocide through dispossession of the land and antiblack racism (31). The prevalence of the redneck reproduces the misunderstanding of racism as an individually based hatred, redirecting focus away from the implicit whiteness embedded within institutional policies, structural dynamics, and subtle acts of discrimination, including microaggressions (35).

Discursive distancing among most white participants is but one example of Abelson's interrogation of whiteness. She also uncovers and challenges whiteness through an analysis of white trans men's fears of "spectacular violence" (128) primarily by analyzing participants' frequent discussions of the murder of Brandon Teena (132). References to Brandon Teena's murder reproduce spatial understandings of violence positing the Midwest and South as more dangerous. This crime was understood by many participants in terms of homo- and transphobic violence perpetrated by rednecks (135). Careful to point out that white trans men are susceptible to violence, Abelson concentrates on the ways that race, sexuality, and class rendered the black man, white woman, and Brandon Teena—who were all killed in this attack—more vulnerable to violence. While respecting her white participants' fears of violence, she points out that vulnerability to violence is not experienced uniformly across trans populations (128). She also shows how hybrid masculinity—white trans men's bid to not be "too soft" when dealing with their fears of violence and not appear as "deviant" perpetrators of violence (134)—distracts from how their playing within the rules of racism, sexism, and homophobia reproduces systemic inequities (132).

Abelson frames Trans Day of Remembrance (TDOR), a trans community-building event, as a "vulnerability ritual" (129) that often erases race, sexuality, and poverty by framing violence against trans people as solely transphobic (131). This framing obscures white supremacy while enabling white trans men to reinforce their own marginality

through rendering invisible antiblack violence, anti-Latinx violence (to name two examples of racialized violence), misogyny, and impoverishment. Moreover, such a “race to innocence” (Fellows and Razack on page 131) enables white trans men to “absolve . . . themselves of their culpability in any other forms of inequality and violence” (130).

Abelson’s centering class and political economy strengthens her critical analysis of masculinity. She takes great care to outline how the historical development of spatially based masculinities adhered to regional economic production (28). The western cowboy, the midwestern farmer, and the southern “good ol’ boy” emerged from rural economies based on agriculture, extraction of natural resources, and the management of such operations. Meticulous in her commitment to intersectional analysis, she deeply intertwines class-based masculinities with their roots in colonialism and slavery (28–30). These cultural images still occupy an important place regarding the formation of respectable masculinities according to the logics of whiteness, the working class, and heteronormativity that undergird them. Goldilocks masculinity—the hybrid masculinity espousing the performance of the regular guy—currently remains tied to middle-class ideals. The regular guy as the traditional breadwinner, for example, is demonstrated in midwestern and suburban ideals of masculinity (48). Black trans men, as another example, upheld middle-class ideals rooted in propriety as they worked to create a respectable distance between themselves and the racist cultural image of the hypermasculine thug (39, 41).

Men in Place is an ambitious effort that makes an invaluable contribution to trans studies and critical masculinity studies. Abelson demonstrates the ways that the masculine continuum privileging Goldilocks masculinity, a hybrid form, is formulated differently across the western, midwestern and southern states. Nevertheless, Goldilocks masculinity produced via whiteness, heteronormativity, and middle-class ideals—this desire to be acknowledged and respected as a regular guy—exists within multiple spaces and locations. Abelson warns trans and critical masculinity scholars of the ways that hybrid masculinity responds to feminist and antiracist critique that not only fails to challenge systemic power relations but reproduces them via distancing oneself from faggy masculinity (and other expressions of femininity) and the racist cultural image of the hypermasculine thug. Although trans men’s experiences offer deep insight into masculinities as an interrelational process within particular places, trans men cannot be held solely responsible as individuals for upholding whiteness, class-based oppression, heteronormativity, and misogyny. Resistance rooted in feminist praxis is a collective effort that pays keen attention to the local specificities of gender and its intersections with race, sexuality, and class.

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