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"Contrary to All the Other Shit I've Said": Trans Men Passing in the South

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Abstract
This article examines the influence of geographic location on trans men's desire to pass in the southeastern United States. Through 51 in-depth interviews with trans men, I find three key reasons for passing in the South: 1) self-confidence and psychological health; 2) the privileges of being a man; and 3) safety and fear of violence. These motives for passing are amplified in the South, where transphobic and homophobic incidences of discrimination and fear are elevated. The trans men in this study linked their increased desire to pass in the South to conservative religion, racism, and increased fear of violence. Although passing was important for all but one respondent, some of the men also discussed problems with the concept of passing and the negative consequences of passing as cis men.

Keywords Trans · Trans studies · Passing · The south · Trans men · Transphobia

Trans men have gained wider acceptance and visibility in the United States over the last decade (Abelson 2019; Sumerau and Mathers 2019). In fact, one of the first trans men to gain national media attention, Chaz Bono officially came out ten years ago in 2009. Chaz Bono, son of Sonny Bono and Cher, was the subject of a documentary, *Becoming Chaz*, in 2011. While increased acceptance and visibility over the last decade has changed the landscape for trans men in the United States, the southeastern United States remains socially and politically behind in accepting queer people (Abelson 2019; Barton 2012; Baunach et al. 2010; Sumerau and Cragun 2018). The increased heteronormativity and transphobia in the South (Bradford et al. 2013; Mathers et al. 2018) leave many trans men feeling the need to fit into the gender expectations of the region. This need to fit in, whether for self-confidence and psychological health, safety and fear, or the privileges that come with fitting in, leads to an increased desire for trans men in the region to pass as cisgender men.

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Trans Men "Doing Gender" Through Passing

Geographic location plays a key role in determining how trans men "do gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987). "Passing," in this study, denotes the ability of trans men to be seen as the gender they identify with (man, male, trans masculine, genderqueer, etc.), rather than to be seen as a woman based on the sex—female—they were assigned at birth by others (parents, medical providers, etc.) (Pfeffer 2017). The concept of passing holds negative connotations for some within academia (Pfeffer 2017; Stryker 2017) and some within the trans community (Catalano and Chase 2015). For instance, some trans men feel the concept of passing implies deceit, or that they are trying to be something they are not. Other trans men wish to pass but are afraid of the invisibility and other issues passing can cause (Catalano and Chase 2015). Although the term passing is contested, I argue it holds more potential than other concepts, such as "being recognized as" or "being read as," and is a concept many trans people continue to identify with. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the concept of passing and its continued importance in society today.

Historically, the term passing was first used regarding race, specifically in reference to runaway slaves. Passing signified a nonwhite person who was seen as white (Dawkins 2012); passing as white allowed runaway slaves to escape from slavery (for more on the history of passing in the United States, see Hobbs 2014). Therefore, from its conception, "passing was imbricated with strivings for freedom" (Hobbs 2014, 30). Since colonial times, passing has also been used by other minorities—in terms of gender, sexuality, religion, ability, etc.—to gain power in an unequal and hierarchical society. Passing in this sense is not about hiding who you are; rather, it is about being accepted for who you are and achieving your goals in an unequal society (Dawkins 2012). Consequently, to argue that "passing is passé is to presuppose that the concepts of race and racism," along with gender, sexism, transphobia, sexuality, homophobia, heteronormativity, etc., are also obsolete (Dawkins 2012, 4; Schoenfeld 2014). This rhetoric that passing is outdated relates to our current post-everything society—post-racist, post-feminist, post-sexist, etc. Despite the ideas of many conservatives that we live in a post-oppression society, where "diversity" and "multiculturalism" are celebrated, most Americans continue to believe in the innateness of race, gender, and sexuality and support the inequalities these beliefs uphold (Dawkins 2012; Schoenfeld 2014). In this society, where hierarchies of identities still prevail, passing continues to be a "way of seizing control" (Dawkins 2012, 154).

Concepts other than passing remove some of the impetus and importance behind passing. Dawkins (2012) argues that passing is the only concept that clearly demonstrates how important certain identities are to gaining privilege and access in our society. Even for those who do not desire to pass, the power and privilege that comes with passing often leads them to pass in at least some situations (Dawkins 2012). Similar to passing, "stealth" refers to trans people who choose to live privately, or not disclose their trans status to others in their public life (Reynolds and Goldstein 2014). While passing is more contextual, stealth usually refers to being seen as cisgender all of the time in public. Some people choose to pass based on the situation or location, while those who are stealth likely never disclose their trans identities in public.

West and Zimmerman (1987, 2009) explain that everyone is held accountable for "doing gender" according to hegemonic standards of what it means to be a man or a woman in our society. Doing gender in stereotypical masculine ways includes acts of domination and misogyny, and reinforces the gender binary and normative expectations of what it means to

be a man. For instance, Nash (2011) finds that for trans men to be recognized as men, they must adhere to stereotypical displays of masculinity in the form of more masculine clothes, hairstyles, voice, and how they carry themselves. As Catalano and Chase (2015, 422) argue, even for trans men who wish to challenge the current gender order, "passing as a man is the only way for participants to be read as not-women, given naturalized assumptions about the gender binary (there are only men and women)."

Intersectionality and Trans Masculinities

How trans men do gender intersects with their other characteristics, such as sexuality, race, class, nationality, ability, and more. Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality to demonstrate the influence of race on the various experiences of women, specifically black women. Intersectionality complicates the notion that studying gender alone is sufficient for understanding inequality. The intersectional approach moves scholars *beyond* adding oppressions, to the consideration of unique standpoints within the matrix of domination (Collins 1986, 2009) and how these distinct standpoints create unique experiences for people—socially, politically, and economically (Holvino 2010; Collins 1986, 2009). Intersectionality theory also demonstrates how geographic location changes the meanings of these varying characteristics and their relationships to inequality (Glenn 2002; Mohanty 2003). As Abelson (2019, 8) demonstrates, understanding the influence of geographic location on men's lives is as important as understanding other intersecting characteristics.

Around the same time that the concept of intersectionality was being formulated within black and multiracial feminism, R. Connell proposed a theory of multiple masculinities. Multiple masculinities clearly articulates that all masculine identities are not equal and that hegemonic masculinity is not stable (Abelson 2019; R. Connell 2009). This theory makes clear that intersections of other privileges and oppressions, such as race, class, or sexuality can lessen the power and resources available to certain men. Based on this theory, all men are striving for hegemonic masculinity: "The currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (R. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). However, despite multiple masculinities theory complicating our notion of a static form of masculinity, studies that use this theory largely continue to limit masculinities to male bodies (Abelson 2019; Halberstam 1998).

One study that examined masculinities and how they intersect with other identities outside of bodies assigned male at birth was Schilt's (2006) study of trans men in the workplace. Schilt (2006) found that in the workplace, race and ethnicity had a negative influence on the privileges trans men received. Specifically, experiences of trans men of color in the workplace were very different from white trans men's experiences; becoming men of color evoked different racial stereotypes and tempered the privileges of masculinity. Other studies of trans men also point to the importance of intersectionality. In their 2013 study, Rowniak and Chesla found that for trans men in San Francisco, California, the idea of transitioning and then identifying as straight did not make sense; heterosexual men "represented a community and way of being that were both foreign and unappealing for all" (458). Along the same lines, Catalano and Chase (2015, 422) found that for trans men in college in the New England area of the United States, being recognized as cis men was problematic: "For some, the experience of being categorized with cisgender men raised the question of whether their masculine postures

reified normative masculinity." Finally, in a nationwide sample of 42 transgender people who identified as heterosexual, Sumerau et al. (2018, 2018, 8) found that most "defined cisgender assumptions and norms as too limiting, and incapable of capturing their experiences."

Abelson (2016a, 2019) is one of the few scholars who has used masculinities theories to examine the lives of trans men at the intersections of identity and geographic location. They find that some trans men are able to gain acceptance through claims of sameness, in terms of race, class, and sexuality, with other men in the region. Specifically, trans men are more likely to feel safe and accepted within their communities when they can claim sameness through white, rural working-class, heterosexual masculinity. Other trans men who cannot claim sameness are unable to garner acceptance and gain access to the privileges of masculinity. Even trans men who could claim sameness and gain the privileges of masculinity, including "reprieve from the social stigma and potential danger of ambiguous gender expression, as well as access to social and material resources granted only to particular group members," understand that these privileges can be taken away at any time if people realize the men are not cis, heterosexual, or like them in other ways (Pfeffer 2017, 39). The likelihood of having your access and reprieve taken away is intensified in the South. Therefore, it is especially important to understand trans men's intersections of identity in this region of the country.

The South & the Rural: The Importance of Location

There is a vibrant and thriving queer[1] culture in the southeastern United States, even in rural areas often ignored by scholars (Abelson 2016a, 2019; Barton 2012; Stone 2018). Despite this thriving culture, there remains increased homophobia (Barton 2012; Baunach et al. 2010), biphobia (Mathers et al. 2018), and transphobia (Bradford et al. 2013; Mathers et al. 2018) in this region of the country. Even as prejudice and discrimination against gay and lesbian individuals dissipates, albeit slowly, other gender and sexual minorities are not benefiting to the same degree from the advancement of gay and lesbian civil rights and acceptance (Cragun and Sumerau 2015; Mathers et al. 2018; Sumerau et al. 2018). Consequently, more research is needed to understand the experiences of trans people in the South.

To date, the majority of research on queer life has been conducted in "urban enclaves" (Abelson 2019; Stone 2018). The lack of research in the South, in rural areas and "ordinary cities," has led to a metronormative narrative of queer life (Kazyak 2012; Stone 2018). For instance, in one of the first comprehensive looks at trans men in the United States, Rubin (2003) studies men in San Francisco, Boston, and New York. Rubin (2003, 4) acknowledged that the men he studied "may be different from FTMs [female-to-male] in rural, inland areas that lack anonymity, medical specialists, or community support." Indeed, they are. Yet, as of 2019, there is still relatively little research that examines trans, and queer life more generally, in the South, the rural, and the "ordinary cities." As Stone (2018, 2) argues, "This metronormative narrative contributes to the construction of gay life as a White, urban, upper-middle class phenomenon."

While over a third of queer people live in the South, only one in 10 sociology studies examining queer life focuses on the South as a location of study (Stone 2018). Furthermore, in the United States, "almost 97 percent of territory… remains nonurbanized, or 'rural,' in

[1] Queer refers to individuals and a community who identify with non-normative genders and sexualities. All of the respondents in this study do not claim this identity, rather this is a broad category of analysis.

character" (Johnson et al. 2016, 1), making this oversight in the study of queer lives even more egregious. By ignoring the South and the rural, people can continue to view these areas through a uniform lens that tells them that all southerners and people who live in rural areas are conservative—religiously, politically, and socially; that people in these regions are mostly Christian; and that all southerners are closed-minded (Johnson et al. 2016). Whether these stereotypes of the South and the rural are true or not, they influence beliefs about queer lives in these areas of the country.

As Abelson (2019, 28) clearly demonstrates, place matters, especially regarding our "geographic imaginaries: the mental images we have of spaces and places that give them much of their meaning and that these places have produced in the popular imagination." The South, in popular imagination, is defined by an opposition between the southern racist white man who wants control of society, and especially of white women, and the good old boy (Abelson 2019). A specific type of good old boy that trans men associate with the rural and the South is the redneck, who most closely adheres to the hegemonic standards of masculinity in the region. The redneck is white, straight, rural, and embodies the most extreme forms of masculinity. He "combines a rebelliousness and independence with a defense of traditional southern values…. [he] is a politically conservative, backward, and uneducated rural man wearing camo" (Abelson 2019, 31–33). Both types of imagined southern masculinity can be dangerous for, or evoke fear in trans men, especially trans men of color. These beliefs lead to the persistent view that queer people leave the South and the rural for urban enclaves as soon as humanly possible (Kazyak 2012); however, this perspective ignores the demographic evidence of where queer people are actually carrying out their lives.

Safety and fear of violence are highly tied to geographic location. When trans men are worried about their own safety, or the safety of their families, passing allows them to curb some of that fear. As Rubin (2003, 3) explained a decade and a half ago, due to "potentially dangerous identities, many of these men prefer to be invisible." Additionally, Abelson (2014, 2019) finds that trans men's feelings of safety often determine how they do masculinity. Specifically, when trans men feel safer, they are more likely to practice transformative masculinities—meant to create gender equity—but when they feel threatened, they practice more defensive masculinities—more stereotypical displays of masculinity that uphold the domination of men (Abelson 2014). When trans men feel threatened, they are more likely to perform stereotypical masculinity in order to ease that fear and attempt to avoid violence. As Abelson (2019, 146) explains, fear often leads trans men to adhere to "local expectations of gender and sexuality and, for white trans men, to participate at least passively in systems of racial domination when interacting in rural settings." Like others who are made to feel vulnerable in our society, trans men map out their geographies of fear in order to keep themselves and their families safe (Abelson 2016b, 2019). These geographies of fear are extremely important and nuanced in the South and the rural.

Related to safety and fear, trans men's psychological health is directly entwined with increased transphobia and homophobia in the South. Previous research demonstrates the impacts of minority stress on the life outcomes of queer people (Meyer 2003; Miller and Grollman 2015; dickey et al. 2016). It shows how stigma, prejudice, and discrimination lead to hostile and stressful environments sometimes contributing to mental health issues. Miller and Grollman (2015) specifically examine how being visibly read as trans, what they call "stigma visibility," increases discrimination against trans people and, thereby, health outcomes. Therefore, continued examination of trans people in the South and the rural is vital to improving the lives of queer people.

Overall, the South, rurality, and religion play a central role in trans men's understandings and experiences of gender, sense of safety, and desire to pass as cis men. These elements intersect to create a unique experience for the respondents in this study. As Johnson et al. (2016, 7) clearly articulate, "space matters where the politics of gender and sexuality in the United States are concerned, not because it is so powerfully determinative, but because its effects are so widely unpredictable." Therefore, sociologists must stop only looking to urban enclaves to study queer life and begin to examine queer lives in all contexts (Stone 2018). The current study answers the call for more analysis of queer life in the South, in rural areas, and in ordinary cities.

Methods

Utilizing in-depth interviews, I share the experiences of 51 trans men who have lived in the southeastern United States. Interviews consisted of questions designed to explore several themes, including: trans identities, passing, gender ideology, transphobia, and the South. For this article, I focus on respondents' discussions of what passing means to them and whether passing is an important element of their gender transition and identity. My methods for analyzing these data were queer; they varied. They were based on specific questions: "What does passing mean to you? Do you pass as a man? Is it important to you to pass? Are there any benefits or disadvantages to passing as a man? Do you think living in the South influences your ability to be out?" My method of analysis was based on theories I had interest in. For instance, how do trans men "do gender" and "do masculinity"? Do trans men gain "patriarchal dividends" (R. Connell 2009) of men in our society, and if so, how and when? The methods were based on themes that emerged from the data that I hadn't considered. For example, how passing often leaves trans men feeling ostracized from the queer community at large, and their previous lesbian communities specifically. Overall, my method of data analysis came from the experiences of the men I spoke with. I analyzed the data using an approach of "cultural humility," which "allows researchers to see the people they are investigating as the experts concerning their lives" (Lombardi 2018, 75). I allowed my respondents to tell me what mattered to them, and how they viewed the issue of passing in the South.

After listening and reading the interviews multiple times, I coded the recurring themes in their responses and here I attempt to explain those themes as fully and as closely to how my respondents see them as possible. My respondents are experts in their own identities and lives. While this may seem obvious, too often in research it is not. The men I spoke with are not cultural dupes, they are experts in being trans in the South. I choose here not to continue "the obligatory rehearsal of 'grounded theory' to describe any and all qualitative research" (Ward 2018, 61). While grounded theory played a role in this analysis, queer methods of analysis are much broader and diverse than grounded theory alone can capture. Queer methods are much more empathetic, yet also messier; however, it is worth the messiness to truly learn from others (C. Connell 2018; Ward 2018).

Phone interviews were used because research shows marginalized populations feel more comfortable and share more honest answers when they are allowed to remain more anonymous (McInroy 2016); and it allowed me to speak with trans men from a broader geographic area than face-to-face interviews would have allowed. Respondents were located through snowball sampling with multiple starts. I contacted trans men from two previous studies (Baker and Kelly 2016; Rogers 2018); reached out to various trans men's social/support groups across the

South; placed posters on my university campus; and posted a call for participants on my Facebook page. All respondents were asked to share my contact information with other trans men who may be willing to participate. I conducted all interviews between January and May of 2018. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to three and a half hours, with an average of one hour and 10 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. All names have been changed for confidentiality purposes. I use the pronouns he, him, and his throughout the article because all respondents use these pronouns (some also use they, them, theirs).

The majority of respondents (30 of 51) identify their gender identity as male (all used the term male, rather than man). About a quarter (12 of 51) identify as trans, including: trans man, trans male, transgender, FTM (female-to-male), trans masculine, two-spirit, nonbinary, genderqueer, or a combination of these identities. The remaining nine respondents identify as both male and trans; most usually identify as male but feel it is important to acknowledge their history or trans identity in some situations.

Eighteen of 51 trans men identify their sexuality as straight and four as gay; in total, 22 respondents identify as monosexual. Twenty-six respondents identify as bi+,[2] including: bisexual, pansexual, queer, polysexual, demisexual, polyamorous, fluid, or a combination thereof. Of the remaining three respondents, two identify as asexual and one does not identify with any sexuality label. Prior to transition, 29 interviewees identified as lesbian, seven as straight, four as gay, 10 as bi+, and one did not identify with any label. This means that prior to identifying as trans, 40 respondents identified as monosexual and 10 as bi+.

While some of the respondents in this study live in moderately-sized cities in the Southeast, only four respondents live in Atlanta, Georgia, the only city somewhat comparable to the "great cities" of the northeastern and western regions of the United States where most research on queer life has been conducted (Stone 2018). The majority of the respondents reside in small "ordinary cities" and/or rural areas. Currently, 23 respondents reside in Georgia, eight in South Carolina, eight in Tennessee, four in Virginia, two in Arkansas, two in Florida, and one in each Kentucky and North Carolina. The remaining two respondents moved outside of the Southeast for school or work after living the majority of their lives in the South. All participants lived at least one year in the South, ranging from one to 37 years, with an average of 22 years. Most of the men in this study (40 of 51) had lived at least half of their lives in the region, and 21 men had never lived outside of the Southeast. A quarter of the interviewees (13 of 51) grew up in rural areas, mostly in the southeastern United States. At the time of our interview in 2018, 14 of the trans men in this study described the area they lived in as rural, 17 as suburban, and 20 as urban. As these numbers demonstrate, queer people come from and live in the South and in the rural, and many choose to stay.

Thirty-eight of 51 interviewees identify as white. Of the remaining quarter of respondents, six identify as black or African American, two as Hispanic, four as multiracial or biracial, and one as Indigenous. The average age of the sample is 29, ranging from 18 to 60. Table 1 provides demographic characteristics of the respondents.

As a genderqueer, southern, feminist sociologist, I approached this project from a position within the southern trans community that gave me a unique perspective to understand the experiences of trans men in the South. Additionally, my personal connections with the queer community in the Southeast allowed me to gain access to different networks of queer people

[2] Sexual attraction to more than one gender or regardless of gender, including, but not limited to, pansexual, bisexual, queer, etc.

Table 1 Demographics

Name	Age	Years in South	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Race	Current State	Rural, Suburban, Urban
Gordon	41	37	Male	Straight	White	GA	Rural
Nolan	36	36	Male/Trans male	Straight	White	GA	Suburban
Damien	38	34	Male	Pansexual	Multiracial	FL	Urban
Derek	34	34	Male	Gay	White	GA	Rural
Kevin	34	34	Male	Pansexual	Multiracial	GA	Urban
Jayden	30	30	Trans man	Straight	White	VA	Urban
Jeffrey	35	30	Male	Queer	White	VA	Rural
Levi	45	30	Male	Pansexual	Black	TN	Suburban
Liam	34	30	Male/FTM	Gay	White	TN	Urban
Mason	34	30	Two-Spirt/Trans masculine	Queer/Fluid	Indigenous	TN	Rural
Dakota	30	29	Male	Straight	White	SC	Urban
Spencer	29	29	Male/FTM	Queer/Pansexual	White	GA	Urban
Colton	28	28	Male/Trans man	Straight	White	SC	Suburban
Jamar	30	28	Male	Demi/Pansexual	White	TN	Suburban
Stuart	28	28	Trans male/FTM	Straight	White	TN	Rural
Gabriel	28	27	Male	Straight	Hispanic	SC	Suburban
Vincent	27	26	Male	Straight	White	PA	Urban
Alec	25	25	Transgender male/Genderqueer	Straight	White	TN	Urban
Emmett	25	25	Male	Straight	White	AR	Rural
Javier	28	25	Male	Straight	Black	GA	Urban
Trip	25	25	Transgender man	Queer	White	GA	Suburban
Walker	51	25	Male	Bisexual	White	TN	Rural
Theo	24	24	Male	Straight	White	SC	Rural
Bruno	23	23	Male	Polysexual	White	SC	Rural
Jorge	24	23	Male	Pansexual	White	GA	Suburban
Darius	23	22	Male	Asexual	White	GA	Urban
Garrett	22	22	Male/Trans guy	Pansexual	White	GA	Suburban
Hayden	32	22	Male	Pansexual	Multiracial	GA	Suburban
Rowen	22	22	Male	Straight	White	GA	Suburban
Samuel	22	22	Trans man	Queer	White	KY	Suburban
Billy	22	21	Male	Queer/Polyamorous	White	GA	Urban
Hugh	25	21	Male	No Label	White	GA	Suburban
Maddox	21	21	Male	Bisexual	White	GA	Rural
Sage	23	21	Trans man	Queer	White	NY	Urban
Timothy	21	21	Male	Bisexual	White	SC	Suburban
Zac	20	20	Male/FTM	Bisexual	White	GA	Urban
Tobias	19	19	Male	Pansexual	White	GA	Rural
Jace	18	18	Male	Bisexual	White	GA	Suburban
Reece	18	18	Male	Pansexual	Multiracial	GA	Rural
Donnie	28	17	Male/Trans male	Bi/Pansexual	White	VA	Suburban
Frank	41	15	Male	Straight	White	SC	Urban
Leo	30	15	Male	Straight	Black	NC	Suburban
Carter	26	12	Transgender	Bi/Pansexual	White	TN	Urban
Andre	33	11	Male/Trans male	Straight	Black	GA	Urban
Quentin	34	10	Male	Straight	Black	GA	Rural
Jamie	33	7	Trans man	Gay	White	AR	Urban
Ronald	60	6	Male/Trans man	Straight	Black	GA	Urban
Dayton	36	4	Trans masculine/Non-Binary	Pansexual	White	FL	Suburban
Max	18	4	Male	Bi/Pansexual	Hispanic	GA	Rural
Parker	23	2	Trans masculine	Asexual	White	VA	Urban
Eli	19	1	Transgender	Gay	White	SC	Urban

and to gain the trust of my respondents. My insider position gave me access to trans men who may be hesitant to speak with other researchers for fear of how their lives would be portrayed.

Through our discussions of passing, three primary explanations of why southern trans men pass arose: 1) self-confidence and psychological health; 2) the privileges of being a cis man; 3) safety and fear of violence. While these reasons are not unique to the South, the interviewees in this study demonstrated that these reasons are especially pronounced in this region of the United States. They related the increased importance of passing to their understandings of gender and increased fear related to conservative religion, racism, and transphobia in the South. Many of the respondents understood that portraying stereotypical masculinity could be harmful to trans men, and others (women, gay men, gender nonbinary people, etc.); however, most respondents felt they had no choice but to pass in this conservative region of the country.

Findings: Passing in the South

Despite criticism of the term passing in academia and the contentious nature of the term within the trans community, it continues to be largely recognized and used among the southern trans men in this study. Avoiding the term, or calling it something different, does an injustice to the respondents in this study who continue to identify with this concept, and it ignores the continued reality and necessity of passing in our unequal and unjust society. Stryker (2017, xi) states, "Being perceived or 'passed' as a gender-normative cisgender person grants you a kind of access to the world that is often blocked by being perceived as trans or labeled as such." It is this normative gender expression and the access to the world it grants, that most men in this study desired. Presenting a stereotypical masculinity was related to multiple aspects of what it means to be a trans man in the South.

While some interviewees preferred the concepts of stealth, blending, or being read as men, many used these terms interchangeably with passing. Regardless of which concept they choose, across age, race, sexuality, and gender identity, the term passing brought up positive connotations for the majority of trans men in this study. Of the nine respondents who did not like the term "passing," or the fact that passing was important to them, eight still felt the need to pass. For instance, when asked what passing meant to him, Andre, a 33-year-old black straight trans male, stated, "I don't personally like that word… I like calling it 'being seen as you want to be seen,' because passing, to me, sounds like you're trying to trick people, to be something you're not." Nonetheless, Andre's definition of what it meant to be a man fit an extremely stereotypical definition of masculinity. Regardless of some of the respondents' feelings about the concept of "passing," all but one trans man I spoke with wanted to pass, at least in some situations; and most felt closer to Alec, a 25-year-old white straight transgender male, who stated, "I transitioned so that I would be passable… I wanted to be seen as a man, not a trans man."

Like Alec, the desire of the interviewees to be seen as they see themselves—as men—also led other respondents to avoid being labeled as trans. Stuart, a 28-year-old white straight male who lived in rural Tennessee, stated, "I'm a guy. I'm not a trans man, I'm a legit dude, and that's just how it is. I live my lifestyle as a man, you calling me a trans man is just a label." Having lived his entire life in the South and currently residing in rural Tennessee, Stuart understood the advantages of being read simply as a man, not as something "other" than. Being white and straight, along with not being viewed as trans, allowed Stuart to claim sameness in many ways and gain the privileges of being a white, straight man.

For many of the respondents, passing was simple because they held a binary view of gender. If people are either men or women, and I am not a woman, then I must be a man. Jamar, a 30-year-old white pansexual male who had lived the majority of his life in Tennessee, explained:

> I hate having to go by the term trans man, because the way I see it, I have changed my body…. [and] once you have altered yourself someway…. I don't think you should have to go by trans anymore…. You have gone past transition*ing*; you have transition*ed*…. the act of transitioning is the phase of going from one gender to the other; that's when trans should be in your title…. Trans is the moving of, kind of like what transportation is... the vehicle used to get from one place to the other.

These trans men did not aspire to challenge the binary gender system, rather they wished to fit into it. Once they had reached the goal of being a man, whatever that meant to them, they wanted others to see them and address them only as men. For these respondents, transition was the time period between living life as the gender they were assigned at birth and moving to their current gender identity.

Despite some interviewees' intentions or desires to challenge the gender binary and stereotypical portrayals of masculinity, most southern trans men in this study largely upheld standards of masculinity in order to fit into the gender binary, rather than challenge or queer these standards. Trans men in the South largely attempted to blend in with cis men in their gender presentations, instead of redoing gender by doing masculinity differently. While some trans men in this study challenged stereotypical displays of masculinity in some situations, 50 of 51 interviewees consciously presented their gender in ways that conformed with stereotypical masculine presentations at least part of the time. This is not a critique of southern trans men's gender presentations, as one trans identity or expression is not inherently more radical than another (Stryker 2017). We cannot, and should not, hold trans people responsible for challenging a gender system that systemically discredits their identities. This is why Stryker (2017, 5) argues that trans identities are "something prior to, or underlying, our political actions in the world and not necessarily in itself a reflection of our political beliefs." Indeed, whether they seek to challenge the gender binary or not, the act of transitioning alone can open further gender possibilities for others. At the same time, scholars *can* examine the influences of trans identities and presentations on larger systems of power and privilege. Here I examine the men's three explanations for passing in the South: 1) self-confidence and psychological health; 2) the privileges of being a cis man; 3) safety and fear of violence.

Self-Confidence & Psychological Health

For most of the interviewees (36 of 51), being read as a man was important for their self-confidence and psychological health. Being misgendered led many respondents to feel shame and self-doubt, and led to uncomfortable conversations and devaluations of their masculinity. In order to avoid awkward conversations and not be misgendered, most of the men I spoke with chose to pass. Dakota, a 30-year-old white straight male, described passing as "one of the best feelings ever…. it is when you are in public with someone who doesn't know your background… and they identify you as the gender you want to be identified as—as the one, you know, you are." Again, passing is not about deception, rather it is about being seen by others and as you see yourself. Spencer, a 29-year-old white female-to-male queer and lifelong southerner, explained, "I feel more comfortable in my skin when I do pass. I just feel like I'm, I

don't know, it's like I'm a 100 percent there; like I'm me." To be seen in a way you do not see yourself can led to confusion and negative psychological consequences. To be comfortable, people's identities must be validated and accepted.

Additionally, passing gives trans people the opportunity to live their lives without the constant emotional stress of explaining themselves and their bodies. For Mason, a 34-year-old Indigenous queer trans masculine person, passing was most important because of how other people view trans individuals. Mason said:

> …As soon as someone finds out that I'm a trans man…. it alters their perception of who I am and I'm immediately… emasculated… So, the first question is, "Do [you] have a dick?"…. I don't fuck around with letting people know that I'm trans or not because of how quickly it escalates to that and how I'm then just a sum of my parts, versus how I identify and who I am as a person.

Passing reduced stigma visibility and allowed trans men in the South to carry out their lives without feeling less than a man. These responses align with Rubin's (2003, 15) findings that "authenticity is a leading principle" in trans men's experiences; trans men are searching for "recognition of the innermost self" and that self is "authentically male."

Only six interviewees in this study discussed how passing made them feel invisible in the queer community, and how this led to feelings of loneliness and isolation. This is particularly challenging when living in an area of the country where there are not a lot of other queer people who are visible or queer places to hang out. For illustration, Jeffrey, a 35-year-old white queer male who lived in rural Virginia, described, "I feel invisible now to the queer community 'cause they see me as a man, and then they see my wife as a woman, so they view us as like a heterosexual couple and it's weird." While being viewed as cis and heterosexual has many benefits, within the queer community it can make a person feel unseen and even unwanted. Similarly, Samuel, a 22-year-old white queer trans man who lived in suburban Kentucky, explained that he felt invisible within the feminist and trans communities; he said the downside to passing was that "the isolation is awful." By being seen as man, Samuel is ostracized from his feminist community, and being seen as cis, he is ostracized from his trans community. While Samuel appreciates been seen as he sees himself, he now feels alone and cut off from the communities where he previously found support. Despite these feelings of invisibility and loneliness, the majority of trans men in this study continue to choose passing.

In addition to changes in their relationships with the queer community, 10 respondents also noticed changes in their relationships with women after they started passing as cis men. Like Nash's (2011) findings, many trans men found fitting into women's spaces difficult after transition. This is particularly detrimental considering that 29 respondents identified as lesbians before coming out as trans. Donnie, who lived in suburban Virginia, was a 28-year-old white pansexual trans male. Prior to discovering his trans identity, Donnie identified as a lesbian woman. He discussed how he was no longer welcome in women's spaces after being seen as a cis man:

> Now that I'm perceived as male 100 percent of the time, there are changes in my life that… I just didn't necessarily anticipate the impact… like no longer being welcome in women's spaces… When you've been in that your whole life it is kind of a weird thing. Because you're like, "I'm the same person." I know rationally, like, why I'm not welcome in that space, but there's part of you that says, "Well, this is stupid." You

know, this is another reason why gender is harmful…. So, it is kind of hurtful in that aspect.

When Donnie considered his experiences living as a woman prior to transition, he intellectually understood why he may no longer be welcomed in women's spaces. However, emotionally this fact was still devastating and meant that he had to find new spaces and people to support his newly found identity. Along the same lines, Colton, a 28-year-old straight white male who had lived his entire life in the South, said, "I feel like women are more on guard around me, than they were when I was just identifying as female and a lesbian." Here again we can see that some men understood how sexism and misogyny created this issue; nevertheless, they were still hurt by being excluded or viewed differently by women after their transition. Dayton, a 36-year-old white trans man who had lived in the South for four years, put it this way, "[Women] are hearing the words through the lens of past hurts and maybe even intergenerational trauma… when they're talking to someone they perceive as a man; they're automatically making assumptions of hearing this oppressor talking." Especially for the trans men who did not feel that their personality changed at all due to transitioning, it was hard to reconcile their understanding of women's points of view, with their desire to be accepted within the groups they were once a part of. Still, the benefits of passing continued to outweigh the disadvantages of being invisible in the queer community or treated differently by women for most of the trans men I spoke with.

Finally, regarding self-confidence and psychological health, many of the respondents mentioned body dysphoria (19 of 51) and depression (8 of 51) as key factors in their need to pass. Jace, who had lived his entire life in Georgia, was an 18-year-old white bisexual male. He described passing as important to him because, "I do have a bunch of dysphoria about it, because I want people to take me seriously as a trans guy…. I don't want them to see me as just this random weird person." Similarly, Leo, a 30-year-old black straight male who had lived half of his life in North Carolina, said, "I don't want to be seen as something I'm not at this point and it would really mess with my dysphoria. I would probably just lay in bed all day until someone told me, 'You look like a man.'" Passing as cis provided many of the men with external validation of their identity and allowed them to feel more comfortable and confident in public. Kevin, a 34-year-old multiracial pansexual male who had lived his entire life in the South, viewed someone referring to him using female pronouns as disrespectful and went on to say, "Plus, it gives me depression." These psychological consequences of being misgendered again point to the fact that trans people, especially those who do not pass as cis, often suffer tremendous health penalties due to transphobic discrimination and the stress this generates (Miller and Grollman 2015; dickey et al. 2016).

The Privileges of Passing

Privileges that come with being recognized as cis men were another benefit of passing. Twenty-six of 51 interviewees specifically mentioned the privileges of passing as a cis man. These privileges led some trans men to reinforce cis- and heteronormativity in order to benefit from the patriarchal dividend. These normative belief systems advantage cis and heterosexual people and oppress others who fall outside of these norms. By attempting to fit into these normative systems, some trans men are integrated and accepted into their communities through "claims of sameness" (Abelson 2016a), which allowed these men to find acceptance even in locations thought to be hostile to trans people. While passing for some respondents was only

about being seen as they see themselves, for others it meant performing a specific type of masculinity—a type others perceive as the definition of a "man"—and gaining the privileges that accompany this performance.

Although some men cited unwanted privilege as a pitfall to passing, most also acknowledged there were benefits. The ambivalence apparent in the men's discussions of privilege exposed the difficult balance trans men must reach to be seen as they desire, while simultaneously attempting not to abuse the power that comes with being a man in our society. Many trans men were granted access to gender privilege that had historically been used to oppress them; when trans men pass as cis, they have the ability to exercise this power over others.

For Leo, passing was about "making sure that I look the part, that I don't give off any… feminine vibes… making sure that my muscles are big enough… Anything that's gonna help me fit into that masculine stereotype." Residing in suburban North Carolina at the time of his interview, Leo was able to claim sameness through identifying and presenting as a man, as well as identifying as heterosexual. However, these privileges were not absolute for Leo since now he was recognized as a *black* man. Leo stated, "I'm a black male in society and so I have to be extra careful with the way I do things. I can't come off as super aggressive, I have to control my temper, you know, all that stuff." Therefore, Leo's claim to sameness was hindered by his intersecting race, and this limited the privileges he could gain from passing as a man. On the contrary, Colton, who identified as a straight white male in suburban South Carolina, was able to claim sameness in terms of gender, sexuality, and race. He acknowledged how these claims of sameness worked to his benefit: "I feel like as a passing guy, actually as a passing white male…. I feel like I get more respect…. there's more of a negative connotation if you're gay in the South, than when you just pass as male."

Some of the men were worried about how the amount of privilege gained through passing as cis would change them, especially when they were both white *and* men. Jamie, a 33-year-old white gay trans man who resided in an urban area in Arkansas, explained how the amount of privilege he gained as a white man in Arkansas could end up being problematic: "I am now a white male, which is probably the worst group of people for, you know, recognizing your own privilege… Something I try to keep in mind is not abusing that." White men in the South must remember to stay cognizant of their privilege, otherwise, they could turn into a perpetrator of sexism and racism. Relatedly, Sage, a 23-year-old white queer trans man who had lived the majority of his life in the South, but resided in an urban area in New York for school when we spoke, explained:

> I hope people never think I'm straight, I really hope I don't ever give off those vibes…. I don't like that I'm getting male privilege, but, I mean, I don't really have a choice in that, right? On top of white privilege, so if I'm seen as a white man, god forbid a straight white man, that's an area of privilege and access that I've never had access to… As someone who often deals with cis het men, white men, I don't like them very much, I'm always guarded around them, 'cause I'm like, you're a fuck truck of privilege, like I can't trust you. And I'm very worried about entering that space myself.

Sage's recognition of privilege, yet desire to separate himself from it was similar to some trans men in other areas of the country. Although Sage spent most of his life in Georgia, he was living as an out queer man in urban New York when we spoke. This allowed Sage some freedom to be more open about his gender and sexuality than other trans men felt who were still residing in the southeastern United States.

For white trans men living in the South, passing provided them with privileges they were often unfamiliar with. Spencer, who resided in an urban area in Georgia, said since passing, "I have more privilege, though I try not to abuse it… I notice I've gotten handshakes and more, you know, like positive interactions with other men, and like they tend to take me more seriously." Likewise, Bruno, a 23-year-old white polysexual male who lived in rural South Carolina, also felt this change after he started passing:

> The way that men regard me is very, very different, like they listen to me more. Male privilege is very real and it's definitely interesting to step into that when I wasn't raised in it. Obviously, I knew it existed, but to see it is very strange. Men definitely…take [me] more seriously.

Clearly having more positive interactions with men and being taken more seriously felt good to the trans men I spoke with; however, having experienced what it is like to not be taken seriously by men, some of the respondents wanted to be careful not to fall into this trap and forget where they came from. Like Spencer and Bruno, Samuel felt the difference when he began to be viewed as a cis man:

> [Passing] gives me more of a seat at the table than I've ever had before…. I just feel like I'm taken more seriously, and that could probably also be like male privilege stuff, I'm sure. Uh, although I feel, like, very complicated about my place in that just because as soon as someone finds out I'm trans, they kind of pull the rug out from under me, a lot of times.

Spencer, Bruno, and Samuel had all three lived their entire lives in the South and represented the three various types of locations—urban, rural, and suburban. Each stated they found privilege when passing as cis men in the South, and each of them identified as white. They all used the phrase that after passing they were "taken more seriously" by other men. While these positive interactions and privileges were found across the region for white men who could claim sameness in terms of race and gender, they all understood there was always a possibility of being "found out" and that privilege disappearing. These men comprehended that privilege was revocable and in order to keep it, they must continue to be viewed as men, and not as trans. If you want a seat at the table and your voice to be heard and taken seriously, you must continue to pass. This is the tragedy of passing, "that some passers see passing as the only path to social equality," and they are likely correct in certain contexts and locations (Dawkins 2012, 155–156).

Unmistakably, passing as a black man did not convey the same privileges as passing as a white man in the South. Three of the six black men in this study specifically mentioned the disadvantages that come with passing as a black man. In addition to Leo who I discussed earlier, Andre, a black trans man from urban Georgia, said, "I do realize what it means to be a black man in America…It means, walking in an elevator and… an old white lady clutching her purse, like, oh my gosh, like it's a black man with me." Likewise, Ronald, a 60-year-old black straight trans man who had lived in urban Georgia for six years, acknowledged his male privilege, but explained that the privilege was often countered by his race: "…Being a black man is a disadvantage. Now people are afraid of me. I'm not a scary guy, but people are afraid." Future research needs to examine more closely how race and class intersect with trans identities and passing regarding privilege, as well as safety and fear.

Another important intersecting characteristic related to privilege is sexuality. While men in other areas of the country do not wish to pass as cis and/or heterosexual men (Catalano and Chase 2015; Rowniak and Chesla 2013), a sizable proportion of the men I spoke with in the South preferred to pass as both of these. Thirty of the 51 men I talked to identified their gender as male (not trans male) and 18 identified their sexuality as straight. Heterosexuality allowed some trans men to more closely align with hegemonically masculine ideals (R. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) through compensatory manhood acts (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). That is, by performing a stereotypical cis heterosexual masculinity, some trans men in this study gained the benefits that come with being a man in our society. Overall, unlike the respondents in other studies (Sumerau et al. 2018, 2018), the majority of heterosexual trans men in this study did not reject cisnormative definitions of gender, nor articulate more gender-expansive interpretations of heterosexuality. The trans men in this study differ from trans people in other studies who were more likely to identify outside of the gender binary and as bi+ (Catalano and Chase 2015; Galupo et al. 2014; Flores et al. 2016; Rowniak and Chesla 2013; Sumerau et al. 2018, 2018). Trans men in the South often adhered to hegemonic understandings of masculinity—tied to compulsive heterosexuality, as heterosexuality is an important component to passing in the South—in order to pass as cis men. While some respondents clearly indicated that cis assumptions did not align with their experiences, the majority of trans men in this study who identified as heterosexual did not "disrupt societal assumptions about the necessity of cisnormativity for heterosexual selves" (Sumerau et al. 2018, 2018, 8). These men desired to be read as cis men and assume the privileges that came along with being men, specifically the ability to attract and protect women.

For other men in this study, their desire to pass as cis went against their understanding of gender and aspiration to be activists for the trans community. However, even these men, who held a more nuanced understanding of gender, still found passing to be an important element of transition. Some recognized this incongruence, yet for various reasons felt the need to pass outweighed their need to challenge the gender binary. For instance, when I asked Sage if it was important for him to pass, he said, "So, the good little activist inside me is like, 'No! Fuck passing! I'm gonna be… whatever the hell I want!'" Sage went on to say, "But, um, I really do want to pass, just for safety, for my sake of mind. It feels good, it feels consistent, and it doesn't feel good to be misgendered." I asked Sage if he felt differently about passing in the South, versus where he lived in New York at the time of the interview. He said:

> In the South, I could pretty much only be out, like, in my community, with my friends. If someone at a restaurant or other things misgendered me, I just wouldn't say anything. I always went the kind of, like, polite, high-pitched public service voice of like, [pitches voice] "Oh, thank you, okay." Very much on that side of caution… I felt there was an additional layer of either bravado or safety.

Likewise, Samuel told me that trans was an important part of his identity: "I'm not a cis guy and I don't want to be a cis guy;" however, he explained, "I guess [passing] is important to me, contrary to all the other shit I've said. It is still really important to me 'cause I just know I wouldn't handle it well if all of the sudden, I wasn't passing." When I asked Samuel if he thought his need to pass was related to living in the South, he said he would need to pass no matter where he lived for mental health reasons, but went on to say, "I tell you, the Southeast is probably about as bad as it gets in America to be a trans person."

Safety & Fear

One reason the Southeast is "as bad as it gets" is due to safety and fear of violence in the region. In total, 28 of 51 interviewees mentioned safety and fear as reasons they desired to pass. Safety and fear seems to be the most consistent theme across research on trans men's desire to pass. Like trans men in other research (Abelson 2016b, 2019), the men in this study mapped their fears onto specific locations and geographic areas. While perceptions of fear did not necessarily align with actual violence in the areas, nevertheless, the South and the rural led trans men to fear violence. This is especially problematic because whether the respondents faced actual transphobic violence or discrimination, fear changed how trans men lived their lives and led them to participate in other oppressive systems in order to be accepted and, for most in this study, to continue to pass as cis men.

Safety and fear as an explanation for passing was most closely tied to geographic location, specifically the South and the rural. While expectations of southern masculinity were related to respondents' self-confidence, psychological health, and the privileges of being recognized as cis men, their feelings of safety and fear provoked the most ardent desire to pass. Hugh, a 25-year-old white male in suburban Georgia, who does not place a label on his sexuality, put it this way:

> A few years ago, I was more open about my gender identity… but since I've gotten further in my transition… I'm a little more stealth than I used to be…. I don't really like that [passing] is so important to me, but when I feel like I don't pass, it really, it's hard… If I was living in a different area of the country, I feel like I would be able to more openly express my trans identity, without as much fear and repercussions.

When I asked respondents if the South had any influence on their desire to pass, a large proportion directly tied their feelings of safety and fear to conservative religion, rurality, and racism. Gordon, a 41-year-old white straight man, had spent more years in the South than any other respondent in this study—37 years, to be exact. When we spoke, Gordon lived in rural Georgia and fully felt the impact of geographic location on his trans identity. Gordon said living in the South impacts his need to pass because "we're in the heart of the Bible Belt… People are still very close-minded… And people fear what they don't understand." He connected his feelings about the South directly to conservative religion and others' fear of difference, which could provoke hatred or violence.

Bruno agreed that the South has "a very different mentality… there's a lot more bigotry here because religion is really deeply tied to the way of life here…. I definitely have gone out of my way to not be visibly trans or visibly queer." In rural South in South Carolina, Bruno believed that passing protected him from people who tied their hatred of trans people to their religious beliefs. Similarly, Stuart demonstrated the fear caused by living in the South and the rural; he said, "…you'll get killed down here. There'll be some redneck honky people that would just kill you in a parking lot… just because you're trans…. Because they think… you're going against what God made you." The rural and religion were closely associated realities that occupied the nightmares of trans men in the South. Although most fears of religion were tied to the rural, Jamar, who lives in suburban Tennessee, also felt religion influenced his fear of living in the South as a trans man:

> Being in the South…I have nothing against Christianity, but the way it is taught here, it is, you were meant to be the way the Bible says…. so [trans people] fear, a lot of times, for our own very lives, at times, because of that upbringing and that religious belief…. Closed-minded Christians are the deadliest of all the Christians; they are the ones that go out and will beat the shit out of somebody.

As these quotes demonstrate, it is largely due to conservative religion that many trans individuals felt that living in the South forces them to hide their trans identity; it is the Christians in the South who will really "beat the shit out of somebody."

While many respondents linked their need to pass to religion, others directly related it to symbols of racism and bigotry. Thirteen of 51 respondents discussed racism, such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and the confederate/rebel flag, as evidence of why they needed to be careful to pass as trans men. Interestingly, all but one of these 13 interviewees identified as white. The visibility of racism in the South was used by many white trans men as a proxy for transphobia and general bigotry. Abelson (2019, 34) also found the trans men she spoke to "entwined the redneck with racism, homophobia, sexism, and violence, and the redneck was placed in rural spaces…. This is why trans men viewed rural spaces as particularly unsafe for anyone who was not like the redneck." For instance, Darius, a 23-year-old white asexual male who now lives in urban Georgia, explained, "…this is such a red state… southeastern state that… the fear is there. You can still drive by porches and see confederate flags, and that always, you know, is dangerous…I have to remember that, like, the danger is real." Darius, like other men in this study, used any sign of bigotry as a symbol to remember that they could be unsafe in the area.

Because signs of bigotry are often more overt in the rural South, many assume that trans people would prefer the city or move out of the Southeast. On the contrary, trans men were able to use these signs of bigotry to determine what areas were safe and what areas were dangerous. What may seem contradictory to some is that overt symbols of bigotry allow queer people to navigate spaces and map their geographies of fear more precisely than in other areas of the country where signs of racism, homophobia, and transphobia are less overt. Nolan, a 36-year-old white straight male who had lived his full life in the South, said:

> …the South is definitely not the safest place in the world to be trans. There's a whole lot of backwoods mindset and I have come to find that anytime you are in an area that is racist, you are also in an area that's genderist, that will not understand it. And sadly, the South has definitely got a higher concentration of that.

By looking for signs of overt racism, trans people can pinpoint areas that are less accepting and avoid those areas to keep themselves safe.

The fear induced by living in the South as a queer person was mitigated, at least to a degree, by passing. Trip, a 25-year-old white queer transgender man in suburban Georgia, explained that, for him, passing was important in the South because "if you don't fit in, you're in trouble… nothing feels safe in the South." By fitting in, things start to feel safer. Likewise, according to Rowen, a 22-year-old white straight male who had lived his entire life in the South:

> Before I was passing… I would be afraid to be with my fiancé, because we lived in such a close-minded place and deep in the South… I was always afraid that somebody would

> say something or confront us or in the worst cases, try to hurt us, and honestly, I haven't felt that since I started passing a lot more.

When other people see you as one of them (in this case white, straight, and a man) fears dissipate and trans men feel more comfortable in public. Rowen feared that he would not only be hurt if people knew he was trans, but also that he was putting his family at risk. Similarly, Jorge, a 24-year-old white pansexual male who lived in suburban Georgia, feared for himself and his family. Jorge passes to keep his family safe: "I hide the fact that I'm trans, usually…. It's important for me to be just like any other regular guy… you have a wife and child, it's like you can't go blasting that you're trans everywhere because you've got to keep your family safe."

Garrett, a 22-year-old white pansexual male, had also spent his entire life in the South. He summed up why living in the South was an important component to understanding the intersections of geographic location and gender identity:

> Living in the South is a very scary thing… I make more of an effort [to pass] … I used to be pretty open about my transness… but, like, this whole overwhelming anxiety about living in the South, in a highly conservative area, has me, like, constantly looking at my surroundings and counting exits and hating big crowds, refusing to go to the bathroom.

Garrett, who was a college student in Georgia when we spoke, explained that while he was in high school, he had urinary tract infections because he was afraid to go to the bathroom. He said he would pass out sometimes from not drinking enough water, to try to avoid using the bathroom. For him there "was just like an overwhelming fear about it." Jamar stated that where he lives in Tennessee, "…to not pass could be dangerous. There are certain parts of [the city] that if you don't pass, and you go to the bathroom, they will corner you and beat the shit out of you." In fact, the bathroom was so important that Jamie defined passing simply as "being able to go to the bathroom and pee." These fears led the men in this study to present a more cis-masculine and heteronormative presentation of gender.

Just as these men's fears revolved around bathrooms, other trans men in the South provided exact locations and precise maps of where they felt safe and where they felt unsafe. Jayden, a 30-year-old white straight trans man, had lived his entire life in the South and resided in urban Virginia at the time of his interview. Jayden explained that in the South, "anybody that has the non-passability issue or is struggling with passability is 100 percent always, always concerned for their safety." When I asked if there were certain situations or places where he felt the need to pass was greater, he said:

> …one of the biggest situations where I want to make sure I'm 100 percent passable, is a country [music] concert. You're going to have a lot of country guys, there's going to be a lot of drinking involved, there's going to be a lot of masculinity involved… and if you're not on their level… sometimes you become part of an issue, and when you're in a big venue like that… blending in is key.

Respondents recognized that they did not want to stand out in a crowd, especially in spaces marked as country or rural. Places marked as country or rural were likely to have rednecks in them and rednecks by definition are hypermasculine and dangerous.

Alec had lived his whole life in the South and resided in an urban area in Tennessee when we talked. He gave the example of a flea market as a location where passing was necessary in the rural South. Alec explained, "A lot of people that come to the flea market are from small towns and country bumpkins…. I do not want them knowing I'm transgender because Bubba over there might be a real asshole and want to beat my ass in the bathroom." Again, the redneck and the restroom play prominent roles in southern trans men's geographies of fear. This aligns with Abelson's (2019) findings of trans men across the country, although the specifics of Bubba in the bathroom demonstrate the particularly southern and rural elements of these fears. Though trans men rarely face violence in restrooms, especially men's restrooms, the fear is genuine and influences the way they move through space and their everyday lives (Abelson 2019).

Darius described living in the South as "scary for a trans person." He said, "I'm kind of lucky 'cause I'm a white guy, so it's a little less scary…. but there is a lingering fear of like the average age a trans person lives to is in their 30s." Some of these fears were based in ideology, not facts; nevertheless, they had an extreme influence on the lives of the trans men I spoke with. While research does not confirm Darius' belief that trans people's life expectancy is in their 30s, this number had a huge influence on Darius's life. A number often cited, but also not established by research, is that the average life expectancy of trans women of color is 35-years-old. Darius, a white person who identified as a man in urban Georgia, was likely safe from transphobic violence; nonetheless, his fear of extreme violence, or murder, most definitely influenced his quality of life.

Clearly, living in the South limits the options of gender expression for some trans men and the locations they inhabit in their everyday lives. Research that suggests gender is being undone (Deutsch 2007), or that masculinity is now inclusive and no longer homophobic (Anderson 2016), is clearly not being conducted in the southeastern United States. Yet, despite trans men's magnified fears in the South, many chose to stay and carry out their lives in southern and rural areas. Many of these men identified strongly with southern and/or rural culture and chose to stay despite some of the obvious downfalls. Several respondents indicated they would have felt out of place or even more unsafe in larger cities due to their southern and rural cultures.

Conclusion

Trans men in the southeastern United States desire to pass, whether they like it or not. The vast majority of trans men in this study "do gender" through passing and enacting hegemonic ideals of masculinity. While some of the respondents held more nuanced views of gender, and some wished to challenge the gender binary system, their need or desire to pass usually outweighed their desire to challenge gender norms. Nevertheless, these men's experiences are extremely important for thinking about gender. As Dawkins (2012) clearly demonstrates, listening to the stories of people who are passing allows us to learn more about inequality and to empower the passers in some ways. Dawkins (2012, 156) states:

> Passers tell stories that show us how we all are duped as society's injustices are concealed and revealed in an attempt to embody democratic and progressive ideals…. If society stops passing, as moral, just, free, or equal, for instance, then the need many potential passers express for projecting more "acceptable" personae and "valuable"

> identities would end…. When passers identify themselves sincerely, they can reveal society's injustices and inequalities…. Failing to acknowledge things said in passing also means that all passers are destined to remain prisoners in solitary confinement because society says they have committed some crime of identity theft.

Overall, we must listen to those who desire to pass. We must hear their stories and use their language to demonstrate the continued limits of a binary gender system, or any binary system for that matter. Trans men who pass allow us to see the social construction of both sex and gender. Additionally, trans men clearly demonstrate the privileges that men continue to receive over women, and other trans and gender nonbinary people who cannot or do not pass. By choosing to ignore or reframe trans men's desire to pass, we give power to the idea that "passing is passé" and this stops us short of fighting for a society where nothing is seen as passing, or everything is seen as passing; a society where we can all just be ourselves.

Passing is highly related to the geographic location of the South, which in many ways remains a location that is less free and less just than other areas of the country—or at least is perceived that way. In an area of the United States known for increased transphobia, homophobia, and biphobia, trans men feel an amplified need to pass. For the trans men in this study, the desire to pass is related to self-confidence and psychological health; the privileges of being a cis man; and safety and fear of violence. While the benefits of passing far outweigh the disadvantages, some trans men do point to problems with passing, such as changes in relationships with women, issues of invisibility within the queer community, and for nonwhite men, the consequences of being a man of color in the United States. These advantages and disadvantages of passing could be overcome if people could present themselves in the way they felt most comfortable, without fear of reprisal. Passing could become passé in regard to gender, but only when people receive equal benefits and privileges regardless of gender. If we acknowledge that we are all passing, that gender and other identities we hold are not innate but socially constructed in an unequal and hierarchical system, then we could end the negativity around passing and all pass as ourselves.

Overall, this study adds to the existing literature on trans men in three primary ways. First, I clearly demonstrate the continued importance of trans men passing in order to protect their well-being and gain privileges. Trans men's attempts to pass should be viewed as part of the flawed binary social structure of gender, not a shortcoming of trans men (Pfeffer 2017). It should be viewed as a demonstration of inequality and a call for justice, rather than an individual act of deception. As Dawkins (2012, 157–158) concludes:

> Our desperation to declare that we have progressed beyond passing, simply because we fail to acknowledge passers and the things they say, means that we continue to cultivate an environment in which passing will remain the most sincere strategy for success. The unfortunate result of this problem is a form of cultural neglect through which we abandon opportunities to engage in the important work of reconciliation that can lead to social change. We fail to see that every act of passing presents an opportunity for reconciliation, expresses a desire for social change, and calls for the freedom to be who we are.

Trans men's desire to pass is a call for everyone to engage in the undoing of a limiting and unequal binary gender system. It is a call for justice and a demonstration of the oppression trans men face in our society.

Secondly, I answer the call for more research on the lives of queer people in the southeastern United States, and rural areas of the country more generally. I demonstrate the importance of geographic location—the South, the rural, and the "ordinary cities" (Johnson et al. 2016; Stone 2018)—when considering trans men's desire to pass. By further nuancing our understanding of trans men in the South, we can expand understandings of gender, masculinity, and passing. The South remains a location with elevated minority stressors, where fitting into the gender binary through passing and engaging in compensatory manhood acts (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009) make life more livable for many trans men. Through claims of sameness, trans men can carry out their lives in the South in a relatively privileged and safe way. This may explain why many trans men opt to stay in the South, even when options to leave are available. Like some rural lesbians (Kazyak 2012), trans men's presentation of masculinity and rurality make them more comfortable in the South and rural areas, despite the downfalls of conservative religion, racism, and toxic masculinity.

Finally, I demonstrate that scholars who have proposed that our society has moved to an inclusive form of masculinity (Anderson 2016) have not considered geographic location and important intersecting characteristics in their work. Inclusive masculinity is not a reality in the South. In this region of the country, masculinity remains largely tied to heterosexuality, stereotypical manhood acts, and privilege and inequality. Even when "doing transgender," many trans men in the South do not develop a "feminist consciousness" (C. Connell 2010), largely due to the constraints placed on the "proper" presentation of masculinity in this area of the country. My findings more closely align with some of Schilt's (2006) respondents who did not gain a feminist consciousness from passing as men. As Schilt (2006, 474) puts it, "Having a critical perspective on gender discrimination… is not inherent" to trans men's experiences. Negative characteristics of southern masculinity related to aggression, treatment of women, and homophobia mean that many trans men must decide between being accepted as "one of the boys," or a feminist consciousness that allows them to develop a masculinity not based on the oppression of others. As Schilt and C. Connell (2007) explain, those around trans men may play a large role in forcing trans men to "do gender," rather than "cause gender trouble." That is, in order to fit in, get privileges, and not disrupt systems, many trans men choose, or are forced, to present gender in stereotypical ways. Of course, these expectations also vary based on other intersecting characteristics, such as race, class, sexuality, etc.

Future research should continue to examine the intersecting characteristics that negate the benefits of passing in the South. For instance, we know that race plays a vital role in the types of experiences trans men encounter (Abelson 2019; Halberstam 2018), especially in the South and in rural areas, where there are unique histories of racial oppression. Unfortunately, the majority of research on trans men to this point lacks the racial diversity necessary to fully understand the impacts race plays on trans identities. Research on trans and nonbinary identities has to continue to reach out to racially diverse communities. This will require scholars to engage in new strategies for recruiting participants, ensure the use of inclusive and diverse language, and work with more scholars of color who know and are a part of these communities. In addition to race, trans research should also examine what other intersecting characteristics, such as class,

ability, sexuality, ethnicity, immigration status, etc., influence trans men's desire to pass, and lives more generally. Finally, more research is needed to understand nonbinary identities in the South. How do those who do not desire to pass differ from the trans men in this study? Overall, these advances in research will require more diversity in our samples and culturally competent scholars who are willing to work with and listen to trans and nonbinary people.

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