

## **Toward a Trans Rural Imaginary: Representation, Counterpublics, and Space in *National Anthem***

**Catherine Faith Gastin**

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines Luke Gilford’s film *National Anthem* (2023) as a representational intervention into dominant imaginaries of trans visibility, rural space, and American national identity. Drawing on Michael Warner’s theorization of publics and counterpublics and extending it to explicitly consider their discursive implications for space, I argue that the film constructs a trans counterpublic grounded in the visual and symbolic terrain of the American West. By situating trans embodiment within rural aesthetics and practices recognizable to a dominant US-American public, *National Anthem* reimagines rural space as a site of queer belonging, challenging the presumed incompatibility between trans life, rurality, and US national identity.

**KEYWORDS:** Trans Representation; Trans Rurality; Queer<sup>1</sup> Rurality; Queer Cinema; Trans Geography; American West

### **Introduction**

Throughout US-American history, trans lives have often been regulated, erased, and rendered unintelligible within dominant cultural narratives and the spaces they organize. Despite increased public attention, trans visibility has seldom yielded recognition or agency. Instead, trans lives are largely shown “by cis people with cis people for cis people” (Stryker 185), reproducing cisnormative frameworks that position trans subjects as objects rather than participants in public life (Keegan 72; Halberstam 151). Such cis-centered visibility—or hypervisibility (Page 135)—structures how trans people inhabit space, both materially and in the collective imagination. Rather than offering protection, heightened exposure regularly intensifies spatial regulation through disproportionate policing, incarceration, and exclusion from services, producing conditions of ongoing crisis (Stryker 180). Contemporary anti-trans initiatives make this spatial logic explicit, centering bathrooms, healthcare, sports, and language—domains that govern how bodies are permitted to appear, move, and be recognized in public space (Quinan 535). Trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF) similarly mobilizes spatial restriction, framing trans inclusion as an imagined threat to “women’s spaces.” In short, hypervisibility functions not only as a cultural condition but as a spatial one, shaping where trans bodies are permitted to exist and on what terms.

These dynamics inform broader US cultural imaginaries of geography, particularly the relationship between trans life and rural America. Although rural space occupies a central

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<sup>1</sup> I use “queer” as an umbrella term encompassing all diverse queer genders and sexualities.

position in national mythology (Johnson et al. 1), queer—especially trans—life is routinely imagined as incompatible with these spaces. Dominant American cultural renderings construct rural space as hostile and cis-heteropatriarchal (Halberstam 54-55; Schweighofer 223), while metronormativity—the persistent narrative mapping of coming out onto migration to the city (Halberstam 108)—positions the urban as the default site for queer life (Herring 4). These associations naturalize the city as the locus of queer futurity and render the rural as dangerous, regressive, or unlivable (Herring 4-5, 10). Such geographically rooted imaginaries do not merely describe space; they actively produce it, regulating where trans subjects are imagined to belong and, by extension, where they can appear as legitimate participants in public life.

Yet despite the well-documented risks of exposure (Gossett et al.; Meronek et al.; Page; Quinan), visibility remains framed as the central path toward livable trans lives. While visibility often provides a gateway to violence and regulation, it simultaneously enables alternative ways of being to emerge, as “media acts as a staging ground for the types of life that are permitted to become real” (Keegan et al. 7). This paradox has fueled debates over whether visibility should be embraced or avoided (Gossett et al. xx). However, such discussions can fail to acknowledge the ways in which the exposure of trans bodies and lives has already been made irreversible. Though the “transgender tipping point”—the 2014 *Time* magazine declaration that trans visibility in popular culture had ushered in unalterable progress (Steinmetz)—proved premature, both its declaration and the intensity of its backlash demonstrate that trans visibility is already entrenched (Koch-Rein et al. 3). Because exposure is not a temporary obstacle but a structural condition, it is essential to find ways to reimagine visibility.

This reconfiguration hinges on the distinction between visibility and representation. While visibility denotes being shown, displayed, and viewed, it does not, as history has demonstrated, confer agency or participation. Representation, on the other hand, is generative, not mimetic: it does not “simply re-present an already existing reality” but opens “doors into making new futures possible” (Gossett et al. xviii). Such trans-centric representations, as I explore below, can construct trans counterpublics—discursive collective imaginaries that counter dominant visibility, allowing marginalized queer subjects to both meaningfully appear in discourse and transform material-symbolic space.

Luke Gilford’s film *National Anthem* confronts these dominant representations by situating queer characters into the American West, where they live, work, and explore their identities. Expanding Warner’s theorization of publics and counterpublics to explicitly consider spatial embodiment, I argue that by integrating trans subjects into rural aesthetics that are recognizable to a dominant American public, *National Anthem* resists the boundaries that heightened visibility creates and maintains, mobilizing representation as a form of spatial counterpublic creation. By portraying trans people engaging in both quintessentially rural practices—ranching, rodeo, horseback riding—and prototypically queer practices—gender diversity, queer intimacy, drag—the film rejects the presumed incompatibility of these worlds.

Through its engagement with the iconography and symbolism of US national identity, *National Anthem* reimagines dominant narratives of queer marginality, reframing trans embodiment as central—rather than antagonistic—to US national imaginaries.

## **Toward a Trans Rural Imaginary**

The tension between trans visibility and representation, their roles in constructing imaginaries of belonging, and their spatial implications can be productively understood through Warner's theorization of publics and counterpublics. Drawing on this framework, I argue that trans counterpublics function as sites for integrating new possibilities for queer identity and embodiment into collective imaginaries, shaping notions of who is permitted subjectivity and where such subjects are imagined to appear. In what follows, I first consider how trans counterpublics operate across discursive and material-symbolic spaces, highlighting their potential to transform the conditions of public imaginaries and belonging. I then turn to *National Anthem*, arguing that the film enacts this counterpublic potential by showing how alternative forms of belonging can be imagined and reworked within rural American landscapes to create a trans rural imaginary.

### **Trans Counterpublics and Spatial Imaginaries**

A public is, in the simplest sense, a collective imaginary. Brought into being through acts of address, Warner defines a public as a metaphorical “space of discourse” created through the circulation of texts (67). Unlike physically bounded crowds, publics are imaginative arenas addressed to potentially infinite fields of strangers. Their broad reach and self-selecting participation allow them to take on the appearance of public opinion, yet this apparent universality masks exclusion. In addressing a public, texts—implicitly or explicitly—imagine and define both their audience and shared world, delimiting who can appear as a legitimate subject. Publics are thus not only discursive formations but intangible social domains through which power becomes intelligible and participatory (Warner 68), reproducing social hierarchies even as they claim inclusivity.

Counterpublics emerge in response to these exclusions. Like dominant publics, counterpublics are constructed through the reflexive circulation of discourse and addressed to indefinite audiences (Warner 113, 120). However, while publics naturalize their imagined universality, counterpublics foreground alternative imaginaries produced by and for marginalized groups, allowing excluded subjects to constitute themselves as speaking agents and generate their own norms for recognition and participation. In so doing, counterpublics enter into conflict with both dominant social groups and their intelligible collective imaginaries (Warner 112). For example, where dominant publics in the US are often structured by cisnormative assumptions that exclude or distort trans lives, trans counterpublics can, in response, create alternative discursive imaginaries where cisnormativity does not structure representation and gender diversity is presumed rather than contested. Publics and counterpublics are thus not

fully discrete but dynamically interrelated: some counterpublics hold the potential to reshape, fragment, or be incorporated into dominant publics over time as they broaden their reach, while others may persist as alternative havens of belonging, meaning-making, and representation by and for marginalized subjects.

By reconfiguring the terms of recognition and belonging, trans counterpublics can not only react to marginalization but also provide metaphorical sites of self-making and cultural production. Their transformative potential, in part, lies in their creative capacity not merely to replicate existing conditions but instead to supply alternative ways of seeing and inhabiting the world (Warner 121-22). José Esteban Muñoz conceptualizes this convergence between reactivity and reimagination through disidentification, a strategy by which minoritized subjects can choose to neither fully assimilate into nor straightforwardly reject dominant cultural imaginaries but instead work to “transform a cultural logic from within” using everyday practices of resistance to produce permanent structural change (*Disidentifications* 11-12). Read through this lens, trans counterpublics can reimagine established symbolic conventions via alternative representations that grant marginalized subjects agency, actively shaping when and how they appear in discourse.

Trans counterpublics may thus not only seek inclusion in dominant imaginaries but also attempt to reshape the conditions of publicness itself. Because counterpublics address indefinite audiences, they can potentially intervene in broader collective imaginaries, reshaping what counts as meaningful discourse, legitimate speech, and participation (Warner 121). Such transformations emerge not from singular subversive acts or individuals, but from sustained collective presence. In this sense, trans counterpublics gesture toward queer futurity, a notion Muñoz describes as a horizon of potentiality—an insistence on constructing a world not yet realized (*Cruising Utopia* 20). The circulation of trans discourse does more than just contest existing norms; it enacts alternative social arrangements and more livable queer futures. Even as their circulation is constrained by pushback and regulation, trans counterpublics expand the conditions under which queer identities and embodiments become imaginable within public life, even if only for counterpublic participants themselves.

Publics’ use of narrative representation to reflect and shape the conditions of power holds implications for space. Although Warner distinguishes publics from physically co-present groups, his framework nevertheless relies on spatial metaphors, describing publics as “spaces of discourse,” “social spaces,” and “spaces of circulation” (67-68, 71, 90, 106). Building on this spatial framing, I conceptualize the relationship between space and collective imaginaries as operating across two interconnected registers: discursive space, the imagined field of circulation in which publics and counterpublics come into being, and material-symbolic space, geographically rooted environments shaped through cultural representation and meaning-making. These spatial dimensions are mutually constitutive: discursive formations shape how material spaces are imagined, while spatial imaginaries regulate who can appear within publics. Thus, while publics are not spatial in a literal sense, they rely on spatial imaginaries to structure participation, access, and belonging. In other words, publics establish who can

appear, while the material-symbolic spatial imaginaries they create organize where that appearance is thinkable.

By making space both a subject of narrative and a site of claim-making, publics and counterpublics become arenas in which discourse, imagination, and embodiment converge, mediating relationships between space, power, and access. Because spatial meanings are socially and culturally produced, they remain contingent and unstable. As Doreen Massey argues, space is “unfinished and always becoming” (59), and thus open to contestation and reinterpretation. Because cisnormative frameworks depend on ongoing repetition, shifts in gendered representation and recognition can unsettle their authority. Transformations in space may therefore occur not only through embodied changes in access or use, but through shifts in how spaces are narrated, represented, and imagined (Rose 258). In taking up space—both as making space a narrative subject and as claiming embodied spatial access—trans counterpublics, as *National Anthem* illustrates, can work to create alternative collective imaginaries of ownership and belonging.

### ***National Anthem* as a Trans Counterpublic**

By situating trans and queer characters within the landscapes, practices, and iconography of the American West, *National Anthem* mobilizes representation as a spatial counterpublic reimagination. The film not only depicts rural space but also reworks its meanings, challenging dominant public representations that cast rural America as hostile or inaccessible to trans life. Rather than treating rural space as a backdrop or obstacle, it reconfigures the established hierarchies associated with dominant American understandings of the terrain, unsettling cisnormative narratives that render queer embodiment out of place, dangerous, or temporary. Simultaneously, *National Anthem* contests metronormative frameworks within broader queer publics that locate authentic queer belonging only within the city and cast rural space as somewhere to be escaped. By portraying characters who are both openly queer and embedded in rural praxis, the film disrupts narratives of “necessary” migration and reframes rural space as a viable site of queer presence and futurity.

Through scenes of ranch work, rodeo, leisure, and intimacy, *National Anthem* situates queer bodies alongside symbols and practices that have historically anchored US national identity, resisting their exclusion from spaces through which Americanness is imagined. In so doing, the film constructs a trans counterpublic in tension with dominant publics, deploying representation not to secure assimilation within existing cis-heteronormative hierarchies, but as a practice of disidentification that reimagines the conditions of recognition in rural space from within. As trans characters inhabit and reshape the visual language of the American West with confidence and ease, they both situate themselves inside an established material-symbolic landscape and unsettle the boundaries governing who may legitimately appear there. This collective act of appearing functions as a form of spatial resistance that renegotiates the boundaries of rural exclusion and, by extension, American identity. While the film’s insertions of queer life into rural iconography and national symbolism could be read as

assimilationist, I interpret these gestures as disidentificatory reworkings, producing a counterpublic in which trans rurality becomes imaginable.

The analysis that follows traces how *National Anthem* constructs this counterpublic by grounding queer presence in established Western aesthetics, positioning trans embodiment as both emblematic of American notions of beauty and unexceptional, and staging queer community as a form of public participation that contests dominant claims to space, nation, and futurity. In reimagining trans embodiment and rural space against the backdrop of dominant US cultural imaginaries as well as metronormative tropes, the film contributes to a trans rural imaginary—a representational field in which trans subjects belong in rural life and are central to its meanings, aesthetics, and social relations.

## The Country is Queer

From the film's outset, *National Anthem* constructs the ranch as a material-symbolic space that is simultaneously rural and queer, positioning these categories as mutually constitutive rather than oppositional and leveraging conventional American visuals to unsettle dominant imaginaries of rural belonging. The viewer initially encounters the ranch from a truck bed as Dylan<sup>2</sup>, the film's protagonist, is transported there by Pepe, the ranch's managing figure, to work as a day laborer. In the establishing shots preceding Dylan's arrival, the film spatially codifies the ranch within its New Mexican landscape. Dylan and three other workers are driven along a dirt road bordered by sagebrush and horse fencing (9:14-9:30). Their relaxed postures—arms draped over the truck's side rails—and dirty plaid shirts, denim, hats, and work boots mark them as ranch laborers, while the truck itself bears signs of sustained agricultural use, from uneven bed-liner paint to sand embedded in its ribbed floor.

These introductory visuals locate the landscape of the ranch within rural American aesthetics and foreground its legitimacy as an active farm. The arid color palette and uncultivated scrub brush signal its location in the American West, while the dirt road emphasizes the ranch's spatial isolation and rurality. The workers' stylization and comportment further reinforce this spatial framing. Their attire not only aligns with established visual codes of rural ranch labor but also carries visible traces of embodied work. The truck's worn condition likewise anchors the ranch within a landscape of functional rural labor. Though brief, this sequence provides contextual grounding that characterizes the ranch as existing within a recognizable cultural terrain of rural America.

Yet while the film renders the ranch legible within dominant American collective imaginings, as the truck approaches the gate, the expectations generated by this introductory framing are immediately complicated, signaling its counterpublic reinterpretation. Three laughing riders

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that while there are readings of Dylan as not straightforwardly male, consistent with the film itself, I will refer to Dylan using he/him pronouns.

on horseback appear before zooming in on one rider, Sky (9:30-9:39). Though the activity itself, the ease with which it is performed, and even the foreshadowing of Dylan's romantic interest in Sky align with the previously established conventions, the riders' tulle gowns—decidedly out of place within the film's realist rural setting—signal that the ranch steps beyond expected boundaries and resists assimilating into normative framing. This passing but conspicuous aesthetic deviation functions as a hinge between legibility and recontextualization, marking a moment of disidentification through which the ranch's familiar rural codes are reworked to hold forms of queer representation they are not traditionally understood to sustain. As the truck nears the entrance arch, a flagpole brandishing a pride flag—rather than the contextually expected American or state flag—and a metal brand sign with the name "House of Splendor" welded between two stars briefly come into focus (9:40-9:43). Though the architectural elements themselves adhere to familiar ranch iconography, the unambiguous queer signaling of the pride flag and the ranch's name "House of Splendor"—evocative of queer ballroom houses<sup>3</sup>—recontextualize these markers, placing rural visual conventions in direct dialogue with queer cultural histories.

Once inside the gate, this juxtaposition between the expected and the queer intensifies, and contextually anticipated spatial markers are reframed through overtly queer visual cues. When Dylan and the crew exit the truck, the camera pans to follow his gaze as the ranch and its inhabitants come into view (9:44-10:00). In the background stands a single-story wooden house; in the foreground, the now dismounted riders lead their horses while others move across the frame carrying wicker baskets filled with vegetables and hauling lumber and firewood (10:00-10:11). Just before the shot resolves on Dylan's face, the camera lingers on two male-presenting people caressing one another—one seated on a tractor, the other standing beside it, gazing upward (10:04-10:11).

Focalized through Dylan, the ranch appears from the perspective of an outsider encountering an unexpected scene. His expression at the start of the shot seems to at once convey surprise and wonder, suggesting that what unfolds before him exceeds the assumptions embedded in dominant rural framings. On one level, the scene is replete with signs of conventional ranch life: returning horseback riders; freshly picked vegetables that attest to ongoing cultivation; lumber that suggests repairs or improvements; firewood indicating year-round residency; and an old-model tractor, a quintessential emblem of established farm life. Yet the people who inhabit this space are visibly queer in their embodiments, movements, stylizations, and modes of relationality. Indeed, it is not just the riders' extravagant costumes that disrupt the

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<sup>3</sup> Queer ballroom house culture is a community rooted in Black and Latinx queer history, in which participants dress, dance, and vogue in competitions for prizes and trophies. Participation is often organized around "house" affiliation—social formations that function as alternative family structures and, in some cases, refer to shared living spaces where members gather and reside. House names frequently follow aspirational conventions, drawing on references to luxury brands or expressions of status, beauty, and self-worth. For more information on queer ballroom culture, see *Butch Queens Up in Pumps* (2013) by Marlon M. Bailey and *And the Category Is... Inside New York's Vogue, House, And Ballroom Community* (2021) by Ricky Tucker.

environmental expectations. Of the at least ten visible figures, the majority have ambiguous gender presentations or are overtly trans, and the forms of intimacy on display are distinctly queer. While Dylan's gaze marks these characters and their interactions as noteworthy, within the space of the ranch itself, queer embodiments and affection—expressed through hands on thighs, hands in hair, and lingering looks—are rendered unremarkable. This simultaneous highlighting—through Dylan's attention—and contextual normalization—through its unremarked-upon pervasiveness—of queerness redefines the conditions of intelligibility within the space. This counterpublic reimagining extends beyond individual pairings and informs the larger relational structures organizing the ranch. Even before the specific contours of these relationships are clarified, the purposeful movements and joyful interactions of the group gesture toward the ranch's communal living structure grounded in queer collectivity, which the film develops more fully as it unfolds.

Despite the juxtaposition that this approach and entrance to the ranch constructs, *National Anthem* declines to resolve the tension between rural legitimacy and queer spatial embodiment. Instead, the film visually and narratively holds these forces in productive relation, simultaneously affirming and unsettling the terms through which rural space is made legible by dominant publics. The ranch's inhabitants, for example, are presented as both contextually competent—actively sustaining the productivity of the space—and overtly queer and trans. Likewise, the tractor, an object firmly rooted in rural iconography, becomes a site of queer tenderness and connection, further embedding queerness into the material practices of ranch life rather than positioning it as external to them. In the scenes of ranch work that immediately follow, the film reinforces this convergence: a montage of Dylan stacking hay, mucking stalls, and caring for horses, intercut with his observations of the inhabitants and sweeping landscape views (12:00-13:15), underscores the ranch's status as a recognizable rural space while simultaneously reimagining who is understood to belong within it.

At the same time, however, this incorporation does not resolve into complete legibility or assimilation. Rather, it enacts a mode of disidentification whereby the film works on and through dominant rural codes without fully adhering to them. Although the ranch is visibly and openly queer, the film declines to name, classify, or stabilize the identities of the bodies it represents—a practice it carries throughout the entirety of the film—resisting the impulse to render them fully knowable within normative frameworks and their power structures. This resistance is further emphasized by the ranch's communal living and non-monogamous relationship structures, which problematize the association between rural space and normative family formations. Such refusals to assimilate neatly into dominant cultural framings stand in tension not only with cis-heteronormative publics but also with metronormative assumptions held by mainstream queer imaginaries that operate on the premise that queer life must be urban to be a viable site of queer belonging. In this way, the film not only legitimizes queer presence within a rural setting, but also withholds that presence from complete codification, sustaining a mode of belonging that is embedded yet irreducible to the codes through which rurality is predominantly understood.

## Trans Femininity as American Beauty

This expanded counterpublic vision of queer belonging in rural space is further articulated through the film's polyamorous romantic lead, Sky, a trans woman whose placement within the landscape and visual stylization frame trans embodiment as not only at home within American visual and cultural symbolism but also emblematic of it. At the conclusion of the montage depicting Dylan's labor and the farm, Dylan is tasked with washing Sky's horse, Cash (13:17-13:25). As Dylan is about to finish, Sky approaches, playing with her hair, and jokes, "Cash doesn't like boys" (13:26-13:36). When Dylan responds with an embarrassed apology, Sky clarifies Dylan's name and continues teasing: "Pepe has told me *all* about you. I think he's got a little bit of a crush" (13:37-14:00, emphasis in original). After another awkward response, clarifying that Pepe is not his type, Dylan asks, "How long have you all had this place for?" Sky replies, "It's been in the family for a while now. Do you like it?" to which Dylan responds, "I always dreamed of having a place like this." After a quiet moment of rinsing and brushing the horse, Sky turns and playfully swipes the wet brush across Dylan's cheek. He sprays her with water; she shoves him lightly and laughs, "you're trouble, huh?" Dylan replies, "No, ma'am." When the moment ends, Sky backs away, cast in golden light and smiling, while Dylan watches her leave, biting his lip (14:00-15:30).

Here, the foreshadowing of Sky's position as romantic lead is cemented through her flirtation and Dylan's visible infatuation. From the outset of the interaction, her sauntering gait, soft smiles, and hair twirling communicate coy interest in Dylan. Despite Sky's established partnership with Pepe—earlier confirmed through a kiss—she gestures toward both the queerness and openness of their relationship by teasing that Pepe has a crush. While Dylan's responses are short and awkward, his blushing reactions, body language, and lingering gaze communicate his interest in Sky. Their chemistry intensifies through playful touches and increasing proximity, all of which, while reciprocal, are initiated by Sky, rendering her an active agent in their attraction. By the end of the interaction, Sky's lingering smile and Dylan's bitten lower lip signal that the narrative groundwork for their romantic entanglement has been firmly laid.

Yet despite the ranch's overt queerness and Sky's trans identity, her transness is neither explicitly clarified nor is her transition or body mobilized as a plot point. While their dialogue hints at the ranch being a queer space—through Sky's teasing of Pepe, their descriptions of the ranch as a "family" formation, and their mutual recognition of it as exceptional and aspirational—Sky offers no clarifying disclosure, and Dylan does not ask for one. Instead, her body language, stylization, and presentation communicate confidence and comfort in her gender expression. Her femininity is neither exaggerated nor framed as precarious, and the interaction itself affirms her accordingly. By joking that her horse—a constant companion since adolescence—"doesn't like boys," she implies that she has never been, and will never be, a "boy," framing her womanhood as neither tentative nor newly revealed. At the same time, the remark—delivered as Dylan brushes a relaxed Cash—subtly unsettles Dylan's

position within a straightforwardly male category, introducing the first inklings of ambiguity in how he is being read and how he situates himself in relation to normative masculinity. In turn, Dylan's responses reinforce Sky's framing of her womanhood: by clarifying that Pepe is not his type while showing clear interest in her, he affirms that he reads and is attracted to her as a woman; his casual use of "ma'am" likewise reiterates this recognition through existing linguistic forms of rural politeness.

Rather than reproducing tropes that frame trans women through exclusion, violence, and fetishization, Sky's representation enacts a disidentificatory reconfiguration, positioning her as an unambiguous American beauty while subtly reworking the cisnormative assumptions that structure this category in dominant public imaginaries. Her transness is neither foregrounded as the basis of legibility nor erased; instead, it is acknowledged through her representation even as her embodiment appears neither exceptional nor transgressive but simultaneously desirable and ordinary. In one of the film's most visually striking scenes, the camera alternates between Dylan's explicit acknowledgment of his sexual attraction to Sky and slow-motion footage of her on horseback. Sky's segment of the scene opens with a wide-angle shot of her and Cash framed against a backdrop of towering rock formations (16:58-16:59). As the camera slowly zooms in, she begins to turn, cutting briefly back to Dylan before returning to a tighter shot of Sky. She then appears with her face fully visible, back arched, body open to the viewer, one hand resting on her horse's rump and the other on his withers as she raises her gaze to meet the camera directly (16:59-17:06).

In this short but charged moment, Sky simultaneously conveys her attraction and presents her body alongside established American symbolism. Her pose, posture, and gaze communicate both desire and desirability: her open stance invites the viewer's gaze, while the extension of her arms and the arch of her back register as overtly sexual. Her Daisy Duke shorts, American flag top, and cowgirl boots evoke classic American pinup imagery, linking her attractiveness to established archetypal beauty standards and national identity. Though her styling could be read as objectifying, her active muscular engagement and confident body language reassert her previously established agency. Her deliberate gaze further resists a reading of passivity, positioning her as an active participant in her own visual framing. Moreover, although the scene is sexually charged, the composition of her pose coupled with the angle of the camera foreclose opportunities for fetishization and speculation about her sexed body. Her seated position in the saddle and bent leg de-emphasize her genital region while bodily features often policed in attempts to "out" trans women—such as her forehead, neck, shoulder width, hands, or feet—are obscured or rendered irrelevant. This absence of trans-specific visual emphasis does not signal concealment, as the film's broader context clarifies, but rather reflects a refusal to conform to dominant codes of transfeminine legibility or reproduce trans-fetish tropes, presenting her beauty as both worthy of recognition and entirely ordinary within the dominant frameworks of beauty in the US.

At the same time, the scene legitimizes her claims to represent rural American identity. Beyond the overt American symbolism of her costume, her lower body demonstrates correct

riding posture—engaged leg muscles, heels pointed downward—communicating equestrian competence and familiarity. She rides a buckskin American Quarter Horse, widely associated with American ranching and rodeo, outfitted in Western tack, further anchoring the scene in identifiable rural iconography. The horse’s demeanor communicates mutual attunement: his head remains in a neutral position, reins hang loose, legs are squared, and ears are relaxed toward Sky, indicating his attention to her. The spatial setting of the scene likewise locates her within the visual vocabulary of the American West. In this way, the film situates trans embodiment within a counterpublic rearticulation of national iconography, reorienting the symbols that structure dominant publics to include historically disregarded subjects.

Taken together, this spatial placement, embodied competence, and visual stylization position Sky’s identity, sexuality, and trans body not as external to recognizable American material-symbolic terrain but as belonging there, embedding trans existence into dominant constructions of American beauty. However, this spatial and cultural claim does not necessarily signal uncritical assimilation into broader imaginaries. Instead, read as a disidentificatory strategy in a counterpublic reimagining, it reappropriates recognizable symbolism while refusing the framing that would render her transness either hypervisible or exceptional. In so doing, the film does not simply replicate dominant characterizations of rural American identity but mobilizes established visual coding to reimagine who has a legitimate claim to these spaces, symbols, and their meanings.

### **Claiming Rural Space**

This embedding of trans identities as constitutive of—not peripheral to—rural American life operates as a throughline in the film, moving beyond individual visibility to collective queer presence that redefines everyday rural spaces as counterpublic arenas in which their norms of use, interaction, and belonging are substantively reoriented. Filled with American flags, cowboy hats, and classic pickup trucks, the film centers a diverse group of queer, trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming characters within identifiable rural American spaces, depicting them fully participating in local life. However, rather than using these spaces and symbols to reproduce the power structures of dominant imaginaries, the film recontextualizes these signifiers through a queer prioritizing lens, using a disidentificatory strategy to create a trans rural imaginary in which queer presence is not simply tolerated but an organizing structure.

In a lighthearted scene, Sky and the ranch family encounter Dylan while socializing, shopping, and drinking at their local farm implement store—a site that operates as an informal leisure setting for rural American youth. Rather than assimilating into the cis-heteronormative expectations shaped through dominant representations of such spaces or attempting to pass unnoticed, the group openly expresses their queerness while occupying the store, actively transforming its meaning through performative practices and reconfiguring what can be done, seen, and recognized within it. After entering the store beneath a large American flag, they

exchange greetings with the shop attendant and joyfully proceed inside with linked arms (20:30-20:40). This entrance signals their claimed insider status in the space. While the flag marks the site's Americanness, their interlocking arms, confident stride, and laughter evoke an in-group posturing that renders their queerness aspirational and belonging, as the shop attendant's greeting seems to affirm. This counterpublic reframing substantively reimagines the possibilities of the space: while the rural American symbolism remains intact, its implications are superseded and recontextualized through the group's embodied takeover. Despite initial reluctance, Dylan is gradually drawn into their revelry as they inhabit the store, wearing, moving, imbibing, riding in, and lounging among its wares (20:40-22:30). Rather than conforming to the space's implicit norms, the group appropriates the store and materially reorders it through their interactions with one another and its objects. This disidentificatory shift is embodied through Dylan's communal drag stylization using items drawn from the store, recontextualizing how and by whom the space and its objects might be used and marking a turning point in his queer self-discovery (22:30-25:29). Loud, unapologetic, and at ease, they claim the space as rightful occupants, reshaping its norms and meanings.

Such acts of reappropriation extend to rodeos, where they attend, compete, and win prizes alongside a diverse cast of queer participants. Focalized through Dylan's experience as a newcomer entering a world that is at once identifiable through a rural American frame of reference and reimagined, an establishing montage unfolds as he steps onto the rodeo grounds (33:00-34:15). A drill team opens the rodeo carrying the flags of the International Gay Rodeo Association, the United States, the Progress Pride flag, and Canada in unison. Here, the display of the International Gay Rodeo Association flag alongside national and pride flags signals self-organized institutional recognition and infers the ongoing existence of a queer rural counterpublic: this rodeo is not a singular subversive moment of inclusion within a dominant public frame, but gestures toward a sustained claim of ownership that reconfigures the symbolic and spatial understandings of the rodeo itself. Queer participation is not merely tolerated within an otherwise normative space, but instead it operates as the defining structure through which the practices, symbols, and spaces are being deployed.

As the montage continues, queer bodies of varied races, genders, ages, and sizes are shown competing in rodeo events. Scenes of bull riders give way to shots of drag queens. Horses are adorned with rainbows and glitter, and queer couples kiss, cuddle, and show affection against the backdrop of the mountains. In this counterpublic reconfiguration, queerness is not an outsider category but the grounds for belonging, creating a frame that is at once recognizable as rural America and also structurally queer. However, while the film clearly establishes queer rodeo as a legitimate and organized entity, it simultaneously resists granting the viewer fully legible subjects by fixing its participants within stable identity categories. Within this spatial reconfiguration, participants are not compelled to narrate, justify, or make legible their identities to claim legitimate presence; instead, the expectations of the space itself are already reoriented around queer belonging.

At the same time, this assertion of queer belonging unsettles metronormative narratives that position queer life as urban and oriented toward escape from rural space. Rather than framing the rodeo as a temporary refuge or exception, the montage depicts rural queerness as lived, communal, and enduring, reimagining the cultural forms and practices often cast as antithetical to it. The atmosphere is celebratory—at once quintessentially American and unmistakably queer—showing not only that queer subjects inhabit these spaces, but that they embrace them as sites of belonging, reworking their cis, straight, white associations within dominant imaginaries. In staging queer participation not as marginal but at the center of the rodeo's rituals and spectacles, the film offers a counterpublic rendering in which rural space is not abandoned or parodied but re-signified through queer presence and collective joy.

This reappropriation of the American rural depicted in *National Anthem* does not merely extend visual access to marginalized subjects but rather reimagines the structures of power and knowledge that organize these spaces. In the scene that follows the rodeo montage, Dylan attempts bull riding (34:15-34:34, 35:12-35:30, 36:10-37:07)—a sport conventionally coded as the domain of cis, white, hypermasculine men—guided by a Black, presumably transmasculine mentor. Though the film does not explicitly name the character's identity, resisting full legibility, this lack of categorical clarity does not produce ambiguity in their role. They wear a trophy belt buckle that signals they have previously competed and won, and their instruction of Dylan positions them as an arbiter of knowledge within the space with the authority to induct others into the practice. By placing a visibly queer person of color as an expert within the space, the film not only renders a marginalized subject visible but also represents them as an active stakeholder there, reimagining conventional framings of knowledge, power, and access in the space.

## Imagining Rural Queer Futurity

Although the film reworks dominant scripts surrounding rural life, space, and queerness, it does not present a frictionless, already existing utopia. Instead, *National Anthem* stages queer futurity within ongoing conditions of risk, loss, and constraint, framing spatial transformation as a potential cumulative effect of sustained queer presence. Early on, Dylan's mother cautions him about the ranch's queer inhabitants, warning, "You saw they had one of those flags. You just can't be too careful with people" (15:50-16:00)—a statement that reflects common framings of queer subjects as inherently suspect. Similarly, despite the liberatory promise of Dylan's experience at the farm store, the moment ultimately ends in panic when he notices other shoppers staring, causing him to abruptly flee the store in tears (25:28-26:00). Later, Cary, a nonbinary character, recounts to Dylan the personal cost of coming out: "When I came out, I looked around, and suddenly I didn't have a family anymore. For a lot of us, that is the price of being yourself" (53:00-53:30). These moments of observation, fear, prejudice, and loss anchor the film's optimistic gestures within the persistent social constraints that shape queer and trans rural life. Dylan's response further underscores this pressure to

preserve the status quo: “I guess I’ve just never really felt it was a possibility for me. I guess, I’ve just always thought that whatever I am is set in stone” (53:37-54:15). His articulation of impossibility and predetermination reflects the deeply entrenched assumption that queerness and rural belonging are fundamentally incompatible.

However, rather than accepting exclusion or treating these divisions as immutable, the film echoes Massey as it frames rural spatial coding as malleable and open for reinterpretation. At the conclusion of the exchange between Cary and Dylan, Cary counters Dylan’s fatalism, saying, “Nothing’s set in stone” (54:16-30). Instead of treating the prejudice, pressure, and cis-heteronormativity implicit in rural spaces as a given, Cary’s assertion of plasticity functions as a hopeful declaration that by existing there as themselves, these spaces and their social constructions can eventually be rewritten within dominant imaginaries. The film reemphasizes this transformative potential in the penultimate scene when Dylan’s mother—now beginning to accept his burgeoning queer identity—remarks, “Somehow, seeing you being happy, living your life, makes me feel like maybe things could change. For all of us” (1:29:13-27). Dylan responds, “They will” (1:29:27-40). In this exchange, Dylan’s mother suggests that seeing him exist joyfully within a new community has reconfigured her framework for conceptualizing which lives she imagines as livable. Dylan’s hopeful affirmation further underscores his own ongoing transformation, signaling that by inhabiting his rural context differently, his sense of who—and how—he might be there has been reshaped. In this way, the film positions disidentificatory counterpublic formations as sites of potential agency while offering a vision of queer coming-of-age that resists mapping self-acceptance onto urban migration.

While this conversation initially appears to address only Dylan’s immediate family, the film quickly expands its scope as the American national anthem plays over their embrace. In the final scene, set at another rodeo ground, the national anthem is recontextualized beyond its presumed cis, straight, white context. Here, a visibly queer Black singer performs the anthem a cappella as trans people, queer folks, drag queens, and people of color watch, hats removed and hands over their hearts (1:29:40-1:31:45). Throughout the performance, the singer smiles and maintains eye contact with the audience, whose visible responses—solemnity, tears, reverence—register its emotional impact. The camera pans, showing multiple pride flags, patriotic bunting, and horses in the foreground with sweeping mountain views in the background, all suffused in pink light.

In this scene, the film appropriates national symbols, historically mobilized against queer and trans communities, and places them into the hands of those marginalized subjects. By positioning a visibly queer Black person as the voice of the national anthem, the film refigures an intersectionally marginalized subject as an authority on Americanness who can contest the meaning and ownership of national symbols. This act of reclamation extends beyond the performer, encompassing the audience as the singer’s sweeping gaze appears to address each individual—affectively affirmed by their noticeably moved responses. Through the camera’s

sustained attention not just to the characters in frame but also to the arena and landscape beyond, the film reiterates its claim of spatial access, ownership, and queer belonging.

Yet while the scene heavily emphasizes national symbols and identity, as at the ranch's gate, it notably only features pride flags raised on the flagpole, with the Progress Pride flag occupying the highest position and the Gilbert Baker Pride flag just below it. This visual hierarchy places queer symbols above not only the red, white, and blue bunting but also, through the camera's framing, even the mountains themselves. The selection and ordering of these flags seem to further articulate the film's political positionality: foregrounding the Progress Pride flag emphasizes the centrality of trans people and people of color to queer liberation, while the inclusion of the Gilbert Baker Pride flag situates this vision within the longer history of queer struggle. By visually placing queerness above all else in the scene, the film seems to clarify that its recontextualization of national symbols is not an attempt at assimilation into existing power structures but instead a critical intervention that reimagines the terms of belonging altogether. In subordinating national identity to queer identity, the film asserts that queer and trans lives not only are able to employ these symbols but have an active stake in defining the meaning of Americanness, and, by extension, the structures of power it upholds. As the sky subtly shifts color in the background, the scene seems to underscore this demand for change, its temporal ambiguity evoking both an ending and the promise of a beginning.

Taken together, the film's final moments set queerness alongside American iconography and geography to stake a forceful claim of ownership. Here, queer identities are American identities, and the national symbols and the spaces they occupy are rendered equally open to redefinition. This closing sequence thus functions as a culmination of the film's broader challenge to dominant imaginaries, contributing to a trans counterpublic that reimagines the relationship between queer and trans embodiments, national identity, and rural space, while offering hope for queer futures.

## Conclusion

By weaving trans bodies and identities into familiar rural iconography, *National Anthem* challenges the spatial and cultural divisions produced by exposure, offering an alternative representation that contends trans people belong within these landscapes rather than appearing as exceptions to them. Through its sustained attention to everyday practices—labor, leisure, intimacy, play—the film challenges the narrative that trans presence in rural space is temporary, dangerous, or anomalous. Instead, it constructs a counterpublic rural imaginary in which trans embodiment is neither spectacle nor threat but a constitutive feature of rural life. In so doing, *National Anthem* challenges dominant public framings that locate queer futurity exclusively in urban space and cast rural America as incompatible with trans existence.

Crucially, the film's intervention does not rely on increased visibility alone. As this paper has argued, visibility without representation has historically functioned as a tool for regulation, rendering trans people hypervisible to systems of power while denying them narrative authority or spatial legitimacy. *National Anthem* instead wields representation as a form of spatial recontextualization, situating trans subjects within established rural frames while largely declining to stabilize or codify their identities. In so doing, the film does not simply insert trans people into existing narratives of Americanness; rather, it reconfigures the frameworks of power and knowledge that usually structure these spaces, using disidentification to transform the meaning of their symbols, spatial imaginaries, and those for whom they are imagined to exist.

Read through an expanded understanding of Warner's theorization of publics and counterpublics, *National Anthem* produces a trans counterpublic that simultaneously reworks discursive and material-symbolic space. The film addresses an indefinite audience while modeling alternative modes of belonging, recognition, and participation that operate outside the boundaries perpetuated by dominant publics. By grounding this counterpublic in rural space—a terrain often mobilized against queer subjects—the film expands the imaginative geography of trans life, challenging the idea that queer futurity must be sought elsewhere. As such, the film's counterpublic does not simply seek straightforward inclusion within dominant publics but argues for a transformation of publicness itself that alters who may appear, speak, and be recognized as legitimate within these spaces.

Despite its generally optimistic stance, *National Anthem* resists utopian simplification. Moments of scrutiny, fear, loss, and hesitation underscore the reality that queer rural life remains structured by risk and constraint. However, the film does not treat these conditions as fixed or inevitable. Instead, it locates the transformative potential of counterpublic formation not as a singular rupture, but as the cumulative effect of sustained queer presence that can gradually reshape spatial imaginaries and the terms of belonging.

As such, *National Anthem* should not be read as offering a definitive vision of livable queer futures, but rather as articulating one possible pathway through which such futures might be imagined and enacted. Ultimately, the film demonstrates a way in which representation can function as a form of spatial resistance under conditions of unavoidable visibility. By centering trans embodiment within the visual terrain of the American West and national symbolism, it opens new doors toward livable futures. In this way, the film asserts that rural space does not have to be a relic to be escaped nor a hostile territory to be endured but can be a site of ongoing contestation and possibility. In so doing, *National Anthem* reframes trans lives not as peripheral to Americanness but as central to its ongoing redefinition.

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