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RURALITY, GEOGRAPHY AND FEMINISM
Troubling relationships

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Introduction

In this chapter, we provide a selective rather than a comprehensive review of the literature. The latter has been ably undertaken numerous times (e.g. Bryant and Pini 2011; Grace and Lennie 1998; Gorman-Murray et al. 2013; Ibarra García and Escamilla-Herrera 2016; Little and Panelli 2003; Pini and Whelehan 2015). We examine the literature through the lens of the troubled relationship between rurality, geography and feminism. We give particular emphasis to more recent scholarship, cognizant that it constitutes a dialogue with foundational feminist rural geographies (e.g. Brandth 1994, 1995; Liepins 1998, 2000; Little 2002; Pini 2002, 2003). In mobilizing Judith Butler’s (1990) metaphor of trouble, we seek to highlight fractures and resonances among rurality, geography and feminism. Our aim is to show each of these as multifaceted and complex theories, experiences and perspectives that should trouble the others.

The chapter is divided into four parts. In the first, we detail how feminist scholarship has troubled the subdiscipline of rural geography. Feminist incursions into rural geography remain highly circumscribed, with gender typically corralled as a separate line of inquiry. However, we demonstrate the often-unacknowledged ways in which feminism has broadened and deepened rural geography epistemologically and methodologically. In the second part of the chapter, we trouble the relationship between rural feminist geography and other feminist interventions in geography. We detail how feminist rural geographers have challenged urban-centric feminist theorizations and one-dimensional representations of rural women. At the same time, we identify gaps in rural feminist geographic scholarship compared to the empirical foci of broader spatialized feminist research. Following this, in the third part of the chapter we trouble the privileging of White, Western neoliberal feminism in rural geography. In troubling the colonial gaze of feminist rural geography, we introduce decolonial feminisms in the final section of the chapter, demonstrating its political and theoretical potential. Decolonial feminisms are part of the body of work emerging from Latin America on decoloniality that destabilizes the existing colonial matrix of power embedded in the specific histories of ongoing colonization of the Americas (see Mignolo and Walsh 2018). Thus, we show how it has troubled universalist constructions of feminism and rurality, and how its
engagement may assist in addressing the troubling relationships between rurality, geography and feminism.

**Feminist rural geography: troubling rural geography epistemologically and methodologically**

Feminist scholarship – as a multiplicity of intertwined theoretical and methodological projects variously emphasizing and seeking to address unequal relations of power – has broadened and enriched the subject of rural geography in a range of compelling ways. In terms of extending the empirical foci in the study of rural farming families, Haugen, Brandth and Follo (2015), for example, attend to the intimate gender dynamics of family break-up from the perspective of women who have divorced farming partners in the past three years. This study moves empirical work away from ideal(ized) heteronormative rural families to encompass diversity and change, while recognizing women’s evolving roles and agency in Western farm life. Importantly, the research identifies a tendency among participants to privilege the farm’s survival in the divorce process. This is attributed to the patriarchal structure and discourse of the ‘family farm’, along with farming community norms, which, in turn, highlights the way that ‘local structures and cultures of care and obligation to others’ are central to rural Norwegian women’s senses of self and the protection of their reputation and good conscience (Haugen, Brandth and Follo 2015: 47). Haugen and Brandth (2015) further explore divorce in farming couples in relation to gendered moralities.

A nuanced illustration of the way in which feminist infused scholarship has enriched rural geography is Riley’s (2009) work on the spatial and temporal dynamicity of farm gender relations in the UK. Through methodologically innovative farm life histories, he demonstrates the shifting nature and temporalities of the gendering of farm practices and spaces. In doing so, he adds nuance to our understandings of men’s and women’s farm identities and their interrelationships. Perhaps most importantly, this work demonstrates women’s agency in the production of hybrid feminine identities. Similarly, Asher (2004) takes a territorial approach to explore Afro-Colombian women’s activism by reflecting on everyday lived experiences, cultural traditions and ancestral medicine practices. By spatially tracing how women organize along the Caucan River, Asher (2004) explores resistances to neoliberal development, government abandonment and racism in their localities. This study is based on doing geographies of place that unveil spatially local resistances.

Alongside this troubling of understandings of ‘the farm’ as a stable, if not neutral, focus of rural geography, feminist scholarship has highlighted other elisions deriving from White masculinist privilege in scholarly representations of rurality. Drawing on Whiteness theory and engaging with the work of Australian Indigenous feminist scholars, including the highly influential scholarship of Moreton-Robinson (2000), Ramzan, Pini and Bryant (2009, 442) acknowledge the ‘power and privilege’ underpinning the subject position of ‘white academic feminists’, along with the inherently ‘situated and partial’ nature of knowledge production. In doing so, they demonstrate the inadequacies of understandings of rurality marked by a lack of Indigenous voices. This is evidenced, in one example, in the primacy given to White farmers ‘in constructions of rural Australia, despite the integral role that Indigenous people played in the establishment and development of pastoral industries’ (Ramzan, Pini and Bryant 2009, 441).

Just as Ramzan, Pini and Bryant’s (2009) research deployed a feminist methodology grounded in the notion of ‘conversation’, Bryant and Livholts (2015) use of a ‘memory work’ approach is a powerful exemplar of how innovative methods grounded in feminist theorizing have extended the subject of inquiry in rural geography. Drawing on Donna Haraway’s notions of situatedness...
and embodied knowledge, Bryant and Livholts (2015) trouble the taken-for-granted separation of subject and object underpinning rural scholarship (and, indeed, scholarship more widely). Specifically, they draw on their own situated memories to show the ‘interconnectivity of self and landscape’ (2015, 183) opening up to scrutiny the dynamic interrelations of gendered bodies and rural landscapes. In adopting a memory work approach, they thus highlight the active processes through which embodied memories inform interactions with place. As they argue, adopting such a method ‘enables the connecting of personal narratives and experiences with social structures bringing to the fore relations of power and how they impact on body and place’ (Bryant and Livholts 2015, 193).

In rural geography, feminist scholarship has further foregrounded complex dynamics of power and place in addressing intersections of normative heterosexuality and senses and experiences of rural locales. Research by Pini, Mayes and Boyer (2013) examining the privileging of rural heterosexuality and the local geographies of containment of non-normative or ‘scary’ heterosexuality in rural communities has both expanded and troubled understandings of the interrelations of rurality and heterosexuality. Such work has demonstrated how the women employed in Australian rural hotels as ‘skimpie’ barmaids – those who wear just lingerie while serving behind the bar – are seen to alleviate the risks locally associated with frontier hypermasculine heterosexuality. At the same time, skimpie barmaids can be seen to destabilize gendered stereotypes around fixity and mobility (Boyer, Mayes and Pini 2017). Attention to the contemporary cultural management of rural sexualities illuminates tensions and contradictions informing the ongoing (re)production of contemporary ruralities.

These tensions and contradictions are taken up by Abelson (2016) in interviews with 45 transgender men living in rural areas of the US. As Abelson notes, transgender people are often imagined to reside only in urban areas, and those in rural locations are excluded. However, through an intersectional analysis she demonstrates that transgender men can mobilize their Whiteness as ‘a key constitutive element of rural sameness’ (2016, 1453), along with working-class heterosexual identities, to forge connections and a sense of belonging. This is enabled in significant part by economic change and rural decline, along with demographic change, so that the boundaries of local inclusion and sameness are extended to maintain racial hierarchies; that is, the terms by which transgender men are included in the rural communities are grounded in the othering of people of colour.

As demonstrated by the above, contemporary feminist rural geography has enriched mainstream rural geography by highlighting embodied dimensions of gendered rural lives. This is also advanced by research on the politics of embodied care work undertaken by Fullagar and O’Brien (2018) and Bryant and Garnhams (2017). In the former, the authors explore rural women’s experiences of depression and recovery, departing from individualized biomedical models to employ instead a relational understanding. Fullagar and O’Brien (2018, 15) highlight the stigma that attaches to the bodies of depressed rural women, who are positioned as ‘less than good mothers, self-sacrificing wives, and stalwart community volunteers’. Formal spaces of care, if they exist, are often avoided and instead women employ a range of embodied self-care practices, such as gardening and swimming, to facilitate their recovery. In a similar respect to Fullagar and O’Brien (2018), Bryant and Garnham (2017) report on the centrality of discourses of the ‘good mother’ in shaping how rural women enact care. In this instance, mothers caring for adult disabled children are viewed as embodying special knowledge and intuition in relation to their children, which creates difficulties in accessing the limited formal social care in rural communities so that care continues in the home. The investigations by Fullagar and O’Brien (2018) and Bryant and Garnham (2017) foreground topics of inquiry in feminist geography, namely care work and motherhood. However, as we discuss in the following section, in the
main this has not resulted in the inclusion of rural perspectives in the development of these literatures.

**Feminist rural geography: troubling urban geography**

Rural feminist geographers have troubled feminist theorizing outside of its subdisciplinary field. They have done so by seeking to understand and illuminate what Brandth (2002, 115) has described as the ‘poor fit’ between rural women and feminism. As Brandth (2002) rightly observes, anxieties about rural women’s relationship with feminism are embedded in a number of assumptions, including, for example, a modernist belief in progress and a second-wave feminist view that there is a commonality to women’s experience. To address the question of why rural women have not adopted feminism, Brandth (2002, 115) counsels that there is a need to refute these assumptions and, importantly, to undertake empirical investigations that privilege rural women’s voices on feminism as potentially ‘individual and collective, heterogeneous, contingent, ambivalent, complex, and embedded within various specificities of rural contexts’. This is a task undertaken by Egge and Devine (2015) in an historical analysis of how women in the rural mid-west of the US responded to the national suffrage amendment in the 1970s. The authors reveal that, while rural women have often been portrayed as failed political subjects, they have often been actively involved politically, as they were in this campaign. However, their activism has occurred outside of mainstream and formal spaces, and so has been overlooked. In another examination of more recent feminist activism in rural spaces in the Global North, Leach (2015) charts the fate of women’s service organizations in rural Canada in recent decades. Interviews with feminist employees in these services reveal experiences of ‘mockery, minimization and misunderstanding’ in some conservative rural communities, but interviewees forge connections and alliances with each other as well as with urban-based feminists (Leach 2015, 92). Their very presence in and commitment to their rural clients provides a useful corrective to urban imaginaries of feminism.

Troubling the relationship between feminist rural geography and other feminist geographical scholarship should not be thought of as unidirectional. There is much that feminist rural geographers can learn from engaging in spatialized feminist research outside the subdiscipline. In preparing this review, for example, we have noted the limited engagement with a diversity of feminist theorizing in rural geography. There are some notable exceptions, such as Kimura and Katano’s (2014) insightful feminist political ecological study of the experiences of organic farmers in Japan, following the Fukushima Nuclear reactor accident in 2011, and Tuitjer’s (2018) new materialist research examining the role of housebuilding in the lives of rural German women.

Kath Browne’s (2011) research on ‘festigoers’ at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival moves away from the widely used lens of the rural idyll to engage with rural utopias as a means to enable consideration of the ‘rural possibilities’ afforded to non-hegemonic sexualities. Through a detailed focus on lesbian rural utopias, Browne (2011) shows how rural others create rural spaces as sites of empowerment and resistance. Also indicative of a more diverse engagement in theory is Bjorklund’s (2013) use of Sara Ahmed’s theory of affect to explore embodiment and belonging for rural young lesbians in contemporary Swedish youth fiction. In another theoretically innovative and important study, Rachael E. Sullivan (2009) uses feminist and queer theory to de-tether the conflation of masculinity and male bodies. She examines how some straight rural women are (mis)read as queer because of their investment in masculinity, while some queer women in the same space are (mis)read as heterosexual. Importantly, she asserts that that
masculine femininity is a ‘highly valued quality within the “macho” landscape’ of the rural area of her study, so it is understandable why some women have considerable investment in such a gender performance (Sullivan 2009, 3). What she offers is not only an insightful analysis of how rural lesbian women creatively read their social space to locate and identify queer women but a nuanced account of enactments of rural masculinity.

Despite the above studies, overall feminist studies in rural geography have not fully exploited the diverse theoretical terrain in gender studies to understand rural gendered lives more comprehensively. This limitation can be illustrated through reference to postfeminism. At present, we know little, if anything, about the constitution of rural masculinities and femininities in the context of postfeminism, a period associated with both a backlash against feminism and a popular(ized) belief that feminist goals have been achieved (McRobbie 2009). The few studies that have been undertaken in this area suggest that there is much to be gained by redressing the urban bias of postfeminist scholarship. While she does not specifically name postfeminism, Little’s (2013, 2015) work on women’s consumption of fitness holidays and spa retreats in rural spaces explores a number of post-feminist sensibilities. These include women’s self-surveillance and monitoring, personal transformation and intensified consumption. She reveals the connection between these postfeminist practices and the imagined natural environment of the rural setting. Elsewhere, Whelehan and Pini (2017) examine postfeminist discourses in three recent women’s memoirs about finding romance in the countryside. They reveal the ambivalences and contradictions inherent in postfeminism as it is manifest in the rural setting. The writers present themselves as strong and capable women with rich professional lives in the city. However, they simultaneously construct the urban as a place to be left behind, sometimes with regret, and the move to the country as a cleansing experience, signifying a reframing of life priorities.

**Troubling White, Western feminism in rural geography**

A foundational critique in the literature emerging from global rural feminisms problematizes its White, Western bias (Gargallo Celentani 2014; Hernández Castillo 2013; Lozano 2016; Marcos 2005; Moreton-Robinson 2000). Notably, these neoliberal feminist narratives and actions have resulted in discourses that position the majority of rural women, around the globe, as ‘other’, ‘exotic’ and ‘powerless’. Simultaneously, they ignore women’s liberation and progress that do not align with a colonial and neoliberal logic. Moreover, within the colonial gaze of feminist rural geography, there is an idea that poor women, rural women and/or women of colour need ‘rescuing’, by prioritizing the global over the local and legitimizing racism. Therefore, there is a commonality between neoliberal globalization and hegemonic feminist discourses, as both are premised on a notion of a linear pathway to ‘progress’.

This commonality is taken up in research on the daily work of campesina women in Colombia by Rodriguez Castro et al. (2016). The authors note that a Western reading of the women participants in their study would typically be that they are failed subjects of both feminism and neoliberal globalization. However, they caution against such a reading, despite the gendered division of labour and the challenges of forging an income from small-scale farming. They highlight participants’ creativity in resisting agricultural globalization through strategies such as selling farm produce in local networks, their pride in the description of being a campesina and their attachment to their rural community and natural surrounds. As such, rural women are viewed as agentic and knowledgeable rather than as in need of saving, as would be the case if seen through the purview of modernist feminist and capitalist/neoliberal orthodoxies.
Rurality, geography and feminism

Despite the sustained and compelling challenges to hegemonic White feminism, there is still a tendency in rural feminist geography to universalize the experience of women. In such work, the ‘we’ that is invoked is typically unstated but taken for granted to be White, middle-class feminists, and the differences between women (although sometimes acknowledged) are then conveniently obscured or muted. This is evident in a celebratory auto-ethnographic review in January 2017 by Garrett Graddy-Lovelace (2017) of the relationship between agrarian feminism and the so-called unproblematised ‘Women’s March’ in Washington. Despite repeatedly using the language of intersectionality, Graddy-Lovelace (2017, 691) concludes by providing a call to action by asking that ‘women rise up – together’. In summoning this undifferentiated social category, she erases oppressions of class, race, disability and sexuality and ignores the material reality that many women benefit from these oppressions. In appropriating the Women’s March as the impetus for global feminist action, she simultaneously re-entrenches the centrality not only of White, urban, Western feminism but a particularly US version of this feminism. This highlights the need, which we take up in the following section, for feminist rural geographers to engage more fully with decolonial feminisms.

Decolonial feminisms

White Western neoliberal feminism has been challenged in academic and activist spaces via the emergence of what is termed ‘decolonial feminism’, as expressed in the work of the Red de Feminismos Descoloniales in Mexico (Méndez Torres et al. 2013; Millán et al. 2014). Decolonial feminists seeks to destabilize truths and question the above perspectives on progress and well-being through an engagement with women’s localized resistances in their territories and communities. Equally, they call for a feminist agenda that denounces racism and that does not silence or exclude indigenous, campesina and Black women (see also Cabnal 2015; Hernández Castillo 2013; Rivera Cusicanqui 2010).

Across the literature that has emerged from decolonial thought, we have identified two main claims about its potential in relation to rural feminist geography. First, it has the capacity to strengthen territorial struggles as a way to contest colonialism and neoliberalism (including patriarchy and racism) by understanding that territory, body and land are intimately related (Gargallo Celentani 2014; Lozano 2016; Suárez Navaz and Hernández Castillo 2008). This is the concept of territorio cuerpo-tierra (Cabnal 2015). The political importance of this concept lies in the reality that territorial struggles are central to the localized resistances of rural communities to colonial practices and neoliberal globalization (Teubal and Ortega Breña 2009). As land is understood as more than just a physical space, so is the territory, and therefore these spaces have history, feelings, life and memory. Cabnal (2015) argues that recognizing the relationship of territory body-land is essential to resist violence against women’s bodies. She notes that ‘there are a number of testimonies of resistance: from the grandmothers to the great grandmothers against the different forms of colonial domination, to the contemporary women who place their bodies in the frontline to defend life’ (Cabnal 2015, np).

Feminist rural geographers have already shown that the home may be differently experienced by rural women in the Global South and, doing so, reveal the efficacy of a conceptualization of territory body-land. In White, Western feminist geography, the positive connotations of home have often been ignored, yet the home is often where rural women, through their gardens, engage in food sovereignty struggles (Espino et al. 2012). These results have been resonated in the work of feminist rural geographers based in other countries in the Global South (Christie 2006; Robson 2006; Wardrop 2006).
A second way in which decolonial thought may be usefully engaged in feminist rural geography is methodologically. In rural geography, Carolan (2008) and Woods (2010) have called for an engagement in methodologies that explore the spatial relationships of neoliberal globalization by focusing on place, both the everyday and embodied lived experiences. However, decolonial work takes this further, advocating a feeling-thinking approach to research (sentipensando) in which the heart and thinking processes are not separate but, rather, entangled in our subjectivities as researchers (Fals Borda 2015; López Intzín 2013; Rodriguez Castro 2017). In the context of feminist rural geography, this involves embodied research in which the study of place and its spatial relationships (both human and non-human) are essential to understanding the countryside. It also requires more communitarian research practices to be committed to render visible the rural actors who have been historically invisible in the mainstream, especially rural women (Espino et al. 2012; Méndez Torres et al. 2013; Riley 2010; Rodriguez Castro 2017). By being attuned to the lived experiences of feeling-thinking, we privilege everyday knowledge in research (Fals Borda 2013, 2015). As a consequence, our emotions, feelings and politics become a site of negotiation, which is a necessary prerequisite to contesting the colonial gaze and to enabling global dialogue.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have taken up Judith Butler’s (1990) notion of trouble to explore the troubling relationship between rurality, geography and feminism. We began by considering the positive ways in which feminists have troubled rural geography epistemologically and methodologically. Despite these achievements, feminist scholarship continues to operate on the margins in rural geography, in that the work by feminists is seldom cited by mainstream geographers. This means that the radical potential of a feminist epistemic lens has not been fully realized by rural geographers. Indeed, a significant body of writing in more recent years has reverted to (or, perhaps, has never moved on from) addressing gender simply by adding it as a variable. Such research is not engaged with the critical political project of feminism that goes beyond the academy in its concern with addressing inequalities of power and advocating for social change.

In the second part of the paper we examined the ways in which feminist rural geography has troubled feminist theorizing more broadly, and vice versa. Again, we concentrated in this review on the constructive conversations that have occurred and should continue to occur as a result of this troubling. What is problematic however, is that rural feminist geography is often overlooked outside of our own subdisciplinary area. It does not seem to find an audience in the larger body of feminist geographical writing, perhaps because it is seen as too niche or particular. This means that the work done by feminists in rural geography is labelled peripheral not just by mainstream rural geographers but also by feminist geographers more broadly.

In the final two sections of the chapter, we troubled the colonial and racial perspective of rural feminist geography. In addition to identifying the criticisms that have been levelled against rural geography by women outside of the narrow confines of the Western world, we engaged with the notion of decolonialism. We contend that this perspective could usefully inform rural feminist geography on two counts. That is, it can both facilitate a deeper and more critically reflexive understanding of the intricate relationship between land, body and territory in women’s lives and encourage more embodied, place-based and communitarian research practices.


**Rurality, geography and feminism**

**Note**

1 *Campesina* is the widely used and culturally appropriate word to refer to the peasant women of Colombia. It has important historical and political implications in the history of rural resistance in the country.

**Key readings**


**References**


Barbara Pini et al.


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