

Book Review

Pini, B., Brandth, B., & Little, J. (Eds.) (2015). *Feminisms and ruralities*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Review by Hernán Cuervo
The University of Melbourne

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In their new edited book, *Feminisms and Ruralities*, Barbara Pini, Berit Brandth, and Jo Little bring together a collection of essays that discuss the intersection of feminism and rural studies. The plural in the title of their edited volume reveals their concerns and aims: to bring into conversation the multiplicity of feminisms and ruralities that intersect with and impact rural everyday lives. That is, a driving force in their book is to highlight the different ontological manifestations of feminism and rurality; how and why they intersect; what can they tell us about the profound social, economic, and cultural structural changes in rural life; and how they challenge traditional assumptions of rural identities. The result is an important book that illustrates the complexity and contested nature of both concepts, and that highlights the theoretical and empirical work that has been done and needs to follow in order to fill the research gap around the concept of difference in rural spaces.

The book is divided in two sections: “The Feminist Movement and Rural Women” and “Feminist Perspectives of Rurality.” The introduction and conclusion, which sit outside these two sections, are not to be missed. In the former, the three editors set the agenda of the volume in an astute, complex, and elegant way, but most importantly, they outline the varied epistemological and methodological contributions that feminism has made to the field of rural studies. For example, they argue that feminism introduced gender as an important analytical category to challenge the masculinized political economy view of rural studies and practices. Nonetheless, and surprisingly to me, Pini, Brandth, and Little are also pessimistic about the continuous “specialized and discrete” place that feminist critique occupies in rural studies (p. 3). For instance, from the first sentence of the book, the authors claim that their

starting point is to question and problematize why different forms of feminism have not been taken up by rural research. The editors speculate that the reasons might be anchored in the urban profile of many feminists in academia and/or stereotypes of rural women as conservative subjects who are detached from the gender egalitarian cause and thus not a prime focus for research. I agree with them that feminist studies have concentrated on urban rather than rural spaces. However, I believe that recent handbooks on rural studies (e.g. Cloke, Mardsen & Mooney, 2006; Shucksmith & Brown, 2016) and the important work of some of the editors and contributors to this book (e.g., Sally Shortall, Lia Bryant) over the years challenge this pessimistic view by the authors.

The first part of the book, “The Feminist Movement and Rural Women,” addresses and recognizes the long political history of rural women in the feminist cause (e.g., in suffrage movements, law reform, and agricultural organizations). These chapters, drawing from the United States, Canada, Australia, and the Nordic region, aim to demystify the idea of women in rural spaces as passive subjects. The contributors to the seven chapters in this section depict the diversity of women’s social and political struggles and challenge the perception of rural women’s social positions as “companion” of the active farming male breadwinner and as caregiver and organizer of the household. They reveal women and feminist movement in motion rather than a static subject dependent of the Other(s).

In my view, the chapter by Sally Shortall on the tension between gender mainstreaming and essentialism in European Union policy reflects an emblematic issue of 21st-century democratic societies. Here Shortall aptly demonstrates the tension between policies that turn away from the particularities of individuals in order to mainstream processes and practices to stop discrimination and the work that gender essentialism does to turn attention back on the group. Thus, it constructs women as a stable and homogenous category in order to highlight inequality between genders. At the core of the problem with this tension are the banishment of difference to the interior of feminism and women’s lives and the neglect of the particular

All correspondence should be directed to Hernán Cuervo, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne, Level: 05 Room, 100 Leicester Street, Carlton, Parkville (hcuervo@unimelb.edu.au).

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challenges experienced by rural women in an increasingly complex spatial environment.

An important idea that permeates the book is that of equality. This idea of equality is more explicitly addressed in the second part of the book. In this second part, “Feminist Perspectives of Rurality,” Butler’s concept of performativity is the lens through which the idea of equality is explored in Little’s chapter on feminist scholarship in rural studies; Byrne, Duvvury, Macken-Walsh, and Watson’s chapter on the feminization of agriculture; and Rogers-Brown’s chapter on the impact of globalization and free trade agreements on rural women in Mexico. Rogers-Brown’s contribution is the exception to the Global North focus applied in this book, including a dominant Nordic and North American emphasis. While the focus on case studies from the Global North might have been the aim of the editors, I feel that it is timely that rural education and rural studies expand their research lens towards the Global South. There is a risk that rural studies might continue to define rurality through experiences situated in the Global North.

In the chapters by Little, Byrne, and colleagues and Rogers-Brown, as well as those by Keller on queering rural spaces and Cairns on gender studies in a rural school, different ways of being are offered through the display of practices, rituals, and discourses. Readers of the *Journal for Research in Rural Education* will be drawn to Cairns’s chapter as the only one that intersects gender and rurality in a school space. The chapter, however, does not examine rural school policies, processes, and practices. Rather, it uses schooling as the backdrop for the study of rural gender performances. Cairns offers an interesting account of the power of class in generating gendered inequalities through the performance of feminine and masculine discourses and practices by rural school students. Cairns’s study will also resonate with rural educators who are familiar with Howley, Howley, and Johnson’s (2014) edited volume in that she highlights the continuous relevant place of class in rural identity analysis. By rendering space, class, and gender visible in rural students’ lives, the chapter challenges powerful discourses anchored in the global testing regime project that constructs learning outcomes as structurally neutral. In addition, I believe Cairns’s work is useful for rural teacher education courses to present pre-service teachers with an example of the complex processes of students’ gender and class construction in rural spaces.

In the conclusion, the editors not only distill the main points coming out of the collection of chapters but show an impressive command of the current agenda of feminism. In particular, drawing on Donkersloot’s (2012) work they focus on the importance of feminine and masculine performativity to understand new practices and identities in a complex post-rural space. This latter concept of post-rural spaces could have been better developed and illustrated throughout the chapters.

Nonetheless, all the chapters offer rural educators a greater understanding of feminism outside the metropolis. Through historical and contemporary case studies, the book eloquently makes clear that equality *and* difference need to be guiding principles in the analysis of rural lives. If this book presents feminism in its various permutations, however, the same cannot be said about the concept of rurality. Much of the “rural” is understood as farming, with some mentions of fisheries and forestry. That is, the contributors mostly focus on farming as the prevalent economic and social practice that serves to scrutinize gender norms and behaviors. In the conclusion, the editors acknowledge their narrow focus on ‘farm women’ and their lack of attention to other rural economies, such as ‘tourism’, ‘extractive industries’, and ‘manufacturing’ (p. 200). Recognition of a multifunctional rural space framework based on production, consumption, and protection (see Holmes, 2006) is unfortunately absent in the book. This absence is, in my view, the volume’s greatest weakness. The chapters, however, offer important accounts of the complexities of rural life. The book is timely, affirming the need for feminist research and identity politics to engage with space as an analytical category, and makes clear to educators, researchers, and policy makers that rural lives matter.

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