

[2]: Studies of Rural Masculinity and Femininity Continue to Demonstrate the Dominance of Highly Conventional Performances of Sexuality. Critically Discuss This Contention.

Despite an initially slow and occasionally “half-hearted” (Little, 2002, P. 655; Little, 2015) adoption of critical feminist approaches, geographical studies on rural masculinity and femininity have provided valuable insight into the performance of sexuality and gender roles in everyday life (Brandth, 2002). Wider disciplinary engagements stress the importance of overt and ‘quiet’ spaces in the socio-cultural reproduction of “sexual norms and cultural standards” (Hubbard, 2018, P. 1296); highlighting the necessary link between “bodies, spaces and desires” (Hubbard, 2008, P. 640). When compared with urban environments, performances of sexuality in rural settings are traditionally more conservative and heteronormative (Brandth, 2002; Leckie, 1996). Stereotypically, masculinities predominately based on physical strength and technical abilities (Saugeres, 2002) have created a hegemony over performances of femininity, typically defined by childcare and domesticity (Gasson, 1980). This essay explores the contention above through an examination of three key spaces of rural life. First, performances of sexuality in agriculture are analysed across environmental and mechanical vectors; providing theoretical foundations for subsequent discussions of the rural home and community, respectively explored through internal and external power relations and leisure activities. Holistically, this essay partially agrees with the contention, as all spaces explored demonstrate and perpetuate conventional performances of hegemonic masculinities and traditional femininities. However, their continued ‘*dominance*’ is questioned due to the increasingly non-conventional performances of sexuality: explored through the assimilation of agriculture and business, shifting constructions of rural morality and subversive community action.

Studies on rural agriculture highlight conventional performances of sexuality through highly gendered divisions of farm labour and valorisation of traditionally masculine traits. Liepins (1998A, P. 376; 1998B) distinguishes between two agricultural “fields of action”: with socio-economic relations and practices on *the farm* distinct from, yet inherently linked to, wider *agricultural politics*. Regarding the former, studies observed the promotion of conventional, hetero-normative performances of masculinity derived from the interplay between ‘man’,

natural environments and embodied working practices (Little, 2015; 2007; Saugeres, 2002; Brandth, 2002). Stereotypically masculine characteristics of “power, strength, and fitness” (Little, 2015, P. 111) are valorised in the socio-cultural identity of farmers who interact with harsh natural environments. This is evidenced through Liepins’ (1998A) visuo-textual analysis of media within the New Zealand Farmer [*NZF*], where forms of masculinity associated with “toughness” were promoted through outdoor work in “rugged” landscapes; supported by captions detailing the battle between “man and nature” (P. 377). These constructions are relational and place-dependent (Little, 2015; Tebbutt, 2006), with comparatively more remote and hostile environments associated with more dominant forms of masculinity. Therefore, the relationship between embodied working practices and nature enables and reproduces conventionally masculine traits through sustained engagement with natural environments, further symbolised through discourses of mechanisation.

Dominant forms of masculinity are additionally articulated through exclusive and gendered constructions of farming machinery. Brandth (1995) similarly examines [*Norwegian*] farming press, highlighting symbiotic relationships between ‘man’ and ‘machine’. Specifically, the tractor symbolises conventionally masculine embodied traits which *the farm* promotes, namely “persistence, technical abilities and power” (P. 132), communicated through adverts which align masculine and mechanical qualities. Saugeres (2002) supplements this discussion, situating the tractor as an extension of hegemonic masculine identities which oppose “women and nature” (P. 156). Interviews revealed understandings that driving tractors was not appropriate for many women, reserving both operation and maintenance for men; representing and legitimising conventional forms of dominant masculinity (Brandth, 2016). Thus, rural studies have revealed how spaces of agriculture valorise, legitimise, and reproduce hegemonic masculinities: sustained by deep-rooted discourses of male supremacy over nature [*and women*] and symbolised through mechanical farming practices. Nevertheless, more recent studies have questioned the universality and continued dominance of hegemonic masculinities.

Additional studies now recognise multiple forms of masculinity which juxtapose conventional forms explored previously. Brandth (1995) initially recognised how advances in agricultural machinery have increased production capacities, thus requiring more “business-like” (P. 132)

performances of masculinity. Synoptically, Liepins' (1998A/B) binary definition of *the farm* and *agricultural politics* has become blurred, with actors now exhibiting behaviours from both arenas. Evidencing this, Bell et al (2015) observed changes in American agribusiness marketing materials, with 67% of farmers depicted in fertiliser adverts now dressed in business attire, as opposed to rugged workwear. This represents shifting understandings of masculine identities: transitioning from "lone wol[ves]" (P. 301) to interconnected, "middle-class businessmen" (Bell et al, 2015, P. 300; Brandth, 2016). Furthermore, The Common Agricultural Policy reforms [EU, 2013: *European Commission*] has now entered farmers into collective economies, subsequently transitioning power to multi-national corporations. Despite being necessary for economic stability, reduced autonomy has redefined agricultural identities through losses in "status" and "power", as explored by Shortall (2014, P. 75) and Dessein & Nevens (2007). Therefore, the continued dominance of hegemonic masculinities in agriculture is questioned, given the existence of non-conventional performances resulting from the assimilation of *the farm* with *agricultural politics*. Although agriculture remains a predominantly masculine space, studies highlighting rural femininities have further destabilised the hegemony.

Performances of rural femininity are more commonly associated with spaces of the home, meaning vital work performed by women on farms was largely unrecognised and unremunerated (Alston, 1998). Traditionally, "public" agricultural work [*outdoors*] and "private" household duties [*indoors*] were co-constructed as largely separate masculine and feminine spaces (Shortall, 2014, P. 68; Leckie, 1996; Brandth, 2016), split between the male "farmer" and subsidiary "farmer's wife" (Brandth, 2002, P. 191; Keller, 2014). Women were excluded from mechanised work, limited to tasks aligned with conventionally feminine characteristics like nurturing animals (Gasson, 1980; Alston; 1998). Rural studies have highlighted the retaliation against hegemonic masculinities in agriculture, leading to increasingly equal participation in mechanised farm work (Saueres, 2002), farm ownership (Keller, 2014) and power in *agricultural politics* (Johansson et al, 2020; Agarwal, 2009). Keller (2014) increasingly recognises performances which combine "rural femininity as well as masculinity" (P. 77), relevant to discussions of 'new femininities' present in business discourses (Crofts & Coffey, 2017; Budgeon, 2011). Consequently, studies have increasingly revealed non-conventional performances of femininity in agriculture, destabilising the

continued dominance of hegemonic masculinity. However, the relational nature of sexuality in agriculture demonstrates how comparatively hostile environments continue to valorise conventional performances of masculinity (Anahita & Mix, 2006), with discussions of femininity reserved for spaces of the home and rural community.

Exploration of the rural home and community reveals discourses of rural femininity conventionally associated with housekeeping, childcare and wifehood; holistically maintaining the rural/pastoral idyll (Little, 2015; Gasson, 1980; Alston, 1998). Rural homes can present precarious power relations: with women constrained by external fears of “social sanctions” and internal pressure resulting from hegemonic masculinities (Gasson, 1980, P. 174). Performances of femininity are constrained through various moral geographies associated with rural life, with Pini et al (2013) referencing hetero-normative reproduction, maintenance of tradition and active roles in childcare as morally correct actions across rural settings. If women strayed away from these ideals, they would be deemed socially and morally wrong. Numerous studies highlight the continued valorisation of femininities in accordance with rural morality, observed in ‘Lonely Hearts’ columns and TV shows like ‘The Farmer Wants A Wife’ or ‘Desperately Seeking Sheila’ (Little, 2003; Little & Leyshon, 2003; Little & Panelli, 2007). The promotion of conventionally feminine traits was homogenous throughout, with female respondents upholding their affinity with rural environments, capacity for domestic work and idolisation of nuclear families (Little & Leyshon, 2003). Therefore, studies elucidating the moral geographies of the home demonstrate the valorisation of conventionally feminine characteristics and heteronormative relationships, with maintenance of the rural idyll and fear of external sanctions at the nexus of female identities. However, studies now reference shifting social expectations (Bye, 2009; 2015; Pini et al, 2013), including validation of external childcare, off-site work, and education. Bye (2009) specifically references increased rates of women in higher education - typically located in urban environments - leading to an adoption of more contemporary performances of femininity, disassociated from rural life. Thus, performances of femininity in the rural home have developed alongside external societal expectations in recent years, destabilising the continued dominance of highly conventional femininities.

However, studies observing the interplay between conventional forms of femininity and hegemonic masculinities reveal internal power relations within spaces of the home, explored through fathering practices and intimate partner violence [*henceforth: IPV*]. Hegemonic masculinities are often “unchallenged” (Little, 2017, P. 485), enabling conservative fathering practices; traditionally disengaged from intimate spaces of parenting (Brandth, 2002; 2016). Men, instead, interact with their children through work/agricultural environments (Brandth, 2016; Allan et al, 2021), constructing childcare as a wholly feminine task (Alston, 1998; Gasson, 1980). Traditionally, hegemonic masculinities have suppressed performances of femininity into highly conventional roles, although numerous studies now engage with non-conventional performances of masculine fathering. Both Brandth (2016) and Allan et al (2021) reference the generational change between fathers, with contemporary performances not reproducing the overtly masculine and, at times, violent presentations seen during the 20th century. Supplemented by changing performances of masculinity in agriculture and contemporary views on external childcare (Molloy & Pierro, 2020), performances of femininity are now more mobile and extend beyond wifehood, redefining gender roles within the home. Moreover, 25% of men interviewed referenced how they were subject to physical violence as children (Allan et al, 2021); synonymous with discussions of IPV within the home.

Despite parity in rates of IPV, conceptualisations of “what ‘counts’” as domestic violence vary between rural and urban environments (Little, 2017, P. 475; Pruitt, 2008; Sandberg, 2013). Little references how ‘intimate terrorism’ is enabled through hegemonic masculinities in rural homes: as male heads of the farm often exert control over the performance of everyday feminine behaviour, including “what they should wear and who they should meet” (P. 476). Akin to discussions of fathering and external moral geographies, there is recognition that such societal standards are becoming more contemporary (Omidakhsh & Heymann, 2020). However, women in rural environments have reduced access to “health, prevention, and protection services” (Peek-Asa et al, 2011, P. 1744), holistically sustaining fear cultures and patriarchal power relations within homes. Rural women in the UK are 50% less likely to report domestic abusers when compared to urban women (Dodd, 2019); referencing how “perpetrators [*are*] shielded by countryside culture”, thus maintaining the rural idyll. Therefore, hegemonic masculinities can enforce highly conventional performances of femininity through embodied behaviours. Whilst not representative of all performances of

rural masculinity, discussions of IPV - alongside fathering - provide crucial insight into how conventional performances of sexuality are internally reproduced in the home through conservative power relations and cultures of fear; leading to collective retaliation through community leisure activities.

Contemporary performances of sexuality expressed through leisure activities in rural communities have revealed a subversion of traditional power relations and conservative performances previously explored. Dashper (2016) references the construction of rural femininities in equestrianism as subversive to traditional understandings of “physical strength and embodied physical activities” (P. 359), collective retaliating against hegemonic masculinity through feminised safe-spaces. Comparatively, performances of masculinity in rural communities remain stagnant. Bye (2006) references how drinking remains at the cynosure of masculine community activities: as explored through Kalgoorlie ‘skimpie’ bars (Pini et al, 2013), Norwegian hunting (Bye, 2006) and uniform valorisation of drinking in younger cultures (Valentine et al, 2008). Such homogenisation across masculine leisure activities has influenced social co-constructions of rural men as “marginalised loser[s]” (Bye, 2006, P. 278; Pini et al, 2013), far removed from hegemonic masculine identities explored previously. Therefore, performances of non-conventional femininity in rural communities have actively retaliated against dominant hegemonic masculinities, representative of their diminishing importance.

Holistically, studies on rural masculinity and femininity still reveal highly conventional performances of sexuality, as explored across spaces of agriculture, the home and rural community. Deep-rooted conceptualisations of hegemonic masculinity in agriculture are explored through the interplay of natural environments and mechanised farming practices, with studies of the rural home revealing internal and external forces which confine performances of femininity. However, there is a growing recognition of non-conventional performances of sexuality which question their *continued* dominance over rural life; as explored explicitly through rural communities, in addition to the assimilation of agriculture and business and shifting societal expectations. Thus, conventional performances of sexuality have become destabilised, with studies highlighting their continued regression as opposed to dominance.

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