





Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life

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In case you thought this book was of limited relevance to your life, let us point out that, as we write, country boys rule the world.

This may seem a large claim to make concerning what might at first blush seem a topic of interest only to specialists. “Blush” may also be the apt word for describing the embarrassed reaction those who research rural masculinity often get when describing their work to others (“You’re studying *what?*”). But there will be no blush on President George Bush’s face as he faces the cameras at the next photo opportunity at his Crawford, Texas, ranch. Wearing his boots and Stetson, posing with his horses, leaning on the rail of his cattle yards, clearing brush, and striding out across his land, Bush uses the imagery of rural life to portray not just a persona of authority and control but a *masculine* persona of authority and control. Here in the wilds of the Texas plains, Bush radiates a sense of primeval masculine power, a deep authenticity of leadership that can be counted on when the going gets tough. It has helped make Bush at times wildly popular (pun intended).

Bush is not the only male leader who has tried to use the imagery of rural life to give an impression of power and toughness. Bush’s rival in the hotly contested 2000 American presidential race, Al Gore, famously tried to “reinvent” himself as an “alpha male” after Bush gained the presidency. Rather than posing as an alpha male cowboy, however, Gore began appearing at photo opportunities with the thick beard and red-and-black-checkered shirt of the stereotypical woodsman. Possibly Gore and his advisers felt that the cowboy role was already taken. Possibly they felt that the woodsman would be a more sympathetic image for environmentalists, for the political left in America, and for other elements of Gore’s constituency. Whatever the reason, both Bush and Gore sought symbolic power through the imagery of country boys—a contest of the cowboy versus the woodsman. And then, in the equally contentious 2004 presidential elec-

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tion, Bush's new rival, John Kerry, sought to portray another kind of rural alpha male: that of the warrior hero, battle-tested in the watery wilds of the Vietnam jungle, gun in hand. Kerry also sought to renew that image during the campaign, taking time out for a carefully photographed pheasant shoot, decked out in an orange hunting vest, gun in hand once more. Indeed, even the whole notion of "alpha males," a concept drawn from zoological studies of wolf packs, is based on our imagined idea that the true natures we encounter in the rural primeval, where the wolf packs run and howl, are "authentically masculine."

Country boys not only rule the world politically. Take the way advertisements for a vast range of products make their pitch through rural masculine poses. Perhaps most widely recognized is the lonely profile of the Marlboro man, tough and independent on his horse in the badlands of the American west. SUV and truck advertisements similarly place their products in the rocky and the rough, calling on the symbolic power of the venerable rural myth of rugged individualism. Such advertisements not only suggest that the vehicle's owner personally gains this rugged power and reputation, but also make a symbolic claim for the reliability and toughness of the product itself. As one of the chapters in this book shows, beer advertisements also routinely use rural settings and rural activities to pitch this conventionally male drink. Real men don't drink latte. They drink beer, smoke Marlboros, and ride their SUVs through mud and up mountains, to the acclaim of women and the envy of other men. Real men are rural men: this cultural idea wields not only enormous political power but enormous economic power.

But rural masculinity is not only an image. Clearly, it is also part of the lived experience of the half of the world that still lives in rural areas—even in the developed world roughly one-fourth of the population still resides in rural areas. We quite deliberately say "half of the world" and "one-fourth of the developed world" and not just the men living there, because rural masculinity is equally an aspect of the lives of men and women. One does not have to be male to experience masculinity. The way rural men conduct their lives has a huge impact on how rural women live *their* lives, for gender is a relational matter. Notions of what are appropriate actions for men are often conceived in contrast to what is deemed appropriate for women, and vice versa. (Imagine Hillary Clinton, Elizabeth Dole, Nancy Pelosi, Condoleezza Rice, or another of the leading women of American politics in a cowboy hat or hunting vest, facing the cameras.) By extension, we can

see that the constraints that men experience in their lives and the ways they operate within them will in turn shape the constraints that women experience and their ways of operating, and once again vice versa. For both men and women, therefore, rural masculinity constitutes not only a relational *ideology* but also a relational set of *social practices*.

This book explores rural masculinity (or what we prefer to term *rural masculinities*, as we explain later) in both senses: that is, as something we imagine and as something we live. We say “we” meaning everyone, male and female, rural and urban. Whether it is the rural man gutting it out into the night on his tractor, the rural woman bringing him his dinner out in the field so he can keep on going, the urban man off on a hunting or a fishing trip with his weekend buddies, or the urban woman left behind to chase the kids, images and experiences of rural masculinity shape all of our lives. Rural masculinity shapes people’s employment chances, their recreation choices, their buying habits, their voting preferences, and their daily interactions with women and men.

With the hope that we might encourage more freedom in those chances, and more informed reflection in those choices, habits, preferences, and interactions, we offer this book.

Seeing Rural Masculinities

So far, we’ve talked about easily recognizable images of rural masculinity: cowboys, woodsmen, farmers, hunters. But, however recognizable they may be, images work—perhaps paradoxically—by making some aspects visible while at the same time making others invisible. Everything that an image shows excludes that which is not shown. This exclusion is not necessarily a matter of calculated manipulation, although it may often be. A photograph, a sentence, a thought: there are practical limits to what these can include, and thus every inclusion depends on exclusion, even when we intend no manipulation. So too with constructions of rural masculinity. Every image of rural masculinity renders some aspects of life visible, while obscuring those other aspects that contradict the message being created in the visible world. Since not everything can be included, choices need to be made—choices that, frankly, provide many opportunities for cultural mischief. Obscuring becomes ignoring, which slides easily into concealing and deliberately distorting. Every image of rural masculinity

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is thus a partial vision of our gendered world—generally (and perhaps unavoidably) partial in both senses of the word, even when this is not our intention.

Some of the most important and sociologically interesting country boys are the invisible and obscured ones we do not easily recognize. Take, for example, homosexuals, who are virtually absent from our thoughts about the rural. In the same way, the rural is typically absent from our thoughts about homosexuality, which has a strongly urban cast in our imagination. In her celebrated short story “Brokeback Mountain,” Annie Proulx points out that this lack of recognition is not a simple oversight or a mere matter of the inherent exclusion of any specific inclusion in an image.¹ She tells the story of two young cowboys who spend half their lives as lovers, meeting sporadically at remote mountain locations even as they both get married and raise families. But to be a “homosexual” and a “cowboy” is to live a dangerous contradiction between the visible and acceptable rural masculinity of the cowboy and the invisible rural world of homosexual masculinity. The potential hazards of this contradiction mean that the two protagonists must live carefully guarded double lives, for when the invisible becomes visible the response can be violent. When one of the lovers—Jack—fails to respond to the annual invitation to slip away into the mountains, his partner, Ennis, rings Jack’s wife:

[S]he said in a level voice yes, Jack was pumping up a flat on the truck out on a back road when the tire blew up. The bead was damaged somehow and the force of the explosion slammed the rim into his face, broke his nose and jaw and knocked him unconscious on his back. By the time someone came along he had drowned in his own blood.

No, he thought, they got him with the tire iron.²

The potential violence of visibility and invisibility is not just a topic for fiction. “Brokeback Mountain” was published in October 1998, the same month that a young gay man—Matthew Shepard—was savagely beaten on a back road in Wyoming and, like Jack, left to die. Matthew Shepard—again like Jack—was killed for transgressing the sexual order of one version of rural masculinity: the version that dictates that country boys are resolutely heterosexual. Being a gay country boy can be very dangerous indeed.

But even the most familiar and accepted country boys have their invisible sides. A common and celebrated icon of the rural masculine is that of the farmer struggling to survive against all odds, heroically staving off the bankers and the weather through plowing, planting, and harvesting for days on end without sleep. In these narratives, the farm survives against the odds because of a tough kind of farming masculinity that endures—and goes on enduring—hardship. Of course, embedded beneath the surface of these narratives are also the stories of the family members who must live with this version of farming masculinity, and who accommodate and support this lonely drama on the prairies. It is the man who typically claims the title “farmer,” even on a family farm where the “farm wife” and the “farm kids” labor both in the fields and in the home on tasks essential to the farm enterprise: feeding livestock, driving grain wagons to the elevator, balancing the books, washing the clothes and dishes, cooking the food, and acting as reserve drivers. But every farm typically has only one “farmer.”

Then there are the small-town patriarchs: the local mayors, the chairs of the chambers of commerce, leaders of the Elks and the Shriners and the local sports clubs, the pillars of the local church. Here we encounter images of rural masculinity that are perhaps less celebrated in the wider culture but are no less central to the sense many rural people have of the appropriate conduct of rural men. Here too we encounter as many invisibilities as visibilities: aspects of masculinity actively constructed out of the materials of rural life to become cultural clothing that presents the man, baring and obscuring as it drapes his contours. For example, as with the family farm, no local polity, chamber of commerce, Elks’ club, or church could survive without the support of family members. And yet there is only one mayor, one chair of the chamber of commerce, one Grand Exalted Ruler of the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks, and one church deacon, and they are nearly always men.

In other words, rural life is typically highly patriarchal. We are even tempted to suggest that it is typically more patriarchal than urban life, although this assessment cannot be a matter of precise measurement. Indeed, part of the allure of rural masculine imagery may be the sense of greater power that it grants both rural and urban men, but again, this allure is something that can only be suggested, not rigorously affirmed. Perhaps this indefiniteness constitutes yet another aspect of the power of rural masculinity. In an age where—thankfully—the justice of patriarchy

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is under much greater scrutiny than in the past, overt declarations of masculine prerogative are increasingly difficult to sustain ideologically—even among men themselves, eager for a “new man” self-image. Patriarchy has long gained its power through a complex mixture of the visible and the invisible, both among the wielders and of its authority and those who submit to that authority. In this, the authors of this volume certainly see no change.

The growing uneasiness with patriarchy, including rural patriarchy, leads us to an important complexity in rural masculinity: its imagery is by no means always positive. Often our imagined country boys are dangerous and depraved, wandering around with a shotgun, wearing long underwear and a straw hat, slurping moonshine and chasing nice urban white-water rafters, like the now legendary villains of the movie *Deliverance*. Or they may be ignorant rubes, the slow-witted and six-fingered left behind by those with the get up and go who got up and went, off to the civilized life of the city, the kind of menacing folk who form the shadowy and sexually depraved mob inhabiting a whole genre of American horror films.³ Or they may be yobs and yahoos, crass good old boys who actually see a cowboy hat, a Confederate flag, or a woodsman’s coat as symbols worthy of admiration. While Bush, Gore, and Kerry may have sought some political gain through their display of rural imagery, we cannot ignore the fact that the press in the United States often ridicules these all too obvious masculine pretensions. Take the scorn heaped on Gore’s “alpha male” reinvention, or the constant lambasting of Bush’s cowboy-hat masculinity in political cartoons. One well-known political cartoon series, *Doonesbury*, used to go so far as to portray Bush solely with a cowboy hat, bodiless, floating in the air, reducing Bush to this icon of rural masculinity. Still others respond that such ridicule is a sign of a liberal elitism out of touch with the dreams of common people. These complexities should come as no surprise to us. Symbols of power, whether rural or urban, male or female, are nearly always contested, for contestation is what power is all about.

Obviously, all these images of rural masculinity—positive and negative, visible and invisible—are not without practical consequence. When we speak of power, we speak of the consequences for the organization of social life. Rural masculine imagery commonly supports social practices that advantage some men over other men, and men as a whole over women as

a whole, whether that imagery is positive or negative in tone. Rural masculinity matters.

But here too we need to note an important complexity. While rural masculinity commonly advantages its practitioners, it can also have negative effects, particularly for rural men. In this regard, let us review some empirical evidence. In this volume, Will Courtenay demonstrates that rural men are more likely to start drinking at a young age than their urban counterparts, and are more likely to drive while drunk. They are exposed to more risks than the average person, especially those who engage in two of the riskiest of occupations, mining and farming. They also take more risks, perhaps in part because of a tough-guy vision of masculinity, which leads to poor health behavior like refusing to use sun-block lotion. Rural men have smaller social networks, seek help for medical issues (especially mental health issues) more slowly than urban men, and are more susceptible to suicide. With fewer resources and job prospects and less education and political power, rural men are perhaps more easily seduced by “hypermasculine” behavior. The hypermasculine swagger of rural masculinity can also have negative consequences for urban men when they engage in its risky ways. Again, rural masculinity matters.

And if it matters, we would be wise to learn to see it more readily—both its practices and its imagery. To that end, we (the editors) have organized this book into three main sections: *practices*, *representations*, and *changes*.

There is no clear line between social practices and the images with which we represent them, as we hope we have already shown. Each shapes the other in a kind of continuous dialogue. The authors of the chapters to follow continually endeavor to show these interconnections and continuities. But they do typically start at one moment or other in the dialogue, going from practices to representations or representations to practices, or at least implying this movement. In the section on practices, the authors more characteristically begin in what rural masculinity leads us to do, or “practice.” By contrast, in the section on representations, the authors enter the analysis of rural masculinity from its imagery and ideology and proceed from there to interactions with practices.

The good news, we believe, is that these interactions are not necessarily static. If one is persuaded, as are the authors of this volume, that rural masculinity is not always beneficial in its current manifestations, learning to see rural masculinity more clearly may also enable us to see beyond it. This is the business of the final section of the book, two short reflections

and refractions on the potential for changes in rural masculinity, its practices and representations.

Studying Masculinities

To help our authors in this task, we would like to review some key issues in the way in which sociologists understand both *masculinity* and the *rural*. These are, after all, the two key terms that describe the subject of this book. If our goal is to see rural masculinity more clearly, we would also do well to turn a magnifying glass on the masculine and the rural themselves. As we shall see, both terms embody the interaction of representation and practice in social life. In this section we take up how sociologists have envisioned masculinity and, most important, why sociologists today prefer to speak (although it sounds awkward to say) not only of masculinity but of *masculinities*.

In order to view the interplay of visibility and invisibility in the imagery of rural masculinity, we need first to contend with a deeper issue: the general invisibility of masculinity as a whole, both in everyday life and in academic inquiry—what Donna Haraway calls the “god-trick” of men being everywhere and yet invisible, omnipresent yet unnoticed. When we talk about social life, and identify some things as *normal*, or *the norm* for human behavior, how many times are we actually talking about what *men* do? Robin Law et al. use the example of the way we talk about “politicians” and “women politicians.”⁴ We ask, for instance, when we will have the first “woman” president or prime minister, or the first “black” president or prime minister. Obviously, the male version of a politician is linguistically (and socially) unmarked, while the female or black politician is clearly marked—and therefore signaled as not normal. In this way, masculinity (and white masculinity at that) has often hidden itself from our eyes using the disguise of “the norm.”

As early as the 1950s, however, writers both in and outside academia began to see men as *men*. On the one hand, there were those who saw men as *a problem*, associated with rising feminist concerns. Another, however, saw men as *having problems*, as experiencing identity difficulties in response to social changes.⁵ The “organization man,” to use the terminology of the time, was in trouble.

From this point, and in loose parallel with these concerns, two distinct

academic approaches to masculinity emerged. One stream saw the study of masculinity as an adjunct to feminist analysis of gendered power in society. The other stream adopted an “insider” stance, looking at men’s individual experiences in order to analyze the “crisis” of masculine identity through changes in men’s work, culture, and politics. While both these approaches aimed to emancipate men from their academic and social invisibility, the first, more feminist approach typically analyzed gender relations in a way that made it difficult to position men, along with women, as oppressed by patriarchy. By contrast, the second approach tended to look at problems of gender less relationally, and thus as unique to either men or women at various times. According to this second approach, men were equally—although inevitably differently—“co-victims” of gender.

Academic research into masculinities matured in 1987 with the sudden publication of several key studies.⁶ These studies clearly illustrated the two distinct directions of masculinities research, with some authors concentrating on the critical analysis of masculinities as part of the wider feminist critique of gender relations,⁷ and others focusing on men as “co-victims” in their own right.⁸ There was, however, some basic common ground.

Most important, all these researchers emphasized the idea that masculinity was not an essentialist biological or psychological state and did not reside in a single “sex role” that was in “crisis.” The idea of sex roles created an impression that people’s gender was something that, in the normal course of life, people grew into—unconsciously choosing one of a small variety on offer. Social theory thus tended to emphasize those occasional situations where something went “wrong” and “role socialization” had not taken place in the way that was expected. Moreover, the idea of “sex roles” seemed to imply that men and women had to adopt particular practices in order for society to function properly: society required men and women to enact masculinity and femininity with the assumption that change would be hazardous for all of us. Both streams of research argued that this “functionalist” view was more of a political position than an accurate account of social dynamics.

In contrast, both of these more recent research streams replaced the idea of the male sex role with the understanding that masculinity was “socially constructed” in different social and historical spaces. That is, they argued that masculinity has never been an unchanging monolith writ in biological and social necessity. Rather, they said, masculinity is as various and as variable as society itself. Consequently, these studies suggested, if

we wanted to understand masculinity, we had to understand the changing social contexts in which particular *representations* and *practices* of masculinity emerge.

One useful way of approaching the social construction of masculinities is the concept of *hegemonic masculinity*. This idea—originally attributed to Tim Carrigan et al.⁹ but most consistently associated with the body of work by Australian sociologist Robert Connell—has helped to unify many of the theories behind the study of masculinity in the 1980s and 1990s. By hegemonic masculinity, sociologists mean understanding masculinity as a critical partner to feminist analyses of power, looking at why and how some forms of masculinity become dominant in a particular society. Connell provides a simple definition of the term: “Hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations.”¹⁰ Hegemonic masculinity is, therefore, the version of masculinity that is considered legitimate, “natural,” or unquestionable in a particular set of gender relations.

By moving toward hegemony theory, Connell shifts the focus of analysis away from *men* as a social group and toward *masculinities*. Not all men enact the same constellation of masculine ideas and practices, nor does any one man enact the same constellation at all times. For example, men commonly vary in their sexuality, both across society and across the course of their own individual lives. Not every man presents himself as a tough guy, and even those who do may at times shuck the cowboy hat and take off the boots, literally and metaphorically. While men as a group tend to experience a higher social dividend of power and reward than women, certain social conditions typically reward specific masculinities over others. In fact, even men who usually do not themselves enact these dominant masculinities will still benefit from the patriarchal society dominant masculinities reflect and support. Thus the enactment of privileged masculinities will enable most men to dominate over most women, and some men to dominate over some other men.¹¹

Hegemonic masculinity theorists argue, however, that this most approved or privileged masculinity is typically not something we see as such. Because of its legitimacy, hegemonic masculinity comes to be seen as natural, and thus is largely unnoticed and invisible even as we strive to enact its practices and representations. Because of its relative invisibility, hegemonic masculinity becomes difficult to contest openly, thus reinforcing its

hegemonic power, because all other gender relationships and dynamics must “fit in” around this dominant norm.

In other words, masculinities exist in complex power relations with each other, and with various constructions of femininity. Thus, Connell argues, the term “hegemonic masculinity” is deceptively simple, as there is no single hegemonic masculinity, separate and apart.¹² Rather, hegemonic power relations actually involve a range of masculinities whose interactions empower some over others. Indeed, their interactions help constitute them to begin with. The tough guy and the sissy, for example, cannot exist without each other. One wins on the playground, but both can win the longer game in life because of how they conceptually support the value of male power. In more formal theoretical language, Connell suggests that we can distinguish at the very least what he terms hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalized masculinities within this range of relationships.

There is something of a grab-bag character to the theory of hegemonic masculinity, as Connell himself has noted.¹³ Rather than a single overarching theory, hegemonic masculinity is more a popular conceptual hook upon which theorists hang related ideas about masculinity. Law et al. identify four key ideas researchers usually associate with the theory:

- the socially constructed basis of masculinity;
- the role of history in constructing masculinities;
- the continuing invisibility of masculinity; and
- the idea of plural or multiple masculinities.¹⁴

We would also add a fifth:

- the interaction between representations and practices of masculinity in all its multiple and relational forms.

Many of the chapters of this book have made at least some use of this framework, even while proposing other theoretical approaches. For example, the chapter by Gregory Peter et al. (which includes one of us) distinguishes between “dialogic” and “monologic” forms of masculinity—in brief, a masculinity that sees itself relationally versus one that does not. Peter et al. in part situate this idea within hegemonic masculinity theory’s notion of plural masculinities. Peter et al. also share the view that all mas-

culinities are socially constructed and relational—even in the case of monologic masculinity, which, ironically, finds its power through denying its constructed and relational character.

Pierre Bourdieu, the famous French social theorist, offered an account of masculinity in one of his last books that also fits well with hegemonic masculinity.¹⁵ In that study, Bourdieu used the idea of *doxa* as a way of describing a certain orthodoxy that emerges around masculinity. Doxa is the end result of many processes and practices that eventually create an established and accepted set of behaviors that signify masculinity or femininity. Doxa is what people in a particular social situation come to accept as the normal, natural, and accepted version of masculinity or femininity in their lives. While Bourdieu fits the pieces together differently, there is a clear similarity here to the idea of hegemonic masculinity. Of course, both Bourdieu and the hegemony theorists do not think that the story begins or ends at that point. Every version of masculine doxa has not only been constructed through quite specific historical and social processes, but will be continually transformed and contested as time goes by.

Other researchers, including Connell, are increasingly emphasizing the place of the body and performance in hegemonic masculinity. In his 1995 book, Connell examines how we “act out” or “advertise” our gender through “body reflexive practices,” or behaviors in which our body’s physical attributes and activities become an active component in gendering us as human subjects. Jo Little’s chapter in the present volume also extends our understanding of masculinities to the practices and performances of the body. She examines the active construction of rural men and women as embodied participants in an unquestioned heterosexual world. A lot of cultural work goes into making us, and our bodies, “unscary” in heterosexual life.

Theorists of masculinity, again including Connell, have also explored “poststructuralism” as an approach to hegemonic masculinities. Poststructuralist theories emphasize that meanings or definitions are indeterminate: we cannot simply “read” one unchanging meaning into behaviors or issues. Rather, our experiences are made up of a constant series of intersections between power, gender, individuality, society, ideology, and material practices. If we look at men and masculinities through a poststructuralist lens, therefore, we need to consider that the experience of “being a man” is often complex, ambiguous, fluid, and self-contradictory. Poststructuralism thus questions our accepted public definitions of catego-

ries, even the very category “gender.” As a theoretical standpoint, poststructuralism has been taken up both by mainstream scholars such as Connell¹⁶ and also by researchers interested in feminist analysis, media studies, and queer theory.¹⁷

Only recently seen as a marginal field of study at best, research on masculinities has now spread far and wide through the social science and liberal arts disciplines, including sociology,¹⁸ history,¹⁹ art history,²⁰ anthropology,²¹ and media studies.²² Masculinity has emerged as an important aspect of “white studies,” postcolonial analysis, and literary criticism. If it is not quite there yet, masculinity research is certainly on the cusp of becoming “mainstream.”

But this overview of masculinities research provides only half the theoretical agenda we need to understand country boys. We have looked at the “boys”; now we need to look at the “country.”

Studying the Rural

How do we study the rural? This question frustrates rural sociologists and geographers, because while we all use the term “rural” with a fair degree of certainty about what we mean, establishing exactly what conceptual evidence we base that “fair degree of certainty” upon is actually quite difficult.²³

In its most practical sense, “rural” refers to those particular spaces that are not metropolitan. In other words, “rural” has immediate meaning as the opposite of “urban” and “metropolitan.” Folks who are rural dwellers are folks who live outside the city. But how do we decide where the city stops and where rural life begins? This separation is becoming especially difficult as the boundaries around cities become blurred by the increasing numbers of “city people” who settle in semirural surroundings. Therefore, can we just decide that you are rural or urban by where you live? Not so easily.

Sociologists used to apply the ideas of the classical social theorist Ferdinand Tönnies to distinguish between urban and rural. In 1887 Tönnies suggested that there are two basic configurations of social life, what he termed *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* (which is the German word for “community”) is the web of sentimental ties that connect people one to the other, while *Gesellschaft* (which is the German word for “soci-

ety”) are the ties of material interest that link us.²⁴ Tönnies stressed that the two forms of connection interact and can be found together in all social contexts, although in some contexts one or the other will usually be more salient. In the mid-twentieth century, sociologists who missed Tönnies’s emphasis on the interactive character of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* proposed that the two could be mapped spatially onto rural and urban life, respectively.²⁵ The more rural, the more *Gemeinschaft*-like life was likely to be; the more urban, the more *Gesellschaft*-like.

Thus was born the now infamous “rural-urban continuum” theory in rural sociology. Despite strong initial support, the concept of the rural-urban continuum faltered in the 1960s, as academics began to question whether the continuum held up in reality. After all, weren’t there plenty of “urban villages” in city neighborhoods that had all the same qualities of so-called rural life?²⁶ Since then, probably no idea has been or continues to be more criticized in the pages of rural sociology.²⁷

A second line of academic argument aimed to distinguish the urban and the rural through demographic and geographic means. In this argument, geographical areas that experienced population densities below a certain level were rural, while any population densities above the line were urban. While this was a simple idea, in practice it proved a little abstract. Did small rural towns of 999 inhabitants really become small urban towns with an increase to 1,000 inhabitants? Furthermore, how could academics make international comparisons when countries like Canada and New Zealand administratively demarcated the differences between rural and urban towns at populations of 1,000, while the United Kingdom used 10,000, the United Nations 20,000, Japan 30,000, and the United States 50,000?²⁸

Subsequently, researchers looked at defining the rural through the existence of particular industries, such as agriculture. The most popular images of rural life often involve some level of agricultural activity—when we think of a “rural” scene, for instance, we often think of a farm landscape. Several rural sociologists in the 1980s, therefore, began thinking less about the distinctiveness of rural society and more about the distinctiveness of the extensive industries in rural areas: farming, fishing, forestry, and (later) tourism.²⁹ While this approach began to tell us a lot about the sociology of agriculture (and other industries), many felt that the “economically driven” definition of the rural left out more than it included.

The early 1990s saw a significant change in the way academics under-

stood the rural. Yes, rural society might have interesting characteristics; yes, rural folk might live in lower-density areas of population; yes, they might work in industries like farming and forestry—but all these academic attempts to fit certain things inside the word “rural” were clearly less than useful. Why not turn around and stop trying to identify a single object called “the rural” and look at the *variety* of ways in which the word (and concept) “rural” is used by both academics and the general public in our social lives.³⁰ In many ways this “turnaround” paralleled the shift within masculinity theory from examining the objective category called “men” to engaging with the many subjective ideas and practices making up different “masculinities.” Likewise, in rural research this “cultural turn” changed the emphasis of study from trying to define the one “real” rural to trying to understand multiple *rurals*.

This new approach recognizes the different narratives that create meaning when we use the term “rural.” To start with, Michael Bell and Andy Pratt point out that the long debates among rural sociologists and geographers about “the meaning of rural” are debates held entirely among academics.³¹ These academic arguments about the rural hold little meaning in terms of the different ways lay people use the term “rural.” In the 1980s, some academics categorized these different conceptions about the rural in terms of a distinction between the subjective rural “myths” of laypeople and the objective rural “facts” of academics.³² In their words, “beyond the popular images there is an objective rural America.”³³ By the 1990s, however, newer debates—such as the one between Jonathan Murdoch, Pratt, and Chris Philo—showed that cultural approaches to sociology were breaking down this distinction between objective “fact” and subjective “myth.” If people act according to a variety of particular discourses about what is rural, then their subjective ideas are just as important as objective “facts” or evidence about their lives.³⁴

Because researchers were now looking at ideas and conceptions of the rural as well as facts *about* the rural, new approaches to discourses of rurality also extended from how people define the rural to how people act out the rural.³⁵ As a result, sociologists now stress the importance of the ways in which media and advertising represent the rural, as well as the ways in which tourists, incomers, and exurban weekend residents practice the rural through their enactment of a symbolically desirable lifestyle—a kind of symbolic consumption of the rural.

Through these overviews we can see that while the rural and the mascu-

line are distinct areas of study, there are some important similarities in their theoretical development. Specifically, the transition from studying men to studying masculinities is very similar to the transition from attempting to objectively define the “real” rural to analyzing multiple discourses of rurality. If we now combine these two areas of study, we can identify the important issues and concerns of the practices and representations of “rural masculinity” itself.

Key Sites of Rural Masculinities

The previous sections show that there is nothing entirely straightforward about trying to analyze either the masculine or the rural. Rather, we must situate rural masculinities in specific historical, symbolic, and spatial contexts. This does not mean, however, that we cannot locate some important commonalities or significant sites that reappear across a variety of rural masculinities. Initially, we want to identify nine sites in which rural masculinities operate or become important, although this is certainly not an exhaustive list.³⁶

At the Household Level

Rural industry is often firmly based in the family or household. In particular, farming involves important household dynamics, and these dynamics—including the division of labor, the division of wealth, cultural legitimacy, decision-making processes, and raising the next generation of farmers—are strongly influenced by gender. While, since the mid-1980s, there has been a great deal of rural sociology and geography focused on women in farm households, male farmers and farming masculinities have, until recently, slipped past us—a clear example of masculinity, as the sociological norm, being invisible. While Kristi Stolen produced the first ethnographic account specifically directed at masculinity in farm households,³⁷ only in the past few years has much published work engaged ethnographically with masculinities in farm households.³⁸

In the Politics of Farming

The very activity of farming itself is not something that we can accept as a natural, normal, or uncontested feature of our lives. How we farm is,

therefore, subject to its own politics. This is particularly important for issues such as conflicts between intensive and extensive systems, leasehold versus freehold, contracting versus cooperatives, and the relationship between conventional and alternative agriculture. Peter et al. provide clear evidence that the way in which farmers construct their masculinity has implications for how they approach sustainability issues in farming.³⁹ At the level of industry politics, Ruth Liepins showed how farmer representatives are overwhelmingly portrayed through a specific construction of masculinity.⁴⁰ These two articles indicate that from the paddock to the boardroom, the politics of farming is influenced by rural masculinities.

At the Level of Small Communities

Small-town and agricultural-community politics is strongly influenced by gender. Little and Jones provided a case study showing how a seemingly mundane political process—the competitive funding of development projects for small towns in England—was actually deeply (and unconsciously) influenced by the “masculinity” of the proposals and presentations.⁴¹ While invisible to the participants, a particular version of rural masculinity, Little and Jones argued, was being privileged in these processes. This case study is just one example of the way in which power, politics, and influence intersect significantly with gender in rural communities. In the later chapters of this collection we revisit research on the influence of masculinity on power in small towns, and look at some specific examples in detail.

In the Restructuring of Rural Industry

Since the mid-1980s, many rural sociologists and geographers have examined the impact of changes in rural industries like agriculture, fishing, forestry, and tourism.⁴² We suggest that rural masculinities have a role in how and where these impacts occur. Berit Brandth and Marit Haugen, for instance, discuss the importance of changing work structures in Norwegian farming and forestry, and how these have influenced (and been influenced by) particular rural masculinities.⁴³ They argue that these forms of restructuring the industry are at the heart of changing definitions of what constitutes the hegemonic version of masculinity in these industries. Again, little other work has been done in this important area, although

clearly these impacts are wide-ranging and influence many areas of rural experience.

In the Spatial Politics of Migration

Another important issue in rural communities is who leaves and who stays behind. Many rural communities demonstrate a form of spatial politics in which one key act of resistance to power structures is simply to leave town. Because those who oppose oppressive or unjust power structures remove themselves from the community, these “unbalanced” structures continue to receive an abnormally high degree of consent from those remaining. In this collection, Caitríona Ní Laoire and Shaun Fielding, David Bell, and Hugh Campbell, address the importance of out-migration for the sexual and gender order of rural communities, and for the institutional structures of such communities.⁴⁴

In the Embodied Experience of Masculinities

In this collection, Jo Little provides an excellent introduction to the issue of masculinity, embodiment, and the rural.⁴⁵ She argues that the body has emerged as an important part of recent theoretical examinations of gender and sexuality. Rather than adhere to traditional concepts of the mind/body split—which suggests that what we think and why we act are more important than the body, which we simply drag through social life as a passive object—we need to study the physically embodied experience of gendered, sexual people. Her examples provide compelling reasons for seeing the rural as both constructed *by* and helping *to* construct our embodied experience of gender and sexuality. In many different rural sites and industries this embodiment is clearly demonstrated by the mutual construction of masculinity and technical skills.⁴⁶

Through Association with “Nature”

As we have seen, there has been, and continues to be, complex academic struggle over how to define the term “rural.” Equally complex debate swirls around the concept of “nature.” To make matters more complicated, the two terms undeniably have a vague but companionable relationship. Many

people think of nature as being spatially located somewhere “out there” (looking out from the city) and point in the same direction they might point if they were asked where “the rural” was located. In several chapters in this volume, the authors interrogate the association of masculinity with the “natural” qualities of rural space and highlight how this association can legitimate and authorize some gender identities.

Through the Symbolic Life of the Rural

In a previous work, Campbell and Bell suggested that traditionally most rural sociology has stuck firmly to empirical and structural sociological reasoning.⁴⁷ From the outset, however, work on rural masculinities has emphasized a more cultural approach. Many chapters in this volume support our observations, as they work from the study of masculine practice to the use of the rural as a symbolic realm, and vice versa. To use the terminology we introduced earlier, such work moves beyond studying masculinity as something that occupies rural space, and toward understanding masculinities as behaviors and attitudes that “produce” and “consume” the rural. In this volume, therefore, rather than tacking on such ideas as afterthoughts to the “real” rural sociology of masculinity, we argue that the study of rural masculinities often shows exactly how rural sociology can escape from its traditional boundaries and begin to contribute to the wider analysis of masculinities.

Through the Symbolic Life of the Masculine

In other words, what all of the chapters of this book imply is that rural masculinity is not some tinkling adornment on the main animal of masculinity itself. Rather, they suggest that masculinity is, in considerable measure, constructed out of rural masculinity. The “real man” of currently hegemonic forms of masculinity is, as we noted, a rural man. Although we are used to seeing the rural as the weaker partner in the rural/urban dichotomy, the studies presented here together suggest that rural masculinity is central to the power of masculinities in rural and urban places alike—to its symbolic representations and thus to its practices, and back to its symbolic representations again.

The Ubiquity of Rural Masculinity

Rural masculinity, then, is neither only rural nor only about men and masculinity. It is everywhere, a part of all our lives: male and female, rural and urban, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, young and old, rich and poor, developed world and developing world. Turn on the television, and there it is, in the advertisements and in the shows. Open the paper, and there it is, right on the front page in the manly looks of the country boys who, as we write, rule the world. Go out on the street, and there it is in the SUV in your neighbor's driveway, and perhaps in your own. Go out in the countryside, and there it is again, rugged and wild at times, at other times nurturing, but always, in our imagination, natural and free. Rural masculinity is something we think and something we do, something we represent and something we practice. Rural masculinity is something we live.

But rural masculinity is also something we can change. We know this because, for all its ubiquity, rural masculinity is always a contested assemblage of rural masculinities in the plural, as variable as they are widespread. We know rural masculinity can vary because it does vary. We know it can change because it does change.

But again, for all its ubiquity, we have seldom seen rural masculinity. It is the proverbial fish swimming in water it scarcely considers. The goal of this book is to present some intellectual tools for the consideration of this water. For example, as our list of suggestions above indicates, at present masculinity stands as a topic of study primarily in terms of the Western world, a focus largely reflected by our chapters. Clearly, however, rural masculinities are not the sole preserve of the "white world"; on the contrary, they are deeply inflected by race and ethnicity, as Kimmel and Ferber, Courtenay, and Lobao specifically suggest. The plurality of rural masculinities finds expression along a myriad of other axes of social experience as well, as yet scarcely researched. Given the aim of this volume—to make visible previously unrecognized, "taken-for-granted" performances of the rural and the masculine—we envisage further studies will take up some of the "invisible" areas implied in this collection: African American, Native American, Hispanic, Asian, Aboriginal, Maori New Zealander, Pacific Rim, mainland European masculinities, and more; the impact of the rural masculine and the masculine rural on lesbian farmers; the role of

the handicapped “on the land”; ethics of animal husbandry; and the part children play learning, supporting, or rejecting specific gendered “performances” of rural masculinity, to name only a few. This is an incomplete list, as it must be: not all the manifold expressions and consequences of rural masculinities are yet visible even to the researchers who have tried to investigate them.

May the clouds soon lift. We—the editors and the authors of the chapters to come—believe the very act of consideration and recognition will change, at least in some small way, both rural masculinity and the broader dynamics of gender it helps constitute. At least this is our hope. For, although rural masculinity is always contested, at present it is not contested nearly enough.

NOTES

1. Proulx (1999).
2. *Ibid.*, 311.
3. Clover (1992).
4. Law, Campbell, and Schick (1999).
5. Savran (1998).
6. In the United States, Brod (1987); Kaufman (1987); Kimmel (1987); in Australia, Connell (1987); and in New Zealand, Phillips (1987).
7. Connell (1987, 1995a); Hearn (1987); Kimmel (1987).
8. Brod (1994); Brod and Kaufman (1994); Kaufman (1987). The co-victim narrative in academia was very mild compared to the sudden emergence of the new men’s movement in the United States. Leading proponents of an antifeminist men’s movement included Robert Bly (1990), Sam Keen (1991), and Warren Farrell (1994). Clatterbaugh (1997) provides a useful critique of the ideological agenda of the wider men’s movement.
9. Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1985).
10. Connell (1995a, 74).
11. Law, Campbell, and Schick (1999, 25–27).
12. Connell (1995a).
13. *Ibid.*
14. Law, Campbell, and Schick (1999).
15. Bourdieu (2001).
16. See also Craig (1992); Hanke (1992).
17. Boyd (1996); Edwards (1997); Jackson (1991); Perchuk and Posner (1995); Pfeil (1995); Segal (1990).
18. Connell (1995a).
19. Roper and Tosh (1991).
20. Perchuk and Posner (1995).
21. Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994).
22. Craig (1992).
23. Marsden, Lowe, and Whatmore (1990).
24. Tönnies (1887/1957).
25. The classic work in this misguided vein is Loomis and Beegle (1950). See M. Bell (1992, 1998b) for details.
26. Gans (1962); Pahl (1964).
27. Friedland (2002).
28. G. Lewis (1979, 21–22).
29. Marsden, Lowe, and Whatmore (1990).
30. Philo (1992, 1993); Murdoch and Pratt (1993, 1994); Jones (1995); Half-acre (1995); Pratt (1996).

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31. M. Bell (1992); Pratt (1996).
32. For example, Dillman and Hobbs (1982).
33. Ibid., 2.
34. M. Bell (1992); Halfacree (1995).
35. Mormont (1990).
36. See also Little (2002b).
37. Stolen (1995).
38. Bryant (1999); Peter et al. (2000); Saugeres (2002a, 2002b); Barlett and Conger (2004); Bell et al. (2004).
39. Peter et al. (2000).
40. Liepins (2000).
41. Little and Jones (2000).
42. Marsden, Lowe, and Whatmore (1990).
43. Brandth (1995); Brandth and Haugen (2000).
44. See also Ní Laoire (2001).
45. See also Little (2002b).
46. Brandth (1995); Brandth and Haugen (Chapter 12 in this volume); Quam-Wickham (1999).
47. Campbell and Bell (2000).