

Race, Ethnicity, and Twenty-First Century Rural Sociological Imaginings: A Special Issue Introduction*

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ABSTRACT This article, which also serves as the introduction for this special guest-edited issue, examines the history of Rural Sociology's scholarly engagement with rurality, race, and ethnicity. We examine the historical patterns of how Rural Sociology has addressed race and ethnicity, and then present results from a meta-analysis of empirical articles published between 1971 and 2020. Over time, the methodological approaches and scholarly focus of articles on race and ethnicity within Rural Sociology has gradually expanded to include more analyses of power and inequality using constructivist perspectives, and greater numbers of qualitative inquiries into the lived experiences of both white and nonwhite people. The articles featured in the special issue extend from Rural Sociology's growing attention to race and ethnicity. Together, they suggest the ways in which rural spaces are racially coded, how intersections with race and ethnicity exacerbate rural inequality, how the domination of people and the environment are co-constituted, and how practices of racism are embedded within contextually specific ecologies. In drawing attention to these contributions, we suggest future directions for the discipline's engagement with rurality, race, and ethnicity, while simultaneously suggesting the ways in which our own disciplinary racial reckoning remains incomplete.

The rural United States has increasingly been at the center of a national political conversation that has explicitly or implicitly been about race and ethnicity (Halloway 2007; Lichter 2012; Pruitt 2019). This conversation was only energized by the 2016 presidential election that drew further attention to the deepening social divides of political ideology and racial anxiety, and the failed neoliberal imaginings of an Obama-era post-racial America (Banks 2018; Metzl 2019; Rodden 2019). The Trump administration only seemed to metastasize long-simmering racial fears, frustration, and anger of a nation that has struggled throughout its history with the contradictions of democracy and equality forged in the crucible of white supremacy, social inequality, and racial injustice (Du Bois 2014; Ellison 1986; Richardson 2020). These tensions assumed

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distinct spatial dimensions as rural and urban America were increasingly framed within popular discourse by both right- and left-wing pundits as oppositional—and racialized—political and ideological spaces (Banks 2018; Billings 2019; Catte 2018; Love and Karabinus 2020; Metzl 2019; Rodden 2019; Wuthnow 2018).

However, popular imaginings of racialized spaces, and in particular rural America as a primarily “white space” (Kimmel and Ferber 2000; Metzl 2019), have consistently ignored the dynamics of race, space and rurality, including the historical presence of non-white peoples and the complexities of settler colonial histories. Native American, Latinx, and African American communities have long maintained an active and vital presence in rural America, despite enduring patterns of exclusion, displacement, and disenfranchisement (Brown 2018; Chavez 2005; McKay, Vinyeta and Norgaard 2020; Smith 1991; Ward 1998). Similarly, popular debate over non-white immigrants obscures how race-making in the rural United States has been tied to global projects of expansion and state-led labor migration, in which U.S. national identity was defined in opposition to a foreign or non-white “other” (Geisler 2014; Mize 2006). As the arrival of new immigrants has made the rural United States less racially and ethnically homogenous, demographic change has also challenged and reshaped community identities (Donato et al. 2007). White rural residents have often confronted the twin phenomena of de-industrialization and demographic change, in which economic hardship is accompanied by both racial anxieties and decreases in cultural and moral capital (Burton et al. 2013; Carolan 2020; Sherman 2009).

What does rural sociology have to offer this current historical moment? How has the discipline reckoned (or not) with questions of race and ethnicity over time? What factors have shaped rural sociology’s engagement with these topics? What insights might rural sociology provide for understanding the complexities of rural social, demographic, economic and political change as we move forward into an uncertain 21st century? These are among the questions that have motivated this special issue. The result is a collection of scholarship representing a range of methodological and theoretical approaches and substantive foci that help advance our understanding of power, meaning, and structures in race and ethnic relations in rural settings. They simultaneously move us to reflect on the conceptual and theoretical lenses rural sociology has used over time to make sense of race, ethnicity, and rurality as the discipline has inscribed, challenged, and/or redefined its own bounds of “normal science” (Falk and Zhao 1989; Friedland 2010; Kuhn 1970; Picou, Wells, and Nyberg 1978).

We begin by contextualizing the articles included in this special issue against the longer history of rural sociology's scholarly engagement with race and ethnicity, focusing on rural sociology's earliest years, and then systematically review work published in the pages of this journal over the last half century. We then provide a discussion of the articles featured in this special issue, drawing attention to how these manuscripts theorize the intersections of race, ethnicity, and rurality in ways that are consistent with and/or push against or extend previous treatments within the discipline. Together, the contributions draw attention to how rural spaces are racially coded, the implications, experiences and outcomes for non-white people, and the ways in which domination of people and environment is co-constituted. We conclude by discussing what we see as a call for promising future research directions, and the discipline's evolving empirical and axiological commitments to better understanding the relationship between race and ethnicity in the context of social agency and spatial inequalities.

Historical Precedents: Rural Sociology's Early Years

While the intersection of rurality, race, and ethnicity has long attracted the attention of rural sociologists, this scholarly engagement has been inconsistent. Where early 20th century rural sociological scholarship on race and ethnicity did exist (for example on migrant labor, land tenure, and Black farmers), it often explicitly or implicitly pointed out race-based social inequalities and structural disadvantage (Snipp 1996). To the contemporary eye however, the engagement of this work with racial questions around rural inequalities is often axiologically ambiguous, and it frequently comes across as undertheorized, or problematically theorized, and especially with regard to issues of power and race.

The first issue of *Rural Sociology*, for example, included an article on "Littleville," an American Indian community characterized by the researchers as "parasitic" in relation to its economic dependence upon seasonal residents driving local gentrification. Using argumentation that anticipates culture of poverty perspectives deployed in later 20th Century policy and academic debates (Lichter and Schafft 2016; Massey and Sampson 2009), the authors argued that Littleville residents "all believe that in one way or another they are descendants from the Indians who once owned their country. Thus, they keep an interesting tradition alive which makes them and others feel that the whites really owe them a living" (Zimmerman, Uscom, and Ziegler 1936:71-72).

As Snipp notes, “while social scientists were well aware of the injustices and disadvantages that burdened racial and ethnic minorities, they also were so steeped in the ambient racism of society at large, that they were not able fully to appreciate the scope of these problems” (1996:134; cf. McKee 1993). At the same time, the problematic undertheorization of race and rurality reflects how many mainstream white sociologists, rural or otherwise, also largely ignored the work of social scientists, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Oliver C. Cox, and others who were directly engaging with race and rurality in theoretically and empirically sophisticated ways (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Jakubek and Wood 2018; Johnson 2004; Morris 2015). Likewise, institutions like the Tuskegee Institute, which Earl Wright II (2020) has argued established the first applied rural sociology program, have largely been written out of the history of the discipline.

Snipp notes that in the post-Second World War years through the early 1960s, race and ethnicity were substantively neglected, and the failure of rural sociology to address the civil rights movement and its rural roots represented a particularly “dismaying oversight” (1996:137). A. Lee Coleman, RSS president, chose the topic of “The Urban-Rural Variable in Race Relations” for his presidential address (1965), stating that he chose the topic because “very little work had been done on it,” and that upon review “I have found even less (scholarship on the topic) than I thought I would” (p. 393). In this address, Coleman wrote,

In preparing for this paper I examined most of the rural sociology textbooks, old and new. I found almost no listings of race, Negro, or other ethnic terms in the indexes of the table of contents. This was not just an oversight of the indexers, for there are only passing references or no reference to race relations or to intergroup differences in rural social structure or behavior and no discussion of the rural-urban variable as a factor in race relations. One of the newest textbooks completely ignores race and the Negro, although its distinctive focus is on the rural life impact of an urbanizing society. Although it was written in the Deep South, it is almost as if it had been written in Sweden or some other country with a highly homogenous ethnic makeup. (1965:394–95)

In Coleman’s own perusal of *Rural Sociology*’s pages he found that in the first 20 years only about 12 articles were published focusing on race and ethnicity, with one paper or so published every two years on the topic up to the time of his drafting his presidential address. In the

early 1990s, the Rural Sociological Society's Task Force on Persistent Rural Poverty, echoing Coleman, similarly observed that "questions of race and racism never received much attention from rural sociologists" (Harvey 2017:142).

Like other social scientists, rural sociologists' engagement with race, ethnicity, and power was not only shaped by broader social attitudes of their contemporary moment, but by funding sources and institutional imperatives and constraints. Federal priorities and opportunities, particularly from the USDA and the land-grant college system, influenced the types of research activities undertaken (Friedland 2010) with the effect of often privileging the concerns and social problems of white male farmers. In part this may be due to researchers' tendency to publish on topics that would not arouse "the ire of powerful, established economic interests" (ibid:80). The Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the USDA, for example, faced challenges when researchers published work documenting racial tensions in Mississippi or were critical of treatment of Mexican farmworkers in California (Zimmerman 2015). At times, USDA reforms, in which social scientists and public administrators cooperated, were oriented toward progressive change and democratization (Gilbert 2016), but these programs also provided more opportunities for white farmers than Black ones (Daniel 2007; 2013; Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin 2002; Hinson and Robinson 2008; Jordan et al. 2009; Reid and Bennett 2012).

Arguably the first comprehensive attempt by *Rural Sociology* to articulate the role of rural sociology from a disciplinary perspective in addressing race and ethnicity was represented by the 1991 special issue on rural race and ethnicity. Gene Summers' presidential address, framed by his own biography, focused on addressing rural poverty, and in particular as it affected rural minorities. The articles that followed resonated with Summers' call, and yet were also consistent with much of the scholarship on rural race and ethnicity preceding the special issue in that nearly all of the articles were based around quantitative analyses that largely treated race and ethnicity as a variable in understanding differences in migration patterns (Wilson-Figueroa, Berry, and Toney 1991), poverty and earning disparities (Rankin and Falk 1991; Saenz and Thomas 1991) or in agricultural structure and practices (Gutierrez and Eckert 1991; Schulman and Newman 1991). Only one article in this series (with the exception of Summers' presidential address) approached the topic from an inherently agentic standpoint in its discussion of the Sea Island Gullah and their history of cultural resiliency and community reproduction (Smith 1991).

As Friedland (2010) notes, just as institutions actively discouraged certain types of research, they have also encouraged others. The rise

of quantification, in part a factor of both technological advances enabling such analyses, as well as the availability of new quantitative data sources, shaped the field's engagement with race and ethnicity as rural sociology followed sociology and natural sciences' interest in statistical analyses and post-positivist approaches. Quantification shaped and abstracted the ways in which researchers conceived of and measured race (Martin and Yeung 2003; Niemonen 1997; Stewart 2008; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). (Martin and Yeung 2003; Niemonen 1997; Stewart 2008; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008).¹ These social and structural circumstances arguably restricted the ability of rural sociology as a discipline to theorize and more fully make sense of complex social issues within a society structured around racial and other inequalities.

Fifty Years in Review: *Rural Sociology's* Treatment of Race, Ethnicity, and Rurality

We contextualize the articles that make up this special issue by conducting a meta-review of every published article within *Rural Sociology* from 1971 to 2020 that directly or indirectly addresses race and/or ethnicity (excluding book reviews and editor notes). Meta-analyses and reviews of articles have previously appeared in *Rural Sociology* (and elsewhere), including those specifically examining the use of theory and methodology (e.g., Bealer 1975; Falk and Zhao 1989; Friedland 2010; Picou et al. 1978), and reviews examining substantive foci (Christenson and Garkovich 1985; Garkovich and Bell 1995; Sewell 1965; cf. Bertrand 1987), but no systematic and comprehensive review to date that we are aware of has specifically focused on the treatment of race and ethnicity (although see Coleman 1965; Snipp 1996). We acknowledge that many rural sociologists have critically engaged race and ethnicity in other scholarly outlets beyond the pages of *Rural Sociology* including other scholarly journals as well as multiple edited and other volumes (see, e.g., Bailey, Jensen, and Ransom 2014; Brown and Swanson 2003; Dillman and Hobbs 1982; Duncan 2015; Falk 2004; Flora and Christenson 1992; Tickamyer, Sherman, and Warlick 2017; Ward 2005 as a partial list). We focus on empirical articles within *Rural Sociology* insofar as these manuscripts are suggestive in signifying what the discipline has considered to be the most salient issues, methodologies, and debates. This review therefore provides a necessarily partial, yet we believe, instructive review.

Our sample includes articles that centered on race, ethnicity, and rurality as primary foci, as well as articles that did not feature race or

¹See Harris (2013) as an exception.

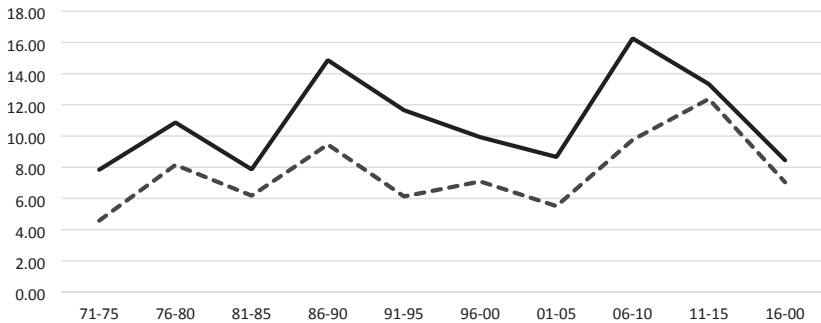


Figure 1. Percent of Articles in *Rural Sociology* Explicitly Addressing Race and/or Ethnicity, 1971–2020. The Solid Line Represents All Articles Incorporating Any Focus on Race, and Ethnicity, while the Dashed Line Represents the Subset of Articles with a Specific Conceptual, Theoretical and/or Analytic Engagement with Race and Ethnicity.

ethnicity as analytically or theoretically pivotal concepts, but may have included race as, for example, a variable within statistical models. In each instance, articles meeting these criteria received a set of codes for year of publication, primary substantive focus, methodology, and racial and/or ethnic groups discussed. We examined the title, abstract and first page of each published article during the 50-year period, looking for any substantive mention of race or ethnicity, and scrolled through each article to quickly check tables and figures. The sampled articles, as pdf files, were imported into an NVivo database, where a coding structure was inductively developed based on article focus, with each article coded for a primary and secondary substantive focus. For example, McLaughlin, Stokes, and Nonoyama's article "Residence and Income Inequality: Effects on Mortality Among U.S. Counties" (2001) was included in the sample because race was examined as a predictor of mortality (though race was not otherwise central to the article). Its primary focus was coded as "inequality" and later combined with articles coded as "poverty" for the code "poverty and inequality." Its secondary focus was coded as "mortality."

Our review shows a consistent if relatively modest focus on race and ethnicity within *Rural Sociology* over the last 50 years. We find that across the five decades between eight and 16 percent of articles published in *Rural Sociology* between 1971 and 2020 addressed race and/or ethnicity in some manner (158, or just under than 11 percent of all published articles during the time period). From this sample, we also identified the subset of articles that included a specific conceptual, theoretical, and/or analytic engagement with race and ethnicity. These articles, 108 in total, accounted for about 7 percent of empirical articles published in *Rural Sociology*. Figure 1 shows these trends over time.

The majority of this scholarship has been quantitative—overall about 70 percent of all published articles²—and has tended to analytically treat race and ethnicity as statistical variables predicting or associated with particular social and economic outcomes. This is especially true of work published in the 1970s and 1980s, although it also characterizes much work published from that time to the present as well. This is perhaps particularly true of research focused on migration and poverty (see, e.g., Foulkes and Schafft 2010; Kandell et al. 2011; Ritchey 1974; Wilson-Figueroa et al. 1991). That is, despite the discipline's significant and critical contributions in generating in-depth understandings of macro-level socio-demographic trends and processes, rural sociology has often tended to engage in analyses in which race and ethnicity are treated as discrete categories and quantitative indices rather than considering the social constructions of these categories, engaging with the lived experiences and knowledge of those persons at the center of empirical inquiries, and/or interrogating dynamics of power and exclusion perpetuating inequalities and social difference.³

Table 1 summarizes the substantive focus of articles engaging with race and ethnicity between 1971 and 2020, showing aggregated raw counts by decade across the fifty-year period. Over time these foci have remained relatively consistent and mostly fall into five main topical areas: migration, poverty and inequality, employment and earnings, socioeconomic status and agriculture. These five areas account for slightly over half of all articles addressing race and ethnicity within *Rural Sociology* published during this time frame.

²Despite the historically post-positivist and quantitative leanings of the discipline, there has been a gradual trend within *Rural Sociology* toward greater methodological and epistemological pluralism over the last half century. This can be seen in the discipline's treatment of race and ethnicity. While during the 1970s–80s between 75 and 80 percent of articles on race and ethnicity were quantitative, the 1990s saw a shift toward greater frequencies of qualitative and mixed methods work, and greater frequency of constructivist perspectives, consistent with broader stalemated “paradigm war” epistemological debates over social science methods that made room for a greater range of widely accepted epistemological and methodological approaches (Morgan 2007). During the 2000s–10s only about 65 percent of articles on race and ethnicity published within *Rural Sociology* used exclusively quantitative methodologies.

³For some notable exceptions, see Brown and Larson (1979), Chavez (2005), Duncan (1996), Geisler (2014), Perry (1980), and Ward (1998), among others.

Table 1. Primary Thematic Focus of Articles in Rural Sociology Explicitly Addressing Race and/or Ethnicity, 1971–2020.

	1971–1980	1981–1990	1991–2000	2001–2010	2011–2020	Total
Social Organization						
Poverty and Inequality	3	7	3	4	3	20
Socioeconomic Status	3	3	0	3	2	11
Ethnic/Racial Identity	4	1	3	0	0	8
Community	2	1	0	1	2	6
Family	3	2	1	0	0	6
Residential Segregation	0	1	1	2	1	5
Education	1	0	1	1	0	3
Environment/Pollution	0	0	0	2	1	3
Political Agency/Control	2	1	0	0	0	3
Ethnic/Racial Attitudes	0	0	1	0	1	2
Ethnic/Racial Conflict	0	0	1	1	0	2
Gender	0	1	0	0	1	2
Housing	0	0	0	1	1	2
Masculinity	0	0	1	0	1	2
Political Orientation	1	0	0	0	0	1
Crime	0	0	0	1	0	1
Economic Organization						
Employment and Earnings	4	5	6	3	1	19
Agriculture	0	6	6	3	3	18
Economic Development and Sustainability	1	0	2	1	0	4
Organized Labor	0	1	0	0	0	1
Population						
Migration	7	1	2	6	6	22
Health	0	2	3	1	2	8
Mortality	0	3	0	1	0	4
Racial Composition	0	1	1	0	1	3
Fertility	0	1	1	0	0	2

Work on race, ethnicity, and migration published within *Rural Sociology* broadly falls into four main strands of inquiry.⁴ The first two strands appeared mainly in the 1970s and 80s and included the impact of migration on poverty status, and especially rural to urban migration, the earlier work of which was largely motivated by attempts to understand the role of migration in the creation and reproduction of ethnicized urban poverty concentrations (Bacon 1971; Ritchey 1974; Wenk and Hardesty 1993). The second strand of work was a linked thread of scholarship examining Black post-Great Migration return to the South (Campbell, Johnson, and Stangler 1974; Long and Hansen 1977), scholarship that mostly described geographic patterns of migration, migration stream selectivity, and in the case of Falk, Hunt, and Hunt (2004) delineated multiple distinct types of return migration streams. A third area of work has examined race and migration selectivity more broadly. For example, Beale and Fuguitt (2011) published work examining the migration of retirement aged Blacks into nonmetropolitan areas, and Cheong and colleagues (1986) investigated racial differences associated with the selection of metropolitan versus nonmetropolitan migration destinations. Last, a more recent strand of work emerging in the 1990s and 2000s has examined new rural settlement patterns of U.S. immigrant populations (Donato et al. 2007; Gimpel and Lay 2008), scholarship that included Lichter's presidential address (2012) signaling increasing racial and ethnic diversity within rural areas as a key aspect of the broader diversification of the United States in the 21st Century.

Beyond migration, an additional three of the five key areas of substantive concentration have primary foci on race, ethnicity, and economic status, including work specifically focused on poverty and inequality, on employment and earnings, and on socioeconomic status more broadly. This work is arguably consistent with the discipline's long attention to social and spatial inequalities, and even when economic status is not a primary focus, it is often a close secondary focus, as in the research on migration discussed above. Like the migration research, it too tends to be, with some exceptions, statistically framed in the effort to explain the determinants of poverty outcomes at individual and aggregate levels and describe the association between race/ethnicity and economic outcomes (e.g., Saenz and Thomas 1991; Slesinger and Cautley 1988; Snyder, McLaughlin, and

⁴As a whole, this work has been highly quantitatively focused, given its attention from rural demographers. Some of Falk's later work, however (though not published within *Rural Sociology*), took a qualitative turn to examine Black Southern non-migrant community in the context of the Great Migration (2004). This work perhaps anticipated later treatments such as Karida Brown's masterful *Gone Home* (2018), a study of early 20th Century Black migration into the Appalachian Coalfields of Kentucky.

Findeis 2006). A major thread of this work emphasizes spatiality and spatial contexts of inequality and/or socioeconomic status (e.g., Brown 1978; Lichter and Johnson 2007; Thiede, Kim, and Valasik 2018). This includes the special issue edited by Lobao and Saenz (2002) which drew attention not only to the significance of examining social differences and processes across rural and urban space, but the interest within the discipline on how power is inscribed across and within spaces and what this means for understanding the creation and reproduction of inequality across multiple scales.

Earlier scholarship on agriculture tended to focus on comparing farmers, farmer-workers, or farming operations across ethnicity (including, as in Salamon's work, differing white ethnicities—see, e.g., Salamon 1980; 1982; 1985; 1989), but with growing attention to non-white farmers and workers (Barlett 1986; Cross, Jackson-Smith, and Barham 2000; Gutierrez and Eckert 1991). While much of this work tended to focus on ethnic differences in practices and beliefs (Barlett 1986; Quisumbing King et al. 2018), at the same time, scholars like Buttel and Newby (1980) called for critical studies of agriculture and rural social relations, and in the early 2000s, a more explicitly critical strand of work emerged in the pages of this journal. Like the contributions of Lobao and Saenz (2002), this work pays attention to how social and spatial inequality unfolds in rural spaces, drawing new attention to how land and farm work have functioned as a mechanism of closure, inscribing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and reproducing unequal power relations (Bailey et al. 1996; Geisler 2014; Mize 2006; Quisumbing King et al. 2018).⁵ While most of this work draws attention to legacies of racism and land ownership and farming practices as axes of exclusion, there is also demonstrable hope that agricultural land reform can create pathways to inclusion and racial justice (Gilbert 2016).

A small, but nonetheless significant body of work published in the 1970s and 1980s within *Rural Sociology* focused on white ethnicity as a particular feature of rural society (Panelli et al. 2009). This includes Salamon's work on intergenerational land transfers and farming decision-making amongst white farmers differentiated by German and Irish ethnic heritage (Salamon 1980; 1982; 1985; Salamon and O'Reilly 1979; see also Cross et al. 2000; McMillan Lequieu 2015). This work was notable not only for articulating particular questions around the

⁵It's worth noting that work that addresses power, race, and agriculture is scarce in the journal in part because the focus of some of this work has been on urban spaces. At the same time, many of the contributions in this field have been published in other venues and within other disciplines such as geography (Ali 2012; Alkon 2012; Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Alkon and Norgaard 2009; Guthman 2008; 2014; Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009; Reid and Bennett 2012; Slocum 2007; 2011; White 2018).

relationship between European ethnic patterns and distinctive family farming practices, but also because of Salamon's use of ethnographic methods, anthropological perspectives, and constructivist approaches.⁶ This work is less explicit about the social construction of race/ethnicity *per se*, and focused more on culture as a determining factor in particular farming practices differentiated across (white) ethnic groups (1982; 1985; 1989). A second body of work concerning white rural ethnicity addressed Amish communities, mostly concerning economic and labor market participation, ethnic boundary maintenance, and residential structure (Buck 1978; Martineau and MacQueen 1977; Stoltzfus 1973). While these two areas of scholarship were prominent in the 1970s and 80s, with few exceptions (e.g., Anderson and Kenda 2015; McMillan Lequieu 2015) they were afterwards largely abandoned as areas of scholarly interest within the journal.

Whiteness in and of itself and its explicit social construction in relation to rurality has only rarely been addressed within the pages of *Rural Sociology*, despite its treatment in other disciplines, as well as in non-U.S. contexts (Cloke 2004; Halloway 2007; Panelli et al. 2009). A rare early example, however, includes Grasmick's (1974) work investigating the spatial patterns of support for 1968 presidential candidate George Wallace among Southern voters, anticipating much later scholarship examining the relationship between rural-urban space and voting patterns in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections (Carolan 2020; Rodden 2019; Ulrich-Schad and Duncan 2018). Similarly, in 2000 Kimmel and Ferber examined rurality, (white) racial identity, and the formation of right-wing militias, connecting their rise with rural economic restructuring and rising (white) rural economic insecurity. Leap (2020), analyzing several decades of lyrics from songs appearing on the *Billboard* country music charts similarly examines the intersection of masculinity and (white) racialized identity. Leap argues that between the 1980s and the 2010s country music lyrics shifted away from men portrayed as family breadwinners and instead increasingly portrayed them as "providing women with alcohol, transportation, and places to hook up" as masculinity was increasingly linked with whiteness. Leap argues that "these rearranged intersections of gender, class, sexuality, and race enable the continued reproduction of gendered inequalities amid rural men's worsening employment prospects" (165).

⁶See Salamon's (1989) response to critiques of her methodological approaches for an illuminating perspective on some of the motivating methodological debates at the time within the discipline and the pages of this journal—and by extension how these debates shaped what rural sociologists believed they knew or *could* know about the nature of race and ethnicity in shaping social outcomes and processes.

In sum, *Rural Sociology* has seen the terms of the conversations about race within this journal change over time, although too much has remained consistent and especially with regard to substantive focus. Much of this scholarship has made critical advances in our understandings of macro-level and demographic patterns of race, ethnicity, and the well-being of rural people and places. The considerations of scholars, however, have also increasingly turned toward interrogating the agency and the lived experiences of both white and nonwhite people, with a growing attention to studying power and inequality from constructivist perspectives. We see these threads grow in this special issue.

Theorizing Race, Ethnicity, and Rurality: Current Insights, Future Directions

The articles in this special issue build on the discipline's contributions to social and spatial inequalities, and add to the journal's historically prominent topical areas related to race: migration, poverty and inequality, employment and earnings, socioeconomic status, and agriculture. The articles interrogate in different ways how the social construction of race and ethnicity intersect with rurality to shape the inequalities, opportunities, and agencies that constitute lived rural experience. Four key insights run through these articles to inform how rural sociologists can approach the study of race and ethnicity: (1) rural spaces are racially coded; (2) intersections with race and ethnicity exacerbate rural inequality; (3) the domination of people and the environment are co-constituted, and; (4) the meaning of race and practices of racism vary and are embedded within contextually specific and historically nested ecologies of local social logic. In the following paragraphs, we locate these contributions in ongoing conversations within and related to rural sociology and identify the importance of these insights for rural sociology.

First, rural spaces are racially coded. This encoding process involves a reinforcing cycle between the place-based history of race, how people imagine these places today (Cloke 2004; Kimmel and Ferber 2000), and how these imaginings shape structures and opportunities for people living in rural places (Pfeffer and Parra 2009). Since the 17th century arrival of English colonists, white politicians, elites, and settlers have expanded white power and control across the North American continent. Such efforts were accomplished through settler colonialism, plantation expansion, and homesteading, among other practices (Blackhawk 2009; Frymer 2017; Glenn 2015; Mandle 1978; Rana 2010; Utley 2003). While the overarching aim of these projects was to construct a white nation and serve the interests of white populations, they also instilled an enduring racial imaginary in which rural spaces were for white people.

These racial ideas, structures, and practices survive through inherited legacies that continuously shape rural spaces in both subtle and overt ways (Du Bois 1999; Duncan 2015; O'Connell 2019; Quisumbing King et al. 2018).

The authors contributing to this special issue illustrate how the racial encoding of rural spaces is embedded in the relationship between imaginaries and legacies. Multiple articles (Bray this issue; Ford this issue) detail how settler colonialism particularly inflects the racial meaning of rural spaces, what racial purposes rural spaces serve, and for whom. For example, Bray (this issue) explains how state bureaucrats project whiteness on and create white advantage in rural spaces. Ford (this issue), on the other hand, shows how survivalist groups known as “preppers” build on the idea of rural space as white to create an escape for themselves in conditions of societal collapse. Mann and Rogers (this issue) discuss the distribution of material resources and opportunities for white and Black students in segregative school environments in the Alabama Black Belt. Lastly, Escobar’s (this issue) study argues how “sundown town” histories shape which spaces Latinx immigrants see as safe and unsafe. The particular reconfiguration of racial meaning in rural Northwest Arkansas, the site of Escobar’s study, is itself a product of imperial legacies, with local agrifood processors recruiting a transnational workforce whose livelihoods were destabilized through colonial and neo-colonial projects. At the same time, Mauer’s (this issue) account of indigenous futurism and ecosystem restoration powerfully demonstrates possibilities for “resurgence, sovereignty, and self-determination” for Indigenous communities who experienced historical and ongoing ecological violence. The study’s methods and empirics detail Indigenous futures involving renewal and emancipation, while outlining the pathways and interventions necessary to arrive at such an outcome.

Second, these articles collectively show how intersections with race and ethnicity exacerbate rural inequality: spaces are heterogeneous and therefore require an intersectional lens for understanding the breadth and scope of rural life (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Collins 2015). While rural sociologists have long emphasized the importance of place (Lobao 2004), articles in this special issue illustrate how place intersects in key ways with race, disability, and legality, among other categories. Ford details how the rural idyll guides a prepper worldview defined by racialized, gendered, and placed-based hierarchies: the white rural male dominates, while racialized, urban populations are subordinate. In this prepper scenario, the conventional notions of rural inequality are inverted, as rurality is seen as a source of prosperity and fulfillment. Escobar (this issue) and Aylward, Barrio, and Kramarczuk (this issue)

show how the local racial context shapes experiences of discrimination and inequality differently. For Escobar (this issue), the experience of belonging is shaped by not only race, but also other intersecting concerns and vulnerabilities associated with nationality, citizenship status, and generational immigrant standing. Aylward et al. (this issue) document how patterns in federal citations for disproportionality were unequal across rural school districts, with white-majority districts reacting to racial and ethnic diversification by using perceived disability status to create new forms of exclusion.

The third insight involves studying the co-domination of people and the environment. Rural sociology has a rich legacy of studying natural resource management, food and agriculture, and work and employment. Nevertheless, these research areas rarely explore the racial logics and racialized strategies of population control that undergird projects like natural resource development and industrial agriculture. While scholars have explored intersections between rural imaginaries and environmental injustices (Ashwood and MacTavish 2016), less is known about the co-constitutive relationships between *race*, rurality, and environment (for an exception, see Bailey, Barlow, and Dyer 2019). At the same time, scholars of settler colonialism argue that environmental domination cannot be understood apart from racialized control of populations (McKay et al. 2020; Murphy 2020; In press). As Norgaard, Reed, and Bacon (2018) note, environmental manipulation is achieved through racial projects involving state-led processes of resource redistribution that undermine Native economic and cultural practices. Thus, race and rurality often intersect in struggles over access to and control of environmental and natural resources.

Multiple articles in this issue employ the lens of settler colonialism to highlight how the domination of people and the environment go hand-in-hand. Mauer (this issue) describes how the violence inflicted through resource dispossession not only violated tribal sovereignty but also engendered intergenerational trauma. Bray (this issue) articulates the bureaucratic mechanisms, ideology, and discourse through which settler projects siphon natural resources from Indigenous nations toward colonizer communities. And Ford (this issue) details how settler colonial attitudes in prepper culture, such as fear of non-white others and individualism, animate beliefs in environmental self-sustainability. In many ways, such environmental attitudes in prepper culture mirror Garrett Hardin's (1974) eugenicist view of a racialized, zero-sum competition for resources. Overall, these articles illustrate a greater need for studies of settler colonialism within rural sociology, while also showing the general importance of studying the embeddedness of racial

ideologies in environmental practices. This is especially the case given the institutional history of rural sociology as a discipline historically connected to land grant institutions, themselves based upon state-sponsored systems of dispossession of Native lands and colonialist settlement projects (Lee and Ahtone 2020; Nash 2019). Perhaps in part because of this, with a small handful of exceptions, rural sociology has largely not addressed American Indian issues. In our half-century review, only 14 articles addressed American Indians and of those 14, only eight articles had a primary research focus on American Indian contexts (e.g., as opposed to including American Indian demographic data in larger comparative statistical analyses). This compares to 78 articles addressing Black populations, and 50 articles addressing Latino populations.⁷

The fourth insight from these articles is that the mechanics of race and racism function differently depending on the local context. Several articles in this special issue provide a template for studying local dynamism and variation within racialized social systems. As the authors show, rural spaces contain pockets of diversity where Latinx people can cultivate community, where indigenous people continue to assert their sovereignty, where Black people resist, and where non-white people face unique forms of environmental domination. Escobar (this issue) shows how the variation of rural spaces is experienced by her research participants: those places that are more diverse are perceived as safer than white(r) and more politically conservative areas. Mann and Rogers (this issue) argue that studies of school segregation often do not apply to rural areas, as rural districts face different problems than their urban counterparts, noting that despite the history of civil rights in rural areas, there have been few studies of present-day segregation in these regions. While Kebede et al. (this issue) focus on changes in the ethno-racial structure of school districts, they move beyond aggregate-level data to show local variation in broader structural shifts. In particular, the authors reveal distinct trends in which white students disproportionately leave non-white districts, enacting new forms of opportunity hoarding and social closure within a diversifying system. Overall, in addressing how race and racism acts differently depending on the local context, these articles also show how varied contexts and struggles at the local and regional levels contribute to the reproduction of racialized social systems.

In sum, through their attention to racial meanings, how the intersections of rurality and race produce inequality, the domination of people and environment, and local variation, the authors in this volume suggest

⁷Also of note is the under-representation of internationally-focused scholarship. Only ten articles in the sample over the 50-year period have a non-US focus, or just over 6 percent.

how rural sociologists can advance the study of race and ethnicity within their discipline. These articles offer key contributions by showing how race and racism evolve and adapt in rural settings and, importantly, also suggest how rural communities might work to begin undoing racialized systems.

Conclusion

In 2021, the United States sits at a crossroad between multi-racial democracy and oligarchy (Du Bois 1999; Richardson 2020). On the one hand, illiberal trends involving distinct racial and rural imaginaries buttress unequal hierarchies and freedoms. Such authoritarian currents have dislodged liberal institutions and values, while also driving democratic backsliding in numerous state legislatures whose conservative members borrow from the voter suppression template of the Jim Crow South (Grumbach 2021). On the other hand, movements for racial reckoning and justice also permeate rural spaces, seeking to achieve democratic inclusion, equal rights, and restoration (Catte 2018; Harkins and McCarroll 2019). These historic and contemporary efforts illustrate how movements for inclusive democracy often emanate from rural spaces and peoples striving to attain liberatory ideals (White 2018).

As calls for an emancipatory sociology have intensified (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020), rural sociologists can play an important role. In calling for a sociology oriented toward human liberation, Morris (2017:209) argues that “it is time to slay the bogeyman of value neutrality and collectively embrace an emancipatory sociology.” Morris points to Du Bois as an exemplar in this mission:

He refused to hide behind smokescreens of a value-free sociology because his goal was to develop an analytically powerful science that could serve as a weapon to overthrow domination. In this view, the myth of a value-neutral sociology leads to pseudo-science useful to tyrants. Du Bois’s prodigious activism and scientific work moved in tandem, revealing these two endeavors are mutually reinforcing. (2017:210)

The Du Boisian tradition is particularly relevant for rural sociologists studying race and ethnicity, as Du Bois “pioneered a rural sociology that was characterized by the deployment of an emancipatory empiricism” (Jakubek and Wood 2018:15; cf. Wright 2020). In other words, Du Bois’s “emancipatory research agenda was built upon his rural observations of populations undergoing social and economic transformation,” with an orientation toward precisely documenting “the relationship between social structure, agency, and the limitations that extra-local forces placed

upon local agency in rural areas” (31). Rural sociologists employing rigorous, theoretically and empirically grounded work have an opportunity to revive the Du Boisian liberatory tradition that served as a founding principle of the profession.

And yet, rural sociologists also have their own accounting to do. How do we explain the discipline’s overwhelming silence on American Indian issues in the face of the land grant system’s history with regard to land grabs and displacement of Native peoples (Geisler 2014; Lee and Ahtone 2020; Nash 2019)? How do we explain the consistent demographic profile of the Rural Sociological Society’s membership as overwhelmingly white (and, until the last few decades, overwhelmingly *male*)? How have epistemological gatekeeping mechanisms within the Society as well as its flagship journal helped to shape what we know, what we believe we can know and believe is *worth* knowing as rural sociologists? How can the Society not only directly speak to but be directly inclusive of those who have historically served primarily as objects of study within the discipline rather than holders and co-creators of knowledge? These are difficult, occasionally uncomfortable, but important questions to grapple with in the context of fostering a more inclusive discipline and a richer, more incisive scholarly foundation.

To advance a values-oriented sociology, rural sociologists need to better understand the particular political economies of knowledge construction that have shaped the field in the past and present (Zimmerman 2015). Friedland’s (2010) critiques of the politics of knowledge production pertaining to agricultural research remains fully applicable to a consideration of what has been published in the pages of this journal more broadly, and rural sociology’s engagement with race and ethnicity. The troubling history of the USDA concealing reports or suppressing particular strands of research connected to core concerns of rural sociology such as the Coahoma County study or the “Farm Populations Estimates from 1910 to 1970” study by Banks and Beale (Friedland 2010; Zimmerman 2015) may seem like events from a relatively distant past. But no less than now are our scholarly foci directed, enabled, and constrained by the social, political, and institutional structures within which rural sociologists and other scholars operate (Glenna and Bruce 2021). Recent legislative efforts in more than 20 states to restrict or ban classroom discussion of critical race theory and “divisive concepts” around race and racism at both secondary and post-secondary levels remind us that these political forces shaping knowledge creation are fully current (Schuessler 2021). Returning to these ethical and epistemological questions is therefore a critical means of advancing the discipline, and particularly at a moment in which clearer, theoretically and

empirically grounded understandings of both racial dynamics and rural-ity are so desperately needed. We look forward to seeing the methods, theories, and approaches that future scholars develop and innovate, and we view this collection of articles as a modest yet promising step forward.

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