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# From the Editor: The Experiences of Rural Women, Children, and Families of Color in U.S. and Global Communities

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**O**f the nearly 6 billion people in the world, 3.14 billion are classified as rural. Many of these people dwell in the hills, mountains, and countrysides of developed and underdeveloped countries, including communities in the United States of America and in the rural enclaves and towns of Latin America and the Caribbean. However, the majority of these individuals and families live on the continents of Asia and Africa, and they live in the worse human conditions imaginable. While there are a few resourceful, rural families whose wealth is tied to landownership, business entrepreneurship, and property holding, the majority of rural individuals are victims of extreme poverty, and political and economic oppression has made it very difficult for them to feed, clothe, and house themselves. Many work for very little and have no real opportunity to increase their earning power. Research shows that, while global income is more than \$31 trillion a year, 1.2 billion of the world's rural population earns less than \$1 a day, thereby creating an even larger gap between rich and poor and rural and urban populations.

The livelihoods of people living in developing and undeveloped rural areas are strongly dependent on the environment. These people have to make a living from what nature provides in terms of oceans, land, and forests, as they earn their living from fishing, farming, forestry, mining, tourism, or related service industries. Rural populations mostly include a variety of families who are subsistence farmers and landless laborers, as well as female-headed households and minority groups who have been pushed onto cheap, marginal land. The majorities of the world's poorest people who live in rural areas have little in reserve and are not able to help their families do more than simply survive.

The articles in this volume draw attention to Diaspora conditions affecting women, children, and families of color in a number of ways. By relating the themes of this special issue to the concerns of rural women and families of color, we explore historic struggles and simultaneous daily confrontation of social, economic, and political oppression. This volume emphasizes a need for social and political movements; social and welfare policy initiatives; and agricultural changes, including the creation of policies related to land and conservation and of programs related to the use of science and technology. In addition, this volume pays close attention to conditions related to the environment, sustainability, health and health education, and water and food needs. Together, these themes, in conjunction with the research and methodological approaches used by the authors to contextualize the realities of rural families, women, and children of color, provide a broader framework for examining issues of representations and identity for a community of people who are largely poor, often overlooked, and, at times, downright left out of the scholarship and the discourse concerning women and families.

As a comparative framework, the articles in this volume give attention to different ethnicities of women and families represented in rural cultures and societies. They also make the connections between understanding location as a political, diasporic concept useful in perceiving how the environment is not only a social, economic, and cultural experience but also a political and physical space that links diasporic people of color to an interdisciplinary, ethnographic sociopolitical economy, where women are continually challenging traditions, thereby empowering themselves to address social justice needs. Within this context, the essays by Stephen Selka and Nghana Lewis are significant. Selka, for example, addresses the grassroots organizing of Afro-Brazilian rural women within the context of religious struggles, while Lewis examines the tragic realities that women in rural sub-Saharan Africa face regarding water needs. Each author invites the readers to think of these approaches as critical environmental, political, and social justice protests, rooted in an attack on aggressive agrarian exploitive politics and oppressive public policy. In doing so, Selka and Lewis show how Afro-Brazilian and rural sub-Saharan African women enable communities to establish control over their environment and resources, as those communities invest in women as various forms of human and social capital and as persons whose skills and experiences are critical in helping communities create and achieve agency.

Furthermore, Lewis's article demonstrates that environmental justice is both a theoretical and activist framework that has two principal objec-

tives: exposing inequities in the distribution of natural resources among the economically disadvantaged, and involving minority groups in making and implementing environmental policy. This approach encourages readers to envision a global world inclusive of rural people of color, where international communities work together to establish firm rooting in indigenous cultural values and communities' social practices to help make families strong. Consistent with this approach, Lewis argues that there is a need for accountability in order to address and improve the human condition and the rights of all people by creating empathic synergy among political, economic, humanitarian, and environmental interests to build capacities to combat disease and poverty in local and global contexts.

Through the ethnographic and interdisciplinary approaches used by Selka, readers can connect the experiences of the Boa Morte Sisterhood to gender resistance against oppressive power throughout the African Diaspora. Boa Morte reveals as much about religious practice as it does the politics of engendered leadership wrapped in class and racial conflict. Taken together, the issues of HIV/AIDS in rural sub-Saharan Africa, as discussed by Lewis, and the struggles of Afro-Brazilian women in the Catholic Church, as discussed by Selka, provide meaningful understandings of rural peoples' need for influence and power in the global world.

Related to the issue of accessing influence and power for rural families and women of color is the work that several authors have contributed in this volume regarding grassroots organizing. Throughout global rural territories, we find women involved with movements. Some of these are political, others are social, while still some others have a cultural or literary focus. Though they are all interconnected, each social, environmental, cultural, and political movement, as Selka shows, provides the opportunity for rural peoples to establish geographical spaces as places of social acting and as locations where local leaders not only engage in activism but also continue cultural traditions as social actors, persons who risk their lives doing activist work to create change on the ground.

In keeping with this focus, readers will find that Nghana Lewis, Carmen Harris, and Stephen Selka have interrogated present conditions by examining historical factors that have drawn rural women of color into very public spaces, where they raised concern about the survival of their children and families. While Lewis's research is an illustration of what rural women and communities can do to connect rural sub-Saharan Africa's struggle with HIV/AIDS to world poverty, Harris provides an example concerning what

women in developing countries can do to force their governments to work with them in creating projects that help rural families improve health, nutrition, and housing.

Selka's narrative further builds on these dialogues. Each essay interprets and transports the ideals of freedom in relationship to the successful establishment of home-grown autonomy that challenges tripartite systems of domination of rural women and communities on both sides of the Atlantic. Therefore, Selka's analysis of Afro-Brazilian rural women shows a fight for freedom in which women in all rural cultures are engaged: the right to religious participation and expression without intimidation.

Sustainability is a reality faced by the rural poor throughout the world. While the term primarily means conservative use of the land and being self-sufficient, the concept can be generally applied throughout rural societies. Thinking of ways to conserve and being self-sufficient at providing for one's own needs appear to be the sustainable approach used by many rural women of color. In this volume, several articles illustrate this point. For example, Lewis, Harris, and Stephen Berrey offer examples of families working to sustain traditions and farming practices that encourage hope. On the one hand, Berrey provides data regarding the African Diaspora that shows how African Americans sustained themselves by imposing a racial literate education on their children; on the other hand, Harris indicates how rural black Americans' self-defining concepts of hard work are examples of a kind of sustainability that, when applied, have, through certain aspects of black aesthetics and traditions, contributed to the progress and survival of rural black people.

Nowhere in this volume will a reader find a more holistic application and meaning of sustainability as a concept than in Lewis's discussion of rural sub-Saharan Africa. Readers will learn how women, men, and children of color are struggling against the catastrophic impact of HIV/AIDS on their families and communities and their efforts to sustain life in many different capacities. Together, Lewis, Harris, and Berrey indicate that substantiality has to be an approach generally practiced throughout the broad spectrum of society. It offers benefits that extend directly from involving rural families in policies aimed at reallocating resources that treat and prevent social, economic, and political ills within developing global communities.

Consistent in the words and strategies of community organizers and local activists is the theme of health care. Great anxiety exists over its availability, quality, and cost. In remote, rural enclaves across the globe, comprising millions of poor people struggling with serious health conditions (many of which are connected to nutrition, food production, access to clean water, sanitation,

and housing), we find extreme suffering from very curable or manageable diseases and sicknesses, ranging from malaria and tuberculosis to HIV/AIDS. Health education is a rural development need, and Lewis and Harris provide a context and a historical and contemporary approach for understanding how health needs have been addressed by local, state, and federal governments. Lewis argues that HIV/AIDS should be placed in political contexts so that it can be substantiated as an environmental injustice, a framework that draws global communities into conversations about change. Lewis, then, characterizes the HIV/AIDS risk factors as an “extension of failed environmental policies and of a regulatory scheme put in place during sub-Saharan Africa’s decolonization to promote the social and economic underdevelopment of postcolonial African states.”

As Lewis and others show, poor health has human, social, and economic consequences that include broad general health conditions created by poverty, social isolation due to the stigma attached to any disease, children being orphaned and left to live alone, and the loss of cultural traditions as parents’ loss of income makes it nearly impossible for families to provide health care. Likewise, economic problems resulting from poor health can be seen in “the loss of family resources due to illness, loss of investment in education, reduced ability to produce food or to generate income from internal sales and exports, and the high cost of treatment demands on health systems” (<http://www.unpopulation.org>). Because of these conditions, each of these authors’ essays points to the need for developed and developing nations to reach out to the rural poor similarly to ways in which Australia has addressed the needs of its rural poor families of color living on the margin. The Australian government has supported the strengthening of local leadership and advocacy, and it has encouraged capacity building to encourage conversations and the creation of activities to change attitudes and behaviors by supporting health care needs.

Harris, on the other hand, discusses the importance of addressing health education and health needs from the bottom up by developing leadership among women in rural communities. Women often are the caregivers in a rural community, and thus they are in a position to monitor the health needs of their children and other family members. Understanding rural women’s cultural experiences is critical to helping them realize the steps that need to be taken to create change by promoting self-agency. These understandings require us to have knowledge of sexual practices in rural cultures, spiritual understanding of people’s relationship to land and the earth, and the wisdom to perceive how to enter into people’s very private space in order to address

issues of sanitation, hygiene, nutrition, housing, and treating basic illnesses. In the same way that nutrition, home, and family needs were addressed by rural African American women through the organization of home demonstration clubs in the impoverished rural South before the Civil Rights Movement, it might be useful for developing countries to consider whether a similar strategy would be effective in addressing many of their food, water, and health needs, especially in lowering children mortality rates associated with malaria, tuberculosis, and diarrhea. In rural developing countries in Africa, for example, more children have died through diarrheal disease since the last decade of the twentieth century than the sum total of all soldiers who died during World War II.

From their daily struggles to earn a living wage, produce food, and establish representation in the political arena, an overwhelming majority of rural families of color seem to recognize that they must organize their communities to meet social, economic, and political needs. Examples of this kind of in-service community outreach are provided in Harris's article. Using a grassroots group-identity social political framework, Harris examines black women's home demonstration work to show how the struggle to meet familial needs became the avenue for rural black women to launch themselves as social actors through their quilting, sewing, gardening, and canning. Through this kind of work, rural women, as this collection of essays suggests, became cultural guardians who provided oral and performative traditions that addressed the massive and shifting oppressive circumstances that rural black families encountered daily.

Stephen Berrey's focus on rural black children and their family life is critical to understanding how some rural families of color responded to negative presentations of their life, a particular dimension of the white imagination that portrayed whites as superior and blacks as inferior. His work pays particular attention to how children learn about race and racial differences and how the family plays a role in navigating these encounters in rural Mississippi. Essentially, this work makes clear that the black nuclear and extended family (additional relatives, neighbors, and other adults in the community) functioned as a critical institution that protected children from racial violence by planting seeds of subversion. Moreover, Berrey's emphasis on ordinary life is important because it discusses various methods and strategies employed by rural families to establish an alternative culture that consisted of different ideas and beliefs that empowered rural families to push for daily survival. How rural black children were provided with an alternative racial education is an example of how rural communities of color try to reject daily white society's

consignment of them to an inferior caste. For the readers, the lessons learned here are applicable to understanding how developing communities—where rural children must now unlearn what urban and larger communities have imposed on them regarding their identity and presumed fate in life—use indigenous cultural ideas to reorient their children toward positive self-images and hope in spite of their poverty.

While these essays are not intended to function as an absolute reality of the daily lives of all rural families in global communities, they can offer insight about the broader structural, institutional, cultural, and physical meanings of the global environment in rural contexts. Lewis's use of the term "environment" relates to politics and policy and their impact on health. Berrey's discussion of environment is an indication of how intellectual and emotional capacity to reinvent meaning can be useful in transforming negative physical and social space to build positive strength in daily life. Through these articles, readers are able to view environment also as a culture that is rooted in a performance of daily living that allows rural people to become socially and politically active in transforming economic spaces that demand equality. Together, these experiences encourage each of us to think about environment as physical, emotional, economical, social, and political, each of which is a space where families work and live.

Other environmental discussions are about the actual physical space. These relate to land, water, climate, and marine life. Soil degradation affects one-third of the world's land and reduces its ability to provide enough food for growing populations, especially in such places as rural Africa, South America, Latin America, and Asia. The depletion of the soil is caused by deforestation, poor land and water management, overuse of fertilizers and pesticides, and poor waste disposal. The combination of poor air, water, and soil will continue to have a tremendous effect on the health of rural people and the ability of rural communities to grow. Moreover, air pollution caused by emission of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere has increased significantly, thereby resulting in more greenhouse gases contributing to global warming, which some believe has caused an increase in temperatures, more frequent droughts, and polar ice meltdowns, threatening the safe and bountiful production of food and water in poor, undeveloped regions. Furthermore, material, physical, and body waste seep into water supplies, destroying marine and coastal life and preventing developing rural communities from producing for their peoples clean and healthy water for drinking, cooking, sanitation, and hygiene.

As an individual approach to the study of rural life and people of color involvement in it, each author in this issue asks important questions about



the role of rural women in creating change in their communities. The authors draw on data collected from extensive fieldwork and show that rural women are actively engaged in social, political, economic, and cultural work to build their families and communities. Through interdisciplinary methodological approaches such as ethnography and performative theory, these authors demonstrate how rural women's service to their families and communities connects to larger social, cultural, and political movements that address class, race, and gender oppression by integrating women's voices and ideas into the larger dialogue about identity and agency.

### **Methodologies, Themes, and Findings**

The evidence that supports the authors' positions and conclusions is established through secondary and primary sources. The arguments and conclusions are based on interview data, reports, letters, and relevant scholarly works, including books and articles that have addressed similar issues. It is clear from the research that rural women, children, and families of color are in crisis and that the people themselves believe that they have to be actively engaged in social, economic, and political developments to bring about change. Based upon the evidence, these authors position their arguments well. They are able to show that, throughout history, women, with assistance from their families, have responded to rural problems with vigor and have been leaders in moving communities forward. In each of the essays, we find this to be evident as this body of research shows the vast organizational skills that women utilize to address cultural needs, social underdevelopment, economic downturn, and political marginalization.

As are families in urban spaces, rural people are also demanding better services from the local politicians who supposedly represent their interests. They have need for clean water, nutrition, better roads, housing, health, and education. They also need effective and efficient rural and agricultural development, specifically concerning the land, its use, and its conservation. These are world issues fundamental to the survival of underdeveloped rural areas and families struggling to sustain themselves. In keeping with this perspective, the authors in this volume clearly show that global people have to be understood on their terms; they also show that those writing about rural peoples' experiences and presenting data concerning them as well as images representing their life need to be cognizant of the fact that rural people are capable of articulating their needs and establishing their own positions within international and transnational discourses concern-

ing rural development. Because of the magnitude of social and economic problems in rural global communities and the amount of money needed to establish specific training to alleviate poor conditions, rural poverty has become international in nature, and as a human rights issue, it demands political engagement and activism from the bottom up and top down.

The research methodologies evident in these essays use multi- and interdisciplinary frameworks that enable this volume to offer insights into the historical and contemporary conditions of rural women, families, and children of color. For example, Selka uses an anthropological ethnographic approach to examine how rural Afro-Brazilian women established agency for themselves through religious and political organizing. His work is based on two years of fieldwork in Reconcavo. It involved participant observation, conducting interviews, and administering questionnaires among members of different religious communities. Selka's interviews and questionnaires concerned the ways in which rural women of African descent constructed their religious identities and struggled against male domination of their religious expression. Selka's research activities primarily took place in churches and temples, in people's homes, and at public religious events and festivals. This ethnographic approach allowed Selka to do the important work of contrasting between the sisters' informal and conciliatory politics and their formal ideologies and confrontational stances that strengthen them as strategic human and political resources, women who connected their rural and familial beliefs with a form of religious identity that has helped them maintain rural empowerment even in urban spaces.

Selka's approach is an effort to tease out rural Afro-Brazilian women's assertion of power into urban places and to illustrate how religion and festivals created the space and opportunity for this to happen. It is also an example of how we can begin to think about gender equality in rural global communities in a broader context. There is an International Women's Day held annually on March 8, which highlights issues concerning equal rights and participation of women in the political and economic process. This commemorative day, combined with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in November, draws attention to a variety of issues and needs concerning gender equality. In addition to analyzing women's political and religious struggles in developing Brazil, Selka's approach invites readers to think about the feminization of poverty in a number of social, political, and economic contexts. Nearly 70 percent of the world's poorest people are women. The growing disparity in health concerns women, since they are the fastest contractors of HIV/AIDS. There are only sixteen countries in the world where women are

represented in national parliaments and governments. Women's contributions to the global economy are growing rapidly, but their labor remains undervalued and undercounted in global economies. Even more alarming is the fact that an estimated one-quarter of all women suffer physical abuse, thereby demanding that the global community take a stand in confronting the violation of rural women's human rights.

Berrey's essay is a great example of how researchers can reconstruct the life of a group of ordinary people, especially persons who are infrequently discussed in the literature on race, region, and culture. To examine the experiences of Southern rural black families, Berrey made great use of data located at several university and state archives. Berrey uses oral history and interview data to connect Southern rural blacks to performance theory, using the theory of racial etiquette, racism, and essentialism. Berrey's case study, ethnographic-like and a phenomenologically grounded theory approach, is useful in helping readers understand how ideology and identity are coexistent and how both worked together in rural black families' efforts to reconstruct themselves philosophically. Through this approach, readers become familiar with how race is learned and unlearned and how, in the case of rural black families, certain social actors interjected forms of familial and communal activism to inhibit the white ideal from becoming a complete black reality. Southern rural black families, instead, produced other meanings of blackness, ones that were rooted in their self-constructed identities and that functioned as a form of racial pride and protest.

Autobiographical as well as biographical frameworks are critical to understanding the rural experiences of families of color at the local level. Harris's essay is a fine example of the use of autobiography, the use of case-study methods, and the integration of traditional primary sources to tell a story that is rooted in the people's narratives of their lives, as they used their own voices to establish agency for themselves. Harris's assessment of strategies used and of ones that can be employed is derived from her reading of government reports, circulars, and bulletins. She also used newspaper articles, letters, records of the federal and state agricultural extension offices and the agricultural experiment stations, and the records of philanthropic organizations and educational foundations. Following this approach, Harris is able to establish the significance of family and home-organizing to the care and development of rural people, especially to families of color, because of their need for improvement and development through the indigenous gendered work of women.

Moreover, readers will see in Harris's methodology ways that rural families of color can be contextualized not only in a global context but also in terms

of a contrast of spatial and isolation identity. Through this approach, we can understand the differences and similarities between rural families of color and white families of similar backgrounds who experience very different realities, especially as their work in communities relates to encouraging leadership development at the grassroots level, specifically in global rural communities where women are a majority and an invaluable human resource.

Defining HIV/AIDS as a global environmental justice issue, Lewis's theoretical and methodological framework suggests that health is a universal human rights struggle. In reaching this conclusion, Lewis used government reports and transcripts, data collected by media entities, and documents and findings of AIDS organizations and nonprofits. Employing a theoretical activist framework, Lewis utilizes environmental justice as a lens to expose the inequities in the distribution of natural resources, which has politically, socially, and economically disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities. Hers is also a methodological approach that involves rural families of color in environmental policy-making and in every phase of implementation, operation, and decision-making that affects their health.

Because of the need for universal support for the alleviation of HIV/AIDS and other treatable diseases, Lewis's research draws readers' attention to the need for voluntary support of poor people in developing communities. Research shows that there are many people in the world who want to make a difference by offering their skills and knowledge by volunteering their services. Having rural families participate in the International Volunteer Day held on December 5 of each year may be a way that some form of commitment can be obtained on a regular basis over a long period of time. Activities can be organized and could benefit from the use of many different teams of people in getting work done, especially in communities that are being crippled by war, poverty, illiteracy, and disease. More importantly, volunteers can help break down barriers, as different groups and communities of rural people work together to develop a greater understanding and appreciation of difference and diversity through friendships they form and the potential lifelong relationship that could evolve from sharing common interests. These connections are needed in helping communities overcome conflict, and they also empower local people to develop greater confidence in their own knowledge and skills.

These articles do more than analyze, examine, and describe the experiences of rural families of color. They also interpret how this population of people has been approached, while also critiquing the manner in which rural people of color have been presented. Through their methodologies, the

authors challenge images that have become fixed in our minds as a part of our imagination of rural families. These articles suggest that rural people are interested in changing their lives and communities where they live and that they are capable of connecting their struggles to the larger social, environmental, political, cultural, and economic needs of poor people throughout the world, rural and urban.

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This list of selected references is provided as suggested readings to support many of the ideas and issues raised in the introduction and in the articles that comprise this special issue. The objective is to offer a broad reading of rural life as it pertains to culture, politics, and economic developments relating to women, families, and children of color in global communities.

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