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RENEGOTIATING GENDER AND THE SYMBOLIC TRANSFORMATION OF AUSTRALIAN RURAL ENVIRONMENTS*

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INTRODUCTION

The last decade has seen arguably profound cultural changes in Australian agriculture. Land degradation and issues of environmental sustainability have risen to the fore despite the productivist agenda that has dominated agricultural politics and policy since European invasion of Australia two centuries ago (Lockie 1998b); while rural women have become increasingly politicised around a range of environmental, community and production issues despite their widespread rejection of feminist identities (Alston 1996). Agricultural landscapes are constructed increasingly as more than sites of production, and farm women as more than 'farmers' wives' and 'off-siders'. Indeed, over 30 percent of Australian farm businesses have become involved in community Landcare groups associated with the National Landcare Program. Former National Landcare Facilitator Andrew Campbell (1994:1–2) asks us to 'imagine a country in which one person out of every four belongs to a conservation group, actively seeking ways of improving their environment' and the possibilities this might hold for a whole range of environmental issues, before pointing out that 'in rural Australia this is already happening'. Importantly, together with the more loosely defined *Women in Agriculture* movement, Landcare groups have become one of the core foci for Australian farm women's increased involvement in agricultural politics and organisations. For many, the parallel timing of these developments is no coincidence – the nurturing of land and community implied by a recasting of agricultural landscapes as places in need of 'care' being seen as congruent with women's perceived embodiment of nurturing and caring characteristics – the sustainability agenda thereby promoting women's participation in public issues and vice versa (Beilin 1997).

According to Patricia Allen (1993), sustainable agriculture needs to be based on a platform of social justice. Failure to address inequalities such as the economic and political marginalisation of women and minorities is almost certain, she argues, to lead to conflict that will ultimately undermine the social conditions of production and promote increased social and environmental exploitation. Social justice is thus

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a necessary precondition for a sustainable agriculture, but it is not necessarily a sufficient condition (Allen and Sachs 1991). The obvious question here is the extent to which promoting social justice for women through their increased involvement in agricultural politics and organisations will actually lead to changes in farming practice and, if so, in what ways? Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with participants in community Landcare groups and the organic farming movement¹, we argue that at issue is not only the question of who is involved in particular social practices surrounding agriculture, but also the conceptions of human–nature relationships embedded within those practices. While it is true that the symbolic gendering of many practices has legitimated women’s exclusion from participation in them, we argue that even as women’s involvement in these practices becomes more publicly recognised, it is still the case that: firstly, the symbolic masculinisation of farming practices acts on both women and men as they construct their relationships to nature via the agricultural labour process; and secondly, that this masculinisation is only one factor influencing the construction of farming practices and their role in mediating human–nature relationships. In order to make this argument a little more transparent, we will turn first to a brief outline of the theoretical approach that will guide this paper.

SITUATED ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGES AND THE GENDERING OF THE LABOUR PROCESS

While there is insufficient room in this paper to deal with them in depth, we think it unhelpful to pursue essentialist arguments regarding the ‘natural’ relationships between women, men and nature. Rather, we concur with Agarwal (1992), Harraway (1991) and Sachs (1996) that the very different experiences of women and men in the labour process and other spheres of activity do entail different interactions with nature. The necessarily partial knowledge that women and men develop is, to use Harraway’s (1991) term, ‘situated’ in these different experiences and interactions. But it is also important to remember that any categorical distinction between the experiences and knowledges of women and men is problematic; potentially overstating differences between women and men and understating differences among them (Connell 1987, 1995). This is most obvious in relation to the experiences of people of different ethnic, racial, class and national backgrounds and the ways in which all these dimensions of difference and commonality interact in the development of more-or-less unique situated or indigenous knowledges (Sachs 1996). Less obvious are the effects of ‘external’ agencies such as governments, agri-science agencies and agribusiness.

There is a tendency within agrarian sociology to deal with farming cultures and

1. Both these research projects were undertaken as part of doctoral projects concerned broadly with relationships between agriculture and environment. Lockie’s (1996) study was conducted in the mixed farming zone of south west New South Wales, and involved ethnographic interviews with 51 people, a household-based sample survey involving another 133, participant observation and discourse analysis. Lyons’ (forthcoming b) study involved organic farmers from both Australia and Aotearoa (New Zealand) in over 70 ethnographic interviews.

indigenous knowledges as exclusively 'localised' phenomena (eg. van der Ploeg 1985, 1992), ignoring the extent to which the social relations in which contemporary farming cultures and knowledges develop stretch in space and time beyond the 'local' and through which 'external' agencies attempt to exert influence over farmers 'at a distance' (Murdoch and Clark 1994). That environmental knowledges are 'situated' in peoples' unique experiences does not mean, therefore, that these knowledges are bounded solely by the 'locale' in which most day-to-day activity occurs. Thus, to the extent that farming practices are constructed in masculinised terms, such masculinisation arises from the interactions of a complex array of actors seeking to define farming practice and to shape environmental knowledges in a variety of social contexts. By implication, seeking to understand the relationships between the renegotiation of gender in the labour process and the symbolic transformation of rural environments must entail a multi-focal ethnographic approach (Marcus 1992) that moves between the understandings of farm women and men and those agencies that seek to influence those understandings, together with the discursive resources they have at their disposal to do so.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE MOVEMENT, LANDCARE PROGRAMMES, AND ORGANIC FARMING IN AUSTRALIA

The Australian Women in Agriculture movement – also known as the rural women's movement – is a loose-knit collective of women linked through a variety of movement events and networks. This movement coalesced in the mid 1980s when the Victorian State Government appointed women's advisors in the Department of Agriculture who subsequently established the Victorian Rural Women's Network and promoted annual 'Women on the Land' gatherings (Alston 1996). This model has subsequently been adopted in most other Australian States. According to Liepins (1998a), while Women in Agriculture participants vary widely in age, the majority are Anglo-Australian women from owner-operator farm units. Although there is evidence that the interests of Indigenous women and issues of native title and reconciliation have been positively represented within movement publications (see for example the Summer 1998–99 edition of *The Country Web*, Special Koori Edition), activism has focussed more on farm-based issues than on wider rural community issues. According to Liepins (1998a), network activities, such as gatherings, have played a key role in transforming the subjectivities of farm women; particularly in generating self-identities as farmers in their own right, rather than as farmers' wives, and as confident and legitimate political activists. Their activism has focussed on two primary issues: firstly, reversal of the historically invisible contribution women make to farming and to rural communities; and secondly, a broadening of the rural policy agenda beyond commodity issues to include social and environmental considerations related to agriculture (Alston 1996; Liepins 1995). This combination of networking and activism has spawned: formalised movement organisations such as Australian Women in Agriculture and the Foundation for Australian Agricultural Women; a series of International Women in Agriculture Conferences beginning in Melbourne in 1994; and recognition and support from Federal Government for the representation of rural

women's interests in policy making (Alston 1996).

The National Landcare Program (NLP) was launched in 1989; its centerpiece is the promotion and support of a nation-wide network of community Landcare groups based on localised watersheds or neighbourhoods. The emphasis of these groups was on addressing local environmental degradation in a cooperative and integrated manner, with governmental support available to assist with group coordination, trial and demonstration projects and, increasingly, problems of particular regional significance. Groups have tended to focus on educational activities, farm and catchment planning projects, tree planting, and demonstrations and trials of new practices (Campbell 1994; Curtis and De Lacy 1997). The consistency of Landcare with the otherwise often competing discourses of ecological sustainability, community empowerment and economic rationalism has seen it achieve almost universal political support and widespread community involvement (Lockie 1997a). Women's rates of involvement in Landcare are considerably higher than in other farm-based organisations (Lockie 1997c). Furthermore, it appears that high participation rates among women is a feature of the most active groups (Curtis and De Lacy 1997), even though women tend to be more concentrated in support roles than in positions of leadership (Beilin 1997; Curtis and De Lacy 1997) and that involvement in Landcare seems to act as a springboard for many women into a range of other farming-related organisations (Lockie 1997c). The other remarkable feature of Landcare is the extent to which it has facilitated a transformation in the way land degradation is understood from a problem that many farmers did not recognise, and which many more denied publicly, to one that is discussed openly and addressed cooperatively (Lockie 1998b).

According to some critics, however, Landcare is more oriented towards supporting current agricultural systems by addressing some of their more obvious environmental impacts than towards any fundamental reassessment of the high-input model on which these systems are based (Lockie 1999a). Organic agriculture, by contrast, represents an opposition to conventional methods of agriculture. Organic farming systems avoid the application of synthetically compounded chemicals, while utilising natural biological systems, including crop rotations and biological pest control, in an attempt to maintain both a productive farming system as well as ensuring the long term viability of farm families (NASAA 1998). Importantly, this organic agriculture movement – comprising both producers and consumers – which began to expand worldwide during the 1920s, has sought to resist incorporation within dominant systems of food provision and, therefore, marks a distinct shift from dominant food systems (Belasco 1993; James 1993). Researchers and growers concerned with the environmental and health impacts of agriculture and food production drove initial research into organic production systems. This was exemplified in Australia by the work of people like P.A. Yeomans – who in the 1950s was critical of artificial fertilisers and focussed upon building up the quality of the soil naturally (Barr and Cary 1992) – and Bill Mollison who began research

and practice with permaculture systems². Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, formalised organic consumer and grower organisations began to expand worldwide (Campbell 1996) and, by the early 1980s, organic certification systems began to be devised in Australia to regulate this growing industry (Lyons forthcoming a). To date there are seven nationally recognised organic certification organisations – the Bio-Dynamic Research Institute of Australia, the Biological Farmers of Australia, the National Association for Sustainable Agriculture, Organic Herb Growers of Australia, Organic Food Chain, Tasmanian Organic Producers and Organic Vignerons of Australia – as well as a number of smaller groups (Lovisolo 1997; Lyons and Lawrence forthcoming). Alongside the establishment of these bodies, interest is now beginning to be shown by food processing companies, including Uncle Tobys (see Lyons 1999), Berrivale, Bunge, Sandhurst and Nugans (Monk 1998). These food-processing companies have facilitated significant changes within the organic industry, including expanding distribution channels as well as the variety of organic produce available. Importantly, many Australian organic products now selling on international markets. In response, the Australian government has recently devised a national organic standard, administered by the Organic Producers Export Group in order to encourage international trade of organic products.

FEMINISING THE LABOUR PROCESS

Women in Landcare

The importance of reconceptualising farm women as ‘farmers’ to their empowerment within the agricultural labour process and in public organisations is difficult to overstate. This is in no small way due to the importance placed by farm men and women on the ‘practical’ application of situated knowledge developed through the labour process. The importance of this belief in shaping participation in public forums was illustrated by one farm woman whose husband thought that much of women’s lack of involvement in leadership positions within Landcare groups resulted not from exclusion, but from their own reticence to take on such roles. Explaining her own view this woman commented that:

I also feel that I don’t know enough about certain aspects as far as Landcare is concerned, so I don’t feel comfortable, I suppose, coming up with certain ideas ... if I did I would have more of a prominent role, for instance, if I was in my husband’s position I would, but since I don’t have the knowledge I don’t (Lockie 1997c:84).

Her husband’s ‘position’, of course, refers to his higher level of involvement in what was understood as ‘productive’ labour. While there were women who thought that men were simply too chauvinistic to accept women in leadership positions conversely, others believed that the legitimate male role was to lead while women provided motivation and support. Women generally saw men as more knowledgeable and were less interested than men in joining Landcare groups for the purpose of

2. Permaculture is based upon a philosophy of permanent self sustaining and regenerating agricultural systems, based upon household and community self-reliance. Permaculture principles have been embraced by many people in urban communities, who are unhappy with the scientific and technological dependence predominant throughout contemporary agricultural practices. (Mollison 1990).

accessing information and education. The unique experiences and perspectives that many women may have been able to contribute were thus just as often invisible. The manner in which this is manifest at the farm level is taken up below.

On-farm Decision-making and Environmental Management

As indicated above, one of the primary areas of activism for Women in Agriculture has been in raising the profile of women's contribution to agriculture. According to Alston (1990, 1995), women have been rendered invisible by a failure within public discourse to acknowledge: firstly, the extent to which the so-called domestic activities to which they have been culturally relegated contribute to the profitability of the farm business by reproducing and maintaining its labour force at minimal financial cost; and secondly, the extent to which they are actually involved in the supposedly more productive activities associated with on-farm labour. This contribution has been marginalised through the labelling of women as 'off-siders' and 'helpers' and the tasks they perform as peripheral or supportive – such as driving into town for spare parts – leaving power to make decisions largely with farm men. In support of this, Lockie (1996) found that according to the results of a household sample survey which quantified the levels of involvement among all family members in those farm activities understood as 'productive', women were substantially less involved than men in all areas of farm labour except for book keeping, and in all areas of farm decisionmaking except for tree planting. The more mechanised and input-intensive the practice, the less that women were involved in either performing it or making decisions about it. Similar results have been reported by Grasby, Lockie and McAllister (2000) based on a national survey of the Australian sugar industry.

This may, of course, be expected to change somewhat because of both farm women's activism and a decline in the ability of many farms to employ labour due to declining terms of trade. Nevertheless, Lia Bryant's (forthcoming) recent study of young women engaged in agricultural education with a view to becoming farmers reveals some interesting insights into the continued hegemony of masculinised constructions of the labour process. Bryant found that while feminism and the Women in Agriculture movement had opened the possibility to take on greater managerial responsibility for farms without transgressing the bounds of acceptable femininity, the understandings young women had of their own bodies still precluded the possibility of taking responsibility for much traditional "men's work". These women sought to define farming in terms of 'business management'. This allowed them to construct their own subjectivities and bodies in ways that avoided their masculinisation – which they constructed in relation to the masculine body's ability to perform hard physical labour – and maintain their femininity – the feminine body constructed as softer, weaker and sexually attractive to men. Bryant's participants' emphasised the importance they saw of 'maintaining femininity' by 'not competing with men' and by not repeating 'the mistakes of those women who begin to dress and act like men and lose their femininity'. Importantly, these constructions were not solely of the young women's making, but were reinforced by: firstly, constant, and often physical, sexual harassment from the men with whom they studied; and

secondly, disparagement from those same men of women's abilities to engage in and learn from the labour process – to develop situated knowledge of farming as opposed to 'text-book' knowledge. Similarly, Liepen's (1998b) analysis of rural media found a recurring discourse associating masculinity with hard physical work in a challenging environment; a discourse drawn on by the rural press and farm leaders alike. The gendered construction of the human body is linked to constructions of the labour process in a variety of contexts, and thence to the construction of knowledges through that process.

The question still remains then as to how women's unique experiences of the agricultural labour process may influence their knowledge and their conceptions of the natural environment. Problematically, a number of authors have sidestepped this issue of the situatedness of knowledge and assumed that women intrinsically establish more harmonious relationships with nature and community. Liepins (1995:122), for example, quotes as 'findings' from the first International Women in Agriculture Conference the argument that:

women think more laterally than men and have a stronger stewardship ethic. Women as educators and nurturers care about the land and are not embarrassed to show this ... Women have great enthusiasm and staying power. They operate more intuitively and in a cooperative way – essential traits for resolving the complex issues presented in working towards developing sustainable agriculture.

For Liepins (1995:123), this is leading women to reconceptualise agriculture; exploring the linkages between 'the economic viability of farming, environmental care, consumer responsibility, community sustenance and political justice'. The importance of such thinking is echoed by Campbell (1994:127), who states that:

It is usually the women on the land who are the first to express concern about the long-term effects (on human health and the environment) of agricultural chemicals, or about the loss of remnant vegetation and hence wildlife, or about water quality, landscape values or the closure of schools, the ageing of rural populations and social fragmentation ... Furthermore, women are often more open and better able to communicate about these issues, and they tend to have a wider network of confidantes.

Alston's (1993, 1995) ethnographic study of farm women found considerable levels of concern about agricultural chemicals and their effects, in particular, on the farm men applying them and other members of their family, including unborn children. Unfortunately these women also thought they had little choice but to continue using these chemicals if they were to remain economically viable, with several reporting largely unsuccessful attempts to either reduce or discontinue their use. Despite this, Alston (1993) contends that increased participation among women in decisionmaking would help to reduce chemical use.

There are two inter-related problems with this argument. Firstly, it adopts a simplistic understanding of gender that assumes that women as a group are categorically different to men as a group (similar conceptualisations are evident in the quotes above from both Liepins and Campbell), meaning that differences among women and similarities between women and men are ignored. Secondly, and flowing from this, research with farm men in similar parts of rural Australia has revealed almost identical concerns and beliefs (Lockie et al. 1995). The question

of why farmers have continued to intensify chemical – use despite the widespread expression of concern is dealt with in more detail below, with the argument put that pressures to intensify act on both men and women. The more immediate question is whether women's and men's location in the labour process may have led to any substantial difference in their responses to such pressures³. It is certainly of importance that women at the forefront of Women in Agriculture believe this movement to have played a key role in placing chemical-safety on the public agenda. However, there is no evidence on a wide scale to suggest that this has led to reductions in chemical-use or to changes in the constructions of nature and environments implicit in such use.

Constructing Good Farming Practice and Managing Risk

According to writers such as O'Connor (1993) and Dryzek (1987), in the absence of regulation there is a tendency within capitalist economies towards a declining rate of profit and the externalisation of environmental and social costs of production. Producers, in other words, faced by falling commodity prices and rising input costs seek to increase production and efficiency in order to boost their own market share and to reduce costs per unit of labour and land. Failure by individuals to do so results in a loss of competitiveness and viability even though the overall impact is to promote overproduction and further falls in commodity prices. Under such circumstances, the incentive is for producers to ignore environmental and social damage caused by this intensification in resource-use – particularly that which is caused by off-site – despite the long-term damage to the productive capacity of the resource base that may be caused. In very general terms, this is just what has happened in Australian agriculture since the Korean War-fueled wool boom of the 1950s (Lawrence 1987). Such outcomes are not inevitable, but are mediated by a multitude of cultural and regulatory frameworks and the constructions of human–nature relationships embedded within these. Of particular relevance here are those constructions that pertain to the 'right' way to go about farming, or about what it means to be a 'good' farmer. At the same time then that there have been clear shifts evident through Landcare towards the association of 'good' farming with an open approach to dealing with land degradation – or to the symptoms of unsustainable farming systems (Lockie 1998b) – there have also been discernible shifts in the regulatory and market environment faced by Australian farmers over the last decade or so that have encouraged the acceleration of intensification of input and resource-use (Lockie 1999b). This is not to say that farmers have simply been abandoned to the vagaries of the global marketplace, but that while collective mechanisms for dealing with risk – such as statutory marketing boards – have been progressively dismantled they have been replaced with a variety of techniques that are promoted to farmers as means of calculating risk and

3. Location within the labour process need to be understood in a wide sense. For example, Barbara Geno's (forthcoming) study of attitudes towards financial management techniques that 'account' for sustainability found that while women appeared more receptive to these techniques than men, gender differences disappeared when corrections were made for education, suggesting that the experience of higher education was actually the most important factor influencing adoption of these techniques.

regulating their own behaviour. Such techniques include property planning, futures marketing and contract farming (Higgins, Lockie and Lawrence forthcoming; Lockie 1999b; Martin and Woodhill 1995).

While neoliberal policy constructs a picture of the 'good' farmer according to his or her engagement with the abstract notion of 'the marketplace', farmers are actually brought into relationships with economically powerful corporate actors from the world of agribusiness. While this may lead to direct losses of control over on-farm production processes (Rickson and Burch 1996), for broadacre agriculture at least the implications of neoliberalism may be more profound in relation to the technologies of knowledge on which farmers are increasingly dependent in order to calculate and manage risks. When asked by Lockie (1996) to describe the major changes he had seen during his own career in agriculture a District Agronomist with NSW Agriculture responded:

Definitely the use of chemicals, and probably the philosophy that [farmers] are more in control than they used to be, because we know more of the parameters that affect what they do ... there are more things that they can measure, and more things that they have control and a choice in compared to what they used to have. So it should be more predictable than it used to be, apart from the rainfall. All things being equal ... there are a lot more things that they can know about than when I started.

The point here, however, is that embedded within what 'they can know' are specific constructions of the human-nature relationship and the way to manage that relationship through agriculture (Lockie 1997b). The overwhelming bulk of Australian agricultural research is directed either straight into increasing production, or into supporting a high-input model of sustainability consistent with drives towards intensification and the interests of agribusiness firms in selling farmers the necessary inputs (Barr and Cary 1992). Applied technologies of knowledge, such as property planning⁴, rely on the interpretation of data such as soil tests through frameworks established as often as not through 'input-requirement' trials; i.e. through interpretive frameworks that take as their starting point the assumption that production conditions can, and should, be controlled through the use of synthetic chemicals and fertilisers. Organic alternatives, by contrast, have frequently been ridiculed and discredited (Lyons and Lawrence 1999) due to the belief by governments and state agencies that productivity cannot be maintained without the judicious use of synthetic inputs (Barr and Cary 1992). Despite the unease that many farmers feel towards high-input agriculture, ignoring or rejecting the 'knowledge' created by agri-science agencies is a risky strategy. For many

4. Lockie (1996, 1998b, 1999b) found that farmers in south west NSW who had undertaken property planning applied more than three times as much lime ($t=2.24$, $p=.030$), and spent twice as much per hectare on chemicals ($t=2.47$, $p=.017$), as farmers who had not undertaken property planning. It also appeared that they spent about 50 percent more per hectare on fertilisers, although this was not statistically significant ($t=1.77$, $p=.082$), reflecting the relatively small sample size ($n=63$) and long history of fertiliser use in the area. In relation to practices which had less direct production benefits, such as tree planting, there were no significant differences between those farmers who had participated in property planning and those who had not.

producers, farming is risky enough due to the uncertainties of weather and market conditions without adding to that risk by adopting a fundamentally different approach to their farming to that of their neighbours and the agri-science agencies that support and advise them (Lockie 1997b, 1999a). In a discussion of diversity, or lack of it, among farmers in their area, one male farmer from south west NSW stated that:

Farmer: We help each other as individual farmers as well. I think a lot of decisions are made like that; a lot really [of] keeping up with the Joneses. But I suppose you're kept within certain boundaries of decision making by what people in the district and other farmers are doing, rather than going off and doing something completely different.

Interviewer: Why, because it's been tried, or you know it will work, or some sort of social pressure to ... fit in with what everyone else does?

Farmer: Well yes, part those. I mean you know farmers are careful in what they are going to do, they do not like taking risks – unnecessary risks. You're involved in a risky business with the elements alone, without going and exacerbating it by doing something to further increase that risk factor.

Reinforcing constructions of what 'normal' or 'good' farmers do on their farms are a plethora of agricultural media and texts that present to farmers pictures of 'themselves'. Lockie's (forthcoming) review of the representation of farm-inputs in rural print media found a normalising discourse in which high-input approaches were taken as the norm and constantly associated with images and quotes from male farmers about what they were doing on their own farm; that is, linking this normalising discourse to the situated knowledge of practicing farmers. Further, with high-input agriculture presented as the norm, alternative approaches, such as organic agriculture, were reinterpreted through the same frame. Organic producers, where mentioned, were thereby represented as clever marketers responding to consumer *perceptions* regarding 'clean' and 'green' foods, rather than as opponents to chemicalised farming systems. Agribusiness advertisers, on the other hand, attempted to associate fertiliser-use with scientific precision, and chemical-use with reliability and effectiveness – all attributes that help farmers to reduce risk through control over the farm environment. This control was itself reinforced frequently with forceful, violent slogans and images such as '*Win the war against wild oats with Avadex BW*'; a militaristic metaphor accompanied by a drawing of a battle-ready soldier. Few advertisements made direct reference to farming as an exclusively male domain, but the representation of chemical-based control in terms of overtly masculinised attributes and behaviours (albeit socially constructed ones) is consistent with a wider discourse of masculine agriculture. With print media coverage of issues and information related to chemical-use and farming practice accompanied overwhelmingly by photographs of male farmers pictured among crops or livestock, farming is represented as an essentially male activity and masculinity as the interpretive frame through which information and images about farming may be rendered meaningful to audiences.

It therefore appears that there is some congruence between neoliberal agricultural policy, the agri-science research agenda and farming culture. Such congruence is not inevitable. It is pursued and reinforced through multiple arenas, texts and

practices. Although women's experiences may lead them to develop alternative situated knowledges to men through their marginalisation in the labour process, they are still exposed to the same representations of farming practice and farmers through rural media; the same technologies of knowledge developed by agri-science agencies; and the same pressures towards risk minimisation. Changes in farm practice are about much more than the renegotiation of gender relations at the farm or even community or industry level, but about the whole agri-science, regulatory and cultural infrastructure that supports industrialised and masculinised agriculture. In such a context, the gender dynamics of organic agriculture are clearly of particular interest since organic farming is based to such a large degree on the rejection of many of those technologies of knowledge that are currently driving intensification.

ORGANIC FARMING AS A CHALLENGE TO INDUSTRIALISED AND MASCULINISED AGRICULTURE

Before attempting to outline the extent of the challenge that organic agriculture presents to masculinised and industrialised agriculture it is important to acknowledge something of the diversity that exists within the organic industry. In particular, the manner in which the industry profile has changed with the recent entry of a number of relatively large-scale producers with close contractual relationships with food processing firms (Lyons and Lawrence forthcoming). No longer a small-scale alternative to industrialised food production, processing and distribution methods—a 'food counter-culture' (Belasco 1993)—organic production is fast becoming a key element in the strategies of a number of food processors and retailers to supply high quality, safe, and premium-priced foods. In general terms, these foods are targeted towards the creation and supply of high-value niche markets, while more universal systems of Quality Assurance are becoming increasingly widespread to ensure compliance with chemical application guidelines and other safety and quality standards for foods destined for mass markets (Lockie 1998a). The primary motivation of these recent entrants to the organic industry appears to be the price premium they receive for organic produce (Lyons and Lawrence forthcoming; Burch, Lyons, and Lawrence forthcoming). Many of these growers have been previously involved in conventional agriculture and have recently converted only a portion of their land to organics in order to access markets for high-value organic produce while avoiding the economic risk entailed in converting all of their land to chemical-free production. For these farms, the decision to convert at least some land to organic production has been primarily a male one, although interviews with both women and men on these farms revealed that women were very supportive of it, in part because it provided them with what they perceived to be a 'healthier' environment in which to raise their children. In relation to the labour process more generally on these larger farms there appeared very little difference with the gender division of labour for conventional agriculture discussed above, with men more involved in work involving farm machinery and other outdoor activities, and in negotiations with field advisors and certification officers, and women more involved in bookkeeping, childrearing and housework.

While economic viability may still be important, the majority of organic growers argue that their primary motivations for farming organically relate to health, the environment and quality of life (Lyons and Lawrence forthcoming). It is this group of growers – whose operations often are smaller in scale and supply either local or generic marketplaces rather than marketing directly to food processing firms – which challenge in many ways the traditional gendering of labour processes. This is shown clearly in decisionmaking related to the decision to ‘go organic’ as well as in the subsequent labour process. Interviews with both women and men on these farms revealed that in many cases women made the decision to go organic, and were more vocal in expressing the importance of practicing organic methods. Further, while on those farms recently converted to organics due to the premium that may be received for organic produce men were much more actively involved in decision-making related to farm management, on those farms where issues related to health, the environment and lifestyle predominated this was not the case. On the majority of these farms both men and women shared many roles traditionally ascribed to men. In particular, issues related to decisionmaking and farm management were more equally distributed. Interestingly, on some organic farms women alone managed decisionmaking and were responsible for the majority or all of the work related to the farm. Often, in these cases, men had undertaken off-farm work to subsidise the income from the farm. Women on these farms were much more vocal throughout interviews.

It is probably reasonable to expect that all recent converts to organic production would have limited situated knowledge of how to produce food organically and would thus be dependent on external sources of advice⁵. In considering what information sources both women and men access for growing organically there again appears to be a bifurcation between those longer-term growers interested in holistic issues, and the larger-scale recent entrants to the industry. Importantly, many recent entrants obtained most of their information – including detailed production specifications – from the agribusiness firms with whom they had their production contracts, thus establishing a completely vertically integrated system of production, processing and distribution (Lyons and Lawrence 1999). Field days, newsletters and visits with company agronomists all provided information to these organic growers. In nearly all these cases, men indicated that they dealt primarily with agronomists and with any details related to the contract or with the firm. Women on these farms occasionally attended field days and regularly read newsletters. Leipens and Campbell (1997) also found this in New Zealand. This pattern appeared to be common across all organic growers, with men participating more actively in information gathering that involved talking with other people (such as representatives from certification bodies, agricultural consultants, etc.), while women were much more thorough in reading through various material sources. It is evident, therefore, that even those members of organic farm partnerships that demonstrated little evidence of traditionally gendered

5. This is not to suggest, of course, that situated knowledge of the effects of chemical and fertiliser does not influence such a decision to convert, nor that such situated knowledge is not gendered.

labour processes either maintained, or had difficulty challenging, the gendered attribution of public and private roles in relation to information gathering activities.

CONCLUSION

There can be little doubt that women's increasing visibility within the agricultural labour process will serve as an important means of empowerment for them. In no small part this is due to the recognition given to the situated knowledge they are thus *seen* to develop and which is believed to be necessary to make decisions about the farm and to participate in decisionmaking at Landcare group levels. Nevertheless, is this enough to challenge the hegemony of masculinised farming practice? So far the evidence seems to suggest not. The relative levels of involvement of women and men is important, but so too are the increasingly integrated relationships between the farm and the production of knowledge in agriscience agencies and the processing, distribution and retailing of foods in an ever more concentrated agribusiness sector. The situated knowledge of farm men *and* farm women cannot be understood independently of this wider context of social relations in which they are enmeshed. This does not mean that farm women and men have no choice or agency, but it does mean that there are substantial risks associated with deviation from the dominant trajectory of input-use intensification. Where farmers have taken the risk to 'go organic' it is certainly of great interest that women have been so central to the decision to take that risk and to the subsequent operation of the farm. This represents a very small proportion – some two percent – of the farms in Australia. Further, the current growth in organic farming and food products seems fuelled by the (often partial) conversion of larger farms linked closely to agribusiness, oriented towards the supply of high-value markets, and dominated by traditional divisions of labour. While the increasing availability of organic foods is welcome for those consumers who can afford them, it remains to be seen just how widely available they become; the influence their production has on mainstream, or 'conventional', agriculture; and the extent to which their production comes to represent more than compliance with minimum standards. Unless these occur, the organic industry will remain little more than a potentially lucrative niche market for some, and a small-scale counter-cultural pursuit for others. As yet there is little, if any, evidence to suggest that the symbolic transformation of Australian rural environments as environments in need of care has been translated into any large-scale project to fundamentally reassess and redirect agricultural production. Our hope is that despite this, the renegotiation of social relationships necessitated by a growing Women in Agriculture movement, a growing organics industry and continued widespread participation in Landcare will raise the questions necessary to stimulate such a reassessment.

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