



Forum

Re-Reading 'Women's Voices from the Rainforest'

Women's Voices from the Rainforest. Janet Gabriel Townsend (in collaboration with Ursula Arrevillaga, Jennie Bain, Socorro Cancino, Susan F. Frenk, Silvana Pacheco and Elia Pérez). Routledge, London, UK and New York, USA, 1995, pp. viii + 212. ISBN 978-0-415-10532-3 (pbk).

2025 marks thirty years since the publication of *Women's Voices from the Rainforest* (*WVFTR*) by Routledge. Janet Gabriel Townsend was the lead author, with six collaborators listed on the cover—Ursula Arrevillaga, Jennie Bain, Socorro Cancino, Susan F. Frenk, Silvana Pacheco and Elia Pérez. This is a remarkable book, and one reason to celebrate its anniversary is to encourage a newer generation of scholars (and for that matter, many peers) to read or re-read it.

WVFTR is intentionally concerned with women 'pioneers' working to sustain a precarious livelihood in the rainforests of Colombia. All too often, it is they and their families who are the initiators of deforestation and the increasing degradation that follows. This is a hard life, often coming at great personal cost and risk, and even then, many losing their farms to the ranchers that follow. Development organizations viewed these women and their families as 'the problem', but with little or no awareness of the realities of their lives, or the structures that constrained their choices, and the socio-cultural, political and economic forces which bore down upon them. *WVFTR* could be described as academically 'ahead of its time', but of course, it helped make that time: generations of feminist geographers, critical development scholars, and champions of participatory methodologies owe something to Janet, her collaborators, and to this book. Like the rainforest pioneers, Janet encountered hostile environments, personal costs, and a lack of recognition from some of the (male) elites in her life. And like these pioneers, she created solidarities and spaces of resistance.

Although ostensibly an exploration of the position of women pioneers in the settlement of new lands, *WVFTR* was equally concerned with 'the methodological difficulties of such a study' (p. 7). Its unique structure was carefully thought through to pursue both ends, and wrestles with the question of who is qualified to be an 'expert' on pioneer women. After a personal preface where Janet reflected on a series of her personal intellectual 'conversions' between different scholarly paradigms over three decades of fieldwork in Latin America, it is divided into three parts. Part 1, 'Outsiders', explains the composition, goal, and activities of the research team. Contending that women are largely invisible in most of the massive literature on land settlement, Janet identifies the book's goal as trying to correct that. To this end, in 1990 and 1991, she led a team of Mexican social scientists to undertake questionnaires, workshops, interviews, and life stories with poor, rural, pioneer women. It is the last of these methods that provides the richest material for the book, and in Part 2: 'Outsiders and insiders', Janet explains how she immersed herself in the transcripts to present her own analysis of pioneer women's experiences. At more than 40 pages, the chapter in this section on 'Mexican women pioneers tell their story', is the longest in the book.

Despite the great lengths that the team went to in pursuing a feminist model of scholarship, Janet is under no illusion that this has afforded them a foolproof or uniquely superior insight into these women's lives. She recognized that visits were too short and fragmentary to be described as 'participant observation': rather, 'friendly strangers' doing 'gender tourism' would be more fair (pp. 11, 17). Nor did she pretend that this work had somehow overridden the unequal power relations in scholarship that the book critically highlights in its literature review. Instead, Janet recognizes that non-exploitative research is a myth (p. 16) and that this was not an equal, participatory collective work with pioneer women, because outsiders selected the stories, translated them, and remained in control (p. 11). The honesty with which Janet acknowledged this is both exemplary and unsettling, writing that 'We sought to be open, explicit, and non-exploitative but we cannot know the extent to which we failed' (p. 16). Nonetheless, this critical self-reflection did not lead to the sort of 'crisis of representation' that some scholars suffered from in the 1990s. Despite these caveats, the authors ventured that 'We believe that it still offers insights into the lives of pioneer women' (p. 81).

It is striking, though, that despite this defence of her analysis and representation, in the book's third and final part, the voices of the outside experts (whether British or Mexican) fall silent and instead we are offered the transcripts of the life history interviews of four pioneer women: Carmela, Elena, Clara, and Guadalupe. There is no expert conclusion, and the section itself is entitled 'Part 3: Insiders' voices? Mexican women speak.' The question mark is significant. Part 3 opens with a reflection by Susan Frenk on the cultural politics of representing others, exploring how language itself is gendered, and how the telling and translation of life histories is a culturally mediated process. Nonetheless, simply ending with the voices of these women is as much a methodological statement as it is a presentation of empirical findings.

Contributions

Many of these innovative and inspirational aspects of the book are discussed in the papers that follow. Most were presented at a session organized at the Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers, in August 2024. Participants were asked not to eulogize Janet or the book, but instead to consider its intellectual legacies and how it speaks to debates three decades on. To this end, the collection is formed of five reflections on *WVFT* 30 years on.

Nina Laurie was a long-term collaborator with Janet, working closely with her on her final substantive project, at Newcastle University, on Nepali women who had experienced trafficking from Nepal. She uses this experience (grounded as it was in the approach Janet pioneered in *WVFT*) to ask a very contemporary question: can Artificial Intelligence ever come to replace humans in the analysis of interview transcripts from such projects?

Janet supervised Javier A. Pineda D.'s PhD at Durham, and they remained long-term collaborators. She taught a summer course at the Universidad de los Andes in 2008 to a large group of graduate students, and in 2012, Javier Pineda had a research internship in Newcastle thanks to the hospitality of Janet and Nina Laurie. Javier confronts the uncomfortable truth that the Area Studies research tradition within which Janet worked was moulded by the British government's Cold War interests in funding knowledge production about Latin America after the Cuban Revolution. However, Javier argues that by eschewing these geopolitical objectives of extracting data about vulnerable societies useful to London, and rather cultivating an openness to the thinking and lived experiences of marginalized people in the region, Janet's work advanced what later became known as decolonial practices of knowledge production, which had a significant impact on Latin American scholarship.

Whereas Javier writes from Colombia, where Janet conducted a significant amount of her early research, Rebecca Elmhirst reflects on reading *WVFTR* in reference to her own work on different rainforests, those of Indonesia. Both in her writing and her personal mentorship, Janet helped Rebecca locate herself in feminist political ecology and navigate the unsettling question of how British people can presume to conduct and speak about others elsewhere. In letting the pioneer women speak of their own experiences, Janet's work was also unsettling of the frames—either positive or more usually pejorative—that are often used to judge agriculturalists in Indonesia.

As an early career scholar who had neither known Janet nor read her work directly, we were thrilled that Olivia Mason, who works on political geographies of Bedouin communities in Jordan, was willing to read and reflect on *WVFTR* without the risk of sentimentality that comes when old friends and students speak of someone's work. Olivia's insightful reflections on cross-cutting themes with her own work, and on the limitations of participatory methods about which Janet was bitingly honest, demonstrate the continued relevance of Janet's scholarship today.

Nick Megoran was taught by Janet as a Durham undergraduate: indeed, it was she who encouraged him to consider PhD research. His paper uses the unusual morphology of Janet's book to reflect critically on contemporary practices of undertaking, analysing and writing up geographical fieldwork. The idea of the session and this collection came to Nick Megoran and Emma Mawdsley at Janet's funeral in 2023. Sadly, Janet's death meant that we are unable to hear her own reflections on her book all these years down the line. Therefore, finally, Alan Townsend, Janet's husband of over half a century and himself a geographer (Alan and Janet first met as junior lecturers in Durham University's Geography Department) provides an afterword on the significance of *WVFTR*, and its afterlives in Janet's biography. He was actively involved in this project from the start and was assiduous in tracking down Janet's collaborators in Latin America and elsewhere on the book and other projects.

We are grateful to Catherine Souch and the RGS-IBG conference organizers for arranging a free hybrid (online and in-person) session to help maximize the chance of former colleagues and friends joining from Latin America and Asia. Many did but, sadly, Meena Poudel encountered connectivity difficulties from Nepal, and was unable to present her paper, and personal reasons meant that Sara Kindon was unable to join us. At the session, Mike Crang also shared his reflections on Janet as a teacher and colleague; a reminder that Janet's research innovations also found their way into the classroom, and some of the earliest dedicated teaching on gender and geography. We hope that this collection will act as both a fitting tribute to scholarship that did not receive the recognition that it deserved in Janet's lifetime, and also as a continued inspiration and challenge to the diverse fields of scholarly theory and practice to which it continues to speak so powerfully to this day.

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