

***Doing* masculinity: gendered challenges to replacing burley tobacco in central Kentucky**

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Abstract This paper offers a case study based on qualitative research in the burley tobacco region of central Kentucky, where farmers are urged to diversify away from tobacco production. “Replacing” tobacco is difficult for economic and material reasons, but also because raising tobacco is commensurate with a locally valued way of *doing* masculinity. The focus is on these two questions: How can the doing of work associated with tobacco production and marketing be understood as also *doing* a particular masculinity? What does an understanding of farm work as a simultaneous *doing* of gender illuminate about the challenges of diversification away from tobacco? Asking tobacco farmers to “grow something else” is also asking them to *do* gender differently, suggesting that the transition away from tobacco must be understood as a gendered transition. This research, focused primarily on male farmers who continue to raise tobacco, suggests the need for gendered research with women and men who have moved away from tobacco to other crops.

Keywords Agriculture · Gender · Masculinity · Tobacco · Diversification · Kentucky

Introduction

American tobacco farming dramatically decreased over the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The number of tobacco farms of all types and in all regions of the United States fell from 512,000 in 1954 to 56,977 in

2002, with a 39% decline in the number of tobacco farms between 1997 and 2002 (Capehart 2004). Between 2002 and 2007, the number of tobacco farms nationwide dropped further, from 56,977 to 16,234, although the number of pounds that were raised during the same period dropped only from about 873 million to 778 million (USDA 2009a).

Kentucky tobacco production, the subject of this paper, dropped over 30% in 2005 (Snell 2006). This was the year following the end of the federal tobacco quota system, which resulted in tobacco farmers’ rapid movement into a free market environment for the first time since the New Deal era.¹ Despite the decline, the 2007 Census of Agriculture revealed that 8,113 tobacco farms remained in Kentucky (USDA 2009a) and that “the number of farms growing tobacco outnumber[ed] all other single ag enterprises in Kentucky with the exception of the number of cattle/hay farms” (Snell 2009). The majority of the farmers who continue to raise tobacco are male.² In 2007, tobacco farming was the primary activity on 5,034 or 5.9% of Kentucky farms (USDA 2009a). Also in 2007, 9,110 or 10.7% of Kentucky farms were principally operated by women,³ and, of those,

¹ See Stull (2009) for an overview of the end of the federal tobacco program.

² By this I do not mean to suggest that there are not women tobacco farmers. As just one example, one of the most outspoken advocates for Kentucky tobacco farmers in the 1990s was Mattie Mack of Meade County. As an African American woman, Mack challenged both gender and racial stereotypes of the typical Kentucky tobacco farmer (see Gibson 1998).

³ This is up from 8,274 or 9.6% in 2002 (USDA 2009b). According to the USDA, “One of the most significant changes in the 2007 Census of Agriculture is the increase in female farm operators, both in terms of the absolute number and the percentage of all principal operators” (USDA 2009b, p. 1). This trend is apparent in Kentucky, where farms on which women are principal operators rose as the number of total farms dropped (see also Trauger et al. 2010).

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only 256 or 2.8% were classified as tobacco farms (USDA 2009a). Not only are the majority of today's tobacco farmers male, but tobacco farming is locally understood as primarily a male activity.

These mostly male farmers are in the midst of a transition period precipitated by the end of the quota system, as well as by ongoing factors such as declining tobacco use in the USA and the changing purchasing habits of the major tobacco companies. The cultural meanings of tobacco have also changed dramatically (Wright 2005; van Willigen and Eastwood 1998), resulting in "tobacco farmer" becoming, for many, a stigmatized category (Ferrell 2009). There have long been those who have argued that tobacco farmers must diversify and replace their tobacco with healthier crops.⁴ As Wright (2005) suggests, the growing challenges faced by tobacco farmers raise questions about why such farmers don't "just raise something else."

This study applies West and Zimmerman's concept of gender as a "routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment" (1987, p. 125) to connections between masculinity and tobacco production in order to identify intangible obstacles to diversification. They "argue that gender is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social *doings* of some sort" (p. 130 *emphasis added*). Following West and Zimmerman (1987), this paper proceeds from the position that not only are men and women often doing different things both on and off the farm, but as they do particular kinds of work—including demonstrating particular systems of knowledge—they are at the very same time *doing* gender in a particular way. As will be discussed, the application of the concept of doing gender goes further than have studies of gender roles on the farm to open up an understanding of the production and maintenance of gender "as an emergent feature of social situations" (West and Zimmerman 1987, p. 126). This paper will provide narrative examples about tobacco production

⁴ Tobacco farmers have in fact always been "diverse," as they are usually also cattle farmers and farmers of hay, feed corn, forages, and other crops. As "diverse" shifted discursively to an active process that implies change, *diversification*, the meaning appears to have changed. I asked a farmer and farm policy activist what she meant when she used the term "diversification," and she said: "Well it's more than just having cattle, or just having cattle and tobacco, or just having cattle, tobacco and hay. I mean all those things—you're diversified in having different activities going on on your farm. I think some of the newer ones were—well like aquaculture and, um, but stepping out. When you diversify, I think more or less you're creating markets, you're finding new ways to farm." The term is used in this sense in state-supported diversification efforts, the largest of which is the Kentucky Agriculture Development Board, which distributes 50% of the funds resulting from the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement (see Swanson 2001). It is also used in this sense by important farm advocacy organizations such as the Community Farm Alliance, and in other public discourses. In this paper, I use "diversification" in this newer, popularized sense, but wish to acknowledge prior meanings of the term.

and marketing as commensurate with the performance of a locally valued masculinity: *tobacco man*. The paper will then consider *doing* gender in the context of diversification away from tobacco.

There are substantial economic and material obstacles that must be faced by farmers seeking to diversify, but the difficulties of "replacing" tobacco are not limited to such obstacles. According to Wright (2005), for farmers, "To transition away from tobacco production would require not only constructing a new set of skills, but rethinking their very identity" (p. 466). Wright demonstrates that the culture and history of burley tobacco production in Kentucky provide important explanations for farmers' continuing production of tobacco despite "grim economic and political signals" about the future of tobacco (p. 465). The current paper narrows the questions proposed by Wright (2005) and focuses on the relationship between tobacco and masculinity, asking: (1) How can the doing of work associated with tobacco production and marketing be understood as also *doing* a particular masculinity? and (2) What does an understanding of farm work as a simultaneous *doing* of gender illuminate about the challenges of diversification away from tobacco? The importance of this research lies in the illumination of crucial links between the performance of a locally valued masculinity and obstacles to agricultural diversification.

Existing research

Although as Battershill and Gilg (1996, p. 134) note, a great deal of research emphasizes that "farmers are remarkably resistant to change," factors that promote or inhibit on-farm changes constitute a major focus of agricultural research. The literature reflects a general agreement that economic factors alone do not account for change. Based on his study of tobacco farmers in two counties in Eastern Kentucky, Swanson (2001, p. 4) found that the primary reasons for lack of interest in alternative crops included lack of markets and "attitudinal" problems tied to farmer expectations of stable prices as a result of the federal tobacco program. Rikoon (1988, p. 153) has noted, "Not surprisingly, researchers are finding that the potential benefits of a new crop or machine are only one of the many factors that the farm population uses to evaluate the value of change." Cranfield et al. (2010) found that economic reasons were not the primary reasons for conversion to organic farming practices among their sample of Canadian dairy and vegetable producers. In their examination of data on diversified farm and ranch operations in North America, Barbieri et al. (2008, p. 226) concluded that "diversification entails more than just economic considerations. This leads to asking a question about the reasons and rationality

behind diversification, as economics does not seem to explain every instance of diversification.”

Identity has been examined by scholars as one important factor in farm decision-making. Particularly germane to the present research is Wright's (2005) focus on identity and his consideration of what he identifies as inconsistencies in interviews with tobacco farmers about tobacco consumption versus production. Wright comes to the conclusion that while tobacco farmers are “reflexive about their own consumption of tobacco”—in fact most do not consume it at all, and encourage abstinence among their children—“production decisions were more likely to be based on tradition and habit” than on predictions about the future of the crop (p. 474).

Seabrook and Higgins (1988) report on the role of “self-concept” in farm decision-making and suggest that information about new farm practices should be presented to farmers in ways that do not conflict with conceptions of self (i.e., as “progressive” or “traditional”). Burton and Wilson (2006) examine the role of identity in the move from productivist to post-productivist agriculture and challenge the notion that farmers are moving, in a linear fashion, to more “conservation-oriented” thinking. They argue that their approach to identity as “multiple, hierarchical and situational” (p. 110) demonstrates that change occurs slowly because farmers are being asked to change identities. Burton (2004, p. 196) argues for further examination of the symbolic values of particular farm practices, particularly specific utilitarian tasks valued by productivist farmers, and how the move to post-productivist farming entails a gradual introduction of new values. He argues that “it is becoming increasingly evident that farmers may also resist change on the basis of an anticipated loss of identity or social/cultural rewards traditionally conferred through existing commercial agricultural behavior.” He examines the “symbolic meanings associated with apparently utilitarian farm tasks” in terms of farmers’ judgments of “good” versus “bad farmers” and suggests that it is the successful demonstration of particular skills and outcomes rather than economic success that determines the “good farmer” (all quotes p. 196). For this reason, according to Burton, economics alone are not enough to convince farmers to change their farming operations because individual and multi-generational farmer status identities within local communities (and judged by local standards) are at stake.

In their well-known study of conventional versus alternative agriculture, Beus and Dunlap (1990) argued that the move from conventional to alternative agriculture requires a multifaceted paradigm shift: from dependence to independence, centralization to decentralization, competition to community, domination of nature to harmony with nature, specialization to diversity, and exploitation to restraint. A subset of the recent scholarship on this topic has

contributed to an understanding of the gendered implications of such shifts. Chiappe and Flora (1998) provide a gendered analysis of Beus and Dunlap’s paradigm shift, asserting that while alternative agriculture would seem to reflect traditionally female perspectives and values, the alternative agriculture movement has been largely controlled by men. Hall (1998) found, in a comparison of case studies of conservation tillage and organic farming, that those moving to organic farming were more liberal in their gender ideology but none practiced full gender equity. Hall and Mogyorody (2007) found that a move from conventional to alternative agriculture does not necessarily lead to gender equity on the farm. Meares (1997) asked if there were gendered implications in terms of “quality of life” on farms moving from conventional to sustainable farming, and found that men’s quality of life is improved more than women’s, primarily because women’s responsibilities in the home do not change as the farm operation changes.

It is widely acknowledged that the work on American family farms has historically been directed by men although carried out by both men and women (Sachs 1983; Jones 1988; Ramírez-Ferrero 2005; Trauger et al. 2010). The male in charge is labeled the “farmer,” a category that is gendered male, and is therefore specifically marked when it is used to refer to women; men are farmers while women are “women farmers” (Peter et al. 2000; Trauger 2004).⁵ Yet, important work has focused on women on farms, including their changing roles (Haney and Knowles 1988). Early research focused on generating an understanding of the importance of women’s work on farms—work that had long been ignored. For instance, Sachs (1983) has made important contributions to illuminating women’s roles on American farms, particularly how they changed as agriculture systems changed. Rosenfeld (1985) examined the first national survey of farm women, carried out by the USDA in 1980, and found that women were often involved in decision-making on the farm, but not in decisions directly tied to crops, such as what to grow and how much, and when to perform specific tasks such as plowing and applying fertilizers and other chemicals. Important regionally focused research has filled gaps in the knowledge about Southern women’s lives and work on farms (see Jones 1988, 2002; Walker 2000).

The research on women and farming has focused on a number of key areas that are central to the current research, including the effects of mechanization on women’s roles on farms and the movement of women to off-farm work. Rosenfeld (1985) found that farm mechanization both

⁵ Also see West and Zimmerman (1987) for a discussion of gender-marked categories more generally. In my experience, this category is also racially marked, so there are farmers and there are “black farmers” and “minority farmers” (see also Kingsolver 2007).

lessened the need for women's labor on the farm and may have pushed women out of farm labor because farm machinery is designed by and for the bodies of men. Hall (1998) suggests that increased mechanization and chemical use has separated women and the farm household from the farming operation. Coughenour and Swanson (1983) reported on Kentucky farm data collected in 1979 and found that men's off-farm work had more economic impact on farm families than did women's. Shortall (2002) found that, among Northern Ireland farmers, women's move to off-farm work has not resulted in increased gender equality on the farm. Gendered access to knowledge has also been a key focus. Leckie (1996) examines the gendered transfer of farming knowledge from male farmers to farm girls who became farmers, while Trauger (2004) asks whether access to knowledge is more equitable in sustainable agriculture versus productivist agriculture spaces.

Trauger et al. (2010) examine women's engagement in entrepreneurial activities on Pennsylvania farms, identifying that the women in their study are motivated by social as well as economic factors. They apply Lyson's (2004) concept of "civic agriculture" to the practices of these women farmers, describing the importance to these women of direct interactions with the consumer in contrast to conventional farming practices (Trauger et al. 2010, p. 44). Of particular relevance to the current study, they note that "women and men tend to play different roles in [agricultural] systems" and "the construction of masculinity and femininity, and their relationships to work roles and decision making, are shifting" within sustainable agriculture (p. 44).

Campbell and Bell provide an overview of masculinity studies in the 1980s and 1990s as it relates to rural masculinities, and note that, "[v]isible farmers were always men, but they were never visible as men" (2000, p. 543). There is a growing body of literature that specifically seeks to address this by considering masculinity on the farm (see Little 2002 for a survey of much of this work). This literature includes examinations of continued male control of the creation and implementation of agriculture policy (Little and Jones 2000; Shortall 2002), the gendered discourses of agriculture politics, as represented in farm organization and rural publications (Liepins 1998, 2000), and gender and farm technology (Brandth 1995; Saugeres 2002).

Changing masculinities is a focus of this literature as well. For instance, Brandth and Haugen (2005) note a change, between the 1970s to the 1980s, in how masculinity is represented in the context of forest work in Norway based on changing technologies. They argue that in the 1970s, physical work with a chainsaw was the masculine ideal, but by the 1980s, loggers "are represented as active and competent machine operators, not only of chain

saws, but of harvesting machines, forwarders, skidders, loaders, trucks and lorries. While man struggling with *nature* was a central theme in 1976, 10 years later the main storyline deals with mastering machinery" (p. 17). Ramírez-Ferrero (2005) examines the complex changes in not only farm practices but also what it means to be a farmer and a man in the aftermath of the 1980s farm crisis.

A portion of the literature on masculinity and farming is concerned with the role of masculinity in changing farm practices. Of most relevance to the current research, is Peter et al.'s (2000) study of the sustainable agriculture movement in Iowa. They suggest that two opposing masculinities are in operation: a "monologic masculinity" which is "a conventional masculinity with rigid expectations and strictly negotiated performances that provide a clear distinction between men's and women's work" in contrast to a "dialogic masculinity," "a broader understanding of what it is to be a man." Peter et al. conclude that "the conventional masculinity of most male farmers hinders the transition from industrial to sustainable agriculture. Moreover, the success of the sustainable agriculture movement depends, in part, on providing a social arena in which men may discover and perform different masculinities" (all quotes p. 216).

This paper attempts to fill two gaps in this literature. The first is the lack of discussion of the movement from one specific crop or farming activity to another. The literature focuses on movements from one type of agriculture to another (e.g., from productivist to post-productivist, from conventional to organic, etc.); this paper is informed by this previous work, yet suggests the need for more attention to the distinct circumstances faced by farmers of particular crops. Secondly, this paper suggests that examining gendered divisions of labor is an important starting point, but utilizes the concept of *doing* gender in order to examine how particular farm work is inseparable from the performance of a particular masculinity and therefore that gender may be an obstacle to transitioning to new farm activities.

"Doing" gender

West and Zimmerman's concept of "doing" gender offers an approach to gender "as an ongoing activity embedded in everyday interaction" (1987, p. 130). They deconstruct the concepts of *sex*, *sex categorization*, and *gender* and illustrate that gender proceeds from sex categorization, which proceeds from an assignment of sex through culturally agreed-upon biological characteristics of males and females which have become naturalized. In everyday interaction, sex categorization is of course presumed, based on culture-specific markers rather than on confirmation of sex characteristics. Sex categorization and gender differ,

demonstrated in part by the fact that one can be categorized as male or female while being perceived as not competently performing that particular gender (p. 134). “Gender activities emerge from and bolster claims to membership in a sex category” (p. 127).

West and Zimmerman critique approaches to gender as “role” and “display,” arguing “that the notion of gender as a role obscures the work that is involved in producing gender in everyday activities, while the notion of gender as a display relegates it to the periphery of interaction” (1987, p. 127). Instead, according to them, gender is produced and maintained in interaction; it is a *doing*. Doing one’s gender is unavoidable—an individual is never *not* doing gender—and in any interaction an individual is accountable for the ability to do gender competently and is subject to evaluation at any given moment. “[N]ew members of society” learn “self-regulating process[es] as they begin to monitor their own and others’ conduct with regard to its gender implications” (p. 142).

West and Zimmerman’s critique of gender as “role” is central to this paper. “Role” is problematic in that it directs our focus to situated behaviors discontinuous from the ongoing maintenance of a gendered self in everyday activities. Although the division of labor, and therefore conventionalized work roles of men and women, has been a major focus of the gender and agriculture scholarship, it represents only one means of considering gender on the farm. In the case of this study, it is argued that describing the roles of men and women in tobacco production does not reveal enough about how tobacco production and diversified farming may be differently gendered. Roles may not change in the transition to new crops, but knowledge, specific work tasks, and relationships with crops do. Understanding these as intricately linked with doing gender illuminates particular obstacles to diversification.

For this reason, this examination of the doing of gender extends to choices about what crops to grow. Sachs (1983) notes that the designation of particular crops as “men’s” or “women’s” is recurrent across agricultural systems, and that women are more likely to have responsibility for subsistence crops and men for cash crops.⁶ Such designations, according to Sachs, are “associated with the gender that controls the management and disposition of the crop rather than with those who actually work on the crop” (p. 6). The concept of gendered crops is useful in the current research for understanding the complications of “replacing” tobacco because tobacco is locally understood as a male crop. Men most often control tobacco production, and this paper will examine not only how tobacco is

understood as a “men’s” crop, but also that the doing of tobacco work is simultaneously the doing of masculinity in ways that doing work related to other crops may not be.

Methods and procedures

Research began on this project in 2005, with concentrated fieldwork during the 2007 crop year (January 2007 through February 2008). This research included participant observation on farms and other locations central to tobacco production and marketing, such as trainings, meetings, and farm field days, as well as at one of the last remaining burley tobacco warehouses, a tobacco receiving station (where farmers now sell their crop), and a redrying facility (where tobacco is processed before it is shipped to manufacturing facilities). Recorded interviews were conducted with sixty farmers, members of farm families, warehousemen, and agricultural professionals; interviews were open-ended and varied in length from 1 to 4 h, and some individuals were interviewed on more than one occasion. Interviewees primarily identified in the following categories, although some participants fall into multiple categories but are counted only once (in the category that they focused on during interviews): fifteen male and one female farmer who raised tobacco at the time of the interview, ten retired male tobacco farmers, thirteen women who self-described as having little or no role in the tobacco production on their farms (it is or was raised entirely by their husbands),⁷ two female and one male farmer who raised tobacco at some point and now raise something else, ten male employees of the University of Kentucky Extension Service (county agents and specialists), two former warehousemen, and six individuals associated with tobacco production in other ways.

Participants were identified informally through networks that included county extension agents and farmers themselves; however, efforts were made to include a diverse sample in terms of county (a total of nineteen), farm size (tobacco acreage ranged from fewer than five to 300), and age (nineteen through retirement). In addition, research included the transcription of 33 oral history interviews conducted with farmers, agriculture professionals, and

⁶ Also see Doss (2002) and Carr (2008) for critiques of the practical application, despite acknowledged cultural constructions, of “men’s crops” and “women’s crops.”

⁷ It is important to note, however, that in some cases it was clear that these women were involved in farm work on occasion; both they and their husbands appeared to downplay their importance in times of need. As Kingsolver (2007) has noted, discourses and realities about the work that women do and do not do are often in conflict, a phenomenon Walker (2006) has attributed (in historical contexts) to issues of class status and expectations.

agricultural policy-makers between May 2000 and February 2002.⁸

Doing masculinity: tobacco men on the farm

As noted above, the work on American family farms has historically been directed by men although carried out by both men and women. Ethnographic research in this project made it clear that this is the case on tobacco farms where, until recent decades, most often each family member did particular types of work at each stage of production, based on gender, age, and ability.⁹ As production and labor practices have changed, tobacco work has become increasingly male. According to one county extension agent:

I think that a lot of tobacco farmers [...] particularly with the larger ones, rather than the wife being involved in the production of the tobacco, or being a stay-at-home wife, she has off-farm employment and more often than not she may well be a professional person. A school teacher, a banker. [...] And you know there are exceptions, but. She's got a job or a position that is generating a significant portion of the family income.

The majority (80%) of the male tobacco farmers in this study—chosen because they raise tobacco—are married to women who have little or no involvement in farm activities. Of the fifteen active male tobacco farmers in this study, only one described his wife as actively involved (she, however, declined to participate in an interview, stating that her husband was the real tobacco farmer); two have wives who help when needed (both of whom were interviewed), particularly with tasks such as transplanting the young plants into the field; ten have wives who are not involved in tobacco production; two are not married. The men in this category farm tobacco, cattle, and forage crops almost exclusively, and most proclaim that they will continue to raise tobacco as long as there is a market and they can make a living.

The following examples explore the relationship that men have with the crop, and suggest that tobacco

production can be understood as commensurate with doing a locally valued masculinity. At times, the connections between tobacco and men are articulated in surprisingly clear terms. For instance, the term “tobacco man” sums up the traits of a type of masculinity that has historically been highly valued in the region. Berry (1993) described the importance of the term and all that it stands for:

As a boy and a young man, I worked with men who were as fiercely insistent on the ways and standards of their discipline as artists—which is what they were. In those days, to be recognized as a “tobacco man” was to be accorded an honor such as other cultures bestowed on the finest hunters or warriors or poets. The accolade “He’s a *tobacco* man!” would be accompanied by a shake of the head to indicate that such surpassing excellence was, finally, a mystery; there was more to it than met the eye (p. 54).

The label “tobacco man” continues to be applied to particular farmers in the way that Berry uses it, with reverence and respect toward farmers who demonstrate the mastery of particular skills; the mastery of these skills has become commensurate with doing a particular masculinity. For instance, when a farmer recommended another participant for this study, he might describe him with some version of “Now you should talk to [X]. *He’s* a good tobacco man.”

Tobacco plays a central role in male coming-of-age narratives. Being old enough to have your own tobacco patch was practically a universal experience for male farmers in this study. Some men were as young as nine and others in their teens, but nearly all the men in this study either mentioned in passing or described in narrative form being given a small patch of their father’s or grandfather’s crop to raise once they had reached a certain age.¹⁰ They were then responsible for that portion of the crop, and they received all or part of the profit from it; several reported paying their way through college this way.

Cutting tobacco is particularly associated with masculinity. One farmer said that what once made a boy a man was how many sticks of tobacco he could cut: “cutting 1,000 sticks in a day made you a man.” The “making” of a man through a specific accomplishment implies more than tobacco-cutting-as-male-role or task. The implication is that cutting is not just what men do; rather, the *doing* of it constitutes the man. The following exchange between a

⁸ With the support of a grant from the Kentucky Oral History Commission, 33 recorded interviews conducted by researchers John Klee and Lynne David between May 2000 and February 2002 were fully transcribed by the author. Interviewees included eleven male tobacco farmers, one female tobacco farmer, one male tobacco worker, as well as fourteen male and four female non-farmers (including university faculty, county extension agents, policy makers, and former tobacco warehousemen).

⁹ For more complete descriptions of the complex steps in tobacco production, see van Willigen and Eastwood (1998), Swanson (2001), and Ferrell (2009).

¹⁰ This is not limited to those identified as active or retired tobacco farmers, but extends to those identified by their current role as extension staff or former warehousemen, as many of these men grew up on tobacco farms.

grandson (Jonathon, 19 years old at the time), grandfather, and the author, is telling:¹¹

Jonathon: You know you just don't come out and pick up a tobacco knife and start cuttin' tobacco. You know, tobacco is such a brittle, um, plant, you know you—you gotta get it on a certain position on the stalk, you know maybe not the exact position, but you gotta get it in the right position where that you don't split the stalk out and it just fall right off the stick, you gotta, have your stamina up enough to where you can cut a hundred and fifty sticks in a row.

GB: or two hundred.

Jonathon: Or two hundred or three hundred even. [...] And the main thing is stamina and form [...]

GB: It's kinda like basketball or football, the best guys win.

Author: Well what makes the best guy?

GB: Strength.

Jonathon: Stamina.

Cutting is compared to competitive sporting events and words like “stamina,” “form,” and “strength”—masculine words, with potentially sexual connotations—are used to describe what is needed in order to do it well. Being known as a good tobacco cutter means that a man has demonstrated that he can do this particular masculinity well. Men often reminisce about cutting tobacco when they were young, racing brothers or friends down the rows.

Tobacco men traditionally competed in other forums as well. One retired farmer told me,

Well, farmers competed among themselves to have the best crop. [...] You know if somebody would maybe learn a little something, maybe about how to do something a little bit better? They wouldn't share that secret with their neighbor farmers. They were gonna keep that to theirself because that gave them an edge, to have a better tobacco crop than their neighbor had. Therefore that gave them bragging rights, you know in the community, “I[m] the best tobacco farmer in this community.”

Not only did the number of sticks you cut make you a man, but the quality of your crop proved how well you could *do* the locally valued masculinity.

¹¹ In all direct interview quotations, punctuation denotes speech patterns rather than conventions of written speech, as follows: a dash is used when the speaker rapidly begins a new sentence or otherwise changes his or her train of thought; “...” denotes a long pause; “[...]” denotes the deletion of words in order to streamline a quotation; commas denote brief pauses; and periods longer pauses.

Because a field of tobacco is in plain sight, it too is a means through which doing masculinity is measured and judged. According to an interviewee in her mid-fifties, her father and other men drove the tractor when transplanting the crop not only because it took physical strength to control, but because the straightness of the rows—a public performance written on the landscape—is a point of male pride.¹² This is not exclusive to tobacco production. According to Ramírez-Ferrero, “evaluations” of how a farm looks serve as “physical manifestations of good decision making” and pride; a farm is “a text that could be easily read by anyone versed in the language of farming” (2005, p. 112). Agricultural historian Pete Daniel has written, “...farmers always associated crooked rows with sorry people” (1980, p. 67; see also Burton 2004).

One farmer in this study has a field of tobacco located adjacent to a well-traveled county highway, and he is very aware of how closely this field is watched: “Everybody in the country watches that piece of ground,” he told me. And a lot has happened on this piece of ground. One year part of it flooded, and much of the tobacco in that portion of the field was lost. Another year, he missed a couple of rows when he was spraying “sucker control”¹³ which meant those plants grew enormous suckers, observable from the road. During the drought of 2007, all of his tobacco in that field died after he had set (the vernacular term for transplanting tobacco into the field) it, and he had to reset it. With each event, he told me, everyone had a comment to make.

In the summer of 2007, I was in that particular field with this farmer a number of times, and my presence, too, was commented upon. One day he was setting tobacco there, and I rode behind him on the tractor. When we went to get a sandwich at the nearby convenience store where farmers from that part of the county congregate at lunch time, it was suggested to him that I be given an umbrella to hold over his head in order to shade him from the sun. Not only would my holding an umbrella provide me with a practical purpose for riding behind this farmer on his tractor, it would also ensure that I was more clearly *doing* femininity by being more actively subservient. The thinly veiled references in my presence on this and other days to the farmer's carousing in his younger years served to underscore the gendered meaning of the joke, and reminded us all that the field and what took place in it were monitored by the men in the community. This was only one of many instances

¹² See Leckie (1996) for descriptions by women farmers raised on farms about work they were not allowed to engage in as farm girls, including driving tractors.

¹³ “Sucker control” is one of several vernacular terms for the growth inhibitor maleic hydrazide or MH-30, which inhibits the growth of “suckers” or shoots of new growth and therefore encourages the growth of the valuable leaves.

throughout the study in which men acknowledged being monitored by or monitoring other men (see Kimmel 2006).

A central aspect of what Peter et al. call monologic masculinity on the farm is “a fascination with big machines that control the environment” (2000, p. 226). Tobacco farming complicates these associations, however, because Kentucky tobacco farmers have traditionally been small farmers who cannot afford (and may not need) large new equipment, and so their tractors are often old. Keeping your equipment running well is a greater source of pride for many farmers than having a shiny new tractor. In addition, because burley tobacco remains a hands-on crop—unlike either the flue-cured tobacco grown in North Carolina and elsewhere or the large acreages of row crops grown by farmers in other regions—new machinery is less a source of pride than doing physical labor. Tobacco farmers often compare themselves with farmers to the west, who, from their perspective, spend their days riding in air-conditioned tractor cabs. For instance, following the dismantling of the tobacco quota system, farmers in other regions are trying to raise burley tobacco for the first time, and one farmer told me that many of them have not done well and will not be raising it again. He provided this explanation:

[A] lot of those are use[d to]—either flue-cured tobacco where they harvest it with a combine or they’re used to running corn and beans where they set in a combine, they’re not used to having that much labor. The money sounds good until you realize how much labor is involved and how much risk is involved, and how much money has to be put out up front in order to hope that there’s a crop at the end. So, some of those people are realizing—Where we don’t have that option—We don’t have those big, huge thousand acres that we can go out here and rent and put in corn and, go over it in a few days and be through.

To burley tobacco farmers, doing hard physical labor is more clearly commensurate with the doing of a locally valued masculinity than owning new machines. This suggests multiple masculinities based on region, crop, and other contextual details. According to Brandth and Haugen, “In research on men and masculinity the concept of ‘multiple masculinities’ has been developed to convey how specific and various forms of masculine subjectivity are constructed in relation to multiple social sites where people are engaged” (2005, p. 15; see also Campbell and Bell 2000). Tobacco men are doing less and less of the field work as tobacco farms increase in size. Many increasingly farm from the cabs of their pickup trucks, and ever-growing tobacco acreages may eventually lead to the purchase of the newer and more

efficient harvesting machines that are currently out of economic reach. What it means to *do* tobacco man masculinity may change as technologies change (see Brandth and Haugen 2005).¹⁴

Doing masculinity: tobacco marketing

As Trauger argues, public agricultural spaces such as “equipment dealerships, grain elevators, and the local town halls, [...] are largely dominated and occupied by men” (2004, p. 296). The iconic tobacco warehouse—where tobacco was once sold to the tune of the auctioneer’s chant in four- to seven-hundred pound piles to the highest bidder—was a homosocial male space dominated by warehousemen and their employees, tobacco buyers, auctioneers, and government graders, all of whom were male. The presence of women was largely limited to the occasional accompaniment of wives on the day of sale, where they sometimes served, along with children, as props to remind buyers that a pile of tobacco represented a family.

The burley tobacco auction system began its decline when Philip Morris began contracting directly with growers in 2000, and it virtually disappeared when the federal tobacco program ended in 2004. Although three burley tobacco warehouses remained in operation in Kentucky in the winter of 2007/2008, still conducting small-scale auctions, the overwhelming majority of burley tobacco producers now sign contracts with tobacco companies and deliver tobacco to company receiving stations. Much has changed, but receiving stations are also predominantly male spaces.

The display of tobacco at sales time serves most obviously as the means through which a sale is made, but it is also a demonstration of the mastery of tobacco man knowledge. The appearance of a crop of tobacco is determined by many factors, beginning in the field and ending with preparation for sale and display on the sales floor. The knowledge that is required at every stage of production and marketing is essential to the successful doing of a tobacco man masculinity. Although participants in this research expressed conflicting opinions on whether or not how your tobacco looked affected your sale price, all agreed that visual appearance was important. When tobacco was still being tied into hands rather than compressed into bales as it is today, a farmer made sure that his hands were carefully

¹⁴ Of course, a historical perspective shows that such changes are in fact ongoing, as what it means to do tobacco man masculinity to present-day tobacco farmers is different from what it meant in their fathers’ day (see Ferrell 2009).

placed in the tobacco baskets when it was unloaded.¹⁵ Charles described his views on this topic through a comparison with his work in a caulk factory, and his wife Charlene joined in:

Charles: Course I worked 31 years at ... for a company up in Elizabethtown [...] We made silicone caulk, and our plant manager said uh... “You know all these years” ... “we’ve been mak[ing] this guy a Cadillac and really all he wanted was a Ford.” So, I mean. Those hands didn’t have to be tied just perfect. It didn’t have to lay on that basket just perfect.

Author: So that wasn’t for the tobacco companies, that you were doing that?

Charles: No. [...] They could say “That’s my tobacco. That’s mine” [...] “See how many pounds I got per acre. See what my price was.”

Charlene: It was pride in themselves.¹⁶

“Pride” is consistently used to reference a central attribute of a tobacco man, as a descriptor of the demonstration of the mastery of a particular local system of knowledge and skill. Ramírez-Ferrero identified a similar symbolic importance of the use of “pride” in reference to male farmers in his interviews with Oklahoma farmers, “to explain social action that was generative and positive—as a force of production: a man’s diligence in his work, his careful nurturance of the land, and maintenance of the family property” (2005, p. 60). In tobacco communities, “pride” describes how the tobacco work is done: it is done with pride, and the doing of the job with pride is commensurate with doing tobacco man masculinity. The care tobacco men took with their tobacco may or may not have affected the price for which their tobacco sold, but according to this former tobacco worker, at one time they believed that it did. A retired tobacco farmer described it in this way:

Maurice: They, some people could make the messiest you ever saw. But a lot of people really, I have uh, seen crops where every hand was the same and, prettiest

you ever saw. But they don’t—The buyers wouldn’t give you a bit more than that than they will the other.

Author: Oh really?

Maurice: No

Author: So it didn’t help your price?

Maurice: Didn’t help your price but it, but a lot of people just, you know, didn’t like sloppy tobacco.

The statement that some farmers “just...didn’t like sloppy tobacco” even though it did not affect the price implies that social as well as economic value is placed on “pretty” tobacco.

While, of course, all tobacco men wanted to be paid high prices for obvious economic reasons, they also benefited from gaining “bragging rights,” as several farmers called the ability to talk about the average price they received.¹⁷ “It was a neighborhood thing and a family thing, you wanted to have the highest selling crop. For two reasons you know to brag about it during the year and also, made you a little bit more money,” according to one farmer. Having messy tobacco—not doing it right—continues to reflect negatively on a grower’s identity and reputation.¹⁸

The aesthetic system that had applied to hands of tobacco was transferred to the bales in which burley tobacco has been packaged since the early 1980s, and in many stripping rooms tobacco is placed in the bale box neatly, in alternating layers, with the stems butted up against the sides of the box in order to form a uniform bale with no leaves hanging out. One farmer said in reference to a particular bale of tobacco during our interview, “Boy it was a pretty thing to look at, you know he’d put a lot of time into it.”

Tending fields, cutting tobacco, preparing a crop for market, and selling it on the auction or receiving station floor all represent particular activities that accomplish both farm work and gender. As farmers do this work they are also doing tobacco man masculinity. These and other activities come together to create the doing of gender on a larger scale: decision-making about what crops to grow. Continuing to raise tobacco means that a male farmer can continue to do a locally valued masculinity. “Diversifying” means moving out of the “tobacco man” category and doing a different masculinity.

¹⁵ Until the early 1980s, leaves of cured burley tobacco were tied into what is referred to as a *hand* in preparation for sale. A hand was formed as the leaves were stripped from the stem in a particular grade. The stems were held tightly in one hand, leaves pointed toward the floor. When a handful had been stripped, a leaf of the same grade called a *tie leaf* was wrapped around the stems multiple times and then woven through the leaves, holding the hand together. Simple as this may sound, tying a “pretty” hand of tobacco was a skill in which farmers took great pride, and a skill believed not to be shared equally among everyone in a stripping room.

¹⁶ Charles and Charlene do not raise tobacco themselves. Although they grew up on tobacco farms, their tobacco work as adults has been limited to part-time seasonal work on other people’s farms.

¹⁷ In one family in this study, however, tobacco prices were a well-guarded secret.

¹⁸ However, there is a widespread perception that crop quality has declined as farmers have increasingly depended on paid labor (see Ferrell 2009).

Doing diversification

The above descriptions of the importance of tobacco aesthetics demonstrate important components of “tobacco man” knowledge that must be mastered in order to both successfully raise and market a crop and command the respect of other tobacco men. This is important in the context of diversification because raising new crops involves learning entirely new aesthetic systems that cannot simply be transferred from tobacco to other crops as was possible with the move from hands to bales. One tobacco farmer and I discussed farmers who were moving to vegetable production, and he told me:

I'd be afraid that, um, I'd raise a bunch of tomatoes or something and they wouldn't, they'd have a speck on them or something they wouldn't take them. [laugh] I mean you know. When you go to the market ... the producer is the low man on the totem pole ... you gotta do what the customer wants.

He went on to say, “But uh, course you know the customer's always right. You know, that's the way it is on everything. The companies they're always right, when we take our tobacco there. That's it, bottom line.” Since “the customer is always right” whether the crop is tobacco or tomatoes, this farmer's comment suggests resistance not to pleasing a buyer, but to learning the aesthetic system of vegetable crops. He and other tobacco farmers have lived and breathed the knowledge of how to raise tobacco that the companies will buy, but there is a world of difference between marketing tobacco and marketing alternative crops.

The federal tobacco price support program alleviated a farmer's need to find a market for his or her crop, because if a tobacco buyer did not buy it at auction it would go into the cooperative pool, and the farmer received the support price. As they attempt to diversify, farmers must create and sustain markets and learn to produce products that conform to the aesthetic standards of those markets. One farmer who transitioned from tobacco to an agritourism operation told me,

[My daughter and my wife] were real sticklers of quality. I couldn't take a second, any vegetable that was a second, [...] you know we didn't put it on the shelf, they just didn't allow it. “Oh, Dad, this is not worth it.” You know, and we'd take it off. You know I was from that old school where, you know okay, “it's eatable!” Edible, you know you should be able to put it on the shelf. But the customer's already got used to [the grocery store] and stuff you know it just, it had to be a just number one grade ‘A’ apple.

Here he suggests that the aesthetic system required for vegetable production was entirely new to him, but known to the women on the farm. This farmer did not set out to

transform his tobacco and cattle operation into an agritourism venture. When his daughter was in high school, he offered her the opportunity to grow vegetables for the local farmers market in order to earn money for college; vegetable sales proved so successful that he eventually stopped raising tobacco and sold his cattle. He and his daughter together now run a farm that has been remade as a public space. In 2007 this included apple, pear and peach orchards; fifteen acres of vegetables; a farm stand; commercial kitchen; concession stand; and play area. They offer “you pick” access, give school tours, host festivals and petting zoos, and serve concessions. The farm stand has grown to include items made on site—apple butter, jams, apple cider donuts, fried apple pies, fudge, and of course apples and produce—as well as food and craft products made by others. When asked if he would be doing what he is doing if his daughter did not work with him, he responded:

Don't know ... don't know if I'd do that or not. Um, because [...] it takes more time, you know it's almost a full time job raising it, and it's almost a full time job marketing it. And uh, that would have been tough without [my daughter], or somebody else in that position. To do that, to be able to do both.

While this example is not fully representative in terms of the size and success of this family's operation,¹⁹ it is indicative of women's involvement in diversification.²⁰ Above, I quoted a county extension agent who could not think of a tobacco farm in the region on which a woman was actively involved. He went on to say, “Now, when they switch to vegetables more typically you would see both spouses involved in it. Sometimes with the lady taking a lead.” I heard a number of stories about farms on which women's expansion of their gardens led to new farming ventures. Trauger (2004) notes that women are more likely than men to specialize in fruit and vegetable farming, and argues that this is in part why the number of male farmers is declining while the number of female farmers grows. While tobacco is a “men's” crop, vegetables and flowers are often aligned with the household, and have frequently been tended by women in order to supply food for the family as well as, when there was a surplus, essential income.

The efforts of such women can be understood as an extension of what women have historically done on farms,

¹⁹ This point raises an important issue which there is not room to discuss here, but that farmers raised frequently along with or in the context of failed diversification narratives. Alternative farming operations are by their very nature niche markets; in this case, there is room in the market for only so many agritourism operations such as this one.

²⁰ As one example, the organization Kentucky Women in Agriculture has been an important resource for women who are interested in learning about alternative agriculture options.

as what was once viewed as supplemental income (even if it was crucial to survival) is in many cases becoming central. One tobacco warehouseman and farmer told me, “My mother sold eggs every weekend [...] She sold them at the grocery store [...] and] she would sell frying chickens. And cream and milk. And have money left over after she bought her groceries.” As farms industrialized and American consumerism became increasingly centralized, women’s productivity on farms declined (Sachs 1983). As the push for small-scale and value-added farming for local markets increases in places such as central Kentucky, women’s productivity appears to be on the rise as women farmers extend the activities of women once categorized as farmwives. For men involved in these ventures, not only are new skills and equipment required, but deciding to diversify away from tobacco requires a new way of doing masculinity.

Conclusions

Following Wright’s (2005) suggestion that the transition away from tobacco production involves issues of identity because of the unique regionalized culture and history of the crop, this paper has investigated tobacco production as doing masculinity. Men have had the primary multi-generational relationship with tobacco as a crop, a craft, and a source of occupational identity, and it is men who are most involved in continuing to raise tobacco today. Although traditionally, women played vital roles in the production of tobacco and there are female tobacco farmers today, women farmers are currently less likely to raise tobacco, and female partners of tobacco farmers are less likely to be heavily involved in farm activities.

Tobacco farmers are doing a particular locally valued masculinity at the same time that they do tobacco work—from cutting tobacco to demonstrating “pride” on the sales floor. Being given a first tobacco crop, cutting tobacco, tending fields and equipment, preparing the crop for market, and other activities represent one level of doing this particular masculinity. In a larger sense, however, the very decision about whether to raise tobacco or something else is also a means of doing a particular masculinity, a “tobacco man” identity. Asking tobacco farmers to “grow something else” is also asking them to *do* gender differently. This particular masculinity has long held both economic and cultural value for men in the region, suggesting that the transition away from tobacco must be understood as a gendered transition.

While “diversifying” most obviously requires obtaining new knowledge, skills, and equipment, and seeking out new markets, it also requires doing an identity other than tobacco man, and therefore doing a different gendered identity. In this sense, like the farmers in the study by Peter

et al. (2000), a particular locally valued masculinity might be understood as one factor holding some farmers back from replacing tobacco. This suggests that in order for tobacco farmers with a particular investment in a tobacco man identity to diversify, locally valued versions of masculinity will have to change and, perhaps, crops that are currently gendered female will have to be regendered.

This research, focused primarily on farmers who continue to raise tobacco, suggests the need for gendered research on diversified farms in the region. Additional research is needed in order to understand the implications for masculinity in those circumstances in which farmers have moved away from tobacco. Might “diversification,” particularly as promoted through state programs, be understood as a professionalization and therefore a regendering of traditional women’s crops? Additional research with women involved in successful diversification efforts is needed as well, in order to understand women’s perspectives on the *doing* of gender in new contexts.

The significance of this case study reaches far beyond tobacco, as it suggests that more work needs to be done to fully understand the gendered relationships with particular crops. Tobacco farming is only one case in which farmers are being asked to “replace” a traditional crop or a way of farming, and there is a need for more studies that focus on the particular crop under production and the challenges that specific categories of farmers face.

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