



## Forum

### Unsettling accounts: Voicing disquiet in other rainforests

**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).

*Women's Voices from the Rainforest* (WVFTR) provides an unsettling account of women's experiences in the process of transforming forests to fields in Colombia and Mexico. In this short reflection, I elaborate on what I found 'unsettling', initially during my engagement with the book and its genesis, but also on the ways the approach and substantive themes of the book continue to unsettle my own research journey and messy collaborations in Indonesia. Re-reading Janet Townsend's work, I realize how much her informal mentorship through the pages of the book and through our in-person conversations have shaped the substantive themes of my work on resettlement (Indonesia's transmigration programme) and 'forced' displacement (associated with conservation and large-scale corporate investments in oil palm), always with an evolving (and sometimes troubled) idea of learning stories 'from below' (Elmhirst, 1999; Elmhirst *et al.*, 2017).

### Unsettling feminist geography practice

The first bit of 'unsettling' has much to do with how I have come to situate myself as a feminist geographer/political ecologist. It was precisely at the time Janet was working on *WVFTR* that I began to repair my own relationship with feminist research. I had been introduced to critiques from, among others, Gayatri Spivak (1988) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988), during a Geography Masters programme at the University of British Columbia in the late 1980s, which had led me to question my 'place' as a feminist researcher. Amidst a flurry of early career researcher angst, which I have jokingly referred to as my own private 'postmodern turn', I could see no way out of what felt like an inevitable 'speaking on behalf of others' when undertaking research. The points being raised in our feminist reading group, particularly around race, Eurocentrism and postcolonial critique, meant an academic career based on research in global South contexts felt at best, presumptuous. I quit academia after completing the MA, trained as a journalist and went to work as a reporter on a local newspaper in the Nottinghamshire/South Yorkshire coalfields where I had grown up.

Conversations around *WVFTR* with Janet and her colleagues were pivotal for me personally. Shortly after returning to the UK from UBC, Janet had invited me to join a feminist reading group with colleagues at Durham University, where some of the ideas that take shape in *WVFTR* were being explored. Tentatively, and in parallel with covering the angry local politics of pit closures in my reporter role, this reading group and the many discussions around the research and writing of the book helped me find a way back to academia. The honesty regarding gaps and failures, of imperfect feminist

ethics in far-away places, the book's narrative that points towards feeling (and owning) discomfort (Ahmed, 2017), shine through in the reflexive approach taken by Janet and her co-authors. When discomfort punctures our equilibrium as white, privileged researchers, instead of withdrawing from difficult encounters and uncomfortable affects, Ahmed invites us to 'stay with the feelings that we might wish would go away' (Ahmed, 2017: 28). Discomfort thus serves as a productive feminist methodological and epistemic opening that mobilizes action against the wilful ignorance associated with privilege, epistemic injustice and silencing.

Through our reading group discussions and later, through the pages of the book, Janet helped me 'resettle' back into the possibility of care-full academic research in the global South, this time via doctoral research under the supervision of Colin Sage at Wye College, University of London, and in partnership with the International Center for Agroforestry Research (CIFOR-ICRAF) in Indonesia. *WVFTTR* went some way to attuning my vigilance around the colonizing effects that can follow the imposition of (white, Eurocentric) feminisms (Kothari, 2006; Mollett & Faria, 2013), encouraging me to continue and address my discomfort. Although not framed in this way, the book waymarked the need to contend with the colonality of Western grand theory and of project log frames—structured tools used by mainstream development agencies to plan, implement and evaluate projects—especially these land among potentially unwilling communities. Feminist geographers based in Western contexts continue to deliberate on these kinds of questions in the pages of journals but also in their everyday exchanges in their research partnerships and in other kinds of coalitions/collaborations within and outside the academy (e.g. Nagar, 2014, Narayanaswamy, 2016, Two Convivial Thinkers, 2023). I continue to reflect on how I've sometimes spoken when I should have been quiet, other times, should have spoken louder. The call to once again 'vacate the space and be silent' (as Kothari, 2024: 240 puts it) in the wake of efforts to dismantle white privilege in feminist development geography still rings loud. This remains a work in progress for me.

### Unsettling framings

The second 'unsettling' point that I encountered on re-engaging with *WVFTTR* relates more to the substantive content of the book. It is interesting re-reading Janet's work here and some of the terminologies and framings that are used in the text, even as the authors are at pains to not impose outsider interpretations on the narratives they collected from women. Today, amidst renewed focus on the colonality of development and indigenous rights in Latin America (Icaza & Vazquez, 2016), labels like agricultural pioneers or land colonization are freighted with violence, and are thus unsettling to the reader, even as they are used deliberately in Janet's book. I understand the use of these labels to be the authors' way of speaking back to the pejorative way in which poor rural people's migration into forest areas is framed by governments and environmentalists, and instead, the term 'pioneer' conjures agency, knowledge and life aspirations. The subaltern speaking, as it were. In Indonesia, I have explored the issues that arise when unplanned migrations by the rural poor are framed by the powerful (corporates, government, transnational conservation agencies and discourses) as 'incursions' by 'forest squatters' (Elmhirst, 2012). In the areas of Indonesia where I've mostly worked (in rural Lampung and East Kalimantan), narratives around indigenous rights carry a different meaning and political resonance to that in the areas of Latin America where Janet was working, with complex political implications around rights and recognition

(Rachman & Siscawati, 2016; Elmhirst *et al.*, 2017, Elmhirst, 1999). Moreover, the conversion of forests to fields is by no means a linear transition (more likely, conversion of a kind of field to another kind of field), nor are social relations captured by pioneer/frontier imaginaries. Rural to rural migration and settlement means negotiation, collaboration, sometimes conflict with other marginalized people, between ethnic groups, but more often, with and against powerful bureaucrats and elites in the context of landscapes dominated by extractivist corporate concessions (oil palm, coal, lithium etc). Other researchers working in Indonesia have described the large numbers of landless rural poor in Indonesia's rural landscapes in terms of the necropolitics of 'letting die' within the racial capitalist coloniality of the Indonesian state (Li, 2010). Like Janet, I would like to press against this framing—these people don't just 'die'. They do stuff, they push back in ways that can be easily overlooked (Kelley *et al.*, 2020; Zhu & Peluso, 2021).

At the same time, the landless poor are also 'un-storied' in the 'repair' narratives that centre on indigenous communities of place that are sometimes written about by ethnographers (Chao, 2022) and that inadvertently come to circulate in particular ways within academic and activist discourses, taking form in what Henry Bernstein (2014) has called 'emblematic instances'. The lives of the rural landless poor or frontier smallholders in Indonesia don't easily fit in the comforting stories of nature connection and more-than-human care. This picks up on something raised several times in *WVFTTR*—the issues that arise when certain kinds of stories (theories, conceptual framings, political agendas) are used to tell stories that cut across and silence (Haraway, 2019). With friends—activists, artists, communities in Indonesia and beyond—we are trying to find better languages and modes of understanding for these 'un-storied' politically hard-to-place men and women in rural Indonesia. Early steps we have written about in a recent collection on *Contours of Feminist Political Ecology* and through our online project *Extracting Us* (Ekowati *et al.*, 2023, Owen *et al.*, 2023). *Women's Voices from the Rainforest* and with it, Janet's wisdom more generally, would be good companions to accompany us in that endeavour.

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