

# Rural being: Merleau-Ponty, embodied perception and intersectionality

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## Abstract

Discussions of space, place and intersectionality have been present in rural studies since the early 2010s. Drawing upon the 'relational turn' in rural sociology and geography, this research has tended to focus on the ways in which the materiality of rural space interlocks with the connective lines of the various identity markers (e.g., 'race', gender, classed, able-bodied, sexuality and so on) of the body to produce criss-crossing and rhizomic assemblages and networks of rurality that has ability to produce inclusionary and/or exclusionary experiences of the rural based on the social locatedness of the individual. This article argues such theorising of rural intersectionality does not foreground rurality enough. Instead, it has the tendency to reproduce intersectional thinking in 'additive' ways within the rural literature. The purpose of this article is to provide a philosophical intervention to the debates in rural sociology and geography on intersectionality. Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodied perception will be deployed to theorise rural as an identity category, which is always already inscribed with 'raced', gendered, heteronormative, abled-bodied and classed configurations because of the historicity of the motor intentionality of the body. Here, I argue that

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the rural is an extension of the body in which it gets to know itself as an included (*being-towards-the-rural*) or excluded (*being-away-from-the-rural*) being due to its pre-reflexive bodily habituation and orientation. Such theorising sees rural as an impregnated reversibility with the identification demarcations of the body—opposed to being ontologically criss-cross and rhizomatic as understood in the current relational literature on rural and rural intersectionality—and thus repositioning rurality as an inherently intersectional category/concept.

#### KEYWORDS

embodied perception, intersectionality, Merleau-Ponty, rural, the body

## INTRODUCTION

Discussions of space, place and intersectionality have been present in the rural studies literature since the early 2010s (see e.g., Cairns, 2013; Horowitz, 2017; Reid-Musson, 2018; Terman, 2020). These researchers have utilised current theorising done within the ‘relational turn’ of rural sociology and geography to explain the ways rural space gets filtered into experiences of oppression for specific marginalised groups living in rural areas and regions. According to my interpretation, the conceptualisation of rural in the current rural studies literature on intersectionality is based on seeing the materiality of rural space as an interlocking or interweaving notion, which comes together with the connective lines of the various identity markers (e.g., ‘race’, gender, classed, able-bodied, sexuality and so on) of the body to produce criss-crossing and rhizomic assemblages and networks of rurality that have certain in/exclusionary effects towards people living in rural areas and regions.

The problem with understanding rural intersectionality in this way is that it does not fully foreground the rural as an intersectional category/concept enough. This is because despite the current rural studies literature on intersectionality framing rural as a relational concept, it is still being presented unintentionally or otherwise as mainly a material spatial category that, when interwoven with the multiple identification(s) of bodies, creates specific configurations of rurality that can both include/exclude based on how the rural is experienced by individuals residing in these areas. I argue that this way of conceptualising rural as an intersectional category/concept still skirts too close to the ‘mathematical model’ of intersectionality vis-à-vis the production of criss-crossing relationalities between rural space (as an empirical concept) and the identity markers of bodies living in rural places (as representational concepts). This presents a misreading/interpretation of Kimberle Crenshaw’s (1989) original intentionality of the intersection metaphor where an accident that is the result of the collision at the intersection of two cars travelling in different directions produces an impossibilisation of fault because it is difficult to identify precisely which driver is at fault.

To understand and foreground the rural as an intersectionality category/concept more, there needs to be a theoretical recasting of the concept. One way I suggest this can be done is by

drawing upon the work of French philosopher, Maurice-Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1964), and his concept of embodied perception. By deploying Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodied perception, the rural becomes understood as a category of *being*. As *being*, the rural becomes a spatial referent that is always already inscribed with racial, gendered, heteronormative, abled-bodied and classed configurations that are geared towards and identify the body but is also only 'raced', gendered, heteronormative, able-bodied and classed because the rural is an extension of the body's motricity of *being-in-the world* (Heidegger, 1927). Such retheorising allows for an understanding of rural as an impregnated reversibility—of both consciousness and materiality—which is directly experienced at the level of the body. This will not only advance rural studies work on intersectionality—seeing the rural as a fully fledged intersectional category/concept of being—but also an understanding of rural as human/nonhuman relationalities beyond current approaches taken from the influence of the 'relational turn' in rural sociology and geography.

In the Rural Space, Place and Intersectionality section of this article, I review the main approaches to conceptualising rural. I discuss what the 'traditional' models of rurality are and how they can be grouped into two main traditions, intellectualism and empiricism. I also discuss the influence of the 'relational turn' on contemporary understandings of rural and subsequently how such relational understandings have informed rural research on intersectionality. Within this discussion, I identify what the main philosophical problematics are in understanding rural in this way and why there needs to be a retheorisation of rurality to fully situate it as intersectional category/concept. The Rural Being: Merleau-Ponty and Embodied Perception section provides my philosophical intervention. Drawing on key concepts taken from the works of Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1964), namely, the 'lived body', motor intentionality, chiasmus and gestalt, I develop a theory of rural as embodied perception. The final section will then conclude by demonstrating how such theorising allows to see rural space as a central identity component contained within the intersectional dimension—opposed to being an ontologically criss-cross and rhizomatic category—and thus repositions intersectional thinking in rural sociology and geography closer to Crenshaw's (1989) original conceptualisation.

## RURAL SPACE, PLACE AND INTERSECTIONALITY

### Intellectualist and empiricist accounts of the rural

Rural social theorists have attempted to provide some sort of classification to give rurality its specific circumscribed signification. Halfacree (1993) is one rural social theorist to meditate upon the classification and distinction of the rural. In his typology of rural definitions, he highlights theorisations of rurality can be separated into three categories: (1) descriptive, (2) sociocultural and (3) rural as locality and representation. Halfacree's attempt to categorise the ways in which rural has been approached as an analytical concept was later followed by Paul Cloke (2006). Cloke divided the distinctions of rural into the following categories: (1) functional, which encompasses both the descriptive and sociocultural demarcations of rurality understood by Halfacree, (2) political-economic and (3) postmodern or poststructural. Most recently, Olli Rosenqvist (2020) reviewed these different models of classification and outlined that the most comprehensive way of categorising the different approaches to the rural is through dividing them into the following: (1) descriptive, (2) political economic and (3) poststructural.

These analytical distinctions of the rural are now largely accepted and have been widely applied within rural research (Rosenqvist, 2020). However, they remain committed to the reproduction

of rural as expressed through the ‘mind-body problem’ (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008, p. 136). The ‘mind-body problem’ conceives of a tension between the physicality of the thing-in-itself and the immediacy of the being-in-itself of consciousness. ‘Traditional’ approaches to rural theory have tended to situate the constitution of rurality into one of these two dimensions, seeing the rural as either as an independent thing experienced directly through the senses or seeing it as formed through the activity of understanding of the concepts and categories that constitute it via the consciousness of the being-in-itself. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945), in his book *Phenomenology of Perception* (herein referred to as *PP*), refers to this ‘mind-body problem’ as the intellectualist (e.g., Kantian idealism or Cartesian dualism) and empiricist (the objective property of things) bifurcation of philosophy. Based on Merleau-Ponty’s intellectualism–empiricism distinction, I have divided these ‘traditional’ analytical distinctions of rural into either *intellectualist or empiricist accounts of the rural*.

*Empiricist accounts of the rural* are characterised by the desire to achieve a ‘scientific’ understanding of rurality. These accounts capture both the descriptive approach (Halfacree, 1993; Rosenqvist, 2020) and sociocultural approach (Halfacree, 1993) to the rural. They are about denoting an area or region’s ruralness based on the objective measurement of specific perceived ‘natural’ phenomena such as land use, remoteness, population size and so on, as well as an area or region’s claims to rurality via particular social and cultural behaviours of its residents. The analytical distinction of the empirical rural also helps to encapsulate some of the political-economic approaches to rurality. Here, it is not so much about capturing or measuring the objectivity of natural or sociocultural phenomenon as rural but rather the ways in which the material conditions of capitalism and economic restructuring have empirical impact and influence on contemporary and historical definitions and understandings of the rural (Mormont, 1990; Shucksmith, 2012). It should be noted, however, that the incorporation of political-economic approaches into empiricist accounts of the rural is not to ignore the nuanced and varied application of its use within the rural literature, with some combining political-economic approaches with more relational ways of thinking about rurality (see e.g., Marsden et al., 1993; Wang et al., 2023; Woods, 2007; see also Relational Ruralism section for a more detailed account of relational approaches to the rural), which themselves are theoretically preceded by a scientific historical materialism (Heley & Jones, 2012). Rather, political-economic approaches have tended to overlook or underemphasise the subjective, lifeworld of individuals in the constitution of rurality in favour of more materialist explanations.

*Intellectualist accounts of the rural* are the epistemological ways of understanding rurality that have been informed by the poststructural approach and the wider cultural/linguistic turn in rural studies. This body of work (Cloke, 2006; Cloke & Little, 1997; Halfacree, 1993, 1995, 1997; Jones, 1995; Murdoch & Pratt, 1993, 1994, 1997; Philo, 1992, 1993) argues the rural is defined through the activity of an incorporeal mind. That is, rurality is the outcome of productive and/or performative sets of discourses, thoughts or judgements that facilitate an understanding of the constitution of the rural. In other words, unlike the empiricist account, intellectualist arguments of the rural are about the forms that rurality takes as opposed to the objective properties of specific phenomena perceived as rural. The application of intellectual accounts of

the rural has led to philosophers such as Deleuze (1995) and Serres (2001) being used to rethink rurality away from a topographical perspective, which sees rurality as geographically fixed and unchanging, to a 'geography of becoming' where the emphasis is on the performative constitution of rural place and space insofar as the rural is conceptually open to possibility and change (see, e.g., Massey, 2005).

There is a consensus among contemporary rural researchers that these *empiricist* and *intellectualist* accounts of defining rural are not satisfactory in helping to address the question what constitutes rurality. They agree that rurality cannot simply be wholly understood as either the consciousness of the being-in-itself or the physicality of objective things (see Rosenqvist, 2020). This recognition of the inadequacies of both *empiricist* and *intellectualist* accounts of the rural has led to the growth of more relational approaches to the rural as a way of overcoming this philosophical bifurcation. Relational approaches to the rural oppose the physical and the conscious dimension of the construction of rurality, instead seeing the physical and conscious dimensions of the rural as criss-crossing, mutually constituting the other and thereby creating new sets of relations and assemblages (and ergo, ruralities). It is a critical excavation of these approaches, which the article now turns to.

## Relational ruralism

Given the conceptual inadequacies that existing approaches—*empiricist* and *intellectualist*—had on understanding rural, Cloke (2006) called for an ontological and epistemological hybridisation of rural theory to help develop more analytical conceptions of rurality. This 'theoretical pluralism' (Castree & Braun, 2006, p. 162) encouraged the adoption of what was considered useful about existing approaches to rural (e.g., descriptive, political-economic and poststructural) and critically evaluated these in relation to the emergence of 'new' concepts and ideas as to better understand the constitution of rural space and place in its multidimensional complexity (see Heley & Jones, 2012). Heley and Jones (2012) maintained this shift towards more pluralistic approaches to the rural has committed rural researchers to philosophically recast the concept of rural to bring attention to the interconnections and relationalities between the material and conscious dimensions in the reproduction of rural space.

This turn to the thinking of rural space as relations—what is now considered as the 'relational turn' in rural studies (Heley & Jones, 2012, p. 209)—has unsettled the dominant rural spatial imaginaries presented within both the *empiricist* and *intellectualist* accounts of rurality. According to Michael Woods (2009), such relational thinking has provided rural social theorists with the opportunity for reflection and introspection in considering the constitution of rurality. Resultantly, many rural social theorists have embraced new conceptions of rurality and are now largely in agreement that the rural should no longer be seen as a physical, inert materiality nor a fully discursive set of practices, processes and imaginings but rather as a mode of spatiality that is brought into being via meeting points of material and conscious relations (Heley & Jones, 2012; Massey, 2005).

One way in which rural has been approached through the relationality of its material and conscious dimensions has been within Halfacree's (2006) theoretical reconsideration of rurality as a 'three-fold architecture'. 'Stressing' a need for rural social theory to overcome the intellectualist-empiricist dualism of rural definitions, he draws upon the work of Lefebvre (1974) to understand rurality as spatial trialectics. Here, Halfacree applies Lefebvre's three conceptions of space—representational space, spaces of representation and lived space—to identify a more complex

working model of rurality in which the quotidian lives and practices of rural residents entwine with the material and conscious facets of the rural, producing an interactional totality of the whole that is open to possibility and change based on the changing relations between rural people and objects. Such radical rethinking of the rural as relational can also be seen in Halfacree's (1993) earlier conceptualisation of rural as location and representation, which articulated a Giddensian (Giddens, 1984) 'duality of structure' approach to understanding rural as both the outcome and resource of the agential properties of individuals.

Relational approaches to the rural have also informed contemporary rural social theorists to advocate for a rematerialisation of rurality (see, e.g., Cloke, 2006; Heley & Jones, 2012; Gallant & Gkartzios, 2019; Rosenqvist, 2020; Shucksmith & Brown, 2006; Woods, 2009). This call for the rematerialising of rural is observed in the ways the 'political-economic' tradition has engaged with poststructuralism to help better conceptualise the local effects of the material conditions of globalised neoliberal capitalism on people living in rural areas (see, e.g., Cloke, 2006; Heley & Jones, 2012; Mormont, 1990; Pratt, 1996; Rosenqvist, 2020; Shucksmith & Brown, 2006). This is demonstrated through Heley and Jones' (2012) application of Katz's (1996) 'minor theory' to challenge the narrative that rurality is reconstituted via major globalised social changes and is instead rurality (the minor category in the relationship between rural and globalised neoliberal capitalism), which reconstitutes the major category (global neoliberal capitalism) from within. Regulation theory is another example of such entanglement between the 'political-economic' and poststructural approaches to the rural. Regulation theory argues to better understand how political economy re/articulates the material conditions of rurality, there also needs to be a simultaneous understanding of the cultural and social conditions that allow for the opening up of rural materialities (see Goodwin, 2005). Rural social theorists who have applied regulation theory have evidenced how the material conditions of rurality are underpinned by very specific, localised social and cultural norms around consumption and production (see, e.g., Banks & Marsden, 1997; Cloke & Goodwin, 1992; Heley et al., 2020; Marsden, 1992; Pemberton & Goodwin, 2010).

Another example of the ways in which 'political-economic' and poststructural approaches have been brought together to better understand rural as sets of relations is within Marsden et al.'s (1993) text, *Constructing the Countryside*. Marsden et al. denoted there is enmeshment between the global political economy that has an influence on, and changes the meaning(s) of, rurality over time and space and that of the behaviours of residents residing in local rural communities. Using the example of agribusiness, Marsden et al. demonstrate how the impact of globalised political economy is locally contingent and based on manifold place-based negotiations of globalised processes, facilitating multiple, differentiated countryside(s) that arose from locally specific responses to global change. Likewise, Woods' (2007) 'global countryside' concept is another example of relational thinking that bridges the 'political economic' and poststructural traditions to the rural. For Woods, the 'global countryside' are spaces where global capitalist relations—the mobility and fluidity of goods, people and services—shape and rearticulate, as well as be shaped and articulated by, very specific, local arrangements and entanglements involving both human and non-human actants. Here, the rural is neither a pure materialist condition nor sets of conscious practices and constructs. Rather, it is the outcome of broader historical and contemporary economic and political processes that shape and are shaped by specific rural place-based relations.

Further 'relational' rural research has sought to utilise Latour's (1993, 2005) actor-network theory (ANT) to demonstrate the ways in which rurality is produced through specific socio-spatial orderings of human and non-human actants (Heley & Jones, 2012). Murdoch's (2000) application of ANT has in particular been significant in helping to identify the constitution of rurality through human/non-human hybridities, including biological organisms and technologies (see

also, Heley & Jones, 2012). Such theorising around rural human/non-human relations has problematised the *intellectualist* and *empiricist* bifurcated accounts of the rural and has instead shown the ways in which both the material and conscious dimensions of rurality are not separate from each other but rather are rhizomically connected (Deleuze, 1995; Massey, 2005), creating new ontologies and epistemologies of the rural.

In the following section, I contextualise how relational approaches to the rural have been utilised in the literature on intersectionality to trace the multiple and overlapping ways in which identity categories (e.g., gender, race, social class, sexuality, disability and so on) intersect with concepts of rural space and place, facilitating specific power geometries of oppression (Valentine, 2007) for marginalised groups and communities.

## Intersectional research in rural studies

A large proportion of the rural scholarship around intersectionality seems to focus upon the connection(s) between gender, sexuality and rural space. In Hulko and Hovanes' (2018) research on young lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people living in small cities and rural towns, it was rural space as a descriptive category (see Cloke, 1977; Halfacree, 1993) that identified and became an identifying strategy of sexual and gendered difference and diversification. According to Hulko and Hovanes (2018), it was the relativity of the rural town or city's space that provided young people an overall sense of place and belonging (or lack thereof). Living in a city provided a positive socio-geographic context in which to develop their identities and build community, whereas the smaller nature of rural towns produced fear, a need to mask identity and a lack of community and belonging. Leap (2017) found that masculinity-based inequalities were informed by the intersections of gender, 'race', class and sexuality as well as rural and urban space. Leap's participants narratively recollected their journeys to and from cities as if they were the protagonist in adventure novels that involved escaping from racialised and sexualised minorities. Such groups and communities of individuals are often constructed as 'urban contaminants' that supposedly de-purify (Sibley, 2002) rural areas via processes of difference and diversification. Leap concludes that by retelling these narratives, participants effectively constructed the place-based identity of their rural communities as well as police the boundaries around what they considered to be an 'ideal, white, working-to-middle class, heterosexual masculinity that was supposedly particular to and characteristic of rural men' (Leap, 2017, p. 12). Abelson (2016) outlines a similar narrative when examining the everyday lives of trans-men living in rural areas. She highlights the acceptance of trans-men is contingent upon their performativity of rural working-class masculinities and whiteness. Thus, trans-men can only experience acceptance when they can stake other claims to rural identity. Where and when this is possible, their transgender identity is accepted or at least tolerated and absorbed into the wider rurality of the place, invisibilised as to make visible the cultural and social homogeneity of the area.

Another theme within the rural intersectionality literature is on 'race', young people and rurality. Terman (2020) examined how the role of young people's social identities influenced their connection to place. Their analysis highlights how young people's sense of place and belonging was dependent on their 'raced' and classed identification(s). Those young people who observed a strong sense of place, belonging and community often self-identified as white and middle-class, whereas those who experienced higher levels of lack of belonging and sense of place, and therefore were more likely to move away from the area or region for education, were from racially minoritised backgrounds. Yet, while this group, according to Terman, were middle class (and

thus mapped onto the power geometry of the local community), their racialised difference was a strong enough factor to foster feelings of needing to move away. This focus on the racialised and classed nature of young rural bodies is also central in the work of Cairns (2013). Cairns illustrates how young people constructed their sense of rurality through the racialised, place-narratives of Canada's idyllicised discourses of rural space that were enmeshed within the historicity of its colonial legacy. Even when young people located their sense of rurality through gendered performativity, they were demarcated as 'others'—known as 'dirts' by Cairns' participants—by their classed, rural status. It is through this demarcating of specific urban and/or global 'contaminating' discourses onto other bodies, young people were able to reify a specific configuration of rurality onto the community and maintain a version of a Canadian 'rural idyll' based on notions of purification (Sibley, 2002).

The final example of theme(s) covered in the rural literature on intersectionality, space and place is the relationship between disability, age and rurality. Kerrigan (2019) shows how the culturally symbolic power of the 'English rural idyll' encouraged individuals—especially older people—to move into rural areas and regions. However, as individuals age into disability, rural living becomes increasingly more difficult, with fewer and fewer social contacts to provide support and exclusion from the landscape with restrictions from specific rural services due to remoteness and wider spatial inequalities experienced in many English rural places. Kerrigan nuances this by arguing there are differences between individuals who have aged into a disability and moved into rural region(s) later in life and those born with a disability and have lived in rural areas for most of their lives. He suggests those who were born with a disability had greater attachment to place as they had adapted to the harsh able-bodied realities of rural living and were more likely to have established networks to support them. This is further complexified at the intersection between 'race', aging and disability. For older disabled migrants, Kerrigan found that they were not only excluded from having a limited social network and difficulty accessing services but experienced examples of everyday racism in their daily lives. The exclusionary nature of rurality is not restricted to older disabled people. Flynn (2024) in this special themed issue has emphasised the social construction of rurality and issues and concerns with accessibility to provide rural disabled children with both experiences of idyllic living (e.g., benefitting from the clean, healthy and convivial nature of rural life) and challenges to rural life (e.g., discrimination, lack of accessibility to specific medical services). Flynn maintains the wider intersectional construction of rurality makes such challenges more pronounced, with many rural disabled children coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, having mental health conditions and experiencing poverty. All of these bring attention to the often-overlooked claim that social class plays a major role in the lives of rural disabled children over other identity markers such as 'race' and gender (see Flynn, 2024).

What this brief contextualisation of the intersectional research conducted within rural studies has demonstrated is despite an engagement with relational approaches to rurality, which do indeed de-purified the rural from its empiricist account while also challenging the social representationalism of the rural expressed by intellectualist approaches, they reinforce the same old philosophical issue inherent within the 'relational turn' in rural theory. The rural is still being thought through the 'mind-body problem' (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008, p. 136) where the physical and conscious dimensions of its constitution are understood as analytically separate, but which are ontologically criss-cross, creating meeting points of intertwinements—much like the connective lines within the symbol of 'X'—resulting in new experiences, assemblages and configurations of the rural at the point of connection and entanglement. This raises a fundamental epistemic-ontological observation of rurality in intersectional thinking. For rurality to be understood intersectionally, there needs to be, one, a way of conceptualising rurality that overcomes

the ‘mind-body’ problem of previous theorising done within rural studies theory, and two, there needs to be a better foregrounding of the rural as to understand the rural as always already ‘written’ by the multiple positionalities in which bodies live. For the remainder of this article, I make a theoretical case—drawing upon the work of French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1964)—for how understanding rurality as embodied perception would help to rethink the rural beyond the ‘mind-body problem’ articulated intentionally or otherwise by previous theorisations and to situate rurality more fully into intersectional thinking in rural studies.

## RURAL BEING: MERLEAU-PONTY AND EMBODIED PERCEPTION

Critiquing what he saw as the intellectualist (e.g., the primacy of the consciousness of the being-in-itself) and empiricist (the crude objectivity of things-in-themselves) dualism of philosophy to explain existence in the world, Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 132) developed a social ontology that sought to offer an understanding of being that was ‘all at once, pell-mell, both “subject” and “object”’. In other words, Merleau-Ponty’s (see 1945, 1964) solution to this overcoming of the bifurcation between intellectualism–empiricism was to provide an existential analysis of lives as situated beings in a phenomenal world. At the centre of this enquiry was the importance of embodied subjective experience and the intentionality of perception, which are in and of the world. As situated beings, subjects are open to experiencing the world in which they live through embodiment, and it is through the purposeful action of intentionality of the body that, in turn, discloses a world that inhabits them. Thus, producing an inherent reversibility that describes the immediate mutual relations between experiences of subjects as situated beings and the wider world that is perceived as pregnant with the other. That is to say, the conscious and material dimensions (subject–object relations) of being are reversible with the other and are directly experienced at the level of the body. The best example to demonstrate this impregnant reversibility is the paradigmatic phenomena of *double touch* as exhibited in Merleau-Ponty’s (1945, p. 107) text *PP*. Double touch refers to the touching of one hand with the other hand. This example reveals the impregnation of the subjective and objective dimensions of being. Being is both a form of embodied experience and something that can be orientated in space. It is both subjective and objective at the same time. Not two dimensions whose connective lines of flight (Deleuze, 1995) meet to constitute entanglements of being (Ingold, 2008, 2011).

This impregnant reversibility present within Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological project provides the possibility to retheorise rurality as an expression and extension of bodies. Rural, under this context, becomes an intrinsically intersectional category insofar as rurality is always already ‘written’ into how bodies live (e.g., through raced, gendered, classed, heteronormative and other modes of being), and it is through the ‘lived’ body that the rural is directly experienced as an objective materiality that has certain in/exclusionary effects onto bodies themselves. Such reconceptualisation situates and develops an understanding of rural that is perhaps far closer to contemporary rural social theorists working with *more-than-representational* philosophies (see Carolyn, 2008; Halfacree, 2014; Phillips, 2014; Rosenqvist, 2020). However, while there is synergy between more-than-representational approaches to the rural and that of phenomenological embodiment, there are ontological and epistemological nuances. A complete discussion of these nuances extends beyond the scope of what is possible to achieve within the contours of this article. Nevertheless, a phenomenological embodiment approach to the rural allows us to see rurality as an impregnated subject–object relation in which rural materialities are extensions of the pre-reflexive embodied perception of the body. More-than-representational theories of rurality, on the

other hand, tend to emphasise the performative, agential entanglements between humans and non-human actants that come together to constitute different configurations and assemblages of rural space and place. A Merleau-Pontian (1945) phenomenological embodiment approach, thus, provides a more sophisticated way of seeing rural subjects and objects as a single fundamental phenomenon: an impregnated reversibility of materiality and consciousness as expressed by bodies in how they live and thus produces a truly intersectional conception of the rural that also overcomes the ‘mind-body problem’ inherent in previous ways of understanding rurality. In the subsequent subsections to follow, I will unpack the conceptual mechanisms behind how to locate rurality as an intersectional category through Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological framework of embodiment.

## Being-towards- and being-away-from-the-rural

Merleau-Ponty (1945) asserts individuals cannot understand themselves as subjects apart from their bodies. And when individuals think about their bodies, it is not the body as an inert object (*Körper*) but rather it is a ‘lived body’, a *Leib*: ‘I can only understand the function of the living body by accomplishing it and to the extent that I am a body that raises up towards the world’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 78). In other words, the body is lived as a ‘here and now’. It is not a thing that exists in space but rather is a habitual, bodily orientation to space. There would be no such thing as space without the body, and we must think of space from the body as opposed to the body from space. In the context of rural studies, the conception of the rural as something that is lived is clearly demonstrated in Halfacree’s (2006) third dimension of his ‘three-fold architecture’ (see also, Lefebvre, 1974). It is also evidently articulated in Ingold’s (2008, 2011) account of life as lived zones of entanglements, which later influenced Halfacree (2014) to rethink rural as entanglements of lived subjective experiences and the object-ness of things.

The Merleau-Pontian (1945) conception of the ‘lived body’, however, sees the ways in which rurality is experienced differently. Rather than seeing the ‘lived’ as one dimension in the overall constitution of rural or seeing the ‘lived’ as a connective line that becomes enmeshed with a simultaneous connecting line of materiality, it instead sees rural as an existential category of *being* that stems from the process of inhabiting space and the ways in which bodies live within that space. According to Heidegger (1927), existence is the central mode of *being-in-the-world* and that this *being-in-the-world* is distinguished through two ways of approaching the world: the *present-at-hand* (the world as made up of physical objects) and the *ready-to-hand* (the practical relations of things; their usefulness or handiness). The totality of being brought about by *present-at/ready-to-hand* produces a way of seeing that is deemed circumspection. Circumspection means to look at the milieu in which objects operate (Barry, 2023). In this sense, the ‘lived’ bodily encounter with rural is constituted by the arrangement of objects with other objects within the immediate locality and the usefulness or readiness such arrangement of objects prescribes. For example, the notion of the ‘rural idyll’ is contingent on the present-at-hand of the natural landscape that appears next to quaint and often vernacular built environments and how this is set aside from more built-up and heterogeneous landscapes and environments of cities. This engenders a context where subjects can engage with the useful handiness of the objects (ready-to-hand) within the immediate rural environment that allows them to experience rurality meaningfully rather than as an unarticulated collection of materials and substances extended in space. The rural is thus the outcome of the readily identifiable relationship between the present-at-hand of objects and subjects’ a priori knowledge of the contextual structure within which they appear ready-to-hand.

Heidegger's (1927) distinction between the present-at/ready-to-hand nature of being influenced Merleau-Ponty (1945) to maintain that there is a *gearedness* towards the world—or, what he refers to as *being-towards-the-world*. Drawing heavily upon this concept, I argue that rurality is experienced directly through the *motor intentionality* of the body itself—what I have called *being-towards-the-rural*. The concept of *being-towards-the-rural* chimes with the ‘more-than-representational sensitivities’ of rural social theorists such as Carolan (2008), Halfacree (2014) and Rosenqvist (2020) who call for an understanding of rural as a series of quotidian routines, intersubjectivities, performativities and affective intensities, which give rise to rural as networks of entanglements of different materialities and subjectivities (see Ingold, 2008, 2011). However, as I will outline below, *being-towards-the-rural* is not a performative or affective phenomenon per se; rather, it arises through bodily habits and pre-reflexive orientations that lay ready to give form to the rural. In other words, the main difference to previous theorising done on rural as ‘lived’ is that through phenomenological embodiment rurality is a state of being that is geared towards ruralness—a *being-towards-the-rural*—which does not know the rural as a totality through which can be seen or looked at but rather a being that incarnates rurality by engaging with the possibilities that the surroundings present it with.

Merleau-Ponty (1945, p. 140) defines motor intentionality as ‘[T]he gesture of reaching one’s hand out toward an object contains a reference to the object, not as a representation, but as this highly determinate thing toward which we are thrown, next to which we are through anticipation, and which we haunt’. The motor intentionality of the body is driven by pre-reflexive skills that are directed towards objects through bodily schematic orientation and habituation: ‘we must understand motricity unequivocally as originally intentionality. Consciousness is not an “I think that”, but rather an “I can”’. The ability to orientate oneself towards space, therefore, for Merleau-Ponty, is about the individual subject’s ability to grasp and handle objects in a way that the act of grasping and handling becomes familiar and absorbed into the body. This is shown most illustratively in Merleau-Ponty’s (1945) example of the blind person and his cane. He explains that the constancy of the cane in providing the blind person’s ability to way-find through the world leads to habituations over time where the cane figuratively gets absorbed into the blind person’s body and thus produces sophisticated forms of knowing the world (e.g., where to go and where to avoid).

Those individuals who possess a *being-towards-the-rural*, therefore, do so because their pre-reflexive bodily habituation gives a ‘grasping intention without being given an epistemic one’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 106). Individuals, therefore, orientated as *being-towards-the-rural* can directly grasp and experience, kinesthetically and somesthesically, the underlying being of the rural without having to point to them. For instance, the embodiment of structural whiteness by some individuals living in rural areas and regions can be solicited by the wider rural environment via histories of motricities that have rendered the rural—at least within its European denotation—as white, colonised places (Fowler, 2021). This relationship between motor intentionality and rural objects opens up solicitations of what rurality means and the body ‘responds to such solicitations’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 140), allowing for an understanding of *being-towards-the-rural*. It is obvious to see how, under this pretext, those who embody a *being-towards-the-rural* experience structural intersectional privilege. After all, it is through their motricities of identification(s) situated at the top of the axes of privilege that produce an experience that is geared towards rurality and that is directed back towards them by the rural environment. However, what about those individuals who do not inhabit a *being-towards-the-rural*? How can they know they do not inhabit something that they do not embody and thus do not solicitate as well as have solicited back towards them? My argument here is that rural being is not only present within the bodies who inhabit a *being-towards-the-rural*, but it is also present within the body schemata of individuals

whose bodies are misaligned with such rural being. Individuals who embody a more urbanised being of difference and diversification (e.g., such as racialised, gendered, classed, able-bodied differences) may experience intersectional disadvantage because their embodied actions in the rural make present the body's pre-reflexive-oriented differences within a space that is brought into being through the *ready-at-handness* of their absence. Thus, those individuals who inhabit—what I call a *being-away-from-the-rural* (or more accurately described through the synonym of a *being-towards-the-urban*) are structurally excluded through the embodiment of rural being that are absent from their surroundings, which make their intersectional identification(s) present within the rural. This draws out an important phenomenological insight based on Heidegger's (1927) concept of the *ready-to-hand*, which the Merleau-Pontian (1945) notion of motor intentionality evidences. As individuals focus on the foreground of their bodily motricity; that is, to say, their quotidian routines of daily life and rural living, what gets receded into the background is the reproduction of structural privilege or disadvantage based on the ways in which their bodies (e.g., 'raced', gendered classed, able-bodied and sexual identifications) live. This appresentation—perceptual presencing and absencing—of the body's motor intentionality has a profound impact on the ways in which the rural is experienced. The foregrounding of intercorporealities of bodies moving through and meaningfully making sense and use of rural means that the reproduction of rural as either a *being-towards-* (structural privilege) or a *being-away-from-the-rural* (structural disadvantage), recedes into the background creating new relations and intensities of the identities of bodies involved.

## Rural gestalt and the impregnated reversibility of rural space

Underlying the bodily orientation to space there is an 'external' or 'objective' space. In *PP*, Merleau-Ponty (1945, p. 334) explains that individuals can have empirical knowledge of 'real' objects, which goes beyond their subjective appearance. However, because the 'real' features (i.e., to say, their *present-at-handness*) of the object are structured by the *ready-to-hand* nature of being 'the thing [object] can never be separated from someone who perceives it; nor can it ever actually be in itself because its articulations are the very ones of our existence'. The primordiality of the *being-towards* connects body and world, presenting an argument for an impregnated reversibility—what Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 130) would later call in his text, *Visible and Invisible*, a chiasm—of the lived experience wherein the individual is in and of the physical world, developing in relation to it and whereby both the individual and the physical world is neither a material thing nor pure consciousness. Instead, because 'the living body primordially and irrevocably [is] stitched into the fabric of the world, our perception of the world is no more, and no less, than the world's perception of itself—in and through us' (Ingold, 2011, p. 12).

Experiences of the rural, as sets of intersectional privilege or disadvantage, therefore result from its impregnated reversibility. Much like the example of *double touch* presented earlier, the rural is a subjective embodied experience that gears the individuals *towards-* or *away-from-the-rural* and is something that is also oriented in space that is geared back *towards-* or *away-from* the individual. For instance, if you have two individuals (one who may embody rural characteristics such as structural whiteness, able-bodied and heteronormativity, and another who embodies more urban characteristics of racial, gendered, sexual and able-bodied difference) who experience the same rural visual field, they will have two distinct embodied experiences. The first person would be directed *towards-the-rural*, while the second person would be directed *away-from-the-rural*. This occurs because the materiality of the rural affords bodies to experience and act or not in specific

ways. Gibson's (2014) affordance theory maintains that when an individual encounters an object within the environmental visual field, the object either affords a facilitation of or hinderance to an individual's ability to act and experience the world. In this instance, individuals who experience the rural as either a *being-towards-* or a *being-away-from-* do so because the physical environment of the rural corresponds with their bodily identifications or not, reflecting a rurality that is or is not an extension and expression of their bodies.

To perceive rural, therefore, is to perceive it through the possibilisation of bodily orientations and habituations. Individuals cannot distinguish between bodily space and material space. The body works as a complete unit in which '[t]he sensory properties of a thing together constitute a single thing, just as my gaze, my touch, and all my other senses are, together, the powers of a single body integrated into a single action' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 331). The perceptual goal of bodily motricities is never to simply receive empirical information about the world but to open up to possibilities of being-in-the-world. Therefore, individuals will always experience the rural through their embodied perception, and such embodied perception will always gear the body either *towards-* or *away-from-the-rural* based on its 'raced', gendered, classed, heteronormative and able-bodied nature, which, in turn, directs rurality as a specific 'raced', gendered, classed, heteronormative and able-bodied being back towards the body.

Rurality is thus a series of complex perceptual patterns that can only ever be grasped in its entirety as an integral whole—a gestalt—between body and space rather than as representational discourses (e.g., intellectualist approaches) or the crude object-ness of things-in-themselves (e.g., empiricist approaches). Seeing rurality through a lens of gestaltism has been explored in the rural studies literature. This literature has focused on psychological attachment to rural landscapes (e.g. Roe & Aspinall, 2011), the ways in which people use particular rural landscapes and environments (see e.g., Gillings, 2012; Rantala, 2010) and examinations of the value of specific technologies to rural development and agricultural work (see e.g., Frossard et al., 2010; Glover, 2022). This article builds upon this literature by demonstrating how rural as gestalt can be used to understand the ways in which the presupposed racialised, able-bodied, heteronormative and classed characteristics of rurality are the result of acquired embodied gestalts by bodies that are themselves always already 'raced', gendered, able-bodied, classed and so on. Consequently, rurality is seen as the outcome of shared pre-reflective identifications that presents itself as racist, heteronormative, classist, ageist, colonial and ableist space because of how the rural is experienced via the apprehension of the always already 'raced', gendered, able-bodied and classed nature of bodily senses, which make rurality objectively determinate with such gestalts and render specific bodies either privileged or disadvantaged based on their embodiment of such gestalts.

To fully understand the influence and impact of perception on a person's experience based on their embodiment of specific spatialised (rural) gestalts, there must be a certain underlying mechanism(s) that alters the experience of certain phenomena for individuals. Drawing on the Husserlian (Husserl, 1891) concept—horizontality—Merleau-Ponty (1945) maintains that an individual subject experiences a given phenomenon based on the ways 'horizons' shape their perception and embodiment of it. Using the example of a bell tower, he (1945, p. 50) writes 'the bell tower appears to me smaller or farther away the moment that I can see more clearly the details of the hills and the fields that separate me from it'. In other words, the perception of a given object is predicated upon the details the individual can make of it, and it is within these details that the body and object are re/produced as expressions of the other. Under this pretext, Merleau-Ponty's reformulation of 'horizons' can be reformulated further as specific cultural and social structures, as well as the social locatedness and its various intersections of the individual, which can alter how some experience different spatialised contexts. For instance, the rural becomes rural by the embodiment of

particular spatial arrangements of the natural and built environment alongside the cultural and social meaning-making that shapes how the individual perceives the space. This bodily process of perception allows for an experiencing of a manifold of possible inclusionary or exclusionary rural worlds based on the individual's embodiment of the wider context of rurality experienced.

By way of example, the rural studies literature (e.g., Cairns, 2013; Cartwright, 2021; Cella, 2017; Gahman, 2017; Kerrigan, 2019) demonstrates how structurally white and able-bodied gestalts of rurality can be understood as horizontalities that determine an individual's experience of the space as either privilege or disadvantage. Thus, where you have two individuals (one who embodies rural gestalts, that of structural whiteness and able-bodied, and another who may embody more urbanised gestalts of difference and diversity) within the same rural environment, they will not both experience the same determinable systematic dis/comfortableness (Ahmed, 2007). To be comfortable, according to Ahmed (2007, p. 158, parenthesis added) is to 'be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world (rural) begins. One fits, and by fitting the surfaces of bodies disappears from view'. Discomfort, on the other hand, is those situations where the body is brought into full view and made visible through its oppressed position in the power structures of the places they inhabit in everyday life (Rodó-de-Zárate, 2023).

Each individual's perception of the rural area as either a site of comfort or discomfort would be contingent upon the gestalts they embody and that which the space reflects back onto the body. Experiences related to individual X or Y (who perceives the rural as either a site of systematic comfort or discomfort) must be accompanied by at least one gestalt characteristic that is both embodied in their subjectivity and governed through their engagement in space as either rural (and thus produce systematic comforts and a *being-towards-*) or more urbanised gestalts (and thus result in experiences of systematic discomfort and a *being-away-from-*). Of course, an individual may embody specific intersectional configurations of identity that embody both rural and urban gestalts simultaneously (e.g., they may occupy a location of whiteness but also be disabled). This would produce dis/comforts that are more circumstantial than systematic in their experiences of the rural. Circumstantial discomforts are the body's momentary encounters with feelings of discomfortableness. For example, a disabled white individual may experience discomfortableness through the able-bodied nature of the rural landscape, but this feeling of discomfort is largely fleeting and premised on a specific spatio-bodied configuration to a certain rural space. Their whiteness still functions as a form of comfortableness because it allows their body to orientate towards a specific configuration of rurality in which their whiteness is already embedded.

## CONCLUSION: RURAL BEING OR INTERSECTIONALITY REVISED

In this article, I have deployed the work of French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1964) to demonstrate how the rural—as an intersectional category/concept—can be better foregrounded by seeing it as embodied perception in which it is always already 'written' into the various positionalities in which bodies live. This is somewhat different to how the rural has been used in intersectional thinking within the wider rural studies literature (Cairns, 2013; Horowitz, 2017; Reid-Musson, 2018; Terman, 2020), which sees rurality as networked, relational assemblages between a manifold of possible subjectivities and materialities. Such an approach reproduces the tendency within intersectional thinking to presume identity markers as 'separate analytics' (Cho et al., 2013; Puar, 2018; Rao, 2023), which can be disassembled and reassembled again in an 'additive' way. However, as mentioned earlier in the article, this is a misreading/interpretation of Kimberle Crenshaw's (1989) initial deployment of the term.

Utilising Merleau-Ponty's (1945) concept of embodied perception, as a theoretical intervention, allows me to present a case for situating rural into the intersection more in a manner that conceives of the 'roads' of rural space and the various identity markers of the body as being always already within one another, providing a closer application of Crenshaw's original intentionality. Under the philosophical premises of Merleau-Ponty, the relationship between rural and the identity markers (e.g., 'race', gender, class, sexuality, able-bodiedness and so on) of the body needs to be understood as an existential account of being. Within this context, individual subjects experience a specific 'raced', gendered, classed, sexually orientated, able-bodied orientation of space because the body is always already 'raced', gendered, classed, sexually orientated and able-bodied. Specific configurations of space—rural or otherwise—are, therefore, already always situated within the body, and it is through the body that the individual comes to know themselves as a systematic or circumstantially in/excluded subject. It is these oft-repeated patterns of the body that produces itself as a *being-towards-the-rural* (and thus experiences systematic or circumstantial inclusions) or a *being-away-from-the-rural* (and thus experiences systematic or circumstantial exclusions).

Through the theoretical lens of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1945) embodied perception, the article presented a novel and radical new ontological articulation of the incorporation of rurality into the rural sociological and geographical literature on intersectionality. The article detailed the ways in which rural is experienced as bodily habituations and orientations. In doing so, it has opened up possibilities of situating *the spatial* into intersectional thinking beyond the existing scope of current trends in relational theorising. Accounts of rurality as embodied perception within intersectional thinking reveal ways of 'doing intersectionality' work that brings intersectionality closer to the approach of which Crenshaw (1989) had initially conceived.

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