Cutting a Thousand Sticks of Tobacco Makes a Boy a Man: Traditionalized Performances of Masculinity in Occupational Contexts

Ann K. Ferrell, Western Kentucky University
In Unsettling Assumptions, editors Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye examine how tradition and gender come together to unsettle assumptions about culture and its study.

Contributors explore the intersections of traditional expressive culture and sex/gender systems to question, investigate, or upset concepts like family, ethics, and authenticity. Individual essays consider myriad topics such as Thanksgiving turkeys, rockabilly and bar fights, Chinese tales of female ghosts, selkie stories, a noisy Mennonite New Year’s celebration, the Distaff Gospels, Kentucky tobacco farmers, international adoptions, and more.

In Unsettling Assumptions, folkloric forms express but also counteract negative aspects of culture like misogyny, homophobia, and racism. But expressive culture also emerges as fundamental to our sense of belonging to a family, an occupation, or friendship group and, most notably, to identity performativity and the construction and negotiation of power.

Folkloristics

“This broad-ranging collection makes a significant and welcome contribution to the study and teaching of folklore; it also has an interdisciplinary reach into masculinity studies, queer theory, transgender studies, and cultural studies; and it succeeds in troubling certain assumptions in the discipline of folklore/ethnology as well as in gender studies and cultural studies.”

—Cristina Bacchilega,
University of Hawai’i

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In November 2000, at the second annual Kentucky Women in Agriculture conference in Louisville, I had a brief conversation with an attendee whose husband raised tobacco. She told me their future seemed increasingly uncertain; their growing quotas were being cut, and her husband now worked a full-time job off the farm while continuing to raise a small amount of tobacco. For him, she told me, it was not just a crop or a source of income; it was a way of life, and she was afraid of what it would mean to him if a time came when he could no longer grow tobacco. Although conversations about tobacco farming—both its culture and its politics—were relatively common in Kentucky at the time, and although I never saw this woman again, this particular discussion became the seed that grew into my research about Kentucky tobacco.

Her story held power for me as a gendered narrative, central to the decline of tobacco production, that was relatively absent from public discourses. Raising tobacco, a multigenerational tradition for this woman’s husband, was worth fighting to hold onto. Working off the farm in part supported his ability to continue raising tobacco and to maintain the family farm that had passed to him from his father, suggesting symbolic as well as economic reasons for raising tobacco. Meanwhile, his wife and the other women attending this conference were exploring new farming opportunities through the exchange of information about agricultural diversification and sustainability, not exclusive to but in a context of the decline of tobacco production. This chapter examines the performance of tobacco work as commensurate with
the performance of a particular locally valued masculine identity, providing a gendered case study of an occupational context in the midst of change.

My ethnographic fieldwork with Kentucky burley tobacco growers began in 2005, with intensive fieldwork during the 2007 crop year (January 2007 through February 2008). I began this work after observing that tobacco was increasingly understood as on its way out due to changing societal acceptance of its products, rising overseas production, and the legislated end to the federal tobacco program—a system in which, since the 1930s, growers agreed to production allotments in return for minimum poundage prices. I quickly learned that while those who continue to raise this crop do not all agree that it is on its way out, many of their discussions are structured around change, serving to continually compare the past and present. The end of the federal program has been widely heralded as the most dramatic change; many growers stopped growing tobacco when the program ended, and those who continue now contract directly with tobacco companies with no guaranteed market. They also face changing farm technologies and labor circumstances as well as a stigmatization of not just the crop but also those who grow it. One of the questions that they frequently hear (and I heard during and after my fieldwork) is “Why don’t you just grow something else?” Gender is central to the complex and layered answers to this question. Tobacco work is certainly not unique in this regard; the relationships between gender, occupational identity, and economic crises—local and global—demand further investigation.

For instance, while the gendered stories of the current period of transition in tobacco regions remain largely absent from media reports, gender is central to other recent public discourses about economic change. The “Great Recession” that began in 2008 was initially described by policy makers, pundits, and media outlets as gendered. The term mancession, coined by a professor of economics and visiting scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute (see Perry 2010), spread like wildfire through analyses of the downturn and its repercussions. The mancession, according to many media accounts, resulted in a “gender role reversal” (D. Harris 2010). Stories in both national and local news provided example after example of stay-at-home dads and working moms. Characterized as the most recent battle in the war of the sexes (Baxter 2009), the mancession, proponents argued, made women the “victors.” Major mainstream publications proclaimed, “Women will rule the world” (Bennett and Ellison 2010) because America had reached the “end of men” (Rosin 2010).

Men’s overrepresentation in fields hit particularly hard by the recession, such as construction and manufacturing, is generally understood to have
resulted in a larger number of job losses for men than for women at the start of the recession.\footnote{4} Women, who have tended to be employed in the education and service sectors, initially saw fewer job losses. However, despite predictions that “women are taking control of everything” (Rosin 2010), the economic picture began to change in 2009. A report released in May 2010 found that “as job losses slowed in the final months of 2009, women continued to lose jobs as men found employment” (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee 2010, 3). Other economic reports demonstrated not only that initial gendered trends changed course but also that throughout the recession, women of color and young women and single women of all races were among those with the highest rates of unemployment. Yet, man-cession pronouncements continued (see McKelway 2010). As one commentary, reporting that March 2011 Bureau of Labor statistics “showed that of the 1.3 million jobs created in the preceding 12 months, some 90 percent went to men,” asked, “By now the burning question is what explains the media’s fixation on the idea that men’s job-loss woes exceed those of women?” (Rivers and Barnett 2011, 1).

Access to jobs—like access to education, according to a long-standing discourse that girls and women are taking over schools—is presented as a zero-sum game; men suffer when women make gains. “Women are taking control—of everything” (Rosin 2010). Such “crisis” rhetorics provide provocative headlines but are problematically based on cultural conceptions of gender as a neat and tidy binary. It is precisely because economists across the political spectrum identify gender as a central factor in employment (even when they differ in their final analyses of who “loses” or “wins”) that occupational traditions offer a crucial context for deconstructing gender as a binary.

In this chapter, I argue that feminist folkloristics has a place in dismantling these discourses, and folklore offers both theory and method applicable to a study of gender that moves beyond the provocative to a more complex and nuanced understanding of its multiple performance contexts. Ethnographic research offers opportunities for looking closely at gendered ideals as they are deployed in specific communities and in particular circumstances. Folklorists have much to offer to this task but also much more work to do. Occupational folklore scholarship has tended to focus almost entirely on men, with little attention to their construction as gendered subjects. Such studies have also privileged the creative over the economic, often “demonstrat[ing] the existence of the aesthetic impulse in the workplace” (M. O. Jones 1984, 176), as though the impulse to create art can be distinguished from the very real need to make a living. In contrast, I argue
that there are connections between the expressive and the instrumental, and between economic need and aesthetic impulse, and that these connections are gendered. I suggest an understanding of multiple masculinities as traditionalized performances of gender.

**MULTIPLE MASCULINITIES**

In recent years, feminist research and action has extended from a near-exclusive attention on women to work on men. Such moves, however, have been tempered with caution. In the introduction to the second edition of the classic work *Masculinities*, R. W. Connell describes a reluctance to write the original book “because there was already a genre of ‘books about men’ that had become hugely popular. This was a mixture of pop psychology, amateur history and ill-tempered mythmaking, and I hated it. Backward-looking, self-centered stereotypes of masculinity were the last thing we needed” (2005, xii). Women writing about men risk, as Judith Newton and Judith Stacey put it, “recentering the very male authority we seek to challenge and revise” (1995, 297). However, as anthropologist Ruth Behar argues, “Feminist revision is always about a new way of looking at all categories, not just at ‘woman’” (1995, 6). Newton and Stacey ask “whether a postmodern feminism can afford, any more than modernist feminism, to be a project for women only” (1995, 289). Rather than focus exclusively on women, feminist research has increasingly extended to the study of gender more widely conceived. Further, according to gender theorist Judith Butler, “In this effort to combat the invisibility of women as a category feminists run the risk of rendering visible a category which may or may not be representative of the concrete lives of women. As feminists, we have been less eager, I think, to consider the status of the category itself and, indeed, to discern the conditions of oppression which issue from an unexamined reproduction of gender identities which sustain discrete and binary categories of man and woman” (1988, 523). Like Butler, I question naturalized gender categories as a binary opposition. The argument that centering one gender results in the decentering of the other gender only serves to reinforce the dominant binary view of sex/gender systems.

Scholars who argue that there is no homogenous “masculinity”—rather, there are *masculinities*—challenge binary gendered constructions: “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” (Brandth and Haugen 2005, 15). In *Men’s Lives*, editors
Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner and their contributors demonstrate how masculine ideals differ dramatically, for example, across race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, and age (2012). Connell maintains that beyond recognizing multiple masculinities, “we must also recognize the relations between different kinds of masculinities: relations of alliance, dominance, and subordination” (2005, 37). Particular forms of masculinity become “culturally exalted” over others and thus hegemonic: “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” (77). Connell is particularly interested in the instability of hegemonic masculinities in changing circumstances, both within and seemingly outside of gender relations.

Using the work of Connell and others, Nicole Power has examined the crisis plaguing fishermen of Newfoundland in recent decades as a crisis of masculinity. Her reading of the discourses surrounding the restructuring of the fisheries also suggests a critique of the zero-sum game model in which men are assumed to be suffering if women make gains. She argues that “men’s economic position has declined due to restructuring, rather than competition from women” (2005, 19). Power also distinguishes between fishermen and working-class men studied by others, between fishermen with different-sized operations, and between fishermen and men who work in local fish factories. Distinct masculine ideals apply to each category. The differing circumstances faced by men in Newfoundland and by Kentucky burley tobacco farmers points to the imperative to recognize multiple masculinities based on occupation as well as history and region.

Folklore scholarship on men and masculinity has too often echoed the media discourses cited above, implicitly arguing that men are losing and therefore women must be winning. For instance, Simon Bronner argues, “For all the reminders that men are different from women in ways other than anatomy, the distinctive cultural traditions that contribute to a conveyable sense of masculinity still need definition, especially in an era when manliness, if given consideration, is often criticized and suppressed” (2005, xii). Such an approach not only reinforces gender as a binary opposition, it simplifies the experiences of men by suggesting that all masculinities are the same. Yet, a central concept of folkloristics—tradition—offers an alternative frame for examining masculinities when combined with Butler’s concept of gender as performance. In order to understand the gendered transitions taking place in Kentucky tobacco communities and beyond, I propose a new approach. In the remainder of this chapter I offer an understanding of gender as traditionalized performance, and I then apply this approach to fieldwork data. In large part because of tobacco’s economic importance in
the regions in which it has historically been grown, particular masculinities tied to its production once “occupie[d] the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations,” to borrow from Connell (2005, 76). A speech given to the Burley Auction Warehouse Association in 1990 by John M. Berry Jr. (former Kentucky state legislator and brother of poet and essayist Wendell Berry) reflected on what it meant to him to come from a family of five generations of tobacco farmers. He notes that when he was growing up, “people distinguished themselves and gained stature in the community, based on how many sticks they could cut or strip in a day, or how neatly they could tie a hand [of tobacco], or if their crops consistently topped the market” (Burley Tobacco Growers Co-operative Association 1991, 129–130). As the economic and therefore political importance of tobacco has waned, so too has the hegemonic position of tobacco-based masculinities.

**GENDER AS TRADITIONALIZED PERFORMANCE**

In the 1970s and 1980s, folklorists updated our understanding of tradition. Dell Hymes asserted that tradition should be understood as rooted not in time but in social life, as process: “to traditionalize” (1975b, 353). His challenge to the notion of tradition as the way things always were is echoed in the work of Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, who argued against the assumption, in both scholarly and commonsense definitions, that tradition is bounded and natural. Practices and ideologies alike are performed in “an ongoing reconstruction of tradition . . . which is not natural but symbolically constituted” (1984, 276). These scholars’ concepts of tradition share affinity with Judith Butler’s gender theory; each argues constitution through doing. Butler describes the embodied performance of gender as a “style of being” and goes on to say that “this style is never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities” (1988, 521). She understands gender as constituted in performative acts rather than simply existing in intrinsic and stable identities. According to Butler, “In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (1999, 33).

Linking and developing these ideas, I understand gender as *traditionalized performance*. In doing so, I depart from the usage of “performance” as folklorists have defined it since the 1970s, as framed moments in which something identified as “folklore” can be observed, documented, and interpreted in an appropriate context, and which is most valued for its aesthetic qualities. Thus, most folklorists have used *performance* to mean “not merely behavior” (Hymes 1975a, 13) but “a unifying thread tying together the
marked, segregated esthetic genres and other spheres of verbal behavior” (Bauman 1975, 291). While folklorists note particular moments when an individual might “breakthrough into performance” (Hymes 1975a), performance in Butler’s sense and as I use it here is ongoing and inevitable. She sees it as comprising behaviors that can be understood as series of discontinuous acts that appear continuous and therefore “natural,” but also as “the stylization of the body and, hence, . . . the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (1988, 519). Understanding gendered performances as traditionalized helps to illuminate the active process involved in enactments of gender based on what Handler and Linnekin call “model[s] of the past” (1984, 276). While tradition, as Hymes argued, need not be rooted in time, in both lay and scholarly usage the idea carries an authority based on a linkage of the present with the past. Tradition is therefore particularly useful for understanding gendered performances in periods of transition, as people grapple with change.

TOBACCO PRODUCTION AS TRADITIONALIZED MASCULINE PERFORMANCE

Burley tobacco, a type that is blended into cigarettes, has historically been raised primarily in Kentucky and parts of Tennessee, and Kentucky remains the largest burley-producing state. Although I have not conducted the comparative fieldwork to be sure, my work with burley growers (who are clear that they raise burley tobacco) suggests the possibility of different masculinities in different tobacco regions. This assertion is in part based in the specialized knowledge necessary for raising different types of tobacco as well as the degrees of mechanization of the production process. For instance, flue-cured tobacco production (dominant in North Carolina, which leads the nation in total production) has largely been mechanized. In contrast, a burley tobacco masculinity continues to rest in part on physical labor that has not—cannot, according to many growers—be mechanized.

Tobacco is culturally understood in Kentucky as a men’s crop. Caroline Sachs (1983) notes that the designation of particular crops as “men’s” or “women’s” recurs across agricultural systems; women are more likely to have responsibility for subsistence crops and men for cash crops. Such designations are “associated with the gender that controls the management and disposition of the crop” (6) and result from traditionalization. With respect to burley tobacco, men traditionally directed the labor of women, children, and other men hired at critical points in the production season.
Traditionally, women played essential roles in tobacco production at all stages, but these have diminished in most farm families as many women moved to off-farm jobs and as larger tobacco acreages led to increased dependence on hired labor. Yet, tasks alone do not make tobacco a men’s crop; indeed, the performance of work and the performance of masculinity have become commensurate.

Power has identified a similar situation for Newfoundland fishermen. According to her, particular “activities also present men with opportunities to demonstrate masculinity. In other words, the culturally valued abilities and skills required to perform many of these services are distinctly masculine” (2005, 74). The specific and particularized activities that are commensurate with masculinity are different for fisherman and for tobacco farmers, demonstrating that rather than homogenous, ideals of masculinity are multiple and localized. This suggests the need to understand what specific activities are commensurate with a particular masculinity. A complete description of the complex gendering of the processes of growing, harvesting, curing, and marketing tobacco is beyond the scope of this chapter. I will focus instead on cutting tobacco and preparing it for market as representative examples because these aspects of tobacco work are particularly understood as male activities and because they are undergoing significant changes.

“Tobacco man” as a descriptor sums up the traits of a localized, idealized masculinity in the burley tobacco region in which I conducted fieldwork. Wendell Berry writes: “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” (1991, 54). The category has been around for decades, as evidenced by Virgil Steed’s narrative of life and work on a Kentucky tobacco farm, in which he notes: “Local farm tenants call themselves ‘tobaclemen’” (1947, 43).

What makes a tobacco man is the competent performance of activities and practices that have, through a process of traditionalization, come to define the category (see Sacks 1995). Seemingly circular, category-bound activities recall Butler’s performativity, as the category is constituted and maintained through the doing of activities. Such performance differs from that of other occupational categories, such as soybean or corn farmers, and from categories of men in nonfarming occupations. While the term might resemble others that appear to exclude women, such as “postman,” it denotes
not merely an occupational category used by insiders and outsiders alike but also (and more significantly) an excellence in the simultaneous performance of both work and gender that only an insider recognizes.9

Tobacco is a labor-intensive crop, often called a “thirteen-month crop” because the ground is frequently being prepared for the coming year’s crop even as the previous year’s crop is being marketed. I focus first on cutting tobacco, described in overt terms of masculine performance. Although mechanical harvesters have been designed and tested since the late 1950s, with the exception of fewer than a handful of large farmers, burley tobacco continues to be cut entirely by hand.10 Cutting usually takes place in August, and it is hot, back-breaking work. The cutter picks up a tobacco stick—a wooden stick, about four and a half feet long and three-quarter by one inch in diameter—thrusts it into the ground at an angle, and puts his metal spear on the upward end. He then grabs a plant with one hand and, with a tobacco knife in the other, cuts the plant off at ground level. With the tobacco knife still in one hand, he seizes the stalk with both hands and spears it onto the tobacco stick. He does this six times per stick. Standing between two rows, he alternates cutting a plant from each, cutting a stick row. A very good cutter cuts 1,200 to 1,500 sticks, with six tobacco plants per stick, in a day—about an acre. Stories are told of men who can cut up to 2,000, or who could do so in their prime. When the process is done well, the cutter never stops, never stands upright, and never puts down his tobacco knife; the sticks do not fall over, and the stalks do not split out. Good cutters are lean, agile, fast but steady, men with stamina. Such descriptions serve as markers of a number of other distinctions including age, gender, and race.

One farmer told me that being able to cut 1,000 sticks used to make a boy into a man. A tobacco crop serves as a rite of passage in other senses as well. The vast majority of the tobacco growers I interviewed described being given their first patch of tobacco when they reached a particular age, ranging from nine to teenaged. This first patch symbolized moving out of boyhood and into manhood, as the young man was now responsible for his own crop. Greater responsibility and increased competence in tobacco differentiated not just boys from men but also men from women. Women sometimes cut tobacco, but they are noted as exceptions:

Noel: Yes, yes, that is the problem with tobacco . . . it’s not for everyone because of the hard work at harvest time.
Ann: So is that the hardest work?
Noel: Yes, yes.
Ann: What makes it the hardest work?
Noel: Without a healthy body, without a lot of stamina, you cannot compete in the tobacco field. It separates the boys from the girls.

Noel explicitly genders cutting tobacco with the statement that it “separates the boys from the girls.” “Girls” can refer not only to females but also to males who are perceived as inadequately performing masculinity, in the widespread tradition of using feminine labels for derogatory purposes.

Men often reminisce about cutting tobacco when they were young, racing brothers or friends down the rows. Informal competition led to formalized cutting contests in which performance became the primary rather than secondary function. The audience, no longer limited to other cutters, could include hundreds of spectators. In our discussion of the Garrard County Tobacco Cutting Contest, county extension agent Mike Carter told me, “We’ve had very few people enter that are not good cutters. Because most of them are aware of the level of competition and they don’t want to embarrass themselves.” Such contests formalized accepted understandings of what it meant to be the best tobacco cutter, and therefore to demonstrate one’s masculinity for others in a meta-performance. Organizers developed detailed scoring systems that take not only speed but also accuracy and neatness into account.

According to Mike, prior to the establishment of cutting contests, conversations about who was the best cutter took place at “the little country stores and poolrooms and, you know, Farm Bureau meetings.” The Garrard County contest began in the late 1970s, a period of both heightened consciousness about tobacco farming as “heritage” and of a labor shortage that, by the 1990s, had led to the current dependence on Latino men to do the majority of the cutting. Because the future of tobacco was uncertain, the cutter’s skills were in danger of becoming obsolete, leading to the celebration of both the activity and the men. The contest continues today, and it may take on new meanings as tobacco farmers themselves do less cutting. More and more Latino men enter the contest each year, and they are not universally welcomed. I wonder if the day that Latino cutters outnumber Whites will mean the contest’s end because it would mean “we” are no longer performing for each other the skills that made “us” men for generations. Indeed, for Whites, “tobacco man” is a White and hegemonic category, despite past and present tobacco work carried out by African American and Latino men.

Many tobacco growers now cut very rarely or never. Instead of working one row over from a buddy, many spend a large portion of their day driving alone in their pickups and tractors, overseeing the work of other men whom
they perceive as different from themselves based on language, culture, and connections to the crop and the land. This change symbolizes an intricately linked set of altered work responsibilities, relationships with the crop, and meanings of the tobacco man masculinity, noted through comparisons of the present with the past.

**A GOLDEN AGE OF MASCULINITY**

Timothy Lloyd and Patrick Mullen identify a “golden age” of commercial fishing in the personal experience narratives of retired Lake Erie fishermen. For these men, the past was a better time characterized by “more primitive technology, harder work, clearer water, more abundant fish, and less governmental restriction” (1990, 80). Similarly, Amy Shuman describes a “golden age” for a community of artisans in Pietrasanta, Italy, in which “stories serve as nostalgic reminiscences that glorify a lost past and lament the present state of events” (2005, 62). Their narratives, according to Shuman, offer allegories of the past that comment on the present. Throughout my interviews and conversations with tobacco growers, nostalgic stories and expressions of change arose, comparable to Lloyd and Mullen’s and Shuman’s examples. The referenced time periods were not necessarily consistent, but were most often that of the speaker’s father or grandfather, in contrast to the Italian stone carvers’ golden age, a quite specific “period of the early 1900s, when artisans worked in large studios employing hundreds of workers” (62). The golden age of tobacco production, then, fluidly addresses cultural practices that reinscribe a performed identity.

Wendell Berry’s description of the tobacco man, quoted above, firmly places the ideal in the past: “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” (1991, 54). County extension agent Dan Grigson described the lessons he learned from his father about doing a job the right way, particularly after he had been given two-tenths of an acre of his own tobacco to raise. I asked if he would describe the farmers with whom he now works in the same terms that he depicted his father, and he replied:

Sure, there are a lot of good tobacco farmers. There are folks who grow tobacco. There are folks who I call “pretty good tobacco farmers.” And then there’s that upper level who just—they’re “tobacco men.” They’re—tobacco women or tobacco men.12 But they do the extra, they always seem to have a good crop, even in a dry year or, you know, too wet of a year,
they’ll still come out with a very good crop of tobacco. Detail people. People, again, who are good managers and make things work. They take care of getting the soil samples and making sure the fertility’s right. Selecting the best varieties, making sure pests are under control. Topping at the right time, cutting at the right time, and watching those doors and curing that crop down. And then, take a lot of pride in making sure that when they prepare it for market it’s prepared well. Not just all thrown together and grades are not mixed up, no weed trash or anything like that in there. They truly have pride in doing a good job.

Through his articulation of a difference between tobacco men, “pretty good tobacco farmers,” and those who simply continue to raise the crop, Dan describes levels of competency in the work performance. At the “upper level,” the tobacco man knows the proper cultural practices required to raise and market a good crop and performs them consistently because he has “pride,” frequently used as a descriptor that moves the activities from practice to performance.

Like tobacco cutting, preparing the crop for market and handling the final sale have traditionally been controlled by men through traditionalized performances—even though women were historically heavily involved in the work process. Cured tobacco was tied into a hand, formed as the leaves are stripped from the stalk in a particular grade. The stems are held tightly in one hand, leaves pointed toward the floor. When a handful has been stripped, a tie leaf of the same grade is wrapped around the stems and then woven through the leaves, holding the hand together. Simple as this may sound, tying a “pretty” hand of tobacco is far from easy; it is a performance requiring technical as well as artistic skill in which farmers took great pride. Once he brought the hands to the warehouse for auction, a tobacco man made sure that employees arranged them carefully when unloading. A man sometimes waited long periods for the preferred warehouse employee who had the ability to make the tobacco look its best. While debates continue about how much the tobacco’s appearance affects price, growers uniformly described its symbolic importance. One retired farmer told me that appearance “didn’t help your price but it, but a lot of people just, you know, didn’t like sloppy tobacco.” The iconic tobacco warehouse, then, offered a homosocial space in which tobacco men performed for one another.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, burley tobacco began to be pressed into bales instead of tied in hands. Although some decried the move to the new packaging method as removing the pride from tobacco, a new but similar aesthetic moved with it. In many stripping rooms tobacco is placed in the bale box neatly, in alternating layers, the stems butted up against the sides to
form a bale that is uniform in texture and color with no leaves hanging out. Tobacco grower Martin Henson and I discussed changing farm technologies:

Martin: Things have come a long way, come a long way. I’ve often wondered what my daddy would say if he’d seen me baling tobacco. [laughing]

Ann: What would he say?

Martin: I don’t know. [laughing] He’s probably turned over, several times, and you know, just—

Ann: Why?

Martin: Well, I know, for years he raised tobacco, he raised tobacco until he was eighty-four, when he passed away. He raised tobacco for probably seventy-some years, seventy-five years, hand tied it, everything was neat, just prim and proper. Now you just throw it in there and tramp her down and go on. [laughing]

While Martin described his father turning over in his grave at the idea of baled tobacco, a farmer a generation younger narrated with awe the neatness of his own father’s bales. Clarence Gallagher described a particularly messy load of tobacco that he had seen, and I asked him what his deceased father—about whom he’d talked throughout the interview—would have said about it. He responded, “Oh my goodness. Dad’s—I wished I had took some pictures of tobacco that he had fooled with. And just actually showed you what older people did. I mean his, his bale just looked like . . . you know, you could just shoot a rifle right down the side end of them, you know what I mean, just never—everything was just—just neat.”

Taken alone, Martin’s rumination on his father’s possible opinion might be read merely as a negative judgment on the baling of the precious leaves. However, placing it next to Clarence’s description of his father’s bales highlights the men as well as the tobacco. Their comments demonstrate how tobacco growers describe change through comparisons with “my father’s day.” Fathers—particularly those who are deceased—model the ideal performance and serve as implicit judges of today’s production and therefore of today’s tobacco men. In such comparisons, tobacco growers now always come up short; they are not the hardworking men their fathers were. Clarence told me, “We’re lazier. I raise more tobacco than my dad did, but the man worked harder. He worked harder. He worked harder than I ever worked, as far as raising tobacco.”

But other standards also apply. Mike Carter told me: “I wouldn’t say [my father was the] most progressive farmer, but if you showed him, if he
saw others doing something and it proved to be—I never thought that he put much stock in it being easier, more easily accomplished, but it—if it was [laughing] something that was maybe quicker, or accomplished the same purpose with maybe less expense, he was willing to adapt.” Mike distinguishes between something “easier” versus quicker or less expensive; a previous generation “worked harder.” Yet, whether their sons describe them as early or late adopters of technology, these tobacco men adapted; indeed, part of the tobacco man’s performance is adaptability, though it is limited to particular kinds of change.

Today’s growers see their jobs as easier than their fathers’ in part because they are increasingly removed from physical labor. But more and more, they also lack physical contact with the tobacco plant. Just as many growers no longer cut their own tobacco, many also no longer strip and bale it themselves, instead paying others to do so. Marketing circumstances have also changed. Now that growers contract directly with tobacco companies, instead of taking their tobacco to the warehouse where they performed for other tobacco men, the sale is now accomplished by appointment at a “receiving station.” The audience is now primarily tobacco company buyers rather than other growers. Moreover, instead of tobacco men spending hours or even days at the warehouse with other farmers, now for the most part they merely pull up, drop off their load, get their check, drive away, and resume work.14 Growers often say there was more pride in tobacco in their fathers’ days. The crop itself, each leaf, was once respected; tobacco men didn’t treat it poorly, step on it, or throw it in the baling box. Ultimately this care had economic motivations; the individual leaves paid for the farm, bought the children’s shoes, and so on. But through traditionalized ideals of masculinity, respect for the crop led to respect for the man who produced it. As the circumstances of tobacco production have changed, so too has the status of tobacco man masculinity.

**BEYOND “CRISIS”**

The current period provides serious challenges for tobacco growers’ economic futures as well as their masculine identities. Beyond particular performative acts such as cutting or stripping tobacco and preparing it for sale is the decision of what to farm. The changing buying habits of tobacco companies as well as the growing awareness of tobacco’s harmful effects and the steady drop in use that has followed have resulted in increasing encouragement for tobacco men to diversify their farms to other crops. Elsewhere, I argue that diversification requires that farmers make major shifts (Ferrell 2012a).
Raising green peppers or tomatoes is neither economically nor symbolically commensurate with raising tobacco. Though as I have noted, part of the performance of tobacco man is the ability to adapt, moving to other crops is a different kind of change. According to Henry Glassie, “Change and tradition are commonly coupled, in chat and chapter titles, as antonyms. But tradition is the opposite of only one kind of change: that in which disruption is so complete that the new cannot be read as an innovative adaptation of the old” (1995, 395). For tobacco men, diversifying to other crops represents a complete symbolic and economic disruption of tradition that is as much about gender as it is about tobacco.

Many successful diversification efforts are taking place on Kentucky farms, and women play active—often leading—roles in these efforts. Organizations such as Kentucky Women in Agriculture work at the grassroots level to empower female farmers. Although my research focus has been tobacco growers, I frequently saw and heard about women’s expansion of traditional farming activities such as gardening to more public arenas. Mike Carter and I discussed women’s general lack of involvement in tobacco production—although there are exceptions—and he then told me:

Mike: Now, when they switch to vegetables, more typically you would see both spouses involved in it. Sometimes with the lady taking a lead.

Ann: Why do you think that is?

Mike: Not sure that a female farmer’s not more prone or more apt to try different enterprises than her male counterpart.

Ann: More willing to try something new?

Mike: Yeah. You know, I mean, they are farmers. The male gender, it seems to me, gets more comfortable in what he’s used to than, what, a female farmer or maybe the female gender as a rule, would. [She] wouldn’t be in that same comfort level, she would be more interested in trying something different.

Alice Baesler responded similarly when I asked her whether she thought that women bring a particular perspective to farming. “I think so—I think sometimes you might get hung up on the big picture of what you’re trying to do. And sometimes women can come up with, with a[n] idea that just might work, that’s just a little different.” Women also commented to me about their tobacco-farming husbands that tobacco is “all they know,” suggesting a belief that these farmers would not be willing to learn new crops. I often encountered such ready articulations of the idea that women are more willing than men to change. The gendering of tradition is in need of further
study, as it too is not a simple binary in which men are aligned with tradition and women with progress. In this case, the expectation of male farmers as stubborn is an aspect of the traditionalized performance itself. Women have always been involved in tobacco production, but men controlled it. Statements that women are more willing to change suggest an articulation that as women increasingly step forward as leaders, they bring fresh perspectives because they are new to such positions. Nationally, the number of women farmers is growing while that of men is dropping, not unlike the increasing move by women into male-dominated fields and particular types of higher education. But does this suggest an end of men, that women are taking over agriculture? By no means. For the time being, even though more women are successfully farming, agriculture remains male dominated.

Whether they continue to raise tobacco or try to grow something else, fewer and fewer tobacco growers can perform the traditionalized tobacco man masculinity. Simply lamenting a crisis of masculinity neither leads to a deeper understanding of gendered relationships nor helps either women or men as they struggle with cultural and economic changes that have very real consequences not only in theory but also in daily life—in factories, construction sites, fisheries, Kentucky farms, and other workplaces. Connell notes that the concept of crisis “presupposes a coherent system of some kind, which is destroyed or restored by the outcome of the crisis.” Masculinity, Connell argues, cannot be in crisis because it is not a coherent system but “rather, a configuration of practice within a system of gender relations” (2005, 84). The changing economic and cultural landscape demands analyses of systems of social relations and the deconstruction of gender as a binary opposition. Such work must continue to problematize monolithic conceptions of masculinity in favor of more nuanced understandings of gendered performances that have become traditionalized in particular localized contexts. Men facing the restructuring of the fisheries of Newfoundland have very different challenges than those facing the possible end to tobacco production—not only because of the nature of their work, but because it has become commensurate with their understandings of themselves as men.

NOTES

1. In 2004 the U.S. federal tobacco allotment program ended. During its seventy-plus years, growing and selling tobacco was limited to those with an allotment, and thus tied directly to land. The program kept tobacco production rooted in specific regions (see Stull 2009).

2. Kentucky tobacco production dropped over 30 percent in 2005, the year following the end of the program (United States Department of Agriculture 2008).
3. I trace this stigmatization of tobacco and its growers elsewhere (Ferrell 2012b).

4. Susan Faludi describes this phenomenon’s manifestations in the 1990s. The headlines she cites as examples of a “masculinity crisis” (1999, 6) strikingly resemble those I cite above. She notes, “It’s often been observed that the economic transition from industry to service, or from production to consumption, is symbolically a move from the traditional masculine to the traditional feminine. But in gender terms, the transition is far more than a simple sex change and, so, more traumatic for men than we realize” (38). Much as I argue here, Faludi demonstrates that viewing such transitions in binary terms is far too simplistic.

5. See also Connell (2005) for a helpful overview of approaches to masculinity/masculinities.

6. Power is careful to distinguish her use of “crisis” from “its use in ‘masculinity crisis’ literature” and “the anti-feminist factions of the men’s movement” (2005, 21).

7. Crop gendering has long been acknowledged in the literature on gender and development and has served as a basis for agricultural policy recommendations in regions that receive development aid from Western countries. Often, an understanding of local conceptions of “women’s crops” and “men’s crops” has been used to address women’s vulnerabilities in such contexts. See Doss (2002) and Carr (2008) for critiques of the practical application, despite acknowledged cultural constructions, of “men’s crops” and “women’s crops.”

8. The aesthetic dimensions of the tobacco man performance alluded to by Berry are generally accepted in tobacco communities—production is often described as “an art”—demonstrating how they implicate both folklore performance theory—a material “aesthetic genre” (Bauman 1975)—and Butler’s ideas of performativity.

9. Similarly, Power argues that “to be a ‘fisherman’ a man does more than simply fish” (2005, 70). See also Mary Hufford’s discussion of “foxman” among foxhunters in the New Jersey Pine Barrens (1992, 94), Roger Abrahams’s “man-of-words” (1983), and Jeannie Thomas’s description of the “cowboy continuum” upon which members of western livestock culture place themselves based on performed masculine identities, with cowboys at one end and farmers at the other (1995, 215).

10. Flue-cured growers mechanized their cutting practices in the late 1970s, a decade after they adopted mechanical technologies that dramatically decreased labor at other stages of the growing season, cutting their labor costs from 370 to 58 person-hours per acre (Daniel 1980, 264).

11. Latino workers, primarily from Mexico and primarily male, now do the vast majority of cutting on Kentucky farms, just as they now do much of the harvest work on farms across the country; they currently account for at least 75 percent of total labor hours (Snell and Halich 2007).

12. Dan’s statement that “They’re—tobacco women or tobacco men” demonstrates a recovery pattern that I witnessed in a number of interviews. Consistently, an acknowledgment that some women do raise tobacco often followed instances in which the speaker had referred to farmers specifically as male and then corrected himself. After the recovery, speakers eventually returned to male nouns and pronouns for the remainder of the interview. I believe that my presence as a woman interviewing primarily men about a male-dominated arena made them hyperaware of gender and their use of gender-specific language.

13. After burley tobacco is cut, it is hung in a tobacco barn—still on the stick, and also by hand—to air cure for six to eight weeks, depending on the weather and farm size. Once cured, the leaves are stripped from the stalk—usually by hand, but in some cases this process has been mechanized—and separated into distinct grades, each of which has a different pricing structure. Currently, most growers strip their tobacco into three grades, though they told
me of periods in which there were seven or more grades as well as brief periods in which they stripped it only into one or two grades. Although men traditionally controlled the work, families once spent weeks or months together stripping the crop.


15. Alice defies the categories I’ve described above. She raises 300 acres of tobacco and is also a founding member of Kentucky Women in Agriculture and Partners for Family Farms, organizations with memberships almost exclusively comprised of diversified farmers.

16. Bauman and Briggs (2003) suggest that the gendering of tradition has historically fluctuated: in periods in which tradition has been valued, it has been understood as patriarchal, passing through the father’s line. In periods in which modernity and progress have been valued over tradition, it has been understood as passing through the mother’s line from mother to daughter.