

Christopher Carter: Directed Interdisciplinary Studies

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Understanding Emerging Stressors and Adaptations in Generational Ranching Operations through Participant Visual Ethnography

Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork with sheep ranching families in Sweet Grass county Montana this research explores emerging stressors and adaptations influencing the decision making process of rural emigration. While this research focuses on a uniquely Montana way of life, urbanization, migration and subsequent loss of rural identity are phenomena that are beginning to be recognized and studied through qualitative methodologies. Through this research I have sought to collaboratively understand, why people choose to stay, why some leave, and the forces at play influencing this process. In doing so I utilize a combination of unique methodologies including Photovoice, Community Based Participatory Research and Participatory Visual Ethnography, as they emerged as the most appropriate means of understanding this community. During fieldwork issues of generational property and social capital transfer, new skilled migrant labor, land management and agricultural subsidy for small scale ranches surfaced as themes that speak directly to debates of food security, urbanization and agrarian identity in the American West. As rural emigration affects societies and economies beyond this Montana community, this USP funded research suggests an integration of participatory and qualitative research methods into the understanding, planning and policy making of sustainable futures in agriculture and society.