Women Making Sense of Rural P(l)ace

A feminist qualitative approach to stories of staying, leaving, and returning in the Catalan Ponent

By

Maria Bosch Profitós

Submitted to Central European University

Department of Gender Studies

In partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Arts in Gender Studies.

Supervisor: Professor Eva Fodor

Vienna, Austria

2025

"The rain comes from places and knows things. It's comfy here, down below. It's comfy in this forest. On this patch of earth. On this patch of world. The rain startles us, with a fresh, renewed awakening. The rain makes us grow, makes us bigger. Sisters! Friends! Mothers! I am all of you. Good morning. Safe travels. Welcome. Welcome back. And then we emerge. We emerge. We emerge as we have so many times before. Now. Now again. Bit by bit. Bit by bit, bearing in mind the small, dark, soft, delicate hole we make in the black earth, in the green moss. Our first tiny tip. Bit by bit, bearing in mind the forest's progression, the millions and millions of downpours we've received, the millions of awakenings, of little caps, of mornings, of lights, of animals, of days. Welcome, sisters. We remember the forest. Our forest. We remember the light. Our light. We remember the trees. Ours, every one. And we remember the air, and the leaves, and the ants. Because we have been here always and will be here always. Because there is no beginning and no end. Because the stem of one is the stem of us all. The cap of one is the cap of us all. The spores of one are the spores of us all. The story of one is the story of us all. Because the woods belong to those who cannot die. Who don't want to die. Who won't die, because they know it all. Because they convey it all. Everything that needs knowing. Everything that needs conveying. Everything that is. Shared seed. Eternity, a thing worn lightly. A small thing, an everyday thing."

Irene Solà, *When I Sing, Mountains Dance*
Translated from Catalan *Canto jo i la muntanya balla* by Mara Faye

"And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
between the reefs
and besides
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the tressures that prevail.

(...)

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
towards the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters

This is the place

(...)

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths in which
our names do not appear."

Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the wreck*

Abstract

This thesis explores the gendered dynamics of rural depopulation and migration in Catalonia, focusing specifically on how women experience, interpret, and reconfigure rural spaces through different life mobilities. In the context of a long-standing process of rural exodus in Catalonia, Spain and Europe, women have historically been overrepresented among those leaving rural areas. This research engages with feminist geography, critical rural studies, and mobility theory to examine the narratives of women who have stayed, left, or returned to rural municipalities in Ponent, a region of western Catalonia. The concept of *life mobilities*—encompassing both migration and non-migration trajectories—is central to the analytical framework, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how place, identity, and movement intersect, and central for filling a gap on geographical characterizations of the rural to study issues of rural-urban migration. Drawing on qualitative methods rooted in feminist and mobile methods, this thesis analyses interviews, participatory walking, mobility diaries, and visual representations produced by sixteen women born in the counties of La Noguera and Pla d'Urgell.

The analysis shows that rural space is constructed through diverse and often contradictory discourses. In the first analytical chapter, I explore how the sense of the rural place is present in women's narratives on their life mobilities, and how those life mobilities reshape their sense of rurality. My analysis show that, for women who stay, rurality is sometimes experienced as restrictive and static, but also as a conscious choice tied to community and lifestyle. For those who migrate, rural areas are frequently framed in opposition to the city. However, returning women complicate this binary by blending urban and rural sensibilities, reimagining rural spaces of spaces with opportunities. I argue that diverse perceptions of rural space shape distinct life mobility narratives, which are, in turn, influenced and transformed

by individuals' evolving senses of place through real or imagined encounters with urban environments. In the second analytical chapter, I analyse the characterization of rural spaces as spaces of lack, stasis and death, instead of abundance, motion and life. I show how those representations are continuously negotiated, nuanced, and contradicted by the women themselves, who describe rural places as simultaneously empty and full of community, motionless yet shaped by mobility, and lifeless yet deeply alive through their attachment to the landscape. Ultimately, this research advances non-essentialist understandings of place as socially constructed by women and their daily and life mobilities and identity negotiations.

Author's declaration

I, the undersigned, Maria Bosch Profitós, candidate for the MA in Gender Studies declare herewith that the present thesis titled "Women making sense of rural p(l)ace. A feminist qualitative approach to stories of staying, leaving, and returning in the Catalan Ponent" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 21,987 words
Entire manuscript: 29,134 words

Vienna, 6th of June 2025

Maria Bosch Profitós

Copyright Notice

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the many people who made it so. Like any expression of life, it is the result of deep interdependence—with those who have cared for me, supported me, and made my existence possible, now and always. Without them, I would not be here, nor would I be writing. They are the condition of possibility for all that I am and all that I may become: my family, my friends. This work is not mine alone—if authorship can ever truly belong to one person.

This research delves from the places I have inhabited, and all those who have pointed to them and said: *this is a place!* I need to deeply acknowledge those who taught me that the places we come from, and the places we live in, shape our understanding of the world and of ourselves in infinite ways. My participants have done this too. I thank them wholeheartedly for welcoming me into their towns and for sharing how they feel, remember, and experience the places where they and I were born. Their insight and generosity have been indispensable.

I would also like to thank the professors who, at various points along the way, helped shape this thesis: David Ross, Hadley Renkin, Adrianna Qubaiova, Kris Orszaghova, and Nadia Jones-Galiani. I am especially grateful to my second reader, Professor Prem Kumar, for his wisdom on geographies, his attentiveness to place, and his patient support throughout this process. Finally, my deepest thanks go to Professor Eva Fodor, for making my passion her own, for sharing my hopes, and for being a wise, generous, and attentive mentor.

Table of contents

List of figures

1. Introduction

One day, I left a place behind. And with that place, its landscape, its yellow, its sadness, its dryness, the hands that labour its fields, the hands that cook for the hands that labour the fields. To leave behind the fields that have always surrounded you –the fields you have surrounded, you have made existent through your gaze– to be a land traitor. I do and also do not know what it entails, because you can leave a yellow behind but it remains inside you.

To leave and love a place. To leave a place, to love a place and yet want to escape it, to inhabit that place through your memories, to inhabit it through the people that still live there, to inhabit it when coming home. To imagine another life, there or somewhere else, because lives cannot be imagined but in places. To be someone is to be somewhere, to be in a place, to be from a place.

One day I moved to a city and with me I carried a yellow, and also an accent. One day, in that city, I saw how some buildings prevented me from seeing the sunlight and a landscape that was not yellow, that was not mine, that I do not know if it ever will be. I spoke with an outsider accent, another accent, in a university class. I learned to use other expressions and tones but to keep with me the recognizable sound of the place I come from. I returned home with a new voice, a slightly softened accent, and a growing ability to talk about exhibitions and politics.

One day, I left a place behind, like many others who did before me, unlike many others that stayed before me, emptying a land. My story is the story of leaving a place. The story of the place I come from is the story of those who have left, the story of the ones who remain, the story of those who come back.

In Catalonia, as part of a wider phenomenon in Spain and Europe, there has been a significant process of rural depopulation starting in the 20th century and intensifying in the mid-20th century. Processes of rural exodus have been selective in terms of gender in Spain, especially after the 1970s. Women born in rural areas have been disproportionately overrepresented among those migrating to the city, while rural areas have been characterized by masculinized and aging populations. In this context, this thesis offers an original approach to understanding the production and experience of rural spaces as central to the stories of women's life mobilities, and to more nuanced understandings of migration and non-migration, studying not only those women who left rural areas, but also those who stayed and those who returned.

The structure of the thesis begins with a Background section where I contextualize the process of rural exodus and rural–urban migration in Spain and Catalonia, including its gendered dynamics. In the Theoretical Framework, I draw on Lefebvre's (1991) and Halfacree's (2006) theories to explore how rural space is produced, and on feminist critical geographies Massey (1994) and McDowell (1999) to explore how gender and place are co-constructed. I also rely on the mobility turn (Shelly & Urry, 2006) and its critical approaches to mobility, migration, and place-making. The Literature Review situates the gap this thesis addresses by outlining previous scholarship on rural–urban gendered outmigration, gender and rurality, women's experiences and negotiations of space, and the intersection of these with mobility. I identify a lack of geographical approaches to women's rural–urban outmigration that focus on their sense of rural space, especially through the study of multiple migration patterns — a gap particularly notable in the Catalan case. The Methodology chapter details the qualitative, feminist, and mobile approach used. Data collection methods included interviews, participatory walking, mobility diaries, and the production of visual representations and mental maps by participants. This data was analysed using discourse thematic analysis aligned with critical constructionist epistemologies. I also provide a brief

demographic overview of the study area, Ponent, with a focus on the two counties where my participants are from: La Noguera and Pla d'Urgell.

The empirical analysis is divided into two chapters. The first explores women's narratives of staying, leaving, or returning to rural areas, examining how their sense of rurality shapes their stories about migration and how life mobilities transform their visions of rural space. The second chapter delves into how rurality is conceptualized and produced in contested ways. The thesis concludes by synthesizing the findings and calling for a more nuanced, relational understanding of rural place-making and women's mobility decisions.

Through narratives, visual representations, and mobility diaries from 16 women born in Ponent who experienced various life mobilities, this thesis shows how different senses of rural space inform distinct experiences of mobility—and how these, in turn, reshape their sense of place, whether through urban life or imagined migration. Rurality emerges through diverse, sometimes contradictory discourses, shaped by and shaping life mobilities. Among women who stay, rural place-making often centres either on a strong, unfulfilled desire to migrate –viewing the rural as a place of nothingness and boredom– or on a proud commitment to remain –conceptualizing the rural as its close and personal social relations, or as a tranquil lifestyle. For those who migrate, the rural is often seen as small and limiting, in contrast to the city, imagined as a space of freedom and self-realization. Women who return to Ponent further nuance this view, rejecting idealized urbanity and revaluing rurality as an intentional life choice. The analysis shows how the rural is characterized through dichotomies of lack–abundance, stasis–motion, and death–life, though strongly present in participants' narratives, are applied specifically to rural areas in contrast to urban ones. While rurality is often framed as empty or lacking, these views are constantly negotiated through lived experience. Perceived emptiness coexists with strong community life; supposed stasis

contrasts with highly mobile practices; and even when seen as lifeless, rural spaces are revealed as emotionally rich and full of life.

Altogether, this analysis supports an anti-essentialist understanding of place as dynamic and relational rather than fixed or homogeneous (Massey, 1994). While the rural has been either characterized as a left-behind space (Pike et al., 2024) or through nostalgic metaphors of the rural idyll that romanticize nature and tradition (Bell, 2006), this thesis shows the complexity and contested construction of rurality as experienced and produced by people and their movement. When rural exodus and migration threaten the sustainability of rural communities, this thesis brings together diverse perspectives to explore why women stay, leave, or return to a place that is experienced as both a void and bliss.

2. Background

Starting in the mid-twentieth century, processes of rural depopulation, the concentration of opportunities in urban settings, and rural–urban migrations by young women have characterized Catalan, Spanish, and, in general, European sociodemographic processes. In Spain, rural depopulation began intensifying in the mid-20th century, peaking in the 1950s–60s in a context of rapid industrialization (García, 1967; Collantes & Pinilla, 2011). The rural population dropped from 60% in the early 1900s to under 25% today, with the sharpest losses in municipalities situated over 30 km from urban centres (Gómez & Holl, 2024, pp. 431, 437).

Catalonia mirrors these trends, though to a lesser degree, in what some refer to as *ruralitat buida o buidada* (empty or emptied rurality) (Baylina, 2020, p. 103). As Vidal (1979) notes, starting in 1860, industrialization generated profound imbalances between urban and rural areas, favouring processes of rural exodus. Economic activity became increasingly concentrated in Barcelona, triggering processes of urban growth, exacerbated by the declining viability of small-scale agriculture and dispersed settlement patterns in rural areas. Three key phases can be identified in the rural exodus: a sharp decline from 1860 to 1900 linked to early industrialization; a temporary stabilization from 1900 to 1930 as rural areas adjusted demographically; a parenthesis in the period from 1930 to 1950 marked by the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939); and a dramatic depopulation between 1950 and 1970 (Vidal, 1979).

The traditional, hierarchical rural model—where municipalities were closely tied to their local centers—was gradually dismantled by the rise of metropolitan Barcelona and its surrounding industrial zones. This rural–urban polarizing dynamic not only drained rural areas of their demographic vitality but also redefined them as peripheral to the dominant

urban-industrial system, transforming the Catalan territory through centralized and interconnected urban systems (Vidal, 1979; Casassas, 1987).

The persistent outmigration of women, especially young women, from rural areas is now a structural demographic pattern in Spain. Female overrepresentation became more visible in the 1970s as general migration declined (Camarero & Sampedro, 2008, p. 84). Since the 1970s, the rise of the service economy, has widened the rural–urban gender employment gap, as urban labour markets offer jobs with better salaries and paths to economic independence—especially in the highly feminized service sector (Camarero, 2020). Meanwhile, rural labour has been and remains highly gender-segmented in terms of sector, quality and quantity (Camarero & Sampedro, 2008, p. 79). This phenomenon has been named *huída ilustrada* (illustrated escape) (Díaz Méndez, 1995), furthering rural–urban segmentation not only in terms of gender but also in terms of educational background. This trend continues in Catalonia, where depopulated regions show aging populations and stark gender imbalances in rural areas, as studied by Baylina (2020) and Salamaña et al. (2016).

In recent years, particularly following the 2009 economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been renewed interest in Catalan rural living, driven by tourism, infrastructure improvements, and proximity to cities (Salamaña et al., 2016; Baylina, 2020; Alomà & Mòdol, 2022). This revitalization of rural areas—again led by the return of women is often tied to new life projects and reflects regenerative visions of rural life, not nostalgia (Baylina, 2020; Fernández, 2022; Gómez & Holl, 2024).

This thesis is situated within these sociodemographic historical processes of rural depopulation and urban-centred development, and especially women's disproportionate outmigration starting in the 1970s, which shaped Catalonia and Spain's spatiality.

3. Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework brings together constructivist approaches to place production, feminist geography, rural studies, and mobility theory to explore how space, gender, and movement intersect in shaping rural-urban women's migration.

3.1 Rural place as sensed, lived, and imagined; embedded in power

3.1.1 The production of rural spaces

Under the term *spatial turn* (Sheller, 2017), theories of place emerged in the 1970s that challenged positivist understandings of space as a neutral physical reality. Humanist geographers such as Tuan (1977) and Relph (1976) revolutionized geographical thought by arguing that places are co-constructed and inseparable from the meanings people assign to them and from lived experience. Within this tradition —which has gained broad acceptance in geography (Cresswell, 2008)— my understanding of place and space draws from Lefebvre's (1991) *The Production of Space*, as interpreted by Harvey (2005) and particularly by Halfacree (2006), who develops a model of rural space shaped by capitalist production.

According to Lefebvre (1991), space is produced by three interrelated dimensions: material space (space as sensed), representations of space (space as conceived), and spaces of representation (space as lived). In other words, place is constituted through physical experience, the symbolic and discursive meanings attached to it, and the everyday practices situated within it (Harvey, 2005). Halfacree (2006) applies this triadic model to rurality, conceptualizing rural space as the interplay between rural localities inscribed through spatial practices (place as materially constructed), formal representations of the rural (place as represented), and the everyday lives of the rural (place as lived). Spatial practices related to rural production in capitalist economies, such as activities of production and consumption,

are tied to material expressions of space and its social reproduction (Halfacree, 2006, p. 50). This involves both sensory perception and the broader economic and social processes necessary for sustaining rural life, where migration and depopulation are central. These practices interact with formal representations of rurality, shaped by capitalist interests that influence imaginaries of the rural. Lastly, the everyday lives of the rural, which are "inevitably incoherent and fractured" (Halfacree, 2006, p. 51), include cultural norms and social relations, which are shaped both by imaginaries and the material conditions in which they unfold. Departing from this threefold model, the rural place is constructed as it is experienced by women who live in, leave, and imagine it in the context of rural–urban migration.

3.1.2 Defining rurality within the rural-urban continuum

As Halfacree (2006) notes, there is no official or widely agreed-upon definition of what constitutes 'non-urban' space under the label of 'rural'. Exploring this ambiguity in the Catalan context, Alomà and Mòdol (2022) argue that while demographic density and population size are relevant for operationalization, rurality is also shaped by a range of "human and economic realities that serve to fixate rurality" (p. 5, author's translation), including distance from urban centres, land use, settlement patterns, and modes of economic production.

In this context, writing a thesis on rurality, rural places, and rural spaces entails acknowledging that these are contested and ambiguous terms. I align with the call to move beyond rigid rural–urban dichotomies and, rather than viewing rural and urban as oppositional categories, I adopt a perspective that acknowledges the increasingly blurred boundaries between rural and urban places and spaces, shaped by complex socio-political and demographic processes (Massey, 1994; Lacour & Puissant, 2007). This is captured in the

concept of the rural–urban continuum, which conceptualizes space as composed of overlapping elements with varying degrees of rurality and urbanity. As Cardoso and Fritschy (2012) explain, this idea was first introduced by Pahl (1966) to describe post–World War II transformations in the countryside, such as migration, tourism, and the growth of second homes, that brought cultural, demographic, and economic changes to rural areas.

In this context, when I use the terms *rural* and *urban*, I do so within the framework of the rural–urban continuum, recognizing not only different levels of rurality and urbanity but also the importance of human perception in constructing these spaces and interpreting, naming, and imagining them as rural or urban. Following Lefebvre (1991) and Halfacree (2006), I argue that rurality is not only defined through measurable indicators but also through how people subjectively identify, experience, and give meaning to place.

3.1.3 Placing gender on the map; gender and space as co-constructive

After the spatial turn that revolutionized geographical studies, feminist geographers developed critical interdisciplinary approaches built on those theories to show how gender is central to the production and experience of space.

In *Space, Place, Gender*, Massey (1994) develops her theorization of place as a social relation, arguing that places and spaces are constituted through dynamic social relations at multiple scales, from the global to the domestic. Places are not static pieces of land or neutral containers of social relations—thus timeless. Challenging traditional dualisms that frame time as dynamic and masculine, and space as static and feminine, Massey (1994) argues that such a binary has depoliticized space and feminized it as static and non-dynamic—a lack, an absence of the temporal (p. 6). Places are open, contested, and continually constituted through their relation to other places and social relations. In turn, "social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism; this view of the

spatial is an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification" (1994, p. 3). As a result, power, gender, and inequalities become central to the constitution and interpretation of place when space and place are conceptualized as social relations.

Massey (1994) and McDowell (1999) emphasize that not only does geography matter to gender—because gender relations are situated geographically and vary spatially—but also that gender and space are co-constitutive. People experience and interpret space differently depending on their position within structures of gender, race, and class, and these differentiated experiences both reflect and produce gender relations. Spatial divisions between public and private, inside and outside, are core to the construction of gender identities. In Massey's (1994) words:

> "Symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed" (p. 179).

Who can move freely, who is confined, and how different bodies are read in different places all reveal how spatiality is implicated in the construction of gender identities and hierarchies. For instance, women are told not to walk dark streets at night and, by not doing so, they are both producing gender and space.

Gender relations, then, are deeply embedded in the production of space, shaped by norms that regulate who belongs where and who is excluded. Places are social relations as much as gender itself is a set of complex social relations (Butler, 1997). As Butler (1997) argues, gender is performed through the repetition of actions and norms embedded in collective meanings and power structures, so gender is produced and exists only in relation to others and to societal norms and expectations. This perspective provides a framework to examine how the spatial organization of society contributes to the construction of identities and power,

particularly those related to gender. In the context of my research, it allows me to explore how women experience rural spaces differently, and how those experiences not only shape the rural itself but also women's subjectivities and gendered identities.

These theories also advance a feminist project by insisting that challenging dominant conceptualizations of space and place necessitates challenging dominant definitions of gender (Massey, 1994, p. 2). Through this relational and political understanding, feminist geographers critique static and nostalgic notions of place, often rooted in binary oppositions like space/time and feminine/masculine that underpin Western traditional epistemologies. Massey (1994) critiques the dichotomous coding of time as masculine –associated with history, progress, and politics– and space as feminine –aligned with stasis, nature, and passivity (p. 6). I believe that these dichotomies extend to the urban –associated with movement, change, progress, and rationality– and the rural –associated with stasis, more natural lifestyles, tradition, and emotionality (Bell, 2006; Little & Panelli, 2003)-- both romanticizing the latter but positioning it as inferior in a spatial hierarchy.

My thesis aims to further this project by thinking about how rural and urban spaces have been dichotomized and gendered, and how gender has been produced through those dichotomies. If the rural has generally been conceptualized as a static and natural place –thus coded as feminine– and the urban as a place of mobility and change –thus coded as masculine– why do women escape rurality? How can we interpret the socio-political meanings embedded in women's migration?

3.2 Mobility, migration and place-making

3.2.1 The mobility turn; to move, to make place

Following the spatial turn and feminist critiques of space, this research is also grounded in the mobility turn in social sciences, as developed by Sheller & Urry (2006). This paradigm emphasizes the central role of actual and potential movement—not only of people but also of objects, ideas, and communications—in shaping social life (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 212).

If place is understood as a social relation (Massey, 1994), then mobility becomes central to its formation, not only as a material condition enabling social interactions but also as a relational practice—we move towards people, for people, with people. The new mobilities paradigm challenges static notions of place by emphasizing movement as constitutive, occurring in, between, and in-between places, and by proposing a "world constituted by relations rather than entities" (Sheller, 2014, p. 790). The mobility turn problematizes sedentary theories and approaches to place that treat stability, meaning, and rootedness as the norm, while viewing distance, change, and *placelessness* as abnormal. It also, as explored in the next subsection, problematizes the romanticized and often masculinized ideal of mobility as synonymous with freedom and cosmopolitanism (Sheller & Urry, 2006).

I believe that mobility is central to how (gendered) individuals make sense of place. Specifically, the traditional link between rurality and lack of movement is challenged when mobility intersects with Halfacree's (2006) three dimensions of rural space. Rural places are sensed through embodied mobility—walking, driving, and through it, seeing, smelling, and hearing—as well as through material movement between rural and urban spaces, which enables the reproduction of daily life, from working to buying food (Salamaña et al., 2016), since mobilities are organized through nodes that structure social life, such as cities are for more urban areas (Hannam et al., 2006, p. 12; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Moving is a social

practice that inscribes rural localities, and thus, mobilities are embedded in the everyday life of rural areas. The mobilities paradigm also considers "representations, ideologies, and meanings attached to both movement and stillness" (Sheller, 2014, p. 789), which shape the imagined and discursive constructions of rurality.

3.2.2 A critical approach to mobility, gender, rurality, and power

A more critical approach to mobility is essential for examining gender, rural–urban dynamics, and their intersection. The mobility paradigm highlights how access to mobility is shaped by power: "moving between places physically and virtually can be a source of status and power" (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 213). As Adey et al. (2014) argue axes of privilege and oppression—such as gender, race, class, and nationality—produce uneven experiences of mobility, including uneven quality, access to infrastructure, material conditions, or temporality (Sheller, 2018, p. 23). Uneven mobilities reflect and reproduce broader power structures, where control over movement is itself a form of privilege (Sheller, 2014; Skeggs, 2004).

Within this framework, I adopt Law's (1999) concept of daily mobilities—defined as the short-term, repetitive movement flows of people, such as commuting, running errands, and caregiving-related travel, typically within urban settings—and apply it to the rural context. Following Law's argument, these everyday movements are deeply gendered, as access to and experiences of mobility are shaped by gender roles, responsibilities, and spatial inequalities (see also Priya & Cresswell, 2016). Moreover, mobility is always anchored by spatial, social, and infrastructural "moorings" that enable, configure, and constrain it in the sense that mobility for some often entails immobility for others (Hannam et al., 2006, p. 11). Thus, both moving and staying can involve forms of privilege or exclusion. Who can and wants to leave the rural world, and who can and wants to stay?

Gender is central because women's—and others' subjectivities shaped by social structures—mobilities differ from men's, but also because this is related to societal and spatial organizations based on gender binaries and hierarchies (Priya & Cresswell, 2016; Castañeda, 2024). As Massey (1994) argues, restrictions on women's mobility have historically been tools of subordination and social control (p. 179), shaping not only their experiences of space but also the way they move or are prevented from moving. Women's mobility is constrained in "a thousand different ways, from physical violence to being ogled at or made to feel quite simply 'out of place'" (Massey, 1994, p. 148). In some contexts, movement can be perceived as a threat to patriarchal stability (Massey, 1994, p. 11) and, at any time, as McDowell (1999) argues, especially in the form of migration, movement always implies "the renegotiation of gender divisions" (p. 2).

While global migration frequently garners attention and is theorized through the mobility paradigm (Hannam et al., 2006, p. 4), inner migration and rural–urban dynamics also reveal stark inequalities. Merging the themes of gender, rurality, migration, and mobility and advancing some of the central topics of interest touched upon in this thesis, Bock (2017) poses:

> "The genderedness of mobility and migration takes on a particular significance in the rural context because of the interesting interaction between the assumed differences in mobility between urban and rural areas and between men and women. Rising levels of migration and mobility thus challenge traditional notions of rurality and rural–urban distinctions, as well as rural gender identities and relations" (p. 11).

The association of femininity and rurality with immobility or reduced mobility is critically examined in this thesis, aligning with broader critiques of the conceptualization of places as static and timeless. Building on this, the mobility paradigm becomes essential for rethinking both gender and rural–urban dynamics, as it reveals how power operates through the

simultaneous construction of practices and imaginaries that privilege some gendered subjectivities and places over others; is the rural a place for women? Is the good woman the one that stays or the one that leaves?

3.2.3 Homing, migrating, place making

In *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, Ahmed et al. (2003) offer a framework for studying migration beyond simple binaries of stasis versus movement or presence versus absence. They emphasize that homing—understanding the possible varied meanings and locations of "home"—is not only as important as moving, but that the two are deeply interconnected and blurred processes. Homes are made, lost, rejected, or revisited through the same processes by which migrations are undertaken, forced, or forbidden (Ahmed et al., 2003, p. 2). Identities are constantly in motion, transformed by movement and places, and transforming the places that are passed through or inhabited. In this sense, "uprootings and regroundings are constituted through the reconfiguration of space, just as the redrawing of boundaries can generate new processes of uprooting and regrounding" (p. 5). This resonates with McDowell's (1999) view that movement—considering migration a form of movement—alters the relationship between identity, everyday life, and place. These processes of rooting and leaving, homing and moving, are embodied experiences shaped by and shaping social structures of gender, race, and class, thus deeply entangled with power and social positioning.

Tolia-Kelly (2006) suggests that migrants carry both material and imagined aspects of the places they leave behind, which in turn shape the places they arrive in, focusing on the Asian diaspora's reconfiguration of Englishness through belongings and sacred objects. Building on her idea, I believe that rural women bring their rural senses of place to urban contexts to

which they move on a daily basis or migrate, and not only reinterpret and construct urbanity through that background, but also further reinterpret rurality through that lens.

In this context, delving into that range of theories and approaches, I argue that (gendered) mobility shapes how (gendered) individuals make sense of place in two interconnected ways. Daily mobilities are the everyday, embodied practices through which rural life is inhabited, moving within and across its various scales, such as the home, village, or nearby town. Second, I suggest that women's experiences of place, shaped partly by these daily mobilities, inform their narratives of migration or non-migration. These trajectories, understood as a form of mobility, are what I call *life mobilities*: the personal paths of staying, leaving, or returning between rural and urban areas.

4. Literature Review

This thesis provides an original approach to understanding women's senses of rural spaces in the context of gendered depopulation and rural exodus. It aims to give a geographical account of why women leave the rural, but also why women live the rural through their life and daily mobilities. In this section, I provide a literature review of the available work on the themes of this thesis: (1) rural–urban gendered outmigration, (2) gender and rurality, and (3) women's experiences and negotiations of space. In each of the sections, the intersection of this scholarship with issues of mobility, if existent, is highlighted.

4.1 Rural Depopulation and Gendered Rural Outmigration

Rural–urban migration is a key driver of depopulation, a complex, multifactorial phenomenon involving chronic population loss that threatens the sustainability of economic and social life (Johnson & Lichter, 2019). This process is tied to global trends such as industrialization, the growth of the tertiary sector, and knowledge-based economies, which have accelerated urbanization and deepened rural–urban divides (Cramer, 2016; Camarero, 2020). In Europe, including Spain and Catalonia, rural depopulation and migration to cities have been notably gendered. Women, especially young women, have out-migrated at higher rates than men (e.g., Wiest, 2016), and the motivations behind their migration often differ by gender, as explored in the literature.

A consistent theme is the limited economic opportunities for rural women. Agricultural work remains masculinized, restricted for and restrictive to women, who are frequently confined to unpaid domestic labour on family farms (Little, 1991, 1997; Camarero & Sampedro, 2008). The rise of the service economy in the 1970s concentrated job opportunities in urban areas. In Spain, rural labour markets remain highly gender-segmented in terms of job quality, quantity,

and sector (Camarero & Sampedro, 2008, p. 79). Education also plays a role: families often invest more in daughters' education to prepare them for non-rural futures (Camarero & Sampedro, 2008, p. 77). This strategy, referred to as *huída ilustrada* ("illustrated escape"), frames migration as a path to skilled work and identity transformation (Díaz, 1995; Camarero & Sampedro, 2008, p. 78).

Underinvestment and weak public services in rural areas further exacerbate gendered emigration, especially as caregiving for aging populations falls disproportionately on women (Recaño, 2020; Fernández, 2022, p. 24). Urban areas are more attractive for women due to better infrastructure for work-life balance, such as childcare and healthcare (Camarero & Sampedro, 2008, pp. 80–81).

Cultural and identity-related factors also influence migration. Patriarchal family dynamics and traditional ideals of rural femininity discourage long-term female engagement with rural life (Little, 1997). In Spain, women often experience rural settings as socially restrictive, with limited autonomy, leisure, and freedom (Fernández, 2022, p. 24), shaped by rigid gender roles (Fernández, 2016, 2022).

Recent studies highlight resistance and rural revitalization. Changes in rural labor markets—such as diversification, agricultural defamilialization, and urban integration—have redefined women's migration and permanence (Camarero & Sampedro, 2008). Educated women, in particular, are returning to rural areas near cities in "commuter rural" models, where they live rurally but work in urban jobs (Baylina, 2020; Fernández, 2022; Gómez & Holl, 2024). In contrast, less-educated women are more likely to migrate permanently due to inflexible, low-skilled jobs. These returns often reflect personal or professional projects enabled by improved infrastructure, communication, and proximity to urban areas (Baylina, 2020; Fernández,

2022). Such movements also express desires for alternative ways of living, rooted in quality of life and belonging (Baylina, 2020).

4.2 Gender Studies and the Study of Rurality

Little and Panelli (2003) provide a comprehensive overview of the evolving engagement of gender studies with rural geography, from early anthropological work on gender differences in specific rural communities to the rise of gender scholarship in the 1970s. While early approaches focused on gender roles theory and relied on static views of men and women in rural areas, later feminist perspectives—shaped by socialist and post-structuralist frameworks—examined rural gender relations as produced through power, space, and identity (p. 281). Little (2015) updates these feminist perspectives, emphasizing a shift over the past decade from fixed notions of gender identity to more dynamic analyses of masculinity and femininity as constructed and performed.

Little and Panelli (2003) identify four main themes at the intersection of gender and rural studies: community, work, sexuality, and environment/space. Community studies revealed how patriarchal divisions of labour and rural idylls extended beyond households to shape entire rural societies, often reinforcing women's roles as unpaid caregivers and sustainers of community life (Dempsey, 1987; Little & Austin, 1996). Gender and work research shifted from documenting farm women's labour to unpacking the patriarchal systems that restricted women's access to employment (Little, 1991, 1997; Hughes, 1997). Studies on (hetero)sexuality have examined the link between traditional masculinity and rural environments. Little (2015) points to emerging research connecting rural masculinity to depopulation, based on constructions of masculinity tied to isolated agricultural work, which can leave men feeling "trapped."

Most relevant to this thesis, research on gender and environment has explored "the intersection between the construction and control of spaces and the politics of gender" (Little & Panelli, 2003, p. 285). It has also examined how associations between femininity and nature reproduce male dominance in rural environments (Rose, 1993; Little, 2017). This thesis builds on this body of work, but further explores these dynamics through the mobility paradigm and in relation to women's life mobilities.

4.3 Space, Gender, and Power in Space and Place Perception

Several studies have shown how individuals, based on socially constructed identities such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, negotiate and experience public and private spaces differently.

Qualitative research on women's sense of place has often focused on negative spatial experiences—fear, unsafety, and "out-of-placeness"—as in Valentine's (1989) "geography of women's fear." Empirical work has explored women's spatial fear and safety as solo travellers (Wilson & Little, 2008), in women-only spaces (Lewis et al., 2015), and in intersectional contexts, such as lesbian women feeling "out of place" (Valentine, 1993) or the racialized dimensions of fear (Day, 1999). Panelli et al. (2005) expand this literature—often focused on urban contexts—by examining women's sociospatial strategies in rural environments. Much of this literature centers on fear and safety, leaving less space for exploring women's spatial production and meaning-makingm with some exceptions. Guðrún's (2013) work on women "reinhabiting" rural spaces through distance learning in Iceland, or Allen's (2002) study of women's rural social spaces, which show how idealized rural imaginaries can obscure subordination.

In Catalonia, Rodó-de-Zárate (2024) explores these dynamics intersectionally, focusing on young people's experiences of comfort/discomfort based on gender, sexuality, nationality, and more across different spatial contexts, such as home, school, public space (Rodó-de-Zárate et al., 2024). Her earlier work also examines the spatial experiences of young lesbians in urban spaces (Rodó-de-Zárate, 2013; 2015), standing out amid the broader lack of attention to intersected gender and sexuality in rural place perception.

Some studies consider experiences of rural places without a gender focus. For instance, McCormack (2002) studies children's biographically shaped rurality and Doheny & Milbourne (2017) examine older people's experiences in rural communities. Others explore tourists' emotional connections to rural spaces (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015), urban-rural attachments (Willits & Luloff, 1995), or the "out-of-placeness" of homeless people in idealized rural settings (Cloke et al., 2000). On mobility, Milbourne & Kitchen (2014) examine how rural life is shaped by movement and access. Joseph and Hallam (1998) note how distance affects gendered caregiving decisions in rural contexts.

There remains a systematic forgetting of rurality in literature on gendered spatial experience –and a forgetting of gender in studies on rural place perception– despite key exceptions (Allen, 2002; Panelli et al., 2005)

4.4 Space and Migration: Geographical Accounts of Migration

This section reviews literature connecting spatial perceptions and senses of place (section 3.3) with geographical accounts of migration and rural–urban dynamics (section 3.1), with particular emphasis on gender and rurality (section 3.2). It highlights how place-based experiences and attachments influence migration decisions and how gender shapes these dynamics in rural contexts.

On rural place experience and migration intentions, Erickson et al. (2018) and Rodríguez-Díaz et al. (2022) quantitatively show that young people's attachment to rural areas can increase the likelihood of staying. Glendinning et al. (2003), through group interviews and surveys with youth in rural Scotland, find that social and emotional ties to community life shape decisions to leave or stay, but young women often report more constraints and lower well-being when they stay. Eacott and Sonn (2006) explore how belonging can coexist with limited opportunity, prompting migration even as a desire to return persists.

Concerning gendered outmigration, several studies explore rural-to-urban migration with a focus on women, though many emphasize urban experiences more than rural ones. For instance, Jacka (2005) and Gaetano (2015) examine narratives of women migrating from rural China to cities, centring urban life and not rural departure. In Sweden, Rauhut & Johansson (2012) study young women's migration trajectories—leaving, staying, returning, or arriving—primarily using labour market and macro-migration theories rather than place-based or geographic lenses. Dahlström (1996) explores how rural youth construct identity through place and mobility, showing that young women, unlike male or urban peers, often view the rural as restrictive and seek opportunity elsewhere.

In Catalonia, gendered migration and rural depopulation are still under-researched from feminist geographic perspectives, despite their importance. Notable exceptions include Baylina & Rodó-Zárate (2020), who examine youth activism as both a reason to stay and a driver of territorial change. They portray rurality as ambivalent: a space of trust and collective bonds, but also of control and repression, especially regarding gender and sexuality. Salamaña et al. (2016) study women in rural Catalonia and Galicia who stay or return, finding that emotional and socio-environmental motivations outweigh economic ones.

Baylina (2020) further analyses the return of young, educated women to rural Catalonia as agents of socio-territorial innovation through entrepreneurship.

4.5 Filling the *space;* furthering the understanding of the rural

The review of the literature reveals several intersecting areas of research relevant to this study: (1) processes of rural exodus and gendered rural–urban outmigration, (2) women's sense of place, (3) gender studies scholarship on rurality, and (4) geographical accounts of migration and rural–urban dynamics, with special attention to gender perspectives and mobility-focused studies.

Briefly, (1) rural exodus and rural–urban outmigration, initially linked to industrialization, have been re-examined through a gendered lens that highlights disproportionate effects on women for economic and social reasons (e.g., Little, 1991; Camarero & Sampedro, 2008; Fernández, 2022), though qualitative research on Catalonia is scarce, with Salamaña et al. (2016) and Baylina (2020) as notable exceptions. (2) Women's sense of place has often been explored through fear–safety frameworks (e.g., Valentine, 1989), usually without a specifically geographical or rural lens, Panelli et al. (2003) being a key exception. (3) Studies on gender and rurality (Little & Panelli, 2003; Little, 2015) focus more on rural gender relations, masculinities, and femininities than on spatial perceptions or migration. (4) Geographical accounts of rural–urban migration usually lack a gender focus and tend to prioritize labour market issues (e.g., Dahlström, 1996; Glendinning et al., 2003), with gender often treated as peripheral. Limited research has addressed daily mobilities in rural contexts), Panelli et al. (2005) being an exception.

Together, these gaps reveal a lack of focus on how gendered mobilities –both daily and migratory– shape women's understanding of rural space. Few studies explore female migration trajectories through a qualitative, geographical lens that considers multiple

pathways. Most research isolates either women who leave or women who stay, rarely comparing the two. Yet understanding why women stay or return is crucial to understanding why they leave. This is especially true in Catalonia, where feminist geographic work on rural–urban dynamics remains limited (Rodó-de-Zárate, 2013, 2014; Salamaña et al., 2016; Baylina, 2020).

While scholarship increasingly explores how women perceive and move through space differently, little work connects gendered mobility with spatial perception in rural areas. This thesis addresses that gap by applying a gendered, geographical lens to rural women's lived experiences and place-making. The originality of the approach lies in the use of *life mobilities*—a multidimensional concept that captures a variety of migration patterns: women who have always lived in rural Catalonia, those who migrated to urban areas, and those who returned after time away. This framework allows for a more nuanced understanding of rurality, showing how women construct meaning through processes of grounding, uprooting, and rehoming. Studying depopulation through *sense of place* reveals how rural space holds value for both those who remain and those who leave—and how that value is continually (re)produced through lived experience.

5. Methodology

5.1 Feminist methods on the move

To explore the gendered experiences of migration, place, and rurality, I adopt a qualitative approach grounded in feminist and critical perspectives. Drawing on people's narratives and lived experiences as sources of knowledge has become a central analytical tool within gender studies and other disciplines informed by feminist methodologies (DeVault & Gross, 2007; Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). As Phoenix (2008) argues, narratives uniquely capture the dialogue between individual subjectivities and collective contexts, illuminating how personal discourses, emotions, and decisions are deeply shaped by place, social norms, and broader structural forces.

While all discourses, including those related to rurality, are constructed as well as situated, women's lived experiences of rurality are not inherently more authentic than others (Halfacree, 2006). However, they are situated and deeply shaped by the intersection of spatiality and gender, and further influenced by factors such as age, class, education, and patterns of life mobility (Baylina, 2021, p. 106). This understanding is rooted in feminist and post-structuralist approaches, particularly Donna Haraway's (2013) concept of *situated knowledge*, which emphasizes that all knowledge is partial and produced from specific positionalities. These positionalities are shaped by the material, social, and cultural conditions that make such knowledge possible.

This thesis, therefore, is nothing but a situated production of knowledge –my own– based on the analysis of the situated knowledge of my participants and their partial, subjective, and personal experiences and understandings of rurality. Thus, this thesis is nothing but another attempt to give another partial, contextual, subjective and non-neutral view of the world, advancing some understanding of a social phenomenon as interpreted also by my

positionality. In this sense, this thesis is not a neutral or universal account, but rather a contextual, partial, and subjective attempt to deepen understanding of a social phenomenon, which si gendered rural migration. As a young woman born in Balaguer, a village in La Noguera, I hold a privileged position in having been able to move to Barcelona for university and to live in different cities, including Madrid, Toronto, and Vienna. My understanding of how women make sense of rural space is inevitably informed by my own lived experience of rurality and mobility, as well as by other dimensions of my identity such as age, class, sexuality, and nationality.

My participants are 16 women with varied internal migration experiences: five who have never left rural areas, five who moved from rural to urban settings, and six who migrated to urban areas and later returned. All were born in La Noguera, except one from El Pla d'Urgell. Ages ranged from 23 to 75, and occupations varied; education levels were less diverse—two completed only secondary education, two had vocational training, ten held university degrees (including one PhD), and two studied remotely. This qualitative sample is not statistically representative but reflects diverse perspectives of women born in the region. Variability in migration patterns structured the analysis to understand how life mobilities influence ideas and practices of rurality, advancing Little's (2015) call for feminist rural scholarship to examine gender relations and intra-group dynamics shaped by class, age, and background.

Following rural–urban theory (Pahl, 1966) and recognizing rurality as a contested, interpretive concept (Halfacree, 2006), I included women living in places defined by their own perceptions and indicators like population size and urbanization. Participants came from Balaguer, one of the area's main towns, closer to urbanization but often identified by residents as a "town" (Alomà & Mòdol, 2022). Sampling was intentional (Otzen & Manteriola, 2017), based on familiarity, contacts, and local networks. Some participants were contacted directly,

others referred by peers, and a few responded to an online call. I provided informal project details and interview outlines to interested women.

The analysis draws on qualitative methods inspired by feminist and critical perspectives, and the mobilities paradigm's idea that research must be "on the move" (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 217). This paradigm supports interdisciplinary methods capturing complex (im)mobility across scales and speeds (Sheller, 2014). Data collection included in-depth semi-structured interviews, some incorporating participatory walking during or after the interviews, as well as mobility diaries and visual methods like drawings and mental mapping.

Women kept "time-space diaries" to record how they "move through time-space and perform activities often on the move" (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 218), using any media they preferred. Following Milbourne & Kitchen's (2014) study of mobility and rurality, these diaries track dynamics of mobility and immobility, capturing challenges of moving in rural contexts. I provided a sample diary (Annex 1) and asked participants to complete one week of entries before interviews, supporting reflection and discussion. Consent forms (Annex 2) were also given.

Semi-structured interviews captured how participants talk about rural space and place. Using oral testimonies is well-established in gender and rurality research (Fernández, 2022). Some interviews were conducted in static settings due to logistics, while others were walking interviews (Sheller & Urry, 2006) or involved participatory walking (Clark & Emmel, 2010). Walking interviews explore the connection between self and place (Evans & Jones, 2011), and participants chose the walking locations, deepening engagement with place-based narratives (Clark & Emmel, 2010; Evans & Jones, 2011). Kinney (2017) highlights that walking interviews reduce power imbalances by giving participants spatial autonomy. After interviews, recordings were transcribed using Soft Català and analysed.

Participants were invited to create visual representations and mental maps, aligning with the rise of creative methods in geography (Hawkins, 2012). These methods capture intangible spatial aspects such as emotions, memories, and sensory perceptions, enriching understanding of place imagination and relation (Tolia-Kelly, 2008). They also challenge dominant knowledge production by emphasizing subjective expression and participatory engagement, contributing to feminist approaches and power shifts (Askins & Pain, 2011; Antona, 2019).

While visual methods are often used with children (e.g., Pinto et al., 2021; Matthews, 1980), their application with adults is growing (Antona, 2019). Following McCormack (2002), asking women to visually represent rural spaces yielded rich data on how rurality is imagined and constructed, opening space for feminist dialogues. Mental mapping captured symbolic, subjective space representations shaped by memory, emotion, and culture (Götz & Holmén, 2018; Szot-Radziszewska & Popławska, 2019). These maps serve feminist geography and migration studies by revealing emotional geographies and identity negotiations, challenging traditional, power-obscuring cartographic practices by acknowledging the mapmaker's positionality (Jung, 2014; Kelly & Bosse, 2022).

After the questionnaire, I provided paper and colours and asked women to "represent the place where they were born" and, if different, "the place where they live now." Initially, participants were asked to draw "a map" with an open format. Some drew intuitively, others were invited to map "spaces they live in and move through" or "a map they would need or like to have," encouraging diverse representations shaped by interview discussions. I treat drawings as discursive texts, interpreting them alongside participants' explanations and testimonies.

All the data is analysed through with discourse thematic analysis of the qualitative data obtained from them. Discourse thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) is the technique

used to identify patterns in the interviewees' responses and interpret them in relation to the research question and theoretical frame. This method is elaborated through social critic constructionist epistemology (Clarke & Braun, 2013), which departs from the idea that the way subjects interpret reality is intersected with socially and culturally constructed meanings through language and ideologies. The relevance of discourse analysis techniques for understanding people's experiences, thoughts, decisions, and feelings shaped by norms and context has been widely acknowledged (Dimitriadis, 2008; Lieblich et al., 1998). Once the data were collected and transcribed, the content of the interviews was analyzed using methods of thematic discourse analysis.

5.2 Ponent o la plana de Lleida; contextualization of the area of study

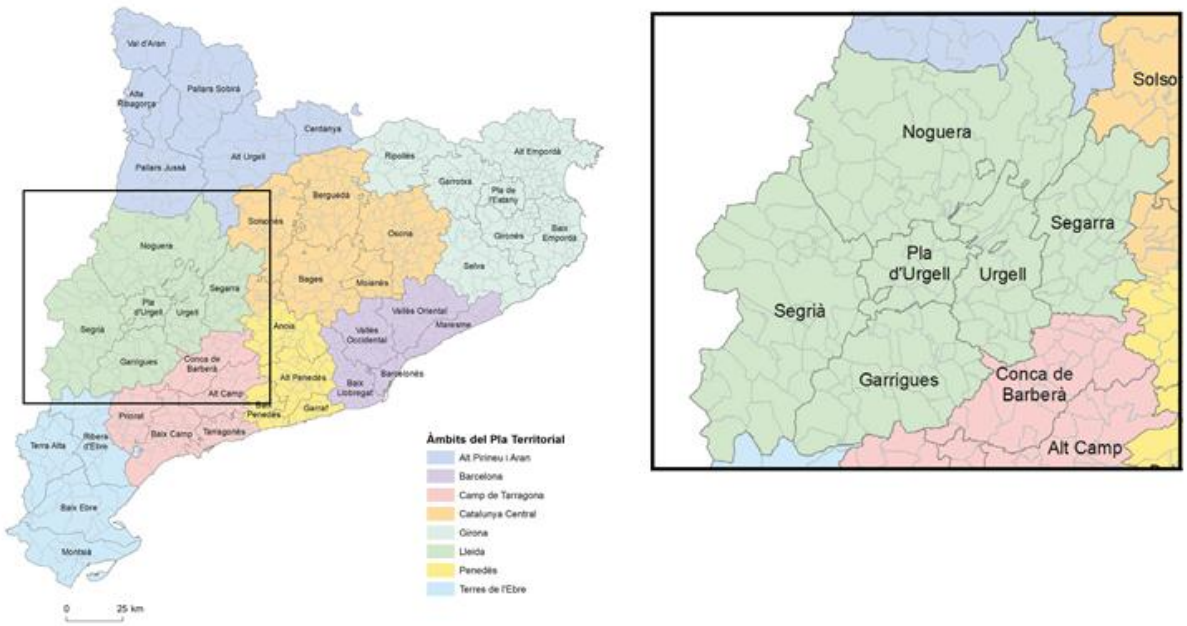
Catalonia reflects the broader pattern of what has been called *ruralitat buida* or *buidada* (empty or emptied rurality) (Baylina, 2020, p. 103). This situation has been fuelled by intense processes of rural exodus, starting with an early decline from 1860 to 1900, a temporary stabilization from 1900 to 1930, the complicated period from 1930 to 1950 marked by the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the post-war era, followed by an intense rural exodus from 1950 to 1970. Industrialization, centred in Barcelona and later its surroundings, led to urban growth and rural decline, as economic opportunities expanded in urban areas while small-scale agriculture and dispersed settlements became less economically viable (Vidal, 1979; Casassas, 1987).

In this context, the area I study—called Ponent, Lleida, or Plana de Lleida—is a region especially affected by processes of rural exodus and depopulation (Vidal, 1979; Casassas, 1987). As Alomà and Mòdol (2022) point out, beyond the centrality of Barcelona, its metropolitan area, and the ring of regional centres with dynamic surroundings, "lies a western Catalonia with clearly rural characteristics, structured around county-level centralities"

(Alomà & Mòdol, 2022, pp. 254–255). Although rurality is a complex and constructed concept, here I present some sociodemographic and economic data that impact people's perception of the region as a rural space.

Balaguer—where four of my participants were born—is the capital of the county and had 17,705 registered inhabitants in 2024 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE], 2025). The names of other towns will not be disclosed to protect the privacy and anonymity of my participants. These towns ranged in size from about 2,000 inhabitants for the largest to 350 for the smallest (INE, 2025).

Figure 1. The territorial units of reference. Municipalities, comarques (counties) and areas of the Territorial Plan.

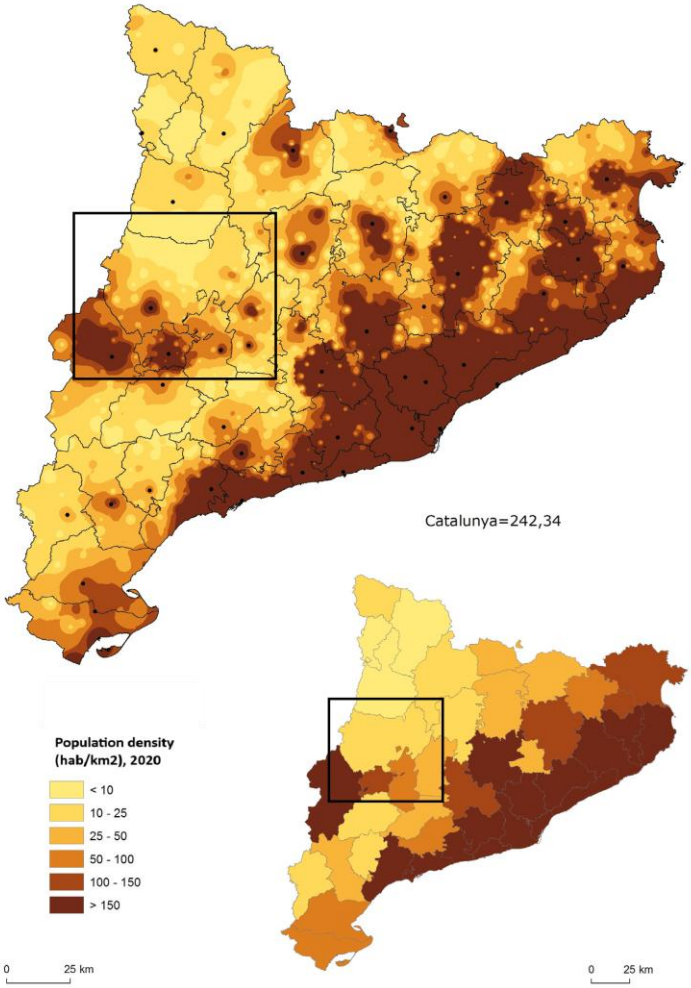


Source: Own elaboration from Alomà & Mòdol (2022, p. 4).

In terms of population density, we observe that, with La Noguera had a density of 10–25 inhabitants/km² in 2020, with a higher concentration around Balaguer, where the density exceeds 150 inhabitants/km². Pla d'Urgell has a density of 100–150 inhabitants/km². Overall,

the entire Lleida area, except for Segrià, has a very low population density, especially compared to the coastal part of Catalonia and the metropolitan area (p. 10).

Figure 2. Rurality as low-density rurality. Resident population per km2, municipalities and counties, 2020.

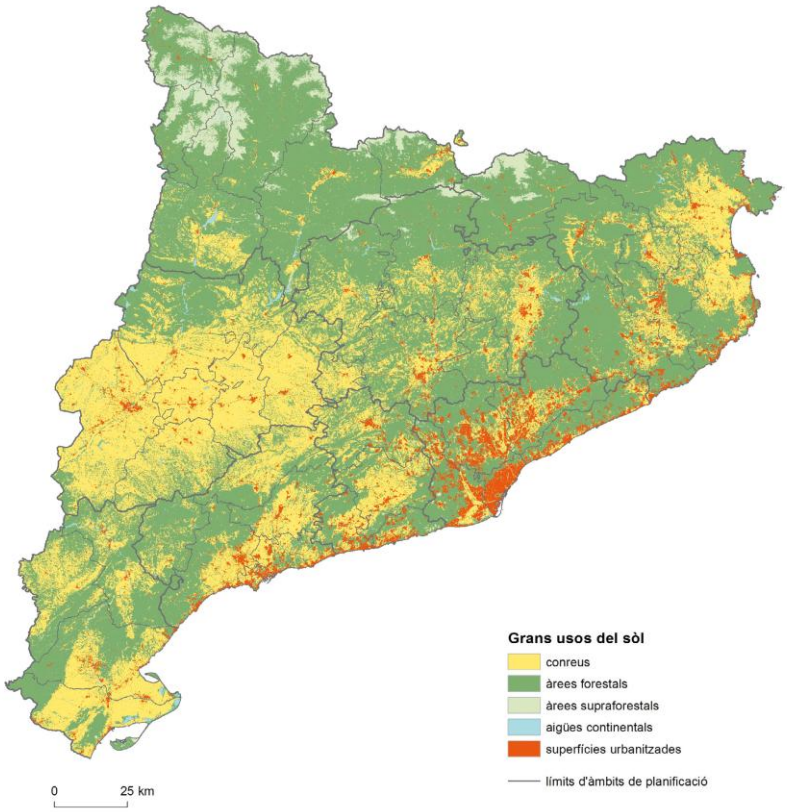


Source: Own elaboration from Alomà & Mòdol (2022, p. 10).

We also observe a concentration of fields and little urbanized land, clearly defining the Lleida area as a region dominated by agriculture (p. 11). While the red areas represent urbanized spaces and the green areas represent forests, the yellow, which indicates agricultural fields, is concentrated around the area of study.

2017

Figure 3. Rurality as a negative of the urban stain. Agriculture, forests and urbanization, 2017.



Source: Alomà & Mòdol (2022), p. 11.

Finally, Aldomà and Mòdol (2022) propose a classification of rural and urban municipalities based on demographic size, economic activity, and the relationships between municipalities with varying degrees of urbanization. According to their framework, the municipalities in which my participants live can be categorized as follows: Balaguer (4 participants) is considered a *rural pole*; 7 participants come from *low-populated rural municipalities*; 2 are from *service-oriented rural municipalities or rural peripheries*; and 4 are from *agro-industrial rural municipalities*.

6. Staying, escaping, and returning; imagining and living rural and *other* lives

As Hannam et al. (2006) note, both being mobile and immobile can entail certain privileges and fall within distinct logics of power, so this chapter critically questions: *who can and wants to leave the rural world, and who can and wants to stay?* Guided by those questions,

this chapter explores how women's sense of place is expressed in their narratives about staying in, leaving, or returning to rural areas. I analyse how they feel, experience, and imagine the places where they were born and raised. Through her life stories of mobility and immobility, I try to respond: *to what extent and how is a sense of the rural place present in women's narratives of their life mobility? To what extent and how do different life mobilities impact and reshape how women make sense of rural space?*

I am particularly interested in how the sense and experience of rural space are narrated to explain why women decided to stay, leave, or return to the rural area they come from, and how these life decisions were made. I also seek to understand how this mobility or immobility reshapes their visions of rurality –both as a lived and imagined place– after their experiences of living in a city, or after not doing so despite knowing others left.

Because this chapter also aims to present and describe the participants to better understand the specificity of the places they come from, it is structured according to the different life mobilities[1]. I first analyse the narratives of women who have always lived in their county; after that, those who left for a more urban area; and finally, the last section analyses the narratives of women who migrated to a more urban place and then returned, so now they are living in Ponent.

The analysis shows that rurality is constructed through diverse and sometimes contradictory discourses, shaped by and shaping different life mobilities. Various narrative strategies are used to produce the idea of the rural. Among women who stay, rural place-making often centres either on a strong, unfulfilled desire to migrate –viewing the rural as a place of

[1] A brief name of my participants; the women who never left Lleida are Jana (22), Judith (24, Balaguer), Elvira (67), Roser (72), and Mercè (75). The group of women who moved to more urban areas—all of whom migrated to Barcelona and still live there with no plans to return—includes: Berta (26), Ariadna (34), Carla (38, the only one of all participants who is from Pla d'Urgell), Isa (62), and Teresa (72, Balaguer). Finally, the third group is composed of six women who moved to an urban area and later decided to return. For some, this mobility was from their hometowns to Barcelona and back: Ares (23), Marina (24, Balaguer), and Cristina (53, Balaguer), Lluïsa (67). For others, this mobility involved movint to their partner's town: Marta (47), Clàudia (55).

nothingness and boredom– or on a proud commitment to remain –conceptualizing the rural as its close and personal social relations, or as a tranquil lifestyle–. For those who migrate, the rural is often framed more uniformly as small, limiting, and lacking opportunity, in opposition to the city, imagined as a space of freedom, success, and self-realization. Finally, the women who return to Ponent after migrating introduce further nuance to this contested narrative about rurality, escaping idealized notions of urbanity and revaluing rurality as a valid choice where a more tranquil life can be developed without giving up on the opportunities and well-being.

After analyzing their interviews, I argue that different senses of rural space shape distinct narratives and experiences of life mobility, and that those experiences are impacted by their sense of place, which is also reshaped by the experience of the more urban places women move to, or by the imagination of migrating. This chapter uses Ahmed et al. (2003) framework which proposes that identity is constantly created and produced by processes of moving and migrating, and that this movement reconfigures the places and spaces. Altogether, this helps to advance an anti-essentialist understanding of places as thought to have a rigid identity (Massey, 1994), which is specifically relevant in the case of rurality, sometimes characterized either as a *place left behind* (Pike et al., 2024) or through metaphors of *rural idyll* that romanticize a nostalgic view of landscape and nature (Bell, 2006).

6.1 Unwilling and challenging immobilities; where is progress for women?

In this section, I analyse the narratives of five women who never migrated from the rural locality or area where they were born, following Bücher and Urry's (2009) idea that potential

and blocked mobilities are central topics for mobility research. Understanding why women stay is central to complement the question of why women leave.

The analysis showed a big difference within the group. While some immobilities are unwilling, and the desire to leave for a more urban place is structural to their sense of the rural space, for others, staying is a proud decision related to their experience of rurality. This reflects what Hannam et al. (2006) argue, which is that both being mobile and immobile can entail some privilege or fall into distinct logics of power[2]. This section shows how both unwilling and desired immobilities negotiate and challenge perceived dominant discourses that privilege feminine subjectivities that leave. My analysis shows that stories of immobility are shaped by how women construct their lives in opposition to a life of leaving, by imagining migration, the city, and the potential urban life they could have had but did not..

6.1.1 Unwilling immobilities; the dreamt desire of living (in) another life

Some women wanted to leave their rural hometowns but were unable to due to family resistance. This chapter analyses the salient themes in the interviews of unwilling immobility as shaped by gendered expectations and responsibilities, a negative sense of place and the idealized imagination of the city and urban life, a symbol of escape, excitement, and progress. Working in complex interaction, these themes show how their senses of rural place shape their desired life mobilities, and the impossibility to leave their town reshapes a sense of rurality as a place to escape from.

[2] Despite issues of class wellbeing and education arise in the analysis some times, my participants were mostly reluctant to discuss these issues or explicitly frame their narratives through socioeconomic themes. This was due to the personal connections I had with them that emerge from the nature of social relations in rural places. I acknowledge that migrations are highly classed processes; who gets to go to university instead of working, under which circumstances or who gets to be supported by their parents to pay for another rent, or who can even dream of leaving, are central issues for rural-urban migrations. Further analysis would be done in those terms.

Judith (24) wanted to go to university in Barcelona: "I really wanted to leave Balaguer, I wanted to do new things, to live new experiences…" and:

> "Balaguer is like a routine, this will always be like that, you know what to do, where to go… Only tiny changes happen here… More than a small city, I believe this is a town".

Her sense of place was that it was too small in terms of leisure offer and people, in the sense that "having a life here means having a public life". Despite the generational difference, Roser (72) remembers what she felt feelings when she was young:

> "I wanted to go to live in Balaguer, because it was very boring to stay here, there was nothing here. You went out and only saw a couple of old ladies, nobody else. What would you do? You didn't do anything, there was nothing."

Ideas of smallness, nothingness, boredom, routine, and lack of excitement structure their sense of place and shape their desire to leave. Nevertheless, despite the contextual and age difference, they both experienced strong opposition and resistance from their families and, specifically, from their mothers, which prevented them from migrating to a more urban place.

Judit (24) remembers her despair and sadness when her parents gave her a "definitive *no*" when she said she wanted to move to Barcelona, arguing that the same degree was available in Lleida –a close city where she commutes from Balaguer– so she could continue to live in her parents' house. While the main reason was avoiding paying for extra rent, she suspects that personal reasons were hidden behind the economic argument: "I believe that my mother wanted to have me around her, at home (...) also because I helped her with the chores and the house". This testimony, as well as the one from Roser (72), shows that not only stories of migration are gendered, but also when looking at narratives; stories of staying are also gendered:

> "Since we had no land, we were not farmers, so my brother had to leave to find a job in a garage. Here, there were no garages, so he went to another

> town. (...) As a daughter and woman, I stayed at home to take care of my parents" (Roser, 72).

These stories of unwilling immobility reinforced an already adverse sense of the rural space as shaped by the construction of their life *in opposition to* an idealized and desired imagination of the city and the potential urban life they could have had but did not. Roser (72) did not want to move to Barcelona or Lleida, but to Balaguer, which is experienced as an urban locality in comparison to her town. She constructs her sense of her rural town together with her imagined sense of a more urban space: "you go on walks, you see shops, you keep yourself amused there by going out or to bars…". She reflected: "Here you can go for walks to, but there is nobody out, in Balaguer, there is always somebody you'll find". Judith (24) also shapes her narratives about lived rural dimension of place not only through her frustration about her unwilling immobility, but also in opposition to idealized imagined urban spaces, through narratives of progress:

> "I realized I was not progressing, I felt so trapped and locked in (...) like in a claustrophobic box. Every day was the same, I didn't see myself advancing, I just wanted to escape from here."

Like Roser (72), she talks about Barcelona by emphasizing those differential elements that she talks about positively, from the turmoil, to the racket and strong traffic noises: "it's so opposed to Balaguer, such a radical difference, that I believe I idealize it because it comes with the desire of escaping from here". Here, the comparison is interesting: Balaguer is perceived as urban and full of excitement for Roser (75) in comparison to her very small town, while for Judith (24) who lives there, it is conceived as a "town" and compared to more urban cities, like Barcelona.

Unwilling immobility, shaped by gendered expectations and the allure of urban life, reveals how rurality can shift from a place of origin to a symbol of entrapment, showing that the

inability to leave or life (im)mobility can profoundly reshape how women feel about rural places.

6.1.2 Willingly staying; challenging narratives about progress

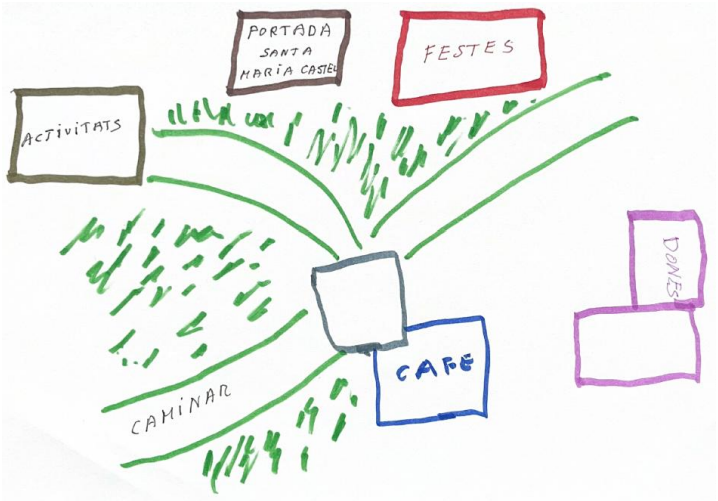
Unlike those experiencing unwilling immobilities, a positive sense of their rural towns and rural space was present in some of the participants' stories of staying, which were rooted in their desire to remain in their towns or region. Moreover, these were articulated as resistance to dominant discourses and societal pressures suggesting that women should leave rural areas, challenging narratives that cities are where progress is to be found for women.

A positive sense of place was central for the three women who spoke about not migrating as a personal decision. For Elvira (67), a strong place attachment characterizes her sense of place, along with an appreciation of rural life: "I'm from here, and I've been here all my life, and I love being here. Do you understand? I wouldn't trade this town for any place in the world." For her, close personal relationships with people from the village were the defining feature she did not want to give up, along with an intangible emotional connection to the place: "If I needed to leave here, I would die the day after!"

For Mercè (75), a deep attachment to her town and what is referred to as *vida de poble*—translating to "town life" and encapsulating the rural lifestyle—was central to her decision to stay: "I am from here, I love it here, I like the town, and I like the town life." Like Elvira, a certain pride in both their specific towns and the rural lifestyle is evident. At one point in the interview, she emotionally confessed: "It's priceless what we have here." When asked what she meant by "priceless," she mentioned tranquility and close relationships with people, "knowing everybody."

Figure 4. Elvira's visual representation of her town.

Figure 5. Mercè's mental map of her town.



The visual representation of their towns also focused on the social element of place. Elvira (67) was one of the few participants who drew people in her representation of place, and one of two people who drew people not representing specific individuals (like family members, friends, or partners), but just the people that structure what is understood as town life. Mercè's (75) perception of space, as represented through her map, similarly shows a clear understanding of space as a social relation. Her map captures those places that are social nodes around which her sense of rural place is structured, such as *festes* (festivities or

parties)—the local space where they celebrate town festivities—and *dones* (women), the place where the women's association meets.

By contrast, due to very traumatic personal experiences spatially connected to different public and private spaces in her town, Jana (22) has a very negative sense of place in the town she was born in, with a sense of place characterized by "disgust," "revulsion," and "rejection" toward spaces, tied to the same feeling toward the people there. Guided by a positive sense of rural space, she decided to move to another small town in the Ponent area, where her partner is from. Her sense of the locality is linked to a sense of rural space as a space of nature, not a locality or a town: "I like it here. The town… not the town itself, but the routes there are to clear my mind. I feel that this landscape… I just love it." Her representation of the town where she lives includes a painted house (the one she lives in) as a representation of her safe space—leaving the rest of the town unpainted—while she fills the landscape with colours.

Figure 6. Jana's visual representation of the town where she lives.

The three testimonies align with ideas of places as social relations (Massey, 1994), as they experience place through their experience of the social and personal relations embedded in them—either those positive (Elvira, 67; Mercè, 75) or negative (Jana, 22). In rural localities, characterized and constituted by what the participants call town life—strong personal connections and a sense of community—this might be even more salient.

Another central theme was the fact that their decisions to stay reflected a subtle resistance to prevailing discourses that equated women's progress with urban life and higher education in the city. By choosing to remain, they challenged expectations about where opportunity and advancement for them were supposed to exist.

For Elvira (67), the decision to stay meant giving up a rare privilege her family had offered her as a woman: the chance to attend university in Barcelona instead of Lleida. Unlike young men from the area, young women were forced to study in Lleida to be more easily "controlled" and kept "close to the family." To stay in Lleida was a desired choice to be able to live closer to her town and go back often: "When I was studying in Lleida, I wanted to keep living here. (...) For me it is as if I never left here."

Despite the different moment and age difference, both Mercè (75) and Jana (22) identify the existence of pressure for young women to leave rural areas for university, and thus progress. Their mothers' pressure, together with previous generations' stories of forced or unwilling immobility and hard experiences of rural life, became narratives to challenge. Mercè (75) was encouraged to leave by her mother, who could not go to university in the late 1940s as a woman from a working-class family, and was aware of the privilege she had in being able to leave—but told her mother she wanted to stay: "I was so clear about it." Jana (22) critically identifies and challenges those narratives about where progress is to be found for women:

> "This is a town mindset, everyone you talk to who lives in a very rural town will tell you: 'girl, you need to study, you need to go to college so you can escape from here'... And I think 'there are other ways'".

Going to university and finding a job is understood as "the way out" of rural areas for women; while sons are expected to inherit the land or the family business, women are expected to leave and build their lives elsewhere. Jana (22) also recognized her mother's pressure to go to university in Lleida and her disappointment when she quit to return to her village, making her feel: "my sister's life, who goes to university in Barcelona, will be better than mine."

Finally, it remains salient how, even for those women who did not want to leave and had a strong and positive sense of rural space and of rural lifestyle, these are still constructed and narrated in opposition to the city. Elvira (67) emphasized: "I didn't even think about a city, no way, never in a million years! (...)." Similarly, Mercè (75) said:

> "I didn't see myself in a bigger place, in a city. I used to like going to Barcelona to my cousin's place. But the second I got back to the village, I couldn't help but think, `It's so nice to be here!' (...). I still think about it now when I go to spend some time there… "Thank God I am back".

Other women chose to stay in their rural towns out of love and attachment to the place and lifestyle, and in doing so, resisted dominant discourses that equate progress—especially for women, in their own perceptions—with urban migration. By staying, they reconstruct rural space and their gendered rural identities, escaping the idea that women being victims of rurality constitutes the only narrative.

6.2 Escaping the town in the pursuit of another life in the city

The women who migrated from Ponent—all of them to Barcelona—present a more coherent narrative of their rural-urban emigration and senses of rurality and urbanity, based on an

ambivalent sense of rural place constructed in opposition to a positive sense of urban place, where opportunities and success are thought to be located. The themes analysed in this section are: the pursuit of better (or non-existent) educational and labour opportunities, the desire to leave home, the idealization of the city, and the naturalization of the migration process. These show how women's sense of rural place shaped their discourses about leaving their towns, but also their experiences of migrating to urban places as progress, reemphasizing certain ideas of rurality as empty, rigid, and hostile.

Educational and labour opportunities feature prominently in their narratives of leaving, often cited as the main reason for their departure, whether due to a perceived absence, lower quality, or inaccessibility of such opportunities. All the women interviewed who left Ponent did so in search of educational and professional paths they felt were either non-existent, limited, or of poorer quality—not only in their hometowns but also in nearby rural hubs or small cities where they had previously commuted for pre-university education.

Ariadna (34) and Berta (26) both studied a communication-related degree, a field they perceive as closely linked to urban life. Barcelona's perceived academic prestige and concentration of opportunities made it the obvious choice over Lleida: "After I decided I wanted to work in communication, this intrinsically led me to think about Barcelona, even though there is the same degree in Lleida" (Berta, 25). Her career later confirmed this choice, as she sees her success as tied to Barcelona's professional networks and media landscape. Similarly, Ariadna (34) recalls choosing Barcelona because, at that moment, the degree was only offered there, but also recognizes: "Maybe I was so excited [about the possibility of moving to Barcelona] that that's why I only looked for degrees that were in Barcelona."

Carla (38) also left to pursue education: "I was clear about wanting to leave (...). I wanted to study Music, so the only option was to leave." In the same vein, Teresa (72) explained that

her main motivation for moving to Barcelona was to study languages and become a draftsperson, believing that relocating to the city was "what was best for me." She later worked at the only bank that hired women at that time, eventually becoming branch chief. "It would not have been the same, for me, in Balaguer," she said, adding: "A woman's labour is her independence." Isa (62), who works in creative media, echoes this sentiment: "I would not have been able to develop my profession here (...), I thought, 'Where the hell am I going to find a job here?'"

For these women, leaving was closely tied to their professional advancement and personal fulfilment. Their narratives equate educational and labour opportunities—thus their success and satisfaction in personal and professional life—with urbanity, shaped by ideals of progress and the imagination of a less fulfilling life had they stayed. Their perceptions of rural and urban life are co-constructed, and a focus on change and contrast between rural and urban spaces is central to all their narratives:

> "I liked it because it felt different from here… This made me feel free." (Isa, 62)
>
> "I thought the city was different and I liked it; the fact that it was bigger, different, more people, more cars…" (Teresa, 72)
>
> "I was drawn to the feeling that Barcelona would offer many more opportunities to do different things, to meet people... A fantasy where you imagine everything will be perfect, but it indeed opened up a whole world of possibilities for me. (...) And I also really wanted to leave. That fantasy... I think it turned out to be pretty real" (Carla, 38)

Their desire to leave is co-constructed by their rural sense of place as lacking opportunity, and the idealization of what the city represents. Their decision to leave, along with their happiness and success in urban settings, reinforces their initial sense of rural spaces as lacking. This sharp opposition—linking educational and professional progress to cities—also applies to social and cultural progress. Rural spaces are often described as "small," "rigid," or

"conservative," and by leaving them, these women felt they were "progressing." Ahmed et al. (2003) propose that moving and migrating are processes of identity making and renegotiation, and McDowell (1999) argues that those processes imply "the renegotiation of gender divisions" (p. 2). In this sense, migrating allows them to create new gendered subjectivities in spaces that are conceptualized as less constraining for themselves—this constraint being explicitly related to gender norms for some of them (Berta, 25; Teresa, 72), though not for others (Ariadna, 34; Carla, 38; Isa, 62).

For Carla (34), a weak sense of attachment to her village became an incentive to leave—something to escape from: "I only had my family. I never had a group of friends, and maybe that was a motivation to leave (...). For me, the town was too small and oppressive." She talks about feeling "marked as different," "marginalized," and "always questioned, always looked at, because there is a town gaze," emphasizing the perceived dynamics of surveillance and social control.

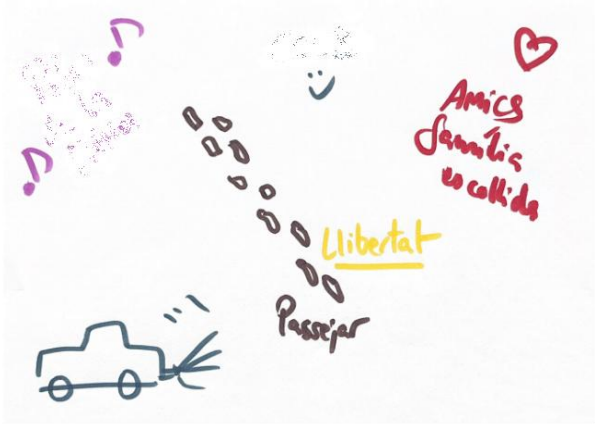
Figure 7. Carla's visual representation of her town.

Carla's (38) town is only represented through the drawing of her house (*casa*) with her family inside it, because, as she puts it, "the only thing I care about in that town is the house." Contrarily, the representation of Barcelona is not only figurative but contains words such as "freedom," "friends, my chosen family," and also the places where she has worked –which I

have edited so that are not identifiable– showing this group's strong identification with their professional success:

.

Figure 8. Carla's visual representation of Barcelona, edited by the author for privacy issues.



Contrarily, the representation of Barcelona is not only figurative but contains words such as "freedom," "friends, my chosen family," and also the places where she has worked, showing this group's strong identification with their professional success.

Teresa (72) said: "I saw it here as a more closed place, and I liked it much more in the city. I felt so good there." Specifically, she constructs her identity in opposition to the women who stayed:

> "The people I knew that stayed here, I saw how they did not progress, for the ideas they had and the objectives they had… For most of the girls my age, their main goal was to get married. And I had a boyfriend too! But that was not my life goal at all".

Similarly, Berta (26) narrates:

> "Since I was 15 or 16, I really felt like leaving here. For me, this felt so small and closed (...). In terms of ideology, thoughts… It is different. They are very close-minded, and I was very curious; I needed to get to know new

> realities. This newness they rejected, I embraced it. So I also needed new people to share that curiosity, those questions, those debates…".

She contrasts the openness about gender and sexuality in Barcelona with the rigidity of her hometown, where she is closeted as bisexual. Leaving allowed her to escape from this scenario, perceived as too small and restrictive for her curiosity.

Figure 9. Berta's visual representation of her town.

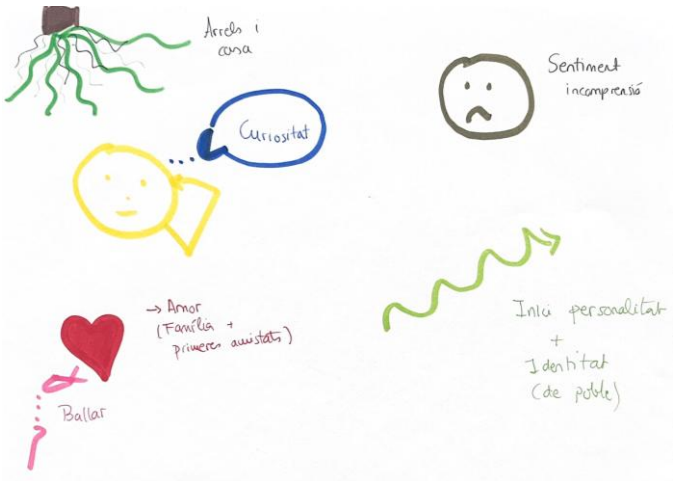
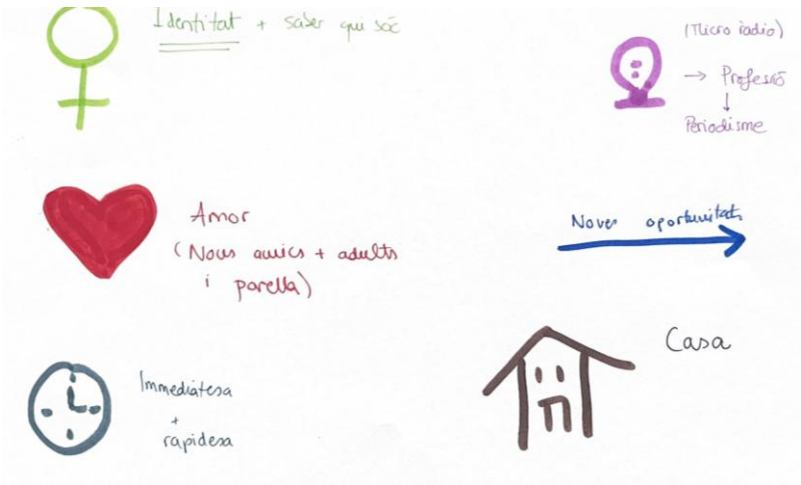


Figure 10. Berta's visual representation of Barcelona.



Berta (25) again thinks about towns and cities in contrast. The town represents "beginning of personality," "roots," and "home," but also "curiosity" and "incomprehension." The city is

connected to “identity,” “knowing who I am,” and a physical home where she envisions her future, while the town remains “a place to come back to, from time to time.”

In conclusion, the experience of the rural world as a more closed-minded, conservative, and sometimes oppressive place remained a central incentive for leaving, for women across different generations. While the rural is portrayed as “oppressive” (Carla, 38; Berta, 26), or “non-progressing” (Teresa, 72), the city is portrayed as a place of “freedom” (Isa, 62; Berta, 26; Carla, 38), and “opening up” (Teresa, 72; Isa, 62). This follows the trend identified in literature, by which patriarchal dynamics and the experience of rural places as restrictive contribute to women’s disengagement from rural life (Little, 1997; Camarero & Sampedro, 2008; Fernández, 2022).

In conclusion, for women who left and stayed in the city, migration was motivated by educational, professional, and personal opportunities perceived as not available in rural areas. The city is idealized as a place of freedom, success, and progress, especially compared to rural areas seen as rigid and oppressive. In this section, I have argued that, in leaving, women carry with them their experience of rurality to interpret and produce through that a new urbanity, and create new gendered subjectivities in spaces that are conceptualized as less constraining, negotiating and producing together a new urban identity and place.

6.3 Re-sensing the rural place after urban life

In this section, I analyse the narratives about the women born in the area of Ponent who migrated and lived in cities for a long time and then decided to come back to the towns they were born in or in other towns where they had a connection with. The incentives behind leaving are similar to the participants that left their towns –seeking educational opportunities or excitement about trying out a new life–, but their life mobilities show how experiences of

place shift over time, blending urban success with a return to rural meaning and identity. The constant renegotiation of rural and urban senses of place through their mobilities shaped challenging narratives of the rigidity in place identity, developing nuanced accounts of rurality and urbanity, and constant renegotiation of place and self-identity.

6.3.1 Leaving joyfully, coming back to settle down

In this subsection, I analyse those women who returned to rural life after years in the city, often due to personal or family reasons. Their return was not due to a rejection of urban life but a desire to ground them. The themes are structured as: incentives for leaving, the importance of highly mobile lives central for processes of homing while living in the city, and the renegotiation of their gender identity by returning to rural places to settle down. Marta (47) was born in a village of fewer than 300 people and later moved to a slightly larger town for school. While most girls her age aimed to go to Barcelona, she chose to study in Lleida, being that migration decision incentivized by the wanting to be in a more natural environment and a strong sense of rural space. Later, she moved to her "dream city," an urban yet smaller place, thinking Ponent lacked prospects in her field: "what am I going to do here?", but also admitting "maybe I chose that because I wanted to leave." Unlike others pressured to migrate, Marta emphasizes her own choice: Parents held those ideas of needing to leave for studying. For some women of my generation, they didn't let them stay here… But that wasn't my case—I wanted to leave."

Similarly, Clàudia (55) grew up in a remote countryside house, with little access to nearby towns. Without a local school, she boarded from age 5 to 18 before studying in Lleida. Developing a life there was never viable: "There was nothing, it is obvious, when I was young, I wanted the city." Though she only lived in the area on weekends and summers, the isolation and lack of services strongly shaped her early desire to leave:

> "If you wanted to stay there, you should work in agriculture, there is nothing else, and parents didn't want that for their kids. What my parents wanted me to do was to open myself… My parents wanted the best for me, and life there is hard."

Cristina (53) left Balaguer for Barcelona at 18 to go to university: "I wanted to leave from here, to Barcelona, to Madrid… I was very curious about knowing other places (...), I wanted to know what happens beyond here." Her desire to leave was not tied to a negative view of Balaguer, but to a curiosity towards other places, together with a lack of strong attachment. For them, similarly to the group of women who left, excitement about leaving and excitement about a more urban lifestyle, as opposed to a sense of the rural space as shaped by perceived lack of opportunities were central. Cristina (55) lived and worked in Barcelona until she was 30, and recalls her time there very positively, emphasizing that, for a young person, "what a city like Barcelona has to offer is incomparable."

Despite a positive sense of urban place, for them coming back was due to a desire of "settling in," thus related to a personal decision of living with moving in with their partners. In this sense, this return implies a renegotiation of gender relations (McDowell, 1999) and the negotiation of a new gendered and placed identity, where labour—both reproductive and paid one—are central for this processes. Moreover, the feeling of living "two lives," incentivized by living in "two places," also made them, and this fragmented or multifaceted sense of home shaped their decision to come back.

Cristina (55) opened a studio in Barcelona, but because most of her projects were based near Balaguer and her partner was from Balaguer, settling down there seemed "the most natural thing to do." Similarly, Clàudia (55) after some years working in Lleida and with the certainty that she did not want to go back to her isolated house, she decided to move to her partner's village, as it was a personal decision that implied the beginning of a family:

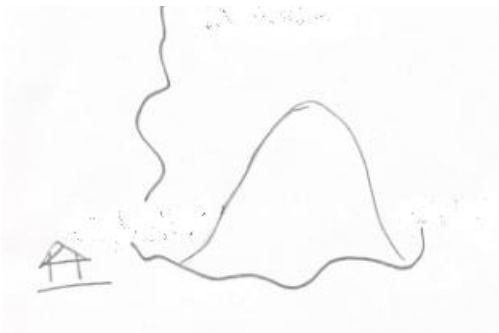
> "I came to live here, to my husband's town, because his mother lived here, and her aunt… You need to prioritize, so I quit my job when my first daughter was born (...). Having to take care of everyone, my daughters, my parents, his parents… Then his [referring to the husband] accident occurred and, of course I could not look for another job."

Marta's (45) return was motivated by personal reasons. After years of long-distance living with her husband and her mother-in-law becoming critically ill, she decided to come back, despite having to negotiate with herself:

> "I was living well there, earning a good living, but my head was here (...). I was earning good money after working hard to get my position. And my husband was the first one to say, 'Do not quit your profession to come back here'. But I felt I had to be here (...). And I wanted to be here."

They all narrate very mobile lives from the city where they lived to their hometowns or their partner's towns, which implied for them a change of their senses of place as shaped by this. Cristina (55) talks about having a "combined life" or "half-time life" between the two places, maintaining two apartments and two offices, while Marta (47) talks about "balancing two places, two homes." They all emphasize that their life was never fully based in the cities but was shaped by constant mobility between there, their hometowns and their partner's town (if it was not the same). This highly mobile life was reflected in the map that Marta drew:

Figure 11. Marta's mental mapping, edited by the author for privacy issues.



At the top of her map, she placed the small city where she built her professional career; on the right, her hometown, where her family lives; and on the left, a "house" representing what she calls her "base camp." Having already "moved and travelled a lot" and fulfilled her "professional ego," what she eventually longed for was stability. As she put it: "In my forties, I was excited about having a base camp, about saying, 'This is my home'" (Marta, 45). The lines connecting these places emphasize the roads and how movement was central to her sense of homing, grounding, and her overall experience of a highly mobile life. Yet, for them, this implied some renegotiations of their identities, not only in terms of gender but also in terms of the weight that professional life and success had in their subjectivities, and also a reshaping of their sense of rural space. This also meant challenging dominant narratives about rurality. For example, Cristina (55) says:

> "There wasn't a positive or romantic image about living in rural places, as there is now. What I used to get was: 'Oh, so you are leaving Barcelona? Are you insane?' (...). And it felt like you needed to convince people: 'You can also work there, you can do things there'. At that time, it was derogatory—there was this perception that in towns, cultural life, professional life… would be worse for you."

Similarly, Marta (45) said that coming back has been a change that implied "giving up my career, I was in a top position, making a good living." Contrarily, now she works in small municipal projects and says that her priorities have changed. Some elements that characterize her rural sense of place, such as "this closeness, being able to come home for lunch with my husband, being able to go for a walk with my friend after…" are highly valued positively. Briefly, the analysis of the incentives for their life mobility decisions of leaving and coming back those women show more contested, together with the co-construction of their senses of place, their identities, and their mobilities and narratives about those.

5.3.2 Ambiguous leaving, desiring coming back

Ares (23), Marina (24), and Lluïsa (67) all left their rural towns to pursue higher education in Barcelona, yet their decisions were shaped more by circumstance than by a strong desire to leave. Each of them maintained a strong attachment to their places of origin and to the social relations and more grounded lifestyle that characterise their senses of rural spaces.

Ares (23) explains that she would have preferred to study at the University of Lleida and continue living at her parents' house, but since her chosen degree wasn't offered there, she had to move, without any particular curiosity or excitement about big city life:

> "I had always been very home-loving and enjoyed living here in Lleida. Still, I liked the idea of leaving for a few years, knowing I could come back on weekends (...). Soon, I realized that living in Barcelona wasn't what I wanted in the long term."

Marina (24) says she left to study in a university in Barcelona, drawn by its perceived higher quality and prestige. She expresses ambivalence about urban life and avoids romanticizing it, unlike many other women who left:

> "I didn't have that urgency or strong desire to go to Barcelona that many of my girlfriends had. Nor did I feel any rejection toward Barcelona or phobia of urban life, which people often says we rural folks have."

Lluïsa (67) moved to Barcelona to study a health-related degree and, after graduating, she returned to her village to work, but could only find temporary substitute roles due to the limited number of permanent positions in the area. After three years of unstable work, she returned to Barcelona to pursue an MA with better career prospects, leading to a stable job, and she remained in the city from age 28 until retirement. She acknowledges how, for her, it was "frustrating to realize that she wouldn't be able to find stability here", showing a

common underlying understanding that migrations that are not forced, yet are still highly circumstantial.

These narratives challenge previous stories of migration that were articulated through narratives of progress and, contrarily, acknowledge a lack of great incentive or excitement. For example, instead of framing her move through either a romanticization of the city or a rejection of rural life, Marina (24) sees it simply as "the course of life that brought me there—not a dream, not a goal, not a rejection."

For these women, a more critical approach toward outmigration is tied to their sense of rural space, shaped by their social and lived experiences. This, in turn, influences how they understand and inhabit the city. Their strong desire to maintain life in their hometowns resulted in highly mobile lifestyles, aligning with the idea of place as a social relation (Massey, 1994), experienced through their relationships and social ties.

For all of them, leaving brought sadness at abandoning their social lives—associations, activities, hobbies, friends, and family. This led to returning home weekend after weekend. As Ares (23) put it, "all my life was here," and "my people lived here." Marina (24) similarly describes coming back every weekend, staying involved in local activities and associations, and feeling deeply rooted in her village due to her family and social networks. Lluïsa (67) also returned home each weekend, explaining that being in Barcelona left her feeling "out of place" and "discomforted" because others there had "their family and their friends."

As a result, they never felt they had fully left their villages, nor fully settled in Barcelona. Their rootedness produced a life of constant mobility. This on-going movement prevented them from truly experiencing Barcelona as "home," a feeling reinforced by the routines of returning. As Marina (24) explained, "my feeling was that there, I was only passing through, that I was coming from the outside." For her, the strain of this highly mobile life eventually

became unsustainable: “after a year, not the city but my life there started to become a site of suffering, a rejection, lack of will… It was exhausting.”

Unlike other participants, their rural sense of place did not necessarily influence their reasons for leaving but instead shaped how they experienced mobility and their enduring desire to return. Their narratives reflect a co-constitution of rurality, urbanity, and life mobilities, revealing the complex interplay between women’s sense of rural place, urban experience, and life mobilities. This is particularly evident in their non-romanticized views of urban space, constructed in contrast to their perception of the rural as home. As Ares (23) said:

> “All those people, public transport… It has its positive parts, you have near your house all kinds of supermarkets, shops, restaurants… But I prefer a more tranquil lifestyle, the one I always had here.”

Similarly, Lluïsa (67) told me about Barcelona “I don’t think it’s an ideal place for me, to live there (...) It feels very impersonal”, comparing it to her village, mostly valuing the town life and the value of the landscape: “life here is nicer, more tranquil”. She portrays her urban sense of place by characterizing urban life through the following anecdote:

> “Once I was going to get the metro, and I was running, like everyone else was doing so. And then I stopped and asked myself, *why are you running, if you are not in a rush?* There is some inertia in the city…”

Both Ares (23) and Lluïsa (67)’s sense of urban space is shaped by how they moved through it. As Lluïsa expressed at various points in the interview, she often felt “uncomfortable,” “overwhelmed,” and “exhausted” by urban public transport, which she needed to navigate daily life in the city.

Their positive sense of the rural—both in terms of lifestyle and social relations—and their more ambiguous or negative experiences of urban life are central to their narratives. Ares (23) values “tranquillity, living in my own home, no noises, no stimuli, and also being able to easily drive to a bigger town or city with my car…” Similarly, Marina (24) describes her

motivations for returning to her village by repeatedly contrasting the two places, framing one in relation to the other:

> "My needs, right now, are to have a calmer life, which I know that's what I have here and not in Barcelona, to be able to do things that satisfy me, go training, meet my people, feel welcomed, be satisfied at work".

For Lluïsa (67), her rejection of impersonal social relations in the city and her inability to feel fully grounded there reinforced her connection to her hometown, which she consistently identified as her true home. All of this led her to say: "I always knew that I would come to retire here!"

This sense of rural space—shaped by strong social ties and personal relationships, deeply bound to lived experience and emotional attachment—is also reflected in the visual representations created by Marina (24) and Ares (23).

Figure 12. Marina's visual representation of the place where she is from.

Instead of focusing solely on her town, Marina draws it as a small part of a much larger rural landscape, one that "connects her with the mountains, the fields, and is crossed by the river." As she described the place she was drawing, she spoke about it in deeply personal terms, linking elements of the landscape—like the river and the mountains—not only to her identity

but also to specific memories. She recalled walking in the mountains, gazing at the fields while visiting her grandparents in the countryside, and how these experiences continue to shape her sense of self.

Figure 13. Ares' visual representation of her town.

When I asked Ares (23) to draw, she picked a spot that held an emotional childhood memory and drew how the village is seen from that spot, showing how her construction of rurality is emotional, tied to personal memories and experiences, and grounded in the relationality of social connections.

The stories of these women show that they left not out of desire but due to a lack of alternatives. Their migration is ambivalent, emotionally complex, and not tied to a dream of the city, showing how both their positive sense of rurality and their more ambivalent sense of urbanity work together to narrate their stories about leaving and staying.

6.4 Discussing rurality and life mobilities

The analysis reveals that rurality is constructed through diverse and often contradictory discourses, which both shape and are shaped by different forms of life mobility. Among women who stay, rural place-making tends to centre either on a strong yet unrealized desire

to migrate—framing the rural as a space of boredom and emptiness—or on a proud commitment to remain, rooted in a sense of close-knit social ties and a tranquil way of life. For women who migrate, the rural is more often portrayed as small, restrictive, and lacking opportunity, in contrast to the city, which is imagined as a space of freedom, progress, and self-actualization. Meanwhile, women who return to Ponent after migrating introduce further nuance to this contested narrative. Their experiences challenge idealized notions of urban life and revalue rurality as a legitimate and desirable choice—one that offers tranquility without necessarily foregoing wellbeing or opportunity.

Through this rich thematic analysis, I argue that the various perceptions of rural space give rise to unique narratives and experiences surrounding life mobility. These experiences are deeply influenced by individuals' senses of place, which itself are transformed through encounters process of migration. My contribution lies in highlighting how women carry their rural sense of place when moving to urban areas, actively shaping and reinterpreting urbanity through this rural lens. While Tolia-Kelly's (2006) argues that migrants bring tangible and imagined elements of their original place to reshape their new environment, I propose that senses of place are carried and central for reinterpreting and producing new spaces.

In conclusion, despite femininity and rurality having been traditionally connected to immobility (Bock, 2017), my participants' narratives challenge static and traditional views of rurality and gender identities in places, showing a much more nuanced, complex, and contested vision of places in line with what Massey (1994) argues for. This work reveals how women's narratives embody a dynamic co-creation identities alongside their migration journeys, highlighting the intricate relationship between these spaces and the formation of both self and place.

7. Rurality as a void

I was walking through the quiet streets of one of the towns I visited, being taken to see how the traditional washing place where Roser (72) played around as a kid while her mother cleaned their mattress, had been demolished and substituted by some picnic tables so the visitors could sit. She told me:

> "There is nothing to do. It is good to have your house here because the landscape is beautiful, but there is nothing here, no shops, no people, nothing. Only one bar, and that's all. And the church! And not even the priest comes here! Once a month, he comes, and only two or three people attend. Sometimes the priest left without conducting the mass because there was nobody there."

What kind of place is this, where a priest attends church once a month and leaves without any audience? What does it mean for a place to be nothing, to have nothing? What is the content of this nothingness, if I can see houses; I can see people, if I can walk a street, if I can observe those mountains?

This chapter delves into a common discourse that repeatedly appeared during my interviews and walks: emptiness, lack, and nothingness. I was surprised by how this characterization aligned with what Massey (1994) called a conservative, static, and essentialist understanding of space.

This concept of space is criticized because it is based on dualisms that oppose the spatial as an absence, as a lack, in opposition to the dynamism of the temporal. Further, those dichotomies code time—associated with progress, movement, rationality—as masculine, and space—associated with stasis, nature, and the feminine (p. 6). While in her argument space is treated indistinctly, I believe that not all space is equally conceptualized as a lack, but adding a rural-urban perspective helps to further this argument.

In the previous chapter, my contribution lay in the diverse meanings that the rural has for women with different life mobilities. This chapter tries to delve more deeply into rural space, advancing its nuances and contested character.

In this chapter, I analyse how rural spaces are materially sensed, lived, and represented, following Lefebvre's (1991) and Halfacree's (2006) ideas. My analysis shows how the dichotomies lack-abundance, stasis-motion, death-life, closed-open—despite being very present in my participants' narratives—are not used indiscriminately to refer to all spaces, but rather to rural spaces in opposition to urban ones.

Although the rural is described as a place of lack—identifying material processes of depopulation, lack of opportunities—closeness instead of openness, stasis instead of movement, and death instead of life, these narratives are negotiated, nuanced, and contradicted by the same women through their experiences and discourses of rurality.

While rural places are simultaneously perceived and imagined as empty, the strength of community life is vivid and persistent in the narratives; while rural spaces are perceived as motionless, they are lived through their highly mobile lives; and while they are perceived as dead places, the liveliness of the landscape as a site of attachment is a persistent theme.

7.1 Material ruralities: emptied places of lack, nothing, and nobody

Places and spaces of lack, empty spaces, spaces where nothing and nobody are located… This perceived material reality structured the imagination of the places where my participants live or used to live. My thematic analysis suggests that, mostly, this lack arises from observing the processes of depopulation as led by people they have been abandoned by, such as neighbours, friends, and relatives, and also by the perceived lack of consumption and labour opportunities.

This is especially persistent for those women who have always lived in rural areas—both those who desired to stay and those who desired to leave—and also for those who left, working as an incentive to escape the place.

Nevertheless, as is argued, that emphasized lack is challenged in other instances, especially through their lived experiences of place, forcing them to have lives that are always in motion. Daily mobilities emerge as a key practice to negotiate rurality, as is mostly seen through their mobility diaries, and activities such as being constantly in motion are part of their lived experience of rurality.

7.1.1 Nobody here, everyone is leaving; depopulation as a loss

Rural places are described as "empty," places where there is "nobody," "no activity," and "no movement," which is recurrently mentioned by almost all of my participants. Rural exodus appeared to be central to women's sense of rural space, especially for those who stayed and experienced the processes by which the people who used to surround them decided to leave their towns. In this sense, one's own and others' lives and migrations are central to my participants' sense of place.

This topic was especially present in the participatory walking with the interviewees that took place inside the towns. For example, during my participatory walk with Roser (72), while walking past houses, she said things like: "In this house, there are only people on weekends," "Here there is nobody anymore," or "People are dying and houses remain empty."

This conversation was replicated in almost exact terms during my participatory walk with Mercè (75), who signalled houses and said: "She never comes around," "This is empty."

On our way, we encountered an old couple who were going on a walk. The concern about depopulation was the first topic that emerged, and a woman desperately told my participant: "We were now looking at the houses, and I thought, Jesus! It's a shadow of what it used to be…" or "There is nobody here, nobody."

Interviewees' direct interaction with the materiality of place, and specifically houses, made them focus their discourses on who lives, used to live, or owns but no longer visits the houses we encountered. This led to the topic of a perceived lack of population in the village, the loss of inhabitants from their towns to more urban places. Here is where this lack and emptiness come from—the life mobilities of other people.

Figure 14. Photograph of neighbouring houses.

Source: Photograph by author, April, 2025.

This picture I took during one of the participatory walks, shows the contrast between a standardized "En venda" (*For sale*) sign and the artisanal sign that households in rural places of Catalonia had in the door with the *nom* o *renom de la casa*, the "renown" of the

household[3], sign of the house name used as an informal identifier for the families (see Iszaevich, 1980).

. Figure 15. Photograph of a kid playing alone.

Source: Photograph by author, April, 2025.

All the women who lived in smaller towns, described the processes by which rural areas become weekend or holiday places, where people and families return either every weekend if they live in nearby rural poles or small cities or during vacation; or even places with growing tourist attraction[4].

Dynamics of depopulation and senses of emptiness are also perceived yet experienced different by those women who migrated. Adriana (34), who lives in Barcelona, admitted:

[3] On an ethnographic note that I believe to be explicative of social relations that characterize the towns of the area, when I was doing participatory walking in one of the towns of a participant, the town where my great-grandmother was born, we encounter an old woman from the town. She quickly saw that my participant was working with somebody who did not belong to the town and, after a second glance, she recognized my origins because a resemblance with my anncestor nobody before mentioned to be: "You are from *Cal Pantano*, right?", she guessed correctly. Cal Pantano ("the Swamp Household") was the name of the house where my great-grandmother was born in.

[4] Some participants, like Elvira (67) critically engages with these people: "I guess they are leaving because they think that, if they live in a bigger city, they will have more opportunities, there are more shops and all these… But once good weather is back, they come here to stay all summer. Every weekend, they come back".

> “Sometimes they tell me, yes, so-and-so owns this house, and I don’t know where that is. I should know, because it’s a village and we all know each other and all that, but… (...) The name sounded familiar, but I couldn’t place it”.

This void is not only a matter of those people who leave, but also the loss perceived in this—a loss of people that is related to a change in the place as a social relation. Isa (62), who lives in Barcelona but still comes back recurrently because all her family lives there, told me:

> "Now it’s changed a lot. I remember when I was a child, all the doors, the entrances, everything was open. There was so much life… (...) The kids, we all played, either inside one entrance or the other. And now life is like… it’s closed off, the place of connection is lost."

She reflects on the loss of some common spaces shared by neighbours, like the church or the streets on summer nights, which are now less shared. Others also share this feeling of loss of community.

Figure 16. Photograph of a man sitting alone in the church on Good Friday.

Source: Photograph by author, April, 2025.

Cristina (55), who lives in Balaguer, a place that is being urbanized and growing: “Balaguer had changed a lot, you used to know everyone, you know… And now, it is growing,

everything changes." This loss of inhabitants and of certain idealized community life is, as explored in the next subsection, contradicted by their descriptions of strong rural communities.

Rural places as places of lack and emptiness related to those depopulation and repopulation dynamics seem key for the development of senses of place. For the women who stayed in rural places—especially those who still live in the same places where they were born—others' mobilities (most of the time, their own families') are key for developing this sense of the rural as a place of exodus, emptiness, and lack. But this lack also constitutes a reason for leaving for those women who escaped it, as was observed in incentives for migration explored in the last chapter; with women desiring to live in urban places, characterized as having "more people," "more activity," "more things happening," and other similar expressions already discussed in section 5.2.

Nevertheless, this narrative about emptiness is contradicted by the centrality of rural communities and social relations as a central element of their experience of rural space, in line with Massey's (1994) concept of space as a social relation.

7.1.2 Rural places as vivid rural communities

The idea that rural places are "empty" derives partly from the material reality of depopulation. Nevertheless, this narrative comes into conflict with how women characterize rural places as small communities with strongly connected social ties. Knowing everybody, greeting everybody, briefly stopping and chatting with people or mutual aid are central topics in most of my participants' senses of rurality and part of the so-called rural lifestyle, town life, or "rural identity" (Ariadna, 34).

> "You might like it or not, but we all know each other. (...) If you go out, you'll constantly be saying *hello* and *goodbye* to people. That's the beautiful

> part, in a city it's much more individualistic (...). You know that if you ever have a problem, you can knock on a neighbour's door" (Ariadna, 34)
>
> "In the village, you know everyone. That's really important, because in villages there are good people and bad people, but you already know who they are, because you all know each other so well. It feels like a family[5]" (Elvira, 67).

Nevertheless, this comes together with ideas of smallness, closeness, as well as the perception of dynamics of social control and surveillance. For example, Judith (24) says:

> "Having a private life is almost the same as having a public one, everyone knows everything. (...) When you go out into the street, it feels like there's this constant invisible pressure, you know that person knows what happened to you".

Similarly, Jana (23) talks about feeling "the neighbour watching through the window." Carla (38) explained to me how her parents, who were the first civil marriage in her town, "could hear the shutters opening so people could stare through them" and uses this metaphor to describe the social control she feels: "This is the feeling I am describing." Issues of beauty standards, sexual life, and queer sexualities emerge as receiving special, especially noted by my youngest participants[6]. This social control and certain rigidity in gender norms are specifically faced by the participants. For example, Isa (62) described feeling judged, in her town, as a single woman, "maybe you don't want to obey, that's why you are alone". Marta (45) describes the pressure received because she does not want to have children:

> "There is another unwritten rule that is quite common in villages, and one I've been a victim of: women who *decide* not to become mothers are labeled as women who *couldn't* become mothers. (...)' It's also a kind of rule that maybe goes more unnoticed in a city."

[5] Other participants, such as Ariadna, also describe it as a "family".

[6] Youngest participants, specifically Judith (24), Jana (22), Berta (25) and Ares (22) raised issues of gender and sexuality being critical and explicit about the role of gender rigid norms and double standards towards women, which is related to belonging to a generation with more access to feminist values. Most of the times, older participants are less explicit or conscious about how they formulate those issues, but still describe discriminatory and violent situations specifically targeted towards women, queer people or non-white people, as well as the existence of rigid gender norms.

Knowing each other can lead to women's identity be constructed always in related to others, and more normally masculine others, such as partners:

> "I like not being *the daughter of*, not being from, ' not being 'the wife of' — I really like that. (...) People might know nothing about me, but they know about my family, my parents, my husbands –because I have had two!– Over time, you manage to deal with it, but still, it really affects me." (Cristina, 55)[7]

Some participants think there is still more hostility toward women, with issues of misogyny, racism, and homophobia arising in various conversations, for example in jokes or casual remarks. Jana (22) shared that she received some "jokes" from old men at the bar when she was sharing a coffee with her partner, implying she should be at home having lunch. Ariadna (34) also acknowledges the bar as a highly masculinized space where certain comments and jokes are permitted. While some identify small and rural places' people as more closed-minded or restrictive, these narratives are nuanced by participants:

> "I don't want to fall into *clichés*, but it's clear that if you've stayed in a village and haven't experienced other realities, it's normal to be more reluctant to get to know them." (Berta, 25)

> "People from villages are often a bit more closed off (…) It's not that I think it's more misogynistic than in cities, but I do think that in a smaller place, where everything and everyone is more concentrated, these things tend to stand out more, you know?" (Judith, 24)

These narratives identify certain closeness or rigidity as related to rural communities, but do not necessarily thing those delve from an essential rural identity, but from the context of which social relations happen: the fact that people know each other, that things are more connected or that there is less diversity. Other participants directly challenge those discourses that portray as more traditional and restrictive those areas, such as Cristina (55): "of course people are misogynistic, but not more than in a city".

[7] This echoes a sentence from Berta (25), who left to a city, in part, because she desired to construct her individual identity without restrictions related to perceived social norms: "Here, I have always been his daughter. Moving to Barcelona, let me be Berta, which is great!"

Despite this tension, there is a generally positive value attributed to what is called "village life" where social relations with neighbours, presence in public and leisure spaces, and participation in social rituals are considered essential elements of rurality.

7.1.3 All this stillness; lack of jobs, leisure and services

Another subtheme that was central for them was their experience of scarcity of opportunities here, mainly in terms of jobs but also regarding consumption and leisure options. As already explored in the previous chapter, the idea that rural areas have fewer educational and labour opportunities is central to narratives about life mobilities and is the main reason why most of my participants migrated to more urban spaces.

The general narrative among women who stayed is the perception of scarce opportunities, especially aggravated for women due to the importance of the agricultural sector in the area, particularly in small towns. For example:

> "If you want to find something, whatever you do… but they are very… rural jobs. If you want to work in your village and you are a woman, you will probably end up cleaning other people's houses (...). I would not go to a pork farm" (Jana, 22).

Similarly, Roser (75), who stayed, notes that women left more because: "There was nothing here if you did not have some land." Despite lived and imagined dimensions of space operating together to construct these ideas, they are partly contradicted by the material and practical experiences of those women who, despite holding these discourses, studied, got jobs, worked, or are retired while living in the same area where they were born, such as Jana (22) and Roser (75) themselves, as well as those who decided to come back and work there.

A common idea is that making a life for yourself "depends on you" (Jana, 23; Cristina, 55; Marta, 45). For example, Cristina (55) compares her labour opportunities in Barcelona and in Balaguer, saying: "In my case, I have more clients here," while Ares (23) states that, in

relation to her job prospects, "there is plenty of opportunity." Women who stayed and especially those who came back, proving that a life here is possible and desired, actively challenge those ideas in their narratives but also through their lived experience of rurality.

Mobility diaries are central for collecting the lived experience of place as tied to material sustainability. Through their analysis, we observe the importance of daily mobilities—and specifically commuting to rural poles where economic and job opportunities are located—for my participants to sustain themselves materially. Out of the seven women who live in Ponent and are formally working—excluding informal care labour, which they all do—only one works fully in her town (Balaguer, the more urban), two have offices in Balaguer but need to be on the move, while the three who live in more rural towns and are working need to commute or have jobs that require daily travel to other towns. Pursuing educational and labour opportunities necessarily implies daily mobilities and driving to other municipalities.

Nevertheless, daily mobilities are incorporated in their lives as naturalized processes, and driving to get to work is portrayed as "easy" (Cristina, 55), "the most normal thing to do" (Elvira, 76), or "it implies nothing" (Jana, 24). For example, Elvira (67) said, "When I finished the degree, I decided that I would find a job around here and commute every day." Similarly, Ares (23) says, "Being able to drive whenever I need it and go to the city—I prefer to have my house in a tranquil place and drive there instead of living there."

Daily mobility is a naturalized necessity to pursue work and educational opportunities for my participants living in the rural world. Because this is precisely what allows them to live in their towns, but also escape them when all those felt lacks seem unbearable, daily mobility is key but taken for granted, as it is a valuable resource to navigate those material lacks and negotiate the available opportunities that may not be present in their localities but are present in the rural area they perceive as the space they inhabit.

7.2 Static places lived in motion

Metaphors that mobilize dichotomies such as stasis-movement and life-death operate in women's sense of rural place through their sensed, lived, and imagined experiences, shaping the perception of rural places as spaces of lack. Rural places are described as static, without "movement" or ongoing activity.

The lack of movement and change is linked to the idea that there is "nothing" in rural spaces, including in terms of social and leisure activities. All my participants expressed this in similar ways: "there's nothing to do" (Roser, 72), "there is not much going on" (Carla, 38), "there is not a lot of activity" (Judith, 24). These ideas often merge into complex forms, combining notions of inactivity, immobility, and stagnation, sometimes relating these perceptions to issues of loss and depopulation:

> "Balaguer will always be Balaguer, all things are already seen, where you can go, what you can do… (...) Change is minimum, it feels so small for people when it comes to leisure options" (Judith, 24)

> "The cinema closed, the dance ended, because people stopped going, people were leaving. People didn't go anymore; once they had cars, they left. The same happened with the shops and everything else. Cars made people go here and there, they moved around, and then the village life… it was a loss" (Mercè, 75).

The inaccessibility to satisfactory educational and job opportunities leads women living in rural areas to be constantly on the move or to migrate. But also, this missing "activity" they are seeking in terms of consumption, leisure activities, or connecting with other people is central to that loss. In the mobility diaries, we observe how the women that currently live in the area—especially those who do not live in Balaguer but in smaller towns—frequently leave their towns to go to bars and restaurants, meet friends and family, access sports facilities, and conduct all types of leisure activities, including gymnastics, volunteering, and training for older people. Consumption is also central and includes mobility, from going to

the supermarket in Balaguer or other rural poles if those are closer, to even having day trips to Lleida, Barcelona, or other cities to go to the theatre and buy clothes.

Again, the imagined rural place enters in contradiction with the lived rural place, where women are in constant motion in their daily practices of mobility to develop their lives, shaping their lived dimension of rural place as a place always left and returned to, as a place to return to and live in, but not as a place where to be active.

7.3 Dead places surrounded by the most lively landscapes

Throughout this chapter, I analysed various metaphors and conceptualizations of rural spaces as spaces of lack and emptiness instead of abundance, closeness instead of openness, and stasis instead of movement. All these collide into the conceptualization of rural spaces as dead and lifeless in the narratives of women. These narratives, especially held by those women who left and partly explain that migration, are also held by women who live here. Roser (72) calls it "such a dead thing," Carla (38) describes it as "having such little life" and "a dead town; there is not a lot going on there," Judith (24), who lives in Balaguer, calls it "quite a dead place," and Berta (25) says "not a very lively town." This deadness is related to the topics already covered in this chapter: the sense of loss, depopulation, and the lack of leisure options.

In this context, I believe the theme of the specific rural and natural landscape of the area—a consistently positively characterized element of rurality by all my participants—is central. The landscape is described as full of life and movement. For example, Jana (22) says:

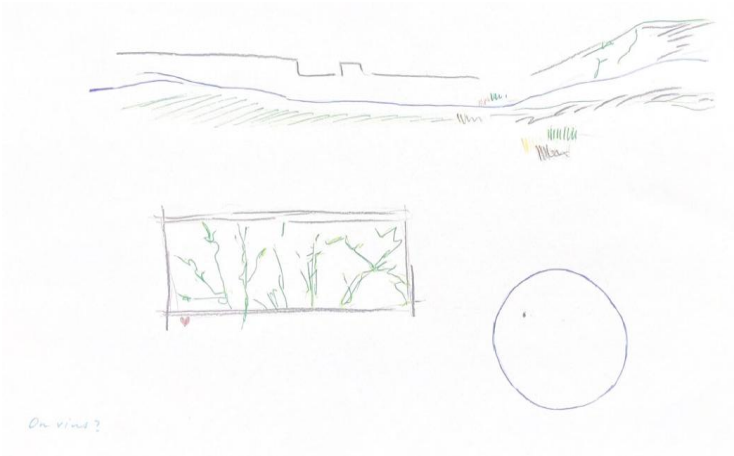
> "I would not recommend that you come to live here (...) You can have a rural life, but the place determines you in the sense that there is not much to do. There are a lot of routes and paths, that's true… But nothing else".

Similarly, Judith (24) says, “the city itself is not the best postcard you can have, but the surroundings compensate for it.” Landscape, which goes beyond the limits of towns or villages, offers a way to understand rural places as more total and hybrid spaces, and advances a way of thinking about places beyond localities. The “surroundings,” especially when transited by the participants either walking, running, biking, or driving through them—activities central to filling the lack of leisure options for all my participants—are key for their sense of rural space, proving again the importance of daily mobilities for place-sensing.,Cristina (55) says:

> “This landscape places you geographically in the world, doesn’t it? If someone asked, ‘Where are you?’ I’d say, I’m in the plain, but just where the Pre-Pyrenees start, and I’m in a town very shaped by the river landscape. I mean, this is my landscape. (...) It’s very hard for me to separate Balaguer from all this surrounding environment, for me it’s the same thing, that’s the way I feel it (...). I think I’m from this plain where the Pre-Pyrenees begin, where a river runs through, where there’s this kind of weather and these fields.”

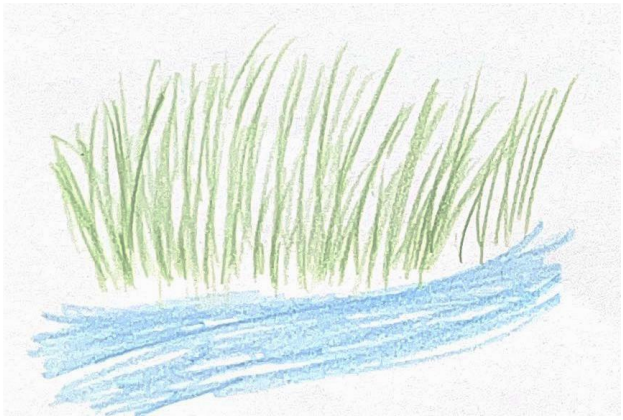
For Cristina, it is the landscape what attaches her to a place and what defines her senses of place, but also her identity. That is represented through her visual representation:

Figure 17. Cristina’s visual representation of the place where she lives.



Similarly, when I asked Marta (45) to represent "the place she is from", she drew an abstract representation of a natural and landscape formed by green fields and a river, and told me: "everywhere I lived, that is what I have always seen".

Figure 18. Marta's visual representation of the place where she is from.



Mountains, rivers, and fields are the main elements that appear in their memories and imaginations of the place. My participants do not only belong to their towns -which they do proudly, most of them– but also to a landscape. Nature appears as a central element for women's definitions of rurality and their experiences of place sensing and experiencing. Jana (22) says: "This landscape… I love it, I am just so drawn to it. It makes me want to go out, and I know that when I am there, I will be okay". Roser (71) states:

> "I sit in my balcony, every day, and I look at the landscape, every day. And I think: 'When I die, who is going to sit here? Who is going to be here and look at this if my children don't come back?' It is sad. I say to myself: 'Who is going to be here and look to these ranges, to these mountains?'"

This sentence reinforces the centrality of landscape and its life, showing the emotionality and strong identity that landscape has to the development of a sense of the rural place. When I asked Roser (72) to draw her town, she quickly drew the silhouette of this view she sees from her window; the mountains and the water:

Figure 19. Roser's visual representation of her town.

Landscape not only challenges their focus on the rural place as a dead place by bringing values of liveliness and nature, but also brings issues of motion and mobility. In contrast to the static and lifeless human-built architectural landscape, the natural landscape is conceptualized with motion by my participants:

> "This big river next to it that is born here, the trees, the leaves… It has some motion. Once you get inside it, it is stressful; narrow and steep streets, no light gets inside it" (Jana, 23).

> "I have always liked the river. Water holds some energy, some life. And having this here, being able to swim in the river, to walk next to it, to the mountain, that holds some life too" (Lluïsa, 67)

The lived experience of place is closely related to being moving through the pathways to get from the urbanized rural localities, to the nature, and walks and runs constitute an important. Through those, the perceived dead is faced, and attachment, emotionality and perceptions of nature as lively and in motion serve to face that emptiness that is sensed as their space.

7.4 Negotiating rural space as a lack

In this chapter, I explored how women often describe rurality as a space defined by absence or void; an empty, lifeless, static, and unchanging place. These perceptions, which resonate with traditional conceptualizations of space as lack or opposition to time and progress (Massey, 1994), are highly contested. These dualisms coexist alongside and are challenged

by women's everyday realities of high mobility and on-going negotiations with social expectations and material conditions.

I argue that rurality is shaped in complex and sometimes contradictory ways through women's presence, movement, and narratives. While rural areas may be imagined as lacking or inert, women's accounts reveal vibrant community ties, dynamic daily routines, and a lasting emotional attachment to the natural landscape, which together complicate simplistic notions of rural emptiness.

8. Conclusion

Rural areas and communities are facing processes of depopulation and rural-urban migration that challenge their sustainability. This thesis has provided an original feminist geographical approach to better comprehend this phenomenon and its gendered character. It has explored why women leave the rural, but also why women live the rural, through a geographic perspective to study how their sense rural places and how they undergo different life mobilities.

This thesis has demonstrated that rurality, rather than being a static or homogeneous category, is a dynamic and contested space actively constructed through women's lived experiences and life mobilities. By analysing the narratives of women who stayed, left, or returned to rural areas, I have shown that rural space is produced and reproduced through women's live and daily mobilities and their own identity negotiations through that. For women who remain, rurality is often framed either as a space of lack for those who unwillingly stay -empty, boring, hostile- or as a meaningful site of attachment and community for those who decide to live there. Women who migrate tend to construct a more binary opposition between rural and urban, positioning the rural as restrictive and the city as a site of opportunity, autonomy, and growth. Those who return to rural areas introduce the most complex and nuanced perspectives, challenging idealized representations of both rural and urban life, suggesting instead a relational understanding in which place and identity are continuously negotiated and redefined.

This analysis has been deepened in the second analytical chapter, by studying a common narrative through which rural is described as a place of lack, closeness instead of openness, stasis instead of movement, and death instead of life. Nevertheless, these narratives are contradicted and negotiated through material strategies, imaginations and lived senses of

space by the same women. While rural places are simultaneously perceived and imagined as empty, the strength of community life is vivid and persistent in the narratives; while rural spaces are perceived as motionless, they are lived through their highly mobile lives; and while they are perceived as dead places, the liveliness of the landscape as a site of attachment is a persistent theme.

While this study offers valuable insights into gendered rural mobilities, it is not without limitations, which point to important directions for future research. Although dimensions such as sexuality, class, and educational background emerged in the participants' narratives and were acknowledged where possible, this thesis did not engage with them in depth. Gender is produced spatially in intersection with other axes of identity—including race, class, and sexuality—in ways that are complex and mutually constitutive. These dynamics should be further explored. Future research would benefit from adopting a more explicitly intersectional framework to critically examine how multiple forms of social positioning shape experiences of rurality and mobility.

In conclusion, women's narratives complicate essentialist associations of femininity and rurality as immobile identities. Instead, they reveal how movement and rootedness are not opposites but interconnected practices through which identities and spaces are mutually shaped and negotiated. Drawing on feminist geography and mobility studies, I expect to have contributed to furthering relational and anti-essentialist understanding of spaces and places, and specially, of rural spaces, generally essentially associated with stasis. Rural spaces are not merely backdrops to demographic decline to which women are victims, but are co-created by women's identities in constant motion.

Appendices

Appendix I. Mobility diary sample; Catalan version (submitted to participants) and English version.

Em seria de gran ajuda que, fins on sigui possible, recullis un **diari de mobilitat** per recollir dades sobre com et mous a través del lloc diàriament, trobaràs un exemple més endavant. Aquestes dades seran anonimitzades i la informació sensible sobre llocs i hores exactes només la llegiréjo. Entenc que pot semblar massa feina però no cal que siugi detallat ni llarg, i potser només cal que hi pensis uns minuts quan arribis a casa o uns segons durant el dia.

Ppodria incloure informació com: data, horaris aproximats de sortida i arribada, per què et mous, manera de moure's, companyia i altres pensaments o sentiments. Pots ser tan creativa com vulguis i incloure el que vulguis, o si estàs ocuapada o hi ha coses que no vols compartir no passa res.

Podeu decidir com de detallada i completa la informació que voleu proporcionar-la, i quant voleu compartir; ser més concisa, menys, o fer-ho durant més dies. Idealment, agrairia que poguessiu recollir uns 5-7 dies, incloent dies setmanals i de cap de setmana. No heu d'incloure hores exactes si no podeu o no voleu fer-ne un seguiment. Pots apuntar-ho en un paper, a les notes del mòbil de manèra esquemàtica, enviar-me un àudio al final del dia per explicar-m'ho…

EXEMPLE.

Dilluns, 30 de març:

Vaig teletreballar. La meva parella va portar els nostres fills a l'escola. Em vaig quedar a casa tot el dia excepte quan vaig sortir a passejar pels voltants dels camps del costat de casa de 18:00 a 18:40. Feia sol i se sentia bé.

Dimarts, 1 d'abril.

Vaig agafar el cotxe i vaig sortir de casa (Bellcaire) a les 8:10 aproximadament per portar el meu fill a l'escola del poble, el vaig deixar a les 8:15, i després vaig portar la meva filla Laura a la guarderia Patufet a Balaguer. Vaig aparcar i la vaig deixar allà cap a les 8:30.

Vaig anar a la meva oficina (Passef de Blg) i vaig arribar-hi a les 8.40, no entro fins les 9. Va sortir de l'oficina a les 15:30, va anar caminant fins al supermercat que hi ha al costat i vaig comprar una mica. Vaig recollir la Laura a la guarderia a les 16:00 (la meva parella va recollir en Joan i el va portar a casa).

Dia esgotador. Vaig arribar a casa a les 17:00 i em vaig quedar allà fent tasques i descansant la resta del dia.

Dimecres, 2 d'abril.

Igual que ahir, però sense anar a comprar després de la feina.

I kindly ask you to conduct **mobility or time-space diaries** to gather data on the way you move and experience the place daily. This diary could include those, and others: date, approximate timings of leaving and arriving, reason for moving, way of moving, company, and other thoughts or feelings associated with it. Feel free to be as creative or reflective on it as desired. Find below an example of the type of information that would be useful for the researcher, but please do not feel limited by this format.

You can decide how detailed and complete the information you want to provide it, and how much you want to write. You do not have to include exact times if you cannot or don't want to keep track of them.

EXAMPLE.

Monday, 30th of March:

I teleworked. My partner drove our children to school. I stayed home all day except to when I went out to have a walk around the surroundings of the fields next home from 18:00 to 18:40. It was sunny and felt nice.

Tuesday, 1st of April.

I took my car and left home X (my village) at 8:10 approximately to drive my child Joan at the town school at X 8:15, and then took my child Laura at the daycarer in Y (mid rural center), parked there and left her there around 8:30. I drove to my office at the center of Y and arrived there at 8.40. Left the office at 15:30, walked to the supermarket next to it, and

got some extra stuff. I picked up Laura from the day carer at 16:00 (my partner picked Joan and drove him home). It was exhausting. I got home at 17:00 and stayed there doing chores and resting for the rest of the day.

Dimecres, 2 d'abril.

Igual que ahir, però sense anar a comprar després de la feina.

Appendix II. Informed Consent Form; English and Catalan versions.

Informed Consent Form (English Version)

Information and purpose:

Your participations takes part of a research study that focuses on the way in which women who live or have lived in a rural area of the Ponent region give meaning to the rural place. The researcher is interested in the factors that have motivated your decisions to migrate or not to migrate from there, as well as your daily experiences living and moving around the area. The aim of this study is to achieve a better understanding of the way in which women experience the rural place through their relation to the space, the practices and the imaginaries of rurality, influenced by their mobility between and through space.

Your participation:

Your participation in this study will consist of an interview of approximately one hour. You will be asked a series of questions about your life experiences in relation to the place you live in, together with the factors that have motivated your decisions to migrate or not to migrate from there, as well as your daily experiences living and moving around the area. You are not

obliged to answer the questions. You can pass on any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

Your participation will also consist of collecting a mobility diary, for a week before the interview, which will be given to the researcher prior to the interview, in which you will collect in writing each time you move to go somewhere, the departure and arrival times, the transport, the reason and any other information, emotion or thought linked to this trip. This information will be discussed during the interview.

You will also be asked, after the end of the interview and its recording, to complete a counter-mapping exercise, drawing on a map.

At any time you can notify the researcher that you want to stop your participation in the study. There is no penalty for suspending participation.

Benefits and Risks:

The benefit of your participation is to provide information on the way women link themselves to the rural place, along with the incentives and barriers linked to life in rural spaces. There are no risks associated with participating in the study.

Confidentiality:

The interview will be recorded using a voice recorder mobile phone application; however, your name will not be recorded on the tape. The audio records will be destroyed after the text is transcribed. Your name and identifying information will not be associated with any part of the written research report, and it will not be connected with the interview responses, mobility diary, or counter-mapping technique.

Contact:

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact:

The researcher, Maria Bosch Profitós:

- Email: bosch-profitos_maria@student.ceu.edu

The research supervisor, Eva Fodor:

- Email: fodore@ceu.edu

Subject's Understanding:

- I agree to participate in this study, which consists of a Master's Thesis for the Master's Degree in Gender Studies at the Central European University, as a requirement for obtaining the Master's degree.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary.
- I understand that all data collected will be limited to this use or others related to the research.
- I agree that my data will be used for a research that might be published.
- I agree to the use of scripts or modified transcripts of the interview, mobility diary, or the image produced by the counter-mapping technique in the thesis.
- I understand that I will not be identified by name in the final product.
- I understand that all records will be kept confidential in the secure possession of the researcher.
- I acknowledge that I have the contact information for the researcher and their advisor, which has been made available to me along with a duplicate copy of this consent form.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time without any adverse repercussions.

Subject's signature: _____ Date signed: _____

Interviewer's signature: _____ Date signed: _____

Formulari de consentiment informat (Catalan Version)

Informació i finalitat:

La teva participació forma part d'una investigació que se centra en la manera com les dones que viuen o han viscut en alguna zona rural de les terres de Ponent donen sentit al lloc rural. La investigadora està interessada en els factors que han motivat les teves decisions de migració o no migració, així com les teves experiències quotidianes vivint i movent-te. L'objectiu d'aquest estudi és aconseguir una millor comprensió de la manera com les dones experimenten les pràctiques i idearis del fet rural, influenciats per la seva mobilitat entre i per l'espai.

La teva participació:

La teva participació en aquest estudi consistirà en una entrevista d'una hora aproximadament. Et faran una sèrie de preguntes sobre la teva vida i experiències de vida a la zona on vius, així com dels factors que han motivat les teves decisions de migració o no migració, així com les teves experiències quotidianes vivint i movent-te. No estàs obligada a respondre les preguntes. Pots transmetre qualsevol pregunta que et faci sentir incòmoda.

La teva participació també consistirà en la recol·lecció d'un diari de mobilitat, durant una setmana abans de l'entrevista, que es lliurarà a la investigadora prèviament a l'entrevista, en

la qual recolliràs per escrit cada cop que et moguis per anar a algun lloc, les hores de sortida i arribada, el transport, el motiu i qualsevol altra informació, emoció o pensament vinculat amb aquest viatge. Aquesta informació es discutirà durant l'entrevista.

També se't demanarà, després de la finalització de l'entrevista i el seu enregistrament, que completis un exercici de contra-cartografia, dibuixant sobre un mapa.

En qualsevol moment podeu notificar a l'investigador que voleu aturar la vostra participació en l'estudi. No hi ha cap penalització per suspendre la participació.

Beneficis i Riscos:

El benefici de la teva participació és aportar informació sobre la manera com les dones es vinculen amb el lloc rural, juntament amb els incentius i barreres vinculades amb la vida en espais rurals. No hi ha riscos associats a la participació l'estudi.

Confidencialitat:

L'entrevista serà gravada mitjançant una aplicació del telèfon mòbil d'enregistradora de veu; tanmateix, el vostre nom no quedarà gravat a la gravació, que es destruirà després de ser transcrita. El vostre nom i la informació que permeti la vostra identificació no s'associaran amb cap part de l'informe escrit de la investigació, ni pel que fa a l'entrevista els diaris de mobilitat, o la tècnica de contra-cartografia

Contacte:

Si teniu cap pregunta o dubte, poseu-vos en contacte amb:

La investigadora, Maria Bosch Profitós:

- Correu electrònic: bosch-profitos_maria@student.ceu.edu

La supervisora de la investigació, Eva Fodor:

· Correu electrònic: fodore@ceu.edu

Comprensió del subjecte

- Accepto participar en aquest estudi, que consisteix en un Treball de Final de Màster del Màster en Estudis de Gènere de la Universitat Central Europea, en tant que requisit per obtenir el títol de Màster.
- Entenc que la meva participació és voluntària.
- Entenc que totes les dades recollides es limitaran a aquest ús o a altres usos relacionats amb la investigació.
- Accepto que s'utilitzin transcripcions literals o modificades de l'entrevista, del diari de mobilitat o la imatge producte de la tècnica de contra-cartografia en la tesi.
- Entenc que no se m'identificarà pel nom al producte final.
- Entenc que tots els registres es mantindran confidencials en possessió segura del investigador.
- Reconec que disposo de la informació de contacte de l'investigador i del seu assessor, que s'ha posat a la meva disposició juntament amb una còpia duplicada d'aquest formulari de consentiment.
- Entenc que puc retirar-me de l'estudi en qualsevol moment sense cap efecte advers o repercussions.

Signatura del subjecte: _____ Data signatura: _____

Signatura de l'entrevistadora: _____ Data signatura: _____

Appendix III. Semi-structured in-depth interviews questionnaire. Catalan version (used in the research) and English translation.

Catalan version.

Bloc 0. Informació sobre el participant.

1. Edat

2. Lloc de naixement

3. Lloc de naixement dels pares

Bloc 1. Històries de vida, mobilitats vitals.

1. Pots explicar el teu camí vital?

Segons la seva resposta:

- On vas néixer?
- On vas anar a l'escola?
- Vas cursar estudis superiors i on?
- Quan vas començar a treballar i com a què? Com ha evolucionat la teva vida professional?

1.1 Decisions sobre migrar o no migrar afectades pel sentit del lloc rural on.

Com descriuries el lloc on vas néixer? Segons la seva resposta, preguntar per: paisatge, edificis, sons, sentiments, emocions, experiències relacionades amb ell, relacions entre la gent d'aquí, records, imatges que venen al cap en pensar-hi, descriure amb una paraula, significat personal…

Segons el grup al qual pertany la participant.

a) Dones que es van quedar.

- Has pensat mai a marxar d'aquí? Per què/Per què no?
- Com descriuries les relacions entre la gent d'aquí?
- Et sents vinculat al teu poble? En quin sentit?

b) Dones que van marxar a més centres urbans.

- Com era viure a X (lloc rural)?
- Quan i per què vas decidir marxar d'allà?
- Com t'imaginaves que la teva vida seria diferent abans de marxar?
- Com diries que ha canviat la teva vida després de marxar d'allà?
- Quines emocions relaciones amb ser-hi i on vius ara? Ha canviat després de passar a X?
- Tornes sovint? Com et sents al respecte?
- Tens la mateixa idea de X quan vas decidir mudar-te que ara?
- Et sents arrelat a X d'alguna manera? Sents aquest lloc com "teu"? Com ha canviat la teva relació amb el territori després de marxar d'allà?
- Et sents arrelat a la ciutat d'alguna manera? Sents aquest lloc com "teu"? Com és la teva vida aquí diferent del que esperaves?

- Pots descriure tots els llocs on vas viure? Segons la seva resposta, preguntar per: paisatge, edificis, sons, sentiments, emocions, experiències relacionades amb ell, relacions entre la gent d'aquí, records, imatges que venen al cap en pensar-hi, descriure amb una paraula, significat personal…

Dones que van marxar i van tornar.

- Com era viure a X (lloc rural) - abans de marxar?
- Quan i per què vas decidir marxar d'allà?
- Com t'imaginaves que la teva vida seria diferent abans de marxar?
- Com diries que et va canviar la vida a la ciutat?
- Per què vas decidir tornar a una zona més rural? És el lloc on vas néixer o un altre?
- Comde descriuries el teu canvi de vida?
- Amb quines emocions et relaciones la primera vegada que vas viure a un poble vs anar a un lloc més urbà vs tornar?
- Tens els mateixos sentiments i relació amb el lloc on vas néixer quan vas decidir mudar-te a un lloc urbà que ara?
- Pots descriure tots els llocs on vas viure? Segons la seva resposta, preguntar per: paisatge, edificis, sons, sentiments, emocions, experiències relacionades amb ell, relacions entre la gent d'aquí, records, imatges que venen al cap en pensar-hi, descriure amb una paraula, significat personal…

Bloc 2. Lloc de vida actual i mobilitats diàries.

- On vius ara i amb qui?
- Com vas aconseguir el lloc on vius (comprat, heretat, llogat...)?
- Tens un vehicle propi? Creus que és important viure al lloc on fas per tenir-lo?
- T'agrada caminar? On? Per què?

- Ja sé que m'ho has apuntat, però descriu-me breument com seria el teu dia d'entre setmana / cap de setmana estàndard, intentant estar rpesent en el que sents, veus…

Demano que treguin o tinguin visible el diari de mobilitat

- Com us vau semblar la informació que us he fet recollir mitjançant aquest formulari?
- T'ha fet reflexionar sobre alguna cosa?
- Diries que passes la major part del teu dia al lloc on vius?
- Diries que t'has de moure molt per a poder dur a terme el teu dia a dia? Com et fa sentir això? (Estàs acostumada? És normal?) Preferiries, per exemple, viure a Balaguer/Lleida i per tant haver-te de moure menys?
- Com et mous pel teu poble ?

Bloc 3. Representacions visuals.

Demano si poden rerpesentar:

- El lloc on vas nèixer
- El lloc on vius actualment, si aquest és un altre
- Un mapa. Si em demanen més guia, demano que dibuixin un mapa del lloc/llocs on viuen o un mapa que necessitarien si un dia perdessin la memòria.

English translation.

Block 0. Participant Information

1. Age

2. Place of birth
3. Parents' place of birth

Block 1. Life stories, life mobilities

1. Can you tell me about your life journey?

Depending on their answer, ask: Where were you born? Where did you go to school? Did you pursue higher education and where? When did you start working and as what? How has your professional life evolved?

1.1 Decisions about migrating or not migrating influenced by the meaning of the rural place where.

How would you describe the place where you were born? Depending on their answer, ask about: landscape, buildings, sounds, feelings, emotions, experiences related to it, relationships among the people there, memories, images that come to mind when thinking about it, describe with one word, personal meaning…

According to the group to which the participant belongs:

a) Women who stayed

- Have you ever thought about leaving this place? Why/Why not?
- How would you describe the relationships among the people here?
- Do you feel connected to your village? In what way?

b) Women who moved to more urban centers

- What was it like living in X (rural place)?
- When and why did you decide to leave?

- How did you imagine your life would be different before leaving?
- How would you say your life has changed since leaving?
- What emotions do you associate with being there and with where you live now? Has that changed since moving to X?
- Do you go back often? How do you feel about it?
- Do you have the same idea of X now as when you decided to move?
- Do you feel rooted in X in any way? Do you feel that place as "yours"? How has your relationship with the territory changed since leaving?
- Do you feel rooted in the city in any way? Do you feel that place as "yours"? How is your life here different from what you expected?
- Can you describe all the places you have lived? Depending on their answer, ask about: landscape, buildings, sounds, feelings, emotions, experiences related to it, relationships among the people there, memories, images that come to mind when thinking about it, describe with one word, personal meaning…

c) Women who left and came back.

- What was it like living in X (rural place) – before leaving?
- When and why did you decide to leave?
- How did you imagine your life would be different before leaving?
- How would you say life in the city changed you?
- Why did you decide to return to a more rural area? Is it the place you were born or another?
- How would you describe your life change?
- What emotions do you associate with the first time you lived in a village vs going to a more urban place vs returning?

- Do you have the same feelings and relationship with the place you were born when you decided to move to an urban place as you do now?
- Can you describe all the places you have lived? Depending on their answer, ask about: landscape, buildings, sounds, feelings, emotions, experiences related to it, relationships among the people there, memories, images that come to mind when thinking about it, describe with one word, personal meaning…

Block 2. Current place of life and daily mobility.

- Where do you live now and with whom?
- How did you get the place where you live (bought, inherited, rented...)?
- Do you own a vehicle? Do you think it's important to have one where you live?
- Do you like walking? Where? Why?
- I know you've already noted it, but briefly describe what a standard weekday/weekend would be like for you, trying to be present in what you feel, see…

I ask that they take out or have visible their mobility diary.

- How did you find the information I asked you to collect using this form?
- Did it make you reflect on anything?
- Would you say you spend most of your day in the place where you live?
- Would you say you have to move around a lot to carry out your daily activities? How does that make you feel? (Are you used to it? Is it normal?) Would you prefer, for example, to live in Balaguer/Lleida and therefore have to move less?
- How do you get around your village?

Block 4. Visual representations

I take sheets and colours and ask, can you please represent:

- The place where you were born
- The place where you currently live, if it is different
- A map. If they ask for more guidance, I ask them to draw a map of the place/places where they live or a map they would need or like to have.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara, Castañeda, Claudia., Fortier, Anne-Marie, & Sheller, Mimi (Eds.). (2003). *Uprootings/regroundings: Questions of home and migration*. Routledge.

Aldomà B., Ignasi & Mòdol R., Josep Ramon (2022). *Atles del món rural 2022: despoblament o revitalització?* Barcelona: Associació d'Iniciatives rurals de Catalunya, Associació de Municipis de Catalunya, Associació de Micropobles.

Antona, Laura (2019). Making hidden spaces visible: Using drawing as a method to illuminate new geographies. *Area*, *51*(4), 697-705.

Askins, Kye, & Pain, Rachel (2011). Contact zones: Participation, materiality, and the messiness of interaction. *Environment and planning D: society and space*, *29*(5), 803-821.

Baylina, Mireia. (2020). Dones i tornada al camp: Protagonistes de les noves dinàmiques rurals a Catalunya. *Treballs de la Societat Catalana de Geografia*, (90), 101–114.

Baylina, Mireia, & Rodó-Zárate, Maria (2020). Youth, activism and new rurality: A feminist approach. *Journal of Rural Studies*, *79*, 189-196.

Bell, David (2006). Variations on the rural idyll. *Handbook of rural studies*, 149-160.

Bock, Bettina B. (2017). Gender and mobility. In Bettina B. Bock & Sally Shortall (Eds.), *Gender and rural globalization: International perspectives on gender and rural globalization* (pp. 8–18). CABI.

Braun, Virginia, & Clarke, Victoria (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101.

Büscher, Monika, & Urry, John. (2009). Mobile methods and the empirical. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 12(1), 99–116.

Camarero, Luis, & Sampedro, Rocío. (2008). ¿Por qué se van las mujeres? El continuum de movilidad como hipótesis explicativa de la masculinización rural. *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas (REIS)*, 124(1), 73–105.

Camarero, Luis (2020). Despoblamiento, baja densidad y brecha rural: un recorrido por una España desigual. *Panorama social*, *31*, 47-73.

Casassas i Simó, Lluís (1987). Un nou model territorial: procés d'urbanització de Catalunya. *Espais: revista del Departament de Política Territorial i Obres Públiques*, 42-46.

Castañeda, Paola (2024). Gender and mobility: Engaging women's mobile lives. In *Handbook on Gender and Cities* (pp. 356–365). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Clark, Andrew, & Emmel, Nock (2010). Using walking interviews. *Realitie*s, 13, 1-6.

Clarke, Victoria, & Braun, Virginia (2013). Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners.

Cloke, Paul, Milbourne, Paul, & Widdowfield, Rebekah (2000). Homelessness and rurality: 'out-of-place'in purified space?. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *18*(6), 715-735.

Collantes, Fernando & Pinilla, Vincente (2011). *Peaceful surrender: the depopulation of rural Spain in the twentieth century*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Cramer, Katherine J. (2016). *The politics of resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker*. University of Chicago Press.

Cresswell, Tim. (2008). Place: Encountering geography as philosophy. *Geography*, 93(3), 132–139.

Dahlström, Margareta (1996). Young women in a male periphery—Experiences from the Scandinavian north. *Journal of rural studies*, *12*(3), 259-271.

Day, Kristen (1999). Embassies and sanctuaries: women's experiences of race and fear in public space. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *17*(3), 307-328.

DeVault, Marjorie L., & Gross, Glenda (2007). Experience, talk, and knowledge. *Handbook of feminist research. Theory and praxis*, 173-198.

Dimitriadis, Greg (2008). *Studying urban youth culture primer* (Vol. 23). Peter Lang.liebli

Doheny, Shane, & Milbourne, Paul (2017). Community, rurality, and older people: Critically comparing older people's experiences across different rural communities. *Journal of Rural Studies*, *50*, 129-138.

Doucet, Andrea, & Mauthner, Natasha (2008). Qualitative interviewing and feminist research. *The SAGE handbook of social research methods*, 328-343.

Eacott, Chelsea, & Sonn, Christopher C. (2006). Beyond education and employment: Exploring youth experiences of their communities, place attachment and reasons for migration. *Rural Society*, *16*(2), 199-214.

Erickson, Lance D., Sanders, Scott R., & Cope, Michael R. (2018). Lifetime stayers in urban, rural, and highly rural communities in Montana. *Population, Space and Place*, *24*(4), e2133.

Evans, James, & Jones, Phil (2011). The walking interview: Methodology, mobility and place. *Applied geography*, *31*(2), 849-858.

Fernández Álvarez, Óscar. (2016). Mujeres en el medio rural: Imprescindibles pero invisibles. In Óscar Fernández (Ed.), *Mujeres en riesgo de exclusión social: Una perspectiva transnacional* (pp. 139–147). McGraw-Hill.

Fernández Álvarez, Óscar. (2022). Reprogramar el campo: Migraciones de las mujeres al medio rural en España. *Ager: Revista de Estudios sobre Despoblación y Desarrollo Rural*, (34), 19–45.

Gaetano, Arianne M. (2015). *Out to work: Migration, gender, and the changing lives of rural women in contemporary China*. University of Hawaii Press.

García Barbancho, Alfonso (1967). Las migraciones interiores espanolas. *Estudio cuantitativo desde 1900*, *123*.

Glendinning, Anthony, Nuttall, Mark, Hendry, Leo, Kloep, Marion, & Wood, Sheila. (2003). Rural communities and well-being: a good place to grow up?. *The sociological review*, *51*(1), 129-156.

Gómez Valenzuela, Víctor, & Holl, Adelheid. (2024). Growth and decline in rural Spain: An exploratory analysis. *European Planning Studies*, 32(2), 430–453.

Götz, Norbert, & Holmén, Janne (2018). Introduction to the theme issue:"Mental maps: geographical and historical perspectives". *Journal of cultural geography*, *35*(2), 157-161.

Guðrún Edvardsdóttir, Anna. (2013). Place and space for women in a rural area in Iceland. *Education in the North*.

Halfacree, Keith. (2006). From dropping out to leading on? British counter-cultural back-to-the-land in a changing rurality. *Progress in Human Geography*, 30(3), 309–336.

Hannam, Kevin, Sheller, Mimi, & Urry, John. (2006). Mobilities, immobilities and moorings. *Mobilities*, 1(1), 1–22.

Haraway, Donna (2013). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. Feminist Studies, 14, 575– 599. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066

Harvey, David (2005). Spacetime and the World. In Giesseking, Jen J. & Mangod, William (Eds), *The People, Place, and Space Reader(12-16).* Routledge.

Hawkins, Harriet (2013). Geography and art. An expanding field: Site, the body and practice. *Progress in human geography*, *37*(1), 52-71.

Hughes, Annie (1997). Women and rurality: Gendered experiences of 'community' in village life. *Revealing Rural Others: Representation, Power and Identity in the British Countryside. London: Pinter*, 167-188.

Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE). (2025). Cifras oficiales de población de los municipios españoles en aplicación de la Ley de Bases del Régimen Local (Art. 17). Lleida: Población por municipios y sexo. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from https://www.ine.es/jaxiT3/Tabla.htm?t=2878.

Iszaevich, Abraham (1980). Household renown: the traditional naming system in Catalonia. *Ethnology*, *19*(3), 315-325.

Jacka, Tamara (2005). Finding a place: Negotiations of modernization and globalization among rural women in Beijing. *Critical Asian Studies*, *37*(1), 51-74.

Johnson, Kenneth M., & Lichter, Daniel T. (2019). Rural depopulation: Growth and decline processes over the past century. *Rural Sociology*, *84*(1), 3-27.

Jung, Hyunjo (2014). Let their voices be seen: Exploring mental mapping as a feminist visual methodology for the study of migrant women. *International journal of urban and regional research*, *38*(3), 985-1002.

Kelly, Meghan, & Bosse, Amber (2022). Pressing pause,"doing" feminist mapping. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, *21*(4), 399-415.

Kinney, Penelope (2017). Walking interviews. *Social research update*, *67*(1-4).

Law, Robin (1999). Beyond 'women and transport': towards new geographies of gender and daily mobility. *Progress in human geography*, *23*(4), 567-588.

Lewis, Ruth, Sharp, Eelizabeth, Remnant, Jenni, & Redpath, Rhiannon (2015). 'Safe spaces': experiences of feminist women-only space. *Sociological Research Online*, *20*(4), 105-118.

Lieblich, Amia, Tuval-Mashiach, Rivka, & Zilber, Tamar (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation* (Vol. 47). Sage.

Little, Jo (1991). Women in the rural labour market: a policy evaluation. In Champion, Tony & Watkins, Charles (Eds.) People in the Countryside: studies of social change in rural Britain, Paul Chapman.

Little, Jo, & Austin, Patricia (1996). Women and the rural idyll. *Journal of rural studies*, *12*(2), 101-111.

Little, Jo (1997). Employment marginality and women's self-identity. *Contested countryside cultures: otherness, marginalization and rurality. Routledge, London a New York*, 138-157.

Little, Jo, & Panelli, Ruth. (2003). Gender research in rural geography. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 10(3), 281–289. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369032000114046

Little, Jo. (2015). The development of feminist perspectives in rural gender studies. In Barbara Pini, Berit Brandth, & Jo Little (Eds.), *Feminisms and ruralities* (pp. 107–118). Lexington Books.

Little, Jo (2017). *Gender and rural geography*. Routledge.

Massey, Doreen. (1994). *Space, place and gender*. Polity Press.

Matthews, M. Hugh (1980). Children represent their environment: Mental maps of Coventry city centre. *Geoforum*, *11*(4), 385-397.

McCormack, Jaleh (2002). Children's understandings of rurality: exploring the interrelationship between experience and understanding. *Journal of rural studies*, *18*(2), 193-207.

McDowell, Linda (1999). *Gender, Identity and Place. Understanding Feminist Geographies.* University of Minessota Press Minneapolis.

Milbourne, Paul, & Kitchen, Lawrence. (2014). Rural mobilities: Connecting movement and fixity in rural places. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 34, 326–336.

Otzen, Tamara, & Manterola, Carlos (2022). Técnicas de Muestreo sobre una Población a Estudio. *Int. J. Morphol*, *1*(2), 2.

Pahl, Raymond E. (1966). The rural-urban continuum. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 6(3), 299–329.ç

Panelli, Ruth, Kraack, Anna, & Little, Jo (2005). Claiming space and community: Rural women's strategies for living with, and beyond, fear. *Geoforum*, *36*(4), 495-508.

Phoenix, Ann. (2008). Analysing narrative contexts. In Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire, & Maria Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing narrative research* (pp. 64–77). SAGE.

Pike, Andy, Béal, Vincent, Cauchi-Duval, Nicolas, Franklin, Rachel, Kinossian, Nador, Lang, Thilo, Leibert, Tim, MacKinnon, Danny, Rousseau, Max, Royer, Jeroen, Servillo, Loris, Pinto, Giuliana, Tosi, Francesco, & Incognito, Oriana (2021). Drawing places, recreating spaces: visual voices from at-risk children. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *8*(1), 1-7.

Priya Uteng, Tanu & Cresswell, Tim (2016). *Gendered mobilities*. Routledge.

Rauhut, D., & Johansson, M. (2012). 'Should I Stay or Should I Go?'-A Case Study on Young Women Leaving Rural Sweden.

Relph, Edward. (1976). *Place and placelessness*. Pion Limited.

Rodó de Zárate, Maria. (2013). Gènere, cos i sexualitat. La joventut, l'experiència i l'ús de l'espai públic urbà. *Papers: Revista de Sociologia*, 98(1), 127–142.

Rodó de Zárate, Maria. (2014). *Geografies de la interseccionalitat: L'accés de la joventut a l'espai públic de Manresa* [Doctoral dissertation, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona].

Rodó-de-Zárate, Maria (2015). Young lesbians negotiating public space: An intersectional approach through places. *Children's Geographies*, *13*(4), 413-434.

Rodó-Zárate, Maria, García-Romeral, Gloria, & Coll-Planas, Gerard (2024). Youth dis/comforts in everyday spaces: an intersectional and mixed methods approach in Catalonia. *Children's Geographies*, *22*(4), 612-627.

Rodríguez-Díaz, Paulina, Almuna, Rocío, Marchant, Carla, Heinz, Sally, Lebuy, Roxana, Celis-Diez, Juan L., & Díaz-Siefer, Pablo (2022). The Future of Rurality: Place Attachment among Young Inhabitants of Two Rural Communities of Mediterranean Central Chile. *Sustainability*, *14*(1), 546.

Salamaña, Isabel, Baylina, Mireia, Garcia Ramon, Maria Dolors, Porto, Ana María, & Villarino, Montserrat. (2016). Dones, trajectòries de vida i noves ruralitats. *Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica*, 62(3), 661–681.

Sheller, Mimi, & Urry, John. (2006). The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning A*, 38(2), 207–226.

Sheller, Mimi. (2014). The new mobilities paradigm for a live sociology. *Current Sociology*, 62(6), 789–811.

Sheller, Mimi (2017). From spatial turn to mobilities turn. *Current sociology*, *65*(4), 623-639.

Sheller, Mimi (2018). Theorising mobility justice. *Tempo social*, *30*(2), 17-34.

Skeggs, Beverley. (2004). *Class, self, culture*. Routledge.

Szot-Radziszewska, Elżbieta, & Zuzanna Popławska, Joanna (2019). Mental Mapping Method in Anthropological Studies on Cultural Landscape. *Studia Etnologiczne i Antropologiczne*, *19*, 15-24.

Tolia-Kelly, Divya P. (2006). Mobility/stability: British Asian cultures of 'landscape and Englishness'. *Environment and Planning A*, 38(5), 762–783.

Tomane, John & Velthuis, Selthuis (2024). 'Left behind places': a geographical etymology. *Regional Studies*, *58*(6), 1167-1179.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. University of Minnesota Press.

Valentine, Gill (1989). The geography of women's fear. *Area*, 385-390.

Valentine, Gill (1993). (Hetero) Sexing Space: Lesbian Perceptions and Experiences of Everyday Spaces. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *11*(4), 395-413.

Vidal Bendito, Tomàs (1979). Èxode rural i problemàtica demospacial a Catalunya (1860-1970). *Estudis d'Història Agrària, 1979*

Wiest, Karin (Ed.). (2016). *Women and migration in rural Europe: Labour markets, representations and policies*. Springer.

Willits, Fern K., & Luloff, A. E. (1995). Urban residents' views of rurality and contacts with rural places 1. *Rural Sociology*, *60*(3), 454-466.

Wilson, Erica, & Little, Donna E. (2008). The solo female travel experience: Exploring the 'geography of women's fear'. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *11*(2), 167-186.