

# Introduction: Rural Cultural Studies

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This themed section of *Australian Humanities Review* seeks to establish the emerging field of ‘rural cultural studies’ firmly on the agenda of the contemporary humanities and social sciences. This is a timely intervention as rural Australia has featured increasingly over the last decade and especially over the last few years as a topic of national policy attention, public commentary and social analysis. If the notion of a crisis in rural Australia has become something of a one-sided cliché, the changes being faced in non-urban—rural, remote and regional—Australia are nonetheless significant, complex and widespread. For example, one of the topics for the federal 2020 Summit, ‘Rural Australia’, addressed future policy directions for rural industries and populations. In this wider context, the purpose of the present collection of papers is to argue for the significance of the cultural dimension—and the multiple dimensions of the cultural—in understanding the key issues of demographic change, economic productivity, environmental and climatic crisis, Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations and land ownership, and the role of ‘cultural’ factors in the renewal, or potential renewal, of country towns and communities.

The essays in this collection offer a range of perspectives representing the ‘cultural turn’ in rural studies and, indeed, the ‘rural turn’ in cultural studies. Rural cultural studies has been formed from the intersection of cultural history and cultural geography and from new developments within adjacent interdisciplinary fields including cultural and media studies, Australian studies and environmental studies. While cultural history and cultural geography may be interdisciplinary in themselves, they are still often separated from each other by disciplinary or institutional boundaries, perhaps most notably in the distinction that persists between the Social Sciences and the Arts or Humanities. Rural cultural studies offers one way, or rather several ways, of crossing these boundaries and thinking through how research questions, fieldwork and analysis may be enriched through multiple disciplinary perspectives.

The notion of ‘rural cultural studies’ is nonetheless, if not quite an oxymoron, still a novelty in both cultural studies and rural studies. Contemporary cultural studies researchers internationally and in Australia have been massively biased towards *urban* popular cultures. While recent studies of cultural consumption and participation, for instance, have acknowledged the variable of residential location, they have not given primary or extended attention to what this might mean for those living in rural and regional Australia—whether on farms, in small country towns, or in larger regional centres (Bennett, Emmison and Frow

*Accounting for Tastes* and 'Social Class'; Mercer; Rowe). Moreover, much research on the cultural changes that are occurring in rural communities has been underpinned by metropolitan norms and systems of value, leading to the assumption that contemporary rural cultures are characterised primarily by limitation or lack.

On the other hand, if cultural studies scholars have been slow to engage with the rural, much research on rural and regional communities has failed to recognise the dynamics of culture. Rural research in Australia has focused largely on the analysis of sociological or socio-economic issues which are generally cast as 'problems' of regional or national significance. In this context, it is not surprising that the kinds of topics that dominate both research and policy frameworks include: changing agricultural and pastoral fortunes; the withdrawal of health, education, government and financial services; unemployment and youth suicide; and the effects of global markets and technological provision on rural communities (Lawrence, Lyons and Momtaz; Lockie and Bourke; Pritchard and McManus; Gray and Lawrence). While these studies have often addressed general aspects of culture and community, the nature or notion of the culture(s) in play has not been elaborated with the kind of complexity that cultural studies has accumulated in relation to urban populations. Elsewhere, political and historical studies have addressed issues of non-metropolitan culture in the broad sense of 'rural ideologies'—ideologies such as agrarianism, countrymindedness, the bush legend or rurality itself—but again only occasionally have the dynamics of culture become the focus of extended analysis (Gray and Phillips; Halpin and Martin; Mules and Miller).

Rural cultural studies, in short, offers to bring the same level of attention to the full range of cultural activities in rural Australia as has been applied to urban areas. It seeks to investigate in depth the differences in the production, performance and consumption of cultures, both the everyday and the 'spectacular', which are the consequence of their location in rural, remote or regional areas. It announces an interest not only in the cultural in 'other' locations but also in the very nature of rurality.

In the Australian case, a cluster of overlapping terms—rural, remote, regional, country, pastoral, bush, outback—has emerged in both official and vernacular languages to account for the diversity of 'non-urban' experiences, economic, political and cultural. Although of necessity certain of these terms are given 'objective' status for the purposes of statistical processing or government policy-making, each brings with it a cultural dimension, an 'excess' of meaning accumulated over time and through the play of political—and cultural—forces. As Andrew Gorman-Murray, Kate Darian-Smith and Chris Gibson argue in the essay that follows, the meanings of the rural also change according to the scale

through which it is produced, whether global, national, state or local or as 'embodied' (literally and performatively) in the individual.

We are familiar, indeed *over*-familiar, with work on the idea of the bush or 'bush legend', but other cultural dimensions of the rural have been less scrutinised. While there are good reasons for the attention which Australian studies, history and cultural studies have accorded to the bush legend—its sheer recurrence in political and popular discourses (and the persuasiveness of Russel Ward's 1958 study, *The Australian Legend*)—it could certainly be argued that the 'fixation' on critiquing the bush legend has obscured any constitutive or positive sense of rural cultures. As John Hirst pointed out thirty years ago, narratives of place and history articulated around pioneering have been at least as widespread and sustained as the specifically democratic sense of a bush ethos delineated by Ward, and probably more so (see also Walker). Recent studies from within cultural history have also worked to 'dissolve' the bush legend back into a broader array of settler/coloniser ideologies and attitudes towards country and towards its Indigenous owners. The range of values that might be summed up in the term 'pastoralism' for example has, again, been at least as influential as ideas of the bush, if not more so (Carter; Hoorn). Images of wheat and the 'Golden Fleece' were much more common in mid-twentieth century Australia than images of bush workers (some will remember the merino ram on the shilling coin and the wheat on the threepence!), while the 'family on the land' soon displaced the iconography of the bushman. Today a phrase such as 'men and women of the bush' need carry very little of earlier meanings of the bush legend, the battler's struggle 'on his selection', or the cosy world of *Blue Hills*.

Environmental history, too, has shuffled perceptions of the bush back into a more complex range of settler perceptions of land and nature. It has also prompted new work, not least in the fields of literary and visual culture studies, that explores the relationships between imperialism and the ideologies associated with agriculture, environment and wilderness (Arthur; Darian-Smith, Gunner and Nuttall; Griffiths; Griffiths and Robin; Harper). Still, the 'constitutive' sense of culture, of production, performance and consumption, of individual and collective meaning-making in rural Australia, both past and present, remains underdeveloped (but see Goodall; Waterhouse).

Two other terms brought under close scrutiny by rural cultural studies are 'culture' itself, and the term with which it is almost always joined in rural research, 'community'. While the broader 'post-aesthetic' understanding of culture that has driven cultural studies forward is invaluable in focusing attention on the forms of everyday cultural practice which are of significance in rural areas, we also need to avoid 'reducing' rural cultures to the anthropological or ethnographic dimension alone. Cultural studies researchers have developed sophisticated languages for analysing cultures as social practices, certainly. But

they have also explored and interrogated cultures as modes of entertainment, self-fashioning, creativity, critique, individuation, group solidarity, professionalisation and public performance; as industries and objects of policy; and as the site of complex struggles across racial and ethnic divides. Rural cultures research would benefit from a similarly multilayered or cross-disciplinary approach. There remains a danger that rural cultures will be identified with certain minimalist, defensive or 'residual' forms of cultural practice only ('holding the community together') while urban cultures will continue to be seen as complex, heterogeneous and perpetually reinventing themselves.

Similarly, rural cultural studies will almost inevitably find itself dealing with issues of place and community—the latter probably the most fraught concept of all next to rurality itself. While being fully attentive to local discourses of community and place, rural cultural researchers will need to guard against assuming that community will always be the goal of rural cultural practices. This is an assumption, again, that we do not have of urban cultures which are often framed in relation to questions of individuation, sub-cultural identity or cosmopolitanism. Studies of rural Australia (and studies of the rural elsewhere) have often been constrained within and by a more homogenous concept of 'community'. Such a conception is cognate with representations of rural communities as self-contained, and relatively isolated or remote from larger regional, national and international networks and markets. Against this tendency, we need to reconceptualise the rural in terms of its participation in these larger networks; and simultaneously in *smaller* regional, national or international networks that cut across community boundaries to connect with similar 'sub-community' interest groups elsewhere. Rural communities are diverse, sometimes more diverse than urban communities, in their mix of Indigenous and non-indigenous residents and/or as a result of particular patterns of 'ethnic' migration. What might we make, for example, of the importance of Italian migration to the canefields of North Queensland? What kinds of transformations of the rural take place if we consider the multi-ethnic communities of places such as Griffith, Mildura, Broome and Darwin? Notions of community can also assume an antagonistic rather than dialogic relation between internally and externally generated forms of culture, emphasising community-generated forms at the expense of those which arrive from elsewhere or move through communities. While there has been a vigorous 'post-structuralist' critique of terms such as community or region, these remain theoretically driven rather than focused on local, located and historicised examples (Bourke; Gray and Lawrence; Mules).

As Kate Bowles demonstrates in her essay below, it is not that rural cultural research has been ignored in Australia, but rather that there has been little communication among researchers. At one level this is precisely because a field such as 'rural cultural studies' has not been articulated and to that extent does

not exist as a place where research from within different disciplines (or cross-disciplinary clusters) could be shared and consolidated through a strong sense of the *cultural*. Rural cultural research, Bowles suggests, has largely been a form of anthropology. While the themes of place, identity and community have become increasingly significant in cultural geography, history and literary studies, and while the representation of rural or bush life has been a foundational concern for Australian studies, Bowles points out that ‘disciplines centrally concerned with cultural production and consumption—cultural studies, communication studies, creative industries research and media studies—have so far been less interested in ... the forms of everyday cultural practice and experience which matter in rural, regional and remote communities’ (Bowles).

Despite contradictions and a lack of communication, within both cultural studies and rural studies, there has been a range of research generating the foundations for a distinct rural cultural studies. There have been several themed issues of the electronic journal *Transformations: ‘Regional Imaginary’* (2000), ‘Fleeing the City’ (2001), and ‘Rethinking Regionality’ (2005). Other work includes studies of the role of the rural imaginary in Australian political and social life (Brett); the ‘lifestyle’ dimension in changing rural/urban dynamics and rural demographics (Burnley and Murphy; Pritchard and McManus); consideration of the diverse social and cultural, including counter-cultural, populations in rural areas (Gorman-Murray, Waitt and Gibson; Gibson ‘Migration’; Waitt and Gorman-Murray); Indigenous culture in rural, regional and remote Australia (Davies; Lawrence and Gibson); the emergence of cultural industries in music, festivals, art, heritage, and tourism in regional Australia (Darian-Smith; Darian-Smith and Wills; Duffy; Gibson ‘Music Festivals’; Mercer; Walmsley); arts provision and participation (O’Regan and Cox; Timms and Christie; Trotter); the role of media including radio, television, cinema, newspapers and internet in regional localities (Cryle; Gibson ‘Digital Divides’; Huggett and Bowles; Kirkpatrick *Sworn, Country*); and cultural dimensions of human-environment relations across the country (Ashley). This is not an exhaustive inventory, but it provides some sense of the diverse work converging in rural cultural studies. This special issue contributes to the new field, drawing together rural studies and cultural studies, and reworking the distinction between ‘rural’ and ‘culture’.

In bringing cultural studies together with historical and geographical perspectives on rural cultures, this collection of essays also seeks to show the value of drawing together the views and expertise of cultural researchers, geographers and historians. Historical studies and geography have long been seen as complementary, balancing the nuances of space and time, period and place, context and change. For several decades there have also been notable overlaps in the subfields of historical geography, geographical history and environmental history (Baker; Powell). The lens of rural cultural research provides another avenue for dismantling disciplinary barriers between historical and geographical

perspectives while recognising and utilising their respective strengths and the productive tensions of cross-disciplinary work.

One of the resonances thus produced is the interrogation and destabilisation of the rural/urban binary. It is virtually impossible, of course, to speak of the rural without noting its differentiation from and connections to the urban. The essay by Andrew Gorman-Murray, Kate Darian-Smith and Chris Gibson interrogates the rural/urban framework, showing how cultural constructions of the rural and its conceptual relation to the urban shift across different spatial and temporal scales. Phil McManus and John Connell further reveal the complex relationships between the rural and the urban in the recent mounting of Country Week exhibitions, which seek to entice urban dwellers to relocate to rural towns. In an analysis that highlights the flows and counter-flows of people, ideas and images between country and city, this research challenges assumptions about urban-to-rural migration in relation to such factors as lifestyle, class and gentrification.

It is in part the interplay of scale in cultural constructions of the rural that Deb Anderson takes up in her case study. She considers how rural identities and places, as supposedly highly localised phenomena, are also inflected and constituted by inter-connections with broader, extra-local scales. Drawing on research conducted in Victoria's Mallee region, Anderson describes the imbrication between scientific knowledge at the national scale and local lived experience in everyday responses to drought and climate change, and how these tensions influence an individual's expression of her relationship to place.

Finally, Kate Bowles returns to the larger question of the division and connections between the cultural and the rural within contemporary areas of scholarly interest. She indicates the limited degree to which cultural studies has engaged with rural research, not merely in terms of its theoretical or historical models, but also in terms of its actual engagement with rural people, associations, communities or industries. Her essay details the profound institutional disincentives to creative rural cultural research, even as it offers a series of arguments about the protocols, significance and rewards that such research might involve. At its best, rural cultural studies provides an imaginative intellectual framework within which the humanities and social sciences can begin to understand the specificities of rural cultures and to contribute more fully to policy making as well as to 'cultural studies' itself.

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