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‘Finding home’: Affective geographies of regional youth (im)mobilities

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Abstract: In this paper, we aim to contribute to a growing body of literature that explores the affective geographies of young people’s internal migration decisions using mobilities/immobilities as our conceptual framework. As such, our focus is not only on why young people choose to leave their hometowns but also why some choose to stay. By paying attention to young people’s experiences of being away, we also shed light on why some

young people choose to return to regional areas having left for a time. In emphasising the affective, material, and embodied dimensions of these experiences, the affordances of rural and urban places are also brought to light. Fifty young people aged between 18 and 34 years from three regional Australian towns took part in the study by participating in semi-structured interviews. Qualitative findings indicate that the internal migration decisions of these regional young people were predominantly affective. We demonstrate how bodies were affected by the particularities of place – including materialities and relations with human and non-humans – that worked to connect or unify bodies, evoking feelings of inclusion and security. We discuss how the affective atmospheres of places pushed into and onto bodies, making them feel dislocated or oppressed, and the way that places worked to push bodies out through the embodied experience of difference. The participants in our study emphasised the dilemma of these affective pushes and pulls, where feelings of belonging, or longing for home or Country had to be negotiated, reconsidered, and re-worked in relation to the unfolding of place.

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1 INTRODUCTION: MIGRATION AND MOBILITY

Rural-urban migration has long been characterised as a push-pull phenomenon – a uni-directional rural push accompanied by an urban pull which attracts rural people, particularly youth, to urban centres based on the potential for higher earnings (Alvarez-Cuadrado & Poschke, 2011). The notion of 'upward mobility' driven by a desire for wealth and prosperity underpins this concept (O'Shea, Southgate, Jardine, & Delahunty, 2019). More recently, however, researchers have been drawing attention to the relational and embodied dimensions of internal migration practices, emphasising that attributes of rural communities beyond employment and educational opportunities are also relevant to whether young people 'stay or go' (Mc Laughlin, Shaff, & Demi, 2014; Thompson, 2017).

Adey (2006), in a provocatively titled paper 'If Mobility is Everything Then it is Nothing', argued that social life must be understood both in terms of what is mobile and what is relatively immobile for mobility studies to make sense. Schewel (2019) similarly argues that '… determinants of change are generally given priority within the social sciences and human agency is often conflated with human *action'* (emphasis in the original, p. 330). The consequence of this thinking for migration research is that 'staying' reflects a lack of agency. By failing to ask the question 'why do people choose not to stay', a mobility bias is perpetuated that reinforces the idea that immobility is involuntary, and mobility is aspirational (Brown, Scrase, & Ganguly-Scrase, 2017). Schewel (2019) argues to the contrary, that immobility is frequently desired. Appreciating this perspective opens up migration research to factors other than economic and rationalist ones, including the

affective, embodied, and material dimensions of internal migration as well as the role of more-than-human assemblages and agencies in migration decisions (Zhang, 2018).

In this paper, we aim to contribute to a growing body of literature that explores the affective geographies of young people's internal migration decisions by conceptualising them in terms of (im)mobility. Accordingly, our focus is not only on why young people choose to leave their hometowns but also why some choose to stay. By paying attention to young people's experiences of being away, we also shed light on why some young people choose to return to regional areas having left for a time. In emphasising the affective, material, and embodied dimensions of these experiences, we also consider the affordances of rural and urban places as well as human/non-human assemblages of becoming and belonging that are inculcated in 'finding home'.

2 AFFECT, EMBODIMENT, AND THE NON-REPRESENTATIONAL

As cultural geographers, we apply a contemporary feminist lens to questions of affect, feeling, and emotion – an approach which is spatially inflected as well as sympathetic to Deleuzian thinking (Dewsbury, 2003), process-oriented ontologies (Manning, 2009), affirmative ethics (Braidotti, 2006), and non-representational theory (Anderson, 2014; Colls, 2012). In their upcoming book, Boler and Davis (2021) summarise this perspective in the following way:

Emotion tends to refer to a nameable quality of experience (such as when you "have" an emotion "about" something). Feeling is a term that confounds the distinction between bodily, cognitive, or emotional experiences as it may refer to the physical sense of touch or subjective experience, or both. Affect is used to describe something akin to feeling and emotion, yet an aspect which is not adequately captured by either term. As a noun, affect tends to refer to the feelings or "intensities" that are less fully formed than nameable or specific emotions. As such affect also acts as a verb, because "intensities" of experience can also be understood to affect (verb) or move (between) people and things (emphasis in the original; p.12).

In taking an affective approach to understanding the internal migration decisions of regional youth, we maintain – in line with sociologists Farrugia, Smyth, and Harrison (2015) – that the non-representational makes the discursive possible. We note, also, recent scholarship on mobilities that similarly adopts non-representational theoretical frameworks and methods,

arguing that they '… capture the more ephemeral, embodied, and affective dimensions of interlocking mobility and immobility, including attention to slowness, stillness, waiting, and pauses, which are all part of a wider sensuous geography of movement, affect, and dwelling (Jensen, Sheller, & Wind, 2015, p. 365). In constructing narratives of their lives, regional young people draw on bricolages of memory which, in turn, are based upon fleeting and deep attachments to rural places (Leyshon & Bull, 2011). These memories are not just registered in the conscious mind, but also felt in the body. It is through the relationships to the places they inhabit that regional youth negotiate and re-negotiate their identities as rural. These relationships are never static but are constantly evolving and changing. Although young people internalise experiences as their 'own', they are nonetheless co-constituted through assemblages and entanglements with the material world (MacLaren, 2019).

Taking the non-representational dimensions of body-space relations into account prompts us to consider the ways in which subjectivity and place agency are enmeshed in young people's accounts of their affective geographies (De Backer and Pavoni, 2018; Hickey-Moody and Kenway, 2017). As De Backer and Pavoni (2018) suggest, rather than personal feelings and emotions, place attachments depend just as much on '… the contingency of a "taking-place" as on the socio-historical layers of meanings, memories, experiences and events that are imprinted on bodies and places alike" (p.11). Similarly, Hickey-Moody and Kenway (2017) suggest that "[i]ntense connections to place are material products of particular spatio-temporal and spatio-sensual assemblages' (p141). As such, a non-representational perspective is not only sensitive to 'felt' knowledges as they are articulated by subjects but also the ways in which people struggle to articulate the sensuous and visceral dimensions of body-space relations (Boyd & Hughes, 2020; Farrugia, 2016; Farrugia et al., 2015).

3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RATIONALE

In this study, our research aim was to explore the affective and material dimensions of the internal migration decisions of regional Australia youth, with a focus on diverse areas of the country. By doing so, we sought to challenge the prevailing assumption that young people's internal migration decisions are economically motivated (RAI, 2020).

4 METHOD

4.1 Locations and Recruitment

This research was part of the second stage of a four-stage project funded for three years by an early career research fellowship (Boyd, 2019). The regional areas included in this project have all experienced a steadily declining youth population each year from 2011 to 2015 (ABS, 2017), and they each play an important role in Australia's food, energy and/or resources sector – Griffith in New South Wales (an agricultural region), Port Hedland in Western Australia (a mining region), and Port Lincoln in South Australia (a fishing port).

Participants were recruited via a dedicated page on social media. Participants were invited to respond to an advertisement using the 'chat' function. On the basis of the 'chat', young people were assigned to one of two groups: people who had decided to stay in their regional town on turning 18 years of age (the 'stay' group) and people who had decided to leave on turning 18 years of age. This second group included people who had not returned and people who had since returned to a regional area (the 'leave/return' group).

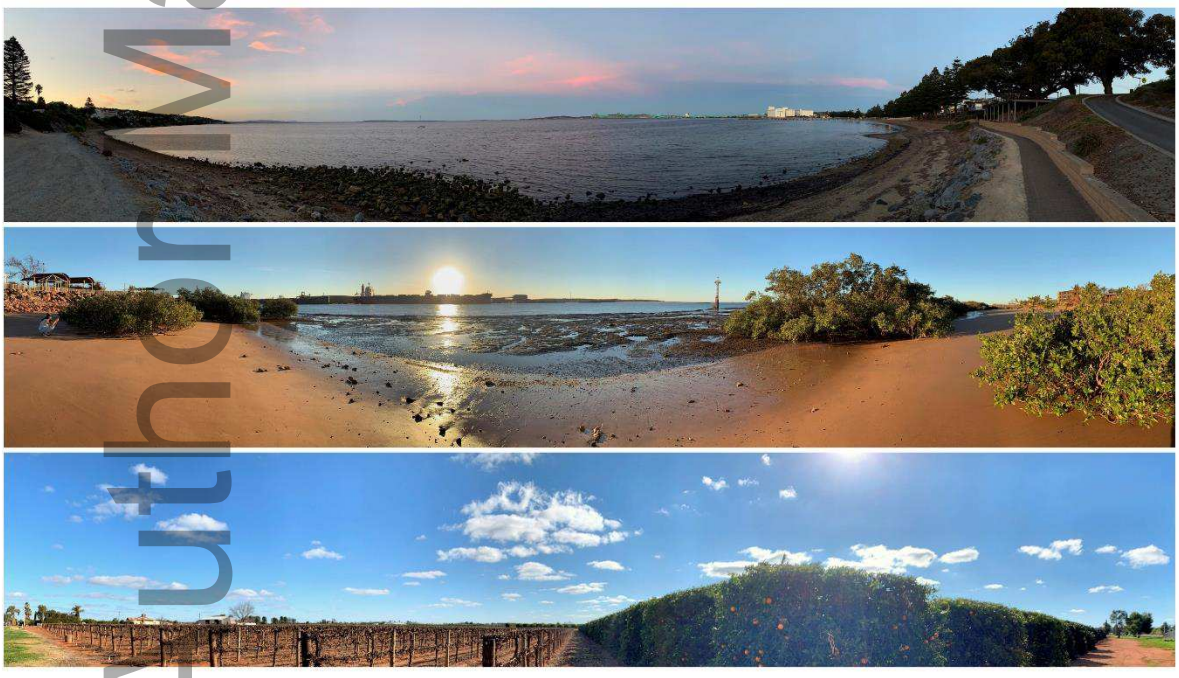

Figure 1. Panoramic photographs taken at each of the three locations involved in the research: Port Lincoln, South Australia (top); Port Hedland, Western Australia (middle); and Griffith, New South Wales (bottom)

Fifty young people from three regional towns aged 18 to 34 years – 15 from Griffith NSW (4 stay, 11 leave/return), 16 from Hedland (7 stay, 9 leave/return), and 19 from Port Lincoln (6 stay, 13 leave/return) – were recruited. The majority of participants identified as being of English or Scottish heritage with the remainder describing their heritage as Indian, Italian, Filipino, Polynesian, or Slovenian. Two participants identified as Indigenous Australians. Although not purposively sampled in this way, the ethnic backgrounds of the participants are broadly representative of Australia's regional youth population.

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

We began with a flexible approach to the qualitative data gathering by offering the opportunity for online or face-to-face interviews. We were cognisant of the fact that this age cohort have significant technological expertise, and most would be comfortable engaging with the project through digital methods. Yet, we also recognised that there are groups of young people who may be disadvantaged and so not have access to technology or internet services especially in rural areas, and, hence, the first author planned to visit each of the field sites to conduct interviews on request. As with many other research projects, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that face-to-face interactions became impossible, and the project had to be amended in light of movement restrictions, which in Australia included the closing of state borders. We offered interviews over the phone as a way to circumvent the divide between digital 'haves' and 'have nots' but also retained online methods for those who had access to the technology.

All participants were supplied with a Plain Language Information Sheet which explained the aims of the project and how the data would be used, and addressed issues of privacy and confidentiality. Written consent was obtained before the interview, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews were conducted by the second author and lasted between 40 minutes and 70 minutes. Participants received a $50 shopping voucher to compensate them for their time. Interviews were transcribed confidentially by a third party before being independently analysed by the researchers with the aid of qualitative software NVivo12. Through a collaborative and iterative approach, themes were identified and refined.

5 FINDINGS

5.1 Places uniting bodies

> I love Griffith and that is why I have not left, and I have stayed here. I guess it's good growing up in a community where a lot of people know you, so, if you are out, or whatever, people will look out for you. Everyone always says if they walk down the street with me that I know everyone, I just stop and talk to people and whatever. So, it's just home, it's like a big extended family living in Griffith.

> I think country towns, they have more security, and more like a family feel. I think there's a level of intimacy in the relationships you develop in the community.

Young people who had decided to stay in their hometowns after turning 18 years of age described the relational attachments to people and place which gave rise to affective intensities of safety, security, belonging and intimacy (Manderscheid 2013). It points to the capacity of affective and emotional intensities to draw bodies together, through feelings of comfort and security related to social proximity – a mobilising of bodies through shared immobility in place. Although the social proximity of rural communities is often experienced negatively by those outside of the mainstream (Dolan et al., 2020; Boyd et al., 2008; Parr & Philo, 2004), participants in this category described specific instances from their childhoods where they had felt safe and protected as a member of a 'tight knit community'. Yet, the participants demonstrated how meaningful places were embodied in different ways (Jensen et al. 2015). Young people from Griffith with Italian heritage related these feelings to family and traditional practices, whereas young people from Hedland identified a communal disposition that was, in part, sustained by corporate-funded activities and facilities related to the mining industry.

5.2 Places pushing into bodies

> I was not confident to go to the city and live by myself. I am a big fan of wider populations, not the city. I would go down for a holiday and to go shopping, but I am not a big fan of crowds.

> I like my peace and quiet, and I also like to have good space around me. I don't like hearing cars all the time. I am not big on change.

Participants described experiences of visiting the city which had reinforced their decisions to stay in their hometowns as adults. Many of these descriptions implicated a bodily sense of propinquity. The city was felt as an intrusion into bodily space – through the crowding of bodies and the noise of traffic – which eroded the embodied feelings of safety and serenity that they experienced at home in the country. Our participants embodied the 'cultural style' of the country through desiring peace and quiet, 'good space' and resisting change. As argued by (Sheller 2004, 223) 'Cultural styles, feelings, and emotions underpin and inform the relationality of things and people in material worlds'. Thus, moving to the city had to be negotiated in relation to the styles and affective intensities of the country that sustained young peoples' understandings of themselves.

5.3 Places linking bodies

> My hometown is very vibrant. It's a quite open and tolerant place to live.

> So, Hedland, I have always referred to it as a melting pot of people, because there are so many different cultures here, like, it is not the place to be a massive racist. In Hedland, if you threw a rock you would hit people from different cultures.

Participants who had chosen to stay in their hometowns describe them as open, accepting, and tolerant of difference. We can conceptualise place as held together through shared proximity and socio-material relations but also through a sharing of affect. As a transpersonal capacity, bodies affect others as well as being affected (Anderson 2006). The result is an openness to diverse social relations which constitute the town as 'vibrant'. As argued by (Jensen et al 2015, 371) emotions are 'externalized and shared relationally between more than one person' For these young people, who tended to identify as 'white', the diversity of racialised bodies in the country – in schools and in the wider community – was named as inclusivity. Although, as Vitus (2015) suggests after Žižek, there are elements of ideology and fantasy that support coherent views of society like these, the young people in this group maintain that, in their experience, the city was 'more racist' than the country.

5.4 Places pushing bodies out

> It's hard because I am weighing up, especially my cultural background and my connection to Country and family, with kind of what I want to do career wise, and it was not something that I did lightly … it is hard, because I am kind of sacrificing a part of who I am as an Indigenous person just because I want to make it. Well, not make it, but just because I want to be successful in, I guess, the Western World … I guess the biggest con for Indigenous people if you are moving from home to go to uni is that loss of connection to Country and family and community.

> We do not have a prison here for women, and we do not have a mental health ward here either. That is one of the reasons to leave as well … a lot of people do leave for the reason that we do not have those services here … when I was homeless, I actually had to go to Adelaide, because there is just nothing for homeless people here ... I had to leave Port Lincoln to go to jail, to go to a mental ward, and to go to rehab… so, I had a bit of a rough go. But I always come home to Port Lincoln, always.

Schewel (2019) presents a model of migration decision making which emphasises two dimensions – the capacity to immigrate and the aspiration to migrate. This model acknowledges that sometimes people with capacity do not have aspirations to migrate and vice versa. In our study, participants constantly negotiated the tensions between the affective attachments to 'home' and the lack of adequate education, health and community support services that essentially gave them no option except to leave. Often this was felt as a 'sacrifice' where they relinquished the affective relations to home for a period, while harbouring strong yearnings to return. Edensor argues that 'Places are thus continually (re)produced through the mobile flows which course through and around them, bringing together ephemeral, contingent and relatively stable arrangements of people, energy and matter' (Edensor 2011, 190). Our participants demonstrated the push of place where lack was felt as a threat to the affective and emotional flows of attachment to place.

5.5 Spaces pushing down on bodies

> When I think back, it was just a bit stagnant for me, not much was happening.

> I always tell people I loved growing up in Griffith, I just could not live in Griffith. I do not hate it, I like to go back and visit, but any more than three days I just get frustrated. I feel like I cannot breathe in Griffith.

Participants who had decided to leave their regional towns described feelings of stagnation or suffocation related to rural living. Although metaphorical, these feelings of 'stuckness' or not being able to breathe are fundamentally embodied sensations. As Nieuwenhuis (2015) argues, there is an intimacy between body and environment that is implied in the concept of breathing, and that 'suffocating airs' hold an affective function in relation to identity. We can also think about immobility and mobility as intertwined (Sheller and Urry 2006). The embodied sensations of suffocation and stagnation arise from the relative stability of rural life, which in turn provide an affective push towards mobility. For these participants, the city offered an opportunity to 'move' and 'breathe' more freely as a young person. Waterton (2013, p.70) argues that 'affects, feelings and emotions are also always invariably shaped in the ways we move through landscapes and, in turn, allow them to flow through us'. For some of our participants moving to the city allowed an emotional and affective freedom.

5.6 'Escaping' embodied histories of place

> … it was my time to make a mark on myself. I didn't know anyone. Nobody knew me. I couldn't walk through the door, and they'd already know who all which family I was from, and who I am. It was just really invigorating to not be known when you walk down the street.

> So I couldn't get out, basically I couldn't wait to get out of Griffith. That whole like, "I want to get out of this small town. I'm sick of being the only gay in the village".

Jones (2011) argues that memory is '… a fundamental aspect of becoming, intimately entwined with space, affect, emotion, imagination and identity' (p.6). This demonstrates how

memories of 'being known' may drive imaginings of not being known, or being known by different others (Fenster, 2005). For those who experienced the embodied sensations of difference – of sexuality – there was an affective push to flee the historical layering of heterosexual norms in place. For others, the stable imaginary of familial resemblance layered over generations, evoked an affective push to create an alternative version of themselves. For some young people, leaving their hometown for the city offered an opportunity to escape the embodied memories of place, and an emotional freedom to explore how identity could play out in relation to new people and places (Jones, 2005).

5.7 Places and embodied otherness

> I hadn't really thought about my image at all, or what I wore, or my weight until I went to Melbourne. Then I realised that how I looked and what I was wearing wasn't great, wasn't very trendy. I became aware of my figure, which was not a good thing.

> I felt all the people that I went to uni with, even just walking around in the city, they all wore different clothes to me. I didn't wear country boots or flannelette shirts or anything, but they all had the city style and they listened to city music … I don't know, I was just different. Even the way I spoke and everything was different.

The majority of participants, regardless of gender, described an embodied experience of otherness in a city environment. This was related to clothing style, appearance, voice, colloquialisms, accents, and inter-personal interactions. The embodied performance of the 'rural' evoked acute awareness of bodily difference and feelings of disconnection and displacement in the city. From a contemporary feminist perspective, Grosz (1994) describes this as 'inversion' – to experience oneself as a differentiated body in space rather than 'self' as interior to the body. It demonstrates how socio-spatial relations with place impact on the affective capacities of bodies.

5.8 The contingency of belonging

> At the time that I decided to leave, I remember I was just feeling really disconnected from Port Lincoln, like I could not wait to get out of here kind of

> thing, really could not wait. But what I have learned over the years is that I can make home wherever I am, I think, my whole journey has been about creating home in myself.

> I thought I had a great attachment to Griffith and could not leave the place and that was the place for me and then I moved away and I realized I think a place becomes a home, I think it's where your people are.

> It's only home, because I grew up here.

These examples illustrate the contingency of belonging where relations with self, others and place are constantly negotiated through emotional and affective registers (Jones, 2005). 'Home' is a central concept in how young people feel that they belong and is configured by on-going practices and performances (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Mee & Wright, 2009). In the context of rural towns, historical social and cultural norms establish particular people and practices as either 'in-place' or 'out-of-place' (Gorman-Murray, Waitt, & Gibson, 2008; Yuval-Davis 2006). Belonging, for these participants, became more about connecting with 'your people' and less about a childhood place that they called 'home'.

5.9 Materialities of rurality

> I always felt I was very lucky, especially here in Griffith. We had open spaces, fresh air, places to run around and get dirt under your fingernails, kick a ball, stuff like that.

> … we have got the pros of being surrounded by the most beautiful beaches and space, if you go to the beach someone is not right next to you. So, all that kind of stuff I think is very special.

> All my life I have always grown up seeing old people having a yard, and they have their roses and their chickens or have their dogs and their cats, and they seem more content, like they have more of a purpose in the country; they can grow their own vegetables here.

The material affordances of rural places were by far the main reason why these participants decided to return to a regional area – wanting to experience these anew for themselves but to also to start families of their own. Beyond romantic and sentimental constructions of home (see Wylie, 2012), participants also described 'more-than human' sympathies which were energising (Bennett, 2020). Consistent with post-structuralist/post-human accounts of dwelling (Jones, 2009), these young people were very aware '… that much of life is only possible through routine interconnections of differing types of things', both human and nonhuman (p. 266).

5.10 Solace of serenity

> When I first came back, I moaned, because everything was not at the tips of my fingers anymore. But then coming back and just realising the pace is so much slower here.

> It was horrible [in the city]. It was uncomfortable, I have never driven with heavy traffic before, it was big and scary and I just wanted to come home and I just missed being comfortable in my hometown, because that is all I knew.

In contrast to the feelings of stagnation and suffocation described by regional youth who had decided to leave their hometowns, those who returned described atmospheres of stillness and slowness as desirable and comforting. Stillness, as a geographical concept, is normally understood in terms of movement, but as Bissell and Fuller (2011) argue, stillness is also a relation concept – as much an attunement or perception as it is a 'dialectic of mobility' (p. 6).

5.11 The ineffability of home

> That is something which, although our cities are quite good for it, I never felt satisfied, because there is a big portion of why I am that it just wasn't. What I really wanted and where I really feel happiest is being back home.

> It feels homely. I don't know how you describe that feeling, but it's a comfort thing to kind of know that if something happens, or I need to talk about it, family's here; it was always kind of the longing for when am I going to see them

> next, especially with grandparents. But yeah, it is a really good feeling that if something, you can just come up for it. They have something, I can be there.

There were moments when participants struggled to articulate what 'home' meant to them, instead gesturing towards the ineffability of home. For Lorimer (2014), discovering one's 'homeland' is an intimate journey of 'memory and emotion, attachment and estrangement' (p. 583). Staying, leaving, or returning to places was always intimately caught up in how our participants understood themselves, and their lives. Many, if not all, of the participants in our study are still on these journeys as they (re)create identities, negotiate relations with self, others, the material and the immaterial aspects of place.

6 CONCLUSION

In this paper we have illustrated how 'finding home' is a continual process of connecting, disconnecting, and reconnecting to place – forming and re-forming attachments which are spatial and temporal. We argue that our conceptual perspective provides a way to consider to the affective intensities which coproduce bodies and spaces in order to rethink migration decisions. Our research has highlighted that the internal migration decisions of regional young people in Australia with a capacity to migrate are predominantly affective. Rather than desiring 'upward mobility', these young people made choices and decisions based on what felt best for them, which for some meant not moving at all. We demonstrated the importance of the particularities of place, including materialities and relations with human and non-humans that worked to connect or unify bodies, evoking feelings of inclusion and security. Further, we discussed how the affective atmospheres of places pushed into and onto bodies, making them feel dislocated or oppressed, and the way that places worked to push bodies out through the embodied experience of difference thus adding to literature that addresses bodies and places, mobilities and immobilities. The participants in our study emphasised the dilemma of these affective pushes and pulls, where feelings of belonging, or longing for home or Country, had to be negotiated, reconsidered, and re-worked in relation to the unfolding of place.

The young people in our study emphasised the positive attributes of rural communities and the negative attributes of the city, and we acknowledge that these views may not be representative of regional Australian youth at large. We also note the limitations of this study in that recruitment and interviews occurred online and that we provided a monetary incentive

for participation (see Parkinson et al., 2019). Yet, our online engagement method was effective in eliciting the emotional and affective dimensions of living in a rural place despite some positive bias in participants' accounts (Longhurst, 2017).

The practical implications of this study relate to policy. Many of the young people who had left their regional areas retained strong links to their hometowns, maintaining a desire to return and 'give back' to their communities. As such, we suggest that greater attention needs to be given to policies or programs that genuinely provide avenues for young people to share their knowledge and expertise and to capitalise on their potential contributions (ACYS, 2015). This means that attention needs to be given to finding ways to engage with regional youth, especially those that may struggle because of difference, and to more actively cultivate supported opportunities to experience the city from a young age. Such exposure, we suggest, may mitigate the negative experiences of leaving, ease the often-stultifying effects of growing up in a country town, and build on the non-representational pull of rurality.

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