



## NOWHERE TO GO, NOTHING TO DO

Place, Desire, and Country Girlhood

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On a bright, clear winter Saturday I'm walking back from the river to the main street in Small Central Town<sup>1</sup> in inland New South Wales (NSW) with three girls I'm trying to get to talk to me.<sup>2</sup> Jenny, Nerida, and Kaylah<sup>3</sup> have become less wary than most here, probably because I don't hassle them about hanging out at the river. Instead I'm interested in what they do there, and why there. They're dubious, of course, and incredulous that anyone pays me for talking to them, but curious too. We stop at the newsagents, talking about magazines, and Jenny laughs at a cover featuring an after-school soap star she particularly dislikes. The café is next door. Kaylah says, "I bet cafés in Melbourne are nothing like that one on *Neighbours*. But I bet they're better than ours." The others laugh, agreeing. What they don't say is that they hate *this* café, where the woman mostly behind the counter won't serve them. They think her refusal is straightforwardly racist—because she hates Aboriginal girls. She suspects them of shoplifting and has reported them for truancy. The café is only one among many spaces where stories about Small Central Town's decline focus on white-Aboriginal tensions and the crime rate as much as agricultural decline, but today we're not talking about any of that. Instead they ask me about Sydney, where they've all been, but only once, and about Sydney cafés, which must also be better than theirs.

This situation represents the significant popular assumption in Australia that country life is lived at a distance from active engagement with the contemporary world, one with considerable influence over the tendency for country youth to drift to the city. But this is also a specifically *girl* situation and suggests, for me, the important contribution girlhood studies might make to understanding what it involves. Exploring what the field might say about this situation confronts two problematic tendencies in contemporary girlhood studies. The first is a tendency for girlhood studies to bifurcate into, on the one hand, stud-

ies of cultural production-consumption to which communication and representation are central and, on the other, policy studies based on a deficit model of what girls need. Addressing this situation requires considering girl-media relations alongside the town's provision of facilities for girls and also considering the relation between these. The second tendency is for girlhood studies to focus on metropolitan girls, except when representing girls understood to be outside of modernity and its privileges—girls discussed with reference to the third world, the global south, or a related category. I want to intersect girlhood studies and rural studies here through a motif fascinating for both and widely represented in popular culture—the idea that country girls have nowhere to go and nothing to do. This is a claim with which most country girls would agree; indeed it describes something empirically unquestionable and culturally vital. But there's much to be gained in looking more closely at this problem and its articulation in girls' lives.

Jenny, Kaylah, and Nerida are country girls. This is not about how old they are exactly, though they are all fifteen; it is about how they are perceived by authorities, institutions, and various malleable or stiff social networks. When people talked to me about the Small Central Town girls they thought spent too much time hanging out at the river, regardless of age or how long they had been in town (there were many mobile families there), what brought those observed together was their visible detachment from stable roles in homes and workplaces and their evasion of the monitoring that should accompany that detachment. This made them seem like a particular kind of problem that the town understood as a *girl problem*. In practice, it matters less what these girls do in the managed and unmanaged spaces along the riverbanks than that they are occupying a space historically identified with girls at risk and in trouble.

In Australia, the cultural significance of ideas about the country means that even towns quite close to a metropolis can experience their countryness very pointedly. Girls' lives are directly affected by what are deemed to be policy problems arising from the special needs of country Australia, and yet reducing the experience of country girls to a policy object is an easy failure of attention. The problems policy faces in addressing country girlhood in Australia are tightly integrated into a popular cultural field. As Michelle Gabriel put it, a decade ago now, but nothing has changed, "media images of Australian regional life are overwhelmingly bleak: regional communities are dying; regional services are withdrawing; an underclass is forming; youth are disappearing; the bush has been forgotten" (2002: 209). This deficit image of

the country is integral to Australian politics, ingrained since debates around Federation about the endangered “national character” (Murphy 2010: 9), but in discourse on rural youth it takes little account of what girls want to access. My interest here is in the relations between country girls’ desires and this disappearance.

It’s Tuesday, more than an hour after school, and I’ve been working in the Northern Beach-Town library. I’m glad of the air conditioning and I like the people; it’s my favorite part-time work here. It’s almost closing time and slow, so I’m writing field notes towards the back near the free computers. At this time they are mostly used by schoolkids waiting where it’s deemed safe and out of trouble or where they can escape the heat. One girl, Candace, who’s had her maximum time on the computer, comes up to talk. I’ve met her at school and remember her name, although she doesn’t remember mine. She asks, so I tell her what I’m doing. This place is “the pits,” she says with relish. “Who’d live here if they had a choice?” Candace moved here a few months ago with her mother, who thinks this is a better place to live a safe and affordable life with her daughter. Candace feels she is miserable beyond belief. “There’s nothing to do.” “People like the beaches,” I comment. She scoffs. On the weekends quite a lot of girls, in small groups, some supplemented by boys and some not, congregate on the beaches. She thinks they’re idiots. And the school is “shit.” She’s doing fine academically, in fact almost at the top of most of her classes, but as far as Candace is concerned that’s because “everyone’s retarded here.” I ask about the apparently satisfied and certainly much-praised girls who had recently starred in a school talent show we’d both attended. *They* seem to be getting something out of the school. Her contempt is vicious. They’re “sad” and “desperate.” Everything about Sydney was so much better, so much *more*, than this. A lot of older people move here, I finally suggest, to retire. “They might as well just die,” she replies.

At the level of a country town as imagined community, local girls work as both symbols of town success and as management problems. Reading rural studies both encourages me to think this is also widely true outside Australia and yet rarely examined in these terms. As Chris Philo puts it, rural geography, his part of the field, has tended to operate on the terrain of “the Other of the Same” (1997: 24), keeping its subject matters firmly anchored in familiar empirical and conceptual moorings. “In so doing it has effectively simplified the countryside—whether by being hung up on agriculture ... by a fascination with the neat morphological unit of the nucleated village; by an obsession with *Gemeinschaft* social relations; by a persistent questioning of the

local-newcomer schism as a key division" (22). In fact, no element of this moment with Candace, from the reasons she is in the town or the library to her lack of interest in talent shows and beaches, is actually defined by her recent arrival. Many girls who have never lived anywhere else say similar things.

If girlhood is not defined by age it remains organized around ongoing and compulsory social training that needs to be geographically located. Rural communities are pervasively represented as isolated, tightly closed networks of observation, and the observation both imagined and experienced as typical of country town life makes country girlhood look and feel like a highly disciplined space, period, or category (Tucker and Matthews 2001; Leyshon 2008). Since the 1990s, not at all coincidentally since girlhood studies has expanded, "studies in rural gender identity have started to benefit from a move away from representation in focusing on performance and on the material practices through which gender and sexual identities are produced and sustained" (Little 2006: 375). Yet in 2008 Michael Leyshon could still argue that "[n]ot much is understood about how, why, or where young women 'roam' within a community, how they become ingratiated within communities, what purpose or value these spaces present for young people or whether the concept of gendered space can be applied to adolescent life" (270). Country towns as experienced by any girl operate on multiple scales, shaped by exigencies of population management at the most abstract scale: by highly flexible local meanings—including who your parents are and, probably related, whether Jean at the café will sell you anything—by geographical limitations and opportunities that are hard to ameliorate at either of those scales; and also by a desiring production of meaningful connections to their own and other places.

The now long-standing impression that country towns are dominated by conservative social formations, including conservative discourses on gender, must be brought into this conjunction and also questioned, considering how diverse the influences on country girls' sense of the world are in practice. Signs of urbanity are crucial for girls negotiating their lives relative to such influences. Hugh Matthews et al. describe English village kids in terms that are clearly relevant to those Small Central Town girls, and to Candace: "it is almost as if these children were trying to occupy, even create for themselves, mini-urban spaces where they could perform a sociability akin to that which they see depicted regularly in television 'soaps,' films and magazines" (2000: 145).

I think it is useful to bring some theoretical tools to this situation to avoid relying on common sense accounts of what girls need and desire.

As Margaret Alston puts some common assumptions, it might be said that while Australian rural youth desire out-migration, “the greater loss of young women, is driven by a lack of employment options, and the need to access tertiary education, it is also driven by a need to escape the small town milieu” (2004: 300). But is this a matter of what the rural lacks? I want to turn here to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. Habitus is a personal orientation in the world carried through later experiences and produced in the experience of particular conditions by which, according to Bourdieu, we “anticipate the necessity immanent in the way of the world” ([1987] 1990: 11). This demands a sense of location, which Bourdieu often suggests is unconscious—not just of a space you move through but a space you manifest. Though it may align with strategic calculations or the following of rules, habitus “puts itself forward with an urgency and a claim to existence that excludes all deliberation” (Bourdieu 1990: 53). Although some geographers have taken up this concept (Holt 2008), it has not been widely employed in either rural studies or girlhood studies, which is surprising given that habitus makes readily available tense stories of origin and ideology that are attractive to both fields.

Habitus is a term for how limits and tendencies are defined by our social context before we can even be made conscious of them. Education, this suggests, although significant, reinforces and gives additional meaning to differences already learned, while offering minute variations on them. But there is room within this idea for wanting something other than what one has been offered. Education serves to legitimize what will count as desirable aspirations (or pretensions) at a level imagined beyond the local. Although this is often thought to be an overly rigid account of how people relate to hegemony, Bourdieu insists on the openness of habitus to modification, suggesting that “in all cases where dispositions encounter conditions (including fields) different from those in which they were constructed and assembled, there is a *dialectical confrontation*” (2005: 46). Habitus is thus quite personal, despite Bourdieu’s overall account of determining social fields.

The conceptual terrain Bourdieu is tracing here also underpins Jonathan Murdoch and Andy Pratt’s (1997) debate with Chris Philo over how rural studies should proceed. Murdoch and Pratt reject any assumption that the rural is a stable object but also refuse Philo’s claim that rural studies is unable to be “sensitive to diverse experiences and histories” (1997: 54). Like Bourdieu, these critics are asking what happens to our capacity to understand structures of power if we embrace the full irreducible multiplicity of experience. If, as Murdoch and Pratt claim, “we can know the rural only from and through particular socio-spatial

positions" (58), such positions are unfixed by any scale of power. They may be broad—from "country girls" to "Indigenous girls in X region"—or seriously specific. An unemployed disenchanted daughter of a middle-class family who couldn't make it work at university and has reluctantly come back home, sleeping in her old room and hardly ever leaving the reassuring other-space of the internet, unwilling to socialize with those of her high school peers who didn't leave town is also a social position, although for me it means a particular girl met during my research. It could actually be thousands of girls because so many institutions, policies, and discourses shaping her experience have also affected others in comparable situations. I think habitus offers a way of engaging with the changeable interweaving of structure and experience involved in an Australian country girl orientation in the world.

Rural studies and rural policy in Australia are preoccupied not only with deficit narratives but also with a long-standing opposition between discourses on the rural dull and the rural idyll that presume a generational formation in which the young are the bored. City girls may often be bored and contemptuous of the familiar. But they can believe in the myths of opportunity and change within their present-tense everyday lives, a belief that country girls find hard to sustain. As one study puts it, "What particularly distinguishes a rural upbringing ... is the sharp disjunction between the symbolism and expectation of the Good Life ... and the realities and experiences of growing-up" (Matthews et al. 2000: 141). Both dull and idyll are nevertheless living country ideals in Australia. It is not that the idyll operates as a fantasy that the dull exposes but rather that the two work together, generating migration flows as well as local social practices.

Amid the demographic transformation of coastal NSW and its hinterland network of river valleys in the late 1970s and 1980s, the River-Town council reconstructed Town Park. It had been there in some form for a century, built in memory of one of the town's colonial benefactors. But in the early 1980s the council landscaped a new park space, adding a wooden climbing frame and a landscaped grassy bluff. One point of this renovation was that Town Park had become a trouble spot. Making it safer meant opening it up for use by families, seniors, and recognized community groups, and excluding people, particularly young men and Aborigines, deemed to be a problem. Established next to the now-defunct council chambers and bounded by churches, schools, a rotary hall, and the main street, Town Park is a public space about public space.

These renovations allowed girls more opportunities to use Town Park, but not in the way envisioned for open and safe public space. The

climbing frame, concealed conveniently by the bluff designed to disrupt use of the open grass by bikes and cars, became a place for girls to gather and talk but also to smoke and drink. If many were caught it was a nicer semi-clandestine space than some others and a change from the river. There was complaint in public forums, and at school some girls were scolded and warned. Eventually another renovation in the 1990s lowered the now worn bluff (bike riders had used it as a ramp anyway), added public toilets, and replaced the frame with a memorial. A new climbing frame more obviously directed at small children was built near the entrance. Many girls still came, but this phase of renovation had opened up a more discreet part of the riverbank, less monitored because less connected to the town as a public institution, and often they went there instead. On my last visit to Town Park a stand of gum trees had been added, interspersed with large spotlights embedded in the ground behind a sign advising that they improved “the ambience and safety” of the park. Crafting this space is an ongoing public drama.

Surrounded by far less managed spaces, Town Park is not needed for outdoor leisure or as a meeting place, and the fact that girls continue to use it is as much statement as convenience. Like many country town parks, its use is more restricted than city park spaces might be, and young people experience these restrictions as age-specific (Leyshon 2011; see also Kenway et al. 2006). The park is managed as a shifting statement about the town’s identity. We might understand this with reference to the geographer Doreen Massey, whose work has been primarily concerned with cities and with globalization. Massey is highly critical of the “tendency to equate the terms local: grounded: everyday: meaningful” which any focus on country towns seems to risk, but her discussion of power-geometry is relevant here. To avoid “valorizing place,” Massey recommends abandoning “territorial thinking” and working instead “through paths, connections, inter-relations” (2002: 24). This power-geometry leads Massey to questions about what a sense of place costs that are useful here because country towns have been so closely aligned with the territorializing claims she warns against. Characterizing a town by “enclosure” is integral to setting up exaggerated oppositions between it and a “threatening” (1993: 67) outside. Thinking through power-geometry, however, it becomes apparent that place can be characterized this way by those excluded from, as well as those privileged by, a place. Country town girls also attribute permanence and singularity to their towns, often in order to name a departure point for change or for desire.

As Meaghan Morris suggests, boundaries around place are constructed in order to be rejected as well as embraced, recalling for her-

self the particular place that “divided the joy of leaving town from the ambivalence of coming home” (1998: 82–83). This ambivalence cannot be dissociated from her account of problems facing “small towns in eastern Australia” at the end of the 1960s: “population drift, shrinking local employment prospects, declining or anachronistic community facilities, ‘nothing to do’ syndrome” (67). But Morris would rightly warn me to be careful of statements about how country town girls live, which easily become the work of “the cruising grammarian reading similarity from place to place.” We also need “a more complex and localized *affektive* relation” (67) attentive to differences between places. Ethnography is crucial here because, to quote Morris again, “Like a lot of cultural activity in ... country towns, you have to know where it is to find it” (81).

Town Park’s quietness during the day, with most people just passing through, is a fair representation of River-Town’s public space overall. And at night this is also representative, mostly empty but occasionally punctuated by dramatic group activities. Young people are the dominant users at night. The other regular visitor is the police. Many nights after closing time at the pubs a police car pulls up on the high street and an officer walks through and back with a torch, moving any lingerers along. Although policing relies on legal limits, unlegislated distinctions based on age, gender, race, domicile, and social networks are also enforced by local policing (see Hogg and Carrington 2006), and the use of Town Park at night is discouraged and all but effectively prohibited for girls.

Strategies designed to support the specific needs of communities often articulate distinctions between types of girls, sometimes even insisting on them where they otherwise might not matter. In all three towns I am discussing here, the distinction between being a white or an Aboriginal girl allocates girls easier or more difficult access to certain town spaces, or even parts of a schoolyard, park, beach, or pub. It is not that all girls in Australian country towns are either white or Aboriginal—far from it—although the majority of the non-metropolitan population identify themselves as white and the proportion identified as Aboriginal is higher than in the city. Rather, this distinction is a dominant imagination of country Australia as space and as culture. As Kate Murphy puts it, “rurality has been racialised in Australia, where country people are assumed to be white” (2010: 26), and the white/Aboriginal encounter in the bush is not only a matter of mythic national history. It is a focusing figure for a cultural landscape encountered by all kinds of country girls every day.

It nevertheless remains too easy to presume the continual significance of the white/Aboriginal distinction. Taking one step back from



its fraught history allows us to acknowledge that there are more commonalities than distinctions between the supervision and disciplines pervading the lives of country town girls. Faith Tucker and Hugh Matthews, analyzing village life in England, suggest that “[o]ne of the consequences of a lack of public space in rural areas, particularly play space such as recreation grounds, is that children, both girls and boys, can become highly visible and subject to adult scrutiny. Contrary to the rural childhood myth and the notion of freedom from surveillance, a number of girls in our study reported that they were often victims of the adult gaze” (2001: 163).

Permitted spaces for girl sociality, like parks, sporting venues, halls, or schoolyards, are available at highly regulated times and through supervisory networks. Leyshon describes youthful response to this surveillance as “deploying tactics of invisibility” (2011: 313), escaping on bikes (and, later, cars in my fieldwork sites), or hiding in houses. But as Tucker and Matthews (2001) suggest, this surveillance is intensified for girls. A “‘natural’ surveillance that is applauded as part of the maintenance of the caring rural community acts as a powerful disciplinary tactic in relation to sexual behaviour and relationships” (Little 2007: 853), and this surveillance is particularly directed to the protection and training of girls.

A sense of nothing-*else-to-do* incites what Kenway et al. (2006) discuss as anti-idyllic behavior. It also makes this behavior more visible. The visibility of nothing-else-to-do not only inspires out-migration but emphasizes alternative pathways to adulthood and its occupations. One of the most popularly voiced concerns about unsupervised girls in these contexts is that they use outdoor spaces for underage drinking (of alcohol), which is assumed to lead to a range of other dangerous behaviors, including sex. These concerns do not disappear when girls are old enough to buy and consume alcohol legally (at majority, eighteen across Australia).<sup>4</sup> Drinking is associated with a freedom to pursue pleasure and a strong sense that there are fewer available pleasures in the country helps establishes pubs and other formal drinking spaces as “aspirational” (Leyshon 2008: 274) sites for youth. Certainly some girls, as Leyshon suggests, associate local licensed venues with male behavior they dislike. They might aspire instead to more youth-oriented city venues, but many continue to engage in alternative local drinking cultures, including in parks.

Brian McGrath, writing about Ireland, suggests that boredom is especially common among rural girls, with few feeling “there were good places to go (... parks, shops, leisure centres)” (2009: 259). Many Australian studies link the prominence of drinking cultures and other forms

of early drug use in country locations to boredom, an absence of alternative venues for sociality, and poor access to transport to viable spaces. These drinking cultures are often described as masculine (see Alston 2004; Kenway et al. 2006), although in the towns I am discussing underage and of-age drinking is part of many girls' lives. It was not understood as drug use, however, but as a mature form of socialization that had more in common with sex than marijuana. Drinking and sex as tactically chosen leisure options seem additionally exciting because they are both prohibited and adult. Recognizing as much means acknowledging that desire for this kind of pleasure will not be met by a new youth center. Such facilities are often praised in rural youth studies (see Skelton 2000; Leyshon 2008), but girls who desire identification with an imagined youth culture urbanity are effectively seeking ways to differentiate themselves from standards within an adult world. They are certainly not seeking more supervised space.

The increased supervision of children in recent decades is widely reported (see Pooley 2011), but in the country this shift runs counter to narratives about the safety, support, and openness of country life (McGrath 2009). This contradiction is not lost on girls, especially subject to such observation, thus intensifying a sense that what they are being protected from is themselves. When studies like Tracey Skelton's (2000) describe the value of formal youth centers, they are describing an alternative parent-approved space. These may be preferable to home spaces, which are not more private for most girls than the spaces they make in public. As McGrath (2009) and others have noted, in the context of expectations that girls remain in supervised spaces domestic media use becomes additionally important for country girls. This sometimes allows girls to feel they have access to an urbane youth culture, although media use is also often heavily supervised.

The girl with time and space at her own disposal is presumed to be a danger to herself, and for country girls this is exacerbated by a sense that country time and space is less regulated, and by rhetoric on the dangers of boredom. This produces a powerful imperative to provide things for country girls to do outside of school hours. If some of these sanctioned activities—like Girl Guides and surf or pony clubs—obtain special facilities from a rural location the relative importance of the whole array—from ballet classes and police-run discos to sports of all types—indicate that something more than physical geography is involved. Such activities provide a map of girl sociality in any town, but like any map it is an interpretation that needs to be examined for what it omits.

From the back of a River-Town Home Ec. class (officially called Food Technology), I am listening to four girls who have been grouped for a practical assignment, as they always are unless they have been talking too much. Shelley, Jessica, Liz, and Angela have been assigned to one of four mini-kitchens in this room, each arranged like the kitchen-dining area of a small flat. I am working here as a volunteer (helping set up and clean up for practical classes) and observing girls' use of this space to represent what they expect and want from life. Today, they are making stir-fry beef. Shelley—blonde, tall, tanned, thoroughly a sporting girl but with a penchant for piled-on bracelets and earrings—says she hates Chinese food. For all of them, Asian is food for eating out or taking away. "As if you'd bother at home," Jessica says. Although she is quieter than the others, her personal style has her often in trouble for breaking uniform rules (non-regulation hoodies in winter or, this week, dyeing her hair a spectacular red) and extends to wanting to travel to Asia and saying she loves the food. The girls' enjoyment of cooking a meal that is not what they would think of as a home meal is made more interesting by Liz. While she looks and dresses much like Shelley, Liz is more focused in this class. She wants to be a chef. She and her mother love cooking shows on television, buy food magazines, and test recipes out at home. Her specific plan for an apprenticeship is new, but Liz has long intended to leave town at the end of Year Ten for the regional city where her older sister lives. She was disappointed to find that, with changes to industrial training conditions, she is now advised to stay at school next year and do the new trades training program in Hospitality. It hasn't affected her interest here, however, because this class may be about cooking but it is engaged with through discourse on homes rather than work. Both Shelley and Jessica also expect to leave home over the next few years. Shelley hopes for university (and to study Physical Education) and Jessica expects to look for work. There are few jobs for late teenage or twenty-something girls in River-Town but whether the ongoing education girls imagine after school is formal or informal, staying in town seems like a narrowed life.

Only Angela plans to stay in town. Slender and pretty in micro-short uniforms, Angela's popularity and her serious local boyfriend combine to increase her satisfaction here. Although she is clever and manages above-average marks with little effort, Angela has no interest in studying. Her future is planned. She and Jason might travel after school, but just for holidays. Nothing about the wider world equals the value of Jason in Angela's eyes, and he is also satisfied in River-Town. Her father, a local businessman, is furious. Like anyone I could ask here he

thinks the drift of kids to the city is bad for the town, but he wants every possible opportunity for his own children. At the end of the year, Angela plans to convert her part-time job in the local supermarket to a full-time one so that she and Jason, a bricklayer, can move in together. The other girls think that maybe if they had a Jason they'd feel similarly. But they're not searching for that kind of relationship, and nor would their parents want them to, even though serious relationships with local boys are the principal reason girls choose not to leave town.

Habitus is a more useful concept for discussing what underlies Angela's desires than heteronormativity or any equivalent term for an ideological certainty. Lia Bryant and Barbara Pini (2011) draw very effectively on Stevi Jackson's rethinking of heteronormativity to analyze the reproduction of gendered dynamics in farming families. But while Angela's family and friends anticipate the natural importance of heterosexual pairing in her future they do not endorse her choice to prioritize a romantic heterosexual relationship over further training. Angela, along with many other girls, sees new possibilities in defining their life around boyfriends, but calling this heteronormativity ignores the important facts that few girls are making Angela's choice and that her teachers and parents actively disapprove of it. Habitus names taken-for-granted expectations, but these do not have to be internally harmonious. What is taken for granted around Angela is that sixteen is too young for adult commitments and that leaving school after Year Ten is appropriate only for girls who have no skills to develop, and suggests poor parenting. Without a contradictory habitus we could hardly explain Angela's prioritization of other values than those produced by an accord between socioeconomic interest and school and family pressures. She is not just slotting into an expected heterosexual role too early. School and family pressures are an argument against themselves for Angela, and it is partly her *country* girlhood that means that Angela sees a radical self-assertion in staying at home.

Johan Rye (2006) has argued that rural youth from families with high incomes who have high cultural capital tend to have a positive perception of rurality, having more resources to create and represent their local social life. Further, he claims that young people from families with low incomes and low cultural capital feel similarly, because city life offers them little and devalues the resources (like pub and sporting cultures) that work for them. For Rye, young people from families with high income and low cultural capital or low income and high cultural capital have a more negative perception of rurality. I agree with all of this to some degree. But having a positive image does not mean that girls choose to stay. In fact, girls from families with higher cultural cap-

ital are more certain that they must leave, probably for education but otherwise in order to gain a world experience that is required for cultural capital.

The year after I met these girls their Home Ec. classrooms, and the building and grounds where Agricultural Science was taught, were upgraded to a state-funded Vocational Education and Training (VET) Center. This was marked by the arrival of chef's whites and caps for the students and by new professionalized kitchens. If such girls have different conversations in those clothes and spaces they will still, I am sure, be directed towards gendered futures in which out-migration is central. As in Northern Beach-Town, where the major VET options are Metalwork and Hospitality, these gender-focused options reflect policies for keeping non-academically inclined seventeen-year-olds in school. Such curriculum patterns and the associated extension of compulsory schooling in NSW are no more neutral than the renovations of Town Park. All are rural youth policy in action, and all have led to an increased tendency for girls to continue in school as yet another approved and supervised space for their social training. But staying in school also increases incentives to leave town, opening easier and socially sanctioned access to the wider world through further education, which, in turn, further limits the pool of jobs that seem appropriate.

If policy-oriented research mentions gender quite often and yet tends to recommend gender-neutral action, as if there were a gender-neutral youth, the lived difference of the country disappears even more quickly. A presumed good like school retention, however, is differently enacted in a country school and meets different desires there. In a report on rural youth needs Carol Croce (1994) represents their key concerns as public transport, service delivery, and income and income support. Despite criticizing policy developed without reference to rural conditions, this account also begins and ends with general goods. I (or the girls above) might well ask, for example, transport *to what?* In Northern Beach-Town, girls would certainly like more regular and cheaper buses to the city's cornucopia of entertainment venues. They also care about access to jobs. But few of them would want those venues or jobs to be in their hometown. Leaving, at least temporarily, is part of what they desire.

Effective policy, such as that crafted in the 1970s to address the problem of girls not investing in or completing school and that shaped the situation in which Australian country girls now grow up, actually begins from an engagement with transforming desires. Peter Kraftl et al. suggest that "analyses of youth policy must be interdisciplinary" and must acknowledge that no concept, from society to space, "operate[s] in

a vacuum. Rather, they are constructed and operationalised and *done*” (2012: 265). The same is true of age, gender, and rurality. But no individual can opt out of these concepts either, and girls are particularly subject to other people’s authority over the terms in relation to which they *do* their lives. Their desires are formed relative to both broad brushstroke pictures and precise situations. Country girlhood itself is an imagined category in relation to which girls live lives influenced by myriad small and large intersecting forces. Their desires are crafted from the contradictions encompassed by that situation. Even girls who prefer the idea of a country life vitally feel the imperative to move on as part of living in that place. What is most crucial to these Australian country girls’ sense of where they come from is its distance from somewhere else, where their own lives are already going on.

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## Notes

1. I am referring to three small NSW towns in this chapter, all with populations of under 6,000. Small Central Town is a remote inland town at an intersection of rivers and highways. Once a transport and economic hub for primary industries, it retains some local government and commercial services because the nearest regional city is three hours’ drive away. On the coast, Northern Beach-Town’s attractive beaches have helped make it a small-scale

tourist center. Located on a once economically significant river mouth, its primary industries are now only residual, and it is dominated by a population of retirees and economically driven by tourism and support facilities for aged care. River-Town is located in the inland hinterland within half an hour of the coast. Once it provided river access to pastoral lands and timber resources, and the town still depends on some economic activity of these kinds. It is now closely linked for all commercial and government services to a much larger town on the coast. This chapter belongs to a broader research project conducted in ten towns and spanning more than ten years. See Driscoll, *The Australian Country Girl: History, Image, Experience* (2014).

2. This chapter first appeared as an article in *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 7, no. 1 (2014): 121–137.
3. Part of my ethical commitment to all the girls I mention is that I conceal their identities, both in order to have them talk more openly to me and because there is no reason they should be attached by publication to their opinions and situations at this time. Both girls and towns have pseudonyms here and I have shifted and blended details to make them less locally identifiable.
4. A strong equation between maturity, freedom, and drinking and a culture of socially acceptable drinking and drunkenness is one of the reasons rural studies from the U.K. and Ireland are more easily applicable to Australia than are studies from other countries. The other key reasons are a shared Anglophone history of imagining the countryside and the expectation and practice of public funding for all education and other youth services.

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