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# Desire, belonging and absence in rural places

John Scott

*Queensland University of Technology*

Anthony Lyons

*La Trobe University*

Catherine L. Mac Phail

*University of Wollongong, cmacphai@uow.edu.au*

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# Desire, belonging and absence in rural places

## **Abstract**

One of the more popular and enduring characters introduced by the British sketch comedy *Little Britain* (2003-2006) was Daffyd Thomas, a 25-year-old gay man living in the fictional village of Llandewi Breffi, Wales. The comedy played to Daffyd's claim to be 'the only gay in the village' (shown to be blatantly untrue), his apparent homophobia and his attention-seeking behaviour, as evident in his over-the-top dress sense. Yet, what made the comedy 'work' was the setting, a traditional pub in rural Wales. As with much comedy, Daffyd presented as 'matter out of place', to borrow a phrase from Mary Douglas (1992); he did not belong in the imagined space in which he resided. Worse, he was an extrovert, showing a total disregard for the conventions of the village social order, but his efforts to court sanction went largely unnoticed. It is not without irony that, in 2010, while conducting an interview with a mayor of a rural Australian town, one of the guest editors was flatly informed that there were no 'homosexuals' in the community, a claim the researcher had heard in other towns. Later, upon reflection, the interviewee qualified his statements, saying "[you] don't really see gays here ... in the farming community". In an instant, a relationship between a fictional village in Wales and an agricultural town in Australia subject to homophobic violence, became apparent. Both spaces conveyed aspects of the belonging and absence which animates sexuality in the rural/urban continuum.

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**EDITORIAL: DESIRE, BELONGING AND ABSENCE IN RURAL PLACES**

John Scott, Anthony Lyons and Catherine MacPhail

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One of the more popular and enduring characters introduced by the British sketch comedy *Little Britain* (2003-2006) was Daffyd Thomas, a 25 year old, gay man living in the fictional village of Llandewi Breffi, Wales. The comedy played to Daffyd's claim to be 'the only gay in the village' (shown to be blatantly untrue), his apparent homophobia, and his attention-seeking behaviour, as evident in his over-the-top dress sense. Yet, what made the comedy 'work' was the setting, a traditional pub in rural Wales. As with much comedy, Daffyd presented as 'matter out of place', to borrow a phrase from Mary Douglas (1992); he did not belong in the imagined space in which he resided. Worse, he was an extrovert, showing a total disregard for the conventions of the village social order, but his efforts to court sanction went largely unnoticed. It is not without irony that, in 2010, while conducting an interview with a mayor of a rural Australian town, one of the guest editors was flatly informed that there were no 'homosexuals' in the community, a claim the researcher had heard in other towns. Later, upon reflection, the interviewee qualified his statements, saying, you, "don't really see gays here...in the farming community". In an instant, a relationship between a fictional village in Wales and an agricultural town in Australia subject to homophobic violence, became apparent. Both spaces conveyed aspects of the belonging and absence which animates sexuality in the rural/urban continuum.

Decades have passed since the so-called 'cultural turn' washed over rural studies. Perhaps, more than anything else, it drew attention to how groups and practices are represented in a rural context, collectively defined and invested with meaning. There seems to be widespread agreement among social scientists that rural is a potent social representation; rurality being contested, unspecific and diverse (Halfacree, 2004; Jones, 1995; Phillips, Fish & Agg, 2001). Terms such as 'farming community' and 'gay', when juxtaposed as they are above, are evocative to the extent they make an association between place and identity. The cultural turn showed how representations condense and distort experience, drawing attention to power. As the example of Daffyd demonstrates, representations intersect with lived experiences in complex ways, simultaneously drawing upon and constructing the world in which we live. The social practices and beliefs which constitute rurality also define what belongs in various rural contexts (Gorman-Waite & Gibson, 2012). While the character of Daffyd was blatantly not cognoscente of it, he represented a 'rural Other' or a 'strange rurality' which forms the abject of rural space (Philo, 1997; Murdoch & Pratt, 1997). We might count among this group women, children, the poor, or, in this case, people of diverse sexual orientations (Cloke, 1997).

Sexuality is increasingly recognised as an important element in cultural representations of rurality, but this was not always so. Until relatively recently, the social sciences tended to construct rural experience from the perspective of the dominant social groups which resided in rural places. Since the 1970s, there have been efforts to correct this bias, especially on the part of critical and feminist scholars who have drawn attention to the gendered and sexual normative structures which help to constitute rural communities. To begin with gender, pioneering studies conducted over the last two decades have consistently shown rural femininity and masculinity to be narrowly constructed around traditional conceptions of gender (Alston, 1995; Poiner, 1990). Much work has been done by feminists to show how patriarchal or hegemonic relations in rural places, while subject to relatively slow change,

support the nuclear family as a dominant model for social organisation in rural spaces (Hughes, 1997; Little, 2003). Further, farmers as the dominant group in the rural social order, embody a select composite of masculinity, which is largely defined as being rugged, and engaged in physically active outdoor work that defines them as 'real men' (Leipins, 2000; Saugeres, 2002). Meanwhile, rural women and non-masculine men are defined by their lack of relationship with the land and doubts exist about their physical capacity to engage in rural labour like mining or agricultural work (Little 2006: 370). As with other populations which constitute the rural other, women and effeminate males are largely seen as unproductive and defined as a passive presence in rural space. 'Real' men are defined as having an embodied relationship with the land, in contrast with women and effeminate males. Research has documented how hegemonic articulations of the masculine influence social relations and can have widespread impacts on well-being in rural places (see Campbell, Bell & Finney, 2000, 2006; Peter, Bell & Jarnigan 2000).

The first research to examine sexuality in a spatial context sought to map the most visible lesbian and gay spaces in North American metropolises (Loyd & Rowntree, 1978). It was only during the mid-1990s that a series of studies by social geographers highlighted the relationship between rural spaces, sexual practices and sexual identities (Duncan, 1996). The interest in rurality and sexuality has continued and expanded to other disciplines, such as sociology (Kirkley and Forsyth, 2001; Smith and Holt, 2005). Much of this work has focussed on same-sex relations in rural areas and the social marginalisation of gay and lesbian people (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Kramer, 1995; Smith & Holt, 2002).

Discursive practices create spatial and imagined zones to order sexual practices, with spaces being created for contaminated or defiled sexualities or erotic or obscene sexualities which are marginalised or excluded from view (Little, 2003). In rural places, as elsewhere, promiscuous and/or erotic sexualities exist at the margins because they are not subordinated to a procreative ideal. One example might be that sex workers have no place in the rural landscape as their labour is regarded as neither virtuous nor ennobling, as might be the case with farmers, being, as it is, associated with sexual gratification. In short, their labour is not viewed as 'productive' and is, more specifically, non-procreative. Not only does the image of the prostitute conflict with that of the farmer, it also defies the gendered divisions of rural communities in which women are idealised as wholesome homemakers.

While it has long been possible to identify spaces characterised by deviant sexual identities, it is also possible to identify spaces characterised by conventional sexualities. Only recently has attention been drawn to how heterosexuality is practiced and constructed in rural spaces on an everyday basis. While heterosexuality, as 'natural', tends to be invisible in rural spaces, it promotes an ideology of monogamous, de-eroticised procreative sexuality. While gay and lesbian people have been identified through their sexual identities, heterosexuals are identified through their social identities, thus limiting the focus of research (Little, 2003).

To the extent that Daffyd represents a popular cultural articulation as rural Other, hegemonic articulations of masculinity are abundant in rural texts and promote heteronormative visions of rural social orders. To take one example, again drawing from popular culture, *The Farmer Wants a Wife* is a popular reality television program, which has aired in 28 countries since 2001. The premise of the show is that a number of farmers are presented with women from the city, one of whom will become their spouse. If the premise sounds familiar, it is. The trope, which might be summarised as cosmopolitan or feminised urban, meets masculine and productive rural, is well-rehearsed in a range of cultural texts played for comedy (see, for example, *Green Acres* 1965-1971) or horror (see for example *Deliverance* 1972). Suitable female partners are those who can appreciate what it means to manage a farm and, while not having farming skills themselves, must appreciate how the business (read 'male bread winner') must take priority over self-interest. The job of the spouse is to civilise and care for the farmer. In its telling, *The Farmer Wants a Wife* is also about urban space, the rural being

meaningless without some sense of what exists outside it. In this way, the rural/urban distinction has structured cultural hierarchies in contemporary society. Bell (2000) claims the rural/urban binary or distinction is loaded, with rural marginalised, while urban is centred.

Historical studies have noted the emergence of modern urban space as a pre-requisite for the development of sexual diversity because urban spaces are considered to be heterogeneous environments offering opportunities for anonymity, voyeurism, exhibitionism, consumption, motion, danger and restlessness (Chauncey, 1994; Hubbard, 1999). In contrast, rural spaces have been presented as cultural vacuums (Aldrich, 2004; Mort, 1995). Rural areas are characterised as having a narrow and restricted vision of sexuality, which promotes highly conventional gender roles and relations (Browne, 2011; Weston, 1995;) whereas cities are sites of affirmation, inclusivity and freedom (Valentine & Skelton, 2003). Further, cities are presented as 'sexual paradises' where tolerance of sexual diversity has attracted rural migrants trying to escape prejudice and discrimination (Weston, 1995). Chinese studies have recently, for example, examined rural urban migrations from a range of contexts, including young women seeking to experience a modern, cosmopolitan lifestyle, as defined through a hyper-sexualised feminine identity (Gaetano, 2008).

Research has sought to understand rural to urban migration of gay and lesbian people, especially in terms of development of sexual identity (Brown, 2000; Cant, 1997), although in post-industrial societies most migration is likely to be urban-urban. It is well-documented the experience of sexual minorities has been marked in rural places by unsupportive social environments and lack of structural services and facilities, resulting in feelings of isolation and social marginality (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Williams, Bowen & Horvarth, 2005). A rigid social order, with little tolerance for diverse sexual expression, results in formal and informal regulation, as well as self and social regulation through policing, social prejudice, violence, discrimination and self-closeting (Cody & Welch, 1997; Gottschalk & Newton, 2009; Kennedy, 2010; Kramer, 1995), with rural minorities adopting 'sexual camouflage' to perform gender in a way which conforms to hegemonic roles (i.e. butchness or passive femininity) to work and live in rural places (Fellows, 2001).

The dystopian rural presents us with backward and simple communities in decline, which are populated by ignorant and conservative people. It is not only people of diverse sexuality who might opt out of the rural sexual order. Mainstream representations of rurality also provide dark visions of the countryside. There is a dystopian rural, which as Bell (1997) discussed, is an imagined landscape of rigid sexual and gendered divisions, offering associations of monogamy, hereditary taint, incest, bestiality, and an archaic gender order. The rural here is a space of departure and deprivation, emphasised in jokes about in-breeding and 'bestiality' (Bell & Valentine, 1995). A vision of this rural can be found in the depraved sexuality of the rustic sodomite as seen in popular films such *Pulp Fiction* and linked with hillbilly horror in the U.S.. In these texts, city men are constructed as emotionally and physically weak and effeminate, whereas country men are 'real men'. Rurality can also be associated with sexual naiveté and innocence which is exploited. At a broader level, rural areas are simply hostile environments in which diverse sexual orientations are unwelcome, as represented in the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

Yet, there is another more utopian rural. The countryside has been perceived as rural idyll (Mingay, 1989) or wilderness (Rothenberg, 1995). Indeed, much research has documented the various ways in which groups have idyllised rural space (Cloke, 2005; Smith & Phillips 2001). The rural idyll typically represents the rural as consisting of simple, harmonious, cohesive and homogeneous communities, ordered and free of social conflict. This idyllic and tranquil rural landscape is rendered a source of nationalistic pride consisting of picturesque scenery, populated by farmers who come to be emblematic of all rural dwellers. This rural is heteronormative to the extent that it is sourced from dominant and hegemonic ruralities. This noted, research has examined not only hegemonic constructions of rural idyll, but also how

marginalised cultures and groups imagine, know, conceptualise and understand rurality (Browne, 2011), acknowledging that rurality is created by people who live in such spaces, as well as the people who visit them and imagine them. Sexual dissidents, for example, have romanticised rural space as a pure site, free from regulation and surveillance, where sex is unrestricted by social regulation and is natural and spiritual (Bell, 2000; Bell & Valentine, 1995). The rural has been the site for free love and sexual experimentation in utopian communities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Binnie and Valentine, 1999). Even conservative and traditional aspects of rural life have been eroticised (see, for example, D. H. Lawrence's work, especially *Lady Chatterley's Lover*). The extreme political Right has also imagined rural spaces as places where hegemonic articulations of masculinity can be restored and reinvigorated, as evident with sections of the men's movement and militia groups (see Kimmel & Ferber, 2006: 136; Woodward, 2006: 230).

Yet, the countryside, sexualised and eroticised, can act as a cultural resource in marginalised sexual cultures (Fone, 1983), as evident, for example, in fetishism for rural men such as labourers and agricultural workers, outdoor life and sex, and naturism (Bell, 2000). The simplicity of early characterisations of rural areas as sexually constraining places and urban areas as liberal has recently been challenged by more positive accounts of sexual diversity in rural spaces (Cody & Welch, 1997) and research has set out to document urban to rural sexual migrations and the development of gay subcultures and identities/subjectivities in rural spaces (Gorman-Murray, 2007). Research has also documented how non-metropolitan sites have been marketed in gay and lesbian tourism (Browne, 2011; Faiman-Silva, 2009; Hughes, 2006). Indeed, recent research has presented a more complex account of diverse sexualities in rural places, which examines how aspects of rural life such as isolation can be alternatively experienced in both negative and positive terms (Howard, 1999; Kirkey & Forsyth, 2001).

Similarly, on a positive note, new technology, such as the internet, can help ameliorate isolation by providing social connections in local and distant locales and also provide knowledge about health and well-being (Williams et al., 2005). Accessing sexual health education and sexual health services can be a major challenge for anyone living in rural areas, with many people having little else available other than their family doctor or general practitioner. For many of those with diverse or marginalised sexualities, there is the added challenge of seeking help and support in communities that do not approve of their sexual practices (Warr & Hillier, 1997). Having to overcome barriers such as prejudice and issues of confidentiality may prevent people from seeking help, such as testing for sexually transmitted infections, learning about safer sex practices, or gaining advice on reproductive health. This is the point at which social practices and beliefs, such as ideals of masculinity and heteronormativity in some rural areas, can have negative impacts on health. It is not only sexual health that may be affected. Mental health may also be an issue for people who feel socially isolated or marginalised within the dominant social order (Lyons, Hosking & Rozbroj, 2014). However, technology is bringing change by providing ways to circumvent social limitations. Online forums and social media can allow individuals to find support, to gain a sense of belonging and to anonymously share their sexual lives with people outside their communities, while new technologies have made some forms of healthcare, such as e-therapy to support mental health, accessible to anyone with an Internet connection, offering advantages for marginalised individuals by allowing disclosure and expression in safe environments (Rozbroj, Lyons, Pitts, Mitchell & Christensen, 2015).

This Special Issue, *Sex, Sexuality and Rural Places*, brings together a cross-section of research and perspectives on issues concerning sex and sexuality in the lives of people living in rural areas. It has been developed with the aim of helping to shine a light on the potential social and health-related issues emerging from the intersections of sex, sexuality, and rural cultures and environments. Governments and health agencies are increasingly aware of issues and challenges that result from rural areas being marginal relative to urban areas, and solving issues such as social isolation has become a focus for policymaking. However, the presence

of sexualities and sexual practices that do not easily fit within dominant rural cultures presents additional forms of marginalisation that demand attention.

Attention to this issue was prompted by a conference convened by the University of New England Collaborative Research Network (CRN) focused on 'Minds Matter – promoting and researching rural, regional and remote mental health and well-being'. The UNE was the recipient of federal funding to build research capacity in regional universities and focused specifically on mental health and well-being in rural and regional communities. Together with partners from the University of Newcastle, the University of Sydney, La Trobe University, the University of New South Wales and the Hunter New England Local Health District the CRN concentrated its research efforts on three major thematic areas. These included self-care and mental health, biomedical science to support rural mental health and sexuality, identity and mental health impacts on well-being and inclusion. Several of the papers in this special edition originated from this conference, and prompted a further call for papers to complement those presented at the conference.

This Special Issue contains articles, largely focused on the Australian rural context, but also with international contributions from Scotland and Pakistan. Dwyer and Ball and Lyons, Leonard and Bariola focus on LGBTIQ populations living in Australian rural spaces. Lyons et al. analysed data from a large online survey, which allowed for a comparison of rural gay men and lesbian women's mental health with their peers residing in urban areas. In particular, their analysis examined psychological distress, resilience and experiences of stigma and marginalisation. This is one of the first studies to examine the influence of demographic and psychosocial factors on mental health outcomes among rural gay men and lesbian women. Approximately one third of the participants reported mental health issues and the same proportion noted violence and harassment and two thirds concealed their sexual identity for this reason.

Dwyer and Ball's article builds on the issue of harassment and violence in rural spaces through qualitatively examining the policing experiences of LGBTIQ people. Given constructions of rural have traditionally not included recognition of trans- and homosexuality, Dwyer and Ball argue that experience of policing, for members of the community and for members of the police service, will be specific to their rural environment, largely due to complex discriminations experienced in rural environments.

Kirkman, Dickson-Swift and Fox turn their attention to non-traditional sexual relationships among rural residents in their mid-life. Like Lyons et al. and Dwyer and Ball, their focus on the rural is ultimately motivated by addressing the need for health services that are not directed by heteronormative and traditional constructions of rural spaces and the people who inhabit them. Kirkman et al. present four case studies of men and women in middle age exploring non-hetero-monogamous relationships and focus attention on the impact that rurality has on these individuals' access to sexual health care in which their risk is acknowledged, but where they are treated with the confidentiality and respect they expect.

From Scotland, Stephen, Cumming and Munoz also focus on the rural delivery of health services; in this instance pelvic floor exercises for women. Rurality impacts on women's pelvic floor health through higher rates of obesity and fewer visits to health care professionals. Asking for assistance for this problem is seen to be more problematic for rural women where confidentiality and anonymity are not guaranteed. Stephens et al. target using increased sexual sensation as a motivating factor for getting women to consistently practice pelvic floor exercises and discuss the potential for increasing access for rural women through the use of smart phone apps.

The final article engages further with the issue of constructing sexualities in rural spaces through an ethnographic study of women in peri-urban Gilgit, Pakistan. Here the intersection

of culture and context are examined in terms of the way in which women manage female sexuality through promoting their difference from men. Walter notes that women constantly repeat modesty and enact shame in order to distance themselves from masculine identities and emphasise their femininity.

Viewed as a whole, these articles engage with issues of pleasure and place, highlighting a diversity of experience that is often missing from how rural spaces are imagined. We do not pretend to provide a comprehensive overview of sexuality and place; that would be impossible. Rather, we have provided a series of diverse and contrasting 'snapshots' which together tell something about otherness and belonging. Most notably, these papers avoid idyllising and dystopian tendencies in the wider literature by drawing upon everyday accounts of the lived rural to better understand well-being and social diversity.

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