

2002 Vol 2 Issue No. 01 — Fleeing The City

> EDITORIAL



Cover image: (not captioned)

Why did we leave the city? Can we have its pleasures from the distance of our Arcadian settings? Indeed, can we belong here in our bucolic isolation? Or are we unregenerate moderns, hooked on newness, restlessness and urban sociality? The theme for this issue arose from the concern of some staff in the School of Humanities Media and Cultural Studies at Southern Cross University in Lismore to explore the regional identity of the Far North Coast of New South Wales, the Northern Rivers or 'Rainbow Region', established for many as the site of one of the waves of 'alternative lifestyle' settlers in the 1970s. Yet the essays collected here show that this was but a moment in a wider phenomenon of internal migration in Australia towards coastal non metropolitan areas.

As [Peter Murphy](#) demonstrates in this issue, Australians have been moving in and out of cities and around the country since Federation. The impulse to the most recent coastal drift has been lightheartedly captured by the ABC's *SeaChange*, whose name Murphy adopts as the demographic phenomenon to be analysed. He and other contributors list 'alternative lifestyles' as one among a number of counterurban tendencies, but the hippie vision is one that particularly resonates with me. I learned the term 'alternative lifestyle' in Hawaii 30 years ago, when it meant rural living in experimental extended family structures, self-sufficiency, ecological responsibility, an anti-war stance, a rejection of being a wage slave and more broadly of the culture of capitalism. Many of us dreamed of 'dropping out' but I didn't know anyone who did it. Nor has it seemed a real or desirable option since for modern consumers lacking in survival skills. However, on moving to the Far North Coast in 2000 I found many people who did drop out keeping their values alive, even to the next generation. Despite sharing many political and cultural values with their parents, this generation is less likely to badge itself as different, or stand opposed to such a monolithic and pervasive enemy as *laissez faire* capitalism.

Later I began to understand the pull of the city and why, despite all we know about the energy crisis, pollution, noise and non-sustainability, the appalling planning processes and the lack of community in the anonymity of the city, modern people (at least those of sufficient means) thrive on the density, pace and unpredictability of urban culture, in all its hopeless contradictions and dangers (Berman 1982). People trying to flee the city permanently were trying to escape from the 20th century, a renegade fantasy. Or perhaps we can see these moves as the experimental living out of a critical discourse. For example the local markets in this region are well developed and take inspiration from other cultures in the supply of local crafts and fresh and cooked food in an atmosphere of conviviality and spectacle. They are a complement to the shopping mall for most local residents, not an alternative to it. Despite their well established (and normalised) presence, the term 'alternative' persists as a label for certain groups of settlers, and represents one of the areas on which [Jo Kijas](#) rightly calls for more research. Contributors such as [Jane Mulcock](#), [Yann Toussaint](#) and [Gerard Goggin](#) use literary tropes such as 'idyll' and 'pastoral' to describe the longing that some enact for a different way of being.

Equally the term 'lifestyle' merits critical treatment. We hear the term a lot in northern NSW, a region whose real estate, employers and educational institutions use the word to promise rewards not available in cities. Far from its 1970s associations with alternative values, 'lifestyle' has come to mean cultural (in a broad sense) consumption: rural real estate, restaurants, the arts, leisure pursuits and cultural events. Working with the Warlpiri Aboriginal community in Central Australia, [Eric Michaels](#) saw lifestyles as 'assemblages of commodified symbols' (Michaels 1987, p 72). He rejected the idea of the 'lifestyle future' promised to white consumers of Aboriginal cultural products in favour of a 'cultural future' built on their own specific

traditions. Byron Bay particularly seems assured of a lifestyle future, selling its 'being there' experience to those in flight from many cities, national and international. The place has come to have a sign value in advertising and in the production of aestheticised exhortations to luxury consumption such as *The Byron Bay Cookbook* (2000).

Further terms are interrogated in this issue. The coast is obviously a crucial object of desire for Sea Changers, but how far inland does its zone of attraction go? Murphy suggests that Sea Changers can also migrate inland, but the sites he considers are close to the coast. **Grahame Griffin** examines the ambivalent term 'hinterland' and how it effectively stamps selected contiguous areas with the identity of the coastal region for which it is claimed: the Gold Coast hinterland, the Byron hinterland.

Despite calling for papers as widely as we could, there is a preponderance of contributions here dealing with the dispersed areas in which Southern Cross University has a presence in Northern NSW: from Port Macquarie to the Queensland border, with one on the adjacent Gold Coast. The only articles from outside this loop are Peter Murphy's overview and Jane Mulcock and Yann Toussaint's examination of some alternative cultural practices in Perth. The contributors come from a wide range of disciplines: demography, geography, anthropology, cultural studies, history, sociology, music and media. Key concepts emerging in this collection are: mapping, population and cultural flows, city/country connections, belonging and dropping in rather than out. While there are also questions to be raised about the interactions between Sea Changers and traditional agricultural regional communities, the emphasis here is on the changing identities and attractions of the coastal regions and linkages between them and the city.

Peter Murphy contributes an authoritative demographic account of Sea Changers. He identifies two basic categories: those who choose to leave (retirees, alternative lifestyleurs, professionals) and 'forced relocators' (those dependent on welfare, such as the unemployed and single parents). Other contributors argue for a more adequate account than that provided by conventional demography. With a focus on Coffs Harbour on the Mid North Coast of NSW, **Jo Kijas** critically examines a range of literature on internal migration and points out many areas where research remains to be done. For example she points to the xenophobic, 'no Asians' imperative behind much counterurbanisation, and regrets the lack of attention to the complexities of Aboriginal population movements, subject to government and social pressures as well as many of the same factors driving Sea Changers: the search for jobs and the cost of living.

Grahame Griffin carefully maps some postmodern Gold Coast developments in all their complex and dynamic meanings, and is particularly interested in the symbolic representations of new landscapes beyond the coastal strip. He stresses people's desire to flee the city for a

safe environment, hence a preoccupation with the dangers of crime and draconian ways to prevent it. [Baden Offord](#) interrogates his own subjectivity in relation to two particularly culturally diverse and rich sites, the lively Caddies Cafe in Lismore and the Byron Bay Lighthouse Walk. He finds peace and belonging in these 'sites of confluence', in contrast to his earlier desire to flee the suburbs. [Diana Sweeney and David Pollard](#) examine a particular group of migrants generally overlooked in demographic literature, the mentally ill. They argue that this group is attracted to Byron Bay for similar reasons to everyone else: the region's cultural diversity (of a different variety to that of Australia's inner cities), its tolerance and acceptance of newcomers, and its beauty, facilities and tourist lure.

What do we seek in making this flight? How do rural landscapes feed the soul? Do we need to move our bodily selves or can we flee virtually? Jane Mulcock and Yann Toussaint examine internal migration in another sense: some urban practices of drawing on nature in order to, they argue, achieve the same result: restore 'lost places' and Arcadian myths. They deal with Landcare tree-planting projects and the use of flower essences as part of a spiritual practice creating new forms of the sacred. [Gerard Goggin](#) uses a similar trope in his concept of the 'wired pastoral', his vision of living in the Rainbow Region but connected by broadband cable to the full range of urban and global culture. However to get the telecommunications infrastructure that this vision requires involves considerable technical and political acumen, a case, he argues, for active citizenship. So one can flee the city in many senses and circumstances.

Goggin's examination of the issues involved in making the wired pastoral happen, or even establishing a basic level of equity of communication services to 'the bush' takes us into the nature of the media and cultural industries in a Sea Change location. Here notions of the 'network society', characterised by hubs, flows and connectedness, take over from simple metaphors of movement (Castells 1996). This also applies to [Chris Gibson's](#) analysis of North Coast music scenes, which reproduce musics generated elsewhere but claim them as local. The rich flux of the local music industry is shown to be a unique product of population movements to the area and the limited economic opportunities within it compared to the city, the source of necessary contacts, facilities and audiences.

A significant component of the migration to the Rainbow Region has been by artists, musicians and writers, and more recently filmmakers and a burgeoning multimedia sector, some of which have historical or cultural links with the alternative communities, but equally with Southern Cross University's programs in these fields. This is a recent tendency explored by Gibson and Hannan in this issue, and characterised by Cathy Henkel and others (2000) as the clustering of 'creative industries'. Here we are dealing with linkages between the region and the cultural and commercial centres in the cities. Most such cultural workers work between the city and the

country to perform, exhibit, secure finance or collaborate. Many of this group desire the 'lifestyle' of the traditional artist's spacious retreat in beautiful countryside. Such real estate is becoming more valuable. Others are attracted to the cosmopolitan tourist culture of Byron Bay.

Michael Hannan explores many of the same phenomena, but restricts his scope to the iconic small village of Nimbin. He outlines the town's history after the 1973 Aquarius Festival, referred to in several articles in this issue and credited in popular history as having first brought alternative lifestylers to the region, although this migration had arguably begun some years beforehand (Cock 1979). Hannan comprehensively describes Nimbin's particular musical culture, derived from traditions of protest, folk music, street theatre and community participation.

Finally, **Fiona Martin and Rhonda Ellis** examine another legacy of Murphy's 'alternative seekers' who moved to the Byron Shire in the 1970s: an independent press, established in reaction to a conservative local media monopoly. They show how the various new settler subcultures set up ephemeral newspapers, but the Byron Shire Echo has become a vigorous, lasting and distinctive independent newspaper that has managed to be consistently critical on political issues, particularly to do with local development, achieve large scale community participation and loyalty, and survive financially. This is possibly a unique achievement in Australia, and demonstrates that the values of the alternative lifestylers still have a powerful presence, though they have been modified as they have diffused and their propagators have adapted to living with capitalism.

Despite large geographic differences in living and recreational environments, many Sea Changers live in a similar style to comparable urban groups, since they involve professional work, access to services and an avid consumption of national media, as well as conventional family structures, living arrangements and housing. In the public sphere of any contested place there are disputes about development proposals, tolerance of difference, drug laws, and sustainable management of the much valued coastal and forest environment. Our flight to sublime landscapes simply takes a different form from that of many city dwellers.

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***Note:** Thanks to Fiona Martin for helpful comments. **Helen Wilson** is Associate Professor in the School of Humanities Media and Cultural Studies at Southern Cross University. She is the immediate past president of the Australian and New Zealand Communication*

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