

Chilling out in the country? Interrogating Daylesford as a 'gay/ lesbian rural idyll'

Andrew Gorman-Murray, Gordon Waitt and Chris Gibson

School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship suggests that the gay/lesbian idyllisation of rural places is an *urban construct*, constituted through metropolitan sensibilities, communities and imaginaries. We extend this work through examining the construction of Daylesford, Victoria, as a 'gay/lesbian rural idyll'. Daylesford annually hosts ChillOut, Australia's largest rural gay/lesbian festival, which underpins its idyllisation. Utilising data drawn from fieldwork conducted at the 2006 festival and commentaries circulated in the gay/lesbian media, we argue that not only is Daylesford idyllised in the Australian gay/lesbian imaginary, but that rurality *and* urbanity are *hybridised* in its framing as a 'gay/lesbian rural idyll'. This is manifested in several ways: discursively, as the 'gay capital of country Victoria'; spatially, through enabling proximity to Melbourne; materially, as a rustic setting for up-market stores/services typically associated with the cosmopolitan inner-city. We thus show how the 'gay/lesbian rural idyll' is an urban construct not only in the gay/lesbian imaginary, but also when spatialised in a rural place.

CONTEXTUALISING IDYLLS

Dominating popular ideas of rurality, the 'rural idyll' frames the countryside as a restorative resource for body, mind and soul.ⁱ Rural places are seen to encapsulate a peaceful lifestyle, or imagined as a pre-human Eden. This concept has received widespread academic attention, with recent work interrogating "the various sociocultural practices and beliefs that underpin (and are part of) dominant representations of the rural".ⁱⁱ In this context, Little and Austin have argued that "many writers have referred to qualities or attributes felt to be important to the rural idyll but few have looked in any depth at how these may vary between groups and individuals".ⁱⁱⁱ Researchers have consequently begun to explore how different social groups idyllise the rural, including immigrating gentrifiers, existing residents, women, men and children.^{iv} Amidst this inventory there is notable inquiry into gay men's and lesbians'

constructions of particular 'gay/lesbian rural idylls'.^v Our paper extends this latter body of work.^{vi}

As this literature suggests, the rural idyll is a construct, existing as much in the collective imagination of certain social groups as in the material setting of the countryside. Following Bell, we call this *idyllisation*: the process of socially manufacturing idyllic ruralities.^{vii} In this context, we seek to explore the idyllisation of an *actual* rural place – Daylesford, Victoria – by gay/lesbian Australians. This 'grounded' case study makes an informative contribution to existing literature. Previous work demonstrates that gay/lesbian idyllisation practices are bound up in the urban/rural binary, and conceptualises the 'gay/lesbian rural idyll' as a largely urban construct, constituted through metropolitan sensibilities, communities and imaginaries.^{viii} While instructive and insightful, this literature has however focused not on particular localities, but on larger-scale constructions of the 'gay/lesbian rural idyll' in either a broad

Western gay/lesbian imaginary^{ix}, or at particular national scales, including the United States^x and Britain.^{xi}

Against this background, we interrogate the ‘gay/lesbian rural idyll’ as manifested in Daylesford, which annually hosts ChillOut, the largest rural gay/lesbian festival in Australia. This event underpins Daylesford’s idyllisation, and we draw data from fieldwork conducted at the 2006 festival and stories about ChillOut and/or Daylesford circulated in the gay/lesbian media. This data suggests that the idyllisation of Daylesford hybridises elements of *both* rurality *and* urbanity. As such, we argue that the ‘gay/lesbian rural idyll’ is an urban construct not only in the gay/lesbian imaginary, but also when manifested in an actual rural place. We first give some conceptual framing, discussing how idyllisation is embedded in the urban/rural binary of the gay/lesbian imaginary, before providing background on Daylesford, ChillOut and our data collection. Finally, we interrogate the hybrid construction of Daylesford as a ‘gay/lesbian rural idyll’.

BUILDING IDYLLS

The process of idyllisation is embedded in the symbolism of the urban/rural binary. As Bell argues, the rural idyll is ‘urbanism’s other’:

Certainly the genealogy of the rural idyll shows it to be an urban construction; the country cannot exist without the city to be its ‘not-a’. So the place to find the rural idyll is in the city, since that is where it is made. Idyllization is a symptom of urbanization.^{xii}

Specifically, the modern rural idyll resulted from the rise to dominance of an urban-industrial culture in the West during the nineteenth century. Rapidly-growing cities were seen as squalid, pestilent sites of physical and moral decay. Conversely, rural landscapes were idyllised by the growing middle/upper classes as restorative and regenerative for body and soul – places which preserved the ‘good life’ before the advent of urban ills.^{xiii} The rural idyll, then, is the country *of* the city: the countryside constructed as a panacea for the problems of the contemporary urban condition.

The construction of a ‘gay/lesbian rural idyll’ is complicated by how gay/lesbian sexuality is embedded in urban/rural symbolism. Scholars have asserted that “the historical urban basis of modern homosexuality means that gay identity is first and foremost an urban identity”.^{xiv} Nineteenth century urbanisation which gave rise to the rural idyll also underpinned the emergence of gay/lesbian communities, facilitated by the mass movement of people to cities. “Homosexually inclined women and men, who would have been vulnerable and isolated in most pre-industrial villages, began to congregate in small corners of the big cities” that provided conditions for the development of self-conscious gay/lesbian identification.^{xv} Conversely, the rural has been imagined as a site of gay/lesbian absence where sexual difference is policed and silenced. This is perhaps most clearly seen in those studies which suggest that “the predominant movements of sexual dissidents are rural-to-urban to escape the constraints of rural and small town life”.^{xvi}

But simultaneously, scholars note that the rural is also idyllised in the gay/lesbian imaginary.^{xvii} While cities might provide conditions for the fluorescence of gay/lesbian communities,

they still reflect a dominant social order that constructs homosexuality as ‘deviant’. In this context, the urban is seen as complicit in proscribing the limits of gay/lesbian identity and community, and the rural comes to be idyllised as a place where same-sex desires are enacted free from the constraints of heteropatriarchal civilisation.^{xviii} Indeed, the pastoral Arcadia or wild Eden has a long tradition in the Western gay/lesbian imaginary, in homoerotic literature, art and film.^{xix} These texts construct the rural as

a place where it is safe to be gay: ... where homosexuality can be revealed and spoken of without reprisal, and where homosexual love can be consummated without concern for the punishment or scorn of the world.^{xx}

Freed from the condemnation of civilisation, same-sex love is no longer seen as a crime against nature, but as a natural expression of passion.

Yet, as with wider constructions of the rural idyll, the gay/lesbian version is still informed by urban(e) ideals. As Bell asserts, “the dream of a gay Arcadia...is...often tempered by a distinctly metropolitan sensibility”.^{xxi} Likewise, Bech argues that idyllic ruralities in the Western gay (male) imaginary cannot be too ‘wild’ or ‘untamed’, but must be somewhat ‘domesticated’ and ‘civilised’:

There must be reasonable order and security there as well as reasonable comfort. ... [T]he homosexuals are civilized people capable of forfeiting the benefits of civilization only with great difficulty. It must be warm, but not beyond tolerable; at the end of the afternoon one needs to sit in a chair and have decent tea served; if there must be nature, then without too many snakes and scorpions.^{xxii}

This is not simply the ‘country of the city’, but a countryside deeply inflected with metropolitan sensitivities:

From the start, contradictions were built into these journeys to or dreams of another country. Not merely between the wish for the anti-civilisatry fulfilment of homosexuality and the homosexual’s need for the benefits of civilization, but also between this unadulterated natural setting and the need for *subculture*, which could be satisfied in the big cities.^{xxiii}

Smith and Holt detail similar ambivalences in their study of lesbian migration to gentrified Hebden Bridge, UK. Utilising 23 in-depth interviews, they found that many lesbians moved to the town largely because of its idyllic rurality, but remark that many concurrently positioned Hebden Bridge as *semi-rural*:

Paradoxically, lesbian migrants noted that they do not desire a ‘truly’ rural location for their residence, despite the resounding wish to live in the countryside. Instead, many interviewees stressed that they had sought a semi-rural residential location within the countryside. This residential aspiration is fulfilled by the semi-rural landscape of the small town of Hebden Bridge.^{xxiv}

Simultaneously, they observe that many “lesbians migrants do not...dislocate themselves from metropolitan locations”, and

frequent lesbian venues in nearby cities. Smith and Holt suggest that “lesbian geographies within Hebden Bridge can therefore be viewed as an outcome of unfolding connections between different types of rural, semi-(rural) and urban spaces, which ultimately fold onto one another”.^{xxv} They urge further work to unpack the discourses and practices that underpin how urbanity and rurality cross-cut each other in “the formation and preservation of contemporary rural lifestyles, socio-cultural identities and sexualities”.^{xxvi}

Extending these ideas about the complex relationship between the rural and the urban in the gay/lesbian imaginary, we argue that the ‘gay/lesbian rural idyll’ is not simply a product of metropolitan imaginaries and communities, but is a construct which *retains* deep traces of urbanity. Indeed, we suggest that gay/lesbian idyllisation innately embeds idyllic ruralities with urban(e) characteristics, so that ultimately the ‘gay/lesbian rural idyll’ is a hybrid construct which draws together, imbricates and fuses idealised aspects of both rurality and urbanity. We explore this contention through a case study of Daylesford.

ANALYSING IDYLLS

Daylesford is located in Hepburn Shire, in Victoria’s Central Highlands, about 100km north-west of metropolitan Melbourne. For over a century, tourist marketing has pitched the region as Australia’s ‘spa country’, offered as a picturesque locality for the revitalisation of health and well-being; for instance:

The Shire boasts the highest concentration of mineral springs in the country together with an equally large array of therapists. Holistic health services, provided in conjunction with the mineral springs and spas, continue the region’s long tradition as a place of healing.^{xxvii}

Mineral springs were discovered in 1864, and ‘spa tourism’ dates from the late nineteenth century, mimicking contemporary European health-spa resorts.^{xxviii} Through these enduring images, Daylesford has become a gentrified tourist town for those visitors – particularly from Melbourne – who want to ‘relax’ and regenerate body, mind and soul. This contrasts with the more popular Australian rural imaginaries of ‘the outback’ or ‘the bush’, rendering Daylesford distinctive in Australia, more closely approximating the Euro-American idyll of the rural as a restorative resource, a place for imbibing nature understood as ‘medicinal’.

Alongside the range of tourism and allied businesses established to take advantage of this bucolic idyll, Daylesford has become a ‘festival’ town: Tourism Victoria’s website proclaims that Daylesford “has an enviable calendar of festivals and events”, and lists 29 different festivals over the year.^{xxix} ChillOut is the largest of these festivals, held over a long weekend in March. Now a decade old, ChillOut attracts around 16000 visitors, making it the largest gay/lesbian festival in regional Australia. The links between this gay/lesbian festival and the idyllic rurality of Daylesford appear more than incidental – the very name of the festival plays on the notion of the rural as a restorative resource. Moreover, ChillOut is purposely held one week after the end of Sydney’s Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival, and one month after Melbourne’s Midsumma Carnival, and is marketed as an opportunity for gay men and lesbians to

relax and recover after the hectic partying associated with these metropolitan gay/lesbian festivals.

To understand the rapidly growing popularity of ChillOut, its economic, social and political impacts, and the interweaving of rurality and gay/lesbian sexuality, fieldwork was conducted at the 2006 ChillOut, held 10-13 March. A range of methods was utilised to explore different dimensions of this event: mixed method (quantitative/qualitative) surveys of festival attendees and local businesses; interviews with organisers, participants, tourism promoters and locals; participant observation; and textual analysis of stories about ChillOut and/or Daylesford in the gay/lesbian press. This paper focuses on the intersection of sexuality and rurality at Daylesford in the wider gay/lesbian imaginary, drawing on a thematic analysis of answers given to open-ended questions in 203 completed ChillOut visitors’ surveys, and on recent commentaries about ChillOut and/or Daylesford in the gay/lesbian media.^{xxx}

CONSTRUCTING DAYLESFORD AS A ‘GAY/LESBIAN RURAL IDYLL’

The sampled media commentaries reveal that Daylesford is idyllised in the Australian gay/lesbian imaginary. Not only is the town imagined as a typical rural idyll – an ideal bucolic setting for the revitalisation of mind, body and soul – but this is seen to be especially suitable to essentialised gay/lesbian sensibilities. In *SX National*, Pope evinced this connection:

Let’s begin with the main drawcard to this idyllic, small-town retreat just over an hour’s drive from Melbourne – the fact that it’s situated slap bang in the middle of spa country, better know as the home of pure indulgence. *This is a gay man’s mecca*.^{xxxi}

Likewise, the restorative qualities of the spa country are linked with ChillOut’s eponymous goals. For instance, an article in *Bent* suggested:

The folk at Daylesford knew their town was the right environment when they started ChillOut festival ten years ago. Only an hour drive from Melbourne the twin villages of Daylesford and Hepburn Springs have been frequented by the masses since the 1800s where folk came to ‘take the waters’ – natural spring waters with healing properties.^{xxxii}

More explicitly still, in *LOTL* Gilbey advised tired Mardi Gras and Midsumma attendees to “recover at the ChillOut Festival, Daylesford”, contending that since Hepburn Shire “contains some 80 per cent of Australia’s mineral springs”, “it’s certainly a fitting venue for a reviving party and a place to soak away the stresses of city life”.^{xxxiii}

The result of this idyllisation process is that Daylesford is imagined as a ‘uniquely’ gay-friendly country town, or “the Victorian queer rural heartland” according to Pope.^{xxxiv} ChillOut fundamentally underpins this gay-friendly image; for instance:

Daylesford is also renowned for being gay and lesbian friendly. Every year on the weekend after Mardi Gras the ChillOut Festival is held, calling itself a post-Mardi Gras recovery party.^{xxxv}

Chillout is celebrating a decade of parties this year and the festival is now recognised as the biggest in the region and certainly the biggest queer festival in rural Australia. The town of Daylesford also boasts the highest percentage of gay and lesbian residents in regional Australia, so who knows; you may never go home. One thing's for sure, you'll definitely see a rainbow flag in the window of many local businesses and there's heaps of gay friendly accommodation.^{xxxvi}

The effect of such rhetoric is to invoke Daylesford as an idyllic country town for gay/lesbian Australians – the rural as a gay/lesbian 'home', picturesque, largely peopled by gay men and lesbians, replete with gay-friendly businesses and services.

But the gay/lesbian idyllisation of Daylesford isn't as simple as framing the 'spa country' as 'the queer rural heartland'. Further interrogation of the media texts, combined with a thematic analysis of the results of the visitors' survey conducted at the 2006 ChillOut, indicates greater complexity. This data suggests that Daylesford, although site of a 'gay/lesbian rural idyll', in fact hybridises aspects of both rurality *and* urbanity, thus evincing the contentions of the literature discussed above: that the 'gay/lesbian rural idyll' is inflected with metropolitan sensibilities and contains deep traces of urbanity. We wish to highlight three ways this urban/rural hybridisation works in Daylesford: discursively, as 'the gay capital of country Victoria'; spatially, through enabling proximity to Melbourne; and materially, as a rustic setting for up-market retail stores and services typically associated with the inner-city.

Discursive hybridisation: the gay capital of country Victoria

The expression 'discursive hybridisation' highlights how gay-friendly Daylesford is conceived through urban and metropolitan *terminologies*. As Bell notes, "as with all the other structuring binaries of identification, the rural/urban is loaded: the rural is marginalized, while the urban is centered".^{xxxvii} By extension, terminology surrounding idyllic ruralities tends to 'centre' the city as an origin, while offering the rural as an 'escape'. Certainly, media commentaries frame Daylesford as an escape, especially from Melbourne. However, they also recast Daylesford as a 'centre' for gay/lesbian lifestyle and subculture: as noted above, Pope called Daylesford the "gay country heartland", and Gilbey asserted that the town has the largest concentration of gay/lesbian residents in regional Australia.^{xxxviii} While the term 'heartland' is often applied to rural places, here there seems to be a semantic slippage: 'heartland' is also used to assert that gay/lesbian identities and lifestyles have an *original* claim on Daylesford – that Daylesford generates and preserves its own form of gay/lesbian subculture.

This notion is reinforced in the survey results, where the language used to invoke Daylesford's place in the gay/lesbian imaginary draws on urban terminologies and functions as much as idyllic ruralities. Responses to two open-ended questions most clearly elicit this discursive hybridisation: *What does ChillOut do for Daylesford's identity?* and *Is it important that ChillOut be held in Daylesford?* Certainly, some participants affirmed Daylesford as an 'escape' from the city. Others, however, drew attention to the town's 'gay-friendly' reputation

and, crucially, framed this in decidedly urban or metropolitan terms, describing Daylesford as a 'gay capital':

Because it's the gay capital. (lesbian/Melbourne)

Cause it's the gay capital. (lesbian/Melbourne)

Well commonly known as 'gay capital of Victoria'. (lesbian/Melbourne)

Gay capital. (lesbian/Melbourne)

A good reason to visit the gay capital. (lesbian/Melbourne)

The term 'capital' is patently urban – the adjective applied to the particular city that houses national or regional legislatures. The term centres power in a specific city, simultaneously suggesting that this is a store for national or regional values.^{xxxix} In this light, invoking Daylesford as 'the gay capital' intimates the 'gay/lesbian rural idyll' is inflected with metropolitan ideals. Daylesford, a 'gay/lesbian rural idyll', is concurrently imagined as a gay *capital*, a centre of gay/lesbian lifestyle and subcultural production. Moreover, this urban terminology overlaps with rurality at times: some described Daylesford as '*the gay capital of country Victoria*':

It's the gay capital of Vic country. (gay/Ballarat)

Gay capital of Vic country. (lesbian/Melbourne)

The rural G&L centre of Australia. (lesbian/Melbourne)

Alternative capital of Vic. (lesbian/Melbourne)

Here, rurality and urbanity are *both* implicated in the way Daylesford is configured: a gay capital *within* rural parameters – the centre for gay/lesbian life in country Victoria. This is buttressed by responses to another question – *Should ChillOut be a rural festival?* – which stressed ChillOut as a focal point specifically for gay/lesbian rural residents:

Increase access for rural/regional gays. Promotes visible gay presence in regional areas. (gay/Geelong)

Good for rural people who may feel isolated. (lesbian/Geelong)

Promotes country and its acceptance of gays and lesbians. (lesbian/Ballarat)

Helps those more isolated. (lesbian/Hepburn)

The responses suggest 'discursive hybridisation' of rurality and urbanity with regard to how Daylesford is conceived in the Australian gay/lesbian imaginary. While the idyllic rural setting is fundamental to Daylesford's appeal, Daylesford is also framed through decidedly urban terminologies and metropolitan functions, imaginatively positioned as a 'gay capital', as a powerful and productive centre of gay/lesbian life. Moreover, this centrality is heightened in the context of rural Victoria, which has few other events or places which act as focal points for gay/lesbian subculture. Thus, one outcome of Daylesford's production as a 'gay/lesbian rural idyll' is a positioning as the 'gay capital of country Victoria'.

Spatial hybridisation: proximity to the metropolitan

This hybridisation is not only discursive – some very material dimensions contribute to the interplay between the rural and the urban, such as Hepburn Shire’s proximity to Victoria’s two largest cities, Melbourne (3.6 million) and Geelong (170 000), which enables Daylesford to be readily and regularly accessed by urbanites. We call this enabling proximity to the metropolis ‘spatial hybridisation’, and suggest it helps facilitate Daylesford’s construction as a ‘gay/lesbian rural idyll’. Smith and Holt provide an ‘inverse’ precedent through their study of lesbian migration to Hebden Bridge, UK, which is similarly close to major cities like Manchester and Leeds. Smith and Holt found that “many lesbian migrants...often visit metropolitan locations to ‘dip into’ and consume commercial lesbian venues and scenes” to reinforce their lesbian identities and networks, and argue that “such interchanges between the urban and rural will influence how lesbian in-migrants construct and experience rural spaces within Hebden Bridge”.^{xi} A similar argument applies to Daylesford, where proximity to Melbourne/Geelong facilitates access by urban gay/lesbian visitors.

The sampled media emphasised this enabling proximity as a drawcard for gay/lesbian visitors:

This idyllic, small-town retreat [is] just over an hours drive from Melbourne.^{xii}

The towns of Daylesford and Hepburn Springs are situated just an hour’s drive from Melbourne, in the Central Highlands.^{xiii}

Daylesford is to Melbourne what the Blue Mountains are to Sydney. Situated one-and-a-half hour’s drive northwest of Melbourne, it’s where stressed-out city dwellers go on the weekend.^{xiiii}

The spatial immediacy of Melbourne/Geelong is fundamental for the idyllisation of Daylesford as a gay/lesbian rural ‘escape’. The nearness of an idyllic rural setting provides easy access, while towns located many hours’ drive from Melbourne would not be visited regularly, and consequently would not be readily idyllised. As Bech implies, the ‘gay/lesbian rural idyll’ cannot be too far “afield” from metropolitan accessibility, or it would not be able to effectively serve its purpose as a restorative retreat for ‘stressed-out’ urbanites.^{xlv}

This was supported through the visitors’ survey. 146 survey participants (72%) were visitors from Melbourne/Geelong, and responses to three particular questions – *Why is it important for ChillOut to be held at Daylesford?*, *Why should ChillOut be a rural festival?* and *What do you like about coming to ChillOut?* – underscored the importance of Daylesford’s proximity to Melbourne:

Close to major cities Melbourne/Geelong but in a pretty rural area. (lesbian/Melbourne)

Inviting setting, close to Melbourne. (lesbian/Melbourne)

Beautiful location. Close to Melbourne. (gay/Melbourne)

Close proximity to Melbourne but far enough away. (lesbian/Melbourne)

Friendly town and close to city. (gay/Melbourne)

Not too far from Melbourne, gay friendly town. (lesbian/Melbourne)

It seems, then, that Daylesford’s proximity to Melbourne is a key feature in its idyllisation, especially by Melbournians. While Daylesford’s ‘pretty’, ‘beautiful’ rural setting is indispensable, the comments also imply that travelling much further would not be so inviting. Thus, it is necessary that Daylesford is ‘not-city’, but it is equally crucial that the town is ‘not too far from the city’. This spatial hybridisation again indicates the construction of the ‘gay/lesbian rural idyll’ is deeply inflected by urban needs – that metropolitan ideals (of accessible escapism) frame the spatialisation of idyllic ruralities.

Material hybridisation: cosmopolitan culture in a rustic setting

Moreover, Smith and Holt suggest this urban/rural interchange can also affect the *in situ* construction of rural localities, evoking Amin and Thrift’s claim that “the city is everywhere and in everything”.^{xlv} As well as tourist travel, Daylesford’s proximity to Melbourne allows for the insinuation of metropolitan sensitivities and cosmopolitan tastes in the very material fabric of this idyllic pastoral setting. This is evident through the proliferation of up-market retail stores, cafés, restaurants, bars, galleries, and lifestyle services typically associated with the gentrified inner-city precincts of Australia’s metropolitan centres.^{xlvi} For instance, out of around 120 shops around Daylesford’s main streets, we observed almost 30 cafés, restaurants and ‘fine food’ vendors, and over 30 homewares, antiques, aromatherapy and gift shops – including one devoted to dog-lovers and another to cat-lovers. This retail specialisation smacks of ‘chic’ cosmopolitanism. We use the expression ‘material hybridisation’ to describe the presence of this inner-city cosmopolitan culture in a small country town, and suggest this is an essential ingredient in the gay/lesbian idyllisation of Daylesford.

The gay/lesbian media proffered the fusion of urban(e) food and retail opportunities with a picture-perfect pastoral setting as a key attraction for gay/lesbian visitors. Wearing’s description in *Sydney Star Observer* is exemplary:

Daylesford is full of historic houses, cafés, antique shops, quaint B&Bs and luxury lakeside properties. There’s a thriving arts scene and several galleries, including the impressive, sprawling Convent which features seven individual art spaces. All of this is set amongst rolling green hills, lush gardens, leafy trees and idyllic lakes.^{xlvii}

Indeed, some commentators suggested this town was the perfect place to shop for unique or exotic collectables, again implicitly overlaying idyllic rurality with idealised cosmopolitanism:

If that won’t get you to Daylesford, the fact that the Daylesford market is one of the best places to pick up that vintage Barbie you’ve spent your whole life looking for just might.^{xlviii}

Pope’s illustration is particularly pertinent for Daylesford’s construction as a ‘gay/lesbian rural idyll’, invoking an object with very camp connotations, suggesting that Daylesford’s retail

culture was especially suited to the whims of a gay/lesbian market – something otherwise expected only in the notable inner-city gay/lesbian precincts of Sydney and Melbourne. In a similar vein, an article in *Bent* claimed that the 2006 ChillOut

weekend boasts more than one would expect of a Mardi Gras with big name acts lined up. ... And the biggest and best way to finish up a weekend of playing in the bush is naturally – a massive dance party, complete with some of the best and diverse DJs Australia has to offer.^{xlix}

The expected cosmopolitan opportunities of a major inner-city gay/lesbian event were used here to promote Daylesford to gay/lesbian visitors, thus intimating that metropolitan tastes and sensibilities are deeply implicated in how Daylesford is constructed as a ‘gay/lesbian rural idyll’.

‘Material hybridisation’ was reinforced through the visitors’ surveys. A number of responses to three particular questions – *Why is it important for ChillOut to be held at Daylesford?*, *Why should ChillOut be a rural festival?* and *What do you like about coming to ChillOut?* – drew attention to Daylesford simultaneously possessing conventionally rural and urban landscapes and attributes:

Great natural environment and retail district. (lesbian/Geelong)

Great atmosphere and I love the country feel and shopping options. (lesbian/Melbourne)

Good infrastructure and shopping. Daylesford is probably one of the quietest and prettiest rural areas. (lesbian/Geelong)

The location – in the hills with decent cafés. (lesbian/Wagga)

Such responses suggested that both rural and urban characteristics underpinned how Daylesford was evoked in the gay/lesbian imaginary. The comments drew attention to the ‘natural environment’, ‘the hills’ and the ‘country atmosphere’, but equally asserted the importance of cosmopolitan culture, of ‘shopping options’ and ‘decent cafés’. What was particularly appealing about Daylesford, it seems, was the *fusion* of urbanity with rurality: the food and retail opportunities are attractively set in ‘one of the quietest and prettiest rural areas’. Interpreting these responses alongside the media descriptions, we suggest the idyllisation of Daylesford relies on the material imbrication of desirable aspects of rural *and* urban landscapes, and that consequently this ‘gay/lesbian rural idyll’ is innately embedded with urban(e) ideals.

CONCLUSION

We have extended literature on the production of ‘gay/lesbian rural idylls’ through focussing, for the first time, on an actual locality which has been idyllised by gay men and lesbians. Our grounded case study of Daylesford applies and advances earlier contentions about how idyllic ruralities generally, and ‘gay/lesbian rural idylls’ specifically, are constructed. In particular, we have taken up ideas which suggest that ‘gay/lesbian rural idylls’ are urban constructs. Through analysing gay/lesbian media commentaries about ChillOut

and/or Daylesford, and qualitative surveys collected at the 2006 ChillOut Festival, we have shown that the gay/lesbian idyllisation of Daylesford hybridises certain idealised elements of both rurality and urbanity. We have thus demonstrated that ‘gay/lesbian rural idylls’ are deeply inflected with metropolitan sensibilities and cosmopolitan ideals not only when configured within the gay/lesbian imaginary, but also when materialised in actual rural settings. This does not diminish the importance of the rustic setting and pastoral countryside. These must – perhaps definitively – remain key elements of the rural idyll. Rather, we have shown how urbanity is equally implicated in the imagined and material production of ‘gay/lesbian rural idylls’, thus disrupting a neat distinction between the rural and the urban.

ⁱ David Bell, ‘Variations on the rural idyll,’ in Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden and Patrick Mooney (eds), *Handbook of Rural Studies*, London: Sage, 2006, pp. 149-160; Brian Short, ‘Idyllic ruralities,’ in Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden and Patrick Mooney (eds), *Handbook of Rural Studies*, London: Sage, 2006, pp. 133-148.

ⁱⁱ Jo Little, ‘Otherness, representation and the cultural construction of rurality,’ *Progress in Human Geography*, 23 (1999): 440.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jo Little and Patricia Austin, ‘Women and the rural idyll,’ *Journal of Rural Studies*, 12 (1996): 101.

^{iv} For example: Martin Phillips, ‘The production, symbolisation and socialisation of gentrification: impressions from two Berkshire villages,’ *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 27 (2002): 282-308; Chris Gibson and Deborah Davidson, ‘Tamworth, Australia’s “country music capital”: place marketing, rurality, and resident reactions,’ *Journal of Rural Studies*, 20 (2004): 387-404; Hilary Winchester and Matthew Rofe, ‘Christmas in the “Valley of Praise”: Intersections of the rural idyll, heritage and community in Lobethal, South Australia,’ *Journal of Rural Studies*, 21 (2005): 265-279; Little and Austin, ‘Women and the rural idyll’; Paul Cloke, ‘Masculinity and rurality,’ in Bettina van Hoven and Kathrin Horschelmann (eds), *Spaces of Masculinities*, London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 45-62; Hugh Matthews, Mark Taylor, Kenneth Sherwood, Faith Tucker, and Melanie Limb, ‘Growing-up in the countryside: children and the rural idyll,’ *Journal of Rural Studies*, 16 (2002): 141-153.

^v Byrne Fone, ‘This other Eden: Arcadia and the homosexual imagination,’ *Journal of Homosexuality*, 8 (1983): 13-34; David Bell and Gill Valentine, ‘Queer country: rural lesbian and gay lives,’ *Journal of Rural Studies*, 11 (1995): 113-122; Gill Valentine, ‘Making space: lesbian separatist communities in the United States,’ in Paul Cloke and Jo Little (eds.), *Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalisation and Rurality*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 109-122; David Bell, ‘Farm boys and wild men: rurality, masculinity, and homosexuality,’ *Rural Sociology*, 65 (2000): 547-561; David Bell, ‘Homosexuals in the heartland: male same-sex desire in the rural United States,’ in Paul Cloke (ed), *Country Visions*, London: Prentice Hall, 2003, pp. 178-194; David Shuttleton, ‘The queer politics of gay pastoral,’ in Richard Phillips, Diane Watt and David Shuttleton (eds), *De-Centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 125-146; William Spurlin, ‘Remapping same-sex desire: queer writing

and culture in the American heartland,' in Richard Phillips, Diane Watt and David Shuttleton (eds), *De-Centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 182-198; Angela Wilson, 'Getting your kicks on Route 66! Stories of gay and lesbian life in rural America c.1950-1970s,' in Richard Phillips, Diane Watt and David Shuttleton (eds), *De-Centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 199-216.

^{vi} These studies use various terms – 'homosexual Arcadia' (Fone 1983), 'lesbian lands' (Valentine 1997) and 'gay pastoral' (Shuttleton 2000). We group these under the convenient term 'gay/lesbian rural idyll', and use inverted commas to signal that the 'gay/lesbian rural idyll' is a construct which differs between gay/lesbians subjects.

^{vii} Bell, 'Variations on the rural idyll'.

^{viii} Valentine, 'Making space'; Bell, 'Farm boys and wild men'; Bell, 'Homosexuals in the heartland'; Spurlin, 'Remapping same-sex desire'.

^{ix} Fone, 'This other Eden'; Bell and Valentine, 'Queer country'; Bell, 'Farm boys and wild men'.

^x Valentine, 'Making space'; Wilson, 'Getting your kicks'; Spurlin, 'Remapping same-sex desire'; Bell, 'Homosexuals in the heartland'.

^{xi} Shuttleton, 'The queer politics of gay pastoral'.

^{xii} Bell, 'Variations on the rural idyll,' p. 150.

^{xiii} Short, 'Idyllic ruralities'.

^{xiv} Jon Binnie, *The Globalization of Sexuality*, London: Sage, 2004, p. 91; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, London: Flamingo, 1994; Henning Bech, *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997.

^{xv} Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking sex: notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality,' in H. Abelove, M. Barale, D. Halperin (eds), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 3-44.

^{xvi} Binnie, *The Globalization of Sexuality*, pp. 93-4; Kath Weston, 'Get thee to a big city: sexual imaginary and the great gay migration,' *GLQ*, 2 (1995): 253-277.

^{xvii} Bell, 'Farm boys and wild men'.

^{xviii} Bell and Valentine, 'Queer country'; Shuttleton, 'The queer politics of gay pastoral'.

^{xix} Fone, 'The other Eden'; Shuttleton, 'The queer politics of gay pastoral'; Bell, 'Farm boys and wild men'. Ang Lee's film, *Brokeback Mountain*, is a recent notable example.

^{xx} Fone, 'This other Eden,' p. 13.

^{xxi} Bell, 'Farm boys and wild men', p. 553.

^{xxii} Bech, *When Men Meet*, p. 149.

^{xxiii} Bech, *When Men Meet*, p. 150.

^{xxiv} Darren Smith and Louise Holt, "'Lesbian migrants in the gentrified valley" and "other" geographies of rural gentrification,' *Journal of Rural Studies*, 21(2005): 317.

^{xxv} Smith and Holt, 'Lesbian migrants,' p.320.

^{xxvi} Smith and Holt, 'Lesbian migrants,' p.321.

^{xxvii} <http://www.hepburnshire.com.au>

^{xxviii} Claire Gervasoni, *Bullboar, Macaroni and Mineral Water: Spa Country's Swiss Italian Story*, Hepburn Springs: Hepburn Springs Swiss Italian Festa, 2005.

^{xxix} <http://www2.visitvictoria.com>

^{xxx} The sample comprises four articles published four months either side of the 2006 ChillOut.

^{xxxi} Cath Pope, 'Daylesford, you'll have a gay old time,' *SX National*, 33 (December 2005): 32.

^{xxxii} Anon, 'Chillout in Daylesford,' *Bent*, 21 (Feb 2006): 67.

^{xxxiii} Andrea Gilbey, 'Chill baby,' *LOTL*, 195 (March 2006): 34.

^{xxxiv} Pope, 'Daylesford,' p. 32.

^{xxxv} Myles Wearing, 'Victoria's spa country,' *Sydney Star Observer* 825 – *Escape* (Winter 2006): 3.

^{xxxvi} Gilbey, 'Chill baby,' p.34.

^{xxxvii} Bell, 'Farm boys and wild men,' p. 548.

^{xxxviii} Pope, 'Daylesford,' p. 32; Gilbey, 'Chill baby.'

^{xxxix} David Gordon, 'Ottawa-Hull and Canberra: implementation of capital city plans,' *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 11 (2002): 179-211.

^{xl} Smith and Holt, 'Lesbian migrants,' pp. 319-320.

^{xli} Pope, 'Daylesford,' p.32.

^{xlii} Gilbey, 'Chill baby,' p.34.

^{xliiii} Wearing, 'Victoria's spa country,' p.3.

^{xliiv} Bech, *When Men Meet*, p. 149.

^{xli v} Smith and Holt, 'Lesbian migrants,' p. 321, quoting Amin and Thrift, 2002, p. 1.

^{xli vi} Gary Bridge and Robyn Dowling, 'Microgeographies of retailing and gentrification,' *Australian Geographer*, 32 (2001): 93-107.

^{xli vii} Wearing, 'Victoria's spa country,' p. 3.

^{xli viii} Pope, 'Daylesford,' p. 32.

^{xli ix} Anon, 'Chillout in Daylesford,' p. 67.