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Escaping from the City Means More than a Cheap House and a 10-Minute Commute

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Abstract

Introduction

We five friends clinked glasses in our favourite wine and cocktail bar, and considered our next collaborative writing project. We had seen M/C Journal's call for articles for a special issue on 'regional' and when one of us mentioned the television program, *Escape from the City*, we began our critique:

"They haven't featured Armidale yet, but wouldn't it be great if they did?"

"Really? I mean, some say any publicity is good publicity but the few early episodes I've viewed seem to give little or no screen time to the sorts of lifestyle features I most value in our town."

"Well, seeing as we all moved here from the city ages ago, let's talk about what made us stay?"

We had found our next project.

A currently popular lifestyle television show (*Escape from the City*) on Australia's national public service broadcaster, the ABC, highlights the limitations of popular cultural representations of life in a regional centre. The program is targeted at viewers interested in relocating to regional Australia. As Raymond Boyle and Lisa Kelly note, popular television is an important entry point into the construction of public knowledge as well as a launching point for viewers as they seek additional information (65). In their capacity to construct popular perceptions of 'reality', television texts offer a significant insight into our understandings and expectations of what is going on around us. Similar to the concerns raised by Esther Peeren and Irina Souch in their analysis of the popular TV show *Farmer Wants a Wife* (a version set in the Netherlands from 2004–present), we worry that these shows "prevent important aspects of contemporary rural life from being seen and understood" (37) by the viewers, and do a disservice to regional communities.

For the purposes of this article, we interrogate the episodes of *Escape from the City* screened to date in terms of the impact they may have on promoting regional Australia and speculate on how satisfied (or otherwise) we would be should the producers direct their lens onto our regional community—Armidale, in northern NSW. We start with a brief précis of *Escape from the City* and then, applying an autoethnographic approach (Butz and Besio) focusing on our subjective experiences, we share our reflections on living in Armidale. We blend our academic knowledge and knowledge of everyday life (Klevan et al.) to argue there is greater cultural diversity, complexity, and value in being in the natural landscape in regional areas than is portrayed in these representations of country life that largely focus on cheaper real estate and a five-minute commute.

We employ an autoethnographic approach because it emphasises the socially and politically constituted nature of knowledge claims and allows us to focus on our own lives as a way of understanding larger social phenomena. We recognise there is a vast literature on lifestyle programs and there are many different approaches scholars can take to these. Some focus on the intention of the program, for example "the promotion of neoliberal citizenship through home investment" (White 578), while others focus on the supposed effect on audiences (Tsay-Vogel and Krakowiak). Here we only assert the effects on ourselves. We have chosen to blend our voices (Gilmore et al.) in developing our arguments, highlighting our single voices where our individual experiences are drawn on, as we argue for an alternative representation of regional life than currently portrayed in the regional 'escapes' of this mainstream lifestyle television program.

Lifestyle Television

Escape from the City is one of the 'lifestyle' series listed on the ABC iView website under the category of 'Regional Australia'. Promotional details describe *Escape from the City* as a lifestyle series of 56-minute episodes in which home seekers are guided through "the trials and tribulations of their life-changing decision to escape the city" (iView).

Escape from the City is an example of format television, a term used to describe programs that retain the structure and style of those produced in another country but change the circumstances to suit the new cultural context. The original BBC format is entitled *Escape to the Country* and has been running since 2002. The reach of lifestyle television is extensive, with the number of programs growing rapidly since 2000, not just in the United Kingdom, but internationally (Hill; Collins). In Australia, they have completed, but not yet screened, 60 episodes of *Escape from the City*. However, with such popularity comes great potential to influence audiences and we argue this program warrants critical attention.

Like *House Hunters*, the United States lifestyle television show (running since 1997), *Escape from the City* follows "a strict formula" (Loof 168). Each episode uses the same narrative format, beginning with an introduction to the team of experts, then introducing the prospective house buyers, briefly characterising their reasons for leaving the city and what they are looking for in their new life. After this, we are shown a map of the region and the program follows the 'escapees' as they view four pre-selected houses. As we leave each property, the cost and features are reiterated in the written template on the screen. We, the audience, wait in anticipation for their final decision.

The focus of *Escape from the City* is the buying of the house: the program's team of experts is there to help the potential 'escapees' find the real estate gem. Real estate value for money emerges as the primary concern, while the promise of finding a 'life less ordinary' as highlighted in the opening credits of the program each week, seems to fall by the wayside. Indeed, the representation of regional centres is not nuanced but limited by the emphasis placed on economics over the social and cultural.

The intended move of the 'escapees' is invariably portrayed as motivated by disenchantment with city life. Clearly a bigger house and a smaller mortgage also has its hedonistic side. In her study of Western society represented in lifestyle shows, Lyn Thomas lists some of the negative aspects of city life as "high speed, work-dominated, consumerist" (680), along with pollution and other associated health risks. While these are mentioned in *Escape from the City*, Thomas's list of the pleasures afforded by a simpler country life including space for human connection and spirituality, is not explored to any satisfying extent. Further, as a launching point for viewers in the city (Boyle and Kelly), we fear the singular focus on the price of real estate reinforces a sense of the rural as devoid of creative arts and cultural diversity with a focus on the productive, rather than the natural, landscape. Such a focus does not encourage a desire to find out more and undersells the richness of our (regional) lives.

As Australian regional centres strive to circumvent or halt the negative impacts of the drift in population to the cities (Chan), lifestyle programs are important 'make or break' narratives, shaping the appeal and bolstering—or not—a decision to relocate. With their focus on cheaper real estate prices and the freeing up of the assets of the 'escapees' that a move to the country may entail, the representation is so focused on the economics that it is almost placeless. While the format includes a map of the regional location, there is little sense of being in the place. Such a limited representation does not do justice to the richness of regional lives as we have experienced them.

Our Town

Like so many regional centres, Armidale has much to offer and is seeking to grow (Armidale Regional Council). The challenges regional communities face in sustaining their communities is well captured in Gabriele Chan's account of the city-country divide (Chan) and Armidale, with its population of about 25,000, is no exception. *Escape from the City* fails to emphasise cultural diversity and richness, yet this is what characterises our experience of our regional city. As long-term and satisfied residents of Armidale, who are keenly aware of the persuasive power of popular cultural representations (O'Sullivan and Sheridan; Sheridan and O'Sullivan), we are concerned about the trivialising or reductive manner in which regional Australia is portrayed.

While we acknowledge there has not been an episode of *Escape from the City* featuring Armidale, if the characterisation of another, although larger, regional centre, Toowoomba, is anything to go by, our worst fears may be realised if our town is to feature in the future. Toowoomba is depicted as rural landscapes, 'elegant' buildings, a garden festival (the "Carnival of the Flowers") and the town's history as home of the Southern Cross windmill and the iconic lamington sponge. The episode features an old shearing shed and a stock whip demonstration, but makes no mention of the arts, or of the University that has been there since 1967. Summing up Toowoomba, the voiceover describes it as "an understated and peaceful place to live," and provides "an attractive alternative" to city life, substantiated by a favourable comparison of median real estate prices.

Below we share our individual responses to the question raised in our opening conversation about the limitations of *Escape from the City*: What have we come to value about our own town since escaping from city life?

Jane: The aspects of life in Armidale I most enjoy are, at least in part, associated with or influenced by the fact that this is a centre for education and a 'university town'. As such, there is access to an academic library and an excellent town library. The presence of the University of New England, along with independent and public schools, and TAFE, makes education a major employer, attracting a significant student population, and is a major factor in Armidale being one of the first towns in the roll-out of the NBN/high-speed broadband. University staff and students may also account for the thriving cafe culture, along with designer breweries/bars, art house cinema screenings, and a lively classical and popular music scene. Surely the presence of a university and associated spin-offs would deserve coverage in a prospective episode about Armidale.

Alison: Having grown up in the city, and now having lived more than half my life in an inner-regional country town, I don't feel I am missing out 'culturally' from this decision. Within our town, there is a vibrant arts community, with the regional gallery and two local galleries holding regular art exhibitions, theatre at a range of venues, and book launches at our lively local book store. And when my children were younger, there was no shortage of sporting events they could be involved with. Encountering friends and familiar faces regularly at these events adds to my sense of belonging to my community. The richness of this life does not make it to the television screen in episodes of *Escape from the City*.

Kerry: I greatly value the Armidale community's strong social conscience. There are many examples of successful programs to support diverse groups. Armidale Sanctuary and Humanitarian Settlement sponsored South Sudanese refugees for many years and is currently assisting Ezidi refugees. In addition to the core Sanctuary committee, many in the local community help families with developing English skills, negotiating daily life, such as reading and responding to school notes and medical questionnaires. The *Backtrack* program assists troubled Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth. The program helps kids "to navigate their relationships, deal with personal trauma, take responsibility [...] gain skills [...] so they can eventually create a sustainable future for themselves." The documentary film *Backtrack Boys* shows what can be achieved by individuals with the support of the community. Missing from *Escape from the City* is recognition of the indigenous experience and history in regional communities, unlike the BBC's 'original' program in which medieval history and Vikings often get a 'guernsey'. The 1838 Myall Creek massacre of 28 Wirrayaay people, led to the first prosecution and conviction of a European for killing Aboriginals. Members of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community in Armidale are now active in acknowledging the past wrongs and beginning the process of reconciliation.

Josie: About 10am on a recent Saturday morning I was walking from the car park to the shopping complex. Coming down the escalator and in the vestibule, there were about thirty people and it occurred to me that there were at least six nationalities represented, with some of the people wearing traditional dress. It also struck me that this is not unusual—we are a diverse community as a result of our history and being a 'university city'. The Armidale Aboriginal Cultural Centre and Keeping Place was established in 1988 and is being extended in 2019. Diversity is apparent in cultural activities such as an international film festival held annually and many of the regular musical events and stalls at the farmers' market increasingly reflect the cultural mix of our town. As a long-term resident, I appreciate the lifestyle here.

Wendy: It is early morning and I am walking in a forest of tall trees, with just the sounds of cattle and black cockatoos. I travel along winding pathways with mossy boulders and creeks dry with drought. My dog barks at rabbits and 'roos, and noses through the nooks and crannies of the hillside. In this public park on the outskirts of town, I can walk for two hours without seeing another person, or I can be part of a dog-walking pack. The light is grey and misty now, the ranges blue and dark green, but I feel peaceful and content. I came here from the city 30 years ago and hated it at first! But now I relish the way I can be at home in 10 minutes after starting the day in the midst of nature and feeling part of the landscape, not just a tourist—never a possibility in the city. I can watch the seasons and the animals as they come and go and be part of a community which is part of the landscape too. For me, the first verse of *South of My Days*, written by a 'local' describing our New England environment, captures this well:

South of my days' circle, part of my blood's country,
rises that tableland, high delicate outline
of bony slopes wincing under the winter,
low trees, blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite-
clean, lean, hungry country. The creek's leaf-silenced,
willow choked, the slope a tangle of medlar and crabapple
branching over and under, blotched with a green lichen;
and the old cottage lurches in for shelter. (Wright 20)

Whilst our autoethnographic reflections may not reach the heady heights of Judith Wright, they nevertheless reflect the experience of living in, not just escaping to the country. We are disappointed that the breadth of cultural activities and the sense of diversity and community that our stories evoke are absent from the representations of regional communities in *Escape from the City*.

Kate Oakley and Jonathon Ward argue that 'visions of the good life', in particular cultural life in the regions, need to be supported by policy which encourages a sustainable prosperity characterised by both economic and cultural development. *Escape from the City*, however, dwells on the material aspects of consumption—good house prices and the possibility of a private enterprise—almost to the exclusion of any coverage of the creative cultural features.

We recognise that the lifestyle genre requires simplification for viewers to digest. What we are challenging is the sense that emerges from the repetitive format week after week whereby *differences between places* are lost (White 580). Instead what is conveyed in *Escape from the City* is that regions are homogenous and monocultural. We would like to see more screen time devoted to the social and cultural aspects of the individual locations.

Conclusion

We believe coverage of a far richer and more complex nature of rural life would provide a more 'realistic' preview of what could be ahead for the 'escapees' and perhaps swing the decision to relocate. Certainly, there is some evidence that viewers gain information from lifestyle programs (Hill 106). We are concerned that a lifestyle television program that purports to provide expert advice on the benefits and possible pitfalls of a possible move to the country should be as accurate and all-encompassing as possible within the constraints of the length of the program and the genre.

So, returning to what may appear to have been a light-hearted exchange between us at our local bar, and given the above discussion, we argue that television is a powerful medium. We conclude that a popular lifestyle television program such as *Escape from the City* has an impact on a large viewing audience. For those city-based viewers watching, the message is that moving to the country is an economic 'no brainer', whereas the social and cultural dimensions of regional communities, which we posit have sustained our lives, are overlooked. Such texts influence viewers' perceptions and expectations of what escaping to the country may entail. *Escape from the City* exploits regional towns as subject matter for a lifestyle program but does not significantly challenge stereotypical representations of country life or does not fully flesh out what escaping to the country may achieve.

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