



Amenity migrants, animals and ambivalent natures: More-than-human encounters at home in the rural residential estate



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ABSTRACT

In light of increased development pressure in rural landscapes, understanding how amenity migrants understand and experience nature is a vital project for rural studies. This paper investigates how residents living in a rural residential estate (RRE) negotiate more-than-human encounters in domestic settings. RREs are emergent forms of master-planned residential development on the rural–urban fringe, marketed and designed to meet an idyllic rural lifestyle. In the RRE, domestic nonhuman transgressions are both presumed as a part of the amenity migrant experience, and pre-empted by estate design and regulation. Border encounters in gardens were explored via semi-structured walking interviews with 27 residents of an RRE, located on the rural–urban fringe of Sydney, Australia. Nonhuman transgressions were found to both contribute towards, and challenge, homemaking practices. Some residents expressed a vernacular ecology at home entangled with more-than-human company, where nonhumans are ‘neighbours’. Gardens were shared, and maintenance practices altered. When domestic expectations of cleanliness and order were challenged, native nonhumans were negotiated in gardens with a ‘hoped-for absence’ (Ginn, 2014). These stories illustrate that a native politics of belonging foreshadows the homemaking practices of amenity migrants. The paper suggests settlements similar to RRE can be a positive intervention on the rural–urban fringe, encouraging different registers of interaction with nonhuman nature.

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1. Introduction

While walking through her two-acre private lot in Nangarin Vineyard Estate, Alice¹ suggested ‘we’re just, you know, houses inside a natural environment ... we’re part of where they live, rather than them being a part of where we live’. Amongst post-agricultural land use, remnant bushland, and large detached homes with neat expanses of lawns, Alice’s assertion lingered. For Alice, home in the RRE presents a different way of sharing space, and different ideas for how space should be shared between humans and nonhumans. This paper aims to explore the rural residential estate (RRE) as a new settlement form on the rural–urban fringe, specifically attending to how residents live with nonhuman nature.

Identified by McGuirk and Dowling (2007) as a new form of master-planned residential estate (MPRE), rural residential estates:

involve the master-planned development of sizeable residential lots around communal agricultural land and rural amenities held under community title by residents who are attracted by the lifestyle aesthetic but not its workload (McGuirk and Dowling, 2007, p. 30).

The RRE is marketed and is designed for the provision of a distinct rural lifestyle. A combination of large private lots, and the integration of rural features in estate design (remnant bushland, small-scale productive activity e.g. vineyard plots and hobby farming), evoke an idyllic rurality, and suggest a closer relationship with nature.

Drawing on a ‘more-than-human’ relational ontology (Whatmore, 2002; Braun, 2005), this paper focuses upon everyday nonhuman encounters in the domestic settings of residents. Building on Power (2009, p. 32) this paper expands discussions of homemaking to the influence of nonhuman agency, concentrating on ‘uninvited’ nonhuman encounters. I examine how others have

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¹ For ethical purposes, all participants have been provided with pseudonyms. This is to address each person’s confidentiality within a small, bounded community.

dealt with nonhuman agency and encounter in suburban domestic gardens (Hitchings, 2003; Kaika, 2005; Power, 2005; Head and Muir, 2006, 2007; Ginn, 2014) to suggest ways that the RRE is both similar to and different from these cases. Analysing the RRE furthers this conversation, highlighting how residents negotiate everyday experiences and competing discourses of nature: as rural, as native, as something to live amongst, and as something to protect (Cadieux, 2011). Abrams et al. (2012, p. 273) stress amenity migration studies tend 'to leave unanswered questions related to the complex social productions of nature characteristic of exurbanising landscapes'. By questioning some outcomes of living in a RRE, this paper advances discussions of how amenity migrants conceive of and manage nature within their properties.

Attending to the social agency of nonhumans has a resonance for rural studies. Mirroring competing uses and valuations of rural landscapes, the status and position of nonhumans in material and imaginary ruralities is mired in paradox (Jones, 2006; Holmes, 2006; Saltzman et al., 2011). I argue that a more-than-human relational ontology is well placed to address this complexity, acknowledging the understated yet key role nonhumans play in everyday rural lives (Jones, 2006).

The paper is structured in two sections. In the first section, I provide a background of residential development in rural landscapes, paying particular attention to the related fields of amenity migration and exurbia. Next, I place the rural residential estate within a wider discussion of the variation of master-planned residential development (McGuirk and Dowling, 2007). I subsequently outline a 'more-than-human' relational ontology for thinking about rural landscapes (Jones, 2006), and detail the methodological approach.

The second section draws on fieldwork conducted in Nangarin Vineyard Estate, an RRE in a characteristically rural region of Sydney. I focus specifically on human encounter with uninvited nonhumans in the private lot, and subsequent bordering practices. Recounting stories and experiences of residents, nonhumans were found to both support and unsettle the home: existing as 'neighbours' in the RRE community, and conversely, as challenges to cleanliness, order, and other forms of human intent. I critically explore how these encounters clash with hegemonic Australian discourses of nature (Head, 2012), and predispositions of an 'ideal home' (Blunt and Dowling, 2006).

2. Literature review

2.1. Amenity migration, exurbia and rural space

Contemporary rural landscapes are characterised by a contested and variable mix of production, consumption and protection values (Holmes, 2006). This paper addresses some everyday outcomes of the *consumption* of rural land: the emergence of market driven urban interests with amenity premium on land values, and 'lifestyle' at the fore (Holmes, 2006, p. 144). Amenity based immigration to rural areas is defined broadly by Abrams et al. (2012, p. 270) as 'the movement of largely affluent urban or suburban populations to rural areas for specific lifestyle amenities, such as natural scenery, proximity to outdoor recreation, cultural richness, or a sense of rurality'. Amenity migration in Australia is termed a 'seachange' or 'treechange', conducted by 'lifestylers' (Gill et al., 2010; Argent et al., 2011). On the rural–urban fringe lifestylers settle in diverse ways, accommodating variable incomes and lifestyles: from hobby farming and alternative lifestylers, to welfare migration and prestige settlement.

Studies based in the United States and Canada term residential land use in rural landscapes as exurbia (Cadieux and Taylor, 2013; Gosnell and Abrams, 2011; Taylor, 2011). Woods (2009, p. 853)

defines exurbia as 'rural localities that have been transformed by in-migration from towns and cities (often for amenity purposes) and associated development'. Often seen as disparate research categories, Gosnell and Abrams (2011, p. 305) place amenity migration into this wider discussion of exurbia: as 'an approach to studying exurbia which looks at the complexity of causes and impacts of exurban growth along with urban fringe studies, counterurbanisation, and research on residential preference'.

Amenity migration and exurbia research investigates social, environmental and political landscape impacts. Archetypal rural areas settled by urban-suburban populations become hybrid spaces – 'in which urban and rural values, cultures and landscapes have become fused' (Woods, 2009, p. 853). This rural–urban 'fusion' – and subsequent clash of value systems and land uses – complicates urban planning, growth management, conservation biology and landscape ecology endeavours (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011; Taylor, 2011). An increased residential presence in rural regions has positive and negative impacts (McCarthy, 2008; Abrams et al., 2012). Regarding environmental implications, subdividing formerly productive land use leads to landscape fragmentation (Argent et al., 2011), creating possible networks for invasive species (Dale et al., 2005), and complicating fire mitigation efforts (Eriksen and Gill, 2010). Conversely Bock and Bock (2009) indicate residential development can support higher species diversity than surrounding homogenised agricultural landscapes.

Rural movements are further driven by discursive representations of rural life. As Wilbur (2014, p. 2) argues: 'rural in-migration patterns have been contoured in large part by collective cultural inscriptions on the countryside, with population reconfiguration often directly linked to the pursuit of the "rural idyll"'. The rural idyll has British origins, emulating pastoral landscapes – and is reproduced on a global scale as a 'reaction to the ills of urban space ... to the perceived stifling effects of suburbia' (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011, p. 322). Idyllic rural lifestyles are associated with an improved quality of life compared to suburbia: a perceived increased sense of community, lower density settlement, and enhanced access to nature (McCarthy, 2008; Wilbur, 2014).

Although 'exurbia is predicated partly on a desire for contact with nature and all that nature represents', ideologies of 'nature' are multiple (Cadieux and Taylor, 2013, p. 3). Amidst a multifunctional rural, the rural idyll is displaced by intermixing consumption and protection values. Emerging environmental and social justice concerns (protection value) envisage rural landscapes as sites of 'nature' (Holmes, 2006), 'native' (Head, 2012), and 'wild' (Buller, 2004). Such disparate valuations inform paradoxical actions of amenity migrants: as Cadieux (2011, p. 344) suggests, 'nature' 'may take the form of cultivating a refuge for indigenous flora and fauna or it might mean mowing a large lawn'. In light of intensified rural consumption, it is essential to grasp the reaction of amenity migrants. This paper responds, exploring how residents of a RRE understand and manage nature within their properties – paying particular attention to nonhuman encounter, negotiation, and the motivations behind decisions.

2.2. The rural residential estate

Addressing increasing variation and diversity of master-planned residential developments, this section places the RRE within a broader framework of MPREs (McGuirk and Dowling, 2007). Responding to a declining first home-owner market, living in MPREs is now the most extensive form of new residential development in the Western world (Cheshire et al., 2010; Thompson, 2013). Although disparate in design themes and regulation structures, MPREs share similarities: uniform block sizes, overarching design guidelines, and the provision of community amenities.

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