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Segregation and protectionism: Institutionalised views of Aboriginal rurality

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Rurality is a complex and contested term, with multiple notions and gazes amid calls for theoretical pluralism. In Australia, the spatial categories of 'remote', 'rural', 'regional' and 'urban' are applied to places that vary in their distance from an economic and political core and have differing population densities. We argue that natural resources institutions in rural Australia demand an 'authentic' performance of Aboriginality that is framed within orthodox and stable constructions of an Indigeneity associated with the remote category. Dominant representations of remote Aboriginal people living on traditional homelands and engaged in 'traditional' environmental protection are assumed to hold for all places and transposed when natural resources institutions satisfy compulsory Indigenous engagement. Such institutional requirements for authenticity exclude alternative and multiple Indigenous voices in natural resources management. Rather, Aboriginal people seek engagement across a portfolio of natural resources activities typically found in rural areas (such as mining, grazing, forestry, water allocation planning, and natural resources service delivery and enterprise development), and not just isolated in natural and cultural heritage conservation. This broad participation would more completely match their expressed aspirations and the multiple lived realities of their fluid and networked rural worlds. Using the rural town of Eidsvold in Australia as a case study, we discuss the findings of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with Indigenous people at regional natural resources management meetings and at 'home' in Eidsvold. Rather than a generic institutional approach, a place-based approach to understanding the complex ruralities of Aboriginal people is needed.

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1. Introduction

Studies that segregate politico-economic structures or socio-cultural representations of nature and landscape as singular explanations for rural geographies are being replaced by more complex ways of understanding rural space. The particular gaze and underlying political, social, cultural, economic and historical processes that construct each space produce multiple rural geographies. In turn, rural places are relational and networked, reflecting forms of rurality that are constantly in process (Cloke, 2003; Smith, 2007).

Crude systems of classification oversimplify the rural-urban continuum, denying these underlying relational networks that transcend urban and rural space and their resulting hybrid mixes (Latour, 1993; Murdoch and Lowe, 2003). In Australia, the terms 'remote', 'regional', 'rural' and 'urban' are used as spatial classifications, but are also used to characterise Indigenous¹ communities²

(NAEC, 1979). Such terms invoke very different representations of Indigenous people and have very different implications for service delivery and community engagement. Using an approach that considers both socio-cultural representations and politico-structural governance arrangements, we³ argue that NRM (natural resources management) in Australia relies heavily on this spatial distinction and imposes a dominant governmental representation of 'authenticity' that segregates and marginalises Aboriginal participation to an othered, remote and traditional performativity.⁴ For example, Aboriginal involvement may in practice be restricted to 'cultural' enrichment of NRM in the form of 'Welcome to Country'

³ The first author has worked with Indigenous people on natural resources management in remote Australia since 1995 and with Indigenous people in non-remote areas since 2005. The second author has worked with Indigenous people in urban, rural and remote areas since 1978. On the basis of our experience we were invited by staff of the regional natural resource management body to conduct research. This invitation was confirmed by its Board including two Indigenous directors, and subsequently confirmed by the entire Traditional Owner Working Group of the regional body, and lastly by members of the Eidsvold Wakka Wakka Corporation.

⁴ We use Edensor's (2006:484) description of the metaphor of rural performance as characterising 'the ways in which people are predisposed to carry out unquestioned and habitual practices in rural settings' which are routinely reproduced and used to denote those who belong in rural space.

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¹ The term Indigenous is used to refer to both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, whereas most of our research is conducted with Aboriginal people and we will often refer only to them.

² There are many and problematic understandings of the word community; in this paper we use community to refer to a geographically bounded group of people.

opening speeches, ceremonies to enact collaboration and common purpose, traditional dancing, naming of places and projects in the local language, story-telling about local resources, and other important validations of the inclusivity of NRM which nonetheless do not include fundamental decision-making resource allocation and other 'worldly' powers. At the end of the day, Indigenous people are left with traditionalism, but have not acquired non-Indigenous skills, knowledges and attributes on which projects are assessed and funded. This schism mirrors the divide between conservation and production values in NRM, limiting Aboriginal participation to stewardship of environments that will inevitably be exploited. This marginalisation from core NRM activities is justified by reference to models of traditional Aboriginal culture that preclude informed, economic motivations and privilege primordial attachments to land that are overwhelmingly spiritual and communal. These models frame contemporary Aboriginal people as culturally over-determined, by group, kinship and spiritual stewardship of land which exclude individual, family or material motivations.

To illustrate our argument we first present literature that links rurality and Aboriginality and exaggerates the spatial and associated cultural categories of 'remote', 'rural', 'regional' and 'urban'. This notion invents and privileges an 'authentic' Aboriginality linked to nature and located in the 'remote'; and is used to legitimise or marginalise Aboriginal participation in natural resources management. We next present some literature around new rural governance forms and trends. These governance arrangements assume community/government hybridity but are problematic because engagement concepts and partnership models are transferred from remote locations and applied in all places.

We next present a case study from Eidsvold (Figs. 1 and 2), Australia, where the regional natural resources body has established partnership arrangements with traditional owners⁵ and Indigenous historical and social residents⁶ in the area. The case study firstly describes the establishment and operation of the regional natural resources body and its plan implementation. Then we visit Eidsvold where its Indigenous residents narrate their unique rurality through mining, cattle, forestry, environmental rehabilitation, service delivery, enterprise development and locally unique histories, while landscape images and government plans enlist 'traditional' knowledges and practices for conserving natural and cultural resources. These Indigenous views are those of a multiple, connected rurality where spatial and cultural divisions are transcended. Nevertheless, the existing partnership model perpetuates a singular, essentialised and narrow notion of Aboriginal engagement and needs to broaden its portfolio to encompass a plurality of rural Aboriginalities.

1.1. Racialisations: authenticity and recognition

There are strong associations between rurality and nature that evoke imagery, performativity and emotions that suit a pure rural nature (Milbourne, 2003); a view that aligns untainted ruralities with unmodified natures that need protection from anthropogenic change. Others perceive rural landscapes through the changing productivist or the ecotechnical consumption of their natural resources (Lockie et al., 2006). Thus rurality and nature are readily linked for protective or utilitarian reasons but in ways

that are not readily connected by their diverse advocates (Clope, 2006).

Although people from diverse cultural backgrounds are often absent(ed) from the rural gaze, Indigenous peoples' are often represented as having a unique attachment to nature, particularly in areas that are remote from the core (Cowlshaw, 1987, 1988). Johnson and Murton (2007) associate academic disruptions between nature and culture with the disenfranchising of Indigenous knowledges and voices from rural studies. Yet Lucero's (2006) analysis of authenticity and strategic constructivism in Ecuador and Bolivia highlights the contradictory and dynamic nature of Indigeneity and its political and cultural expressions in contemporary natural resource management. Escobar (2001) suggests authenticity and connection to localised place are strategically critical to Indigenous identity assertion in the face of powerful globalisation.

All knowledges and practices are hybrid and mediated, constructed or performed to suit the particular context and moment; and thus offer unique understandings that are local and place-based (Agrawal, 1995; Briggs, 2005). Similarly, the knowledges, practices and lifeworlds of Aboriginal landowners offer unique insights and understandings about their particular landscape. Yet the current reification of culturally specific knowledges, practices and lifeworlds in natural resource management as an essentialised characteristic of Aboriginality may counteract any (political) advantage it seeks (Agrawal, 1995; Briggs, 2005). By relegating the presence of Aboriginal people in the landscape to an archaic and primitive other from a remote world, they can be (intentionally) excluded from more contemporary understandings and aspirations for fully participating in globalised worlds (Porter, 2006).

An Aboriginal presence in Australian urban and rural places is often ignored or denied on the basis of an imagined inauthenticity (but see Malone, 2007). This erasure of an Aboriginal presence is linked to a refusal to recognise that cultural interpenetration and hybridity characterises many Indigenous lives, regardless of how they may choose to represent their identities socially and politically (Dodson, 1994; Anderson, 1997). Authenticity is regarded as compromised by both movement away from remote areas and by appropriation of non-Indigenous or urban practices and beliefs (Hollinsworth, 1992). Such movements and changes occur even though for most Aboriginal people urbanisation and displacement from homelands 'came to them' rather than they moved toward it (Byrne, 2003; Byrne and Nugent, 2004).

Large areas of remote northern and central Australia are the traditional homelands of many Aboriginal Australians and their land rights are enshrined by various pieces of settler legislation.⁷ There are many successful examples of partnerships with Indigenous Australians in natural resources management in these areas and these successes rely on or claim various combinations of Indigenous direction, knowledge and participation (Davies et al., 1999). Yet they have foreclosed on other options for engaging Indigenous people. On closer scrutiny Aboriginal people often are requested to provide traditional knowledge or participate in a support role as co-opted in, at best, piecemeal employment contracts with little further NRM prospect (Carter et al., 2006). According to the dominant institutional paradigm, the 'real' Aborigines are those located in the remote north and centre of

⁵ Traditional owners are the senior landowners of each clan estate and their descendants who have traditional ownership and decision-making authority over that land, as recognised in land rights and native title legislation.

⁶ Indigenous historical and social residents refer to Indigenous people who have moved into an area because of government policies or social processes (e.g. employment) but are not traditional owners for that area.

⁷ Australia has various pieces of federal and state lands rights legislation which can confer ownership of land to Aboriginal people. Most land rights have been won in remote northern and central Australia. Elsewhere in Australia, Indigenous inhabitants can claim native title rights which confer various rights to use, occupy and be consulted about land and natural resources. As of 30 May 2007, 29 RNTBC (Registered Native Title Bodies Corporate) had been determined in Queensland, relating to 37 different native title claim determinations. All of these are located in the northern (remote) part of Queensland (AIATSIS, 2007).

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