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Between homes: politics of regional youth migration.

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The dilemma, for many of us, was apparent only when we left, when we realised the consequences of accepting a bargain that pushed you out as fast as it urged you to be different. But the consequences of leaving would pale against those which confronted the people who stayed (Mark Peel 1995).

In this paper, I make a start on a politics of youth migration. My interest as a sociologist in youth migration has been derived primarily from present anxieties over two perceived social problems: Australia's 'regional crisis' and the exodus of 'regional youth'. The message circulating within popular, governmental and social scientific discourses is overwhelmingly bleak: regional communities are dying; youth are disenfranchised; regional services are withdrawing; an underclass is forming; youth are disappearing; the bush has been forgotten. In my backyard, Tasmania - where youth are by definition regional - the noise is deafening. In the midst of this moral panic over all things regional, I question one belief that is gaining currency in popular discourse: that 'if only 'we could curb population loss, preserve regional communities, and keep young people (often referred to as 'young achievers') at home then everything will be all right'. The problem as I currently see it, is that those who advocate this common sense view assume that the existing community formula should be preserved, despite the observation that many aspects of this formula are not working for young people. Further, I note that there is a tendency amongst state authorities and other 'community managers' to construct 'desirable youth', the skilled, work-ready type 'we' want to hold on to, and 'undesirable youth', the dole bludger and marginalised others.

The preliminary findings I present today form part of a sociology doctorate in progress. Please note that I am currently in the business of identifying 'tendencies', rather than providing solutions and policy directions. The aim of my PhD is to examine both the historical anxieties over youth migration in Australia, and contemporary experiences of

regional youth in a period of economic restructuring. I envisage that one of the outcomes of my research will be to inform present debates about regional youth migration, particularly from the perspective of young people. My sociological approach entails a combination of historical case materials and personal biographies; an approach that is familiar to anyone who has read C.W. Mills *The Sociological Imagination* or who is immersed in contemporary postcolonial or feminist research. It is very different to how the majority of research in this area which is based on secondary statistical data, quantitative survey work or focus group discussions. In contrast to existing demographic research which focuses on residential moves and the characteristics of those who move, I aim to problematize the assumptions on which popular and policy discussions about youth migration are based by comparing government reports with young people's narratives.

Contemporary anxieties about 'all things regional'

As a student of sociology, I find it difficult to reconcile the romantic and nostalgic portrayals of rural community life so prevalent in early sociological community studies with contemporary media images of a regional life marked by welfare, poverty and social disadvantage. In Australian media, the golden images of heroic pioneers, brave bushmen and hardworking rural folk have been superseded by images of bush-battlers and broken farmers, and the emergence of a regional underclass. The overriding message is that regional Australians are currently 'hurting' more than any other sector of society. Indeed, passionate advocates and circumspect scientists alike have amassed considerable evidence which demonstrates that Australian society is being polarised along geographic lines (Gregory and Hunter 1995; KPMG 2000; NIEIR 1999) whereby regional Australians are increasingly disadvantaged in comparison to their urban counterparts. For sociologists, Tonnies' classic distinction between the caring, close-knit rural community (*Gemeinschaft*) and the isolating, industrialised city (*Gesellschaft*) sits uneasily with emerging analyses which promote the material, cultural and lifestyle advantages of being located in the global metropolises of inner Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

In political circles, worrying about 'all things regional' has become a full-time occupation. The success of Pauline Hanson's One Nation at the ballot box in 1998, the loss of the Kennett government in the 1999 Victorian state election, and the subsequent failures of National Party candidates to retain their rural seats, have been interpreted as signifying a regional backlash against two decades of economic policy aimed at fostering an open, unregulated and competitive global economy. Over the past year, the Federal Government has provided considerable financial measures and symbolic gestures in

order to subdue an angry regional electorate. Not surprisingly, such gestures have been interpreted as vote-buying exercises, rather than legitimate policy responses to social and economic problems. As the editor of *The Australian* notes:

What is the bush? In Australian political terms now it seems the best definition is any non-metropolitan seat that the major political parties do not hold (*The Australian*, 17/5/2000).

Within this climate of 'regional panic', the issue of depopulation generally, and the 'regional youth exodus' in particular, has become the focus of heated debate. An examination of youth population change and net migration, shows a comparable gap between where young people are leaving from (the rural farm and the regional factory) and where they are heading to (the global cities and the tourist towns). Although net migration losses of young people (15-24 years) are almost universal throughout rural areas, there is an influx of young people in coastal areas in Queensland and NSW, and in remote areas in Western Australia and the Northern Territory (BRS 1999). Map 1.1 produced by the Bureau of Resource Sciences (1999) shows areas where youth population losses have been most pronounced. Youth populations grew in capital cities such as Perth and Brisbane, and were relatively stable in all capital cities with the exception of Adelaide. In contrast, youth population losses were experienced across rural areas in South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and NSW, and in Western Australia's wheat-belt.

While young people have always left their regional homes to pursue opportunities elsewhere, the scale of young people leaving has escalated over the past two decades. Map 1.1 shows that between 1991 and 1996, 52 regional statistical local areas (SLA) across Australia lost over 50% of their young people. It is not just that young people are leaving home, but that they are leaving home in larger numbers and in markedly different times. The issues which young people in the 1990s face include: structural youth unemployment; higher education costs; reduced government assistance; less secure employment contracts; an increasingly non-unionised, casualised labour market; and lower real wages (Gregory 1999; Wyn et al 1997; White 1999).

Yet, surprisingly, media-talk about regional youth migration is largely focused on 'what to do about the regional youth crisis', rather than 'what to do about young people disadvantaged by the new spatial and economic demands of globalisation'. The answer is most often framed in terms of the 'community preservationist' argument previously outlined: that 'if only we could curb population loss, preserve regional communities, and keep young achievers at home then everything will be all right'. For example, listen to this piece of cross-media referencing from *The Australian*:

The ABC organised an essay competition cum challenge to primary and secondary school students. They were asked to write one or two pages, titled *How to Keep Me in my Home Town*. Students were told, "The Outback Revival is about reviving regional Queensland, so your ideas on what could be done to entice you to stay are important" (Wahlquist, *The Australian* 11/8/1999: 14).

The article also offers a quote from the Dubbo Councillor, Tony McGrane:

The biggest export from Dubbo is the youth of my electorate - 65 per cent of the youth that achieve the school certificate leave Dubbo. That's a massive export. We want them to stay in the area. They leave and very few come back.

Where does this popular wisdom come from? Why should we keep young people at home? Who speaks for young people? Who speaks for the Home Town? Who benefits from keeping young people at home and maintaining the present regional formula?

Regional Youth Migration I: Demography and Life Stage.

Before responding to these questions, I briefly discuss Young's (1987) report, *Young people leaving home in Australia*. This report is a key reference point for my current research as it represents the most extensive account of youth residential mobility in Australia. Drawing on a sociology of the family, Young sketches a picture of the transition phases of young people, and situates the leaving home process within an analysis of the family life cycle experience of parents (1987: 2). This demographic analysis is tied to the timing and sequence of transition events and presents the process of leaving home as a natural progression through adulthood.

The first observation in comparing Young's report to my present study relates to timing and a global sensibility. The point I emphasise throughout this paper, that youth migration needs to be understood within the context of global economic restructuring and a bipartisan commitment to economic liberalism, is not novel or particularly controversial to families who are currently trying to meet escalating farm debts and local councillors who are trying to save their vanishing communities. Amongst those fighting the regional battles, the regional youth exodus clearly represents another sign of economic decline: 'we have lost the banks, the post office, the hospital beds, the doctors and now our children'. Yet, the most comprehensive study of youth migration in Australia, conducted by Young between 1981 and 1982 is devoid of the type of connections between global economic change and youth migration patterns so glaringly apparent today. When Young conducted her national survey in 1982 Australia was just on the edge of the 1980s economic boom and as she completed her report in 1987,

Australians were facing the first effects of global economic restructuring mediated by the Hawke-Keating open competition policy of tariff reduction in both manufacturing and agricultural industries. While today there is broad agreement over the constitutive effects of an ideology of economic liberalism, the process of global economic restructuring and the phenomenon of regional youth migration, such political rumblings were far from Young's mind when she started out on her study of young people leaving their family homes.

Unheeded by the present global noise, Young proceeds with her national study of young people's experiences of leaving home. She notes in the opening of her report that prior to her study this phenomenon had only been examined in a piecemeal way, and had largely been determined through parental information or with regard to marriage patterns (1987: 11). She sets out to rectify this situation with her comprehensive analysis of a national survey of young adults conducted by the Institute of Family Studies in 1981 and 1982. Her concern to step beyond migration patterns is evident in the broad aims of her study:

to provide a description of the characteristics of the leaving home stage, to explore the demographic aspects of leaving home, to discuss the role of key background factors on leaving home, and to explore the existence of stress and conflict during the leaving home transition (Young 1987: 1).

Following the life-stage approach, Young presents the reader with a reference young person's experience of leaving home. While she does not track individual leaving home experiences, she is able to specify some national trends in youth mobility patterns. One of Young's key findings is that the leaving home process is no longer inextricably associated with marriage, securing a job and buying a home. Instead:

for many young adults leaving home now seems to mark the beginning of a period of independent, non-family living, in which they can be alone or with friends, in a lifestyle quite different from what they experienced while living at home or from what they will experience when they marry and begin their own family (Young 1987: 140).

A quick survey of ABS social trends suggests both continuities and discontinuities with Young's findings twenty years on. Two of Young's key observations, that marriage as a reason for leaving home is declining, and that there is an increase in the proportion of young people returning home after first leaving (that is, an increase in circular migration), are relevant today. ABS data show that marriage rates for young people have declined considerably throughout the 1980s and that young people are much more likely to be in a defacto relationship (ABS Cat 4111.0, 1997: 1). Although there are no ABS data on

young people returning home, increased levels of youth unemployment, increases in temporary, part-time and casual work opportunities, increased participation in higher education and training, and the deferral of partnering, child-bearing and home-purchase, suggest that movements between the family home and independent living have stabilised or increased since Young's survey. However, in contrast to Young's earlier findings, the age at which young people leave home has increased over the past decade:

In 1982, 61% of young people lived with their parents. By 1990 this had increased to 68%, with slight declines in subsequent years (ABS Cat 4111.0, 1997: 19).

I have developed a more comprehensive critique of Young's approach elsewhere, which I am unable to go into today. Suffice to say that I see shortfalls in the assumptions of Young's family life stage approach, the survey method on which the reports findings are based and the politically neutral and decontextualised approach Young advocates. I note that Young's demographic life stage approach is not particularly useful in responding to the types of questions I pose above, and is the antithesis of my biographical and historical approach to the study of youth migration. This is not an argument against Young, but an argument for moving on.

Regional Youth Migration II: Biography and History

In undertaking an approach that emphasises personal biographies and history, I draw on the work of poststructuralists of many ilk, including feminists and postcolonialists, who have refused to seek sociological explanations through abstracted theory and decontextualised data, and who instead argue for close attention to personal narratives and biographies actualised within a matrix of historical struggles. As a student of sociology, my own intellectual position is formed within this poststructural moment, and also within a more extensive history of sociological and anthropological inquiry which dates back to the community ethnographers of the Chicago school in the 1920s. While this approach does not promise to generate a 'median reference young person' or universal laws about youth migration, it can generate a critique of dominant assumptions that plague migration debates, and it can provide an historically contextualised snapshot of the fracturing and diversifying experiences of regional young people.

In adopting an historical and biographical approach, I will examine over the next two years how youth migration has historically been problematized in governmental discourse, and I will conduct in-depth interviews with young people from two case study areas who have left, who are leaving or who have stayed in their regional home town. In preparation for this study, over the past six months, I have followed youth

migration debates in Tasmania through an examination of government reports in the 1920s, 1970s and the 1990s. I have also tracked regional youth voices through the media, in particular, the documentary transcripts of ABC Heywire entrants. In the findings that follow, I refer to all these case materials and specifically to Mark Peel's (1995) study of Elizabeth as an exemplar of this biographical and historical approach, and as an historical source of young peoples' experiences of living in (and leaving) an Australian manufacturing town over the past three decades.

Informed by documentary materials amounted to date, I return to my original concern with the popular belief: that 'if only we could curb population loss, preserve regional communities, and keep young people, than everything will be all right'. Through an examination of government reports, I show that community preservationist arguments are not new, but were being articulated by State authorities in the 1920s in Tasmania, and have reemerged in contemporary debates about Tasmanian youth migration, and in relation to Australia's regional youth exodus. I argue that this shared belief is based on three problematic assumptions:

- that communities should be preserved in their present form;
- that young people should be kept at home;
- that it is not just young people, but the 'best and the brightest' who are critical in securing an economically viable future.

Through an examination of youth documentaries, I show that, in contrast to community preservationist arguments:

- not all young people are happy with the present community formula;
- not all young people want to stay at home - some want to leave, some want to live between homes, and some want to return, but make a different life;
- that the focus on 'the best and the brightest' young people results in the marginalisation of others.

Moreover, I suggest that community preservation arguments do not form an adequate basis for an equitable response to the issue of escalating youth migration. Not only do such arguments serve state interest, rather than youth interests, but advocates of this approach tend to focus on young achievers, rather than addressing the needs of young people who are particularly disadvantaged by changing spatial and economic demands in this period of regional decline.

Keeping youth at home

Contemporary anxieties about young people leaving their regional homes are not new. Turning to the Tasmanian case, it is clear that 'keeping youth at home' has been a favoured strategy amongst State authorities who have had to deal with the persistent problem of youth population loss from Tasmania to the mainland. However, as my findings also show, this approach which has been revived in present debates about the regional youth exodus in Australia, are neither necessary or inevitable.

Population loss has come to represent somewhat of an institutionalised 'crisis' in Tasmanian politics. Tasmania has experienced net migration losses since the mid 19th century which commenced with the Victorian gold rush in the 1850s and the ending of convict transportation in 1853. As Hugo notes,

Tasmania has a long history of net migration losses to other States, a low level of immigration from overseas, and its natural growth rates are lower than any other Australian state (Hugo, 1996).

An examination of three major inquiries into the Tasmanian economy demonstrates the extent to which population loss has been perceived as a problem in state politics throughout the twentieth century. In 1926, Lockyer saw population loss as "the most significant feature" (1926: 11) of Tasmania's unsatisfactory performance. By the late 1970s not much had changed. Callaghan included outmigration in his summary of Tasmania's major recurrent problems, which in the 1970s included "unemployment, its continued outmigration of younger people and its industrial production and transport difficulties" (1977: 7). In 1997, Nixon in the opening of his report comments that "a lot of the problems facing the State have persisted for over 70 years" (Nixon 1997: v). Like his predecessors, Nixon links population decline to a 'dismal economic performance', and notes that "population growth over recent years has slowed to become virtually stagnant, and the future projection is for the population to decline" (Nixon 1997: v).

Within the three reports youth migration is presented foremost as a state economic problem. There is also uniform agreement that not only is migration a symptom of Tasmania's poor economic performance, but it also reduces the state's capacity to achieve stronger economic growth. Accordingly, youth migration is viewed as a threat to the state economy. It is a threat in the sense that it leads to a depletion of Tasmania's skilled labour and increases the financial tax burden on the remaining populace. As Lockyer in 1926 warned:

The State is losing its more valuable manhood, and if the drift be not soon arrested the result to the State may be readily appreciated (1926: 11).

He also specifies the potential costs:

It follows that with the present lessening population to share the cost of government the financial burden on the people remaining in the State is rapidly becoming almost unbearable (1926: 11).

In the 1990s, Nixon worries not just about Tasmania's manhood but the entire skilled labour force, presumably women included: "The skills base of the workforce is being depleted as skilled workers leave Tasmania to look for employment" (1997: vi).

Amongst these report, youth migration is perceived as a serious problem that, like the Tasmanian economy, needs to be managed. As Lockyer notes, the right economic formula and a watchful State eye "should lead to substantial progress, with a more contented as well as an increased population" (1926: 12).

In managing the problem of youth migration, Lockyer and Nixon come to a remarkably similar conclusion: that a reversal in the youth outmigration trend is required in order to abate the above economic threats. Both appeal to Tasmania's parochialism and the populace's deep commitment to the state in specifying their recommendations. Lockyer asks the Tasmanian people to maintain faith despite a failing state economy:

The loss of population, heavy taxation, and other vicissitudes naturally have occasioned much anxiety, but they certainly do not justify a loss of courage (1926: 12).

Nixon makes an equally emotional plea:

Where do Tasmanians want to be?They don't want their children to be forced to leave the State for work, and they also want worthwhile employment for themselves.

They don't want to have to join their children on the mainland (Nixon 1997: 7).

In Nixon's extract it is assumed that young Tasmanians and their parents don't want to leave their 'beautiful island' and forgo their 'excellent lifestyle' under any circumstances; instead they are forced to leave because of lack of employment.

While community preservation for Lockyer centres on preserving the state economy, Nixon's proposal to curb population outflow demonstrates a commitment to preserving the existing Tasmanian lifestyle.

Throughout my inquiries I have been attracted by the lifestyle enjoyed by Tasmanians. Nothing is ever very far away. In the morning I can be shopping in the city, while by early afternoon I can be casting a few flies in virtual wilderness surroundings. Heaven on earth. It's up to Government to protect this lifestyle (Nixon 1997: 7).

Whether it is retaining wealth or retaining lifestyle, the question of who benefits is equally valid. It's not clear to me how young, male workers would have financially benefited by Lockyer keeping them in the State in the 1920s, nor how a young woman from Geeveston in the 1990s might be advantaged by Nixon's attempts to preserve a

lifestyle which she had never directly experienced or desired in the first place. Exactly whose wealth and whose lifestyle are Lockyer and Nixon seeking to maintain?

Convinced of the importance of preserving Tasmania's lifestyle and retaining Tasmania's young people, Nixon recommends some creative strategies to induce young people to stay at home in the 1990s. In Recommendation 122, Nixon suggests that State Government provide discounted fares on the *Spirit of Tasmania* to touring rock bands (Nixon 1997: 202). Indeed, it seems the value of young people to the state government is rising. The government wants educated, talented young people who will help Tasmania adjust to the information technology revolution and push Tasmania further along the road to economic recovery. And they will do anything to keep them, to the point of subsidising international rock acts. As Nixon explains:

The lack of these (*entertainment*) outlets then works against young people staying in Tasmania. They seek the excitement offered in the mainland capitals (Nixon 1997: 202).

The prevalence of 'keeping youth at home' arguments in the 1920s and the 1990s suggest that such claims are versatile and have considerable political appeal. Recent commentators link these conservative tendencies with periods of accelerated change. For example, commentators have argued that globalising processes have coincided with a resurfacing of attempts to hold on to or strengthen localised identities, and to preserve local cultures and communities (Massey, 1994: 4). Hage (1997) argues that such strategies to control and fix the meaning of places are largely enacted by those with stake in the existing order. In relation to nationalism in Australia, he argues that those who currently benefit from the present 'white nation' order seek to control the home space by legislating for ethnic others, rather than allowing these others to have a real political voice.

Lockyer, Nixon and other community preservationists play a similar politics in relation to youth migration. These politicians view themselves as the principal 'managers' of the Tasmanian home and accordingly adopt a paternalistic stance by directing youth populations to stay at home. They see outmigration as a visible threat to the regional home and the present formula from which they benefit. However, their investment is rarely made explicit; instead they frame their arguments as necessary for the benefit of that vague concept 'community'. Both Lockyer and Nixon present their arguments as though they are commonsense and shared by the Tasmanian populace, without acknowledging that their arguments are largely based on State self-interest. Moreover, Lockyer and Nixon promote this socially conservative agenda as the only option

available, without fielding other possibilities. However, as Callaghan in his 1977 report demonstrates this type of scenario is not necessary or inevitable.

Like Lockyer and Nixon, Callaghan also saw that outmigration was hampering the State's ability to achieve stronger economic development. However, he recommends that Government action focus on attracting new residents from foreign immigration or interstate migration, rather than attempting to encourage people not to leave. He draws on a national report which sought to determine the reasons why Australians move between regions and between States. In contrast to both Lockyer, Nixon and the general flow of debate on the youth exodus from Tasmania, Callaghan is not fixated with community preservation, but envisages a mobile local population, and an influx of migrants for the benefit of Tasmania's economy.

In Callaghan's 1970s inquiry, he demonstrates an awareness of the problems with speaking from a State position, without recourse to young Tasmanians and their particular circumstances.

A climate of defensive State-rights sentiments and parochial loyalties can, however, lead to an excessive concern for the welfare of a State or region as a whole, at the expense of the wishes and needs of its constituent population (1977: 69).

He notes that while youth outmigration is an economic problem for Tasmanian state authorities, it also has social implications for young Tasmanians and their families:

For those with close relatives who have moved to the mainland... the impact would seem to be significant. Throughout the course of the inquiry many references were made to the social problems created by that 'stretch of water', and to the effects of family separation in particular (1977: 77)

Callaghan also acknowledges that the Tasmanian lifestyle which Nixon wants governments to preserve for all is not shared by everyone.

Young people, especially, leave in search of higher education and/or more urbanised life styles. The relaxed pace of Tasmania...does not suit all, and it is unrealistic to assume that it would (1977: 29).

The arguments outlined here in relation to the Tasmanian case are presented as way of warning in relation to current debates about the Australian regional youth exodus, which are dominated by emotional attachment to the bush and arguments about community preservation. In the Tasmanian case, Callaghan's approach represents an important counterpoint to conservative tendencies which plague migration debates, a conservatism which advances state interests without reference to the experiences of young people, and particularly of those disadvantaged by changing economic circumstances.

Desirable youth, undesirable others

State authorities and community managers in seeking to preserve and protect their backyard, also seek to manage populations in accordance with the new economic and spatial demands of globalisation. In regards to the regional youth exodus, the crisis isn't just about losing bodies, but about losing the 'best and the brightest'. While in the 1920s Lockyer was worrying about Tasmania's 'valuable manhood', in the 1990s information society, state authorities worry about losing their most educated and computer literate youth. Such narratives construct two types of young people: 'good hardworking qualified, skilled and work-ready young people', *desirable youth*; and 'bad lazy unqualified, low skilled and long term unemployed youth', *undesirable others*. Here the tendency is to blame young people for not achieving institutional success, rather than attending to the difficult issue of how structural inequalities prescribe those outcomes.

Youth studies have persistently pointed to the way young people are demonised and depicted as deviant and criminal within the popular media. Cohen (1972) pioneered this approach in his study of how the youth gangs 'Mods' and 'Rockers' became the subject of a collective moral panic over juvenile deviance. In a more recent and Australian-centred case of youth representation in the media, Davis (1997) also shows how young people are systematically discriminated against through their exclusion from decision making roles in the media industries, or through baby boomer elites trivialising or misrepresenting their views. The construction of negative and stereotypical images of youth is also the starting point for much contemporary academic youth research (White 1999). However, in somewhat of an about face, the young people featured in media commentary on the regional youth exodus tend to be angelicised, rather than demonised. They are 'outstanding', they are the 'cream of the crop', they are 'talented', they are the source of our society's 'creativity', they are 'energetic and innovative' and they are, as highlighted in the previous section, deeply committed to their regional home towns.

Amongst the stories I have followed in the media about the regional youth exodus, I select an article which most exemplifies the current construction of desirable youth. The article, from Tasmania's major newspaper, *The Mercury*, is entitled, 'The Peak of Success (But they just want to come home)' (Sharon Webb: 23/10/1999). Webb profiles the 'Intelligent Island's Lost Potential' which comprises four Tasmanians who achieved academic success in Hobart and then went on to obtain further academic success interstate and overseas before landing research postings in the United Kingdom. Within this article, the four researchers are viewed as representative of a wider loss of 'high-fliers' and 'young Einsteins', and part of a general 'brain drain' from Tasmania. As Webb laments "...Tasmanians long ago became resigned to young high-fliers leaving the island"

(23/10/99). The 'Einsteins' are also depicted as being deeply committed to their home town, evidenced in both their desire to come home or their regular trips back home. All four say they would:

love to be part of reversing the trend of an ageing, dwindling population. They want to live in Tasmania and bring up children here (23/10/99).

It is clear that it is not just the loss of young people from the state, but the loss of Tasmania's University educated elite, 'our brightest exports', which is at the heart of the State government's problems. As one of the 'achievers', suggests,

Now we need a new logo: Tasmania, the Young Einstein Isle, because probably our biggest export is young people educated at the University of Tasmania.

In youth migration debates, spokespeople overwhelmingly subscribe to the view that people leave because they are the 'best and the brightest', not that such young people are constructed as the 'best and brightest' because they leave. In propagating the view that the state is losing its most 'talented', Webb assumes being an 'achiever' is related to people's inherent intelligence. Are the four 'Einstein's' born 'achievers' or are they retrospectively recognised as 'achievers' because they made it in London? This angelicising of intelligent youth is not an isolated example, but repeats a popular piece of everyday wisdom that has been expressed by fellow students at my university, and expressed by objective demographers and concerned community sociologists. This quote from Australian community sociologist, Margaret Bowman, expresses this common sense logic:

Vulnerability to external forces breeds uncertainty, isolation begets fear of the city, and there is a constant awareness that the city acts as a magnet to some of the *most talented and ambitious young people* (Bowman 1981, xxvi-xxvii).

In interpreting ABS statistics of youth outmigration from Gippsland in regional Victoria, demographer Dr Bob Birrell explains:

Between 1991 and 1996...three times as many 15 to 24 year olds left Gippsland as arrived. In Victoria, one in four young people - "the best and brightest" says Birrell - left the country, mostly for Melbourne (Tim Colebatch, 25/1/2000, *The Age*).

Although these positive success stories are important in challenging the negative stereotypes of youth that dominate popular media, there is a darker side to the construction of desirable achievers - that is, the construction of undesirable others: the dole bludger, the drug abuser, and the single teenage mum. Mark Peel, in his study of Elizabeth, notes that the innocent objective argument of real essential winners and losers is deeply problematic, with a strange tendency for women, aborigines and working class kids living in Elizabeth to persistently fall into the undesirable category. Peel shows how such classifying work, distinguishing between good youth and bad youth,

insinuates itself into local institutions and working class family lives. He notes that there is a streaming of winners and losers within the education system:

It is not that the school-work transition has changed much since the 1960s . The same structuring of chances, with education 'working' for those who will leave the town and 'failing' those who will stay, remains largely in place (Peel 1995: 201).

While there is a tendency towards blaming individuals rather than a failing education system which does not work for isolated, regional youth, and a deregulated economy and diminishing welfare system that does not work for a significant proportion of youth regardless of geography, Peel avoids blaming Elizabeth's youth for their unemployable predicament and instead puts it down to a matter of bad circumstances and bad timing.

For the young people who stay in the 1990s, the problem also lies in what there is to inherit. The same people who used to take marginal jobs in hope of getting something better eventually, or who scored one of the coveted apprenticeships, now move into unemployment (Peel 1995: 201).

While sociologists have been closely monitoring the construction of undesirable youth since the 1960s largely under the auspices of the study of 'deviance', they have rarely examined how this experience is internalized by young people. While this avenue is generally pursued by psychologists in terms of depression, anxiety and self-esteem, Peel's personal biographical approach to the study of Elizabeth allows him to theorise the interiority of his own, and thereby other young Elizabethan lives. In the following passage Peel points to the potential and far reaching effects of negative constructions of youth minus the normal psycho babble of self-esteem:

Disillusioned with schools, losing hope, unable to get work even though having a job is still the way they define having a future, Elizabeth's young people all too readily accept themselves as 'part of the million unemployed', the shit-kickers on the 'shitheap'. They are frustrated and angry, upset by an older generation who won't see that the world has changed. Some are apathetic, some want to get out, all of them want a better life (Peel 1995: 202)

Contemporary youth experiences

So how does the rhetoric of politicians, bureaucrats, researchers and journalists compare with the experiences of young people from regional Australia? Ideally, this section would be based on the case study work I am intending to conduct over the coming year. Instead, I specify some preliminary impressions arising from radio documentaries produced by regional youth for an ABC youth radio competition in 1998 and 1999. The documentaries are loosely organised around the theme of being young and living in regional Australia, and they represent a mix of personal biography, investigative journalism, anthropologising, fiction, and fantasy.

'Home' is a recurring theme within these documentaries as the writers aim to narrate their home life to an urban-based broadcaster and, accordingly, the regional home town is persistently contrasted with an imagined big city. Talk about leaving home also features significantly in both the 1998 and 1999 documentaries. While some anticipate leaving their regional home, others speak from direct experience of living away from home. In regards to the leave or stay dilemma, some state a strong commitment to their home and their regional lifestyle long after they leave, while others are unsure about the foundations of their home: will their town become one of those feared 'regional ghost towns'? (Natalie Murphy, 16 years, 1999), will their parents have to sell the family farm? (Justin Smart, 22 years, 1998). In a telling example, Kate Figuerra and Elissa Nagle (both 18 years, 1999) list a sense of home, one that is assumedly secure and permanent, amongst a range of experiences and services which they suggest young people living in regional areas miss out on.

Ok um I'll have two secure childhoods with a safe walk to school included in that and um oh a quality education, a close student-teacher relationship, and a fun but clean social life. Um two part-time jobs within a 5km radius from home, familiarity with long distance travelling, a sense of home, and two open tickets to life thanks (Kate Figuerra and Elissa Nagle, 18 years, 1998).

A strange list of requests for two 18 year olds sitting in a McDonald's drive thru.

Like state authorities, young people are concerned about the considerable outflow of their friends and neighbours.

quote.....

However, in contrast to community preservationist arguments, regional youth are less taken by the idea of preserving the present community formula and being kept at home. Within their narratives, there is a discernible ambivalence about the current community formula in regional Australia. While for some the home is a place of security, warmth and belonging, others emphasise their personal experiences of exclusion and

marginalisation within a 'small-minded' town. These young writers also express ambivalence about the idea of staying at home, regardless of whether there are work opportunities or not. While some want to head to the global cities and never look back, others would prefer to have the opportunity of living between homes, or to create a new lifestyle that is founded on the best of both urban and regional worlds.

In contrast to those who advocate preserving the present regional community formula, there is a rich tradition of sociological inquiry that has insisted that the home site, whether it be a *domestic*, *regional* or *national*, is not necessarily a familiar, safe and desirable place; although it certainly might be experienced and imagined as such. For example, feminists have refigured the domestic home as a prison for women (Eisenstein 1979), community sociologists have refigured the home town as the domain of an elite-middle-class establishment (Wild 1981), and contemporary theorists have recognised the power of 'white nationalists' to position Others within 'national home imaginaries' (Hage 1998). Such writers emphasise that the comfortable sense of belonging and inclusion felt by people within their home or community, necessarily entails the exclusion and marginalisation of others.

In relation to regional youth, it appears that many aspects of the present regional community formula are not working for young people. Many talk about feeling like an alien and a freak, while denouncing the limited views of their peers compared with what they view on the internet and television. The following three examples demonstrate an awareness of the downside of living in a small, intimate and caring community.

Around here everybody knows everything about everyone else. Sadly this also means there is no room for individuality.....I stand here hoping that I won't have to be present on this oval much longer and that my future children won't have to stand on these footprints of mine and be worried about what people will think of them and how they are going to get out of this town (Angela Tollis, 17 years, 1999).

Unfortunately it is the closeness of the community which works against people who are a bit different. If you fit in than it is great, but if you don't then life can be really miserable (Fiona Baily, 17 years, 1998).

Being a conservative close-knit community and a place where people come to retire, it is harder for the youth to find a niche in their community (Rebecca Morgan, age not specified, 1998).

Previous community studies conducted in regional settings suggest that the experience of marginalisation is not random, but is targeted towards those who do not conform to

restrictive gender and sexual roles. For example, Dempsey (1990) and Poiner (1990) argue that women are systematically discriminated against and marginalised within patriarchal, rural communities and excluded from many traditional activities and sites such as the local council, the sporting field and the pub. The following dialogue between two fictive female characters gives the audience a chance to listen in on young women's experiences in a regional setting in the late 1990s. The writer, Fiona Bailey, depicts two archetypal 'regional women of the 1990s': Sharon, the unconventional, artistic, feminist who is frustrated with the passive roles which women in her town inherit; and Cheryl the conventional, popular girlfriend of Damien who accepts that being silent, fitting in with the 'drinkers' and getting married are her lot.

Cheryl: My Mum says you shouldn't be too opinionated around guys cos they don't like it. It threatens their masculinity or something. Damien thinks I look much prettier with my mouth closed.

Sharon: Doesn't that bother you Cheryl? If your boyfriend doesn't respect your opinions, or even allow you to have any, then why are you with him? (Fiona Baily, 17 years, 1998).

It is evident that these young women are making decisions not just about leaving or staying at home, but about the lifestyle and roles they wish to experience and create. While Cheryl will stay and be the partner to someone else, Sharon rejects her parents' and friends' regional lifestyle and will eventually move on.

Sharon: Don't you want to do anything else except get married Cheryl? It is a really big world out there, don't you want to explore it just a bit. Find out who Cheryl is and what Cheryl wants to do for herself? (Fiona Baily 17 years 1998).

In his study of Elizabeth, Peel makes a similar observation. He recognises that leaving home is not just a 'natural progression' into adulthood, but rather a decision about identity and lifestyle and, for some, a rejection of the limited roles which are available at home, regional, suburban or otherwise:

For others departure made more sense, or was indeed the only option; the immediate limits of the workers' city were perhaps starkest for them. For if a workers' city manhood or womanhood made no sense, or could not easily be accepted, there were precious few alternatives. Becoming a different kind of woman or man meant getting out (Peel 1995: 153).

In regional Australia there is considerable evidence to suggest that such restrictive gender roles, which predefine who is an acceptable regional bloke and who is an acceptable country girl, coexist with restrictive notions of sexuality (Wyn et al, 1997; Hogge, 1998; White, 1999). As Jane Darling writes:

If you've got a boyfriend, sweet, you are set, but no slutty sex or drunken behaviour or you're the carcass of the bitchin' community left to be unmercifully torn apart by the hungry scavengers for months on end (Jane Darling, age not specified, 1998). Although such restrictions impinge on all regional youth, gay and lesbian youth are the primary targets of this discrimination. They are particularly disadvantaged as they have to deal with the ambivalence towards youth generally, they suffer the social disadvantage of living in rural Australia, and they are oppressed within and excluded from their particular regional home site for disobeying a hyper-heterosexual regime. While Bailey tells the audience that not conforming to passive female roles can result in being labelled a lesbian, a fate even worse than being a girl, Tim McKenzie and Ben Westblade document their own feelings in relation to their discovery that homosexual men rely on a bush beat for sexual encounters and question why this situation persists:

I wondered why they were too ashamed to be homosexuals - it's not illegal and it's said to be ok on the tellie and that. Even my teachers at school say it's all right. But then again, people like John's Dad call them all sorts of names, make jokes about them and really give em a hard time (Tim McKenzie and Ben Westblade, both 16 years, 1999).

In a recent study in Tasmania, Hogge (1998) examines in a more systematic way how the 'coming out' experiences of gay and lesbian youth can result in heightened discrimination and abuse and, in turn, become the catalyst for young people leaving home for good.

While the above examples emphasise the downside of being young in regional Australia in the 1990s, contemporary youth research shows that escaping to the city does not necessarily mean that problems facing young people will disappear. Regional women face similar problems to their urban sisters: sexual discrimination, sexual harassment; domestic violence; youth unemployment; isolation and depression. In some of the documentaries, the writers mention negative experiences of life in their new urban homes:

I'm a country girl in an urban world and I hate it (Katherine Coutes, 16 years, 1998).

You crave freedom, freedom in a wide open space, away from the noise, crime and claustrophobia of the urban environment (Justin Smart 22 years 1998).

There are very few voices, amongst the regional youth transcripts, which envisage a simple physical journey from the family farm to the global metropolis. Both Eamonn Miller (18 years, 1999) and Alicia Gallagher (17 years, 1999) document the love-hate relationship they feel towards their respective regional homes. The plots they construct follow a similar format whereby the protagonist is desperate to leave home or

frustrated by having to return home, only to realise that her/his regional home life isn't so bad after all. After a trip to the mainland, Eamonn's alter-ego Renton tells his Mum "As soon as I get enough money together I'm going back - for good". Just as Alicia Gallagher despairs "Boy did John Denver get that one wrong. I say country roads take me out of here, NOW" Both depict their local community as small-minded and their home town as offering limited opportunities. However, by the close of their respective documentaries we are assured that there really is 'no place like home'. In a dramatic turnaround, Renton returns with new zeal ready to make Tasmania a better place, a place more like his desired mainland, and Alicia Gallagher, after awaking from her city dreaming, decides there are heaps of things she will miss about the family farm and concludes with Denver's nostalgic cry to "Take me home country road".

Turning to other transcripts, I find there are many other possibilities presented here whereby young people don't simply leave home, but are working out ways of living between their former regional home and new urban territories. For example, Justin Smart recognises the advantages of leaving, but finds himself drawn back to his home in Keith:

I was grateful for the opportunity to experience a different lifestyle, open my eyes and ears; however, soon I gravitated back to where my heart belonged (22 years 1998).

While many young people realise that they are destined to leave their former home town, they also speak of different strategies for reworking the present regional community formula . Some strategies include taking the benefits of the city back home, using technologies and communication to break down geographical distances, maintaining a network of friends who have also moved away from home, and taking favoured aspects of regional life with them into the concrete jungle.

Closing

Throughout this paper, I have attempted to unpack the common sense view that prevails in contemporary discussions about Australia's regional youth exodus: that 'if only 'we could curb population loss, preserve regional communities, and keep young people (often referred to as 'young achievers') at home then everything will be all right'. I have argued that this view is based on the assumption that communities should stay the same, young people should be kept at home and that the 'best and brightest' are required to secure a decent future for the home town. A closer look at the narratives of young people, however, shows that they see the issue differently. While they are frustrated that present climate of regional decline is closing off former options to stay at home, equally they are frustrated by the existing regional community formula.

Over the next year I will be conducting in-depth interviews and observations with young people from the North West Coast of Tasmania, and Gippsland in Victoria who have stayed at home, who have left permanently and who are living between homes. Following up the tendencies identified to date, I hope to provide a more youth-centred response to the issue of escalating regional youth migration, than is presently available in Australian policy. I envisage that such a response would entail addressing issues which face young people who are disadvantaged by changing economic circumstances, and who have limited cultural and material resources to cope with the difficult transition from home. This is in marked contrast to the dominant community preservationist response which speaks only to the 'Einsteins' who have, for the most part, already secured a comfortable place within the global village.

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