

My Life as an (Australian Sheep Farmer) Irish-Australian Poet

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Abstract

In my rural community, there has been a great dearth of support for my academic and creative pursuits, yet I love the country lifestyle and want to continue living in it. I achieved my PhD in 2020 with a prosimetric reconstruction of the female journey in Irish mythology and, while labouring on the research and writing, I was living a parallel life as a merino sheep farmer. In this paper, I present an autoethnographic reflection of the particular challenges faced by those of us who take on creative and academic pursuits in rural communities. It is tough in the bush, with limited resources for mental and physical health, let alone study and creativity. Those of us who undertake such pursuits seemingly unrelated to our 'real' lives have to be markedly resilient to survive. As a feminist, a poet, and a sheep farmer, I was able to find ways not only to survive but to flourish in the cracks and crevices in-between the rural/city divide, and the creative/academic divide. This reflection suggests there are significant socio-cultural gains to be made by according greater value to what rural creative scholars can offer that is very different to the mainstream. It is written as a hybrid combination of poetry, academic analysis, and creative prose. The style demonstrates the use of poetry as a creative research tool to both discover insights into the personal creative journey and convey these to an academic audience. A version of this article was presented at the CSU Creative Practices Crevice Communities symposium in 2022.

Introduction

I was hand-rearing seventeen merino lambs, all colour-coded with cat collars to tell me what formula they were on, and screaming at my husband that this was not what I wanted to be doing with my life. In that moment, I made the decision to return to post-grad study and undertake a creative PhD. I achieved my doctorate in 2020 with a feminist reconstruction of Irish mythology in prosimetric form. And I am still a merino sheep farmer raising orphaned lambs. There has been a great dearth of support and resources for my academic and creative pursuits while living in the country, yet I have persisted. And, as a feminist, a poet, and a sheep farmer, I have found a

way to flourish in the cracks and crevices that appear between the rural/city divide, and the creative/academic divide.

This autoethnographic reflection considers the particular challenges faced by those who take on creative and academic challenges in rural communities, and what can be gained by giving us a bit more space and looking at what we have to offer that is very different to the mainstream. In taking this position, I am claiming that my story offers something new to the body of qualitative research about the path to higher education in rural Australia and being a creative academic living in a rural environment. My study pathway, from nursing to welfare to writing and literature, has been an individual pursuit but now I realise that means not only that *I* am exceptional but am part of a wider story about the minority of country people who have aspirations for higher education and the even rarer people who actively follow through despite a myriad of obstacles not faced by those in an urban environment.

My recent employment with the Country Universities Centre has made me aware that my experience as a rural person who has persisted on the path to Higher Education makes me something of an anomaly. Especially when that academic journey has led increasingly towards poetry. These interests, in both academia and wordcraft, usually attract people to the city, yet I am determined to stay in the country. However, the journey has made me aware just how difficult it is in the bush, with severely limited resources for mental and physical health, let alone study and creativity. We have to be tough to survive. We do survive, we flourish, and our creativity has the particular subtleties, the colours of camouflage and shadow and light, the nuances of life lived in-between spaces.

Although this had been my journey, I only began to realise the unique nature of that experience when we were being inducted as learning skills advisors and advised about the obstacles to higher education in rural areas – they were talking about us, the inductees.¹

Only 24% of country people have a higher ed qualification.

Are they talking about me?

Only 18% of Wangaratta people have a higher ed qualification.

Are they talking about me?

Most rural people are conservative in their politics and values.

Are they talking about me?

They are talking about me.

They are talking about my family.

They are talking about my friends.

They are talking about my community.

¹ "Regional and Remote Higher Education: A Quick Guide." Research Paper Series, 2021–22, Parliament of Australia, 2022, https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp2122/Quick_Guides/RegionalRemoteHigherEducation#:~:text=Attainment%20by%20regionality,remote%20and%20very%20remote%20areas.

They have studied this community.
They have studied my friends.
They have studied my family.

They do not know my community.
They do not know my friends.
They do not know me.

I am “most country people.”
I may not have been born under a tree
but I climbed those branches
and sat among the leaves, listening,
to the voice of the wind
and the creatures in the bush.
I swam in the billabongs,
walked barefoot on dusty tracks,
grew up with the taste
of unpolluted air on my tongue,
a sky undiluted by artificial light,
washing the dirt from vegetables picked fresh,
washing blood from my hands for the meat we ate.

When they talk about
my family, my friends, my community,
they are talking about me
from the country.

But I am highly educated.
I am highly creative.
Conservative? In some things, not my politics, never that.
Better described as radical, activist, maybe a ratbag,
my mother would have you think so.
I am countrycreativeconservativeveryeducatedPhDwhatdoyoucallme?

I will
crawl back into the cracks,
hide undercover in this little community,
every now and then give off
a flash of glowing green, white, red, yellow, indigo,
standing out just for a moment,
then becoming again
like all the others.
Home. Home-sown. Home grown. Home.

We, the new LSAs, were all country people who had completed degrees and post-grad research; that’s why we had accepted employment to support others on their journey to higher ed. It began to dawn on me, during that induction process, that people were studying us as though we were

endangered animals in the wild. And making assessments of the challenges and obstacles and threats to our survival, which are not just about practical problems like access to resources but also about attitudes. And, of course, coming up with suggestions for what could be done to fix the problem. Without recognising, perhaps, that the ‘problem’ includes those characteristics that have enabled rural communities to survive as cohesive and self-sufficient entities.

I am defensive of rural people, have heard them/us denigrated in urban circles and even more in academic echelons. There is a deficit in an academic approach that seeks to deconstruct rural communities without recognising what is most valuable about them. Last year, the Creative Practice Circle at Charles Sturt University introduced me to the idea of the crevice communities, and it resonated with my experience and how I want to relate this to others.

Think of us as plants that grow in crevices, in obscure places, hidden, with little nutrition, nothing to hold onto except air and a bit of granite, scatterings of soil low in nutrients, high acidity that would burn away more cultivated plants that demand hydration and depth. Plants that grow in crevices survive on very little, not enough to make a great splash or get noticed or be arranged in displays in florist shops to be sold in bouquets and wreathes. Plants that grow in crevices know how to cling on, know how to survive, and part of that is not being flashy, not being seen, because you do not want anyone to pluck you away. So soft subtle colourings, camouflaged amongst the others, lichens and mosses and tiny, tiny flowers. Not really of any great value, any significance, little worlds supporting little creatures that would hardly be missed if they moved to extinction.

Crevice communities are incredibly interdependent, both fragile and determinedly resilient and adaptive. How could I emerge as anything other than creative? It is both my methodology and my product, what I take away, examine forensically and creatively, and then contribute. I am captured by the idea of the crevice community and the realisation that I have, perhaps, found a way to describe how I both belong and do not belong, am the same am different, push my way in and get shoved out and slide into another place and settle in. For a while. Until it becomes too hot and dry, and I crumble away, or it becomes too wet and I get overcome with the fresh growth, or too cold and I disappear under the layers of ice. I do not transplant well but I will cling to whatever gravel I can find and take what nourishment I need and if I find my way back to my own community, I will thrive once more.

We in the country have something we can teach the whole world of survival and tenacity and making the most of every little bit that comes your way. What is more, we deepen the crevices, expand, and self-propagate until, eventually, that cliff face crumbles and the rock breaks apart and the landscape is changed to become more accommodating and allow greater plants to find a place to take root and live amongst us. But you cannot force yourself upon us, you must wait until we make room and welcome you in, or you will not thrive and will not survive and will return to where you came from talking about how closed and small-minded that place was.

Many of the attitudes that contribute to the country-city divide are ingrained in me, I can feel their instinctual rising up in response to different situations. Conservatism in the country is not primarily, I suspect, because we are inherently conservative, but because we must cooperate with our neighbours and get along simply to survive. We cannot exist solely as individuals.

Anonymity is not the luxury that it is in urban environments, where an individual can more easily hold an autonomous existence.

I went looking for research into the rural-city divide, anything on linguistics, social interaction, value systems, prejudices. I found that rural communities were universally regarded as inherently conservative and largely homogenous in nature, lacking the cultural and linguistic diversity found in urban centres. Conservatism in relation to gender roles drew considerable attention, measured as uniformly more entrenched in rural communities. A study by Tyler and Fairbrother reinforces the derogatory stereotypes about masculinity as entrenched in a frontier mentality, risk-taking behaviour and gender divisions of labour and response to disasters.² A more nuanced consideration is given by Christine Eriksen and colleagues who write that “The term hegemony is not without its problems, however, as it often evokes an overly monolithic conception of domination by men that disguises the intimate inner workings of culturally and historically distinct arrangements between women and men.”³ These arrangements are potentially part of the social cohesion considered by McManus and his colleagues in their study into rural community and rural resilience.⁴

Even the term, ‘rural’ has many different meanings but is perhaps best understood in this context as an ideology that is about being connected to community and shared experiences, forming an identification with place, seeing the self as different to the urban. Jean Ross recognizes that within rural communities there is a distinctive socio-cultural development of personality and characteristics that value mateship, survival, toughness, and resilience.⁵ While these are generally viewed as masculinities, I would argue that they are equally characteristic of country women, though this has gone unacknowledged or unexplored by researchers.

The *World Happiness Report 2020* anticipated that there would be a greater sense of well-being with increased urbanization but found that education and accessibility were the biggest indicators for happiness in urban settings. For those with lower education, inequality was exacerbated in urban settings, accompanied by the concomitant problems of higher crime rates, longer commutes, and greater challenges with housing affordability. Unsurprisingly, while urban living could afford a higher standard of living in developing countries, in developed countries such as Australia, there were higher rates of happiness in rural living. In considering whether happiness was related to place or person-related, it emerged that community connection was the most important factor towards happiness.⁶ This was confirmed by Anton and Lawrence, who found that place attachment grew from community participation and shared experiences during disasters. Women were found to form stronger attachments to place, and it was considered that

² Tyler, Meagan, and Peter Fairbrother. "Bushfires Are ‘Men's Business’: The Importance of Gender and Rural Hegemonic Masculinity." *Journal of Rural Studies* 30 (2013): 110-19.

³ Eriksen, Christine, Nicholas Gill, and Lesley Head. "The Gendered Dimensions of Bushfire in Changing Rural Landscapes in Australia." *Journal of Rural Studies* 26, no. 4 (2010): 332-42 (334).
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2010.06.001>.

⁴ McManus, Phil, Jim Walmsley, Neil Argent, Scott Baum, Lisa Bourke, John Martin, Bill Pritchard, and Tony Sorensen. "Rural Community and Rural Resilience: What Is Important to Farmers in Keeping Their Country Towns Alive?". *Journal of Rural Studies* 28, no. 1 (2012): 20-29.

⁵ Ross, Jean. *Rural Nursing: Aspects of Practice*. Rural Health Opportunities, 2008.

⁶ Burger, Martijn J., Philip S. Morrison, Martijn Hendriks, and Marloes M. Hoogerbrugge. "Urban-Rural Happiness Differentials across the World." Chap. 4 In *World Happiness Report 2020*, 68-94. New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2020.

this might perhaps arise because of their greater social connection within communities.⁷ This was, of course, variable, with more remote rural locations having very limited service provision because of geographical isolation, and that this had particular impacts on indigenous populations that were more concentrated in isolated localities.⁸

I was particularly interested in the sociolinguistics of rural and urban modes of communication, but this research was largely focused on dialectical differences, which both serve to exhibit local identity while also emphasises differences between rural and urban populations. Gordon noted, in his study, the tendency to stereotype rural communities and for those in urban centres to use pejorative terms such as 'hick', 'redneck', 'hillbilly' in the US example and similar terms elsewhere.⁹

There was this limited research into linguistics as indicative of identity and belonging, but not on modes of communication, idioms of speech, extending beyond dialect to the physical communication such as eye contact, or avoiding the direct gaze, the importance of a good handshake, respecting personal space, physical stance, body language, and protocols of speech. These nuances of rural communication are, perhaps unconsciously, integrated in the nature of those who grow up in the country but, as has been related to me anecdotally, seem so foreign to new arrivals.

So, into this under-researched area, I offer my experience and analysis as someone raised in rural communities who, after living in urban environments both nationally and internationally, has chosen to entrench myself in the former. From my own observations, I argue that there are differences that stem from a rural experience that is community-focused rather than individualistic. This leads to different modes of communication. There is less privacy, more exposure, the grapevine both serves to make sure that needs are met while it also pressurizes people to not be seen as different. Therefore, when people meet up, they talk firstly about the weather then how you are, what is going on in family and your community, and then on to business. It may be called gossip, but these are the threads that hold a community together.

I have noticed that those from an urban background tend to be more reticent about personal matters, will talk about business rather than divulge personal information. What may be a survival mechanism for living in close quarters with too many people in an urban environment where you cannot all be connected, and do not want to be, can be seen by rural people as stand-offish, an urban snobbishness, an unwillingness to share personal lives and become part of the community. Paradoxically, while rural people may seem more open, there is a greater pressure towards all being the same, not stepping above anyone else, whereas in the city there are so many varied ideas and people and resources that difference is more readily embraced.

Into this space, higher education and creativity, by their nature, introduce new ideas that can be perceived as threatening to social conformity and functionality. Some of my community

⁷ Anton, Charis E, and Carmen Lawrence. "Home Is Where the Heart Is: The Effect of Place of Residence on Place Attachment and Community Participation." *Journal of environmental psychology* 40 (2014): 451-61.

⁸ Tonts, Matthew, and Ann-Claire Larsen. "Rural Disadvantage in Australia: A Human Rights Perspective." *Geography* 87, no. 2 (2002): 132-41. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/stable/40573668>.

⁹ Gordon, Matthew J. "Language Variation and Change in Rural Communities." *Annual Review of Linguistics* 5 (2019): 435-53 (438).

members are mildly impressed that I am have attained a PhD but poetry and Irish mythology are not regarded as having any utility in managing resources, health and welfare, education, or business operations, so it is considered pure indulgence, even something that may pose further danger by encouraging others to consider alternative pathways.

Yet it is what has enabled me to survive in the country. I live on a sheep farm, and though my husband works off-farm to bring in an income stream, the farm is a business or else it becomes just a very expensive and exhausting hobby. Outside of the drought years, we can manage a small profit. There is no value attached to the work hours that we put in.

Which returns me to that pivotal moment when I was hand-rearing seventeen lambs colour-coded with cat collars for different formulas and feeding regimes and medical interventions, and when I say seventeen that means seventeen had survived. Nine lambs I was tenderly rearing seemed to be surviving – until they died. Then there were the ones that died in the paddock before any rescue attempts, and not counting the ones that died in the first hour or first day or first couple of days of rescue, and not counting the ones lost to foxes and eagles (yes, I have seen this). No wonder I was screaming at my husband that this was not what I wanted to be doing with my life. I wanted to write, I wanted to research, I wanted to dive into mythology, I wanted to think about how women are represented in story, I wanted to think. Be creative. Study. Research. This was about soul-survival.

But I did not want to leave home. I did not want to leave my rocks and my hills and my swimming holes and my dogs and ... my lambs. I wanted to wake up to the birds not the traffic. I wanted more books but not too many people. I wanted both worlds. I wanted to show that it was possible to have both worlds even though my husband was the only one in my community who supported my endeavours.

I grafted myself onto the academic world only to find that I did not wholly fit there either, try as I might. Parts of me almost belonged but there were parts of me I held back because the skies close in among the city buildings and the taste of rainwater is so much sweeter than what comes out of the treated reservoirs. So, after all those years of hard academic slog, I have retreated to my crevices where I can hide and grow strong again. And ask, am I an aberration, an anomaly, or are there others out there like me? Has what I have done made any difference?

My mother is wary of my influencing others to pursue goals above what are needed to maintain a happy home. I might cause them to be dissatisfied, attain to something different, and the structures break down. I have transgressed the codes of pragmatic expectations. That is not generally valued.

Attitudes are changing, I think, but mostly in the conventional fields of health, welfare, education, agriculture, technology. Just as there was the expectation that I should take on study directly connected to the health of the community rather than my own interests, in the academic environment there was the perpetuation of the belief that I was limiting myself by remaining rural, that I should move to the city if I wanted to make it. I have limited my opportunities by remaining in the country, and I have also allowed myself to carve out the life that I want.

And I have fed my soul and stood up for my community and the richness it gives me. I am part of the community, of the whole, one of the eccentrics that needs to be treated carefully less I am too disruptive, but it is still where I belong.

It becomes about how I frame the narrative of my journey – from within the community or outside of it – how I tell the story that either diminishes my rural roots or pays them due respect – how my journey becomes one of dismantling beliefs about the country, about women, about creative artists, about who I am and if that is determinate or in constant flux between different identities, sheep farmer or poet or academic. Or/. Sheep farmer AND poet AND academic.

O'Shea and Stone describe women who return to academic study later in life as heroic and map their journey on the Hero's Journey as outlined by Joseph Campbell, noting that the process is both personally challenging and transformative.¹⁰ I find that the hero's journey is a useful metaphor for understanding my own travels and travails. I have left my community, faced my darkness, defeated my foes, attained my goal. But the hero must return, sometimes to a world where those in the community do not understand how they are changed. The hero returns bearing a boon, a trophy, an elixir for healing, which may be gratefully accepted or may be regarded as a poisoned chalice. Then that moment of return passes and life resumes.

Post-PhD

After submitting my thesis,
as a pdf emailed at 3.44pm,
it was time to take the dogs for a walk,
and then my husband was home from work,
so we took a brief recess
for chocolate and whiskey
before heading out to bury the dead sheep
while there was still daylight enough,
checked the horses while we were there
because two should be in foal,
but weren't showing yet.

Then, in the dimming even-light,
we replanted the geranium
dug out by my recalcitrant dog,
put a tree guard around it,
then I got showered to wash off
the geranium-infused odours of dead sheep.

We microwaved the leftovers from the night before,
then I gathered champagne and Tim-Tams,
logged on to the Facebook room
so friends could drop in to congratulate me

¹⁰ O'Shea, Sarah, and Cathy Stone. "The Hero's Journey: Stories of Women Returning to Education." *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education* 5, no. 1 (March 2014): 79-91.

and I could tell them
how my life had changed
in so very many ways.

We keep shearing, breeding, lambing. I was changed but my world was not. Here lies the dissatisfaction that can be regarded as destabilising, and this is the point at which the hero may depart instead for another journey.

I had undertaken several courses of study, some completed some uncompleted, until my path became more and more focused upon my writing and my poetry. People in my community kept asking where this PhD would get me, what I would do after. I would keep answering that for these years, this was my work. Paid work because I had a scholarship. I was not doing a course, I was researching and writing and contributing to the body of creative academic knowledge. Which made even less sense to them.

So, what does that mean? I cannot measure how my research and writing have affected the world. I just know that it has. I have shifted the way some people think. I have inspired others. How is that measurable for its effect upon the world generally? And I will continue to use poetry as an exploratory tool to excavate what lies beneath the prosaic, and I will write about what I unearth through that creative process, and I will continue to ask questions that disturb the foundations, and to hide in the crevices to nurture my creativity and find a sense of belonging.

There is an arrogance in the autoethnographer to feel their experience and their reflection upon that experience, and their reflexive capacity to reflect upon the way they reflect, has something to offer more than what quantitative research might supply. What my story offers is the demonstration that none of us are determined or well-described by the collection of quantitative data; we cannot be measured by units that will miss what is living and evolving in those cracks and crevices that can speak to universal needs. Because we are not conservative uneducated, homogenous unless you lump us all together as such; we are intricate and complicated and resilient and innovative and brave and tenacious and beautiful.

We are individuals in relationship with communities within communities, and even those of us hidden away in cracks and crevices might have something to say about how to survive and flourish in the most inhospitable of environments and create a new understanding of the interconnection between tiny, tiny plants and the giants of the dominant social ecology.