Urban-rural mobility during COVID-19: the growth of 'cottagecore' in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand

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Abstract

In Australia, COVID-19's impacts on everyday urban life may have provoked interest in urban-rural migration, raising important questions about (im)mobility and environmental justice in the region as a whole.

Theme

Mobility Events

Keywords

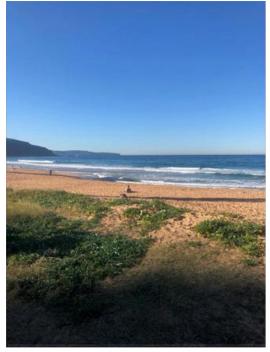Urban, city, rural, Australia, New Zealand, cottagecore, pandemic, lifestyle, inequality, environmental justice

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Globally, urban areas have emerged as 'hotspots' of the COVID-19 pandemic.[2] Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand are among the world's most urbanised countries: 86% of Australia's total population lives in urban areas,[3] most of them in the populous eastern cities of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Meanwhile, 87% of Aotearoa-New Zealand's population lives within its urban centres:[4] Auckland, on the country's North Island, is the most populous city, followed by South Island's Christchurch. In both countries, most cases of COVID-19 have been detected as 'clusters'[5] within densely populated urban areas, which have been disproportionately impacted by lockdown and social distancing measures.

In Australia, the immobilities produced by these restrictions have spurred emergent mobilities, particularly those that resemble 'ex-urbanisation,' or urban-rural migration.[6] These migrations are thought to be tied to a disillusionment with urban life, that has only deepened during the pandemic.[7] This trend is more broadly reflected within the global rise of 'cottagecore,' an aesthetic that romanticises a rural idyll, and that is thought to point to wider cynicism towards urbanity.[8]

The coast of Australia (Source: author)

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[2]United Nations. 2020. Policy Brief: COVID-19 in an Urban World.

[3]United Nations Population Division. World Urbanization Prospects: 2018 Revision.

[4]Ibid.

[5] Boseley, Matilda. 2020. Everything we know about Melbourne's COVID-19 clusters. The Guardian. 9 July 2020. Available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jul/09/coronavirus-victoria-melbourne-covid-19-cases-clusters-hotspot-suburbs-hard-lockdown-family-outbreak-towers-flemington-keilor-downs-albanvale-hallam-coburg-brimbank-wollert-ascot-vale-maribyrnong-fawkner-tullamarine-truganina. Last accessed 22 December 2020
Nguyen, Kevin and Sarah Thomas. 2020. Sydney's northern beaches coronavirus cluster grows to 90 after eight new infections recorded. ABC News. 22 December 2020. Available online at: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-12-22/sydney-nsw-northern-beaches-coronavirus-cluster-grows-to-90/13006258.
Roy, Eleanor Ainge. 2020 Auckland Covid cluster caused by quarantine breach, says Winston Peters. The Guardian. 13 August 2020. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

[6]Connell, John and Phil McManus. 2011. Rural Revival? Place Marketing, Tree Change and Regional Migration in Australia. Routledge: London and New York.

[7]Delaney, Brigid. 2020. The real life…or just fantasy? How coronavirus sparked a cottagecore revolution. The Guardian, 30 May 2020. Available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/may/31/the-real-life-or-just-fantasy-how-coronavirus-sparked-a-cottagecore-revolution. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

[8]Ibid.

Decamping from the city

In some cases, mobility restrictions in urban centres in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have spurred out-migrations from cities. Guardian journalist Brigid Delaney outlines the experiences of several formerly city-dwelling couples for whom the pandemic has prompted a relocation to regional Australia.[9] Several of her subjects question the necessity of living in the city during the pandemic, given the closure of workplaces and transition to working from home. An article by journalist Calla Wahlquist reiterates many of the same reasons: one of her subjects, who moved from Melbourne to Torquay on the cusp of the city's second lockdown, explains, "what I used to love about the city I no longer use".[10] These subjects observe that many of the advantages of city life, including social and cultural attractions, have disappeared since March. However, Delaney's and Wahlquist's subjects further identify 'push' and 'pull' factors that existed long before the pandemic, including the city's exponentially high housing prices, or the desire to be surrounded by nature, or to know one's neighbours. Connell and McManus dub this sentiment "countrymindedness", or the idea that rural, rather than urban, produce people of good character.[11] For those already weary of urban life, the pandemic appears to have provided a final incentive to depart.

Each of these factors influenced Michael's decision to relocate with his partner from Sydney to the south coast of NSW in May. He tells me that while he and his partner had individually considered a regional move for several years, COVID-19, and various additional factors, provided an additional push. During the first lockdown, the rented house they shared in inner-city Sydney was sold, and they were asked to move. As both Michael and his partner had started working from home during lockdown, they felt there was little point in staying in the city in the absence of many economic or social attractions. Michael cites many positives to the move, including their proximity to the beach, having more space at home, and spending far less on rent. They have also met others who have made similar transitions, and who have viewed the pandemic as a final 'push' towards a move they have long wanted to try.

The rise of cottagecore

The disillusionment with urban life is further illustrated through the sharp global growth in interest in the 'cottagecore' phenomenon – a visual aesthetic popularised on social media, that romanticises a rural lifestyle, inspiring trends in fashion, food and recreation[12] — since March. Although the term was coined on social media platform Tumblr in 2018, cottagecore has experienced a sharp uptick in interest during 2020, which is largely attributed to a collective need for escapist fantasies under lockdown.[13]

[9]Ibid.

[10]Wahlquist, Calla. 2020. The Covid exodus from the city: 'That's it, I'm calling the real estate agent'. *The Guardian,* 21 August 2020. Available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/aug/22/the-covid-exodus-from-the-city-thats-it-im-calling-the-real-estate-agent. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

[11]Connell, John and Phil McManus. 2011. *Rural Revival? Place Marketing, Tree Change and Regional Migration in Australia*. Routledge: London and New York: 19

[12]Bowman, Emma. 2020. The Escapist Land of 'Cottagecore', From Marie Antoinette to Taylor Swift. *NPR.* 9 August 2020. Available online at: https://www.npr.org/2020/08/09/900498227/the-escapist-land-of-cottagecore-from-marie-antoinette-to-taylor-swift. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

[13]Ibid; Delaney 2020; Hall, A. 2020. 'Why is 'cottagecore' booming? Because being outside is now the ultimate taboo'. *The Guardian,* 15 April 2020. Available online at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/15/why-is-cottagecore-booming-because-being-outside-is-now-the-ultimate-taboo. Last accessed 22 December 2020

Contextualising de-urbanisation: seachange and treechange

Still, neither the sentiment behind 'cottagecore,' nor its apparent instigation of urban-rural migration, are novel phenomena. In Australia, the last decades of the 20th century saw increasing numbers of Australians migrating away from the metropolis and towards rural and country areas.[14] These migrations, popularly known as 'seachange' or 'treechange' – depending on whether the individuals in question chose to live near the beach, or the rural interior – have been attributed to Australians' changing cultural values, including an emphasis on lifestyle and amenity.[15] Similar migrations have been observed in other parts of the world, often provoked by "an idealised construction of a mythical rural lifestyle".[16] However, Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand are renowned for their natural environments – their ecology and availability of open space were, after all, key attractions for settler-colonists[17] — and relocating to the countryside has additional historical, political and emotive salience – within their national imaginaries.

Differentiated mobilities

The mobilities discussed here are predominately lifestyle migrations. Wahlquist notes that "large sections of the community…haven't the luxury of choosing a greener prospect."[18] While successful lifestyle migrants generally have accumulated wealth and assets with which to start their new lives,[19] those with lower incomes are unlikely to have the same resources. Connell and McManus therefore recognise that 'ex-urbanisation' migrations are more likely to involve affluent former citysiders, seeking out a "more pleasant environment" within proximity to cities.[20] During the pandemic, this may involve individuals who have the capacity to work from home.

   Still, it not only the affluent who move to the country, and those with lower incomes may also move to find work or cheap housing[21] — albeit, perhaps with a lesser degree of choice. Given the devastating economic impacts of COVID-19, it is worth considering that greater numbers may also move out of the city for pragmatic, rather than lifestyle, considerations.

Meanwhile, cottagecore's critics have highlighted its exclusionary nature, illustrated through its predominantly white aesthetic.[22] This erasure echoes marginalised peoples' relationship to their physical environment in many parts of the world. Environmental justice activists have long reminded us that having access to outside space has several critical benefits for our mental and physical health, and that it

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[14]Costello, Lauren. 2007. Going Bush: the Implications of Urban-Rural Migration. *Geographical Research* 45(1): 85-94.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Mitchell, Clare J.A, Trudi E. Bunting and Maria Piccioni. 2004. Visual artists: counter-urbanites in the Canadian countryside? *The Canadian Geographer* 48: 152-167 in Costello 2007: 87.

[17]Connell et al. 2011.

[18]Wahlquist 2020.

[19]Heanue, Siobhan and Craig Fitzsimmons. 2020. Moving back to the country good for business – if you're in the right one. *ABC News*. 1 July 2020. Available online at. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-01/covid19-tree-change-sees-regional-revival-but-there-are-risks/12402268. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

[20]Connell et al. 2011: 27.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Kapur, Bethan. 2020. Is cottagecore a colonialist fantasy? *i-D*. 24 September 2020. Available online at: https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/ep4egw/is-cottagecore-a-colonialist-fantasy. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

Shipin, S. 2020. 5 Black Women on Embracing Cottagecore as an Act of Rebellion. *Glamour*. 18 September 2020. Available online at: https://www.glamour.com/story/black-women-on-cottagecore. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

is not only the privileged who should have access to healthy outdoor environments.[23] Still, this is not a reality for many people. Most Australian cities have "contaminated industrial areas" that neighbour areas populated by working-class, immigrant, Indigenous or homeless populations.[24] Research in Aotearoa-New Zealand further reveals that outdoor pollution levels are higher in neighbourhoods with higher numbers of low income households, or that are otherwise deprived.[25] While disadvantaged and marginalised urban communities might have fewer opportunities to move to the countryside, they are also far more likely to be deprived of access to outdoor space while in the city.

The future of de-urbanisation

While some urban-rural migration might have occurred over the course of the pandemic, it is uncertain whether these will constitute more permanent migrations. Michael does not anticipate permanently leaving the city with his partner. While this was never their original intention, there have also been some challenges to the move: there are less social attractions outside the city, and they do not have so many friends close by. While he and his partner have enjoyed the opportunity to trial a 'seachange', they plan to move back to the city in another six months, when they expect city life will have further normalised. Historically, similar migrations around the world, whether provoked by plague, or by war, have been mostly temporary. However, Wahlquist notes that some regional realtors in Northern NSW have been contacted by Australians returning from overseas, and seeking to buy their permanent homes in the area.[26] This trend towards permanency is reminiscent of an earlier one: in the 1970s, several Australian coastal towns, including Byron Bay, Noosa and Kiama, underwent rapid development due to significant urban-rural lifestyle migration.[27] Although many lifestyle migrations are temporary, we may certainly again see a rise in similar, longer-term movements.

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[23]Byrne, Jason. 2012. A healthy environment shouldn't just be for the rich. *The Conversation.* 26 November 2012. Available online at: https://theconversation.com/a-healthy-environment-shouldnt-just-be-for-the-rich-10439. Last accessed 22 December 2020.
[24]Ibid.
[25]Pearce, Jamie and Simon Kingham. 2008. 'Environmental inequalities in New Zealand: A national study of air pollution and environmental justice'. *Geoforum* 39(2): 980-993.
[26]Wahlquist 2020.
[27]Connell et al. 2011: 26