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## **Rural Space and the Rural Imaginary**

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The rural refers both to a spatial category, defined in terms of material features such as population density, and to a social imaginary incorporating idealized understandings of history, nature, and authenticity. The lived experience and cultural production of people living in rural areas are therefore products of material realities, while at the same time, it is a representation of an imagined rural identity. Globalization, communication technologies, and the redistribution of agricultural economies have radically redefined the rural–urban interface and the boundaries thereof.

Critical perspectives in rural geography provide a framework for understanding the material realities of rural space that shape musical practices across cultures, while at the same time understanding rural identity as a product of implicit mythologies about authenticity and cultural heritage. This entry first introduces the study of rural geography, followed by a discussion of music in relation to place and how such study has paralleled trends in geography and sociology. It concludes with an examination of how the rural imaginary has shaped the creation, practice, research, and documentation of music.

## Rural Geography

The explicit study of rurality is relatively recent in geography. Prior to the 1930s, rural geography was not a distinct subfield, but human geography in general tended to focus on rural areas as sites where the dynamic relationships between human society and its environmental surroundings could be more easily observed. Carl O. Sauer, for example, developed his theories on the history of agriculture by studying the imprint of human society on the rural landscapes of Mexico and Central America. Ethnographies of the 19th and early 20th centuries also demonstrated a preference for rural populations because of their relative isolation from the cosmopolitan culture of urban centers.

In the 1930s, expansive policies regarding agriculture and land use across the industrialized countries of North America and Europe led to the development of subfields specifically focused on rural geography. In the United States, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration in 1933 and the Rural Electrification Administration in 1936 were programs within Roosevelt's New Deal that radically transformed rural life. In the United Kingdom, the first Land Utilisation Survey began in 1933 and led to a raft of new policies governing development in rural areas. An increased academic focus on rural society and agricultural systems followed suit with the formation of the Rural Sociological Society in the United States in 1937. At around the same time, the field of rural geography also emerged within the Soviet Union, with S. A. Kovalev's redefinition of rural economies in the 1940s.

By the 1970s, scholars in the fields of rural geography, sociology, and history began to challenge certain assumptions about the rural, especially portrayals of rural life as a historical artifact where past practices and customs are maintained. Raymond Williams's 1973 book *The Country and The City* critiques nostalgic representations of the countryside as offering a simpler, Edenic past, identifying this as a recurring image in English literature dating back to the 16th century, that erases the complex power dynamics of rural social formations and their role in modernization and capitalism. Incorporating poststructuralist perspectives, scholars in rural geography have been increasingly critical of frameworks that identify rural economies and cultures as independent or distinct from their cosmopolitan counterparts.

Rural geography has focused increasingly on the interpenetration of rural and urban space, the relationship between idealized representations of the rural (e.g., the rural idyll) and lived realities, and the transformation of rural space in response to globalization, technology, and economic change. The 1997 collection *Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalisation, and Rurality*, edited by Paul Cloke and Jo Little, delves into the construction of the rural as both a real and imagined space and discusses about those groups that are marginalized by these normative representations of rural culture. Contemporary analyses of rurality strive to account for distinct material features of rural spaces, relevant cultural representations and images of the rural, and the actual lived experiences of the diverse populations occupying those spaces. Since 1985, *The Journal*

of *Rural Studies* has housed current thinking within these discourses.

## Music and Rural Space

References to the rural within the study of music and its relationship to place and society have paralleled these trends in geography and sociology. Bruno Nettl's *Folk and Traditional Music of the Western Continents*, for example, juxtaposes folk music with "urban, professionalized, cultivated classical music," tacitly identifying folk music with the rural without explicitly defining the features of the rural. More recent scholarship deals critically with the rural as both a spatial category defined by certain material features and as a normative imagined geography.

### Material Features of the Rural and Their Impact on Rural Musics

Most countries and international bodies define urban or metropolitan areas in terms of population density and total population and designate the remaining areas as *rural*. Some official definitions have also incorporated the presence of an agricultural economy. India, for example, requires at least 25% of the male working population be engaged in agricultural pursuits for an area to be designated as rural.

The low population density of rural areas corresponds to the spatial practices of rural communities. The arrangement of people and infrastructure within the landscape relates to the productive use of this land for activities such as agriculture, hunting, or logging. Increasingly, patterns of rural land use take into account the value of the land in tourist economies as well as resource economies.

Tim Ingold has used the term *taskscape* to describe the way that land is integrated into rural life, connecting spatial organization (e.g., the arrangement of fields, woodland, roads, and structures) with temporal patterns (e.g., seasonal patterns, the cycles of planting and harvest). Within this taskscape, villages exist as a decentralized network of hubs, each supporting the self-sufficiency of the surrounding rural community while also providing an interface between rural and urban sectors.

Areas with low population density have less combined resources to support musical economies, wherein music is purchased as a luxury commodity or leisure activity. This is compounded by the fact that many characteristic forms of rural employment, such as farming, logging, mining, and fishing, are labor-intensive and not highly profitable. Musical activity in rural areas therefore occurs most often as a part of social gatherings, such as ceremonies, festivals, and other community events that foster group coherence, and contains participatory elements either in the music itself or in its association with ceremony or social dance.

Thomas Turino's 2008 work *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* theorizes the distinction between participatory and presentational music. Turino draws upon a comparison between the participatory musical practices of the Shona people in the rural Murehwa district and the norms of concert presentation that were introduced by colonial mission schools and took root in the cosmopolitan culture of an urbanized middle class. In a very different context, the participatory approach can be observed in shape note singing, which emerged in the rural northeastern United States in 1801 and has continued in the rural southern states. In this choral tradition, the sections of the choir sit facing each other, leaving no room for a passive audience. Participatory music supports the presence of varied levels of expertise and ability and should not be understood as simplistic or undeveloped. Instead, it connotes a common understanding of music as a shared activity rather than an object of observation and analysis.

Given the limited resources of any single rural community, there is a variegated continuum between amateur and professional musicianship, wherein musicians who make their entire living from music are often itinerant to some degree. This can be seen with the traveling *lènggèr* ensembles of the Banyumas region of Central

Java, the *Ashik* bards of Anatolia, and the African American blues singer of the southern United States. While many contemporary rural areas have educational systems that offer access to some form of standardized music education, the modes of musical expertise specific to local rural cultures are generally transmitted through oral tradition.

Musical materials and aesthetic conventions vary widely across the rural regions of the world. The common features of rural areas, however, support participatory musics, integrated into community activities. Smaller populations mean that these practices develop in the absence of niche cultures of connoisseurship that favor innovation and discursive nuance, apart from the concerns of mass-market appeal. Rural conditions therefore provide the relative isolation that supports the diversity of folk music traditions, while also shaping the rural practice of classical or popular music styles. A marching band playing a notated arrangement of “Eye of the Tiger” in a Fourth of July parade in a small town in the United States, for example, still consists of amateur musicians of varying skill levels, participating in a community ceremony that serves group coherence.

### The Rural Imaginary and Its Impact on Rural Musics

The rural refers to a set of representations and mythologies as well as a set of material features, and these also impact the relationship between music and rurality. While it would be wrong to uncritically assume the European notion of *the rural idyll* as a universal paradigm for the image of the rural, Western imperialism has played a historical role in urbanization and land use worldwide, and the explicit study of rural geography and sociology is still based primarily in Great Britain and North America. In his 1978 book *Orientalism*, Edward Said used the term *imagined geography* to refer to the tacit assumptions that exist within the culture of a colonizing power, regarding the people and land being colonized, and to describe the process by which imperialism seeks to concretize this imagined sense of the other through political means.

This concept is useful in understanding not only the imposition of a European concept of the rural idyll in colonial projects but also the hegemony that can exist within a single nation, wherein systems and policies designed in urban centers concretize an imagined geography of the rural. Contemporary, poststructuralist perspectives in rural geography work to critique these assumptions about the rural while also understanding the impact that such imagined geographies continue to have on the lived practices of rural spaces.

Contradictory associations surround the rural in its relationship to safety and adventure. On the one hand, small, relatively homogenous rural communities can be seen as calm, slow-paced, and safe social environments, where familiarity and family ties contribute to security (though this association is only available to those who belong to that homogenous demographic). At the same time, as a contact point between civilization and wilderness, the rural can be seen as a site of adventure and even danger. This is particularly pronounced in places such as Canada, the United States, Australia, and portions of South America, where the myth of the pioneer taming a wild frontier is central to national identity and the ethnic identity of the settler demographic.

The *bush ballads* of Australia and country- and-western music from the United States are prime examples of musical genres that are central to a national identity built around this two-sided image of the rural. This dynamic can also be observed in two song genres of rural Brazil. “Payada de contrapunto” is an aggressive dueling song form from the pampas of southern Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, where two or more singers engage in a competitive bout of 10-line stanzas, challenging and insulting each other over *rasgueado* strumming on the guitar. The song celebrates the rugged individualism, competition, and machismo of the gaucho. In contrast, the more sentimental *sertanejo* music from the rural northeast portion of Brazil features male vocal harmonies that are almost always sung by brothers. These two musics allude to two sides of rural identity and masculine identity in particular: the tough gaucho and the caring brother.

Perhaps the most persistent aspect of the rural imaginary is the nostalgia that Raymond Williams observed in 1973, wherein the city is associated with progress and futurity, while the rural is associated with history and the past. This appears as a wistful image of the rural as a site of cultural authenticity, connection to community and land, and a *wholesome* life away from the noise, urgency, danger, and anxiety of the city or the modern world at large. At the same time, this association with the past can be negatively characterized in the idea of *backwardness*, a term connoting ignorance as well as outmoded value systems.

Nostalgic representations of rural life are highlighted in the musical genres that emerge when rural populations migrate into urban areas. In Mexico, *ranchera*, a sentimental genre of music that romanticizes rural life, emerged in the early 1900s, following Porfirio Díaz's policies of rapid industrialization and the expropriation of communally held farmland. After displaced farmers moved into the cities and became part of an urban workforce and market, a commercial genre celebrating the simplicity of rural life emerged. This dynamic can also be seen in Thailand in the 1950s and the rise of *luk thung*. After a significant number of people from the rural region of Isan in northeast Thailand migrated to Bangkok to work in the service sector, the musical genre of *luk thung* emerged, featuring stories of rural migrants' experiences but in a musical language that reflected the hybridity and performance practices of Bangkok's cosmopolitan culture, incorporating Western instruments and elaborate stage production.

In the cases of both *ranchera* and *luk thung*, the imagined geography of the rural plays a significant role in the constitution of musics that are not shaped by the material features of rural spatiality. These musics have, in turn, transformed the musical practices of the regions they represent. Governments have also leveraged these nostalgic perceptions about cultural authenticity and rural life, undertaking efforts to collect folk songs from rural regions and then reproducing them for a mass audience, removing specific markers of rural dialect or variance that could highlight ethnic or class differences.

Recording technologies have also had a significant impact on the musical representation of rural culture. Since 1890, marked by Jesse Walter Fewkes's first wax cylinder recordings of the Passamaquoddy people in Maine, field recording has been an important tool in the musical study of rural populations. Remote recording was developed in 1923 by Okeh Records, one of the first commercial labels to specialize in African American music and rural music. In the 1940s, Alan Lomax made many mobile recording trips throughout the United States and the Caribbean and played a major role in increasing the national awareness and popularity of regional rural musics. Through this work, he also played a significant role in shaping the narratives, associations, and notions of authenticity surrounding these musical practices. These commercial recordings, along with the proliferation of broadcast media in rural areas, have also had a global impact on rural musical practices.

Since 1990, scholars have raised important questions about cultural appropriation, representation, and exploitation related to the distribution of rural music through a recording industry based in Western urban centers. More recently, as web technologies disrupt fundamental spatial understandings of the rural–urban continuum, musicological scholarship has also focused on the global impact that affordable recording technologies and online distribution have on rural musical cultures.

**See also** [Authenticity](#); [Classification, Vernacular and Ethnic](#); [Country Music](#); [Folk Music](#); [Roots Music](#); [Urban](#); [Urbanization \(Urbanism\)](#)

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### Further Readings

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