Boomtown

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Runaway Globalisation on the Queensland Coast

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PART II CLASHING SCALES

Preface

This book is an outcome of ethnographic research carried out as part of the European Research Council Advanced Grant project 'Overheating: The three crises of globalisation, or an anthropological history of the early 21st century', 'Overheating' for short, running from 2012 to 2017. The project's aim has been to explore and account for local responses to global, accelerated change through a number of case studies from around the world – Peru, Canada, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Western Europe, Sierra Leone, Australia – plus more than a dozen smaller projects carried out by MA students doing fieldwork in as many locations, from Corsica to Nepal. Although it is based on ethnographic studies and carried out by anthropologists, the project has interdisciplinary ambitions, aiming to bring statistics, political economy, macrosociology and history to bear on the anthropological microdata. Just as the phenomena we study are multiscalar, so are our research methods.

In an early position paper (Eriksen 2013), I explained *overheating* as follows:

> The accelerated and intensified contact which is a defining characteristic of globalisation leads to tensions, contradictions, conflict and changed opportunities in ways that affect identity, the environment and the economy.… change takes place unevenly, but often fast and as a result of a peculiar combination of local and transnational processes. Such forms of change lead to 'overheating effects' in local settings worldwide: Unevenly paced change where exogenous and endogenous factors combine to lead to instability, uncertainty and unintended consequences in a broad range of institutions and practices, and contribute to a widely shared feeling of powerlessness and alienation.
>
> People perceive, understand and act upon the changes in widely differing ways depending on their position in the locality (class, age, gender, etc.) and on the characteristics of the locality as well as its position within regional, national and transnational systems. In order to understand globalisation, it is necessary to explore how its crises are being dealt with in local contexts – how people resist imposed changes, negotiate their relationship to global and transnational forces, and which strategies for survival, autonomy and resistance are being developed. These explorations must take the *genius loci* of the locality

> seriously, situate the locality historically and connect it to an analysis of global processes. Finally, in order to demonstrate the ubiquity of overheating effects, systematic comparison between otherwise very different localities is necessary. (Eriksen 2013: 1)

This perspective is elaborated in my more recent book *Overheating: An Anthropology of Accelerated Change* (Eriksen 2016a; see also Eriksen 2016c).

This book has its focus on one of these 'hotspots' or hubs of overheating. Gladstone, Queensland, Australia is overheated, it is fraught, and it is ambiguous. It is a potent symbol of fossil-fuel-driven industrialism, as one of the largest coal ports in Australia and recently also one of the largest ports for exporting LNG. Yet the city, in spite of its location on the coast of Central Queensland, is conspicuously unmarked in the collective Australian psyche. In spite of its rapid growth and very considerable contributions to the Australian economy, the city doesn't even figure in the national weather forecasts on TV, and many Australians are only dimly aware of its existence, in spite of the fact that Gladstone is at the epicentre of the mining boom which has transformed the Australian economy and, until the steep decline in fossil fuel prices in 2013–14, shielded it from recurrent economic crises affecting other parts of the world since the turn of the millennium. Environmentalists in the large cities may ultimately want to shut down key industries in Gladstone, as it is a major contributor to Australia's massive carbon footprint. Yet tens of thousands of people depend on Gladstone's energy-intensive industries and there is no easy way out, 'not a magic button to press', as a thoughtful schoolteacher in Gladstone pointed out during one of our conversations. There are, in Gladstone as elsewhere, genuinely mixed feelings about, as a gas worker put it, 'what we are doing to the planet'.

This book explores this ambivalence by telling the story of Gladstone and relating it to the larger forces of economic globalisation. I shall talk about double binds, clashing scales, dissenting voices and happy immigrants, remoteness and proximity, boomtown syndromes and environmental challenges. Part I describes the ascent of Gladstone from backwater to industrial powerhouse, indicating how the widespread eagerness for development and coal-fuelled optimism make the city a quintessential expression of industrial modernity and a belief in endless growth. In Part II, I analyse some of the contradictions and sometimes catastrophic side-effects resulting from a single-minded emphasis on growth and development as well as structural conflicts between large-scale projects and small-scale lives. There are three major case stories in the book, narrated in chapters 6, 7 and 8, and, along with the other

material presented, they form a pattern and tell us something important about contemporary neoliberalism and local consequences of economic globalisation.

Fieldwork took place in 2013–14, when Gladstone was perhaps at its historical apex as an industrial powerhouse. Unemployment was negligible, optimism for the future was almost ubiquitous, and the politicians did not foresee an imminent downturn. After the completion of my fieldwork, the city went into an unprecedented and unanticipated slump. This book, then, is the story about the boomtown immediately before the bust. Few saw the storm coming, and it came with a vengeance, with serious consequences for the lives of Gladstonites, their private finances and their collective self-understanding. The real estate market has all but collapsed, dramatically slashing people's lifetime savings; there is no longer a shortage of labour but of jobs; and the upbeat optimism still near-universal during my fieldwork has been dealt a severe blow. Based as it is on fieldwork in Gladstone from November 2013 to March 2014, this book is written from the vantage-point of the ethnographic present. Yet the reader should be mindful that fast change, in an industrial hub like Gladstone, does not just lead to overheating, but can also result in cooling down. The Epilogue outlines some of the post-boom characteristics of Gladstone, a city which had been accustomed, in the last generations, to growth and industrial development as natural.

Many wonderful people are to be thanked for their contributions to this book, and I have tried to write it in such a way that it might be of interest to those who have contributed to it, Gladstonites and others – as well as being a book that I might have wanted to read myself. First and foremost, research in Gladstone would have been impossible without the collaboration of the local population, and I was at the receiving end of an extraordinary amount of kindness, hospitality and generosity from almost everyone I met. I was invited into homes and on excursions, had lunch or coffee with innumerable Gladstonites old and new, took part in meetings and receptions, many of them by invitation only, was met with friendliness and openness whenever I – sometimes a tad rudely – intruded into people's lives, and I had a field day as an ethnographer from beginning to end. I would especially like to thank – in no particular order – Matt 'Charlie' Cameron, Ren Lanzon, Jim Ellis, Kezia Smith, Jan Arens, Karen Arens, Colin Chapman, Matt Burnett, Gail Sellers, Andrew Jeremijenko, Liz Cunningham, Melanie Achilles, Anthony Esposito, Paulette Flint, Crystal McGregor, Lyndal Hansen, Rick Hansen, Ian Woodhouse, Luisa, Marguerita Dobrinin, Paul Tooker, Captain Guru, Veronica Laverick, Mike Lutze, Betty and Jim, Michael Bloyce, Peter Harland, Yvette Luckock, Craig Butler, Michelle Butler, Marnie Campbell,

Lyndal Gilson, Alec Lucke, Mrs Kendrick, Mara Pattison-Sowden, the librarians at Gladstone City Library, the people from WIN (Welcoming International Neighbours), Conservation Volunteers Australia, Bechtel, the Gladstone Corps of the Salvation Army, Gladstone Ports Corporation and Rio Tinto Alcan, Rotary Sunrise and Central Queensland University. However, I must extend a special thanks to a few: Cheryl Watson (for her world-class hospitality and for sharing her beliefs in a greener world), Vicki Johnson (for her exquisite ethnographic sketches), David Harvey (for good times and mateship), Peter Brady (for being such a great companion and guide), Luis Arroyo (for sharing his knowledge and friendship) and Alison Liefting (for excellent research assistance). A very special thank you goes to Anna Hitchcock, who was not only an invaluable conversation partner in the field, but who has subsequently read and commented critically and constructively on the first draft. She has saved me from many an embarrassment through her excellent comments. I am also grateful to Pluto's three anonymous readers, all of whom provided important comments on the first draft.

I have followed common anthropological practice regarding anonymisation. Most of the Gladstonites are anonymised. Public figures making public statements are not. Some others also feature with their full names, in cases where anonymisation would not have been possible, credible or even desirable. They have all been consulted. I have tried to be fair to everyone, but the analysis and conclusions are naturally my own.

At the University of Queensland in Brisbane, I have particularly benefited from the criticism and encouragement of my colleagues Kim de Rijke, David Trigger and Sally Babidge. It was Sally's idea that I should do fieldwork in Gladstone in the first place – an excellent suggestion, as it turned out. Greenpeace Australia and Greenpeace's Save the Reef campaign in Brisbane helped me to get started. At home in Oslo, the Overheating research group has been a constant intellectual presence, and its members have been part of the conversation from the beginning, so I would also like to express my warm thanks to Astrid Stensrud, Elisabeth Schober, Wim van Daele, Henrik Sinding-Larsen, Cathrine Moe Thorleifsson, Chris Hann, Robert Pijpers, Lena Gross, Maria Guzman-Gallegos and Irene Svarteng, as well as our many excellent MA students. Towards the very end of the writing process, I received important input from Hedda Askland. Needless to say, I am also grateful to the European Research Foundation for having funded the Overheating project.

Finally, I must thank my family – Kari, Ole and Amanda – for bearing with my long absence in distant Queensland. I hope it was worth it.

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There is some overlap between three of the chapters and previous publications. Part of chapter 3 was published in Eriksen and Schober (2016), part of chapter 5 in *Ethnos* (Eriksen 2016b), and a condensed version of chapter 6 in the open-access publication *Contested Knowledges* (Eriksen and Schober 2017).

Oslo, January 2018

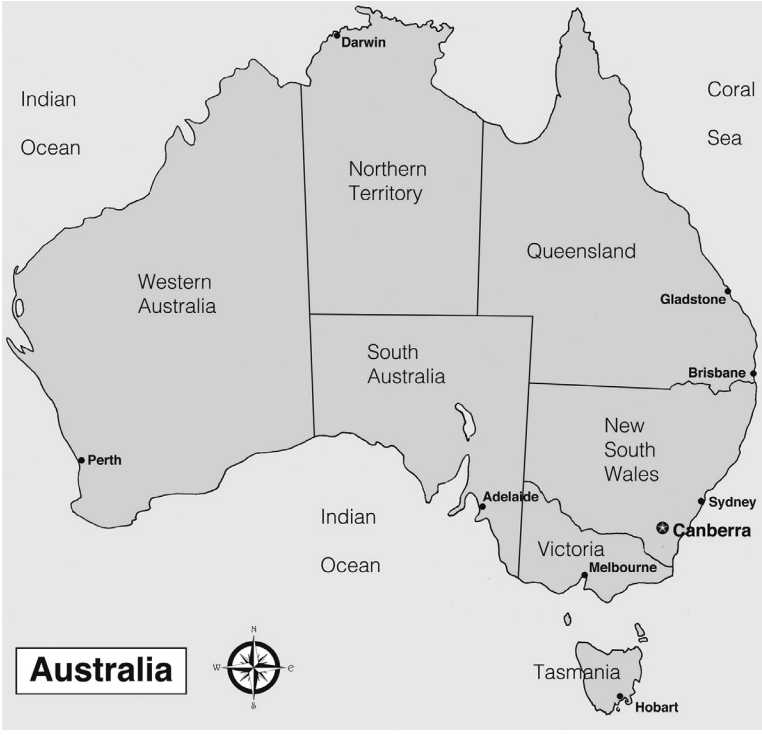
Prologue: The High Point of Extractive Industrialism

In Gladstone, even the sunset is sponsored by the fossil fuel industry. To watch the sun setting in the west, you must also simultaneously stare at the three tall, symmetrical columns of Gladstone Power Station. The largest in Queensland, the power station feeds on black coal from the interior of the state and, doubtless by coincidence, it was placed in the exact spot where the sun sets.

Gladstone is the undisputed industrial hub of Central Queensland, but it began to develop as an industrial town only in the 1960s, leading its population to mushroom from about 5000 in 1950 to 12,000 in 1971 and 33,000 in 2014 (70,000 if the greater council area is included). In 2013, the statisticians of the Queensland government anticipated a doubling of the population by 2036. Until the 1960s, the city was, by and large, perceived by residents and outsiders alike as a stagnant backwater or billabong. Just a couple of decades later, the city found itself at the epicentre of contemporary industrialism, with its large-scale electricity production, alumina refineries, aluminium smelter, cement factory and expanding coal port.

The expansion continued until the end of my fieldwork in March 2014, when boom turned into bust. This is a book about the boomtown Gladstone, however, and the subsequent slump will be dealt with only briefly in the main text, and slightly less briefly in the Epilogue.

From 2010, massive construction again took place in Gladstone, bringing money, infrastructural changes, environmental protests and temporary workers into the city yet again. On Curtis Island, across a narrow channel from Gladstone CBD (central business district), three large liquid natural gas (LNG) terminals were constructed by the American engineering firm Bechtel. The gas plants themselves are owned by three different conglomerates. Approved plans to build a fourth LNG terminal were eventually cancelled, or perhaps just postponed, in early 2014, owing to market uncertainties. In addition to the LNG terminals themselves (which are located on an island that, strictly speaking, forms part of the Great Barrier Reef region), thick pipelines connect the terminals with the gas reservoirs in the coal seams in the Queensland outback, 500 km away. Simultaneously, in a bid to increase coal exports,



Map 0.1 Australia, with Gladstone located between Bundaberg and Rockhampton[1]

a third coal terminal has been built at Wiggins Island, a few kilometres north of the city, as the international coal markets have been booming, especially in East Asia. Although coal prices declined sharply in 2014, the logic of expansion and economies of scale continues to apply. The reasoning is that if the mining companies and Queensland government are to make comparable profits in the future, with anticipated unstable coal prices, it will be necessary to continue increasing production capacity and expand the ports.

Gladstone is a bustling, hectic, noisy place epitomising the immense power and sheer energy of industrialism – but it is also deeply marked by ambivalence. City councillors, industry leaders, members of the 'fluoro brigade' working on Curtis Island across the Narrows, motel hosts and housewives express optimism, but also ambivalence, uncertainty, a muffled anxiety which sometimes turns loud and explicit.

1. All maps were drawn by Maria Kartveit, using public domain sources.

* * *

Approaching Gladstone airport in a smallish propeller plane from Brisbane, you cannot fail to notice the contrast between the serene greenery of the remaining forest cover and the raw brutality of the small open-pit mines and construction areas breaking up the lush landscape; the clash between the blue Pacific ocean and the crimson pools of bauxite refuse from the alumina refinery; green pastures next to barren fields of red wasteland reminiscent of Martian landscapes; beaches and suburbs rubbing shoulders with smokestacks and warehouses. Before landing, you catch a glimpse of the industrial port facilities defining the boundary between city and sea, the hundreds of empty coal wagons on railway side-tracks, the chimneys of the power station and, perhaps, the distant metal structures of the LNG terminals on Curtis Island, the cranes at the wharf and the foreign cargo ships lined up off Facing Island on the Pacific perimeter, waiting to load.

A first whiff of ambivalence came my way during the taxi ride into town from the airport in November 2013. It took a short eternity for the taxi to arrive – this was later explained as a function of the high cost of living in Gladstone, making it hard for a taxi owner to break even – and when it was finally my turn, I offered to share my taxi with the couple next in line. They were middle-aged and looked as if they might be on holiday. The lady happily got into the front of the car, while her husband entered the back seat next to me with some more effort, since I had already filled up the trunk of the sedan with my suitcase, which meant that he had to place his only slightly smaller suitcase on his lap, which he did without complaining.

Off we went, and it soon transpired that the gentleman next to me, who introduced himself as Mike, was employed on Curtis Island, where no less than three LNG plants were currently being built, to the exasperation of many locals, as well as environmental organisations in remote places such as Brisbane and Sydney. 'So,' I said, 'good job you've got over there?' 'Well, yes,' he replied, 'it's four weeks on and one week off. A few days off in-between as well. But,' he added without any prodding on my part, 'we don't really know what we're doing to nature. You know, the gas was there for a purpose. And we use explosives and chemicals to get it out. Who knows how the land is going to respond?'

Mike refers to coal seam gas, teased out of the crust of the Earth in the interior of Queensland, either by pumping water out of the coal seam in order to release the gas or, if the gas is trapped in rock, through fracking, by creating tiny earthquakes underground (see de Rijke 2013). In the latter case, the process can be compared to shaking a soda bottle, then

removing the top and sucking in the CO_2 which bubbles up. In a word, the earth has to be shaken a bit for the gas to emerge.

The taxi driver, a white Australian, joined the conversation. 'Well, actually I don't have much time for them greenies,' he said; 'I'm in favour of jobs and a sound economy.' The conversation drifted in a different direction, but the construction worker's perspective stuck. He had a good job with excellent pay but he felt uneasy about what he was doing. Right now, he and his wife were on their way to Yeppoon, further north, for a few days of vacation before spending some time with friends in the Gladstone area.

This unease is just as integral to the air of Gladstone as the faint smell of sulphur and the fine coal dust that settles everywhere when the wind comes from a particular direction. Gladstone has been an industrial town since the mid-1960s, but since around 2010 it was as if change had moved up a gear – acceleration accelerated – with very noticeable effects. This acceleration of acceleration, characteristic of twenty-first-century global capitalism, is what I refer to as overheating (Eriksen 2016a). My fieldwork took place when construction activity was at its height, a possible downturn being anticipated by a handful of pessimists in late 2014, when several large projects were expected to be finalised. As a woman in her thirties, a hard-working professional and a mother of two, said to me

> we didn't use to have traffic here, and all of a sudden, there are traffic jams on the Dawson highway during rush hour. Or if you have a boat and go out crabbing or fishing on the weekends, you'll notice the increase in large vessels. So, you know, we are aware that we are an industrial city, but in the last few years, there has been a lot of change.

At first, there was one, then there were two; by now, the industries dominating the cityscape are many. It sometimes almost appears as if the government of Queensland had decided, presumably with the complicity of Gladstone Regional Council (GRC), its Engineering Alliance and its Chamber of Commerce, to place as much as possible of the dirty, noisy and profitable resource-based industry of Queensland around Gladstone. Its industrial adventure began in 1967 with the opening of the then largest alumina refinery in the world. The power station came in 1982, followed by the aluminium smelter on Boyne Island nearby. Those were the integrated cornerstone industries of the town at the time, and the giant mining corporation Rio Tinto Alcan was instrumental in making this happen, as owner of the alumina refinery, the power station, the bauxite mine in Weipa, north Queensland and the coal mine at

Callide which provided the energy. The port was expanded in the same period, and new railway lines transported coal from mines in the west as well as produce from other parts of the state. In the space of a few years, Gladstone became a major coal and multi-commodity port as well as the site of a huge alumina refinery. From the late 1970s, several new industries established themselves – a cement factory, chemical plants, another alumina refinery – and the coal terminal was eventually supplemented with another coal terminal … and yet another.

Since 2010, the expansion of the port has continued, and Gladstone harbour has been dredged to make room for larger ships, making the water muddy and, according to the critics, with adverse effects not only for fishing, but also for the Great Barrier Reef (see chapter 6). In addition, the southern part of the nearby Curtis Island, a place of great recreational value to Gladstonites and others, has been transformed. From 2011 to 2015, up to 10,000 workers were shuttled across the harbour to the island on a regular basis. They were engaged in building three large LNG refineries. If you go for a drive into the country north of Gladstone, you'll notice the railway tracks and a scattering of industrial plants as you go, but you will also see the gas pipelines, meandering their way, wormlike, through the hilly scrubland, across the dry gumtree forest and towards the mudflats leading to Fisherman's Landing, offering the shortest crossing to Curtis Island. Machines capable of dwarfing almost everything in their surroundings clear the land to make space for the pipelines like thick, shiny snakes carrying gas soon to be used as fuel to electrify homes, factories and sweatshops in China and India.

Throughout most of Australia's settler history, mining has put food on the table for sweaty, hard-working men and their families and money into the coffers of the lease owners; it has attracted migrants from Europe and Asia, provided energy to the industries and households of the country, spurts of growth and prosperity to sleepy towns, glamour to financial districts, busy days to port cities and royalties to state and federal governments. It is also integral to the pioneering spirit of the new country. In the decades after Australia had ceased to be a penal colony, rumours of mineral wealth lured willing English migrants to the remote continent, some of whom did in fact become rich as a result. The Mount Morgan mine, an hour's drive north of Gladstone, was for decades one of the most productive goldmines in the world, creating wealth still visible in the mansions lining the Fitzroy River in Rockhampton. The hard-working, dusty, resilient, lone miner of the past is an iconic figure in the Australian self-understanding, the current mining boom a recipe for economic stability in a sea of crises. Who could be against mining in a country such as this?

Mining has been crucial to the Australian economy, demography and identity since the mid-1850s (see chapter 2 for a cultural perspective). Yet the current mining boom is unprecedented in its scope, scale and economic significance. In 1961, mining represented about 8 per cent of Australia's exports. By the early 1980s, its contribution had more than doubled, representing 20 per cent. By 2010, mining 'contribute[d] almost 60 per cent of export receipts' (Cleary 2011: 5). While virtually any known, and valued, mineral in the world can be found in Australia, the economically most important exports are coal and iron ore, although LNG is predicted to have a bright future, in spite of the sharp drop in global gas prices in 2013–14. The mining companies are all privately owned, and major development projects tend to be financed by transnational conglomerates.

The mining boom is not without its numerous and vocal detractors. Many of them are connected to the strong and diverse Australian environmental movement (Hutton and Connors 1999; Burgmann and Baer 2012; Flannery 2015; see Munro 2012 for a non-academic perspective). Their arguments are multiscalar, ranging from assessments of psychological stress and reduced quality of life in mining areas (Albrecht et al. 2007; see also Connor 2016) to local environmental destruction and global climate change. From a social and economic perspective, the journalist Paul Cleary (2011, 2012) has shown how the unprecedented resource boom has resulted in increased inequality, partly owing to a lack of political governance. Cleary also shows that the increased public wealth is largely spent on social welfare and consumption, rather than investment in infrastructure or education. He explores the influence of mining companies on democratic processes, pointing out that they are so powerful that, in 2010, they were able to bring an elected prime minister down. Kevin Rudd had proposed a carbon tax on mining, aiming to spend the money on balancing the economy (which showed symptoms of 'Dutch disease', that is, overdependence on one booming sector, leading to decline and neglect in other parts of the economy) and investing in infrastructure. The concerted efforts of three mining giants (Rio Tinto, Xstrata and BHP Billiton) eventually succeeded in deposing Rudd (Cleary 2011: 75–7). Ties between politicians and large mining companies are, in other words, very close. Finally, Cleary remarks that one striking feature distinguishing the current resource boom from former mineral booms is the size of the mines. What counted as a mega mine in the 1980s is a normal mine in the 2010s. Since Australia has to be competitive in the global market, its high cost of labour must be matched by higher productivity and efficiency, which is achieved through scaling up the operations and mechanising the production. In effect, mining in

Australia has increasingly taken on the sociotechnical characteristics of the oil industry. As argued by Timothy Mitchell (2011), coal mining was a nuisance for the established elites throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century. Miners were numerous, they were unionised, and they could control the flow of the lifeblood of the economy, namely the energy. With the shift to oil, seen by Mitchell as prompted just as much by political motivations as by economic or market considerations, the labour force could be dramatically reduced. Rather than hiring thousands of radical, unionised working-class men, the oil company could make do with fewer, well-paid, skilled workers operating the wells and the pipelines. They were far less likely to create difficulties for the management and political elites. Australian mining has followed this pattern. Although more than half of the country's export earnings comes from mineral wealth, less than 2 per cent of the Australian workforce is directly employed in extractive industries (Mining Careers 2016). To this must, naturally, be added many more whose jobs would not have existed without mining – from the pilots flying bread into the LNG town of Karratha from Perth to the car rental firms catering to DIDOs (drive-in drive-out workers).

Australian mines are now by and large mechanised, open-pit operations. In a not too distant past, the iconic Australian miner would have been a gritty, ragged and emaciated man who went underground with his pickaxe, facing great peril for lamentable remuneration until the day he literally struck gold. The typical miner today may have a very comfortable salary, could be either male or female, and may spend their days operating a very large machine such as an excavator from the air-conditioned comfort of a cabin, accompanied by music from their headset, a cold Pepsi Max on the dashboard.

It is not only researchers like Cleary who see the symptoms of 'Dutch disease' or resource curse in Australia. In Gladstone, people who have non-industrial jobs also worry for the future of the non-mining sectors in the Australian economy. A typical statement came from a taxi driver, who had previously worked for 15 years in mining: 'The problem is, mate, that Australia is just becoming the quarry of the world. We're now importing manufactured stuff from China while selling raw materials to their industry.' Basing economic policy on the principle of comparative advantage, Australian politicians consistently favour extractive industries at the expense of manufacturing. Yet this policy reduces the overall flexibility of the economic system, making other sectors less viable and other commodities more difficult to export, owing to the strength of the Australian dollar caused by the resource boom.

Ironically, some of the most vocal and visible campaigners against mining in contemporary Australia belong to a profession that rivals mining as the iconic Australian occupation, namely farming and livestock raising. Australia's post-contact history can be told as a story of successive gold rushes, mineral discoveries and rags-to-riches stories, punctuated with stories of hardship, failed searches and brave men who perished in the vast deserts of the interior, in search of a better life for themselves and their families. But it can also be narrated, credibly to many, as a story of equally heroic men braving an unpredictable climate, hostile Aborigines, isolation and loneliness, but inch by inch, acre by acre turning the semi-arid outback into productive farmland. Many of the English migrants who arrived in the pioneer era were not miners, but sheep farmers.

In Queensland and New South Wales, the outback is defined as the region between the Great Dividing Range (a string of low mountains separating the relatively well-watered coastal strip from the dry hinterland) and the desert. Owing to underground lakes and aquifers, pastoralism and agriculture are possible in areas that receive only scarce and unpredictable rain.

Since the turn of the century, numerous local conflicts between farmers and gas companies have spread from the coast into the outback, especially in Queensland, where gas concessions are more easily granted than in New South Wales. Under Australian law, the owner of a property cannot refuse if a gas company wishes to undertake exploratory drilling. If gas is found, the state government may or may not give the company the right to drill commercially. In Australia, underground resources belong to the Crown (state), so the potential economic benefit for the landowner is limited.

Many farmers are frustrated and angry about the situation, and many have joined the Lock the Gate Alliance, formed in 2010 at the initiative of the academic and environmental activist Drew Hutton, which uses civil disobedience (locking the gates, literally) to prevent the resource companies from exerting their legally sanctioned rights. Australian environmentalists are also concerned with the way mining transforms the landscape and contributes to ecological damage and climate change. In 2003, the Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined the word *solastalgia* (Albrecht 2005), which refers to the distress experienced by people whose immediate environmental surroundings are being transformed without their consent. His source of inspiration was the rapid expansion of open-pit coal-mining in the Upper Hunter Valley in central New South Wales. More recently, the anthropologist Linda Connor (2016), who has collaborated with Albrecht, has developed his

perspectives further, emphasising a holistic approach taking in humans, communities, myths, nature and other elements in an environment populated by humans. She argues that the transformations of the Upper Hunter can only be understood in a global context.

These are some of the contradictions with which this book is concerned. It is an attempt to identify and deepen our understanding of some of the basic, contradictory features of contemporary world society. It is about large and small scales, fossil fuels and ecological sustainability, speed and slowness, gains and losses. But it is also a portrait of the boomtown of Gladstone, an almost suspiciously well-kept secret in Australia. In the broader context of Queensland, a cursory comparison of Gladstone with the breath-taking beauty of the south-eastern hills, the lushness of the northern rainforest, the turquoise waters of the Whitsundays and the subtropical idyll of the Sunshine Coast, the glitz and glamour of the Gold Coast and the funky buzz of Brisbane, makes it easy to understand the barely suppressed laughter from a recently arrived journalist when she heard local luminaries speak of the region's potential for tourism. Gladstone is where Queensland keeps its dirty laundry. But it is also in many ways a microcosm of Australian society and of the contradictions of contemporary global capitalism.