Introduction

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Approximately 80 per cent of Australians live in the large cities that cling to the coastal periphery of the arid continent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008). Each of these cities is assumed to act as the administrative and cultural hub of their respective state and territory. This metropolitan focus is replicated in many countries throughout the Global North. Over 80 per cent of Canadians (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada [HRSDC] 2014) and Americans (United States Census Bureau 2010) live in major cities and conurbations; similar patterns underpin most of the modern nation-states of the Global North. Simultaneously, these highly urbanized societies continue to extol the rural lifestyle as central to the nation’s moral and historical compass. Within Australia, cultural knowledge of the country’s rural and regional areas remains axiomatic to citizens’ sense of self and national community. This is reflected in the creative practice of those in the major metropolitan centres. While creative products connect audiences with global trends, urban populations retain an intense emotional affinity with those who live what are imagined to be wholesome lives in regional and rural settings.

In this book, we challenge the metropolitan focus in much of the scholarship regarding regional arts, along with the assumption that creative practice in the regions is necessarily a pale reflection of the cities. Instead, we argue that patterns of creative practice in regional communities are sustainable and innovative in distinct ways. Rather than compare regional and metropolitan experiences, we foreground the non-metropolitan as central to a broader understanding of self and community. In this way, this book’s contributors use the Australian example to suggest ways to re-imagine how regionalism might be constituted in the Global North, and explore new ways in which the creative arts can strengthen and refashion inclusive communities.

Regional Creativity

Regional communities are at the centre of Australia’s successful export economy, which has sustained the country’s buoyant economic growth through successive global economic crises. Most regional communities are heavily dependent on industries associated with agriculture and mining, making their inhabitants vulnerable to fluctuations in the market. Nonetheless, regional Australia continues to contribute a sizeable majority of the country’s export income through mining and agriculture. Despite this, regional Australians frequently feel that they are marginalized in the decision-making processes that affect them
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(Charters et al. 2011). Rather than benefit from their centrality in the national economy, many feel their communities are marginalized and threatened by accelerating change.

A close association with the land, and familial connections that frequently span multiple generations, are at the heart of regional communities' sense of self. This is particularly the case for the large numbers of Indigenous Australians, who form a significant proportion of rural and regional communities, and whose connections to the land are profound and enduring. Rather than the common depiction of communities in terminal decline, there are emerging patterns of people seeking to join regional communities. These range from those returning to childhood homes in order to raise young families, professionals seeking less stressful lives (Regional Australia Institute 2014) and newly arrived refugees and migrants (Sched 2013). The phenomenon of fly-in fly-out workers also continues to redefine regional families and society (Meredith et al. 2014). Communities beyond the metropolitan fringe should properly be considered as dynamic, fluid and forward-thinking.

This reality is not represented in the cultural mythology of regional Australia. Creative products, such as films, rarely depict the vibrant creativity in regional communities. Instead, they reproduce the dichotomy between a supposedly cultured metropolis and rugged frontier. Many replicate images of hardy resilience, which focus on heavily gendered stereotypes of alcohol-fuelled violence exacerbated by a hostile untameable landscape. In this tradition, people in regional settings are frequently bored and suicidal, suffering intellectual atrophy, a dark secretive loneliness, murderous intent and high levels of conservatism. While other products depict a romantic idealism, it is generally achieved through an almost total erasure of the contemporary Indigenous presence.

In line with many countries in the Global North, Australia's intellectuals, policy makers, creative thinkers and practitioners predominantly reside in the country's major metropolitan centres. A population of approximately 24 million in a geographical area the size of the continental United States means that many services are inevitably centralized, with creative activity similarly affected. Yet, the assumption that metropolitan culture provides a default model for others to aspire towards continues to influence the formation of policy and the creation of artistic opportunity. One recent government initiative in the state of Queensland created the 'Super Star Fund' to provide substantial financial support for productions that feature internationally renowned artists. Regional centres are unlikely to have the 'history of staging large-scale... work' (Arts Queensland 2013) that the application requires, and are instead encouraged to develop joint proposals with larger companies and producers. Although other smaller grants are available, the deep social connections and organic development of the regional arts are rarely incorporated in such opportunities or policy development.

In part, governments' emphasis on initiatives such as the Super Star Fund reflects a desire for productions that have substantial economic (and social) impacts. Indeed, there is a strong movement in associated federal government networks to broaden the economic value of the arts in the regions further, given their impact on social well-being. Researchers, such as Deborah Mills, have successfully pioneered a national arts and health policy. Recently, the
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Australian Government's Standing Council on Health developed a national arts and health framework, which has now been adopted by all states across the Commonwealth. Many of the case studies collected by Mills (Institute for Creative Health 2014) indicate the effectiveness of arts-based activity and creative endeavour in bringing communities together, and uses the arts to examine critical regional issues such as health and communities' social and physical well-being, arguing that such measures be adopted by all states across the Commonwealth.

This has yet to be applied systematically in terms of regional arts. Regional communities have an acknowledged 'rich "bush tradition" of innovation' (Charters et al. 2011), but this social entrepreneurship is often assumed to lie primarily in commercial and cultural sectors. Without detracting from the arts' very real economic benefits, there is nonetheless an imperative to recognize that there are often secondary to (or, at the least, inseparable from) the social outcomes. We assert that what differentiates creative practice in regional centres is its role in the formation and maintenance of inclusive communities.

Creative Communities

The Creative Communities book is divided into three sections: 'Rethinking Regionalism', 'Returning Creativity' and 'Restoring Community'. Contributors in the first section question what regionalism means in a rural and regional creative context of contested local spaces. Chapters in the second section explore the refashioning of communities through creativity, and look at case studies of environmental crisis, population movement and Indigenous community. The group of chapters in the final section investigate how communities engage in cultural experience, and the performance of inclusive narratives within this context.

This book highlights examples of the uniqueness of creative practice in regional Australia. The chapters refute prevailing metropolitan assumptions in order to reveal vibrant communities that capitalize on sustaining effective relationships through knowledge of place and creative endeavour. There are four key recurring themes that have evolved in the process of developing the collection, and which are all featured in various aspects through the chapters: namely, transformation, connectivity, storytelling and liminality. These themes formed as authors and editors worked together in the various iterations of drafts. They are embedded and woven throughout the methodology, data and outcomes of the projects discussed in the chapters.

The chapters in this book include contributions from Australia's leading theorists in the creative industries, as well as applied case studies from established and emerging practitioners in the creative and performing arts. The book developed organically from an initial research project at the University of Southern Queensland, which is located in regional Australia. The University of Southern Queensland is one of the country's oldest tertiary-level trainers of creative artists, and is unique to regional Australia. In addition to its teaching and research activities, the school runs creative arts events that bring over 25,000 community members...
to the university's campuses every year. As editors, we sought a collection that reflected this long-standing commitment to the communities of regional Australia.

The chapters do not directly address commercial art-making or mainstream examples of creativity, whose metropolitan expressions are well studied. Instead, contributors use germane and ongoing regional experiences to introduce multiple interpretations of terms such as 'creativity', 'regionalism' and 'cultural'. We do not seek to posit this as a point of difference from the city, but rather present the liminal or threshold stories of the vibrancy and innovation of creative cultural practice in regional and metropolitan centres. In this way, this book debunks the assumption that regional areas have little or poor opportunities for creative and cultural development. Instead, contributors explore what regional creativity might mean for the individuals and communities at the centre of dynamic networks of creative practice.

Rebecca Scollen's chapter, 'Same but Different: Growing New Audiences for the Performing Arts in Regional Australia', is one of a number of contributions that engages with the key theme of connectivity to explore community in the regional arts. She addresses the difficult development of audiences for the performing arts in regional areas. In doing so, she argues in favour of increased community-based strategies that break down barriers that can prevent regional people from participating in the arts. Scollen's work explores the widespread perception among regional communities that artistic products and processes are isolated from the people they seek to engage. Scollen argues cogently for a deeper relationship between non-theatre-goers and arts organisations through a genuine sharing of needs, assumptions, products and objectives. Intersecting with the work of other contributors, her chapter focuses on the important processes by which audiences (and arts organizations) construct stories regarding their experiences of performances. The chapter is particularly important for this book as it aims to strategize how the pervasive and enduring ignorance about regional living might be undone to the benefit of both rural and metropolitan dwellers. This phenomenon is not unique to Australia and is demonstrated in other post-settler societies in the Global North.

Margaret Woodward and Craig Brenner's chapter similarly engages with the themes of connectivity and transformation. Entitled 'Learning from Inland: Redefining Regional Creativity', their chapter focuses on creating new language about the interface between creativity, innovation, technology and advanced forms of production and high-value services in regional settings. Their concept of 'Agri-activity' evokes a powerful creativity and ingenuity in the national imagination, which originates from inland regional communities. In doing so, they re-frame the concept of creative regions to better represent inland Australia's diverse and long-standing sites of creative ingenuity. Like Scollen, Woodward and Brenner advocate for the connectivity between human and spatial dimensions, and embed this into an Agri-activity Index in order to map shifts in perspectives around regional resources.

As editors, we encouraged contributors to engage critically with notions of regionality and regionalism. Mark Gibson's chapter, 'Creativity and Alternative Sociality: Creative Communities in Suburban and Peri-Urban Australia', challenges these terms through critical
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reflection on the nature of connectivity. He explores the often porous ‘borderlands’ of areas that lie on the cusp of metropolitan cities and rural locales. As Gibson discusses, the advent of ‘clusters’ to engage creativity and business success can supersede geographical location, yet spatial proximity remains central in the transfer of tacit knowledge and in an important consideration in what and where ‘regional’ influences are occurring. Gibson coined the term ‘law of creative concentration’ to describe the prospects for creativity increasing in proportion to density of population, and he applies this to the outer suburban (or peri-urban) areas and the ‘in-between-ness’ of the visibly rural and visibly urban.

Patrick Mitchell’s chapter similarly disrupts accepted notions of what constitutes regionalism, in order again to explore themes of connectivity as well as the transformation of communities and creative practice. ‘Practising for Life: Amateur Theatre, Regionalism and the Gold Coast’ explores the phenomenon of the ‘Little Theatres’ that are often part of the community arts scene in regional centres. As Mitchell explores, there is a direct correlation in attitudes that perceive amateur theatre activity as synonymous with regional living and an ‘in-between-ness’ of being outside the realm of metropolitan innovation. Mitchell uses the lens of amateur theatre to disrupt the distinction between regional and metropolitan identities, and concentrates on the stories and experiences of participants in the amateur theatre activity as transformative in (and to) communities. He concludes that the re-framing of amateur theatre as a stable enterprise of connecting humans to social and cultural growth in peri-urban communities is desirable, and opens windows to understand the value of amateur theatre and the arts.

The chapter by Tamara Whyte, Chris Matthews, Michael Balfour, Lyndon Murphy and Linda Hassall, ‘Getting to Know the Story of the Boathouse Dancers: Football, Freedom and Rock ‘n’ Roll’, offers a very different interpretation of the transformative power of creative practice and storytelling. The authors’ discussion is initially situated in the city of Brisbane during the 1950s and 1960s. Using oral history and verbatim theatre, they explore historical memories of regionalism in cities before they become metropolitan areas. They also foreground the necessity to privilege of history that often ignores city-dwelling Indigenous people and frames their connections to country through a European distinction between ‘urban’ and ‘country’. The researching and retelling of Indigenous stories reclaims the significance of the cultural transformations that took place at a mid-twentieth century dance site within the domain of white, urbanised people in a major city. Their definition of regionalism extends to attitudes about inclusion and exclusion, and access to privileged spaces. In this manner, the boathouse dances provide connectivity through which to explore and expose historical accounts of regional and urban cultural values, memory, storytelling and challenge to authority.

Paul Carter’s chapter also considers the interconnectedness of Indigenous and non-Indigenous presence in regional communities. Carter focuses on the deserts of central Australia in his work, entitled ‘Common Patterns: Narratives of “Mere Coincidence” and the Production of Regions’. He explores how storytelling and place-making affect sociability and community in profound ways. His chapter opens a window to ways in which change
might be achieved through negotiation across time and space to connect people from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Based on a collaborative project with community members, Carter traces the transformation of stories into places and services that reflect community identities and needs.

Louise Johnson also explores non-European concepts of creativity and connectivity in her chapter, 'Creative and Destructive Communities of Lake Condah, Tja’i Raka, Western Victoria'. Her study focuses on the Gunditjmara people as a creative community, whose presence has been transformed and articulated in the land for centuries. Using the community's highly unusual harvesting system as a case study, she explores how landscape is variously created, destroyed and interpreted by both Indigenous and colonizing groups. As with a number of the chapters in this book, place-based social and economic practices are supported by the stories she explores. The connectivity is a connection between the past and present, but also the coming together of people at the sites as meeting places. Johnson's analysis discusses the roles of contestation and coloniality within the landscape, and considers it to be inherent to the sites' contemporary meaning as a creative and productive landscape.

The themes of transformation through storytelling continue in Wendy Richards' chapter, 'In Now We Will Live Forever: Creative Practice and Refugee Settlement in Regional Australia'. Richards gives insight into how Sub-Saharan African refugees in regional Australia developed an anthology of stories about their experience of multi-generational displacement. The processes of taking oral histories and committing these to a book provide a means to explore the multiple literacies that were engaged by participants and project managers. Richards' account speaks directly to the role of creative activity in the development of community well-being in regional settings. The negotiation of literacy between oral and written language, and between members of the project team, are the 'in-between' factors that illuminate the transformational potential of creativity among those who feel ill at ease with traditional practices of culture knowledge in the Global North.

Susan Lockman's chapter explores another kind of transformation through migration and population movement. 'The Artists Are Taking Over This Town: Lifestyle Migration and Regional Creative Capital' discusses the spatial dimensions of story and place through what are known as 'tree-change' migration. According to Lockman, creative workers are one of the most common groups attracted to living and working in regional settings. Her piece examines relatively privileged regional sites to demonstrate how the flow of people brings new cultural practices and creative literacies to communities. The ingrained narratives of population loss (especially of young people) from regional areas are challenged here, as Lockman transforms the narrative into the return of regional capacity that affects the well-being of the whole community. In common with Richards, Lockman investigates transformational activity at the community level and at the site of relationships between people and place.

Storytelling is a central theme throughout this book, and perhaps the most explicit engagement with this is offered in the chapter by Ariella Van Leyn and Helen Kiesbe. Van Leyn and Kiesbe discuss innovative use of digital technologies to enhance storytelling.
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from regions that have experienced crisis. In this way, they point to new ways to improve community resilience and inclusion. ‘Making Stories Matter: Using Participatory New Media Storytelling and Evaluation to Serve Marginalized and Regional Communities’ explores a project that connected a cyclone-damaged regional community with a wider audience (locally, geographically distant, and for posterity) by using digital technologies. Partnering with non-governmental organizations and public institutions, the researchers designed workshops to close the gap between regional communities and technological infrastructure and knowledge. The pedagogy embedded in the workshops facilitated a self-actualizing awareness among participants that enabled them to more readily collect, store and disseminate stories. This transformed the relationship between oral story and local knowledge, participant and audience, regional isolation and connectivity.

The tensions between storytelling and community transformation are explored by Robert Mason. His chapter, ‘Vicarious Heritage: Performing Multicultural Heritage in Regional Australia’, recounts a heritage tourism project that connected geographical locales and historical data into a single actor performance narrative for tourists and locals. The performance of regional heritage is necessarily a negotiation between stakeholders as well as with audiences that experience it. For the latter, the creative product relies on a reflexivity to engage with the historical story as well as the dynamics of the performance itself. The chapter explores the balance between tourists’ desire for information, the creation of an engaging narrative and the commercial needs of regional and heritage tourism. In this way, it discusses the role of the past in the present and its influence on social connectivity, inclusion and creative practice.

Tensions between perceived metropolitan bias and regional ingenuity form the basis for Janet McDonalds chapter. Her chapter, ‘Artist-Ran Initiatives as Liminal Incubatory Arts Practice’, examines the numerous young artist enclaves (known as artist-run initiatives (ARIs)) in a regional centre. Focusing on their embedded presence in the community, she explores how articulating difference from metropolitan ARIs re-frames their sociocultural practice as liminal rather than marginal. Moreover, she argues that the positioning of ARIs as liminal practices, outside of traditional or commercial artistic practice, is a strength to the communities. Demonstrating that regional ARIs are by their very nature short-term, intensely active, and innovative, McDonald argues that this allows for up-skilling and mentoring that is somewhere in-between, or on the threshold between, formal training and industry models. The ARIs provide a metaphor for regional creative practice as somewhere that has the potential to be on the threshold between innovation and traditional or heritage arts practices.

Andrew Mason’s chapter, ‘Art in Response to Crisis: The Drought and Regional Community’, intersects with Van Luyk and Klaus’ piece on the role of the arts in response to natural disaster. Mason analyses the liminal position of visual arts during the worst drought recorded in a regional centre since European settlement. ‘Avant Garden’ was created by local and nationally renowned artists to celebrate the innovation of a regional ‘garden city’ without water. Artists told their stories through public works that could interact with festivagiers, some critiquing the notion of gardens, and others representing the memory of flowers. Like
McDonald, Mason considers the community as embedded in the creative practice, rather than as temporary creative practitioners. The sustainability of such an initiative is reliant on the climate, and so the artistic and cultural practices developed in a drought are always in the threshold of change and transformation.

Conclusion

Profound connections abound in regional communities not only out of necessity but also because connectivity is more innovative where there is scarce mobile coverage, hundreds of kilometres between neighbours, and vast differences in the make-up of the population through chosen and non-chosen immigration and settlement. Through the interwoven themes of transformation, connectivity, storytelling and liminality, this book explores the capacity of arts to transform communities’ sense of self. It demonstrates the unique nature of arts practice outside metropolitan centres, and, in doing so, the enduring resonance of the regions to contemporary artistic experiences throughout the Global North.

References