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book review

Sharing the Wealth

By-roads and Hidden Treasures

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Paul Ashton, Chris Gibson and Ross Gibson (eds)

By-Roads and Hidden Treasures: Mapping Cultural Assets in Regional Australia

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It is hard to resist the allure of a rough-edged map with its suggestion of treasures to be found in wild and unfamiliar locations. Like the idea of an uninhabited beach or first contact, the fantasy of stumbling across riches—material or experiential—propelled by a sense of derring-do is inscribed from childhood on in every shipwreck, haunted house, romance or pirate story. Adults come to learn of a much harsher reality where pirates enact politically marked forms of unregulated violence that may nonetheless be state sanctioned, treasures are goods stolen from other

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people that continue to bear the fingerprints of colonial and imperial wars in their amassing and maps are the cartographic tools of robber barons and claimants of invaded lands.

By-Roads and Hidden Treasures plays within and among such contradictions. Born of an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project intended to map and analyse forms of creativity, cultural development and productivity in regional Australia, this anthology offers a collection of essays that work to complicate the literature on creative industries. Reading this book in the context of the cultural policy and creative industry oeuvre, three key features stand out. First, without fanfare it transcends usual approaches to cultural asset mapping and well-rehearsed problems of definition. It does not wallow in familiar conventions of debate about, for instance, the neoliberalisation of arts policy, or what distinguishes the terms 'cultural' from 'creative', or dwell on how regeneration through creativity is also a mode of gentrification and mono-culturation. In one of the more theoretically advanced chapters in the collection, 'Locating the Local: Culture, Place and the Citizen', Deborah Stevenson allows some of her frustration with these conventions to show. She pokes at the mandatory positivity required of case studies of culture-led city and regional rejuvenation projects and the 'rather predictable suite of recommendations' inhabiting policy blueprints for cultural planning. (100) Stevenson notes that underpinning the inarguable calls within cultural planning documents for greater social inclusion, democratic definitions of what creativity is, and notions of the cosmopolitan citizen, lies a deep assumption about the ability to consume. The implications are clear. A raced, classed and lifeworld-conformist consumer is being encouraged to overtake and displace those who were there before while pretending they are celebrating a more diverse and inclusive public. Radical alterity makes way for acceptable funkiness. Gibson, Warren and Gallen's contribution, 'Engaging Creativity in Industrial Regions: Mapping Vernacular Cultural Assets', shows similar flair. They identify the paradoxical mimeticism at work in local government attempts to harness 'unique' vernacular assets to reproduce versions of cultural activities (a theatre district, a writer's festival, a clear visual arts presence) that patently manifest a recognisable creative vibe behind which there is nothing truly new or unexpected. Crucially, these writers are sympathetic and intellectually generous friends of the policymakers and

implementers they critique. They do not lampoon the planners for their unoriginality but stay with the contradictions, helping their policy interlocutors nut through the inequalities created by the loss of the blue collar workers who were valorised in foundational creative industries texts.

The second key feature of this collection is its uneven tone, which in its own way constitutes a gentle critique of conventional cultural policy approaches. The anthology deliberately mixes the instrumental with the experimental, the theoretical with the practical, lyrical non-fiction with standard academic prose. Even in chapters that give instrumental advice on how to do cultural research in country towns where art is not manly enough to be considered a serious subject of reflection (Malone and Anderson, 'Having the Conversation') or which tell how to use GIS to map creative imaginaries and systems of distribution and supply to transcend the limitations of conventional data sets (Brennan-Horley, 'Mapping Methods'), the contributors still manage to quietly disrupt expectations. Malone and Anderson's contribution hails another of the outputs from the ARC research this collection originated from, a toolkit on cultural mapping and cultural planning, featuring seventeen case studies from regional New South Wales and Victoria. The piece they contribute discusses what lay behind the selection of those seventeen studies including mention of the depressing narrative that could be yielded if a post-mortem were conducted on their discarded case studies:

Time and again, combinations of staff turnover, financial cutbacks, volunteer burnout, skills gaps, absence or loss of critical knowledge and unsustainable strategic goals that did not fit the capacity of the local area signalled the end of good plans and activity. (40)

Even though Malone and Anderson clearly focused on the (obligatory) 'what works' side of the implementation ledger, they still unearth important insights. They have to confront the question of what makes for a cultural asset in places which have not benefited from creative industry re-education camps, places where people still equate culture and art with elite expressions such as opera, ballet, professional theatre and symphony orchestras and don't see themselves as having anything 'creative' to offer. Often the answer is to approach the issue obliquely by asking open questions: 'If you and your family were to leave the Central Darling forever, what do you think you'd miss the most about the place?' (44) The answers provided reveal

the issues that give small remote places their appeal and their frustration. Of course isolation, mobility and access are major concerns but the unexpected happens too. Ray, a postman from Ivanhoe, emerges as the locus of cultural activity though he too insists he is not creative, despite being the landscape designer and volunteer builder of the local park, the mayor of Central Darling Shire, holder of the keys to Ivanhoe Hall where performances are held, fund-raiser extraordinaire and the one who ensures safe delivery of canvases, paints and other essential resources coming in and the freighting of cultural outputs going out. (45–6) Such a character is pivotal, yet his role will not be registered as belonging to the creative industries, just as there is no metropolitan template for cultural planning or succession strategy that could possibly fill his shoes. The point of celebrating Ray is to recognise that regions need to be catered for in their specificity.

This brings me to the third feature. The book is a claim for the importance of regions and a critique of the metropolitan planning models that are too often imported despite their patent lack of fit. Many of the chapters critique the currently dominant focus on gentrifying the inner city in the name of cultural branding and how this leaves ‘the situation (and applicability) of cultural planning to places within towns and regions beyond the metropolis vexed and uneven’. (101) Within each of the book’s three sections (Definitions, Theories, Case Studies), at least one essay reflects on the nature of gathering cultural research data and how to map and track ‘the local’ beyond authorised versions of where creativity can be found. We learn from different contributors how cultural assets, such as heritage collections, are also archives representing the memorialising traditions of an occupying colonial culture (Miranda Johnson, ‘Indigeneity and the Archive’), and how cultural sites, such as Federation Square in the centre of Melbourne, are connected to the ‘drought-plagued, deforested Mallee’ which subtends and finances Melbourne’s well-watered metropolis (Emily Potter, ‘Postcolonial Atmospheres’).

The concept left more untouched than I would prefer is that of policy itself. Cultural planning and its related scholarship is curiously unreflexive in relaying normative definitions of policy. In embracing the concept of policy as a vehicle for influencing change, cultural researchers tend to adopt a conceptualisation of policy as discrete artefacts or strategies for funding and action that come about through processes of review and consultation, pragmatic consideration and evaluation of

different options as influenced by key stakeholders, academic researchers and other experts. In this perspective, policy is developed by institutional players operating at local, state and federal government levels whose discursive and political task it is to herd new funding categories and domains of action into life. Influencing policy is a matter of creating convincing arguments—we call it having research impact.

This anthology does not entirely abandon this concept—it was conceived, after all, in partnership with the very institutions that are usually attributed either policy formulation or implementation power. But, like the haunting traces of colonial dispossession that persist in talk of ‘cultural assets’, the essays here can also be read between the lines as troubling positivistic assumptions about how policy works and how research influences policy. The authors present a picture of serendipity as well as planning, of adjustment and compromise, of the inadequacy of planning data if national collections are relied upon. It does not pretend to be an ethnography of policy but stands as a call to attend to what keeps people going in places where most of us don’t live.

Taken as a whole, the book practices what it preaches, offering ‘hidden treasures’ for those prepared to settle in for the dig and unique insights for those prepared to travel off the main roads. It achieves more than its cover photograph of a dirt road passing through scrub would lead one to expect. It is a refreshing and important counterpoint to the swollen body of cultural policy and creative industry material that uncritically rehearses a set of concepts that derive from elsewhere (the post-industrial, the metropolis, the transnational). It is a clever, subtle book, which deserves to be put to wide use in teaching, as a methods primer for research and, yes, to reset policy discussion to the creative potential of the Australian here and now.

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