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**Writing and researching (in) the regions**

Abstract:

The special issue of *TEXT* on writing and researching (in) the regions provides a robust portrait of the ways in which regional Australia is imagined, produced, and negotiated by writers and scholars working in a range of settings broadly understood as regional. The writing and research here gather around a range of themes: writing (in) the regions; teaching (in) the regions; and publishing (in) the regions. Together, these works contribute to the ongoing negotiations around how to understand, interpret, work within and nurture regional writing, teaching and research.

Biographical Notes:

Dr Nike Sulway is Senior Lecturer in Creative and Critical Writing at the University of Southern Queensland. Dr Nike Sulway is the author of the novels *Winter's Tale* (forthcoming in 2019), *Dying in the first person*, *Rupetta*, *The bone flute*, *The true green of hope*, and the children's book *What the sky knows*. Nike co-edited *Forgotten Lives: Recovering lost histories through fact and fiction* (Cambridge Scholarly Publishing, 2018), with Professor Donna Lee Brien and Dr Dallas Baker, as well as a previous special issue of *TEXT* on Australasian fairy tale history and practice.

Dr Lynda Hawryluk is a Senior Lecturer in Writing and Course Coordinator of Creative Writing programs at Southern Cross University. Lynda lectures in writing units and supervises Honours, Masters and PhD students. She is the immediate past President of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, and a board member of the Byron Writers Festival. An experienced writing workshop facilitator, Lynda has been published in both academic and creative publications.

Dr Moya Costello has four books – two of short creative prose and two novellas – and many pieces individually published in scholarly and literary journals, and anthologies. She has been awarded writing grants and fellowships by government departments and literary organisations. She has been a guest at many writers' festivals, read her work at various venues, been a writer-in-residence at Monash University, and judged many literary competitions. She is an adjunct lecturer with the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Southern Cross University.

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## Introduction

What are regions in Australia? One place to begin to define such a slippery term might be to draw on that of the Regional Australia Institute (RAI) which defines regional Australia as 'all of the towns, small cities and areas that lie beyond the major capital cities (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and Canberra)' (RAI 2017a). According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), Australians living in these areas:

> experience poorer health and welfare outcomes than people living in metropolitan areas. They have higher rates of chronic disease and mortality, have poorer access to health services, are more likely to engage in behaviours associated with poorer health, and are over-represented in the child protection and youth justice sectors. (AIHW)

People living in regional areas of Australia are also far less likely than their peers in the major capital cities to hold a Bachelor's degree: in the 25-34 years age group, around 20% of residents hold a degree, compared to 45% of the same age group living in major cities (RUN 2019b). Regional students and researchers, and the universities that cater to them, are then operating in a complex research and education environment that is markedly different to that of their urban peers: an environment coloured by complex socio-economic and cultural disadvantage, as well as a differentially rich set of needs.

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) is a collective of universities that, together, deliver higher education to over 135,000 students, 45 percent studying online, with this education delivered across 62 physical locations (RUN 2019a). The RUN's objectives are to work together to enhance and support the particular needs of regional universities, including their students, by providing policy advice to government, strengthening and promoting regional universities, and building institutional capacity and sustainability 'through the sharing of best practice in educational delivery, training, research and organisational management, particularly with reference to regional contexts' (RUN 2019c).

This Special Issue of *TEXT* collects papers from researchers at five of the six universities in the Australian RUN (Central Queensland University; Southern Cross University; Federation University; University of Southern Queensland; and University of New England), as well as from Charles Darwin University.

Despite the seeming clarity and perhaps even sense-making utility of these governmental and organisational definitions of what it is to be regional in Australia, the regional is only easy to define – to enclose within a boundary of some kind – if you define it in ways that are useful in limited contexts: for administrative, bureaucratic and managerial processes, and for the purposes of government policy and funding. As writers, researchers, and educators who live and work in areas dubbed regional by various national bodies, we know through experience what it is to live, work, write, and dream within a regional landscape. We know, too, that our

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experiences of the challenges and opportunities particular to writing and researching in regional universities and areas are markedly diverse: that the issues facing writers, researchers, and students in the Northern Territory, for example, are notably distinct from those of the same group of people on the Sunshine Coast, or in the Gippsland region. We understand, too, that while bureaucratic definitions are useful in some contexts, the experience of regionality exceeds both the geographical limitations of such definitions, and the limits that they set on expectations of regional writers and researchers to provide leadership, and provide exemplars of excellence: to provide a particular, and particularly inspiring and thrilling, set of stories and other research outcomes. To embody a set of experiences that are not limited by our location outside the major capital cities, but enriched by it. Enlivened and particularised.

Of course, our experiences of the regions are only ever partial and personal: they are *our* experiences, of *our* regions. According to the RAI, there are 'more than 9 million people living in regional Australia; and … every community is different. But … all have some similar issues surrounding regional jobs, population shift, health and education' (RAI 2017b). How then, to begin to compass all that regional writing and research have to offer?

It isn't possible, in any single journal issue, to canvas the full range of writing and research being produced in/in response to the regions: instead, this collection is only one in a series of recent explorations of regionality as a locus of creative and critical understanding. In 2016, *Meniscus* published a special issue (Beyond the Divide) 'dedicated to writing and writers living and/or working on the other side of divides (geographical, political, linguistic or cultural)' (Baker 2016: 1). In 2018, the New Zealand Studies annual conference theme was Regional Identities & Coastal Communities of the Pacific. In 2019, as well as this collection of works, we know of at least two other forthcoming explorations with a focus on regions. *M/C Journal* have announced the publication of an issue titled *regional,* scheduled for publication in June 2019, which 'seeks to solidify some of these understandings along with the experiences of living, working, creating, researching, or thinking in or through regional Australia'. An upcoming special issue of *TEXT* (Peripheral Visions) shares its title and thematic focus with the 2018 AAWP conference of the same name, including a focus on 'writing from the regions'. Internationally, too, the regions have become an increasing focus of interest: for example, in 2014 the *European Journal of American Studies* published a special issue on North American regionalism.

Regionalism, then, is an emerging and persistent focus of scholarship in writing and its related or sister fields.

This collection of works seeks to both interrogate and illuminate the regional, or regionality, as both a site of practice, and (in its gestural, evolving form) as a form of practice. The regional, like its equally nebulous counterparts, the urban and suburban, the rural, the national, even the global, is in these works always in a state of becoming, and often uneasily addressed. Many of the works in this collection begin their explorations with articulations of what regionalism is or can be: what limits it imposes, and what possibilities it opens up. The collection explores the challenges of self-identifying as a regional writer, a regional researcher, or a researcher of regionality, in a cultural context where, as Lynda Hawryluk,

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Emma Doolan and Moya Costello note, the regional is often understood as parochial, banal, or insular (4). This collection demonstrates that the regional is, rather, rich, diverse, and complex, while also being flexible enough to accommodate a range of expressions and experiences. As Jane Palmer notes in her contribution, the stories that are gathered and told (by her fellow researchers and, we would argue, by the gathering of researchers brought together in this collection) have what she dubs a 'somewhereness':

> something that locates country without recourse to the boundaries designated by governments, courts or institutional administrations. (4)

The various re-conceptualisations of regionality in this collection demonstrate Claire Hansen's insight, too, that regional places are 'not bounded and defined by [their] counter-positioning to places imagined in the concepts of metropolis, the urban, the city [but] generated through networks' (5). And, as Grayson Cooke and Dea Morgain argue:

> regionality is something that disappears as it appears, in some way always able to be reconstituted elsewhere when the need arises. And, regionality is just as much a state of mind as any "real" space. Marginality often occurs at the very heart of what is considered central, and this has always been the case ... inbetween one space and another, in an imaginary and a real at the same time. (2005: 5-6)

Together, the works in this collection provide an insight into what researchers and writers are thinking, and doing, in Australian regional areas. Many of the works engage with the particular challenges and possibilities that come with teaching in regional settings, while others are concerned with how to represent regional Australia in ethical, authentic, and fresh ways. The works loosely cohere around three themes: writing (in) the regions; teaching (in) the regions; and publishing (in) the regions.


## Writing (in) the regions

Perhaps the strongest theme across the collection is the elusive question of how to express regionality through writing: how do regions impact on the works created in, with, or about them? How do writers ethically and authentically reflect the particularities of regional people, experiences and landscapes in their works?

Palmer suggests 'that being a regional writer is not a matter of which region I inhabit or which other regions it overlaps, but rather which region I help to "perform" through the practice of writing' (5). A performativity that evokes the 'specific *somewhereness* of each story: that the stories themselves remain local or regional, rather than being subsumed' into a homogeneity (8).

John Ryan's paper describes and documents his collaborations with the Northern Tablelands region of New South Wales in the process of creating a 'gorge-text that encodes the writing that plants themselves do *in* – and *about* – their worlds as well as the human writer's *composing-with* plants to create a poetic work' (1). Ryan's articulation of a symbiotic, collaborative partnership between landscape and writers is echoed in Hansen's paper, where

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she describes students in far north Queensland 'as finding their "books in brooks" and "tongues in trees"' (2).

Hawryluk, Doolan and Costello describe the emergence of a distinctive regional literature, similar in some ways to the Tasmanian Gothic or the Southern American Gothic. Christine Tondorf's 'Lure' is an example of this Northern Rivers Gothic, a narrative in which the beach offers 'restoration, yet [is] also home to the grotesque and strange' (9).

Louise Henry grapples with the challenges of creating an affecting voice for a 'peripheral history' (1) of women's stories in far north Queensland. To voice the absence of these women's narratives, Henry experiments 'with literary techniques in response to unreliable and incomplete accounts of the north' (10).

Sophie Masson provides a rousing account of how to not just sustain a writing practice in regional Australia, but to create and sustain a flourishing set of complementary writing and publishing practices. She argues that while writers everywhere face the challenges of technological, social, and structural change in the publishing industry, those living in regional areas 'face additional issues related to geographic distance from major publishing centres' (1). Her solution is to 'wear many hats' such as those of student, writer, teacher, board member, networker, and publisher.

## Teaching (in) the regions

Online teaching is a strong feature of teaching in regional universities, with 45 percent of students in the RUN (2019a) studying online. Donna Lee Brien and Liz Ellison begin their investigation of online student learning with a discussion of the challenges around building a sense of community for regional, but perhaps especially regional and online, students. The paper provides an evidence-based, qualitative study of the ways in which online interactions can provide experiences of community, of finding your 'tribe'.

Threasa Meads provides a passionate and richly detailed account of the ways in which an innovative, challenging, and yet nurturing set of teaching and learning strategies have been used to address the needs of first-year students at the regional and online campuses of Federation University. She focuses, in particular, on how to design teaching and learning experiences for a broad range of learning outcomes, including overcoming student resistance to the notion of being creative, facilitating creative writing practice, and fostering a culture of creative writing production (1).

Hansen also provides a rigorously well-considered exploration of place-based pedagogy: a pedagogy rooted in an understanding of the complexity and fluidity of 'regional places [which] are imaginative constructions' (15). Her paper, which centres on the process of teaching Shakespeare's *As You Like It* to students in far north Queensland, negotiates the complex relationship between a sense of lived place and the literary places imagined and constructed in the texts we encounter in our teaching, writing, and research.

## Publishing (in) the regions

Several works in this collection include some discussion of publishing within the context of teaching and writing (in) the regions. Masson, for example, critically engages with Ben Walter's argument that 'geographic disadvantage – i.e. distance from the major cities – may make things much harder for regionally based writers, especially with city-based literary organisations turning a blind eye to their own privileged status as inhabiting cultural centres with easy access to opportunities' (Masson 9). This sense that regional writers and students might feel disengaged from, unaware of, or disinterested in publishing is reflected, too, in some of the discussions of student perceptions of their relationship to publishing in Hawryluk et al, and Meads. Masson demonstrates that, despite perceptions that publishing (and its associated practices) are centred in Sydney and Melbourne, regional areas are home to a range of thriving boutique or small publishers such as (within the Armidale/north-west NSW region) Christmas Press, Little Pink Dog Books, and Lacuna Publishing.

Two works in this collection focus explicitly on publishing (in) the regions. Nicole Anae provides a critical assessment of the regional literary journal, *Idiom*, published by Central Queensland University. Through her close analysis of three substantial issues, she demonstrates that *Idiom* provides 'a unique sense of place and history' (1), celebrating the region in a way that contributes to the ongoing construction of Australian literary regionalism.

Glenn Morrison, Raelke Grimmer, and Adelle Sefton-Rowston provide a detailed examination of their research into the viability of publishing a regional literary journal for the Northern Territory: 'something Territorians have not had since 2000' (17). Their thoughtful and detailed mapping of the potential and pitfalls of setting up a new journal featuring the voices and stories of the Northern Territory provides a fascinating insight into the ways in which Australian literary journals currently in circulation are not sufficient to reflect the broad scope of Australian regional writing.

**Conclusion**

These studies – both articles and creative works – provide a broad, emerging, contested, and vibrant portrait of writing and researching (in) the regions. Together, they demonstrate that regional writing, research, and teaching practices are diverse and lively, as well as creatively and intellectually rigorous. As editors, we'd like to borrow the spruiking term 'Regions Rising', used by RAI (2017b) to title their inaugural summit in 2019 in Australia's capital Canberra, to characterise this Special Issue of *TEXT*. As we have heard at a recent conference, regions are places, or spaces, whose stories are always in a state of becoming, always being written. We believe that this issue makes a significant and meaningful contribution to that process of writing the regions.

A special issue of a scholarly journal does not come together without substantial and ongoing support from a range of people. The editors would like to thank each of the peer reviewers for this issue, without whom the collection would not be as robust, engaging, or intellectually rigorous as it is. A thank you, also, to the *TEXT* Special Issues editors, who continue to commission, and shepherd to publication, a wide range of scholarship in these special issues.

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