
By-Roads and Hidden Treasures begins with a deceptively complex research question: “how can we best map regional culture in contemporary Australia so that we can assess that culture’s value?” (p. 3). This inquiry began with the Cultural Asset Mapping in Regional Australia project, a collaboration of universities, local governments, and community actors, but also brought in other scholars studying locality, political economy, culture, and place-based community politics. While the book complicates as many questions as it resolves, it nonetheless provides useful guidance for scholars, cultural planners, policymakers, and political actors. The book provides a flexible roadmap for how to assess, engage, and support local communities’ ‘cultural assets’ in a manner appropriate to places of marginality, exclusion, and conventionally unrecognized vibrancy.

The collection proves timely. As Ross Gibson explains, this is “a time in national and global history when the most basic precepts in planning, governance, and cultural geography [are] being interrogated” (p. 1). The shift in Global North nation-states like Australia towards postindustrial economies has put ‘culture’ in a double bind. On the one hand, immaterial things like knowledge are increasingly commodified, yet, on the other, conventional systems of valuation have been thrown into doubt. The collection does not theorize these transnational processes, but rather asks how ‘the local’ has responded.

Offering important insights for cultural geographers, these authors rethink conventional conceptions of ‘the local’, culture, value, and place, though scale remains less richly theorized. For instance, Deborah Stevenson reframes ‘culture’ as a way of life, challenging cultural planners’ conventional focus on ‘the arts’. She also reappropriates ‘creativity’ from its
conscription by Richard Florida’s ‘creative class’ and the ‘creative industries’, in which “economic ends are dominant” (p. 102). Andrew Warren and Rob Evitt explore how young Indigenous hip-hop artists practice place through the ways they negotiate their marginalization. “Place is crucial” for them as a source, mediator, and product of their music (p. 137). Place is relational and hybrid for these artists, emerging at the intersection of local politics and transnational black hip-hop solidarity.

While others describe ‘place’ as ‘sites’ of creativity (e.g., see Gibson, Warren, and Gallan’s chapter), Emily Potter describes the “shadow places” that haunt Australian landscapes. Drawing on the work of ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2008), Potter argues that “[e]very place has in its composition the imprint of other places” (p 83). This “web of responsibility” implicates both the centers and the margins (p. 84). This ethos seems vital given, on the one hand, Australia’s (post)colonial legacies of marginalizing Indigenous folks, often through planning policies, and, on the other, neoliberal place-making that centers ‘culture’ as consumption. Moreover, Potter’s conception of place moves beyond, as Ross Gibson writes, the naturalized “divisions between the rural and the civic, the marginal and the central” (p. 11). The book’s focus on regional Australia challenges these binaries, while still engaging real marginalization.

The book also offers an urgent call to practice, as evidenced in its sequence, placing a section on “definitions” in cultural planning before its theoretical and case study chapters. While this may risk deploying concepts before fully conceptualizing them beyond institutional frameworks, these chapters are nonetheless instructive for those new to cultural planning. Sue Broaden and Paul Ashton explain the history of cultural planning, but also describe how the present “need for robust research and rigorous analysis [on]…supporting cultural development in local communities and for evaluating the cultural impact of service and programs” (p. 34). The
following chapters respond to this need. Margaret Malone and Lisa Andersen outline ‘best practices’ (e.g., facilitating access and engaging communities to set long-term goals) and to-do’s for practitioners (e.g., an open-minded approach to ‘culture’ and working across scales of government) (p. 40). Chris Brennan-Horley combines GIS with qualitative methods like interviews and mental mapping to make less tangible cultural assets more visible. Miranda Johnson describes archives as both a method of cultural assessment and a cultural asset in itself. Greg Young provides a promising if somewhat underdeveloped blueprint for “holistic” research. Justin O’Connor prescribes steps for policymakers, including “a new language of value” in which the economic is neither excluded nor dominant (p. 180). Penny Stannard, in a helpful if simplistic chapter, highlights how some challenges facing cultural planning are not new. Finally, Eddy Harris, an Indigenous Bakandji artist, tells his own story, invoking themes found elsewhere in the book. He challenges assumptions about ‘culture’, highlights interconnected centers and margins, and outlines practical steps to help artists.

Ultimately, By-Roads and Hidden Treasures both benefits from and struggles with the tensions of its polyvocality. Different paths through the text will necessarily produce different meanings, involving both emphases and oversights. Readers with various purposes, whether for theoretical enrichment or thoughtful practice, will nonetheless be left with a more complex understanding of ‘the local’ within our moment of globalization and with a roadmap of multiple possibilities.

References
