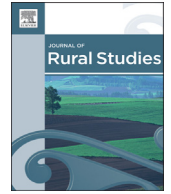




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud

Rural cultural resourcefulness: How community music enterprises sustain cultural vitality

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 February 2016

Received in revised form

20 October 2016

Accepted 4 November 2016

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Resourceful creativity

Resilience

Adaptiveness

Isolation

Creative frugality

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how musical performance and expression catalyse rural cultural resourcefulness amidst uncertainty and change. We describe and then challenge conceptions of rural vulnerability and resilience amidst substantial social, environmental and economic change. Rural populations are increasingly constituted as vulnerable subjects within state-expert modelling of economic and environmental resilience. Yet, cultural resources and capacities are seldom acknowledged. Community music provides an often invisible and overlooked example. In rural locations music may struggle to be a commercially viable industry, but takes different forms in diverse community music enterprises, including non-profit clubs, orchestras, ensembles, choirs and festivals. Such enterprises sustain engaged music participation despite challenges of isolation and lack of critical mass, and enable people to adjust to change and develop social networks. In so doing, community music contributes to an evolving, prosaic sense of rural cultural resourcefulness. We document how rural Australian musicians negotiate isolation, distance, and new circumstances, and foster alternative spaces for creativity. Geographic and socio-economic limitations triggered those with an insatiable desire to make and perform music to create their own opportunities through grassroots creativity. From this quotidian example we challenge state/expert conceptions of rural resilience. Resourceful creativities – focused on cultural vitality, process and everyday rewards rather than commercial successes – illustrate how rural people sustain cultural life amidst hardship, isolation and change.

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1. Introduction

All societies have traditions of musical performance and expression. Music is a powerful visceral force; it can foster feelings of community and belonging while establishing a sense of self-identity and place (DeNora, 2000; Duffy, 2000). In her seminal essay on the topic, Susan Smith wrote of the use of music by marginalised people throughout history as an outlet available for them to ‘enhance their lives and challenge their marginality’ (Smith, 1997:516). This article discusses one such marginalised group: musicians within an isolated and sparsely populated rural Australian community. From this example we seek to contribute to a burgeoning conversation – in this journal and elsewhere (Anwar-McHenry, 2009, 2011; Mayes, 2010a; Edwards, 2012; Luckman,

2012; Waitt and Gibson, 2013) – on the varied contributions of arts and cultural activities to rural life.

Further, we wish to respond to growing debate regarding conceptions of vulnerability and resilience as they pertain to rural populations. Rural people in Australia and elsewhere have dealt with enormous change, and face uncertain futures: harsh weather patterns fluctuating between droughts and floods, physical and mental isolation, ageing populations, and decreasing access to public services (Cocklin and Dibden, 2004; Connell and Dufty-Jones, 2014). A growing literature is taking stock of capacities among rural communities to respond to socio-economic and environmental change, disasters and sudden shocks (Anderson, 2014; Singh-Peterson and Lawrence, 2014). In this article we focus on the rather more prosaic, and cultural, capacities among rural communities to adjust to change and challenging circumstances (cf. McManus et al., 2012; Roberts and Townsend, 2015). In rural areas, especially where populations are sparse, musical participation – in festivals, orchestras, choirs – generates rare spaces for creative expression, knowledge sharing and various forms of emotional support (Anwar-McHenry, 2011). Beyond

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dominant understandings of vulnerability and resilience – framed in social and economic terms by the state and policy/research experts as short term response to disaster (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2013) – we document and theorise ongoing, everyday forms of *rural cultural resourcefulness* as catalysed through musical participation. We are less focused here on resilience as a response to disaster or sudden shocks, than to ongoing gradual change in a geographically marginal location, with accompanying persistent difficulties faced when commercial possibilities are limited. We highlight the contributions such cultural participation makes to the wider resourcefulness of rural communities (cf Anwar-McHenry, 2011; Derrett, 2009). Resourceful creativities, we argue, warrant closer attention within the wider debate about rural resilience, analysing the manner in which meaningful and active cultural life is sustained in rural areas.

Our paper is structured as follows: first, we overview the debate on conceptions of rural vulnerability and resilience, clarifying our distinctive response. Then, after a brief explanation of what is community music, along with a description of our case study location and methodology, we detail the story of musical practices in the Bega Valley, Australia. In a region where commercial music opportunities are fragile, community music programs flourish. Through listening to those involved in such programs, we explore the significance and meanings of music participation, and its wider social and creative role in ostensibly vulnerable rural places.

2. Rethinking rural resilience: towards resourceful creativities

Creativity is increasingly viewed as a facilitator of regional development via discrete cultural activities such as music, film, literature, fashion, and visual arts, where value is created not in physical production, but in creative content, and its semiotic meaning (Scott, 2000). Arts and cultural activities are in themselves nothing new; but in the past two decades, re-positioned as part of the *creative industries*, they have assumed an increasingly important position within regional development policy debates (Gibson and Klocker, 2005; Scott, 2006). The promise is that high value activities in the arts, culture and creativity can stimulate meaningful employment, attract tourists and inward investment, and also generate a lively cultural milieu that attracts innovative and highly educated people (Bell and Jayne, 2010).

Subsequent work has sought to demonstrate how the arts and creativity contribute to regional development in more diverse and holistic ways (Waite and Gibson, 2013; Roberts and Townsend, 2015). Beyond creative activities as rural economic revitalisation strategies (which quantitative modelling suggests are unlikely to yield significant increases in formal employment – see Argent et al., 2013), are a host of contributions to the vitality of everyday life and resourcefulness of rural communities. The cultural activities that underlie commercial creative industries frequently survive – and even thrive – despite sparse and small populations, low incomes and the failure of commercial actors to maintain viable enterprises (Ward and O'Regan, 2015). The *absence* of realistic commercial opportunities fuels 'creative frugality' (Gibson and Connell, 2012:6) – the ability to pool scarce resources to sustain cultural activities, and thus generate vibrancy of another kind.

In theorising the social and symbolic significance of vernacular creative endeavours in rural contexts, we draw upon the antecedent work of Robyn Mayes (2010a, b), who examined the making of postcards in a small rural Australian town. In Western Australia metropolitan producers refused to print postcards of the town because they did not feel there was a sufficient market. A group of residents decided to design postcards themselves, more for the symbolic contribution to the town's identity and community than

for any explicit profit. Creative practice can be a means for fulfilling needs that the commercial market cannot meet. In addition, creativity was used as a medium in which residents could catalyse sense of place, socialise and foster a sense of community (Mayes, 2010b). This too resonates with our example below, which focuses on musical practices as ongoing, everyday participation activities, rather than as exceptional or special events.

In community music, the emphasis is much less on the capacity to generate private sector incomes or singular 'successes' (as measured by commercial markets – royalties, record sales, ticket receipts, rave reviews in commercial print media), and instead on the multiple everyday pleasures that stem from participation in a creative and expressive activity. Music practices are a means for the flourishing of new rural subjects in the community economy domain (cf. Gibson, 2001), where social and cultural life generates a distinctive moral economy (Hesmondhalgh, 2013) surrounding creative interactions.

From this distinctive cultural and creative practice, we seek to make a contribution to academic and policy debate examining rural vulnerability and resilience amidst widespread social, economic and environmental transformations (McManus et al., 2012; Imperiale and Vanclay, 2016). Such concepts as vulnerability, resilience and adaptiveness have assumed increased importance across rural studies, and social and ecological literatures amidst climate and economic crisis. Resilience is 'rapidly emerging as an idea 'whose time has come' in policy debates' (Martin and Sunley, 2015:1) surrounding the capacities of urban, regional and local communities to respond to and cope with change.

A host of such changes have transpired in rural areas (Tonts et al., 2012). These include: social and economic stresses from restructuring (Pritchard and McManus, 2000; Lockie and Bourke, 2001); changing geographies of investment and work in agriculture, forestry and mining (Tonts et al., 2014); and heightened exposure to extreme climatic events as a consequence of global warming (Head et al., 2011). Population decline and ageing in many rural areas have accompanied structural changes in agriculture (Cocklin and Dibden, 2004), but are also amplified and counteracted in uneven ways by new urban-to-rural mobilities of retirees, lifestyle migrants and tourists (Connell and McManus, 2011; Davies, 2014). Increasing debts and costs of capital inputs, uncertainty over succession, and unpredictable growing seasons (including worsening floods and droughts) has seen many farmers leaving their fields (Lockie and Bourke, 2001; Wheeler et al., 2012), or contemplating the future amidst growing concern over drought and climatic variability (Head et al., 2011). Renewed questions are being asked about the vulnerability and long-term viability of rural communities (Martin and Budge, 2011; Hogan and Young, 2012).

In response there is a growing body of research documenting distinctly rural patterns of social, economic and environmental vulnerability and resilience (Beer et al., 2012; Tonts et al., 2014). Such research frequently undertakes sophisticated modelling of social and economic variables, that may include population ageing, growth and decline, industrial and employment mix, labour market and skills, remoteness, and existing agricultural and other land uses, overlaid with predictive models of biophysical and climatic change. Onset of more frequent extreme climatic events is frequently the core concern (Singh-Peterson and Lawrence, 2014), spurred by growing need to model exposure and responses to disasters (Imperiale and Vanclay, 2016). Less well understood are ongoing, everyday experiences of vulnerability, and prosaic cultural practices that enhance longer-term social, economic and environmental resilience (Anderson, 2008, 2014; Head et al., 2011).

Critically, resilience has tended to be defined by state agencies and expert knowledge (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2013), rather than as an extension of capacities fostered within communities

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