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Space and Place for women in regional creativity

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Abstract

The creative and cultural industries have an image of being open, progressive workplaces. However statistics show that the sector actually has far less diversity in its workforce, including less women employed, and even less in management roles. This paper looks at the issues of underrepresentation of women in the creative and cultural industries and investigates how being located in a non-metropolitan setting can be both a benefit and a challenge for women working as creative practitioners. The paper will also investigate why this gender imbalance has, until so recently, been largely absent from creative and cultural industries discourse. By working away from the hothouse of city-based enterprises often associated with informal recruitment practices and connections, can working in the smaller scale of regionally based enterprises benefit women? Using an approach that moves away from the tendency to align the sector with a neo-liberal position, this paper will instead take a wider view of the way the creative and cultural industries can provide regional locations with social capital and identity of place in addition to the economic benefits that the sector can offer.

Space and Place for women in regional creativity

This paper focuses on bringing a feminist perspective to issues of employment within the creative industries, and in particular, the way that practitioners working in regional, non-metropolitan settings may have a different experience of the way gender issues manifest themselves. The perspective that I offer has emerged from my PhD research into regional creative industries in which I argue that creative practitioners located regionally operate differently to their metropolitan counterparts. It is therefore important to understand this way of working and support it differently, although current policy and practice does little to acknowledge this difference and associated needs. The place of women within this regional creative ecology was something that gradually emerged in the course of interviews and observations with creative practitioners from the NSW central west region. Place is therefore central in the research that has led to the themes in this paper.

Research Background

For the purposes of this discussion on creative industries, a standard definition is being used: those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent, and that have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property (Department of State and Regional Development., 2008). The sectors covers the following broad conglomeration of sub-sectors: advertising; built environment; design (including fashion, industrial and graphic design); visual arts; music; performing arts; publishing; screen (television, film, electronic games and interactive entertainment); radio.

It is also useful to clarify what is meant in this paper by the term 'regional, particularly as there are a number of different definitions of what regional means in Australia and even more on a global scale. One definition, the ARIA (Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia includes all areas outside the major capital cities, but my interpretation is more influenced by the RRMA (Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas) index which excludes all centres with a population of more than 100,000. In keeping with this definition, for the purposes of my research I am concentrating on the region covered by Arts OutWest, the Regional Arts Development Organisation in the NSW central west. As the Executive Director of Arts OutWest I am very familiar with the region in which I am researching. The area includes two regional cities each of around 40,000 people, country towns and villages, agricultural land and wild bushland. The western end of the region is considered remote and around a quarter of the population there is Aboriginal, while the eastern end is only just outside the Blue Mountains which is considered part of Western Sydney.

Why a feminist perspective?

The starting point for this research did not include a feminist perspective and was more focused on the practical issues of running regional creative enterprises: the challenges of getting creative product to a market, isolation and lack of networks and clusters, access to training, lack of broadband and tensions between production and consumption (Flew, 2010; Gibson, Murphy, & Freestone, 2002; Henkel, 2010). However in the course of data collection, in particular, interviews with creative

practitioners from the region, the need to bring a feminist perspective became apparent. At the time of writing, eighteen creative practitioners had been interviewed, and in spite of the intention to ensure a balance across art-form, location and gender, I realised that fifteen of those have been women. Statistically this is very different to the employment numbers for Australian creative industries. Throughout an interview process which was attempting to probe questions of why practitioners were located where they were and the advantages and disadvantages of being regionally based, I started to realise that there were some gender issues emerging about the way these practitioners worked, their motivations and what they were gaining from their practice and from their regional location. It became apparent that the research required some feminist theory and awareness of gender issues in the theoretical framework to support what was emerging.

Feminist literature within the creative industries

There has been a large amount written about the creative industries over the past fifteen years and yet there is surprisingly little that addresses gender issues, with Angela McRobbie (2007, 2011, 2012) and Rosalind Gill (2002, 2014; 2008) being two notable exceptions along with geographers Doreen Massey (2013) and to some extent Jo Foord (2008; 1986) and several others. Recently this has become as somewhat hotter topic. A number of writers – both male and female - have explored the notion of the 'precariat' within the creative industries, that is, the precarious and often exploitative practices in employment more commonly associated with poorly paid unskilled labour but also rife in the flexible work environment of the highly skilled creative industries workforce (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2015; Miller, 2010; Murray & Gollmitzer, 2011; Ross, 2008) but McRobbie and Gill both interrogate the disadvantage of women within this precariat.

McRobbie (2011) identifies many of the attributes of women working in the creative industries sector and the reasons that their under-representation – especially at senior levels – needs to be analysed. McRobbie states that these include the fact that women working in the creative industries are young and mostly graduates, they

are the beneficiaries of second-wave feminism, many are childless and they are constantly changing to fit in with new sets of conditions in their industry. She also points out that female participation in the creative industries is predominantly white and middle class and have been influenced by their access to training and education. While other writers have acknowledged that the entrepreneurial environment is sometimes not an easy fit for women (Conor, Gill, & Taylor, 2015; Nixon & Crewe, 2004), McRobbie raises the question of what a feminist politics of women's entrepreneurial activities ought to be. 'There is slippage in this account, rather than a confronting head-on of the reality of post-Fordist flexibility, along with enterprise culture as a recent mode of governmentality, both of which in the last decade become speeded up and intensified by the gains of neo-liberalism in political culture' (p73). McRobbie also raises questions about whether the creative economy has been good or bad for women, the effects of gendered neo-liberalism, and whether women are ambassadors of new capitalism or simply flexible workers in the new creative economy, in the 'permanently transitional' job market which has been the subject of extensive attention in recent years, where self-employment (or freelance work or even cultural entrepreneurship) is something quite different from being a conventional employer (2011, pp. 72-73).

Rosalind Gill (2014; 2008) also looks at the way women operate within the creative industries sector. In her work she goes beyond the excuses of child-rearing to identify some of the reasons that women do not enjoy either the participation rates or the success rates of seniority with the sector and barriers they experience. She outlines three areas of focus: Firstly she argues that there are new, mobile, subtle, and revitalised forms of sexism in circulation; secondly that there is a dominant post-feminist sensibility which suggests that all the battles have been won, and therefore renders inequality increasingly difficult to voice; and thirdly that the new forms of labouring subjectivity required to survive in the field of cultural work may themselves be contributing to the inequalities in the field, by favouring an entrepreneurial individualistic mode that disavows structural power relations.
Gill (2014; 2008) points out that the inequalities of gender as well as of race and class found in the labour force of the creative industries is at odds with the image

projected by the sector itself of being open, inclusive and progressive. In relation to the absence of gender debate in much of the creative industries literature, Gill argues that inequalities in cultural labour have been under-explored - particularly those relating to gender - almost as if academic research priorities are reflecting the wider post-feminist complacency that regards gender inequality as a thing of the past.

Picking up on Gill's concern with the image and the reality of creative industries, the word 'cool' has been associated with the sector in many ways. Several reports – most notably the Skillset UK report in 2010, have exposed the lack of both cultural and gender equality and although there is no equivalent report in Australia, even a brief look at the statistics here indicate that things are not markedly better. Part of the 'cool' image of creative industries workplaces include strong reliance on informal networks to get jobs, emphasis on out of hours networking in social settings, expectations that workers can work flexible hours, often at unusual times and informal workplace protocols. Although these features do not inherently contain any gender bias, it has been claimed that they inadvertently promote a 'blokey' culture that can disadvantage women (Conor et al., 2015).

Employment in the creative industries

Statistics over a number of years have consistently indicated that there are more men than women employed in the creative industries and that they are higher paid and more likely to be working full-time in the industry. For example, Australian Bureau of Statistics data from 2010 showed that the breakdown of male and female works in the cultural sector was 55% male and 45% female. Usig the UK as an example, Gill has collated statistics from various sources to make this point about the differences and lack of gender equality:

In terms of gender, there is a more complex picture. In some industries (e.g. computer games), women are barely present at all—averaging 5% across the different component fields (online, multimedia, etc.). In others, the issue is one of occupational segregations. In the film industry, for example, women dominate in

wardrobe and make-up yet constitute only a small minority (average 15%) in key creative roles such as directors, screenwriters, and cinematographers (Lauzen 2012; Conor 2014). In television, women's representation is better, but primarily at more junior levels. Overall, women working in the media and cultural industries are significantly better qualified than their male counterparts, with a greater proportion being graduates and an even more significant difference in the numbers of women, compared with men, with higher degrees (Skillset 2010). Moreover, women are significantly more likely to have undertaken industry-specific training. Nevertheless, they earn on average of 15% less than their male colleagues and are much less likely to be promoted or to make it into senior positions (Skillset 2010). This marked pay inequality holds true even when other factors are adjusted (controlled for), e.g. the lower age profile of women in the workforce (Gill, 2014, p. 513).

Reasons for gender differences in regional creative industries employment

Bringing the discussion back to the subject of location and the factor of place in the creative industries scenario, based on the data collection and preliminary analysis to date in this research, the narrative for women is not all bad. It appears that regional places can in fact be kind to women practitioners. Several reasons for this are posited below, using examples from my research to support the claims.

There are four reasons that I would like to suggest may be the cause of a regional dynamic that does not work so negatively against women practitioners. Firstly, regional creative industries are already removed from the 'cool' milieu of the city. Therefore women working in the creative industries in regional locations are not having to compete within the 'blokey' culture that disadvantages many of them. Secondly, regional places often provide the networks of support that can make it easier for women to manage their commitments.   This may be different to the professional networks of the industry and could mean friends, family or community. The third reasons is that less financial pressure due to lower costs in regional locations provide women with more choices about the level in which they wish to engage professionally with the cultural and creative industries sector. Finally, many women move to the country for reasons that are not connected with their own work

or practice but they need to find their own voice and a place in a regional community on their own terms. Creative practice can allow that to happen. I will explore each of these reasons with examples from women who are regional creative practitioners.

Regional locations removed from 'cool' culture. I suggest that being away from the 'cool' of big city enterprises enables women to get on with achieving on their own terms. An example is Subject K who was a trained graphic designer who got a job in a large Sydney based firm.

I worked, when I first finished uni I lived in Paddington and I worked in Kirribilli, and that was an advertising agency where really I was the guy's PA, I didn't get to do a lot of graphic design, but it was nice to work in a studio. But that just told me to make up my mind, I really <u>did</u> want to be back in the country where … it wasn't going to take me forever to get ahead. And my pay I think was two hundred and fifty dollars a week and my rent was one hundred and fifty, but nobody can live in Sydney on a hundred dollars a week. So financially it wasn't great, I wasn't really getting any work experience in graphic design, so - , and it took so long to get to work. It's just so crazy and, yes, it just wasn't for me. (Subject K, graphic designer).

This, by itself, is not evidence of being disadvantaged by the male culture of creative industries, but it was one of the early interviews that started me wondering and which was then supported by other data collected as well as in reports such as the UK Skillset report (2010).

Another of the comments, this time by a theatre practitioner, also pointed to the fact that many women do not function well in the city-based pressure cooker environment in industries that have high demands and inherent power structures. She states: Originally I turned up here because it was really friendly. It was lovely. It wasn't Sydney. I hated Sydney. I lasted about eighteen months in Sydney and it was about twelve months too long is what I've always said. I blame that on the events industry probably (Subject B, theatre designer).

Regional networks and support. Regional places may be criticised for not always providing networks of other workers, training opportunities, ways of collaborating and places in which creative output is highly concentrated. However the easier access to other support networks including family and friends can provide women with some of the more practical support that they need.

Below is an example, one of many, in which an illustrator talks about the benefits of being in a regional area close to family.

Well I was in New Zealand because my partner was working in the film industry and that's where I worked for a while. We had a child together, we split up and I didn't want to stay in New Zealand. It's beautiful, but I really wanted to be with my family. So I moved back here six years ago. So … I'm only here because of my family. But, it's also, I guess it's double edged as well. Like I'm here because of my family but I'm also here because I can survive here whereas, I'm on a single income – a single creative income. There was not much chance of living anywhere in a big city. But I didn't want that anyway. I've done that and I didn't want to live… in Sydney again (Subject F, illustrator).

The benefits of networks between successful practitioners and the community go both ways and several of the women interviewed commented on the way that people in their regional community had embraced their practice with enthusiasm and generosity. Friends and community seem to get something out of being connected to a creative who is recognised for their work outside of the region.

I think they do like and … I know I have a much bigger following of people here in Orange. In fact I generally feel that the people who keep me afloat are all the girls I went to school with who buy my books for everyone, which is great, and I'm very grateful (Subject F).

The word of mouth of small communities taps into the way many female practitioners operate and the way women network, as shown by another practitioner:

Yeah, I think a rural community is far more prepared to take a word of mouth recommendation than they are in the city. I think it carries more weight because of the smaller environment, so I'll – if they're going to recommend her, then they're almost putting themselves on the line, and I think people – I think people appreciate that. Say, they think: well if she says it's good then it must be alright because she wouldn't say it's good if it wasn't. So in that sense, that does build and breed that brand loyalty as well (Subject G, milliner).

Or from the theatre practitioner:

But the advantage of being in the regions is never mind the space, you have the opportunity, it's a welcoming community, a supportive community, and a friendly community generally (Subject B).

This recognition and acceptance by the community was echoed by a sculptor who talked about the fact that living in a regional and rural community has meant that people are there for her, things like a farmer volunteering to come and forklift her work up for transporting to Sculpture by the Sea, or a metal company providing her materials.

Benefits of lower costs regionally. The third posited reason for regional practice being 'kinder' to women was that creative practitioners often find the lower costs of living regionally attractive. This is the case for both men and women, but I raise it as a gender issue because women are trying to keep their businesses going around other family demands, or may have felt that the competitive city environment did not suit their way of working.

I guess you either choose to live somewhere lovely, and quiet, with your family, or you have a life working really hard to earn enough money to survive somewhere glamorous. I don't think it affects my income that much (Subject F).

A Lithgow based designer talked about costs, but note the way that she also looks at the importance of access to family, friends and community:

I guess the original reasons were we wanted two hours distance from Sydney so we could easily access our Sydney clients. It was budget. Budget was part of the plan. It was the business community. It was the train line. Direct access for our family and friends to come up and down if they choose to as opposed to driving (Subject S).

Creativity and identity of regional women. The final point about the way regional places offer different ways of operating for women is about the need for regionally based women to use their creativity as part of their identity. This is illustrated by the quote below from a rurally based professional photographer:

And it's soul saving I think if you -. I was probably the classic 'farmer wants a wife' type thing; I'm from the city originally and I come from a very artistic family background, so the whole idea of farming was completely new to me, and foreign, and so there's been a big learning curve, but I think, to keep a part of yourself in an industry and an environment that is just so different and it's so specific. I mean, you're either born into it or you have a passion for it and then you really go for it, but if you don't have those two of those things, it's really really hard to maintain your own sense of identity, 'cause it's such a strong identity – the identity of a farmer. It's a very strong image and if you're not, and I'm not, we're chalk and cheese but it works, so yeah, it's really really important. And I think you're right, that there are a lot of women that have married farmers that have a really strong creative, 'cause it's this force to keep yourself, so I think they put that into their art, and so it's quite strong actually (Subject K, photographer).

Conclusion

There remain barriers to any practitioner working in a regional setting. Being away from metropolitan centres means that practitioners may have different markets, they

usually need to find different ways to access their markets and they work off a regional economy that sometimes does not offer the same financial rewards that a city-based practice may do. They often feel isolated in their practice and don't have access to highly skilled networks, professional development or shared resources. However the non-cool, community networked environment of rural and regional Australia can offer opportunities for women and remove some of the gender-based barriers that women can encounter in metropolitan creative industries. In doing so it seems to shift the creative industries sector away from pressures of an industry too strongly associated in its policy with a neoliberal agenda and its economic successes, to one in which the social capital is recognised, the value of networks and community are maximised and in which some women are able to establish creative enterprises without the difficult power structures often encountered in the competitive world of metropolitan creative industries.

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