Young People’s Place-Making in a Regional Australian Town

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Abstract

The intensification of globalising flows associated with the current condition of globalisation has had a significant impact on the ways that people relate to, talk about, and construct place. In the context of non-urban places, impacts of globalisation are felt by young people who are uniquely ‘embedded’ in local places. However, the ways that young people construct place under these conditions is opaque and complex. This article addresses Farrugia, D. (2014). Journal of Youth Studies 17 (3) pp. 293–307 call for greater focus on the experiences of young rural people constructing place under the conditions of globalisation. A recent focus group study in regional Australian with 16-28 year-old people builds on the work of rural sociologists investigating this area. Place-making is demonstrated for analysis in this article through young people’s discursive narratives combined with verbal expressions of a more experiential and embodied place-making practice. This article illustrates that young people’s place-making ‘beyond the metropole’ endures in robust and unique ways.

Introduction

Rural and regional places ‘beyond the metropole’ are understood as uniquely impacted by changes broadly associated with globalisation (Kenway et al. 2006). These relate to industrial and economic restructuring (Hall et al. 2009) resulting in a significant centralisation of employment and an increasing focus on the city, particularly in regards to the diminishing youth labour market (Farrugia 2014). Young people’s outmigration in search of employment and educative opportunities (Alston 2004, Bloksgaard et al. 2015) is another facet of this process. Places on the periphery, and those who live there, adapt to these changes in a range of ways to re-invent notions of place (Nyseth and Viken 2009), incorporate mobilities into the production of place (Bærenholdt and Granås 2008) and negotiate the instability that can arise from these processes (Faber and Nielsen 2015). This article is situated within discussions about young people in marginalised and regional places negotiating the impacts of change.
This article builds on the small body of research on young people’s construction of, and relationship with, regional places in Australia (Harris and Wyn 2009; Farrugia 2014; Farrugia et al. 2016). The following analysis acknowledges the complexity of regional places and is situated against the backdrop of a regional town intersected by globalising flows. Massey’s (2005) conceptualisation of space broadly informs my approach. Identifying a ‘failure of spatial imagination’ erroneously conceiving space as a passive, static ‘container’ to enclose pre-formed identities, Massey (2005, p. 8) instead highlights the socially constructed, and pluralistic dynamics of space. Space is a mutually constructed, heterogeneous, ongoing, an always open and lively project undertaken by people, and demonstrated in the ‘simultaneity of stories-so-far’ (Massey 2005, p. 130). While the concepts of ‘space’ and ‘place’ cannot be conflated, this article draws on Massey’s interpretation of the construction of subjective space and intersperses it with an analysis of place-making projects. The article propels the role of peoples collected ‘stories’, or narratives, that serve to produce place (Massey 2005).

Young people’s place-making projects in non-urban areas are an under researched topic within sociology. Regional and rural places are more likely to be sidelined (Farrugia 2014), as are the diversity of young people’s perspectives on areas of concern to them (Panelli et al. 2002). Spectacularised conceptions of youth as a disruptive presence in public spaces (see Pickering et al. 2011) are here put aside, to instead focus on mundane, everyday experiential and discursive place-making mechanisms and the ways young people construct place in a regional town as demonstrated in their talk.

Place-making, as understood for the purposes of the following discussion, is enacted as a discursive process (Bendson and Jackson 2012; Jackson and Benson 2014; Elwood et al. 2015) that manifests as a conscious process as well as ‘beneath’ conscious articulation (Farrugia et al. 2016). Place-making mechanisms encompass an active engagement demonstrated in talk concerning place. Simultaneously, place-making is a process that occurs beneath rational articulations demonstrated in verbally expressed interpretations of material place as sensed, emotive and experiential. Insight into these dual facets is key for a rounded, nuanced understanding into this social process. Further, it is important to progress the sociological discussion concerning young people’s place-making in non-urban places. Their negotiation of globalising flows ‘beyond the metropole’, in the form of industrial restructure and youthful mobilities (Kenway et al. 2006) constitutes an ever-changing, fluid process, which shapes the place-making projects of young people in novel ways.

The article first provides background on different place-making mechanisms, including discursive constructions, and then focuses on more experiential, embodied dimensions of place-making. The methodological approach of the focus-group style study follows, then discussion of the key findings. These detail young, regional people’s place-making strategies in several forms, including their appropriation of dominant discourses narrating young rural lives, as well as emotive expressions articulating a more, sensory, felt relationship with place. The article concludes with a short discussion and a summing up of the research’s key implications.
Discursive constructs pervading understandings of place are a common means to understand and characterise place (Halfacree and Rivera 2011; Farrugia et al. 2016). Here, social processes are reproduced as conscious, rational articulations based on individuals’ own backgrounds and experiences coloured by pre-existing place categories (Farrugia et al. 2016). Focusing on the ways that people talk about place in this way allows opportunities to examine ‘the production of meaning in social life’ (Wetherell et al. 2001, p. 3). Here, discourses emerge as more than a way to describe aspects of the environment, instead becoming key ‘social practices’ that serve to construct place insofar as it ‘re)produces and shapes objects of knowledge... as well as being (re)produced and shaped by them’ (Torkington 2012, p. 75). This approach has been deployed in research literature (Bendson and Jackson 2012) to determine how people engage in constructing place and to provide a window into the nuance of their relationship with localities.

One broadly reproduced discourse and widespread way to conceive of non-urban or rural towns is in terms of an ‘idyll’. Though sometimes used as a pejorative, the term nonetheless retains a certain resonance and power (Short 2006). By this reckoning, non-urban places are perceived as being closer to ‘nature’ and also safer and more inclusive communities. Positive aspects are expounded including stronger sense of community, perceived tranquillity, aesthetic appeal of the natural environment and greater security (O’Connor 2005; Rye 2006). In addition to being conceived as an ‘idyll’, rural places have been represented as more conservative, more racist, and also more static, isolated and removed from the impacts of globalisation (Goodwin-Hawkins 2015). Also conceived as a ‘rural dull’, these places can be seen as backwards, less progressive, more traditional and its people subject to greater social control (Hidle et al. 2009). Place reputation, and negotiating stigma also emerge (Matthews 2015). While much of this literature specifically focuses on ‘rural’ places, discourses used to characterise and construct place have been extended to a range of non-urban places (see for example regional in Harris and Wyn 2009). Still, a suite of research has challenged discourses that paint non-urban places as idyllic, static and socially conservative. This work has highlighted a range of subtle and complex processes in the construction of rural, non-urban places that contradict such stereotypes (Bell and Osti 2010; Goodwin-Hawkins 2015).

In spite of critique among the academic community, key discourses narrating rural and non-urban places are very much present within local communities (Short 2006). While, heterogeneous accounts are generally reported by those who live there (see for example Farrugia 2014; Farrugia et al. 2016), discourses which construct an ‘idyll’ or disadvantage still emerge in significant ways among rural residents (see O’Connor 2005; Rye 2006). This is because such discursive constructs share a ‘discursive dominance’ (Blokland 2009, p. 1594) within these places. Influenced by the people who interpret such discourses, through the lens of ethnicity, culture or social economic status for example, residents’ (re)production of place narratives constitute key place-making mechanisms. This is because such discourses help to define what places of meaning are, and what they are not (Blokland 2009; Bendson and Jackson 2012). As such, these discursive narratives subtly intertwine and mutually inform
how places are understood and how they are actualised by those who live there (Bendson and Jackson 2012).

Place-making mechanisms that serve to constantly (re)construct localities are demonstrated in a range of recurrent discursive practices narrating collective understandings of place, and alluding to those felt sensations ‘beneath’ articulated expression. Dominant discursive understandings about place, regionality, and stigmatised place reputation play a role in young people’s place-making practice. Further, those verbally expressed emotive, sensory connections to place constitutes an opportunity to extend analysis to provide a comprehensive view of place-making processes. To this end, literature theorising this connection will be reviewed.

Place-making as an experiential, embodied practice

While discursive constructions constitute a more prominent and immediate mechanism for conceptualising and making place (Bendson and Jackson 2012; Elwood et al. 2015), those aspects of the process that are more difficult to consciously reflect on and articulate have been theorised as equally important (see Seamon 1979; Tuan 1979). This article extends analysis on place-making in regional places and examines experiential, felt sensations implicated through being in, and making place as they are verbally articulated by the young residents. This might seem counter to the fluidity and mobility implied under a framework drawing on globalisation, and its differential impact on people’s relationship with place. However, an approach taking into account the felt, sensory, and experiential relationship with place provides crucial insight accounting for an alternative perspective of the place-making project.

Drawing on the work of relevant human geographers (Seamon 1979; Tuan 1979; Thrift 2008), those experiential components of young people’s regional place-making in globalised times can be isolated for analysis. Here, material worlds are not created independently from those who occupy them (Anderson and Harrison 2010), rather they are formed when occupied by people (Massey 2005). The focus is less on dominant discourses utilised to construct place, and more on those ‘sensuous processes through which bodies and places come into mutual co-existence’ (Farrugia et al. 2016, p. 2). Indeed, experiential data in the form of interpretations gathered from the physical senses and emergent ‘feelings’ associated with being ‘in place’ is an important component of a more comprehensive account of people and place (Tuan 1979).

Extending Tuan’s (1979) analysis, Seamon (1979) moves beyond discourse to conceptualise the relationship between bodies, and places. The enactment of habitual or routine practices and movement over time are termed ‘place-ballet’ (Seamon 1979). Like many aspects of the place-making project, the construction of places of meaning via the habitual movement of bodies in space constitutes a taken-for-granted, and unpremeditated dimension of the process (Seamon 1979; see also Tuan 1979). Seeking to look beneath cognitive articulations of the world, instead there is an assumption of a constantly evolving, unstable, ‘lively’ world mutually shaped by bodies and places (see Farrugia et al. 2016). Collectively, these approaches, make sense of embodied and felt sensations, and ascertain how bodies entangle with material localities in order to make place within the opaque realm of felt and emotive sensations.
In the context of rural young people’s place-making practices, Farrugia et al. (2016) were keen to delve into this opaque realm of embodied place-making. To this end, Farrugia and colleagues (2016) applied an experiential approach using a non-representational theory (NRT) lens to analyse the affective, embodied, sensory experiences of bodies in place. They argued that these were key in examining young rural people’s ‘emplacement’ and their relationship with place. Here, physical bodies do not just ‘feel’ physical spaces, but become ‘spatialised’ via the process of producing a sensuous, emotive connection with place. Farrugia et al.’s (2016) young participants’ embodied entanglement with place was demonstrated when they talked about their rural homes in emotive terms, how they felt when they were there and the sense of ‘freedom’ and ‘pleasure’ they experienced. This was contrasted with those participants’ descriptions of being in ‘the city’ that was sensuously experienced as a different, ‘weird’ locale. Farrugia et al. (2016) analysed these understandings as collectively constructed imaginations of spaces underscored by an affective, sensuous, embodied co-constitution of place. Like Farrugia and colleagues (2016), Carolan (2008), and Woods (2010), this article infers embodied, and experiential spatial entanglements via their discursive expressions of emotive sensations in relation to place (even if this is counter to a more unadulterated reading of the theory on which this work draws, including Thrift’s (2007) use of NRT).

For the present purposes, then, place-making compromises those discursive practices utilised by young people in a regional town deployed to make sense of their relationship to local place, and to construct place more broadly. Place-making can comprise the directed and conscious action aimed at actively changing communities, or localities, enacted by particular community members. For example, Benson and Jackson’s (2009) middle-class respondents sought to construct classed places through the preservation of historic buildings, and patronage of local businesses. However, this article aligns with Farrugia and colleagues (2016), who locate the construction of place within those discursive practices narrating meaningful, complicated relationships with place.

The following extends current debates regarding young people’s lives in regional Australia by investigating how they make places of meaning in mundane, everyday contexts via talk. Analysis of young people’s construction of their regional homes will extend from a focus on dominant discourses to a consideration of more experiential and embodied aspects as a second key mechanism for being in, and making place. The inclusion of diverse place-making practices in this article assists in the exposure of those opaque, difficult to articulate dimensions of the process. This investigation into how people talk about place, as well as how they talk about feeling and sensing the environment around them provides a more comprehensive story of the ways that young people in a regional town make place than analyses focusing on just one dimension over another.

The study

The study was conducted in Shepparton, Victoria, a regional town with a population of 60,223 (ABS 2011), approximately 180km north of the state capital, Melbourne.
Government ‘remoteness classifications’ categorise Shepparton alternatively as a ‘large rural centre’ (AIHW 2004), or ‘inner regional’ (ARIA 2014). While these classifications have broadly informed decisions to use ‘regional’ terminology to refer to Shepparton, Woods’ (2007) concept of the ‘global countryside’ is used as a means to move beyond population based parameters. Woods’ (2007) concept serves to interrupt stereotypes of non-urban localities diametrically opposed to the transnational flows of people, goods and information associated with the ‘global city’. Here, the ‘global countryside’ represents regional or rural places sharing strong interconnections across the globe in the form of commodity networks, commercialised natural resources as well as in/outward flows of migrants (Woods 2007). As part of the ‘global countryside’, Shepparton has had a traditionally strong agricultural and manufacturing sector. Part of a larger fruit growing region, fruit processing and preserving takes place in manufacturing plants in and around the town. These companies maintain diverse and extensive distribution networks across the country and globally. The weakening of the industrial and manufacturing sector in Australia as a whole, and centralisation away from rural and regional areas has of course had a significant impact (Hall et al. 2009). In terms of population, Shepparton has been the site of successive flows of migration from across the globe and is relatively diverse (ABS 2011). With globalising flows, such as these intersecting place, young people from a range of cultural and social backgrounds in Shepparton enact their place-making projects.

After receiving ethics approval in March 2015, fieldwork took place April-July 2015. Several youth organisations, volunteer groups and training organisations were identified within Shepparton and approached directly. Pre-arranged visits were used to invite potential research participants. Before focus groups began, Information Statements outlining the project, confidential nature of participation, grievance procedure and researcher contact details were distributed along with Consent Forms. These details were reiterated and discussed verbally in straightforward language. The focus group protocol was semi-structured with a range of items designed to elicit participant opinions, perspectives and experiences in relation to place-making, as well as their lives in a regional town more generally.

Interviews were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo to assist the organisation of codes and identification of thematic divisions. On close reading of each transcript, a loose coding structure was devised encompassing the range of topics covered in focus groups. Codes represented emergent themes present in the data set, and several subthemes were assigned at this point to capture greater detail in the representation of the young people’s talk (Braun and Clarke 2006). The process of analysis constituted an attempt to reflect the responses of the participants as accurately as possible while addressing the research aim. Basic demographic information collected was used to form a picture of the respondent group in terms of age and gender profile, participation in education and employment, as well as number of years spent living in Shepparton.

Focus groups were utilised as an appropriate and non-threatening means to gain information pertaining to the project aims (Madriz 2000). Respondents had opportunities to be prompted by others and respond to opinions within the group that provided unsolicited and valuable data on how they understood and constructed regional
place (see Madriz 2000). The methodological framework spanned young people’s talk across a range of settings so that opinions and experiences that emerged could be situated within a broader ‘system of meanings’ (Scwandt 2002, p. 191). This data collection strategy facilitated my ability to explore participants’ interactions with others, as well as interactions within a larger group. The place-making processes, as well as the mechanisms and constitutive discourses employed among the participants, were inevitably informed by the broader community in which the young people lived. Therefore, this approach was particularly important.

Participants were aged 16-28 years old, and were residents of Shepparton and the surrounding area for at least three years. In total, 62 young people took part in the research with an average age of 21.5 years across 12 separate focus groups. A purposive sampling approach was conducted including the diversity of young voices in the town, though it is not within the scope of this article to analyse the impact of respondents structural and cultural positioning on their place-making practice. Focus groups included between eight and four participants, with one group having only two participants. While the dynamics of this very small group are necessarily altered from a larger group, and may not conform to the traditional focus group form (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013), their data are included here as a meaningful contribution. Approximately half the participants identified as male, and half as female. Further, just under half indicated they had lived in Shepparton their whole lives, while the remainder had moved from other places. Half of respondents reported being in education, including one third in tertiary, and one in five stated they were enrolled in secondary school. Over half reported being employed, with nearly one quarter being casually employed, and just under one third in full-time employment.

The findings are presented in two themes that explicate those place-making mechanisms demonstrated in the young people’s talk (re)producing dominant discourses, and explanations of their more felt sensations. Discursive constructions in relation to place, and meaning-making demonstrated by those who live there have been deployed in a range of research agendas (Trudeau 2006). In relation to ascertaining more felt, experiential or emotive information in discursive contexts, Edwards (2001) argues that while verbal articulations of internal emotive states might seem counter-intuitive, emotive talk can actually engender significant insights into ‘talk-in-action’ (Edwards 2001, p. 192). Therefore, the themes presented here include firstly dominant discourses of rurality ‘beyond the metropole’, whereby young participants respond by appropriating and adapting aspects of these narratives to better reflect a more complex, lived experience. A second theme is participants’ experiential, and felt sensations in regards to local and more unfamiliar places that ultimately reveal a more embodied place-making process. These themes represent several key trends among the young respondents’ talk in regard to places of meaning identified by them.

Discourses of rurality: Appropriating and adapting dominant narratives

Shepparton is a place with a reputation that extends beyond its geographic locality. The pervasiveness of this reputation was evidenced in the airing of a current affairs
programme during the fieldwork phase of this project (Potaka 2015). This programme encapsulated common perceptions about the town, holding Shepparton as emblematic of a suite of ‘rural problems’, many of which concerned young people, including youth unemployment, and teen pregnancy.

The theme of social and economic disadvantage that underscored the television programme, also emerged as a key trend in respondents’ discussion about their regional homes (see Matthews 2015). Focus group members demonstrated a keen awareness of what they saw as external views of their town. They explained how the town-reputation was characterised as suffused in social disadvantage and plagued with a variety of social problems. Respondents were eager to orientate themselves in relation to this discourse. Some wanted to defend the perceived negative implications, as well as what were considered unwarranted depictions. Others wanted to eschew pessimistic accounts while recognising that social problems were present and punctuated their experiences. Still, a third trend appropriated the discourse of rural disadvantage more wholly. Acknowledging the ‘discursive dominance’ (Blokland 2009) of these stigmatised place reputations (Matthews 2015), the young people actively re-arranged negative stereotypes to construct place in a way that was faithful to their own experiences. These diverse trends indicated the complex nature of the discursive place-making project among the young people in Shepparton.

Though they acknowledged the common negative perceptions of Shepparton, focus group members were keen to shift away such depictions. However, several respondents located what they described as a generic characterisation as external, and originating from those who had not lived, nor visited the place. For example, the two young women in focus group 8, one of which was about to finish secondary school while the other had recently graduated and was working casually in the service sector at the time of data collection, discussed the town’s reputation:

Zoe: I just don’t think that the town is as bad as everyone says it is, you’ve gotta live here to know what it’s like.

Jade: oh god!... everyone jumps on the bandwagon...

Zoe: ... if we hated it that much, we wouldn’t live here, you know, I would’ve moved away ages ago... (Focus Group (FG) eight, young women, two in group)

Contrasting discursive understandings of non-urban places rife with disadvantage and lacking opportunities, a young man in focus group ten highlighted more positive conception of the ‘rural idyll’ (O’Connor 2005; Rye 2006). While both discourses are referred to, this participant, also in his final year of secondary school, ultimately concluded with a more pessimistic conception of Shepparton:

Jake: ... you think of small country towns of being nice and innocent, well I feel like Shepparton is a small town with like, a city culture, a city culture in the sense that you have the drugs problems, you have the violence problems all of that kind of stuff and the multicultural issues that comes with that. In the city, but we’re a small country town so there’s nothing better for anyone to do. (FG ten, young man, six participants in group)

This negative assessment equated social problems related to drugs, violence and a lack of ‘things to do’, with a ‘city culture’. The idealised image of the rural places as
one that is removed from problems like these associated with urban places can still be maintained by the respondent (see O’Connor 2005; Rye 2006).

But this characterisation of the town was quickly countered by another young man in the same focus group looking to emphasise aspects of the town he perceived to be neglected by such a negative reckoning:

Ethan: … but like we still have good stuff (laughs), like we have some pretty impressive kids in schools come through, and then some people are just, and some people do really well, like we have doctors and things that come through. People that come here and they love it cos’ they’re just in a certain areas, where they’re just like, ahhh, my god, community vibe, awesome. (FG ten, young man, six members in group)

Reflecting a more idyllic conception of smaller regional towns (see O’Connor 2005; Rye 2006), here Ethan is keen to shift attention from social problems. Instead, he seeks to draw attention to the relative success of secondary school students while making a more positive comment about the sense of community.

These excerpts represent focus groups discussion in which participants responded to those dominant discourses characterising rural places in oft-times stereotypical fashion. More than a series of statements on their preference, or distaste of the town, these excerpts represent a cautious and emerging optimism couched against pervasive place reputations. Orientated within ‘discursive dominance’ (Blokland 2009) narrating place-reputations, the young people were able to take part in a place-making project that subverted this ‘dominance’ with greater nuance. This highlights the complexity of the discursive dimension of place-making, whereby dominant narratives were rarely reproduced in their entirety by participants. Instead, different elements from a range of narratives were incorporated into a more comprehensive representation of place, and their relationship to it.

While few talked about aesthetic qualities of place, these themes did emerge among some participants:

Sara: I like the farm life… (all laughs) I actually do, like, I really love waking up to like, cos’ where I live there’s an orchard at the back, like houses aren’t built there and it’s just beautiful waking up to like, you know, seeing that… (FG9, young women)

This type of exaltation of rural environments as a repository of visually appealing, typically agrarian landscapes has been a stronger component of research exploring ‘incomer’ migration, or ‘tree-changers’ (see Sampson and Goodrich 2009; Bendson and Jackson 2012) rather than young rural residents constructing local places. Nevertheless, Sara’s explanation was emblematic of a sub-theme of respondents constructing a more positive, affirming form of place.

The ways that participants responded to pre-formed narratives of their town, as well as their part in variously perpetuating, complicating and re-writing those discourses emerged as a crucial place-making process (see Torkington 2012). Understandings and conceptualisations of place were simultaneously informed by, as well as a critique of, these omnipresent discourses narrating disadvantage. In the process of responding to reputations typifying particular places, respondents were able to incorporate their own experience to both disrupt and reproduce discursive understandings. In so doing, broader discursive understandings of place developed and
filtered through personal experience, circumstances and resource access was a key place-making process (see Blokland 2009; Sampson and Goodrich 2009).

Another dimension present in respondents’ discussion and appropriation of discursive constructions of place relates to categories characterising passive, static rural localities. Here, non-urban places are understood as defined by limited inward and outward flows, effectively ‘cut off’ from other places (Goodwin-Hawkins 2015). Owing to the relative mobility of participants’ lives (Wiborg 2004), this construction of place was not always borne out among focus group respondents. Rather, conceptions of place as complex, specific localities intersected by flexible interconnections and movement were more common (Goodwin-Hawkins 2015). Focus groups conducted with members of the migrant community indicated higher rates of mobilities, with familial and diasporic connections reaching further afield, both nationally and internationally (Brekke 2008); although, this was more common among first generation migrants than second. Still, participants across all cultural and ethnic backgrounds reported high degrees of emplacement (see Harris and Wyn 2009).

Nonetheless, tensions emerged associated with the daily demands of sourcing car rides and commuting to and from everyday commitments and activities precluded ease of movement (see Harris and Wyn 2009) irrespective of cultural background.

Nonetheless, participants’ more cosmopolitan motilities were evidenced in their acquaintance with nearby cities like Melbourne, or smaller regional centres like Bendigo. For example, some focus group members blurred place-categories in their discursive constructions of Shepparton:

Paige: I describe Shepparton as pretty much like a more remote version of Melbourne. It’s like, each little town is kinda like a suburb, but like further apart. Like we have in-between space that is kinda like scenery and then you get to another town. (FG ten, young woman, six in group)

Here the language of suburbia is used to think about, and conceive Shepparton and surrounding towns. With 180km of predominantly agricultural land lying between Shepparton and the state capital, Paige’s description of Shepparton as a ‘suburb’ is interesting. More than geographic proximity, Paige demonstrated her understanding of Shepparton via an eschewal of traditional rural or regional descriptive discourses (see the ‘idyll’ Short 2006). Instead, drawing on the language of place available to her, she compared her home to an outer-Melbourne suburb to represent the availability of services, and opportunities to shop for clothing. Not merely reflective of her movement between places, this melding of categorisations was also constituent in her place-making practice.

Similarly, the young women of focus group eight drew on more urbanised place narratives to explicate their engagement with, and construction of regional place:

Zoe: Yeah, I think we’re pretty much an outer, outer suburb of Melbourne... I reckon that we could pretty much explain that, just two hours away, but we’re pretty much, like everyone goes to Melbourne, everyone in Shepp travels to Melbourne. Like, all the time, for shopping, just, just a day out sort of thing, you catch the train in the morning, you catch the train home at night, it’s just something to do, yeah... if you don’t have your licence yet, otherwise you just go with your friends... (FG eight, young woman, two in group)
Like Paige, Zoe drew on what she interpreted as a more attractive, and positive construction of place. She utilised discursive constructions available to her in terms of convenient motilities, and access to commercial activities. However, it is important to note that all respondents did not talk about such flexible mobilities. Travelling between Melbourne and Shepparton is perhaps more reflective of participants’ structural positioning and access to economic resources. Several focus group discussions indicated a less mobile relationship with material place. Still, proximate mobilities of this kind emerged as a consistent theme.

Here, the discourse of static, a-mobile rural lives was countered and the role of mobilities in the making of regional places was highlighted (Wiborg 2004; Bærenholdt and Granås 2008; Bloksgaard et al. 2015). In many ways, Shepparton defies those ‘dominant’ discourses (Blokland 2009) utilised to talk about, and construct non-urban place in public life. Further, regular, or semi-regular movement between places can reinforce conceptions of place, with understandings conceptualised in relative terms (Bærenholdt and Granås 2008). Although rural/urban dichotomies constitute a pervasive lens through which to conceptualise regional places (Heley and Jones 2012), participants were reluctant to wholeheartedly adopt simplistic and dichotomous distinctions, even if these often constituted a starting point for discussion. Indeed, the notion that boundaries separating metro Melbourne, periurban or semi-rural suburban Melbourne and regional Shepparton were blurred reflects theorising on the obscuring of borders separating city and country (Heley and Jones 2012). Here, respondents respond to discourses that construct regional places as discrete and static localities removed from the city. As in their appropriation of discourses of disadvantage, familiar motilities and blurred boundaries separating regional and urban tempered discussion of their regional homes. Melding dominant discourses narrating static, removed and discrete localities with experiences of mobility and blurred boundaries constituted a mechanism for the respondents to make place according to their own experiences, alongside more common discursive constructions.

Embodied, experiential place-making

Respondents further reported a more visceral connection to place in addition to appropriating dominant discourses to form discursive constructions of place. Here, it is experiential impressions drawn from different senses and that are verbally expressed in terms of feelings, sensations and emotions that contribute to a broader, more comprehensive telling of respondent’s construction of place (see Farrugia et al. 2016).

Respondents articulated these felt sensations, and their embodied entanglements within their local places most clearly when they discussed the ‘quietness’ of Shepparton in comparison with the anxiety inducing city spaces they encountered when they drove to Melbourne. Here, the relationality of the place-making project endured. Further, consistent with established difficulties reflecting on, and articulating such ‘felt’ relationships with different places, the respondents often struggled expressing the nature of this relationship (see Moores 2012). ‘Place-ballets’ (Seamon 1979) were
described by numerous participants in terms of encountering busy, heavy unfamiliar traffic conditions. Negotiating physically intimate, and unfamiliar city-scapes were recollected with a visceral distaste and keenly avoided among several participants. Being in the city was described as an intense experience and contrasted to the ease and familiarity of regional, and local home places. This neatly reflected Farrugia and colleagues’ (2016) findings on young rural people’s comparison between city and country, and the visceral sensations they used to describe these places. In addition to an understanding of place based on the material environment, or in terms of mobilities across landscapes, this was a sensory experience and simultaneously, a construction of place (see Tuan 1979). Here, the young participants demonstrated a more embodied experience of place. More than experience though, in this context, place can be understood as a physical ‘feeling’, whereby participants’ become ‘spatialised’ in place by way of forging sensuous, emotive connections with local and familiar places (Farrugia et al. 2016). Here participants’ descriptors of relative ‘peacefulness’ or ‘relaxedness’ demonstrated Farrugia et al.’s (2016) sensory emplacement.

Common descriptors among participants discussing felt sensations in relation to place were again, often conceived in relativised terms. Here, their regional homes were ‘quiet’, ‘chilled’ places, while the metropolitan ‘other’ was experienced as ‘busy’, and ‘stressful’. The mingling of rural, regional or urban discursive constructions of place was put aside when alluding to more emotive place-making processes. These descriptions of embodied sensations evoked those affective states and alluded to sensory, ‘felt in the body’ conceptions of local and regional place understood in terms of a sense of auditory (‘quietness’), visceral (‘busy’) sensations (see Tuan 1979; Farrugia et al. 2016). Indeed, a relative sense of ‘quietness’ linked with non-urban places was expressed by numerous participants in several focus groups. For example, this young woman, who was a health sciences student, reflected on living in suburban Melbourne and in the smaller Shepparton:

Hayley: It’s much more, a quiet and relaxed, um… from where I grew up (suburban Melbourne) Victoria, um… like where I grew up, it’s like more loud, and like more, really… here in Shepp… yeah, I do, I prefer the quietness, I think. (FG two, young woman, four in group)

Some of the young women of focus group 12, a group conducted within the migrant community, also shared a physical aversion for busy city-scapes:

Aisha: … I don’t kind of like going to the cities… ahh, I don’t know, for some reason, if you go to Melbourne and then, even for one day, I get tired of there. I just wish I could come back any minute to Shepparton…

Mariam: … But when we go to city, we don’t like it…

Aisha: Especially how busy it is, the streets and everything. (FG 12, young men and women, eight in group)

While higher rates of mobilities may have constituted a more prominent reality for this group of young migrant women, this did not interrupt their place-making projects, nor did it preclude a more ‘felt in the body’ form of place-making. The sense of busyness, of noise, and security was also perceived in relief, symptomised most
clearly by the close, intimate presence of car traffic and higher levels of human density. A visceral sense of size and proportion was described in the context of security among focus group four as well.

A further example of more experiential place-making was demonstrated among several young men from focus group six who had returned from a neighbouring regional centre after having moved there to complete tertiary studies. In this group, there was an opportunity for reflection on ‘quiet’ regional spaces versus the more ‘busy’ larger regional town:

Marco: I wouldn’t go to (move to) say, Bendigo... just because I’m not into the hustle and bustle and the takes you 45 minutes to get to work. There might be more things to do, but we’re not that far from Melbourne. If we really want to go and do something in Melbourne for a weekend we can. (FG six, young man, seven in group)

Similar to others, Marco’s aversion to city spaces was based on an emotive distaste to what he saw as unfamiliar, physically intimate locales. Even weighed against the attractive argument that there is ‘more to do’ in these places, it was nonetheless preferable to limit the ‘hustle bustle’ of city visits to short-term forays. Here, circumventing the visceral nearness of other human and non-human objects enabled him to affirm more positive affective relationship to places associated with comfort and familiarity (see Farrugia et al. 2016).

Discussions articulating a sensuous, embodied impression of quietness and security also elucidated feelings of familiarity in regards to place. Here feeling accustomed to, and experiencing a sense of control and knowledge in the context of place was a valued and desired sensation:

‘Farah: Yeah, I reckon we’ve just grown up in it so we don’t know any better. Like, if we go to Melbourne or something, yeah, it’s new to us and everything, but we still wanna go back’. (FG nine, young woman, four in group)

Making a sense of place in Shepparton via a more embodied, experiential and pre-discursive process was demonstrated as a key mechanism among the young people of this study (Farrugia et al. 2016; see also Seamon 1979). In terms of the young respondents and their place-making practice in Shepparton, it is possible to interpret these discussions of their felt sensations as reflecting a more embodied relationship with place (see Carolan 2008; Farrugia et al. 2016).

**Discussion and conclusion**

Young people’s regional place-making in Shepparton is a process that occurs across multiple layers. It takes place consciously, as an active, directed process demonstrated via talk, drawing on subjective interpretations, experiences and dominant discourses. Crucially, place-making also occurs ‘beneath’ more rational articulations and emerges as a sensory, experiential relationship with place that can be inferred via emotive expression narrating felt experiences in relation to place. These dual facets are vital for a nuanced insight into this social process.

The themes presented above, including discourses of rurality, as well as experiential place-making, demonstrate place-making mechanisms as interpreted and
described by the young participants. Some of these practices are somewhat opaque (Moores 2012), and the participants themselves often expressed difficulties articulating their thoughts, or interpreting open-ended questions designed to elicit their opinions and experiences in regards to key places of meaning in their lives (see Farrugia et al. 2016). Still, an investigation into discursive place-making revealed the complex means through which dominant narratives informed the ways young people talked about their town (Blokland 2009). Interestingly, the ways that these discourses were critically adopted and appropriated demonstrated a robust place-making process. It indicated that regional young people were actively involved in forming and adapting these processes within everyday contexts (Panelli et al. 2002). Rather than being the passive recipients of the interruption, and potential eradication of local place by globalising flows, they demonstrated an active participation in broader place-making processes. Rounding out participants’ experiences of place-making across all demographic groups were their self-described felt sensations in relation to places of meaning. This was a place-making process occurring ‘beneath’ those discursive, articulated thoughts on place where respondents ruminations on their feelings and emotions in regards to place are interpreted as reflective of those felt sensations (see Tuan 1979; Farrugia et al. 2016). These themes paint a comprehensive accounting of young people’s place-making practice in a non-urban town by taking into account a rounded approach of both discursive and experiential processes.

In regards to the context of globalisation and Shepparton as constituent in the Australian ‘global countryside’ (Woods 2007), the respondents tended not to reflexively orientate themselves within a self-consciously global context. Some participants, however, did express a cosmopolitan perspective, discussing travelling to the capital city in order to participate in more globally connected youth consumer subcultures, yet perceived this as a relatively mundane experience. This was perhaps reflective of structural positioning including greater access to material resources and, for those from migrant communities, greater connections across urban Australia. Simultaneously, however, the young respondents demonstrated a singular focus on home and local place with aspirations encompassing proximate localities. Place-making and the construction of meaningful locales were not always at the forefront, but the importance of place emerged as key in their everyday lives. Indeed, the findings demonstrate that place-making occurs in a range of ways and that it is personalised and informed by experiences and backgrounds of respondents. Here, the place-making project was not so much disrupted by the presence of globalising flows, rather it was in a perpetual state of modification and adaption constantly reflecting the needs of those who engage, as well as the places being moulded and constructed by them. The young people of this study did not talk about engaging in spectacularised practices that have pervaded, and underpinned much of the literature on young people in relation to place (see for example Pickering et al. 2011). Rather, they went about their everyday lives: socialising, hanging-out with peers, working and/or going to school or University. But the respondents were clear on their thoughts and opinions in regards to the town and their interactions with it.

This article is situated within current debates about the impacts of globalisation on regional communities, particularly among the young residents of these towns. In many regional towns, including Shepparton, debates around the influence of
economic restructuring, and outward migration are key topics of concern to community members. In many ways, this is because the nature of these impacts, and consequent changes to place they engender, are not entirely clear. Assumptions regarding a potentially negative effect on place due to globalising processes in the country pervade dominant discourse characterising rural localities (see for example Mann 2010). Further, complexities and nuances inherent in the construction of non-urban place among young people living under globalising conditions require greater investigation. Addressing these concerns, the present findings demonstrate that place-making endures as a robust project among the young participants. Therefore, while there have been changes to the ways that rural and regional places are constructed (relating to the presence of in/outward mobilities, industrial restructuring and centralisation of youth orientated opportunities towards urban places) place-making persists among the young residents of this study. This is because place-making processes occur within every day, mundane practices, encounters and experiences. As such, place emerges as a valued component of these young people’s broader lives in regional Australia.

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