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Region power for mobilities research

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ABSTRACT

In this *Thinking Space* essay, we explain why the COVID-19 pandemic makes mobilities research more important than ever. In a time when mobilities have been reconfigured so dramatically, perhaps even leading people to value mobility differently, we need concepts and theories that can help us to attend to and navigate this new situation. Our contention is that mobilities research must recentre the region. Building on earlier work in the mobilities paradigm, we suggest ways that regionality can be conceptualised, and argue that mobilities in our part of the world take distinctive manifestations that warrant our attention. Our essay concludes by pointing to new directions for mobilities research from our region.

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Introduction

One of the key contentions underlying the ‘new’ mobilities paradigm, that ‘it sometimes seems as if all the world is on the move’ (Urry 2007, 3), seems a curiously ill-fitting epithet in the wake of COVID-19. The coronavirus pandemic precipitated one of the most significant reconfigurations of mobility practices in living memory, interrupting trends that have been in train since the mid twentieth century. While the virus itself has been highly mobile, the world witnessed over two years of border closures, lockdowns, supply chain disruptions, housing crises, tourism collapses, heightening geopolitical tensions via ‘vaccine diplomacy’ and contrasting infection control responses. New habits of working from home and communication reconfigurations have persisted for many. A post-COVID blip of intense mobilities is apparent as people make up for lost travel time, but it is still unclear what ‘post’ pandemic will look like long term.

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Think back, and the immobilities of the pandemic contrast strikingly with earlier work in the social sciences that became transfixed on the intensification of global trade networks and the implications of new digital technologies. Rewind three decades and Castells' (1996) idea of the 'space of flows' epitomises an intellectual transition in the social sciences that occurred from the 1980s to the 1990s in the EU and US. From a political economy perspective, the hyper-regionalism of Thatcher and Reagan offered a critical counter-discourse embedded in the so-called 'roaring nineties' of expansion of global trade where scholars departed from regional foci to analyses of globalisation and the diminishing of borders in favour of porous and borderless societies (Castells 1989). From a social and cultural perspective, a focus on mobility offered a powerful way to imagine place in a much less essentialised way, moving from bounded notions of belonging and authenticity, to more relational and hybrid ways of understanding how places are formed of multiple intersecting mobilities (Massey 2005).

Of course, the entire world has never really been on the move. One of the most powerful political objectives of the mobilities paradigm that emerged at the turn of the century was to reveal how the dazzling theories about the intensification of global travel and trade in the 1990s blinded us to the eddies, frictions and shadows that have always been the flipside of 'new' mobilities. The new mobilities paradigm emerged in part as a critical response to theories that risked celebrating unfettered movement, pointing instead to the uneven power relations that were giving rise to different forms of mobility and, crucially, immobility (Sheller 2003). Indeed, for mobility scholars, diagnoses of hypermobility and the related figure of the elite, globetrotting 'frequent flyer' were always something of a dangerous caricature (Cragg 2002). The past two decades since the 1990s have seen a proliferation of research splintering the idea of free and equal mobility. This body of multidisciplinary research foregrounds the politics of who moves, how often they move, through what routes, and how mobility feels (Cresswell 2010; Sheller 2018). And because mobilities are relative, this work consistently acknowledges the significance of various kinds of immobility – from infrastructural moorings and stoppages, to experiential frictions and stillnesses, to those 'left behind'.

In this *Thinking Space* essay, we explain why the COVID-19 pandemic makes mobilities research more important than ever. In a time when mobilities have been reconfigured so dramatically, perhaps even leading people to value mobility differently (Cresswell 2021), we need concepts and theories that can help us to attend to and navigate this new reality. Our contention is that mobilities research must build on earlier work in the mobilities paradigm by *recentering the 'region'*. There are several rationales underpinning this. First, and substantively, from the privileged viewpoint of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the world appears more divided and regionalised than ever: Brexit, Australia's state-based responses to COVID-19, divisions between 'red' and 'blue' states in the USA, Trump's cancellation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, China's border closures, the mobilisation of Russian forces into Ukraine, South China Sea manoeuvrings, independence movements in Catalonia, Scotland, Hong Kong, and elsewhere, and the growing concentrations of wealth and power in some regions at the expense of others, are just some examples of intensifying regionalisation around the globe. Second, and more institutionally, we write as mobilities scholars from Australia who are committed to fostering distinctive mobilities research from our region. In 2017 we set up AusMob, the Australian Mobilities Research Network, to facilitate

mobilities thinking from and about this part of the world through the lens of multiple disciplines.

Here we articulate the value of a regional approach to mobilities from this part of the world. First, and as context, we explain why mobilities is (still) a vital analytic, pointing to the reconfigurations that have occurred in the wake of COVID-19. Second, we outline why thinking through a region (still) matters and suggest ways that a region and regionality can be conceptualised, building on earlier work in the mobilities paradigm. Third, we argue that mobilities in this part of the world take distinctive, context specific, manifestations that require our attention. Fourth, we point to new directions for mobilities research stemming from our region.

The power of a mobilities lens

The world-changing event of COVID-19 has catapulted the relevance of mobilities as an analytical lens back to centre-stage. In this first section, we outline the enduring value of a mobilities lens. The immobilities induced by travel restrictions during the pandemic have reinforced the importance and value of mobility to the functioning of our social, cultural and economic worlds. The heavy disruptions to global logistics and associated shortages in the supply of goods during the pandemic compromised habits of social reproduction. This was compounded by flows of migration grinding to a halt, leading to labour shortages. In Australia, the loss of international students from universities significantly challenged the economic viability of a sector that has come to rely on this cohort. Leisure and cultural practices and their associated mobilities were curtailed in the name of stopping the virus (Iaquinto 2020). Being forcibly immobile for long periods of time made people realise how important mobility is to our lifeworlds, from the daily mobilities of commuting to work and exercising, to the more episodic mobilities implicated in business travel and holidays with friends and family (Bissell 2021). Indeed, more than just functional, it became apparent how mobilities contribute something much more existential to who we are. During lockdowns, lives lived without the myriad mobilities that many had become used to, seemed attenuated; drained of stimulation, purpose, anticipation – pale imitations of our past lives.

Politically, a mobilities lens helps to elucidate how the immobilities generated by the pandemic had differential impacts in different places and on different people. In Australia, the selective lockdowns of a few public housing tower blocks in Melbourne, for instance, surfaced a range of profound inequalities in terms of what and who was judged to be risky, curtailing the freedoms and dignity of some of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society (Matereke 2020). A mobilities lens also helps to shine a light on those forced to remain mobile during periods of mobility restriction, including a range of essential workers who, by dint of their exposure to more people and environments, were at greater risk of contracting the virus, such as food delivery riders in the gig economy (Straughan and Bissell 2022). A mobilities lens also spotlights other groups of people such as refugees and how they continued to move despite pandemic-induced travel restrictions – groups who continued to inhabit socially unjust spaces (Vogl et al. 2021).

More than just diagnosing how things are, a mobilities lens also forces our attention to the more finely grained evolution of mobility practices both during and in the wake of the

pandemic. For instance, a reluctance to travel in confined spaces of public transport prompted some to cycle commute for the first time in Australian cities. New ‘pop up’ bike lanes sprang up, especially in inner city areas, and new cyclists had to learn skills for navigating unfamiliar environments (Waitt and Stanes 2022). For similar rationales to prevent viral exposure, some leisure travellers in Australia switched from flying and cruising to holidays facilitated by car and campervan travel (Butler et al. 2021) – though the pandemic significantly challenged those ‘lifestyle travellers’ already on the move (Williamson, Hassanli, and Grabowski 2022).

Beyond the spaces of mobility themselves, a mobilities lens is useful for considering flow-on transformations to wider ecologies of living and working. For instance, the disruptions of COVID-19 have profoundly reshaped practices and relations with paid work. As working from home has become normalised for many, the lack of mobility into central business districts has meant that significant impacts are felt on urban economies as office spaces are vacated, and many restaurants and cafes serving office workers and international students have closed down. A mobilities lens also expands our objects of analysis to consider the intangible but real dimensions of such transformations. For instance, a reduction in the mobility of people into city centres has reduced the buzz and vitality that used to characterise the working day. Despite commuting into the CBD has partially returned, many cities feel different now.

Beyond a preoccupation with the movement of people, one of the defining strengths of the mobilities paradigm has always been its capacity to think beyond the sphere of transport and bodily movement. The necessity to think through the relationships of multiple intersecting mobilities is crucial for understanding the multidimensionality of complex problems such as COVID-19, as well as a host of related challenges including climate change. Building on earlier mobilities research on viral mobilities (Law 2006), recent mobilities scholarship, for instance, has reemphasised the interrelationships between the non-human mobilities of viruses and the human mobilities of people as carriers (Iaquinto 2020), intensifying an already complicated set of biopolitical protocols in spaces of transit such as airport quarantine (Barry 2022). Our relationships with more-than-human mobilities are also borne out in work on the impacts of bushfires in a climate-changing world, where a mobilities lens is perfectly suited to elucidating the different spatial and temporal scales through which these impacts take place (Verlie 2022). These ‘more-than-human entanglements’ (Barry 2019) are made even more complex when we consider the various governmental responses to wicked problems. Recent turns to consider policy mobilities have illuminated how these responses themselves travel between places, as well as unpicking the diverse objects, ideas, problems, processes, organisations, and regulations that constitute policy (Lovell 2017). Such work on policy mobilities has not only explored the mobility of ‘top down’ ideas, but also ‘bottom up’ knowledges mobilised by migrants and refugees (Matthews 2021). The recent emergence of mobility humanities as a distinctive subfield of mobility studies has supplemented these intangible mobilities with a host of new objects of analysis such as memory (Istvandity 2022).

In short, COVID-19 has further enhanced the power of a mobilities lens to think through the complexity and richness of some of our most pressing global challenges. COVID-19 has prompted a huge reckoning with the significance and value of different

kinds of mobility, and recent developments in mobilities studies provide the ideal conceptual tools to interrogate these transformations. The proliferation of recent approaches has added new objects of analysis for mobility studies that demonstrate the importance of thinking about mobilities ‘ecologically’ in terms of their interconnectedness and relatedness. Furthermore, a mobilities lens is also centrally attuned to the unevenness of these interconnections, given that a longstanding tenet of the mobilities paradigm is the differentiation of mobility.

To fully realise the power of a mobilities approach for thinking about socio-spatial relations in the wake of COVID-19, we contend that mobilities research needs to return to one of its foundational ideas by recentring the region. The focus on region, we argue, offers ways to consider how multiple mobilities emerge and interact at different spatial and temporal scales. In ways that resonate with the framework of panarchy (Berkes and Ross 2016), reconsidering the region as that which arises out of numerous and interdependent socio-ecological systems, can help better understand the significance of mobility to our more-than-human world.

Region power

The region as both an object of analysis and an analytical lens has a vexed history across the social sciences. During the first half of the twentieth century, the description of regions was a core part of social scientific activity. As the first issue of the first volume of this very journal from 1928 illustrates, regions were on the minds of the nation’s formative geographers who were keen to contribute to region-building in the southern hemisphere through geography’s heuristic of bridging the human and physical sciences. As the editors of volume one mused, paraphrasing apical colleague Sir Edgeworth David: ‘modern Geography may be described as the best guide to nation-planning’ (Taylor and Stead 1928, 3). Reflecting the deeply colonial sensibilities of their era, the editors depicted Australia facetiously as a ‘relatively new land’ requiring ‘purely descriptive work’: a task for the retinue of undergraduates featured in the first volume of the journal. Their accounts encompassed geographical reflections on diverse topics ranging from the regional geology of New South Wales to urban meteorology. A description of Sydney’s ‘extraordinarily muggy’ humidity in Summer by the divisional meteorologist D J Mares, who unfortunately neglected to note the poor decision-making in urban planning that privileged European architects and traditions over user comfort, is directed to an overseas audience unfamiliar with the city’s climate. Indeed, it is tempting to recommend a comment on British dress code norms as a solution to the great ‘personal discomfort’ of the author (Mares 1928, 66). Alongside this nascent regional urban geography are the geological and topological descriptions of Hazel Brewster and Agnes Caldwell (1928, 54), which acknowledged Indigenous occupation and use of midden dune sites in the Illawarra.

However, as Paasi and Metzger (2017, 25) note, ‘a stable and somehow fixed image of preceding traditions of regional geography seems to have become a caricature for the representatives of newer approaches’. It is therefore worth acknowledging that as an explicitly regional journal, even then, *Australian Geographer*’s initial interests were surprisingly bound up with mobilities of knowledge and people and the perceptions of regions across societies and between nodes of power. Indeed, Griffith Taylor’s gaze

was firmly set towards British and American scholarship owing to his career spent overseas and professional career mobilities to European centres of scholarly activity in fields he considered Australia's moiety. Region building was forefront in the minds of settler Australians in the late 1920s as the nation's status as a far-flung outpost of the British Empire underwent scrutiny following the First World War. Australia was in some ways a steppingstone for geographers to overseas hubs – Griffith Taylor accepted a position as Professor of Geography at the University of Chicago in the same year as the first issue of the first volume of this journal, testament to the mobilities of talent through global pathways of the academy at this time. Australian geographers styled themselves as bridging the social and physical sciences through fusions of geology, topography, demography and, in many instances, what we would understand as crude cultural and social analysis – albeit often in deeply colonial and troublingly racist ways. Nevertheless, awareness of how disciplinary standards have been formed historically by mobilities and immobilities is a critical tool for contemplating the field's future in the southern hemisphere.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the study of regions fell out of favour, especially in disciplines that have been key contributors to the mobilities paradigm such as Geography. While 'writing regions, undertaking a regional study, was once a standard form of geographic communication and critique' (Riding and Jones 2017, 1), regionalism became viewed as an outmoded approach. As Riding and Jones (2017, 1) summarise, 'to describe a region in itself was thought to be a conservative or basic undertaking, which could lead to a simplification or neglect of witnessed peoples and places'. Concerns about essentialising what a region is by 'pinning it down' were accompanied by concerns about regional fetishism – where a region is perceived as a 'superorganic' entity (Duncan 1980) that is imbued with agentive causal powers of its own, rather than an effect of intersecting physical, economic, social and cultural processes (Paasi and Metzger 2017). This understanding of region power as an analytic was deemed to be damaging precisely because it obscured the politics of the actual forces (and mobilities) that were at play in particular regions.

The mobilities paradigm that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century provided a vital corrective to these more problematic understandings of regions, Sheller's work on the Caribbean is exemplary in this regard, emphasising how regions are not containers that can be pinned down, but rather an emergent expression of intersecting mobilities taking place at multiple scales. For Sheller, '[t]he very idea of this region as a single place, its naming and its contemporary material existence are constituted by mobilities of many different kinds: flows of people, commodities, texts, images, capital, and knowledge' (2003, 7). In contrast to earlier work on globalisation that tended to produce celebratory accounts of networks and flows, the mobilities paradigm provided analytical tools for thinking about how regions themselves come into being and, consequently, how such regions are maintained through processes of inclusion and exclusion at a range of scales. Such relational understandings of regions pioneered through the mobilities paradigm have since been taken up by geographers and others (Allen et al. 2012; Amin 2004; Carter and Pasquier 2010) to think about the politics of regions in a more emergent manner.

The analytical power of an open and non-essentialised understanding of region has more recently been developed through edited collections and articles within the

mobilities paradigm that each explore the distinctiveness of mobilities in different regions, including 'Italian mobilities' (Ben-Ghiat and Hom 2016) 'Arctic mobilities' and 'northern mobilities' (Habeck and Broz 2015), and 'Asian mobilities' (Lin and Yeoh 2016, 1006). Italy's status as a major tourist destination, emigration hub and transit point for African migrants has made Italian mobilities a useful analytic for engaging with recent debates around transnational labour, international tourism, colonial legacies and resurgent nationalism (Ben-Ghiat and Hom 2016). Attention to Arctic mobilities was, for Habeck and Broz (2015), an opportunity to highlight the joys and pleasures, along with the challenges, involved in moving through a remote region. Rapid development in Asia has led to calls for it to be considered as a topic for mobilities research in its own right, rather than as a point of comparison with other regions such as Europe and North America that continue to take precedence (Lin and Yeoh 2016).

This resurgence in mobility studies echoes a wider turn back to the concept of the region. First, there has been a marked (re)turn to identity politics in the humanities and social sciences, where questions of belonging are centre stage. Such questions have arguably been reignited by increasingly reactionary responses to different kinds of mobility in different regions. Second, and correspondingly, there has been a marked shift to pluralise the location of academic knowledge production beyond the hegemonic centres, and prioritise other perspectives that have, until now, been regarded as peripheral. The call to decolonise the production of academic knowledges is about expressly valuing previously obscured voices and perspectives in underrepresented regions (De Leeuw and Hunt 2018). As Paasi and Metzger (2017, 20) summarise, 'it has become practically axiomatic in the social science literature to note how 'the region is back' in both academia and wider societal life – in spite of contrasting tendencies related to globalisation and all kinds of flows and networks'.

In Australia, the concept of the 'regional' has a specific meaning in internal parlance. In contrast to major, urban, metropolitan centres, the term 'regional' is used as a socio-spatial concept to describe populated areas outside of the major metropolitan centres and is often contrasted with areas that are classified as remote. But 'regional' has multiple interpretations in Australia. It may be equated simply with 'rural', 'remote' and non-capital cities such as Cairns or it might be divided up into 'inner regional', 'outer regional' or non-metropolitan areas (Dadpour and Law 2022). Much recent mobilities literature in Australia has focused on the distinctive challenges of regional communities. There are distinctive infrastructure concerns, as illuminated by Stanley et al. (2019) who explain how mobility is fundamental for social inclusion in lower-density regional Australia, advocating for greater public transport investment in regional areas. There are specific concerns about inclusion and belonging, as described by McAreavey and Argent's (2018) work on new immigrants to Australia that unpacks the challenges and opportunities for migrants and for host communities in regional locations (see also Galligan, Boese, and Phillips 2014). And, as Butler (2021) emphasises, the intensification of diverse forms of mobility are ultimately transforming regions in myriad ways.

Equating the concept of the region with non-metropolitan areas is itself a trait of the Australian region. In many parts of the world, such as Europe – where Regional Studies and Regional Science are vibrant areas of research – regions are an intermediate geographical level between local and global, usually conceived as areas encompassing

more than one nation. In Australia, regions are generally conceived as smaller and less formal than states, and crucially, as an Other to major cities. As Robyn Eversole (2015, ii) explains in her book *Regional Development in Australia: Being regional*, 'In Australia, regions are not just geographic locations, they are also cultural ideas. Being regional means being located outside of the nation's capital cities and in the periphery of its centres of power and influence'. While not unique to Australia, framing 'the regions' in 'deficit' terms rather than recognising and celebrating their unique value is a deeply ingrained issue and ongoing driver of regional politics (Eversole 2015).

There is wide variation in the sort of characteristics used to define particular regions. As Rickards (2017, 298) notes, an unstable array of references to certain economies, catchments, coasts, populations, land types, species assemblages, historical artefacts or neighbouring cities, among other things, are used to define specific regions. In other words, not only is there a looseness and ontologically slipperiness to the *general* concept of the region, but different types of regions foreground different materialities, leading to depictions such as: bioregion, mega region, city region, creative region etc (Paasi and Metzger 2017). Across these types, the boundaries and meaning of specific regions are often fuzzy.

Much mobilities research from this part of the world takes advantage of this flexibility and has pushed the spatiality of the region into different directions. Robertson et al.'s (2018) focus on the Asia-Pacific respects how international migrant mobilities in this part of the world loop Australia into a much wider geographical sphere. This sense of a region that connects Australia with the Asia-Pacific is borne out in research on everyday mobilities within Australia. Waitt, Kerr, and Klocker (2016) for instance explore how migrant Chinese women in Sydney are often fearful of driving, preferring to walk or cycle, but often become pressured into driving. Zooming out, Kwok and Khoo's (2017) work on Asian Australian mobilities illuminates how such regional mobilities have given rise to a new identity politics in Australia. In contrast, Farbotko et al.'s (2018) research on regional climate change mobilities casts its net wide to encompass the Pacific, extending a sense of the region to a broader area.

Climate change is one of the reasons that many existing regions and their inter-relationships are shifting rapidly. The dynamic character of the feature(s) used to define a region means that 'not only is any given region likely to 'experience change', but its actual existence may be called into question' (Rickards 2017, 298). As some regions recede from view, new ones emerge. Yet many present-day regional policies are blind to both 'the layered regions that lie below' (p.298) and the new regions that are possible or emerging. Despite important progress, one glaring example of this is the persistent neglect of the complex tapestry of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island nations and Country that underlies the violently imposed regions of European settlers, and the ongoing marginalisation of Indigenous Australians in regional development conversations about the future (*tebrakunna* country and Lee 2019). One feature of Australia's distinctiveness is this (post)colonial context, overlaid with massive migration over seven decades resulting in half the current population being born overseas or with a parent born overseas.

More than sorting through different spatialities and materialities, understanding regions requires a sophisticated cultural lens. The meaning of regions and any given region is open to interpretation and contestation, given people's different relationships

with place, priorities and lived experiences (Weller 2017). Thus, returning to the idea of region is not about going back to an essentialised or fetishised understanding. Rather, it builds on the evolution of social theory over the past few decades, especially insights from antifoundational process theories of mobility that seek to refute essentialisms that seek to pin down regions (Sheller 2003; Sheller and Urry 2004). For Riding and Jones (2017, xxviii), more recent relational approaches to space and mobility invite us to 'reposition and reanimate' the study of regions. As they argue, 'comprehending the region as animated, relational, performed, lived, in process, as well as documented, described, created and cartographic, is to accept the region is to be best understood and theorised through its tensions' (Riding and Jones 2017, xxviii) rather than trying to distil any essential characteristics. This is a much more contingent and emergent understanding of regions which are understood as 'entities shaped by social relations and networks made up of complex linkages and flows with a specific territorial reach' (Paasi and Metzger 2017, 22).

Work on mobilities in Australia illuminates this more processual understanding of a region brilliantly. Rather than being bound to a specific location, Boese, Moran, and Mallman (2020) describe how international migrants in Australia enact a range of 'settlement mobilities' that take them between urban and regional locations. This sense of frequently shuttling between locations also emerges in Farugia's (2020) research on youth in regional Australia. For him, local social and economic histories offer young people different ways of relating to notions of mobility while reconstructing their meaning of home in the process. At the household level, work on labour mobilities demonstrates how the stretched sense of a region for some comes at the expense of contraction for others. Mayes's (2020) research on left-behind women partners of men mobile workers illustrates how these kinds of periodic mobilities deeply impact women's mobilities and experiences and organisation of social time. Straughan, Bissell, and Gorman-Murray (2020) describe these experiences through the mobility experience of 'stuckness'. Such labour mobilities are also mediated by the distinctive socio-environmental hazards that affect this part of the world, as Zander, Wilson, and Garnett (2020) suggest in relation to the increasing threat of bushfires. Furthermore, the process of being a researcher in Australia comes with its own regional dilemmas. For instance, earlier anxieties about the need for academics in this region to be looped into international networks through mobilities are borne out in recent research by Glover, Strengers, and Lewis (2017) that describes the challenges of these demands in light of sustainability implications. Each of these examples provides a more emergent sense of a region in flux, reshaped by its multiple mobilities.

Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart's idea of 'regionality' takes this processual 'ecological' understanding of region a step further. Rather than trying to produce a general description of a region, her ficto-critical writing attempts to register the distinctive qualities of a region and how they are encountered. Putting it in her own characteristically poetic way, Stewart argues that 'to say that categories or representations produce regionality is to ignore the tactile compositionality of things and the way that strands of influence pulled into a plane of expressivity become a milieu that stretches transversally, as affect, from land to heart and habit' (2013, 277-8). For Stewart, reflecting on a region of New England dear to her, 'regionality is an edgy composite of trees and grasses, barns and steeples, commons, colours, ecosystems, noumena, haircuts, performed socialities, the spiciness of food, a robustness in cold weather, a hyperactive sense of practicality'

(2013, 281). This is a much more ‘minor’ way of writing regions, given that it is not about identifying overarching, determining forces that reduce everything else to a stronger logic. ‘Regionality itself takes place in singularity,’ Stewart says, ‘because it is an improvisatory conceptuality. This writing is an experiment in attuning to such conceptualising. Approaching regionality means finding ways to sidle up to its peculiar ongoing generativity, the way that its affects become native, attaching to bodies and socialities, to an ethos, to the very possibility of an ordinary’ (2013, 283).

One could of course argue that in the pursuit of writing a region from the perspective of its singular qualities that register in sense, there *is* still a kind of pinning down going on, even in its utter contingency. As Paasi and Metzger argue, more recent processual approaches to regions ‘generally all in turn implicitly lean against something supposedly firmer and ‘more real’, as a purportedly solid ontological ground that can be used as a leverage point to denounce the ‘mere illusions’ that are problematically reified by others’ (2017, 25). Indeed, one could also argue that there are some pragmatic continuities here with earlier approaches to writing regions which, if read more generously, also sought to find ways to ‘sidle up to’ a region’s ‘peculiar ongoing generativity’ – even if this generativity was ultimately in the service of colonial power. And yet there is something about the multiple agencies that compose a distinctive sense of regionality in Stewart’s work that permits specificity and singularity without pinning down. This is a sense of a region that emerges through the jolts and swerves of its various mobilities – a lived sense of a region that comes from the embodied experience of moving between places, of moving encounters. In this regard, Lancione and Simone’s reworking of a similarly vexed spatial concept – locality – which they say ‘is not a specific territorial position but an *affection*’ (2021, 972, emphasis added) strikes to the heart of what is so distinctive about Stewart’s take on the region. An affection is a very different way of thinking region power in a double sense – affection as a capacity to be affected by and transformed by its distinctiveness, and affection as an emotion associated with devotion and investment.

Crucial to this idea of region as affection is an appreciation that one’s capacity to be affected is differential, both between people and in time. As such, though we appreciate Stewart’s attention to the precise affectivity of a region, we advocate for a more pluralistic sense of what constitutes a region from differently mobile positions and starting points. A sense of the becoming of a region might be collectively sensed, as in Stewart’s account, perhaps resonating with Raymond Williams’ (1977) notion of a structure of feeling that appreciates the collective dimension while allowing for singularity and specificity. But we are also interested in the disjunctures and separations between different understandings of a region that might not be so compatible or complementary. This is particularly germane for a context like Australia where Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies rub up uneasily against colonial ways of knowing and thinking (Suliman et al. 2019) and cannot necessarily be synthesised or even necessarily shared (Law 2004, ch 7). As such, through the idea of region power as a power to be affected, rather than striving to pin down what this region is, we want to develop an attunement to the distinctiveness of mobilities in this part of the world from multiple starting points. This is not a ‘superorganic’ understanding of region that somehow hovers above everything and exerts its own ‘agency’, but rather a more speculative, hesitant and plural understanding of region where we will be ‘responding *differently together*, as inhabitants of the same affective environment’ (Massumi 2015, 108, italics added).

Mobilities distinctive to our region

Taking the region seriously then invites us to appreciate how mobilities in this region are in some ways distinctive and deserve to be theorised and understood on their own terms. While they might resemble mobilities happening in other regions, they have their own meanings and affects. Think here of the Indigenous Songlines and Dreaming narratives that travel across regions; the cacophonous cultures of Schoolies' week travel to the Gold Coast or Dunsborough; the social rhythms of Grey Nomads touring the Top End region in campervans; the droving histories etched into the Birdsville track; the airport lounge filled with hi-vis-dressed fly-in fly-out workers; the rattle of the Indian Pacific crossing the Nullabor; the glinting sun on the harbour as commuter trains thrum across the Sydney Harbour Bridge; the hot rod car culture of Castlemaine; the distinctive call of a male lyrebird heard while bushwalking in Morton National Park; the vexed image of an Indonesian fishing vessel on the ABC news; the troubled deportation of migrants to, and immobility on, Manus Island and Nauru; the politicised medevac flights. All these and more are mobilities from our region that are distinctive. Though many are yet to be comprehensively examined, over the past few years a body of work has emerged that clusters around some themes which seem distinctive to the Australian Asia-Pacific and/or Antipodean region, some of which feature work specific to particular regions within Australia, as we describe below. We acknowledge that this work has been enabled by earlier foundational mobilities scholarship. Indeed, each of these topics was present in the new mobilities paradigm from its inception. However, our choice to spotlight work published over the last five years or so by scholars in Australia is underpinned by our conviction that it is politically important to showcase it on its own terms, shaped precisely by the affectivity of this region.

Arts-based approaches to mobilities

An important theme for mobilities research from this region is creative and arts-based practices, which destabilise research practices that 'name, order, and confer meanings to space' (Okimoto 2010, 247). From an Antipodean perspective, arts-based practice offers ways to challenge assumed historical and geographical knowledge since Aboriginal, Māori and Pacific Islander conceptualisations of place and time describe different spatial and temporal relationships (Ballantyne and Burton 2009; Burarrwanga et al. 2019; Standfield 2018). Rather than positioning Indigenous people as 'local' and disengaged from national and international relations, First Nations communities have long interacted with neighbouring communities in the region (Standfield 2018). Furthermore, scholars highlight how First Nations peoples conceive the world as 'a complex network of mobilities and immobilities connecting people, ancestors, stars, canoes and other vessels, ocean, islands and continents' (Suliman et al. 2019, 300), drawing on creative practices that communicate these relations. Indigenous arts-based practices invite audiences to reflect upon the ongoing impacts arising from mobilities of colonisation and capitalism, as well as inviting us to think anew about these complex and divisive histories (Andrew 2022). Broadening out, arts-based research offers opportunities to experiment, collaborate and consider new ways to question the world that has as its starting point an emphasis on individual subjects in motion (Barry and Keane 2019; Boyd

2017; Castro et al. 2022; Gibbs et al. 2020; Waitt, Harada, and Duffy 2017). Thus practice-based work offers alternative ways to express the experiences of our unique regional mobilities, as evidenced in Gorman-Murray and Brickell's site-specific photomedia installation that brought together archival, found and donated photographs, and ethno-poetic verse as markers of a journey 'to examine and communicate the history and the experience of trans-Tasman queer lives' (Gorman-Murray and Brickell 2017, 579).

Family and suburban mobilities

Everyday family mobilities is a topic that has been distinctively advanced by mobility scholars in this region. Pathbreaking earlier work by Dowling (2000) on the mobile practices of mothering in suburban Sydney has catalysed the development of a body of more recent work in the same city that has foregrounded family mobilities beyond the private car through e-bikes and car sharing, the evolution of which has been contingent on Sydney's unique governance landscape (Dowling and Maalsen 2020). The specificity of the Illawarra region's unique material entanglements comes to the fore in research that has looked at journeys on foot with children (Clement and Waitt 2018) and the way that the region's atmospheric conditions are reckoned with (Clement 2021). Threading between Sydney and the Illawarra, this research highlights the specific combination of environmental affordances that can produce distinctive atmospheres felt in this region's commuter train carriages (Bissell 2018; Harada, Birtchnell, and Du 2023). What emerges here are mobilities that are sculpted by the contextual assemblages of which they are a part, a striking example of which can be seen in work on car mobilities, sound and gender in Wollongong (Waitt, Harada, and Duffy 2017; see also Kent 2015), as well as work on everyday mobilities of residents in Western Sydney from migrant backgrounds (Williamson 2016). In short, the specific affects, atmospheres and sensations that emerge in each of these papers are cued by the irreducibly contingent, context-specific materialities of these particular regions.

Tourism mobilities

Scholars from Australia have also helped lead vital work on tourism mobilities, demonstrating how such diverse mobilities produce and transform regions (Dadpour and Law 2022) both within Australia and overseas. Work on the themes of marginalisation, overcrowding, automobility and sustainability among tourists in Australia (Butler et al. 2021; Hardy and Aryal 2020; Iaquinto 2018; Williamson, Hassanli, and Grabowski 2022) has accompanied work that has explored disruptions to tourist mobilities owing to multiple crises, including bushfires, droughts, floods and COVID-19 (Barry and Iaquinto 2023; Butler et al. 2021; Dadpour and Law 2022; Williamson et al. 2023). Such crises have in turn exacerbated community-tourist tensions in specific regions, such as in regional Victoria during the early stages of the pandemic (Miles and Martin 2020). Recent work has also shown how Australian tourism mobilities have been transformed by COVID-19, such as the turn to private cars and caravans rather than cruise ships and aeroplanes to reduce the risk of infection (Butler et al. 2021). International border closures have boosted regional rural economies via domestic road tripping (Butler et al. 2021), changing the experiences available to tourists, as well as the potential to reduce carbon

emissions (Young et al. 2017). Work in this field has also produced new ways of evaluating the environmental (Barry and Suliman 2020) and economic impacts of backpackers, providing benefits far from major tourist centres (Iaquinto 2018), especially through employment in the agricultural sector (Iaquinto 2018).

Youth mobilities

Researchers in Australia have developed new ways of thinking about youth mobilities that are contingent on the unique circumstances of this region that acknowledge its settler legacies (Idriss, Butler, and Harris 2022). These developments include research on Indigenous youth mobilities (Prout and Green 2018), highlighting how lifecycle events impact on the motivations and impetus of youth movements and their interconnection with contested identities. This work has sought to decentre youth mobilities away from urban centres towards regional and rural areas. Both Boyd and Harada (2022) and Farrugia (2016) have focused our attention towards the affective and embodied dimensions of mobility for rural youth choosing to leave, stay or return, highlighting how their decisions reflect complex factors including class, place attachment and the tension of the cosmopolitan ideal on ideas of mobility and rootedness (see also Farrugia 2020). Alternatively, Forsey (2015) has explored the influence of (lack of) education choices on mobilities of regional youth and their families. Significant research explored how mobility offers LGBTQI+ youth opportunities to get away from a particular set of norms, expectations and networks, and engage with new possibilities with 'like-minded' others (Cover et al. 2020; see also Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014) – a literal 'coming out'.

Research in this field has also highlighted the significance of race, especially when considering the mobilities of young Pacific Island workers who travel to rural Australia for work (Stead, Taula, and Silaga 2022), the wider rural multicultures that emerge from such mobilities (Butler 2021), as well as how citizenship rights impact on (im)mobility for refugee-background youth (Nunn et al. 2016). Extending this focus on international connections, Asian youth mobilities to Australia has become a dominant recent theme, with scholars exploring how global mobility flows enhance options into emergent adulthood for Hong Kong young people who participate in working holiday schemes (Ho 2019). Others have explored justice and equity in the international student experience (Tran 2016; Sidhu et al. 2021), developing new concepts that acknowledge the intimate temporalities that both facilitate and limit Asian transnational mobile lives in an Australian governance context (Martin 2022 Robertson 2020).

Home mobilities

In the Australian region, research into the (im)mobilities associated with housing and the creation of home are increasingly important. Extremely high costs, both in the rental and purchasing markets, have turned Australia and New Zealand into countries where housing-related income pressure is significant, and homelessness is a growing social issue. Residential mobility is often seen as either a positive or negative, based on mobile versus sedentary assumptions (Buckle 2017). Indeed, the dispossession of Indigenous Australia by British colonisers was based on such assumptions, with their nomadic mobility interpreted as lack of connection and possession (Prout and Green

2018). Research in Australia has pioneered work on the ‘mobilities of disadvantage’ (Wiesel 2014, 319) that reinforce housing insecurity through hectic rental pathways, homelessness, loss of home ownership and repeated moves into and out of social housing. Significant attention has also been devoted to ‘urban drift’ from regional areas to cities as a result of lack of services, education, suitable housing and employment opportunities – although, contrarily, concerns around regional unemployment also revolve around assumptions about a lack of desire to move (Dufty-Jones 2015).

Simultaneously, Australia has been characterised in recent years (especially since the COVID-19 pandemic) by counter-urban mobilities towards high amenity coastal and rural landscapes (Buckle 2022; Gurrán, Norman, and Hamin 2016; Li et al. 2022). For householders, this counter-urbanisation – known distinctively in Australia as sea-change and tree-change – is often motivated by a desire for homing characterised by community, affordable housing, family, stability and a retirement lifestyle. Complicating such ideals, however, are numerous challenges, including the gentrification of small towns (Denham 2021a). In particular, people’s relocation to regional areas for housing can tie them to lifestyles based on long commutes to the nearest city (even if they do not commute every day), leading to little time to engage with local communities and the suburbanisation of peri-urban areas (Denham 2021b). Research indicates that regional population growth benefits both new arrivals and existing residents best when it is accompanied by new local employment opportunities that reduce reliance on extensive everyday mobilities (Crommelin et al. 2022) – as Crovara’s (2023) research on regional coworking spaces in Victoria powerfully indicates.

Australian mobilities research also explores the experiences of refugees settling in Australia. Studies indicate that, for refugees especially, home is a vital space to re-make connections with others, and a space of personal pride, of comfort and leisure, of family and commensality (Fozdar and Hartley 2014). However, cost, choice, quality and complex bureaucracies mean that refugee households often struggle with insecure tenure. As a result, they are often located in cheaper, outer suburbs with poor infrastructure and transport, and are far more likely to move house, and far less likely to purchase a property, compared to other migrants (Fozdar and Hartley 2014; Sampson and Gifford 2010).

More-than-human and (post)disaster mobilities

The relationship between humans, other living beings and their surroundings is core to concepts and patterns of (im)mobility in the Australian region. Building on the materiality and more-than-human turns in social science, recent Australian research attends to various aspects of the more-than-human world as not only constituent of the broader environment through which humans do or do not move, but as mobile agents. For example, Barry and Suliman (2022) explore the troubled intersection of the vast ‘flyways’ of migratory shorebirds and urban development in and beyond Australia, including land reclamation for airports to facilitate the airborne mobility of humans. Somewhat conversely, Cooke and Lane (2018), Cooke, Landau-Ward, and Rickards (2020), Phillips and Atchison (2020), and Atchison and Pilkinton (2022) explore the often *unwanted* mobility of plants and how they challenge land managers’ and others’ efforts to place particular nonhuman lives in some spaces and not others. Also examining

unwanted nonhuman mobilities, McManus (2021) explores the confronting (and fatal) incursion of bushfire smoke and ash into Australian cities during the Black Summer fires of 2019-20, while Williamson et al. (2023) and Verlie and Blom (2022) similarly follow the smoke into homes and classrooms to document its often intangible and more-than-physical effects.

The Black Summer fires are indicative of the climate change context of mobilities and research on them. Although there is a relatively large Australian literature on disaster management including technical studies of evacuations, there is little research in the Australian context on emergency (im)mobilities of the sort Adey (2016) refers to. Where a mobilities lens has been used consistently is in research into slower and more indirect climate change effects, including effects on people's decision making and attachment to place. Butler et al. (2021; 2022) explore people's leisure travel decisions in the disaster recovery phase (following bushfires and COVID lockdowns), and note the synergy between a turn to local and regional travel, slower mobilities, and '*personal and community* recovery from the impacts of multiple crises' (Butler et al. 2022, 774). The use of longer-term, though not always permanent, migration prompted by the experience or projection of climate change-related impacts is also the focus of a rapidly growing, rich literature (e.g. see Boas et al. 2022; Tschakert and Neef 2022 and Zander, Richerzhagen, and Garnett 2021), building on earlier work on human migration as an adaptation strategy by authors such as King et al. (2014).

It is important to note that researchers are among those affected by the more-than-human mobilities constituent of many disasters and climate change impacts. The embedded, experiential character of being researchers in a dynamic and sometimes dangerous context is something that researchers in the region have drawn attention to (e.g. Rickards and Watson 2020), reflecting a broader reflexive turn in scholarship prompted in part by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Hopkins 2021).

Future region power

In synthesising just some of the recent mobilities research undertaken in Australia, our intention is to highlight that this field is in rude health, with each reference demonstrating scholars within, affected by and contributing to our region in different ways to extend mobilities thinking. In highlighting 'region power', we do not want to fall into a parochial framing of a single world society (the famed 'new world order') or a singular kind of mobility typical to Australia: the triumphal hyper-mobility of its megacities or the tyranny of distance still felt by its frequent flyers in direct flights to Europe from Perth. Diversity is the catchword here and the diversity of mobilities cited in this paper should be seen as a testament to the paradigm's strength rather than a dilution of its core intent. As one of the founders of the mobilities paradigm warned: 'The concept of society will in the future be one particularly deployed by especially powerful 'national' forces seeking to moderate, control and regulate these variously powerful networks and flows criss-crossing their porous borders' (Urry 2000, 1). What we can learn from this viewpoint is that the pluralisation of mobility to mobilities offers a salve to the chauvinistic, grandstanding, nation-building element in Australia's region power that it is known for, even notorious for, on the global stage. Region power, in our reading, stems instead from the embracing of diversity and the keen awareness of the tempos

of mobility that separate out, as relative types: different humans, non-humans, objects, data and ideas.

So, far from a niche concern, mobilities thinking has become a mainstream analytical lens across geography and other cognate disciplines. And yet we contend that there is still much more to do. In the closing section of our essay, we speculate on how we as a community of mobilities scholars could extend debates further. Rather than pointing out a set of new objects of analysis (though there are undoubtedly many), we propose three directions for future mobilities research from our region which we hope will further strengthen the distinctive ethos of our mobilities research.

First, we encourage mobilities researchers from this region to expand the conceptual foundations of the work that they are undertaking. So much work in the mobilities paradigm is still deeply indebted to Anglophone academics and philosophies that have their roots in the European continental tradition. This is in part about appreciating how our starting points for thinking about key concepts such as power, subjectivity, agency, and ethics have their own regional provenance, rather than assuming that such concepts have universal purchase. We would like to see mobilities researchers engaging sensitively with traditions outside the Anglo-Euro mobilities cannon to destabilise and pluralise these now-hegemonic ways of thinking about mobilities. This might be about engaging with overlooked thinkers and theorists from this region whose ideas cannot be subsumed into our current approaches, and grappling with how these conceptualisations differ. This includes better valuing the different kinds of social and political thinking that different migrants to this region bring with them.

However, fundamental to this is also an engagement with Indigenous conceptualisation of mobility. Though work highlighted in the previous section demonstrates that such thinking is already happening, we recognise the need for deeper engagements with different forms of Indigenous thinking that disrupt settler-colonial legacies (Clarsen 2015; 2017; Taylor, Payer, and Barnes 2018). Moreover, there is an urgent need and 'obligation to engage with Indigenous understanding of (im)mobilities' (Suliman et al. 2019, 298) at this time of climate change because of 'the subordination of Indigenous voices; and the marginalisation of (im)mobility concerns from the global climate agenda' (ibid.300). Though we acknowledge that care must be taken to avoid a 'new imperial history' (Standfield 2018, 1), this invitation aligns with moves beyond this region to decolonise mobilities thinking in other parts of the world (e.g. Hinger 2022).

Second, and relatedly, we advocate for a modest sense of region power. We have already noted the strong tendency evident in attempts at writing regions in the early pages of this journal to 'pin things down', in other words, to produce definitive accounts of regions. Though postcolonial sensitivities have thankfully become more pronounced in more recent work on mobilities, there is still arguably a tendency for mobilities researchers to assume that the goal of research is to pin things down, to make definitive claims about what, precisely, is going on. Such a tendency is understandable when grappling with new situations might require an element of temporary stabilisation – for instance, in the study of new mobility technologies (Bissell 2023). Yet given our commitment to pluralised conceptualisations of mobility as advocated, mobilities thinking from our region must necessarily become more comfortable with less certain and more speculative outcomes.

When Stewart (2013, 284) argues that ‘strong theory’ has a ‘tendency to beat its objects into submission to its dreamy arguments’, the upshot of her argument is that rather than being seen as a knowledge deficit, there are all kinds of benefits in being less certain about things. Resonating with Hughes’s (2021) writings on the opening up of perceptual worlds in the experience of being lost, rather than being snapped-to-grid, this ‘weaker theorising’ permits both our objects of analysis and our modes of evaluation to be stranger and more multiple than we presently permit. Especially important in the non-stationary, non-linear climate we are now in, the goal of research here is not about getting the most *accurate* description of mobilities that are happening (Rose 2016). Rather, it is to prompt us to think about some of our most cherished concepts in new ways in order to better understand what situations could be.

Third, and finally, we encourage mobilities researchers to join in and support the diverse mobilities institutions in our region to help foster connection and collaboration. Highlighting the powers of institutions might seem like a somewhat counter-intuitive point to finish on – especially at a time when the more repressive powers of some of our dominant societal institutions are rightly under the spotlight. However, our argument here is that we need to affirm the quieter enabling powers of the institutions that allow this kind of progressive, socially just, mobilities research to take place. Against a backdrop of capricious national funding regimes and many years during which humanities and social science research has had to fight for its institutional survival in Australia, it is important that we champion each other’s work, especially graduate researchers and early career academics. An important part of this are those institutions that explicitly support mobilities research in this part of the world. Unlike large corporate universities, networks like AusMob and the Institute of Australian Geographers are more fragile, have limited funding (if any), and rely on the dedication of volunteers to keep them afloat – something that is even more challenging in the wake of COVID-19 and the collective burnout currently palpable. Yet such networks are part of what enables learning from each other and development of new ideas collectively. Our hope is that in the long tail of COVID-19, AusMob will continue to be an institution that will energise, excite and inspire; fostering the next generation of mobilities thinking in our region. We invite you to join us on this journey!¹

Note

1. To see our events and activities, please visit <https://www.ausmob.com.au>.

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