

*Varieties of Imagination,
Creativity & Wellbeing in Australia*



*Edited by Anita Archer, Aaron Corn, Frederic Kiernan,
Peter Otto, and Anthea Skinner*

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Unlikely Publishing*

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1. Welcome, Introduction & Acknowledgments

Peter Otto, Anita Archer, Aaron Corn,
Frederic Kiernan & Anthea Skinner



Figure 1. Olafur Eliasson, “Model Room” (2003), in collaboration with Elnar Thorstein (detail). Photo: Peter Otto, Tate Modern, London.

Archipelago

“Welcome”—is unlikely to be the word readers expect to find first in an ebook on *Varieties of Imagination, Creativity, and Wellbeing in Australia* (VICA), perhaps because that title implies a conventional overview, distanced from the everyday contexts and interactions on which it depends; an overview that can be neatly carried away in one bag by readers. This impression is not entirely incorrect, given that VICA assembles, inside a single volume, views on imagination, creativity, and wellbeing in Australia as seen from First Nations, Disabled, and European/settler perspectives, understandings, and traditions, but as will soon become obvious it sets out to do much more than that. In brief summary: this collection aims to question the assumptions and point of view from which overviews of imagination, creativity, and wellbeing are typically drawn. It does this by broadening, disrupting and reinterpreting the “usual” sources while also changing the conversation in which these terms are commonly discussed and policy on these matters is developed. To this end, the following pages function as a form of common ground, which host a variety of voices, heard in an array of media and genres, with each speaking from places different from the others. Together, they evoke the mix of proximity (similarity) and distance (difference), agreement and debate,

that is characteristic of open enquiry, but without rapidly resolving what is said into the abstract forms, no longer responsive to multiplicity, that are all too often characteristic of the detached observer.

In contrast to the inert categories deployed—and flat world projected—by conventional overviews, these voices together evoke what one might call “a non-hierarchical ... domain where the horizons of the parts intersect,” overlap, and engage with each other.¹ In this environment, which includes verbal, visual, musical, and performative elements, our organising terms (imagination, creativity, wellbeing) can be recognised as multiple rather than singular, each overlapping the other, and the lines drawn between them can be seen as contingent. Rather than a place used only for representing the varieties of imagination, creativity, and wellbeing, with “variety” understood as an inflection of what we already know, this common ground or space can become a vehicle for re-visioning those phenomena, by critically examining, dismantling or just putting to one side dominant frames of reference and exploring/demonstrating/revealing alternative ones. In other words, VICAW invites readers/viewers to remain immersed longer than is usual in a state one might describe as ambiguous, in the sense of being open to more than one interpretation; and in so doing the book becomes, one might say, an invitation to what Édouard Glissant calls “archipelagic” rather than “continental thought”²:

[C]ontinental thought ... makes us think that we see the world as a bloc, taken wholesale, all-at-once, as a sort of imposing synthesis, just as we can see, through the window of an airplane, the configurations of landscapes or mountainous surfaces. With archipelagic thought, we know the rivers’ rocks, without a doubt even the smallest ones.³

In this context, the word “welcome,” which we now extend explicitly to *you*, includes you in a conversation that is extended each time this ebook is opened and readers step inside an environment—a common ground—filled with voices speaking variously from a wide range of places, some may be familiar, some distant, but all addressed to you. This is a type of conversation long overdue and increasingly necessary for the creative arts, the humanities, education, architecture, medicine, cybernetics—indeed, wherever it is crucial to engage with a world that is now manifestly multiple rather than singular. To quote Glissant once more, we dwell in a world where, “for the first time, the semi-totality of human cultures are entirely and simultaneously put in contact and in effervescent reaction with one another” and there is consequently “no legitimizing transcendence,”⁴ no point from which the whole can be ordered without radical loss of diversity and complexity.

For those inclined to continental thought, archipelagic thinking can

occasionally prompt a degree of anxiety, perhaps even hostility. This is in part because modern styles of the former (continental thought), with their emphasis on categorisation, predictability, abstraction, and universality, are still marked by their emergence during the Enlightenment (1687–1789) as a defence against the waywardness of the particular—a waywardness heightened by social upheaval, rapid cultural change, and, perhaps most importantly, by the discovery that Europe was merely one “in the sum total of civilizations.”⁵ Continental thought, notwithstanding its many virtues, is therefore shadowed by a hierarchical binary opposition between the universal and the particular, with the latter functioning as the naïve and/or benighted world from which the former struggles to extricate itself.⁶ In contrast, although Glissant privileges archipelagic over continental thought, he places them in a relation to each other of apposition rather than opposition, suggesting that their exchanges need not be hierarchical or antagonistic.⁷ This transforms conventional understandings of both terms, as Glissant argues in books such as *Poetics of Relation* (1990; trans. 1997), *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity* (1995; trans. 2020), *Philosophie de la Relation. Poésie en Étendu* [*Philosophy of Relation. Poetry in Extension*] (2010),⁸ and so on. The implications of this revision of conventional terms could waylay us for some time, but for the purposes of this “Introduction” it is sufficient simply to say that it opens the possibility of seeing the world, perhaps in the here and now and not only in a utopian future, “as a dynamic totality of interacting communities, all aware of each other and constantly changing.”⁹

Openings

But perhaps we have moved too quickly to what sounds like a conclusion. You might be demurring that archipelagic thought is barely worth announcing in a volume that takes “imagination” and “creativity” as two of its three key terms. Both are commonly associated with the new, particular, and diverse rather than the conventional, universal, and uniform, and to that extent can be placed at the antipodes of continental thought. Further, these “archipelagic” associations help explain why imagination and creativity are increasingly understood as key ingredients in the experience of wellbeing,¹⁰ which typically attempts to heal by restoring to the individual, group, or community a sense of agency in their own life. With all this in mind, it would be reasonable to look for the archipelago of imagination/creativity first in the traditional genres with which they are most closely associated: art, literature, music, architecture, design, fashion, and so on. And second, in the cultural locales where they have since at least the late 1970s become prominent, as seen for example in discussions about creative economies, cities, and institutions;¹¹ in a wide range of academic disciplines;¹² and as

keywords in education, economics, healthcare, urban design, and industry.¹³

Many of these traditional genres are represented in this volume, but they are nevertheless not the archipelagos with which it is solely concerned. It can be argued that, notwithstanding their importance, they frequently reflect the dominance of Anglo-European traditions, which typically assume able-bodied rather than disabled agents¹⁴ and downplay the relevance of non-Western cultural traditions and contexts.¹⁵ At the same time, although it is often assumed that the notions of productive imagination on which they are based are universal, they in fact emerge only in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, as one amongst a variety of understandings of the imagination, many of which have powerful (even if not widely recognised) legacies in the present.¹⁶ The use of the word “creativity” to describe a human rather than divine power occurs still more recently. It appears in this sense first in the 1870s but enters mainstream discourse only in the 1950s, with its popularity steadily increasing every year after that, alongside related words such as creative, create, imagine, and imagination.¹⁷ Seen in this light, what had at first seemed like an archipelago, can in some moments and from some points of view look like the fruit of modern doxa and some would say commercial empire.¹⁸

If we want to foster “a dynamic totality of interacting communities, all aware of each other and constantly changing,” it is crucial to have an at least rudimentary understanding of the *varieties* of imagination, which includes the tradition/s on which they draw, the contexts which they engage and of which they are part, and the manifold ways in which they differ from, but also overlap, combine, and/or interact with each other. This is arguably all the more crucial in the twenty-first century where, on the one hand, computer-mediated communications have in effect compressed time and space and, consequently,¹⁹ “[t]he influences or impacts of cultures on one another are immediately felt as such” rather than stretched out across long time frames.²⁰ And, on the other hand, creativity, narrowly conceived as a mix of “originality” and “task-appropriateness,”²¹ has become so dominant that it now “counts as something everyone is obliged to achieve.”²² The first, which brings varieties of imagination into proximity with each other, is eclipsed by the second, which by enabling the “convergence between artistic labour and post-Fordist, immaterial or cognitive labour”²³ leads to what has been called the “creativity complex.”²⁴ This in effect draws the varieties of imagination apart again, short-circuiting the dialogue between them and, therefore, moving out of sight its implications for our understanding of wellbeing.

Time-space compression has a long history, beginning with the formation of global colonial and trading empires in the sixteenth century; taking recognisably modern form in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution; and then accelerating in

the late-twentieth century, owing in large part to advances in computer-mediated communications.²⁵ It is surprising therefore that academic study of the relation between creativity and culture is so recent. Just how recent is suggested by the first chapter of *The Palgrave Handbook of Creativity and Culture Research* (2016), entitled “Introducing Creativity and Culture, the Emerging Field,” which its editor, Vlad Petre Glăveanu, describes as “among the first large-scale publications to consider creativity and culture as a unitary research area.”²⁶

This emerging field is enabled by what Max Helfand, James C. Kaufman, and Ronald A. Beghetto, in the first sentence of the first chapter of *The Palgrave Handbook*, describe as the “broad consensus on the definition of creativity” that has been in place “for more than 60 years.” This definition is the narrow view we mentioned earlier, which sees it as involving both “originality” and “task-appropriateness.”²⁷ The second term (“task-appropriateness”) places creativity inside culture, which because it determines both the “task” and what counts as original can be viewed as the enabling frame for the first term (“originality”). At the same time, “originality” maintains enough of a link with the productive imagination for creativity to be presented as the ultimate source of culture and as that which opens spaces of possibility in the given. These superficially contradictory claims turn culture into a processual rather than static domain, which as it advances changes the contexts that determine both what counts as original and whether the potential for originality is widened or narrowed. Originality and task-appropriateness/culture are accordingly so closely entwined with each other that it makes little sense to study the one without the other.

Varieties of Imagination, Creativity, and Wellbeing contributes to this emerging field, even though it does so with a twist that we can introduce by noting that the contrary terms (originality and task-appropriateness) defining conventional notions of creativity does a lot of work. First, it divides studies of imagination from those of creativity, with the former focused on the solitary genius and the latter on more everyday individuals inside social, cultural, and professional contexts. Although in some contexts this distinction is useful, it tends to obscure the complexity and multiplicity of European histories of imagination, in which the entwining of imagination and culture in the everyday lives of “ordinary” people, the relation between individual and social modes of creation, and the extent to which imagination and commerce are entangled with each other are of more than passing interest.²⁸

Second, although the “broad consensus on the definition of creativity” provided a useful first frame for studies of creativity and culture, it has also worked to eclipse the variety of imaginations/creativities and to occult the dialogue that in everyday life continues between them. And third, the emergence of “creativity and culture as a unitary research area” is roughly coterminous with the emergence of research analysing the extent to which

dominant notions of “creativity” are themselves products of a particular culture that are aligned with neo-liberalism; inflected by Cold War discourse; powerfully oriented to the market; and involved in the aestheticisation of the social, a phenomenon endemic in late capitalism.²⁹ When seen through this lens, creativity seems closely allied with “a type of economic, political, and social organisation in which all that matters ... is efficacy, adaptability—unfailing flexibility” rather than, for example, with interactions where “participants exercise transformative effects on one another though the demands of recognition, of non-domination, and of liberty.”³⁰

The realisation that our understanding of creativity is the product of a particular culture, rather than a universal form differently realised in different cultural contexts, situates rather than dismisses the discoveries that take it as their starting point, while opening the field it had previously seemed to contain. In so doing it foregrounds the importance of archipelagic thought about imagination, creativity, and wellbeing—the catalyst for which in this ebook is conversation.

Talking With Each Other

Varieties of Imagination, Creativity, and Wellbeing in Australia—the project and the ebook you have opened—is a collaboration between the Indigenous Knowledge Institute (University of Melbourne), Disability Studies, the Research Unit in Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Contemporary Culture (ERCC) (Arts Faculty, University of Melbourne), and the “Creativity and Wellbeing Research Initiative” (CAWRI). It brings together First Nations, migrant, and settler artists/writers/musicians, as well as people interested in the history of imagination (in whatever tradition) and those interested in creativity and disability, to explore what creativity, imagination and wellbeing might mean in different Australian traditions and contexts.³¹ The project set out to identify and examine points of contact and/or interaction between these different traditions and contexts, as well as any shortcomings in academic and/or dominant understandings of imagination, creativity, and wellbeing insofar as they are relevant to Australia. However, precisely because this project involved bringing sometimes radically different points of view and ways of knowing into proximity with each other, it soon became clear that if we wanted to avoid (or at least defer) the abstractions of continental thought, the best way of proceeding was via the to-and-fro of conversation. Although the last word in the previous sentence might sound anodyne, “modes” and protocols of conversation can differ dramatically from each other, opening the possibility of misunderstanding, so that “conversation” opens a space of both possibility and risk.

The first stage of VICAW accordingly began with three separate group discussions, each involving artists, writers, performers, activists, and

academics, which focused on notions of imagination, creativity, and wellbeing as experienced and understood in different communities, demographics, social groups, and professions. The first group drew together people living with a disability; the second First Nations; and the third those involved in academic study of art, literature, music, and so on. These categories were not exclusive and were understood to be in this context artificial, given that many participants could have belonged to two and sometimes to all three of these groups. These conversations were in themselves remarkable and “complete”; but they were also preliminary because they were turned towards participation in the second stage of the project, which brought people from each of these groups together in roundtable discussion. In this regard, the questions for each group were as simple as they were demanding: “What topics are crucial for a conversation about imagination, creativity, and wellbeing?” and “What do you want to share with others in this larger discussion?”

The roundtable was held on December 9, 2021, with 29 participants, at the 20th annual Symposium on Indigenous Music and Dance, which formed part of the 44th annual National Conference of the Musicological Society of Australia. It provided an opportunity for participants to learn from each other, build on earlier discussions, establish relations and networks, and develop a sense of what the next steps in this project might be. The discussion focused first on the traditions/cultures/understandings of imagination, creativity, and wellbeing that informed/inspired participants and/or from which they drew strength. It then turned to representation, understood as an omnibus category that included the role of medium (voice, ritual, genre, and so on); the environment/audience on which the work depends; what can, should not, or cannot be represented; and the power of stories, for good and for ill. This was followed by remarks on archive/memory, which explored what is needed to support, safeguard, and/or communicate (where appropriate) cultural stories. And, although we were by then running out of time, the discussion turned to “Futures,” during which exchanges centred on the role of the varieties of imagination/creativity in a world disentangling itself from colonial social imaginaries, marked by social inequalities, and threatened by climate change.

The conversations and roundtable were unusual in at least three ways. First, they occurred in a research environment in which the relation between participants was one of exchange rather than extraction of knowledge, in which listening was at least as important as talking, and where the aim was to build understanding between people and groups. Second, each participant was considered to be a chief investigator, who owned their own story. And third, following from the previous points, it was agreed by all participants that they would not publish what was said by others. Although somewhat contentious in a research environment wedded to speed and

quantifiable outcomes, these conditions help explain the active generosity of participants, the intimacy of what was discussed, and the sense of trust that developed during the conversations and roundtable.

These first stages of the project provided the foundation for the next, in which our many chief investigators were invited to develop what they had said in the conversations and/or the roundtable, for inclusion in the ebook you are reading. This broadened the conversation in four ways. *First*, some of the contributors drew in, as co-authors, their collaborators on projects that had informed their views on imagination, creativity, and wellbeing. *Second*, each contribution was read by two anonymous referees, some of whom engaged in an extended to-and-fro with contributors, bringing a new set of voices into play. *Third*, it brought us to Practice Lab, the student-led graduate design studio based at the Victorian College of the Arts, where we met three of their team, the talented designers Ethan Tsang, Mia Murone, and Georgia Hodgkinson. The design of *Varieties of Imagination, Creativity, and Wellbeing*—from fonts, colours, and ornaments to ordering devices, layout, and overall form—is their response to a brief, refined in a workshop with our contributors, which invited them to fashion an open rather than closed form, which could house a variety of voices, evoke a sense of roundtable conversation, and yet easily be navigated by readers/viewers. And *fourth*, when Haydie Gooder took on the role of copy editor, a fascinating conversation began with her about how best, in dialogue with authors, to edit contributions that were divided from each other by voice, genre, medium, and point of view and yet belonged to the same conversation. The object of this rapidly widening conversation was to realise, at least to some degree, even if only within the virtual covers of an ebook, the possibility entertained by Glisson of a relation between the whole and the particular that is one of apposition rather than either opposition or appropriation.

Uncertainty, Imagination/Creativity, and (perhaps) Drastic Reorientation

We are, of course, now deep inside another conversation, which broadens each time a reader/viewer opens this ebook. For those new to this group, a question is likely to arise for which we have no single answer, namely: “If *Varieties of Imagination, Creativity, and Wellbeing in Australia* is akin to an archipelago, on which island should I begin?” Some will want to travel from the first chapter step by step to the end. Those with more peripatetic inclinations, will wander here and there inside it. And those more attuned to image than text, might turn first to the remarkable visual works re-presented in the volume, by Safdar Ahmed (figs. 11.15–17), William Blake (19.4–8), Lyndell Brown and Charles Green (28), Olafur Eliasson (1.1), Tim Ferguson (14.1–8), Iswanto Hartono (11.2), Glenn Loughrey (3.1), Thomas Risler (12.1–

6), and Melinda Smith (4.1), amongst others. Together they constitute a multi-dimensional gallery within the book—an expanse in which some of the most striking landmarks are:

- Loughry's "Treaty"—a painting that explores wellbeing in Australia as dependent on the strategic reimagining of self and country, which is "used by the Islamic Council of Victoria in 23 mosques, as well as in St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne, and other major institutions."
- Works by Safdar Ahmed, Iswanto Hartono, *et al.*, that together offer a glimpse of (amongst other things) the collaborative curatorial-practice of the Indonesian artist collective ruangrupa; the role of individual and community wellbeing in its work; and the transformation of art world institutions proposed by ruangrupa—as seen in 2022 at *documenta fifteen* (11.1–17).
- Risler's mapping of the architecture at the now decommissioned residential institution, Kew Cottages, where he lived, which by mixing documentary, interpretation, and self-expression evokes a realm usually hidden by the binary opposition between continental and archipelagic thought.
- Brown and Green's panoramic "100 Years of Turbulence," the original of which is fifteen metres long, which presents the artist in one of their many important roles, namely as witness, which is evoked in this work by "photographs taken across 100 years of catastrophic (and terrible) post-Enlightenment history," from 1918 to 2018.
- Smith's simultaneously focused and expansive meditation on the exchanges between imagination/creativity, embodiment, trust, communication and wellbeing, as seen in the video titled "AirDancer," use her experiences as a dancer who uses Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) as a result of her disability, to explore the topics of this book through the many forms of communication she utilises, including movement, touch, pattern, her voice, and technology.
- Ferguson's expressive paintings of everyday life, rippling with the joy of active seeing, which culminate (for us) in the swirling blue and black lines of the wheelchair and the wry expression of the rider in "Never Stop Moving" (14.8).
- And, shifting to an earlier era, William Blake's iconoclastic "יָהּ & his two Sons Satan & Adam," which continues to challenge assumptions about what imagination is, the traditions to which [European notions of] imagination belong, and their involvement in the logics not just of liberty but unexpectedly also of domination.

But no matter in which group you find yourself, you might find it helpful to know before you proceed further a little more about what is being discussed

inside VICAW. For the first group, this will provide a glimpse of the landscape through which they will be travelling. For the second, it introduces a few of the many paths that they might like to take. And for the third, it foregrounds some of the ways in which the visual works illuminate or engage with other contributions. In the interests of economy, we will mention only four topics of conversation, with each followed by a list of contributions in which it is explored. Given that each of the chapters in this book engages with more than one and in some cases all of these topics, while branching out to other areas of interest, it is worth saying that these lists are not intended to pigeon-hole anyone or anything. We offer them only as doorways through which readers/viewers can step inside a still more wide-ranging conversation.

Traditions

- “Creative Responsibility: Shaping Purposeful Communities through Ceremonial Performance” (chap. 3)
- “An Imagined Tradition: Varieties of Imagination in Enlightenment and Romantic Thought” (6)
- “Re-envisioning Imagination: Revisiting Kant” (13)
- “The Source of a Haunting and Authorial Survival in Aboriginal Australian Literature” (17)

Archive/Memory

- “The Groove of *Raypirri*’: Following the Clapsticks into a New Generation” (8)
- “‘Minus Plus’ and The Art Project, 1975–1980” (12)
- “Creating an ‘Archive’ that Centres the Legacy of Artists with Disability” (16)
- “100 Years of Turbulence” (18)
- “Romanticism, Capitalism, Wellbeing, and the Long Age of Imagination” (19)

Opening Spaces/Worlds/Possibilities

- “Designing Common Ground: Layout, Typeface and Media” (2)
- “The AirDancer: The Rhythm of My Body Shapes” (4)
- “AirDancer” (video) (5)
- “The Rockchick Files” (7)
- “Loneliness, Music and Gay Men: A Reflection on Darren Hayes’ *Homosexual* (2022)” (9)
- “Opera in a Time of Social Crisis: Developing a Community of Creative Care, Melbourne 2020” (10)

Futures

- “Lumbung as Method: Community, Wellbeing, and the Participation of Safdar Ahmed and Refugee Art Project in *documenta fifteen*” (11)
- “Untitled” [with eight paintings] (14)
- “A Transition to Crip Lit: A Plea for Disability Literature to be Included as Compulsory Reading for Secondary and Tertiary Students” (15)
- “Highlighting the unseen to co-create another reality” (20)

Readers/viewers might be put off guard by our description, in the preceding pages, of a book unwilling to combine its points of view into a single view. The productive power of uncertainty generated by the multiplication of traditions and points of view should however not be underestimated. Readers/viewers should be warned that to enter the space opened by this volume, a space that lies midway between the absolute and the arbitrary, “may have severe side-effects, including drastic reorientation.”³²

Peter Otto, Anita Archer, Aaron Corn,
Frederic Kiernan, and Anthea Skinner