This article uses a case study of a Melbourne-based youth media project called Youthworx to explore the processes at stake in cultural engagement for marginalised young people. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted between 2008 and 2010, I identify some ways in which the city is implicated in promoting or preventing access to socially valued spaces of creativity and intended social mobility. The ethnographic material presented here has both empirical and theoretical value. It reveals the important relationships between the experience of place, creativity, and social life, demonstrating potentialities and limits of creativity-focused development interventions for marginalised youth. The articulation of these relationships and processes taking place within a particular city setting has theoretical implications. It opens up an opportunity to consider "suburbs" as enacted by specific forms of access, contingencies, and opportunities for a particular demographic, rather than treating "suburbs" as abstract, analytical constructs. Finally, my empirically grounded discussion draws attention to cultural and social consequences that inhabiting certain social worlds and acts of travelling "to and beyond" them have for young people.

Youthworx is a community-based youth media initiative employing pathway-based semi-formal creative practices to re-engage young people who have a history of drug or alcohol abuse or juvenile justice, who have been long disconnected from mainstream education, or who are homeless. The focus on media production allows it to tap into, and in fact leverage, popular creativity, tacit knowledge, and familiar media-based activities that young people bring to bear on their media training and work in this context. Underpinned by social and creative industry policy, Youthworx brings together social service agency The Salvation Army (TSA), educational provider Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE (NMIT), youth community media organisation SYN Media, and researchers at Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University. Its day-to-day operation is run by contractual, part-time media facilitators, social workers (as part of TSA’s in-kind support), as well as media industry experts who provide casual media training.

Youthworx is characterised by the diversity of its young demographic. One can differentiate between at least two groups of participants: those who join Youthworx because of the social opportunities, and those who put more value on its skill-development, or vocational creative industries orientation. This social organisation is, however, far from static. Over the two years of research (2008-2010) we observed evolving ideas about the identity of the program, its key social functions, and how they can be best served. This had proceeded with the construction of what the Youthworx staff term "a community of safe belonging" to a more "serious" media work environment, exemplified by the establishment of a social enterprise (Youthworx Productions) in 2010 that offers paid traineeships to the most capable and determined young creators. To accommodate the diversity of literacy levels, needs, and aspirations of its young participants, the project offers a tailored media education program with a mix of diversionary, educational, and commercial objectives. One-on-one media training sessions, accredited courses in Creative Industries (Media), and industry training within Youthworx Productions are provided to help young people develop a range of skills transferable into a variety of personal, social and professional contexts. Its creative studio, where learning occurs, is located in a former jeans factory warehouse in the heart of an industrial area of Melbourne’s northern inner-city suburb of Brunswick. Young people are referred to Youthworx by a range of social agencies, and they travel to Brunswick from across Melbourne. Some participants are known to spend over three hours commuting from outer suburbs such as Frankston or even regional towns such as King Lake. Unlike community-based creative programs reliant on established community structures within local...
suburbs (for example, ICE in Western Sydney), Youthworx moved into Tinning Street in Brunswick because its industry partner—The Salvation Army—had existing youth service infrastructure there. The program, however, was not tapping into an existing media “community of practice” (Lane and Wenger); it had to forge its own culture of media participation. In the early days of the program, there were necessary material resources and professional expertise (teachers/social workers/a creative venue), but it took a long while, and a high level of dedication, passion, and practical optimism on the part of the project managers and teaching staff, for young people to genuinely engage in media training and production.

Now, Youthworx’s creative space is a “practised place” in de Certeau’s sense. As “the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers” (De Certeau 117), so is the Youthworx space produced by practices of media learning and making by professional creative practitioners and young amateur creators (Raffo; for ideas on institutionalised co-creative practice see Spurgeon et al.). The Brunswick location is where our extensive ethnographic research has taken place, including regular participant observation and qualitative interviews with staff and young participants. The ethnographers frequently travelled with young people to other locations within Melbourne, accompanying them on their trips to youth community radio station SYN Media in the CBD, where they produce a weekly radio show, as well as to film shoots and public social events around the city.

As an access learning program for marginalised youth from around Melbourne, Youthworx provides an interesting example to explore how the concerns of material and cultural capital, geographic and cultural distance intersect and shape processes of creative participation and social inclusion. I draw on our ethnographic material to illustrate how these metonymic relationships play out in the ways young participants “travel distance” (Dewson et. al.) on the project and across the city, both figuratively and literally. The idea of “distance travelled” is adapted here from evaluation literature (for other relevant references see Dowmunt et al.; Hayes and Edwards; Holdsworth et al.), and builds on the argument made previously (Podkalicka and Staley 5), to encompass both the geographical mobility and cultural transformation that young people are supported to undergo as an intended outcome of their involvement in Youthworx. This paper also takes inspiration from ethnographic approaches that study a productive and transformative relationship between material culture, spatial geography and processes of identity formation (see Miller). What happens to Youthworx young participants as they travel in a trivial, and at first sight perhaps inconsequential, way between the suburbs they live in, the Youthworx Brunswick location and the city is both experientially real and meaningful. “Suburban space” is then a cultural site that simultaneously refers to concrete, literal places as well as “a state of mind”—that is, identification and connections that are generative of a sense of identity and belonging (Ferber et al.).

Youthworx is an intermediary point on these young people’s travels, rather than the final destination (Podkalicka and Staley 5). It provides access to various forms of new spatial, social, and creative experiences and modes of expression. Creating opportunities for highly disenfranchised young people to access and develop new social and creative experiences is an important aspect of Youthworx’s developmental agenda, and is played out at both philosophical and practical levels. On the one hand, a strength-based approach to youth work assumes respect for young people’s potential and knowledges—unlike public discourses that deny them agency due to an assumed lack of life experience (e.g., Poletti). In addition to the material provision of “food and shelter” typical of traditional social work, attention is paid the higher levels of the Maslow hierarchy of human needs, with creativity, self-esteem, and social connectedness at the top of the scale (see also Podkalicka and Campbell; Podkalicka and Thomas). Former Manager of The Salvation Army’s Brunswick Youth Services (BYS)—one of Youthworx’s partners—Craig Campbell argues:

Things like truth and beauty are a higher order of dreams for these
kids. And by truth I don’t mean the simple lies that can be told to get them out of trouble [but] is there a greater truth to life than a grinding existence in the impoverished neighbourhood, is there something like beauty and aesthetics that wakes us up in the morning and calls a larger life out of us? Most of those kids only faintly dream of such a thing, and this dream is rapidly being extinguished under the weight of drugs and alcohol, abusive family systems, savage interaction with law and justice system, and education as a toxic environment and experience. (Campbell)

Campbell’s articulate reflection captures the way the Youthworx project has been conceived. It is also a pertinent example of the many reflections on experience and practice at Youthworx that were recorded in my fieldwork, which illustrate the way these kinds of social projects can be understood, interpreted and evaluated. The following personal narrative and contextual description introduce some of the important issues at stake. (The names and other personal details of young people have been changed.)

Nineteen-year-old Dave is temporarily staying in an inner-city refuge. Normally, however, like most Youthworx participants, he lives in Broadmeadows, a far northern suburb of Melbourne. To get to Brunswick, where he does his accredited media course three days a week, he either catches a train or waits for a mini-bus to drive him there. The early-morning pick-up for about ten young people is organised by the program’s partner—The Salvation Army.

At the Youthworx creative studio, located in the heart of Brunswick, right next to railway tracks, young people produce an array of media products: live and pre-recorded radio programs, digital storytelling, mini-documentaries, and original music. Once at Youthworx, they share the local neighbourhood with other artists who have adapted warehouses into art workshops, studios and galleries. The suburb of Brunswick is well-known for its multicultural profile, a combination of industrial and residential estates, high rates of tertiary students due to its proximity to universities, and its place in the recent history of urban gentrification. However, Youthworx participants don’t seek out or engage with the existing, physically proximate creative base, even within the same street. On a couple of occasions, the opposite has been the case: Youthworx students have been involved in acts of vandalism of local residents’ property, including nearby parked cars. Their connections to the Brunswick neighbourhood remain poor, often reflecting their low social capital as a result of unstable residential situations, isolation, and fraught relationships with family. From Brunswick, they often travel to the city on their own, wander around, sit on the steps of Flinders Street train station—an inner-city hub and popular meeting place for locals and tourists alike.

Youthworx plays an important role in these young people’s lives, as an important access point to not only creative digital media-based experiences and skill development, but also to greater and basic geographical mobility and experiences within the city. As one of the students commented:

They are giving us chances that we wouldn’t usually get. Every day you’re getting to a place, where it’s pretty damn easy to get into; that’s what’s good about it. There are so many places where you have to do so much to get there and half the time, some people don’t even have the bloody bus ticket to get a [job] interview. But [at Youthworx/BYS], they will pick you up and drive you around if you need it. They are friends.
It is reportedly a common practice for many young people at Youthworx and BYS to catch a train or a tram (rather than bus) without paying for a ticket. However, to be caught dodging a fare a few times has legal consequences and young people often face court as a result. The program responds by offering its young participants tickets for public transport, ready for pick-up after afternoon activities, or, if possible, "driving them around"—as some young people told me. The program’s social workers revealed that girls are particularly afraid to travel on their own, especially when catching trains to the outer northern suburbs, for fear of being harassed or attacked. These supported travels are as practical and necessary as they are meaningful for young people’s identity formation, and as such are recognised and built into the project’s design, co-ordination and delivery. At the most basic level, The Salvation Army’s social workers pick young people up from the Broadmeadows area in the mornings. Youthworx creative practitioners assist young people to make trips to SYN Media in the city. For most participants, this is either the first or sporadic experience of travelling to the city, something they enjoy very much but are also somewhat daunted by. Additionally, as part of the curriculum, Youthworx staff make a point of taking young people to inner-city movie theatres or public media events.

The following vignette from the fieldwork highlights another important connection between physical journey and creative expression.

There is an excitement in Dave’s voice when he talks about his favourite pastime: hanging out around the city. "Why would you walk around the streets?" a curious female friend interjects. Dave replies: "No, it’s not the streets, man. It’s just Federation Square, everywhere … There is just all these young wannabe criminals and shit. People don’t know what goes on; and I want to do a doco on the city, a little doco of the people there, because I know a lot of it.”

Dave’s interest in exploring the city may be interpreted as a rather common, mundane routine shared by mildly adventurous adolescents of all walks. And yet, there is much more at stake in his account, and for Youthworx young participants more generally. As mentioned before, for many of these young people, it is the first opportunity to travel to the city. This experience then is crucial in a sense of self-exploration and self-discovery. As they overcome their fear of venturing out into the city on their own, they also learn that they have knowledge which others might lack. This moment of realisation is significant and empowering, and they want to communicate this knowledge to others. Youthworx assists them in learning how to translate this knowledge in a creative and constructive way, through an expression that weaves between the free individual and the social voice constructed to enable a dialogue or understanding (Podkalicka; Podkalicka and Campbell; Podkalicka and Thomas; also Soep and Chavez). For an effective communication to occur, a crafted social voice requires skills and a critical awareness of oneself and an audience, which is very different from the modes of expression that these young people might have accessed previously.

Youthworx’s young participants draw heavily on their life experiences, geographical locations, the suburbs they come from, and places they visit in the city: their cultural productions often reference their homes, music clubs and hang-out venues, inner city streets, Federation Square, and Youthworx’s immediate physical surroundings, with graffiti-covered narrow alleys and railway tracks. The frequent depiction of Youthworx in young people’s creative outputs is often a token of appreciation of the creative, educational and social opportunities it has offered them. Social and professional connections they make there are found to be very valuable.

The existing creative industries literature emphasises the importance of social networks to existing communities of interest and practice for human capacity building. Value is argued to lie not only in specific content produced, but in participatory processes that establish a link
between personal growth, individual skills and social and professional networks (Hearn and Bridgestock). In a similar vein, Carlo Raffo uses Granovetter’s concept of “weak ties” to suggest that access to “social relations that go beyond the immediate locality and hence their immediate experiences” can provide marginalised young people with “pathways for authentic and informal learning that go beyond the structuring influences of class, gender and ethnicity and into new and emerging economic experiences” (Raffo 11). But higher levels of confidence or social skills are required to make the most of vocational or professional opportunities beyond the supportive context of Youthworx. Connections between Youthworx participants and other creative practitioners within the creative locality of Brunswick have been absent thus far. Transitions into mainstream education and employment have also proven challenging for this group of heavily marginalised youth. As we found during our ongoing fieldwork, even the most talented students find it hard to get into mainstream education courses, or to get or keep jobs. The project serves as a social basis for young people to develop self-agency and determination so they can start engaging with new opportunities and social networks outside the program (Raffo 15). Indeed, the creative practitioners at Youthworx are key facilitators of connections between young people and the external world. They act as positive role models socially, and illustrate what is possible professionally in terms of media excellence and employment (see also Raffo). There are indications that this very supportive, gradual process of social learning is starting to bear fruit for individual students and the Youthworx community as a whole as they grow more confident with themselves, in interactions with others, and the media work they do.

Media projects such as Youthworx are examples of what Leadbeater and Wong call “disruptive innovation,” as they provide new ways of learning for those alienated by formal education. The use of digital hands-on media production makes educational processes relevant and engaging for young people. However, as I demonstrate in this paper, there are tangible, material barriers to releasing creativity, or enhancing self-discovery and sociality. There are, as Leadbeater and Wong observe, persistent links between cultural environment, socio-economic status, corresponding attitudes to learning and educational success in the developed world. In the UK, for example, only small percent of those from the lowest socio-economic background go to university (Leadbeater and Wong 10).

Youthworx provides an opportunity and motivation for young people to break a cycle of individual self-destructive behaviour (e.g. getting locked up every 6 months), intergenerational reliance on welfare, or entrenched negative attitudes to learning. At the basic level, it encourages and often insists that young people get up in the morning, with social workers often reporting to have to “knock at people’s houses and get them ready.” The involvement in Youthworx is often an important reason to start delineating between day and night, week and weekend. A couple of students commented:

I slept a lot. Yeah, I was always sleeping during the day and out at night; I could have still been doing nothing with my life [were it not for Youthworx]. Now people ask if I want to go out during the week, and I just can’t be bothered. I just want to sleep and then go to [Youthworx] and then weekends are when you go out.

It also offers a concrete means to begin exploring the city beyond the constraints of their local suburbs. This literal, geographical mobility is interlocked with potential for a changed perception of opportunities, individual transformation and, consequently, social mobility. Dave, as we have seen, is attracted to the idea of exploring the city but also has creative aspirations, and contemplates professional prospects in the creative industries. It is important to note that the participants are resilient in their negotiation between the suburban, Youthworx and inner city worlds they can inhabit. Accessing learning, despite previous negative schooling experiences, is for many of them very important, and reaffirming of life they aspire to. An opportunity to pursue dreams, creative forms of expression, social networks and education is a vital part of human existence. These aspects of social inclusion
are recognised in the current articulation of social policy reconceptualised beyond material, economic equality. Creative industry policy, on the other hand, is concerned with fostering creative outputs and skills to generate engagement and employment opportunities in the knowledge-based economies for wide sections of the population. The value is located in human capacity building, involving basic social as well as vocational skills, and links to social networks. The Youthworx project merges these two policy frameworks of the social and creative to test in practice new collaborative approaches to youth development.

The spatial and cultural practices of young people described here serve a basis for proposing a theoretical framework that can help understand the term "suburb" in an intrinsically relational, grounded way. The relationships at stake in cultural and social participation for marginalised young people lead me to suggest that the concept of 'suburb' takes on two tightly interwoven meanings. The first refers symbolically to a particular locale for popular creativity (Burgess) or even marginal creativity by a group of young people living at the periphery of the social system. The second meaning refers to the interlocked forms of material and cultural capital (and distance), as theorised in Bourdieu’s work (e.g., Bourdieu). It includes physical, spatial conditions and relations, as well as cultural resources and possibilities made available to young participants by the project (e.g., the instituted, supported travel across the city, or the employment of creative practitioners), and interlinked with everyday dispositions, practices, and status of young people (e.g., taste). This empirically-grounded discussion allows to theorise 'suburbs' as perceived and socially enacted by concrete, relational forms of access, contingencies, and opportunities for a particular demographic, rather than analytically pre-conceived, designated spaces within an urban system.

The ethnographic material reveals that cultural participation for marginalised youth requires an integrated approach, with a parallel focus on material and creative opportunities made available within creative sites such as Youthworx or even the Brunswick creative area. The important material constraints exemplified in this paper concern socio-economic background, cultural disadvantage and geographical isolation and point to the limits of the creative industries-based interventions to address social inclusion if carried out in isolation. They tap into the very basis of risks for this specific demographic of marginalised youth or "youth at risk." The paper suggests that the productive emphasis on the role of media and communication for (youth) development needs to be contextualised and considered along with the actual realities of everyday existence that often limit young people’s educational and vocational prospects (see Bentley et al.; Leadbeater and Wong). On the other hand, an exclusive focus on material support risks cancelling out the possibilities for positive life transitions, such as those triggered by constructive, non-reductionist engagement with “beauty, aesthetics” (Campbell) and creativity.

By exploring how participation in Youthworx engenders both the physical mobility between suburbs and the city, and identity transformation, we are able to gain insights into the nature of social exclusion, its meanings for the youth involved and the project managers and staff. Thinking about Youthworx not just as a hub of creative production but as a cultural site—“a space within a practiced place of identity” (De Certeau 117) in the suburb of Brunswick—opens up a discussion that combines the policy language of opportunity and necessity with concrete creative and material possibilities. Social inclusion objectives aimed at positive youth transitions need to be considered in the light of the connection—or disconnection—between the Youthworx Brunswick site itself, young participants’ suburbs, and, by extension, the trajectory between the inner city and other spaces that young people travel through and inhabit.

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References


