The project known as Cultural Asset Mapping Project in Regional Australia (CAMRA, 2008–2014) took its researchers travelling through a representative array of regional Australia, an array that was chosen deliberately to comprise a summary schema of all regional Australia. I was lucky enough to be one of the investigators. We selected the particular study-regions knowing that we had to get to the most telling places while staying within our abstemious budgets. So we studied how to run the project from Sydney in such a way that we could see frugally but not meagrely into several ‘other’ Australias. We wanted the array of study-regions to form a kind of template of regional Australia. We wanted our data and the theses we drew from them to be ‘scalable’ across the nation even as these theses and data were also pointed and pertinent exactly to the locations that we investigated.

So we made partnerships across a nationally representative range of locales from remote Australia (Central Darling Shire), to ‘tree-change’ havens and regions living in the aftermath of old-pastoral economies (both encompassed by Armidale–Uralla), to a
government-border jurisdiction (Albury-Wodonga) and to seaside enclaves and post-industrial urban outlands (encompassed by the Illawarra, Wollongong and Port Kembla). Much of regional Australia falls into one of these categories and we believe that insights gleaned in our study districts will feel true for people from many other regions that we did not visit. In other words, we have worked to make sure our findings can be taken to heart and mean something to people all over the continent; that the findings ‘get them where they live’.

Across the hundreds of unpredictable exchanges that ensued when we investigated the chosen regions, the locals often initiated remarkable runs of thought, imagination and compassion. Time and again strangers shared intimate insights that drew us in close and turned the world around just a little. Daily, we were struck by the importance of creating spaces that are not only physical but also mental and emotional, sometimes to the extent that they are also spiritual, spaces where you can define and make claims for yourself in order to offer yourself more resiliently to the world of everyday experience. Right from the start we sensed how useful it is to mark boundaries, to define locales and regions, to mark them but not entrench them. In the coming chapters you can see that the research gave weight to these first impressions. We grew to understand how you need a solid subjective standpoint – or some specifically located and structured node of everyday experience that can be called your culture – in order to move productively out to the larger world (or network) of others. The more solid your grounding, the more nimble you can be with the possibilities when encountering all the other places and people who make the vast surrounding world. The more robust the local or regional nodes, the more resilient the entire network. (For a good entrée to these largely unmeasurable but nevertheless crucial concerns, see the chapters in this book by Greg Young and Sue Boaden and Paul Ashton.)

As I reflect on the insights offered through the encounters with our selected regions, I keep coming back to a special image in the
collection of the State Library of New South Wales. It was drawn by Yakaduna, a rural-regional Aboriginal man, whose colonial name is recorded as Tommy McRae (born ca. 1835, died 1901). He lived on the plains of the upper Murray River at a time when his country was being overrun and reconfigured by agriculture, pastoralism and the European regulations of land-ownership. His picture, called ‘Sketch of Squatters. Drawn by Tommy an upper Murray Aboriginal. 1864’, is a modest ink configuration, roughly 14 × 10 cm, showing the barest graphical rendition of six silhouetted European figures gathered in a chattery gaggle, gesticulating and standing stiff-legged with their knees locked and their tiny feet trying but clearly failing to grip the colonised ground.

The most striking aspect of the sketch is how Yakaduna has conveyed the paradoxically competitive camaraderie amongst the squatters. Adapting European aesthetics and materials to his own sensibility, he shows not only how flushed with bravado
the squatters are, now that they have entered his country from elsewhere, but also how tottery they are and how poignantly they need each other in their newness to the scene; he shows how much they want to get the jump on each other but also how they dare not isolate themselves in this place that they cannot claim to know well even as they have claimed it administratively. It’s a scene sketched by someone who, while still remembering intensive belonging, has been recently wrenched from that intimate state. To my eyes, the picture is a beautifully nuanced study of alienation or stalled belonging. From someone who knows the location intimately, we have a picture of the exact opposite of closeness. It’s there in the authorial attitude of Yakaduna and it’s there within the frame, in the squiggled figures of the Europeans. For all their bluster and energy, the squatters seem at odds with each other and their environs. They appear unsettled, alienated from the ground they occupy. Untethered. Not grounded. In fact, they look a little bit mad, with their jumpy eagerness to gesticulate and make claims. You can almost hear those frockcoats flapping as the buffeting goes on unabated.

So the picture makes a point. It is polemical. Imaginative too. Gazing on its meagre lines, I can’t help but conjure the scene in which this rural Indigenous man was improvising with the new, imported technologies of paper and ink to serve his own purposes, working out how to convey some of the ideas and emotions that were bursting over his cognition and infiltrating his inherited sense of place now that the squatters’ powerful new world had come to his ancestral region. The picture is a poetic conundrum in this regard, holding several contradictory propositions and difficult moods in a highly suggestive array. And it stands as a precursor to the great flourishing of imagination that has come, in recent decades, from dozens of rural-Indigenous painting communities.

Every time I look at Yakaduna’s sketch I get an overwhelming sense that it was made for us here in the future as much as it was also made in response to the importuning, back then, by some newly arrived settler with a meagre payment or a curt demand.
In other words, the picture was and remains part of an economy that cannot be separated from the grim history of colonialism and the making and marking of regional limits. The picture is part of a history of the modern European metropolis arriving to mark out the divisions between the rural and the civic, the marginal and the central. It is shadowed by large forces of land-seizure and cultural erasure that are implicit but not necessarily obvious in the postcolonial condition of all regions in Australia. (This strong idea is proposed in Emily Potter’s chapter in this book.)

What is at stake when you assert your belonging in a rural zone of Australia nowadays? Or when you proclaim your valid knowledge of it? Or your difference from it? When I assay the full range of chapters that follow in this book, I am stuck by how much all the authors are concerned – some tacitly, some emphatically – to understand scales of value that evade the measures of demographics and economics. Scales that need to get measured as feelings, as sustained avidity rather than as monetary investment or enumerated attendance. The chapters all show how keen is the awareness of the value of commitment, relationship, care and intimacy in regions that are not blessed with metropolitan proximity to influence and decision-making. This is particularly evident in Deborah Stevenson’s chapter on the forces that shape citizenship, Penny Stannard’s on the special qualities of the suburbs and Eddy Harris’ distinctively Indigenous account of individual entrepreneurialism serving communal resilience. There’s keenness and close care in the memory-work that can hold a community together even when its constituents are dispersed widely across space and time, as demonstrated in Miranda Johnson’s chapter on the regional asset-value of archives, which can help communities gel both across generational time and despite spatial dispersal. There’s something delicately felt – an urge to care for a place lovingly by monitoring all its present needs and imagining a wide range of future options and an investment in the real value of emotion and imagination – that is shown again and again to be driving cultural workers in ‘marginal’ places: MCs rapping
new bushmen’s precepts, verandah tale-tellers and long-distance postmen conveying not only stamped material packages but also sentiments and snippets of community banter and know-how, or museum entrepreneurs taking a punt on the value of puzzlement, adventure and delight in the development of the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart. All this is touched upon in the chapters by Chris Brennan-Horley, by Chris Gibson and Andrew Warren and Ben Gallan, by Margaret Malone and Lisa Andersen, by Andrew Warren and Rob Evitt, and by Justin O’Connor.

Most of the writing in this book lauds the intimate values that put robustness in a place – values with more than monetary worth or electoral/political influence. The writers investigate how to catch the rich and special sounds and smells, the rhythms and closely felt textures, the particular qualities and rituals that define any ‘marginal’ place that is managing to survive all the contingencies and exigencies that are so often pushed upon it from outside and far away. The authors show ways to bear witness to the convictions that locals carry within their rural or regional domains. They tally the force and richness of someone’s resolve to make a go of it in zones removed from the administrative engines and gears in the cities.

The chapters all show the great value that regional people give to and draw from the connective work they do, connective to fellow inhabitants but also to the distinctive characteristics – animal, vegetable, mineral, meteorological – of a place. The extent and exertion of such connective work show how much local people care about a place and, by extension, how much they are roused to care for it in direct proportion to how much they care about it. In this equation, it is culture that usually arises and sustains amidst all this exertion. And this is all connected to how strongly people are compelled to assert (or sometimes perhaps to criticise) and reiterate the particular qualities of their places.

Analysing the customs and patterns made by cultural activities and products can help us understand how strongly culture is used by inhabitants of regions for maintaining the boundaries that
differentiate their special home-places from other regions. This analysis also aids the understanding of how diligently inhabitants maintain ritual activities that push long, intergenerational durations of coherence through all the educational transactions that go on in a place. Over extended time, we have seen in the CAMRA project that culture enacted in a region can put verve in a place. This verve has a value that can be described or evoked but that is often beyond measure.

The rhythm of ritual is crucial to this sense of assertive involvement with a particular place because when repetitions are freely given, not just from drudgery, an inhabitant can develop a sense of being stitched in to a place. I mean ‘stitched’ in the sense not only of being attached to the place but also of helping to hold it together, trussing it with meanings and committed affections and patterns of love and obligation that make continuity and connectivity amongst the communities that lodge in a place. Out of such freely given repetitions, something technical and closely felt can emerge: enchantment. With repeated, ritualised acts of singing, storytelling, dancing or making marks or artefacts in response to a particular place at crucial times of their life, creative subjects and stories ‘attach’ themselves to that place. After a while their identities cannot be imagined as separate from the place. The place gives ordered meaning and intensified feeling to the people, and vice versa. Enchantment is the process of chanting oneself into place, into reality. Enchantment is creative, reiterative and constantly careful. It occurs overtly in ancient, indigenous rituals. But it also occurs in annual agricultural shows and music festivals, in football finals, in ceremonies marking personal and communal anniversaries. It’s a process concerned to maintain distinctiveness, to hold firm not only against the decay that time and tiredness always bring but also against malicious incursions from outside, be they governmental neglect, media misrepresentation or the chimerical lure that cities waft at the young.

To find the courage (which comes from ‘le coeur’ – the heart) to work and hold firm like this, you probably need to feel roused
in response to the value of a place, to care enough about it and to feel so much closeness that you feel encouraged to take care of the poignant details, again and again, ritually and assertively. It is personal, this moment when you evaluate the worth of so much effort. It is an intimate moment when you make a commitment, and as these moments are repeated, they become heartfelt. And the sequence that follows from such moments – the sequence of care – is loving somehow.

Amidst all the politics, pragmatism and scepticism that are rightly parlayed in these essays, this word can and should be stirred in: love. Finally, no matter how shy we are to deploy this term in the social sciences, these chapters persuade me that this phenomenon – love – looks like the most compelling and all-encompassing keyword to brand the surprisingly intimate domain that has been surveyed in the investigations of regionalism that these chapters proffer.

The love is there in the labour, beyond any rational position description, performed by postal officers in regional Australia, whose years of commitment have made them the main communicative but also affectionate threads that stitch together spatially isolated communities; the love is there in the pride of local surfboard shapers who create bespoke designs, handmade iteration after handmade iteration, that assess a surfer’s idiosyncratic body and performance styles and match them to the specific qualities of the breaks that peel off day and night along the local points and reefs of their home coastline; the love is there in the connective work – the travelling, the talking, the deal-making and encouragement – enacted by the local poets, singers, painters, MCs and exhibition and festival curators who are glimpsed in this book constantly moving about their regions, joining people with people, holding ideas, practices and memories firm across the generations, across the absences when people move to the cities or return needing reorientation, across the stints of discouragement that come with being told again and again that you are out on the margins. This is a love invested and emboldened in the bonds
maintained between people and place. Felt as a sense of active attachment, this love burgeons in cultural activities, in pulses of commitment, sustained creativity and generosity, enlivening individuals and communities. This love shows how a potent centre can be created in any place where heartfelt enchantment occurs continuously and collectively, rendering margins relative. For a region can be in the heart of the people who sustain it with careful tending – in the heart, not an extremity. And despite the deprivations that might threaten the vivacity of any place in the outlands (defined thus by metropolitans), its cultural activities and assets are always its lifeblood. Culture gives integration to the experience of a place and gives inhabitants something more than subsistence – it gives a centre to existence.