WOR CULTURE: DISTINCTIVENESS: NORTH OR NORTH EAST

Welcome to this reflection of our sixth *Wor Culture* event which focused on **Distinctiveness: North or North East**. Here, we'll give the key points from our presentations, reflect some of the discussions, provide some (hopefully) useful links and resources, and let you know what's happening next.

For those of you who couldn't be with us for our zoom gathering, further information on what *Wor Culture* is about can be found at the end of this document. Please get in touch if you'd like to contribute, have any suggestions, or would like to share any links or resources.

We look forward to welcoming you to one of our events.

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Presentations

Our event included presentations from **Keith Merrin - Chief Executive of Sunderland Culture** and **Anna Disley - Executive Director (Programme & Impact) at New Writing North**
[If you click on the Presentation menu there is an option to view with subtitles]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0ncPZ5_1qE

BREAKOUT ROOMS

After the presentations we split into Breakout Rooms (smaller discussion groups) themed on:

- Distinctiveness of place(s): what makes us different
- Influencers and influencing: how to make the case/who to
- Collaboration or competition? Moving forward effectively

Here's a summary of the key points from those groups

Distinctiveness of place(s): what makes us different

- Regional Arts Assoc – we've always been pretty good at working together

- NE also has a strong history (going back to 1980s and earlier) as a good place / space for artists to live /work (urban and rural) – it would be interesting to map this
- [For anyone wanting more historical evidence of these two points I can recommend Natasha Vall's very readable 2011 book 'Cultural Region – NE England 1945-2000']
- Contemporary and historic associations with technical innovation (esp. coal industry – renewable energy)
- Local community action re self-identities and self-narration – as oppose to externally imposed and 'singular' narratives / lens of 'North-East-ness'– there already but need to create opportunities to expand this – esp. resisting easily imposed (urban) NE as post-industrial 'economic failure' narrative
- Recognition of strategic value of working together as a wider 'North' but concerns that NE distinctiveness can easily be overlooked / lost within this, esp. more powerful NW voices (Manchester)
- There was an uneasiness about the notion of branding the Northeast as a particular thing
- In this notion of identity are we talking about individuals or groups? Considering the importance of inclusivity and diversity are we inadvertently setting ourselves up to fail if we go down the route of trying to say what's really distinct about people in the North East which is a very heterogeneous as a group?

Funding / Public Investment / Economic Development

- Concerns expressed about the level of funding delivered into parts of region (e.g. ACE funding) relative to other parts of England / per capita. Is this about engagement with funders? The volume of applications submitted? the quality of those applications? Or, funder lack of understanding of local context and issues?
- Is the region self-excluding i.e. how loudly do we shout? Is our voice cutting through at national levels?
- What does this mean for the widely trailed 'levelling up' agenda? The recent Spending Review announcement of a £4bn Levelling Up programme is based on a competitive bidding process with decision-making at a national level.

Connectedness, Profile & Identity

- The NE's relative isolation makes it a "best kept secret"
- The region is both connected and isolated, dependent on the context - "it's a double-edged sword"
- The popular (mainstream?) perception of the NE is a form of "greyness and bleakness", driven by a past industrial heritage that celebrates or presents itself through films (e.g. Ken Loach) or TV (e.g. Vera). Where or how are the new and growing industries being presented i.e. digital and data, medical research, new and renewable energy? And how this links with a vibrant social scene in the NE. "This is what attracted me to the region".
- We may have more of a distinctive identity, but it's made up of a broad range of "micro identities" - it's not a mon-culture, we are heterogeneous. We have "a culture that is welcoming".
- Perceptions of the NE often come from platforms or voices unconnected and outside of the region? "Are we stuck in the past? Does it have to be connected to an older heritage?" "We can, and should, engage with local people directly."
- "Distinctiveness does not preclude connectedness".

Promotion and Voice

- "We need a strategy for spending more time here" - how do attract and retain people? What are the levers and the opportunities?
- How can the region present an identity and an experience through other media / channels i.e. reach new audiences outside of traditional formats like film or tv?
- We aren't a simplistic demarcation recently voiced by Jake Berry, ex-Northern Powerhouse Minister i.e. 'football in the North, ballet in the South'.
- "I came to the region and Newcastle, having had no prior connection, because of its strengths in poetry"

Place

- The NE covers a broad range of places, spaces and environments - urban/city centre living and working, exceptional rural and natural assets, coasts/castles etc -and in a relatively small area that can be travelled across and within* (*noting that we need infrastructure improvements and investment)
- Natural benefits of wind/wave etc for renewable energy production
- Part of the region's strength rests with its relative "wildness, and its richness in nature".

Influencers and influencing: how to make the case/who to

How do we influence the Local Enterprise Partnership about the importance of culture to the region, especially as central government are using the LEP as a conduit to funding.

- The Journal has bought the rights to "Passionate People, Passionate places"...is that now defunct idea now? Is that a cliche?
- Importance in the power to tell our own story for example the wind power and tech innovation happening in Blyth which is of. national significance. How are we going to communicate these stories within a cultural context?
- Importance of getting these stories onto the screen to get past depictions of the NE as Get Carter without the coal. See Ken Loach for the perpetuation of NE misery. We need science fiction to imagine new scenarios (see Peter Hamilton's The Great North Road as a great example where Newcastle is a lucrative interplanetary portal).
- How do we influence DCMS and lobbying on behalf of the region. The What Next? national organisation has access to DCMS and ACE on behalf of arts organisations and (less successfully) freelancers
- Who is in the room? Is the whole community involved in influencing what they think about the region

Collaboration or competition? Moving forward effectively

- Commonalities of need across the North, can we look more at common successes?

- We need a more rich and nuanced way to describe what it means to be from the North/North East but how to do that is really tricky
- Do we have to sell our soul to the North to attract investment and affect change
- How do we define local and hyper local?
- Imagery is very difficult as can alienate some people as well as promotes tourism/heritage etc
- Climate change narrative in the region is important role for cultural sector. With economic activity, the natural world, engaging communities in this issue
- Partnerships working well to ensure local authorities are keeping culture at the heart of their agendas
- What difference do these partnerships really make? What does the North East want and can we have both?
- In any collaboration there has to be compromise and possibly lose something, identity?
- Conversations should start at the grassroots level rather than be a marketing exercise looking for a brand image
- Should we remain an island?
- Political views also play a role in identity and is it OK for the swirling identities to play a role in the collective idea of North East

RESOURCES/READS/SECTOR NEWS

This is not a comprehensive list (and many sources will have been updated or have become outdated by the time you read this). It is what we've come across, what people have been reading recently, and resources suggested by yourselves.

- Creative Fuse CAKE events re-starting in December and running through on a monthly basis into 2021. http://www.creativefusene.org.uk/category/latest/cake-events/
- The North East Culture Partnership's Shifting Cultures event takes place on January 29 2021, details here https://mailchi.mp/7c60e579e97c/save-the-date-for-our-annual-forum-2021?e=5eb057935e
- New Writing North - New Narratives for the North East https://newwritingnorth.com/podcast/podcast-new-narratives-for-the-north-east/

If you have any other resources you would like to add to this list please email bob.allan@ncl.ac.uk

Want to be kept in the loop? For information about Wor Culture and future sessions you can sign up here and view our blog at https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/culturencl/