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## Producing local content in international waters: the case of Netflix's *Tidelands*

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### ABSTRACT

Netflix's supernatural crime series *Tidelands* (2019) was the subscription video service's first commissioned original series to be produced in Australia. Shot in tropical Queensland with a diverse cast of local and international stars, *Tidelands* exemplifies the complex challenges involved in Netflix's attempts to be a global producer creating content for national markets. This article builds on a tradition of research into international television production to locate *Tidelands* within its industrial and cultural contexts. Combining textual and industry analysis, and drawing on an interview with executive producer Nathan Mayfield, we show how *Tidelands* negotiates a strategic dual orientation in its use of locations, casting and genre, addressing both Australian and international audiences simultaneously. We conclude that internationally oriented Australian subscription video-on-demand originals such as *Tidelands* rehearse but also reformulate longstanding tensions regarding the interaction between the national and the global in screen culture.

### KEYWORDS

*Tidelands*; Netflix; Australian television; television production; subscription video-on-demand; SVOD production; SVOD originals

## Introduction

*Tidelands* is an eight-episode fictional drama series that premiered on Netflix in December 2018. It tells the story of Cal McTeer (Charlotte Best), as she returns home to the small fishing village of Orphelin Bay in Queensland, Australia, after serving a ten-year prison sentence for arson and manslaughter. Cal becomes embroiled in her family's drug-running enterprises and drawn into investigating a local commune of strange inhabitants, a tribe of murderous half-Sirens, half-humans called Tidelanders. The show – described as 'steamy' and 'ominous' in the Netflix catalogue – combines elements of multiple genres, including crime drama, supernatural fantasy and romance. It is gratuitously violent, with abundant sex and nudity: the opening scene of episode one features a topless siren gouging out the eyes of a hapless sailor. In all respects, *Tidelands* delivers on the promise of subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) drama to provide the kind of edgy, transgressive, adult content that is outside the remit of broadcast television. *Tidelands* also represents a high-profile instance of a national screen industry's tentative engagement

with a global video platform and its multifaceted models of commissioning, producing and distributing.

*Tidelands* was Netflix's first major original series commission in Australia, following on from several co-produced originals made in partnership with local broadcasters and exclusive content acquisitions. *Tidelands'* production employed more than 500 Queenslanders and was closely followed by industry observers and local media. 'I'm sure we will not please everyone,' said the show's executive producer Tracey Robertson, when it was released. 'But yes, there's a lot riding on it ... because [Netflix] want to see how *Tidelands* goes, to see if they want to get heavily in the [Australian] market' (in Knox 2018). Unfortunately, the show was not well reviewed upon its release. Critics derided the series as 'lightweight and underwhelming' (Ma 2018), a 'strange kettle of fish' (Newsome 2018) and 'kinda painful to watch' (Lenton 2018). *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Houston 2018) questioned *Tidelands'* courting of an 'international audience for whom it's clearly intended'. As is customary, viewer numbers have not been publicly released by Netflix, however the company's Director of Original Series Lisa Hamilton Daly acknowledged at an industry conference in Melbourne in November 2019 that '*Tidelands* regrettably did not get the audience we thought it would.'

In this article we want to consider *Tidelands* through a different lens by exploring the show's unique position at the interface of Australian national television, international markets, and an evolving SVOD production and distribution model. We argue that *Tidelands* reveals something of the conditions under which local Australian content circulates and competes within the SVOD system. Seen from this perspective – as a symptomatic exemplar of a changing screen ecology – *Tidelands* is more than a sensational genre series: it is also a 'born international' television text (O'Regan and Ward 2006, 18) that reveals the complex challenges involved in Netflix's attempts to be a 'local producer' that creates 'global TV' (Barmack, in Hopewell and Lang 2018). This article contextualizes the circumstances in which *Tidelands* was created, as Netflix expanded its service and original production strategies internationally. We establish that Netflix's focus on engaging local and international audiences simultaneously is not new, but rather emblematic of longstanding tendencies in Australian screen production. We consider scholarship in screen and cultural studies concerned with reconceptualizing national screen culture as distinctly *international* and we examine the continuities and changes *Tidelands* embodies as an SVOD-produced text. We conclude that *Tidelands'* use of location, casting and, through these, genre rehearse but also reformulate tensions between national and global screen culture, expanding outdated binary critiques and contextualizing the future analysis of Netflix international originals.

## Australian television and international markets, then and now

As has been widely noted in industry commentary over the last decade, the rapid global consumer adoption of SVOD services and the increasing market power of these services within audiovisual production worldwide has altered existing practices of television commissioning, production, financing and releasing. Of the multi-territory SVOD services, Netflix is arguably the most aggressively international, with more than sixty percent of its subscribers now outside the United States (Netflix 2020). It was also the first US-based

SVOD service to significantly commit to international production as a key strategy for its global expansion.

Netflix is now producing content in around 30 different countries while publicly declaring its ambition to ‘bring engaging stories from many cultures to people all across the globe’ (Netflix 2020). The company, managed from its Los Gatos headquarters, now has regional headquarters in Singapore, Amsterdam and Mexico City, and production facilities in Canada, Spain and the United Kingdom (Clarke 2019). Netflix has also driven a dubbing boom, working with more than 125 providers worldwide and translating content into more than 30 languages (Roxborough 2019). Our analysis of Netflix’s global original series production up to February 2020 has found that 177 of Netflix’s 306 commissions/co-commissions (58%) originate from outside of the US. This figure refers to scripted series and excludes children’s content. The bulk of these global originals were produced in Europe, Latin America and Asia, with South Korea, the United Kingdom, Japan, Spain and Brazil emerging as key sites of production.

Within this context of escalating international production, Netflix has also been growing its Australian content investment – albeit from a low base. Between 2015 and 2018, Netflix produced two fully-funded original series in Australia: *Tidelands* and Chris Lilley’s mockumentary *Lunatics* (2019). Following the federal government’s announcement in May 2018 of a new Location Incentive fund (initially 140 AUD million, and boosted with an additional 400 AUD million in July 2020), Netflix has commissioned several more Australian originals including the political thriller *Clickbait* (produced in Melbourne by Matchbox Pictures) and the Chris Hemsworth feature *Escape From Spiderhead* (to be filmed on the Gold Coast). The SVOD service has also partnered on numerous co-productions with local broadcasters, including the recently-announced *Dive Club*, produced with The Steve Jaggi Company and Network 10’s digital multichannel 10 Shake, in which Port Douglas will stand in for the fictional Cape Mercy.<sup>1</sup> These fully-funded originals and co-productions – together with exclusive licencing of titles and use of local post-production facilities – represent the backbone of what Netflix (O’Donnell and Richards 2020, 4–5) claims as a ‘significant and growing contribution to Australia’s content production ecosystem’ made ‘not because of regulatory compulsion’ (of which there is little) but rather to reflect their commitment to the sector. Unsurprisingly, the company’s production activity in Australia has been scrutinized by local screen industry stakeholders, who question whether the company’s relatively modest level of production investment is sufficient given Netflix’s outsized market power in Australia and its impact on local broadcasters and pay-TV.<sup>2</sup>

This background provides important context for understanding the expectations around *Tidelands*, Netflix’s first foray into Australian drama production. The concept for *Tidelands* was created by Stephen M. Irwin and was in development with Brisbane-based production house Hoodlum for several years before being picked up by Netflix. Hoodlum – a producer with long experience in both Australian and international television markets – had previously worked with Irwin on his other shows *Harrow* and *Secrets and Lies*, and through these shows had also established a working relationship with ABC Studios International executive Kelly Luegenbiehl. When Luegenbiehl moved to Netflix, Hoodlum pitched the *Tidelands* idea to her and she commissioned the series. According to *Tidelands* executive producer Nathan Mayfield (Mayfield 2019), the show ‘felt like a “big” story that happened to be set in Australia, but it didn’t feel like it was parochial ...

[Netflix] knew that it was going to travel, and that was one of the key deciding factors.’ As this quote suggests, *Tidelands* was designed as a lavish, big-budget showstopper original series – a show both perceptibly Australian yet global in its appeal and mode of address. The fact that Hoodlum was producing the show exclusively for one platform, as opposed to multiple broadcast partners in different territories, meant a more streamlined production workflow for Hoodlum, with only one set of notes to reconcile: ‘they [Netflix] were the studio, and they gave notes, and we worked those through’ (Mayfield 2019). Mayfield notes that Netflix offered feedback on aspects of the production where international audience legibility was seen to be at stake:

I reckon there was some stuff we had to change that we would just be pissing ourselves laughing at these scenes, that you realise were really parochial, and we did get push[back]. They were moderated by Netflix. They were like, ‘The accent needs to be broader,’ or they didn’t get some of the irony or these moments that we all loved, and they would have been great winks to the Australian audience. But they had that other filter on, which is ‘Okay, well, we don’t get it, so [you have to change it]’ (Mayfield 2019)

Managing this balance between international legibility and local specificity has long been a challenge for Australian television production, and is acknowledged to some extent in the way Netflix explains its approach to producing global originals. Netflix’s Chief Content Officer Ted Sarandos has stated that the most successful originals, such as the Spanish series *Money Heist*, are those that are ‘super authentically local and really satisfying for the viewers, starting in the home country and then expanding around the world’ (Netflix 2019, 11). Luegenbiehl (2019) similarly observed that ‘the more local that we are and the more specific we are, the more universal we actually are.’ Hamilton-Daly (2019) has also spoken of the company’s desire to produce familiar genres ‘with a local sheen’ and ‘some level of cultural specificity and realness.’ While this approach reflects a well-established model of international television production (produce in one nation, sell into international markets), a key difference is that Netflix is a global platform seeking to compete in around 190 countries simultaneously, and which is increasingly multi-national in its production strategy. Notably, Netflix’s public statements also suggest a rejection of the idea that global content need necessarily be delocalized or lacking cultural specificity. Instead, Netflix global originals are expected to engage both local and international audiences. Yet, as Mayfield’s comments make clear, elements of a production deemed illegibly local may still attract pushback or moderation from Netflix.

This aspect of the multi-territory SVOD business model is clearly at some distance from national screen discourses and policies grounded in a paradigm of ‘telling Australian stories’ – in which Australian screen culture is defined by its distinction and difference. However, the necessity for Australian television drama to engage international audiences is nothing new. Australian productions have long relied on international sales and co-production deals to provide vital co-financing for local content. This issue, and the wider question of the internationalization of Australian screen production, has been on the agenda for Australian screen studies since the 1980s, when scholars began to reconceptualize Australian screen culture as an always-already international project constituted by its external relations (Dermoddy and Jacka 1987).

This revisionist understanding of Australian screen culture informs a range of scholarship across film and television studies. In *Australian National Cinema* O’Regan (1996, 2)

famously argued that Australian cinema was ‘fundamentally dispersed’. Goldsmith (2010, 201; citing Sassen 2000, 216) advocated for an ‘outward-looking Australian cinema’, conceptualized as a series of “‘frontier zones” where the local/national and the global/international overlap economically and culturally.’ Australian television scholarship has likewise sought to deconstruct the binary of national/global, often through attention to how Australian television exports circulate in the international market. In *Australian Television and International Mediascapes*, Cunningham and Jacka (1996) showed the empirical extent of Australia’s television exports of both programmes and formats into multiple markets, informed by an ‘Empire strikes back’ counter to the cultural hegemony of US and UK television. In their extensive work on television production on the Gold Coast, O’Regan and Ward (2006; Ward and O’Regan 2011) described an ‘internationalization of the local’ in Australian television stretching back to key export series including *Skippy*, *Neighbours* and *Flying Doctors*, and running through 1990s productions such as *Paradise Beach* and *Pacific Drive*. They noted three characteristic textual forms associated with conditions of successful internationalization: footloose international productions; internationally oriented Australian series; and ‘deterritorialized programming . . . made to circulate internationally’ (2006, 27). For O’Regan and Ward, these involve ‘models of production that need to be understood simultaneously as inside and outside the context of national television’ (2006, 19). More recently, Potter (2020, 53) has likewise described how Australian children’s television producers include both recognizably Australian aspects of the *mise-en-scène* (scenery, locations, accents) and other, strategically delocalized elements that allow ‘content [to] move freely in international markets without elements that might be confusing or off-putting to its audience.’

These various accounts give a sense of the industrial conditions of Australian television production, including the need for texts to engage both local and international audiences simultaneously, but differently. Cultural critique of internationally oriented national texts often equates the national with the authentic and the global with inauthenticity, selling out, and distortion. This presumes that national audiences necessarily want something different from international audiences, or that there is a true meaning which must necessarily get distorted or sacrificed if the text is to succeed internationally. We can see versions of this critique in the use of the term ‘Euro-pudding’ to describe co-productions where too many partners ‘influence the product in such a way that it becomes a flabby constructed narrative that has no authentic anchor in reality’ (Bondebjerg et al. 2017, 6). Similarly, this is evident in recent criticism of Netflix originals in the UK, which have been described by one prominent cultural advocate (Bazalgette, in Middleton 2019) as ‘curiously stateless’ because of their global orientation and apparently delocalized character.

More sophisticated accounts have sought to describe the subtle ways in which screen creators deploy national specificity for the purposes of international legibility. In her foundational work on small-nation cinema (Hjort 1996; 2005), Mette Hjort develops a nuanced framework for understanding relations between the national and the global in screen texts. Rejecting the idea of an authentically national cinema, Hjort distinguishes instead between ‘opaque’ elements of the text that are incomprehensible to international audiences (culturally specific references to national folklore, humour, and history) and ‘translatable’ elements (cultural universals) that are easily understood. While noting that some Danish directors, including Lars von Trier, have achieved international success by

effacing national specificity through multilingual scripts, casting, and a palette of international stylistic references, a more common strategy is to ‘leverage’ (Hjort 2005) national specificity by speaking simultaneously, yet differently, to national and international audiences. Hjort (1996) describes this as a ‘dual orientation’: opaque elements of the text trigger certain meanings for national audiences while translatable elements engage international audiences at a different level. Hjort’s framework is helpful for understanding Netflix international originals, because it moves us beyond the dominant frame of reference within national cinema and television discourses anchored in a binary model of local/global relations. Instead, Hjort reminds us that texts are designed to signify differently to different audiences, and may be characterized by multiple, conflicting tendencies and strategies rather than existing as a fixed point along a spectrum of purity versus inauthenticity (see also Elsaesser 2005; Goldsmith 2006).

This framework is helpful for understanding a text such as *Tidelands* and its dual mode of address. Rather than attempt to divine a pure essence of national screen culture or merely identify instances of compromise and failure at the hands of the international, this approach instead requires that we undertake the more meaningful work of understanding how texts may instead leverage national specificity in particular ways. Extending this mode of analysis to *Tidelands* opens up some new and interesting questions that go beyond the mere fact of the series’ international character and instead require that we more concretely locate the text and its modes of address within the longer history of Australian international television. To what extent, then, does *Tidelands* rehearse the established tendencies of Australian television in its international orientation? Are there aspects of *Tidelands* – and of Netflix’s multi-territory SVOD production model – that are genuinely new and different? How does *Tidelands* leverage the national to signify differently to different audiences? The same questions could (and should) be asked of other local Netflix original production models, such as the arguably ill-timed mockumentary *Lunatics* (which sought to capitalize on the international success of controversial Australian talent Chris Lilley) and the US-set *Clickbait*, which utilizes local facilities and funding (but not accents). In the next section we will address this notion of change versus continuity by looking closely at key aspects of *Tidelands*: its location and casting, and through these questions of genre.

### Locating *Tidelands*

*Tidelands* is set in the fictional beachside town of Orphelin Bay. The show was also entirely filmed in Queensland: Stradbroke Island, Moreton Bay, Shorncliffe, Victoria Point, Cleveland, Yeronga. While the setting is never explicitly identified as being in Australia, there is also no attempt at delocalization: most of the cast speak in Australian accents, and signifiers of Queensland are ever-present – in an address on a letter, on car numberplates and business logos, on the ‘Orphelin Bay: Queensland’s Best Kept Secret’ sign on the way into town. According to Mayfield (2019), the ‘spectacle’ of these sites was an integral element of *Tidelands*:

I get pitches where people too quickly say, “We could set it in Queensland or Alice Springs or ... you tell me.” ... No, the reality is this was always grounded in this sort of fictional world. We knew it was going to be Queensland. We knew that it was going to be Stradbroke Island.

We knew that it had that coastal feel. And we also knew that that hadn't been seen on television before, not even on Australian TV . . . We went and pitched that to Netflix, that it was a spectacle. We took a drone up and shot all this stuff, so that when we pitched to the forty or fifty people that were in the room we also showed them these drone shots of the beaches . . . it didn't look like Bondi, and it didn't look like the Daintree – it just had this unique thing that they hadn't seen.

This aspect of *Tidelands* contrasts with what O'Regan and Ward (2006, 27) describe in their analysis of Australian fantasy shows set in delocalized nether-worlds: 'fictions that have no special relation to any specific place other than perhaps an affinity with the global culture of Hollywood.' While *Tidelands* has elements of delocalized fantasy in its use of multi-ethnic, supernatural characters, its mise-en-scene is firmly situated in the physical landscape, tourist and agricultural economies, and cultural milieu of Queensland. A significant feature of the show was its ability to '[showcase] Queensland in all its striking coastal and inland glory' (Mayfield, in Enker 2018) and this was no doubt of central importance to Screen Queensland, who offered undisclosed financial support to the show in the expectation that *Tidelands* would deliver 'strong cultural tourism outcomes' (Goodenough 2018). The Netflix-produced featurette, 'Welcome to Orphelin Bay', released as part of the show's advertising campaign, appears for the most part like a tourism advertisement. Lingering shots on waves, sweeping pans on endless crops and farmland, spectacular aerial drone shots of the bush and untouched coastline – these elements combine to present the landscape as another character in the story, integral to its "look and feel". Released in December, *Tidelands* taunted a winter-gripped Northern hemisphere Netflix audience with "gorgeous shots of pristine beaches" that "take on an almost-pornographic quality" (Nelson 2018). In this way, *Tidelands* does engage in Caldwell's (1995) notion of 'landscape exhibitionism', featuring what Ward and O'Regan (2011, 34–5) described as a 'certain stylistic inflection that includes the aesthetisation of iconic Australian landscapes and lifestyle – national images that function as image and story enhancement.' As Potter and Davis (2017, 28) noted, 'the connections between Australian broadcasting policy, producers' aesthetic and creative considerations and the availability of infrastructure and labour frequently result in the foregrounding of the beach and other waterside locations' in Australian screen texts.

However, unlike the Gold Coast-based TV productions studied by Ward and O'Regan (2011, 90) which were characterized by 'a wide lens, colourful backdrops and a sunny palette of strong primary colours', the palette of *Tidelands* is rather more muted. Blues, greys and greens dominate, suggesting a seedy, sinister undertone. Spectacular coastal and rainforest imagery of sub-tropical Queensland is interspersed with grimy interior scenes: a pub with memorabilia-lined walls, a police station, run-down Queenslander houses, a fish processing plant, and decrepit boats of various sizes. Apart from the obvious importance of the ocean to the siren story, the ability of the sky to turn from brilliant blue to threatening sub-tropical storm is omnipresent. The opulent, decadent Tideland commune with its lush greenery and glamping vibes, and Tideland leader Adrielle's mansion – dark, packed with knick-knacks and the sound of running water, full of hidey-holes, secret rooms, and caged creatures – are otherworldly sets, used to create a tropical space of fear, desire and danger. Through this combination of 'sunshine and noir' – a pairing that Davis (1990) used to refer to popular imaginaries of Los Angeles in film



and literature – *Tidelands* carefully juxtaposes sunny coastal locations with much darker imagery

Queensland features as a powerful presence throughout the show, but its spectacular landscapes are filtered through other elements of the mise-en-scene associated with supernatural, thriller and crime genres. The overall result could be described as something like *'True Blood* meets *Ocean Girl*'. The adult nature of *Tidelands*' plot and themes – involving criminal gangs, smuggling, sadistic violence and polysexual mythical creatures – was clearly better suited to an SVOD platform than to broadcast television. For Mayfield (2019), *Tidelands* was an example of 'heightened genre' with its 'own canon'; a show too 'big' for broadcast. Once the series was commissioned by Netflix off Hoodlum's pilot pitch, the writers 'just went for broke', 'burning through story material' and '[getting] away with a lot' (Mayfield 2019). Much like location and casting, the show's genre affiliation is crucial to the legibility of *Tidelands* both for Netflix and for the Netflix audience. While not the focus here, we recognize the value of extending previous analysis of the prioritization of genres like 'fantasy over cultural specificity [as] a strategy for enabling global circulation' (Ward and O'Regan 2011, 39) to SVOD original production as well.

The locations used in *Tidelands* engage both Australian and international audiences differently, in specific and strategic ways, demonstrating Ward and O'Regan's proposition (2011, 33, following Havens 2003) that the global trade in television fiction 'internalises and works with national particularities through the sense of a national brand that locates Australian content [and, we add, culture] within a certain value hierarchy'. Despite the fact that much of the scenery used has rarely featured on screen, the mundanity of the sites used is immediately recognizable to a local audience: scrubland and cane fields, a hills-hoist clothesline in a backyard, the worn stilts of a flood-protected Queenslander home. These opaque elements resonate for those audiences familiar with the specific cultural references associated with these signifiers of everyday life and landscape in Australia (and more specifically, Queensland).

At the same time, *Tidelands* deploys Hjort's 'translatable' elements for different purposes. Notable here is the use of establishing drone shots and outdoor action sequences and sex scenes set amidst Queensland's coastal landscape, used here to spectacular effect. Almost every episode of *Tidelands* opens and closes with some kind of beach or coastal imagery. Water is ever-present – just outside the window in interior shots, at the end of a dock, or signified by the cry of a seagull in the audio track. *Tidelands*' aquatic motif plays on well-known mermaid lore and a global affinity with the pull of the water evident in Netflix's taste cluster of similar commissioned and acquired content (*H2O Mako Mermaids*, *The I-Land*, *Aquaman*, *Outer Banks*). To this end, the show is thematically relatable to audiences around the world, as explained by one of the show's stars, Brazilian actor Marco Pigossi (Vnuk 2018), who thought the series would go down well in his home country too:

They [the Tidelanders] come from the water ... Their bodies are natural for them. It's kind of what people are supposed to be, you know? People aren't supposed to be so worried about things ... Brazil is a little more like this. I think Brazil's going to love this show!

Here we can see how *Tidelands* uses landscape to careful and specific effect, overlaying the translatable and internationally legible imagery of Queensland's spectacular coastline with more opaque signifiers of Australian suburbia; all of which is counterbalanced with

the kinds of baroque interior locations familiar to viewers of other adult supernatural dramas such as *True Blood*. In this sense, *Tidelands* is doing more than simply packaging the Australian landscape for international consumption. Following Hjort, we would instead suggest that it is leveraging national specificities in both transparent and opaque ways, for different audiences simultaneously, and in line with its genre identity and its industrial context – as an Australian original designed for both local and international viewing across Netflix’s 190 territories.

### Casting *Tidelands*

The large-scale nature of the *Tidelands* production relied not only on catering to a global audience for fantasy or appropriating simultaneously distinct and familiar locations, but also on assembling a diverse, recognizable on-screen ensemble. Netflix has acknowledged that ‘meeting the demand of [the] increasingly international audience naturally entails a more inclusive and representative approach to casting’ (Sarandos, in Hyo-won 2016). *Tidelands* represents an interesting example of this purported approach. Most of the large on-screen group is Australian or New Zealander, with the lead – Charlotte Best – recognizable from the long-running soap, *Home and Away* and the small-screen adaptation of *Puberty Blues*. Indigenous stars Madeline Madden (*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Pine Gap*) and Hunter Page-Lochard (*Cleverman*) appear in supporting roles. *Tidelands* also stars Spanish actress Elsa Pataky, best known for her role in the *Fast and Furious* franchise, in the lead role of Adrielle; Brazilian telenovela star Marco Pigossi as Tidelander enforcer and Cal’s lover; and several actors from the Philippines and the United Kingdom in supporting roles as Tidelanders.

The curious internationalism of the cast of a programme that was apparently not trying to be ‘anything but an Australian show’ (Mayfield 2019) is not explicitly referenced or explained in *Tidelands*’ narrative. But this element of the show reflects its industrial context, as an Australian-made SVOD original designed for global circulation. The casting of *Tidelands* represents more than a response to a local broadcast industry long ‘structured for homogeneity’ and an example of the proclivity of online content to ‘bristle’ with diversity (Turner 2020, 22; 24). *Tidelands* producers ‘wanted the Tidelanders to feel like they have come to this place for a special reason but they all speak with different accents’ (Knox 2018a). They were able to leverage the convenient fact that the show’s story ‘lent itself to have people who came from all over the world’ (Mayfield 2019) to appeal to Netflix’s then fledgling internationalization strategy. All this reflects both a cosmopolitan vision and a basic economic necessity of global SVOD production: circulation-based casting. As Mayfield explains,

Elsa [Pataky] just lived here, so that was fine. But Marco, he wasn’t our idea. Marco was a genius idea from Kelly [Luegenbiehl, now Netflix VP International Originals] who was trying to establish a foothold and relationships in Brazil, and she literally rang us and said, hey, there’s this guy Marco that we’re about to do a deal with, check him out, we think he should be in it. We went and did it . . . It’s all in Portuguese. Then you go look and you see that he had like, millions of Instagram followers – and you’re like, okay, there’s something in this. And he ends up being amazing, and beautiful on screen and all of that stuff. And had a great time. And it was sort of his first English-speaking role. And so immediately you had that mix. There was always the intent for diversity across the board anyway. (Mayfield 2019)

As Mayfield's comments show, actors carry a 'background resonance' (Jordan 1981, 197) with them to each new performance, although recognition depends on cultural context and prior familiarity. The casting of Pigossi and Pataky – known mostly to Australian audiences as the spouse of *Thor's* Chris Hemsworth – was designed to build awareness of *Tidelands* in key international territories, while signifying differently to Australian audiences. Notably, promotional launch events for *Tidelands'* premiere were held in only three countries – Australia, Spain, and Brazil – reflecting the strategic importance of these markets for the series. To Latin American audiences, particularly those in Brazil, Pigossi is a telenovela heartthrob who has starred in more than a dozen TV Globo productions. *Tidelands* represented his first foreign role, serving to launch Pigossi internationally before he starred in his own Brazilian series on Netflix, *Invisible Cities*, from Oscar-nominated animator Carlos Saldanha. For Australian Netflix audiences, the inclusion of veteran local actors such as Alex Dimitriades (as a corrupt cop) and *Neighbours* star Peter O'Brien (as an exiled Tidelander) added a different layer of resonance, evoking memories of local soaps and crime shows like *Underbelly*. Australian audiences, however, would have been unaware of Pataky's career as a Spanish model, actress and film producer, with a score of film and television credits in her native country (and language). There was a dual orientation, therefore, in the casting of the programme: it spoke in different ways to different audiences. Here we can see how what Godzich (1999, 44) dubbed a 'strategy of diglossia' – 'an almost cheeky insistence on a cacophony of accented Englishes' (Hjort 2005, 184) – is closely linked to the show's industrial context as an Australian-produced Netflix global original. While the mysterious and unexplained nature of the multi-ethnic cast – exactly *why* the Tidelanders all spoke with different accents – proved to be a stumbling block for audience and critical engagement with the show, this aspect of *Tidelands* reflects both the creative vision of a polyethnic, supernatural community of outsiders as well as the necessity of the show's international legibility as a national original within a multi-territory SVOD platform.

### Learning from *Tidelands*

The obvious temptation with *Tidelands* is to fall into a simplistic assessment on grounds of cultural authenticity and categorize it as a failed attempt to 'sell' Australia to an international audience. Our reading of the show has taken a different approach. In this article, we have shown instead how the textual form of this series embodies traces of its industrial context as a globally circulating SVOD original that is both recognizably local in Australia and globally distributed content that must engage an audience across multiple Netflix territories. From this perspective, *Tidelands'* strategy for a dual address is significant. A more charitable reading of the show than has been offered by its critics (see Cunningham and Scarlata 2020) would understand *Tidelands* as representing one particular strategy for combining the local and the global – a strategy that was highly experimental and unevenly successful, but which tells us something important about how Netflix approached its international commissioning and how Australian producers have responded in their creative decisions.

In this sense it is interesting to contrast *Tidelands* with other recent Australian SVOD originals, such as Chris Lilley's Netflix original series *Lunatics* (with its more opaque references to Australian character and public culture), the upcoming Netflix original *Clickbait* (a classic 'offshore' production shot in Australia but set in the US and starring US actors), Apple's beleaguered *Shantaram* adaptation (shot across Australia and India), or Amazon Prime

Video's announced reboot of the local broadcast comedy/drama *Packed to the Rafters*. Each of these shows takes a markedly different strategy in how to integrate the national and the global. Clearly, there is no single formula for how Australian SVOD originals might achieve a dual orientation, nor how to reconcile opaque or translatable textual elements in the text. Each producer and each text is taking its own path, while responding to a shared set of industrial conditions – namely, the disruptive new forms of simultaneous multi-territory circulation characteristic of the major SVOD services. Future research into these SVOD originals will reveal the evolving and important role of *international* screen production in the context of a rapidly changing global screen ecology. *Tidelands*, then, represents only one configuration of responses to these challenges. There is no one way to be local or global in television production.

## Notes

1. *Lunatics* and *Tidelands* were fully financed by Netflix and did not receive Screen Australia funding. *Tidelands* received undisclosed financial support from Screen Queensland. Budget and expenditure data for these series are not publicly available, however Screen Australia notes that these two Netflix series contributed (alongside titles from ABC, SBS, Stan and YouTube) to a tripling in total expenditure within the category of Australian online drama in the 2017/2018 financial year, compared to the previous financial year (Screen Australia 2018, 16).
2. According to market research firm Ampere Analysis (2020, 2), the SVOD user base in Australia is now roughly three times as large as the traditional linear pay-TV user base. The most recent Australian Communications and Media Authority (2020) *Communications Report* notes that 55% of Australians have access to Netflix at home (2020, 92). For analysis of the politics and policy of Netflix in Australia, see Turner (2018), Lobato and Scarlata (2019), and Cunningham and Scarlata (2020).

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