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## Understanding the value of the creative arts: place-based perspectives from regional Australia

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### ABSTRACT

This article highlights challenges of attempting to rigorously evaluate and meaningfully communicate the social impacts of arts and culture in regional Australia. By examining how arts and culture are perceived in two geographically opposed communities, this research finds the benefits of arts engagement can be tangible and intangible, and both offer high value to regional communities. More nuanced approaches to impact assessment can help to effectively account for an array of understandings of the value of arts and culture, beyond solely numerical measures, and instead ascribe worth to localized narrative indicators of success. Opportunities exist in increasing attention to place. Sensitivity to place can illuminate how regional communities innovatively leverage creative capacities, address local challenges and create localized impact. This research suggests the value of arts and culture might be best understood at a local level, and that community-led and community-generated creative experiences are those which communities find most impactful.

### KEYWORDS

Arts engagement; cultural value; impact assessment; creative placemaking; regional Australia

## Introduction

In Australia, arts organizations, cultural institutions and all levels of government share a tacit agreement and understanding that arts and cultural engagement make a significant contribution to social impacts in education, belonging, identity and the wellbeing of those who participate in them (see Australia Council for the Arts, 2020; Fielding & Trembath, 2020; Meyrick et al., 2019). These benefits extend beyond individuals and reach throughout whole communities and cohorts. Current impact assessment approaches are dominated by quantitative methods. Goldbard (2015) says that arts and cultural impact measures are plagued by “the metrics effect”, and are according to Holden (2004, p. 17), “increasingly being questioned, both in terms of the utility of methodologies employed and the extent to which the results illuminate our understanding”. Goldbard (2015) refers to this practice as “Datastan” and argues that within the arts and cultural sector there is a need to capture a more fulsome picture of arts participation and engagement by individuals and communities. Quantitative assessment methods, frames and tools that are deployed alone to measure arts and cultural engagement,

can have the effect of flattening out the history, purpose and meaning of arts engagement for communities. Narrative-based qualitative methods can however offer rich additional qualitative data to help realize the full, intangible potentials of creative arts engagement and its benefit for communities.

The debate about the most effective ways to report on the impact of arts and cultural engagement by individuals and communities is not new in Australia or internationally. Belfiore notes that there are “two defining issues of contemporary cultural policy debates: cultural value and the challenge of its measurement” (Belfiore, 2015, ix). Belfiore extends this by saying that the measurement of value attributed to arts and culture is particularly heightened when arts products and experiences are supported through public funding. The challenge is not a data collection issue but a conceptual one. Radbourne, Glow and Johnson (2013, p. 5) note there has been some shift in governments and evaluation approaches. They believe that “there is now a movement to identify and measure the intrinsic qualities of the arts, whether these by artistic excellence, innovation or vibrancy”. To understand and articulate the value and the impact of arts engagement for individuals and communities, we must understand what value and impact “looks like” and how it is described by the people who engage with arts and culture in the places they live. Too often, arts and culture are represented as produced by sectors, or associated only with particular organizations and individuals (Symons & Hurley, 2018, p. 122), and value is frequently aligned with worth and measured in terms of economic outcomes or quality indicators. Problematically, this overlooks localized understandings and values of arts and culture, and their impact in terms of how they make people feel, the ways they empower people and interact with place to foster legacy.

This article shares the first stage findings of an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project – *The Role of the Creative Arts in Regional Australia: A Social Impact Model* – which explores the ways regional, rural and remote communities experience arts and culture in their own communities. This project responds to research over the past fifteen years (see Dunphy, 2009, 2015) that has categorically demonstrated the benefits of participation in arts and cultural activities in regional communities, and the desire to develop activities from within communities, rather than receive arts programmes from outside. The project’s partners and collaborators are organizations and government departments that are directly involved in the development of Australia’s regional policy, arts policy, or in the delivery of arts activities and services in regional locations – whether as part of local regional governments, or those who live and work in the two research sites: central western Queensland and north west Tasmania. Discussing the findings of ten semi-structured interviews with these project partners and exploring two locally-designed and delivered creative projects, this paper examines how the value of the arts is perceived in two geographically opposed communities and argues that meaningful arts and cultural engagement is community-led and community-generated.

The interviews emphasized “place is everything for regional communities” (Chan, 2018) and echoed broader conversations about the limitations of existing impact assessment models for representing the diversity of ways arts and culture are valued in their communities. Interviewees represented the arts as responsive, participatory, reflective of local heritage and culture, and central to the positive shaping of place and community. Place-based creative and cultural projects address local needs and reflect local identities,

build capacity, and create lasting impacts which are often ineffable in nature. This article pays particular attention to themes that consistently emerged across the interviews: the need for more nuanced approaches to impact assessment in order to measure and articulate the value of the arts in ways that are relevant to individual communities, while also being considered appropriately objective and rigorous enough for governments and funding bodies; and how we indeed recognize and verbalize the embedded nature of arts and culture in places and communities more broadly. Drawing on creative placemaking research and practice, this article explores the ways in which the intangible as well as tangible value of cultural and arts engagement are innovatively being articulated within the two research sites in regional Australia. The aim is to find new ways of unpacking and understanding localized impact in place – beyond only the economic story.

### *Introducing Central Western Queensland and North West Tasmania*

The first phase of the project sought to understand the cultural sectors of the two research sites from the perspectives of the project partners. This phase sought to develop an understanding of the types of creative and cultural activities that are valued in those regions, and the design and delivery processes of arts and cultural experiences that interviewees have found impactful. Project partners include local, state and national government bodies concerned with how best to strategically communicate and effectively evaluate the social impacts of the creative arts in these communities.<sup>1</sup> The two research sites – central western Queensland and Burnie in north west Tasmania – have active existing arts ecosystems, while also experiencing significant economic disadvantage and low rates of social inclusion.<sup>2</sup> Central western Queensland comprises seven local government areas and a land mass of approximately 62.5 million hectares, which is a third the size of the state (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020a) and 2.5 times the size of the UK. The region has the highest rate of youth unemployment in Australia at 28.4% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020a) and has been fully drought declared since 2013 (Queensland Government, 2020).

There are no consistent definitions of rural, regional or remote in Australia; rather, geographical remoteness is measured based on population size, remoteness from capital cities, and relative access to services (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). However, the Modified Monash Model (2019) prepared by the Department of Health uses Australian Bureau of Statistics data to categorize all Australian locations on a scale from MM1 (major cities) to MM7 (very remote communities) and is useful in this context. The entire central western Queensland region is classified very remote (MM7), while Burnie in north west Tasmania is classified as a large rural town (MM3). The broader north west region of Tasmania is a mixture of categories MM3, MM4 and MM5. Burnie is also a recognized area of social disadvantage, ranking in the lowest quintile of the Socio-Economic Disadvantage Index (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018), with 45% of young people not completing high school (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020b). Both research sites were chosen in conjunction with the project partner organizations as communities deemed on a spectrum of those in immediate need yet whose capacities and challenges are also reflected to some degree throughout most of regional Australia.

Recognizing the different objectives of each project partner, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand how their organization defines value and impact;

how they each describe their definitions of value and impact; how value and impact might be inflected at a local level within the regional, rural and remote communities in which they work; what evaluation or assessment frameworks were these organizations using to analyse the impact of arts and cultural engagement; and what deficits or impediments were evident in the deployment of currently available assessment frameworks. Site visits were undertaken in late 2019 to informally meet with project partners and develop an initial understanding of the local arts ecologies of central western Queensland and Burnie, including the creative and cultural activities delivered. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, all interviews were conducted using Zoom software, and were fully transcribed.

The initial site visits and thematic analysis of the interviews revealed strong correlations in how the two communities positioned arts and culture: arts and cultural events and activities seem directly informed by and shaped around place-based assets such as heritage and lived experience; arts and culture can be a means of creating localized solutions to address entrenched challenges; and local networks and connections greatly assist. Central western Queensland's creative and cultural industries have traditionally centred on arts and crafts, and Burnie has developed a brand as "City of Makers" which reflects their papermaking heritage. The heritage of both places is strongly reflected in current projects which are key case studies in our research: Burnie's *Paper on Skin*<sup>3</sup> annual wearable paper art project is an event that began in 2012 to celebrate the region's industrial past, and central western Queensland's *Dress the Central West* is a wearable art project that commenced in 2019 to encourage and empower local people within central west communities to find "beauty within the drought".<sup>4</sup>

In consultation with research project partners, *Paper on Skin* and *Dress the Central West* were chosen as case studies because they were deemed by the partners and research team to be projects which strongly reflect each region's creative capacities, amplify local assets, and have been designed and delivered to address localized challenges. Project partners and interviewees based in each region implicitly believe these projects are impactful in myriad ways; however, their social impact has not been formally measured or expressed before. A later phase of this research project will formally assess each project's impact within the community, with specific focus on education and health and wellbeing outcomes.

*Dress the Central West* is a community-based project which was developed to inspire and engage local people to find and articulate the beauty of their community and landscape during unrelenting drought. The project began as a series of wearable art workshops in the central western Queensland region in which participants created garments from local and "found" materials – such as sheep's wool, stock feed bags, rope, tree bark and feathers – to represent their region's landscape and many stories. Indigenous participation and representation were central features of the project, with local Aboriginal artists leading aspects of the project and contributing their stories and original designs to the garments.<sup>5</sup> The project culminated in a fashion parade and gala event in June 2019. *Dress the Central West* attracted local and state media attention, and the garments have since been modelled and displayed at other events across the state, including an exhibition at the State Library of Queensland.

*Paper on Skin* is a wearable paper art project and biennial competition designed to reflect and celebrate the region's papermaking heritage by drawing together the past

and the future, reflecting and respecting a sense of place, whilst inviting and inspiring innovation and beauty. Initiated and delivered by the local, volunteer-run arts council since 2012, *Paper on Skin* partners with local government and an array of arts and non-arts community organizations and local businesses. The competition attracts local, national and international entries, and paper art workshops, public lectures and exhibitions are programmed around the competition judging and gala event. *Paper on Skin* has evolved over the years as it strives to engage with and connect the Burnie community in new ways and respond to the community's needs. In 2020 for example, due to COVID-19 restrictions, *Paper on Skin* collaborated with a local employment service provider, screen professionals, and Australia's leading arts and social change organization big hART<sup>6</sup> to locally produce a short film showcasing the competition entries<sup>7</sup>, in lieu of the face to face gala and awards event.

Both *Dress the Central West* and *Paper on Skin* are multifaceted in that they consist of participatory and performative elements, embrace handmade, craft and design elements, reflect local stories, and have been developed and enabled through sustained local collaborations. The two research sites exhibit many similarities while demonstrating two distinctive approaches, reflective of their place and community, to designing and delivering arts and cultural programmes that leverage and amplify their community's unique strengths, networks and talent, and respond to localized needs. *Dress the Central West* and *Paper on Skin* both demonstrate ways in which the tangible and intangible value of arts and culture are being articulated. As two case studies, these arts projects and events will be formally evaluated in the next stage of the research.

### *Understanding the value of the arts in communities*

The contribution of the arts to national and local economies is often emphasized by government organizations in order to articulate the value of the sector and justify public funding. However, an over-emphasis on economic indicators may ignore or diminish the ways in which arts and cultural engagement is actually experienced and valued by individuals who together make up each unique community. The interviews highlighted a tension between funding bodies' and government's need for "hard facts" (interviewee 9) and tangible measures of impact, and an intrinsic understanding that arts engagement produces a myriad of other, often intangible outcomes, which may be difficult to adequately articulate in funding acquittals and formal reports that serve top-down imperatives. As an interviewee stated,

Everything's a little bit more than economics; there is a social aspect to the arts and I use the word 'social' in its broadest term including health and wellbeing. There's a portion of every community that just likes playing in that space. It's that liveability. Increasingly there is an onus to display that value and that impact and it ultimately comes back to the funder in some way (Interviewee 3).

Interviewee 8 similarly suggested the value of the arts could not be measured or represented in purely financial terms, stating "Councils have quite a commitment and understanding of arts from the point of view of not only tourism but the point of view of preserving our heritage ... If it's part of preserving our cultural heritage, we value it very highly" (interviewee 8). For interviewees, there is an intimate relationship between

local economies, community wellbeing, the vitality and liveability of regions and towns, and arts and cultural engagement. Hence, the economic value of the arts is and must remain an important part of the impact story, but it is not the full story (interviewee 1). More nuanced approaches to assessing and communicating the benefits of arts engagement are needed to effectively account for the multiplicity of understandings about the impacts of arts and culture across diverse communities, beyond solely quantifiable measures.

The persistent emphasis on quantifiable measures of success alone limits the capacity of communities to define and effectively communicate the impacts of arts and culture within their unique communities. This can be problematic for securing funding for the types of locally-led creative and cultural engagement that are most relevant and useful for each community. An interviewee's description of a process of "translating" project intentions into the language required by funding applications reveals a disconnect between funding bodies' and communities' perceptions of impactful arts engagement and success:

When there's a really good project out there and it's not written the way that the assessment team wants to see it written it's not even looked upon ... I might write it in a way that's really connected to how it's going to be [in the community] but I then have to find a way of translating it to match the criteria. And then you've got to do that with the reporting process again (interviewee 4).

Broad, standardized criteria and indicators of success – such as expected number of ticket sales and people "engaged" – can prompt organizations to propose what they think funding bodies want to see and downplay what the community needs from the project. Broad-scale measures of success restrict the possibility of demonstrating the ways in which arts and cultural programmes are innovatively being deployed to address local challenges and amplify local strengths.

Communicating the impact of arts engagement in ways that are considered robust and objective to funding bodies, while also reflecting the value of projects for their communities, is a significant challenge. Discussing evaluations of Indigenous policy in Australia, McCausland (2019) found similarly that Aboriginal communities and government stakeholders who fund programmes in their communities often have very different priorities and understandings of success. Problematically, "[a] focus on the plethora of statistics generated by monitoring tools has meant there has been little attention paid to more qualitative or locally relevant measures of performance" (McCausland, 2019, p. 67). These observations were echoed by an interviewee who observed "a white lens is about statistics and about capturing data and that's really got no relevance to an Aboriginal culture" (interviewee 4). While funding bodies expect visible, easily quantifiable outcomes, programme deliverers at the coalface of communities prioritize intangibles such as relationship-building, participation, and capacity-building which "is a process that takes time and care that may not fit neatly into government funding cycles" (McCausland, 2019, p. 69).

For those designing and delivering arts projects and experiences in their own rural or remote community, impact is more often visible only at a local level, may be deeply personal, and may not align with markers of success set by funding bodies or stakeholders external to the community.

You see the impact in people, you saw who they were a week ago to who they are through the impact of their engagement in the project. The whole community will tell you it has changed that person's life. That's really important but really hard to document without a conflict of confidence, especially when that person has been struggling and you can see they've come through the struggle. You've got to respect that (Interviewee 4).

Interviewees involved in arts policy as well as arts delivery agreed that the impacts of arts and cultural projects for individuals and communities are rarely instant and are often ineffable in nature (interviewees 4, 5b).

For rural and remote communities, externally set measures of value may be especially meaningless or problematic as small populations and therefore small numbers of attendees at events (interviewee 3), community timeframes, or Indigenous ways of working (interviewee 4) are not taken into account. Mahon et al. (2018) argue that many opportunities for rural development are missed because of narrowly-focussed policy priorities on the value of the arts. They state: "the continued requirement to achieve economies of scale and measurable outputs in places with lower population densities or other historic deficiencies and vulnerabilities often means that central state or agency sources of funding are put out of reach" (Mahon et al., 2018, p. 211). Writing from a regional development perspective, Bartleet et al. (2019) found that "Australian regional and remote areas and communities are often measured against realities and benchmarks that are not their own, despite increasing policy focus on local solutions for development" (Bartleet et al., 2019, p. 32). Rather, urban imperatives and measures continue to be imposed upon non-urban communities and locales.

These perspectives highlight the need for models and processes that are appropriate for diverse communities, that privilege local voices, and ascribe a higher value to locally-relevant indicators of success. McCausland (2019) and Badham (2015) both note that measurements of success set by agencies or funding bodies external to the community may contradict or diminish local priorities. They argue for processes of impact assessment that are attuned to a community's unique needs and values. Reflecting Badham's observation that "local understandings of cultural value and progress are not universally translated or easily compared" (2015, p. 195), an interviewee stated "regional Australia is not homogenous. Even within regions there's going to be different social value and impact depending on what that community's aims are or what they've been through or what they're working through" (interviewee 2a). Badham (2015) describes development of place-based indicators of success as a means of ameliorating the limitations of cultural indicators which homogenize experiences of cultural value and fail to encompass local knowledge. She argues "it is only the people who experience the community directly who can determine what progress means locally" (Badham, 2015, p. 210) and describes a participatory and community-engaged process of developing cultural indicators. Deliberately shifting benchmarking powers to the grassroots provides opportunities for communities to identify "what matters" – including their own assets and needs – and allows for the tracking of social change within their communities, based on their own defined values (Badham, 2015, p. 209).

The measures of value and understandings of success privileged in funding acquittals, by agencies and government, can fail to acknowledge or fully capture the value of arts and culture in regional, rural and remote communities, as well as the types of creative

and cultural engagement those communities find meaningful. Opportunities exist in the form of increased attention to the specificities of place, including the needs and assets of each community, and the development of evaluative frames and impact assessment models that pay attention to the tangible, as well as the intangible values that are locally relevant.

The tangible values of the arts may include employment (by local businesses or otherwise) of individuals in the creative industries sector, attendance numbers at events (and associated economic return); whereas intangible values may include voluntary engagement or commitment of individuals in the creative industries sector, social cohesion, community wellbeing, identity of place, and liveability. In the two project sites, arts and culture offer a means of achieving both tangible and intangible outcomes. As an interviewee described, “at the end of the day what you really want to achieve is buried in your project. The project’s not what you want to achieve, it’s the things inside the project that you want to achieve and the project just becomes the vehicle” (interviewee 4). Understanding the precise ways value and impact are perceived by diverse local stakeholders, and the ways they might be meaningfully articulated, is a key goal for the next phase of this research project.

### *Place*

To include and understand the intangible as well as tangible values of arts and culture within communities, an increased focus on place is needed. Place is not something merely encountered; rather, “place is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience ... There is no possibility of understanding human existence – and especially human thought and experience – other than through an understanding of place” (Malpas, 2018, p. 13). The characteristics of places profoundly shape the experiences, behaviours and quality of life of the people who live in them (APPGAHW, 2017, p. 66), and sensitivity to place provides a means of unravelling the ways in which arts and culture reflect, shape and enhance the lives of people who engage with them.

Human geographer and philosopher of place Tim Cresswell (2011) distinguishes between space and place. So much of the discourse and conversation in the arts sector has traditionally been about space – venues, galleries, museums, theatres – rather than about place. Cresswell proposes that place is about meaning and attachment, while space is associated with abstraction and action. Similarly, Marxist human geographer Doreen Massey (1991, June) makes the point that space and place sit in opposition to one another and that while space might be viewed as ephemeral, place can be considered in context of positionality and “one’s place in the world”. This concept of positionality and the understanding and claiming one’s place in the world is a crucial part of place-based creativity. Recent research which mapped the arts and cultural ecology of Australia’s very remote Barkly region found “creative practice was seen to enhance the image and self-esteem of communities in Barkly, counteracting the negative stereotypes that characterized mainstream media coverage of the region” (Bartleet et al., 2019, p. 102). The role of arts and culture in shaping place identity, and also the influence of place on the arts and cultural activity of communities, were clear in central western Queensland and Burnie.

Interviewees positioned the arts and cultural activities and programmes they found meaningful as deeply embedded within place, responsive to the specific needs and

experiences of local residents as well as amplifying the community's creative capacities. Rather than framing arts and culture as an additional or optional feature or source of entertainment, interviewees stressed a need for:

... changing the narrative around arts and saying that it is essential and embedded across all communities. It's leading and being responsive in emergencies, it's connecting communities, it's providing breadth of culture across all portfolios so therefore it's an essential part of regional development, regional communities, place-making or infrastructure (interviewee 1).

The specificities of place – geography, climate, demographics – and the assets of communities – knowledge, relationships, creativity, culture, lived experience – were part of the impetus and the perceived success of arts and culture in the two research sites.

Much has been written about the ways in which arts and culture shape places and communities. The diverse field of practice known as community arts or community-based arts which emerged in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s (Badham, 2013, p. 96), and the increased interest globally in participatory and collaborative arts practices since the 1990s (Bishop, 2012, p. 17), recognize and aim to extend the potential for arts and cultural engagement to produce a range of instrumental and social outcomes for specific cohorts and communities. Recently, the burgeoning practice and body of literature on creative placemaking has further extended the role and perceived value of artists and the arts in communities (Markusen & Gadwa Nicodeums, 2019, p. 23). Creative placemaking describes the intentional and integrated positioning of culture and the arts in place-based community development and planning (Sonke et al., 2019, p. 4). It is an approach that supports cross-sector collaboration and policies and embraces arts and culture as a critical resource in creating stronger, healthier and more equitable communities. Creative placemaking recognizes that arts and culture have a role to play in every aspect of society (Bonin-Rodriguez, 2014, p. 133) and that we have much to learn and benefit from exploring and investing in community-led and place-based responses to emerging health, social, and environmental issues.

In a rural and remote Australian context, creative placemaking helps us to recognize and describe the embeddedness of arts and culture within communities and the significant and innumerable ways they contribute to community wellbeing, support local economies, and ameliorate localized challenges. Bartleet et al. (2019, p. 176) identified cross-sector collaborations between arts and non-arts organizations, not-for-profit and for-profit sectors and government as a key strength of the very remote Barkly region. Sustained, collaborative, community-driven and place-based arts and cultural activity made a vital contribution to regional development across social, cultural and economic domains. Cultural and social domains such as cultural maintenance, were found to enhance and promote positive place image and identity, and health, wellbeing and quality of life factors were inseparable from economic outcomes such as tourism and work as creative practitioners or sale of artworks (Bartleet et al., 2019, p. 8). The place-led approach and values offered by both *Dress the Central West* and *Paper on Skin* creative placemaking events support this holistic view of the role of arts and culture in communities. Both events uniquely help to contextually centre the lived experiences of community members and appreciate the uniqueness of place to richly understand, evaluate, and develop avenues to further sustain the role of the creative arts in communities.

Attention to locally-led and community-generated arts and culture expands understandings of creativity, and the role that arts and culture play in strengthening communities. Symons and Hurley (2018, p. 122) found that people from communities high on the “deprivation index” are often not recognized as creative producers in their own right and are instead often the recipients of a prescribed set of cultural or creative activities produced by others. In both case studies, the local communities are focusing hard on changing that narrative. Greater sensitivity to place and local dynamics provides a critical means of acknowledging communities’ own understandings of culture and creativity and allows them to develop avenues that amplify their existing creative potentials (Symons & Hurley, 2018, p. 124). In the two project sites, this refers to local arts organizations knowing their community intimately and therefore being able to see and take advantage of potentials and assets.

McHattie et al. (2019, p. 314) argue that developing a deeper understanding of local contexts and people’s lived experiences of arts and culture in the places they live may contribute to more equitable and inclusive models of support and funding. In the following section, close attention to place through the frame of creative placemaking enables exploration of the ways in which communities are leveraging their own tangible and intangible assets – including relationships, heritage, environmental attributes, lived experiences, creativity and culture – to create localized impact in place.

### **Community networks and relations**

In central western Queensland and Burnie, rich networks – formal and informal connections and relationships external to and within the communities – underpin the design and delivery of arts and cultural projects in each community. In the accounts of interviewees, responsibility to community, sustained relationships, and responsiveness were amongst the components that made locally-generated arts and cultural experiences especially meaningful. An interviewee described,

I believe you walk together, you talk together, you live together. And that’s the difference between a fly-in provider and a local provider. A fly-in provider can come in and get the job done and go. But when you’re a local provider, you get the job done, and you’re growing another job while you’re doing it, because you can see the next step (interviewee 4).

This perspective highlights place-based arts and culture as deeply rooted in and influential of social and cultural contexts. Locally-based organizations were highly attuned to the needs of their communities (Bartleet et al., 2019, p. 178). Local interviewees positioned themselves not as producers or presenters of cultural product; “rather they are orchestrators of social interaction with communities who are seeking opportunities for interactivity, participation, access and engagement” (Cameron, 2009, np.). Deep knowledge of community was cited as an asset, while reciprocity, and ability to listen closely and respond quickly, emerged as part of the role and responsibility of the arts service provider in the community.

Reflecting Bartleet et al. (2019), cross-sector collaboration was a key feature – and likely a strength – of the arts and cultural ecology of the central western Queensland region. Interviewee 4 positioned the arts organization as a collaborator and facilitator at the service of the community. As a facilitator, the organization creates opportunities for

community members to develop collective responses to local challenges and experiences; as a collaborator, the organization brings together a range of businesses and service providers to realize shared goals (Redaelli, 2019, p. 180). In one interviewee's account, sustained collaborations within and beyond the local arts and cultural sectors were critical to project design and delivery:

It's the network of people, community, family, friends, industries, other service providers. That was a classic example with *Dress the Central West*, we had no money to start with and the project just kept growing and growing ... we had no idea how we were going to fund it. But all of a sudden people would say, 'okay I've got a spare X amount and I can support it with this' and we were just able to work with that network to make it succeed (interviewee 4).

The interviewee stated that funding cycles rarely provide the flexibility required to enable small organizations to deliver arts and cultural experiences when the community needs them; hence, the locally embedded, invisible and intangible social contracts and cultures of reciprocity (McHattie et al., 2019, p. 312) are crucial to creating impact in place.

Collaborations with a cross-section of the community – including local government, small local businesses, professional artists, and not-for-profit organizations including the Central West Aboriginal Corporation – were framed by the interviewee as essential to the delivery of *Dress the Central West*, and success was a collective notion:

It's not our project – it's the community's project. Success is not for one person, success is for a whole heap of people and things only grow and succeed if everybody's involved. *Dress the Central West* wasn't just us, it was the Central West Aboriginal Corporation. But it was based on respect, on confidence, on relationships, networks, and on supporting each other. I think that is the model of *Dress the Central West*. We had four towns working on the project separately, then we came together as a whole region (interviewee 4).

Viewed through the lens of creative placemaking, it is possible that the collaborative nature of such projects is fundamental to their perceived value – intrinsic and instrumental – within the community. Creative placemaking highlights the inextricability of the arts from a range of other sectors, such as housing, transport and aged care (APPGAHW, 2017, p. 64), and posits that long-term impact in place can be nurtured by supporting development of sustainable partnerships between culture and other sectors (BOP, 2019, p. 15). While the impacts of arts and cultural projects within the central western Queensland and Burnie communities have not yet been assessed, it is worth noting that rich networks and deep ties are amongst the place-based assets that communities are already harnessing to realize solutions to seemingly intractable challenges.

In their representation of *Dress the Central West* for instance, the interviewee highlighted the facilitatory roles of the organization. The interviewee described the project as a means of "opening a door" for local people to fulfil their creative potentials and emerge as leaders. Speaking of one of the Aboriginal artists involved in the project, they said: "she's taking the lead because she's got the passion – she wants to do this, but she just needs the door opened for her. That's what we really do – we open a door and let them walk through" (interviewee 4). According to the interviewee, *Dress the Central West* facilitated capacity building, skills development, paid employment, and opportunities for positive self-representation (ibid.). Describing the challenge of reporting on these outcomes, they observed:

There is generic data collection we keep for the purpose of funding providers. Then there is all the richness of data that is local knowledge. You see impact in how people have flourished and how they've grown and come out of their shell ... you've got that knowledge and you can see it and the rest of the community can see it too (interviewee 4).

Impacts such as number of people employed in arts and cultural projects are the kinds of tangible outcomes that funding agencies may be measured and reported on to funding agencies; however, capacity building and the positive impacts of opportunities for self-representation in the short and long term are harder to fully capture and represent within most reporting timeframes.

Beyond its impact on people working in the agricultural sector, “drought has a significant spillover effect on other residents” as economic stress spreads throughout local communities and economies (Edwards et al., 2018, p. 27). The reports of interviewees reflected scholarly literature that shows drought can profoundly affect the social and economic character of places through reduced consumption expenditure in local towns; lower rates of on-farm employment; and increased mobility as residents move in search of work (Edwards et al., 2009, p. 119). As an explicit response to both social and economic impacts of drought, *Dress the Central West* employed local professionals and simultaneously leveraged and “nurtured” their creative capacities. It provided an avenue for hairdressers, makeup artists and models to extend their skillsets and represent themselves to the community as diversely skilled professionals (interviewee 4). These perspectives connect to both tangible and intangible values – such as an increased need for skills development and employment opportunities in the face of drought, and self-esteem building opportunities as a means of stemming the outflux of young professionals in the region. Such values are locally specific and cannot be easily addressed by programming designed and delivered to communities by external parties, which rarely pay attention to specific place-based assets and experiences.

### **Local heritage and place identity**

The unique identity of place and local stories emerged as assets to be capitalized on in the creation of arts and cultural experiences. The potential for arts and culture to reflect, redress and shape place identity was part of the value of locally-generated arts and cultural activities. In the accounts of interviewees, the Burnie region’s industrial heritage as a papermaking town was an important local story which underpinned various arts and cultural activities, events and infrastructure, such as the Makers’ Workshop cultural hub and *Paper on Skin*. Reflecting Burnie’s heritage has always been central to the biennial *Paper on Skin* wearable paper-art competition and event, and since 2016 the project has worked to further “build sense of place” (interviewee 10) by leveraging tangible (including cultural facilities) and intangible assets (such as local history and heritage) to build more opportunities for community participation and engagement around the competition and event. Describing the development of *Paper on Skin*, an interviewee described: “another thing that we wanted to do in 2018 was to really build Burnie’s paper making heritage into the competition, which is why we approached Council to use their boutique papermaking facility” (interviewee 10). Implementing these intentions, in 2018 the project used the papermaking facility to offer paper art workshops with an international artist prior to the performative event (ibid.).

As creative placemaking scholarship highlights, one way in which the arts and artists interact with and positively shape place is by engaging with the history of a community, its values, and bringing these stories to the attention of its citizens (Redaelli, 2019, pp. 180–181). Creative and arts events emphasize the tangible and intangible assets that already exist in the community and so influence how a community perceives itself, its stories, and anticipates the future (Brownett, 2018, p. 76). *Paper on Skin* is biennial, but the sense of pride associated with the city's heritage and stories, sense of inclusion and collective identity might be intangible “take home” aspects (ibid. 78) and parts of the project's living legacy in the community.

The interviews revealed a tension between dominant or externally constructed identities of their region and positioned locally-led arts and cultural activities as critical tools for shaping the identity of place in ways that are authentic for the people who live and work there. Referring to the state of Tasmania, an interviewee distinguished between the creative and cultural identity of the broader state and a more localized place-based identity for the rural town of Burnie:

There is this unprecedented attention in Tasmania at the moment on Tasmania's arts and culture thanks to MONA<sup>B</sup> but that emphasis is really bleeding out into the regions now and that sense of confidence is really growing. It's a confidence in saying, 'well you know even though we're part of this state there's very much unique and discreet cultural identifiers in the different regions of the state' (interviewee 10).

Tasmania's growing reputation as a creative and cultural state is framed here as useful for developing a strong sense of place, and local pride. However, interviewees also signified the need to define and express a more localized place-based identity through designing and delivering the kinds of arts and culture that are locally relevant.

The value of place-based creativity and culture for expressing the identity of place can be seen in the tangential outcomes of the *Dress the Central West* project. The designs and creations of central western Queensland Aboriginal artists involved in *Dress the Central West* featured on the catwalk at a national fashion event, Melbourne Fashion Festival, in March 2020. This outcome forms part of the legacy of *Dress the Central West* and potentially extends or evolves “the richness of the place-based narrative” in ways that contribute to practitioners' personal identity scripts (McHattie et al., 2019, pp. 310–311). Interviewee 4 suggested this personal achievement for the artist may also have collective outcomes, through inspiring young people that personal achievement and success are possible for people of any age, regardless of personal circumstance or the place where they live.

Symons and Hurley (2018, p. 123) note that ideas of “culture” can become ideologically constrained to particular practices, organizations and individuals. What is needed is a more nuanced understanding of arts and culture that encompasses “everyday “little c” creativity”, including craft, hobbies, creative experiences and stories and that are important to local people, as well as “high Culture” practices of art or theatre that are more traditionally associated with the term art and culture (Symons & Hurley, 2018, p. 124). Writing from a rural perspective, Mahon, McGrath and Lillis (2018, p. 214) similarly urge an alternative conceptualization of creativity, in order to reflect “the ways in which rural places and communities have made the arts and culture relevant to them in managing change and development in economic, social and cultural terms”.

Interviewee 9 described curating exhibitions at the regional gallery to include artists as well as local crafts and designers, which they felt were “more accessible than high art” (interviewee 9). Interviewees’ representations of *Paper on Skin* similarly highlighted a broad and varied understanding of arts and culture by including craft and participatory elements such as papermaking workshops, as well as “high culture” practices through the international wearable paper art competition and associated performative event. These processes of bridging various types of creativity in order to respond to local interests and increase the relevance and accessibility of art for a specific community are amongst the explicit values of place-based arts and culture.

Alongside strong conceptions of Burnie’s place-based assets and capacities – tangible and intangible – the interviews highlighted identities and localized challenges that they sought to change or address through local arts and culture. For example, interviewees noted that the Burnie community faced high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, and that creative arts programmes and activities explicitly aimed to address this (interviewee 9, 10). In 2020 *Paper on Skin* developed a new partnership with arts and social change organization Big hART<sup>9</sup> in order to expand its capacity to meet the needs of the local community by addressing social disadvantage. In its most recent iteration, *Paper on Skin* collaborated with Big hART in order to provide local young women with real-world learning and employment opportunities. Young women involved in Big hART’s Project O<sup>10</sup> were members of the production team for the *Paper on Skin* short film<sup>11</sup>, developing creative and technical production skills, in addition to “soft” transferrable skills such as time-management and logistics (Big hART, 2020, October 12). Importantly, involvement in the creation of *Paper on Skin* widened young people’s perspectives on future career paths (ibid.). Reflecting the central western Queensland interviews and creative placemaking ideas, these new developments for *Paper on Skin* highlight the ways in which place-based arts and culture are intrinsically shaped by local social and cultural contexts, but also valued for their capacity to support community-led social change. As was also clear in central western Queensland, responsiveness to local experiences, flexibility within projects, and ability to embrace new opportunities and work with various partners, emerged as important attributes, and are amongst the defining characteristics of locally generated arts and culture.

### **Conclusions and future directions**

In Australia, the terms “regional” and “regional arts” are often a catch-all for vastly differing settings, experiences, and activities, from large prosperous regional centres to isolated townships. Yet in this research interviewees did not see regional, rural or remote as “the same”, and perhaps categorizations, generalizations and comparison as such are not always appropriate. The first stage of this research has however illuminated important similarities in terms of the values attributed to arts and cultural activities. In both regions – one rural and one remote – each local community critically draws on their unique local heritage and place identity to create arts-led programmes and events, and use local collaborations and networks to engage individuals and intrinsically augment value collectively for the whole community. This augmented “intangible value” seems to move beyond just cultural, and may include sense of pride, belonging, well-being, skills-development, employment, tourism, all of which may speak to the

“liveability” of a place. In central western Queensland and Burnie in north-west Tasmania, all interviewees viewed arts and cultural activities as inherently informed by local contexts and capacities, and valued and credited for influencing the physical and social character of places. Attention to place through story also provides an important and impactful way of understanding diverse and unique regional life experiences. By paying greater attention to these local nuances we can illuminate the multiplicity of arts practices, the creativity and culture in non-metropolitan areas, and acknowledge community members’ differing expectations of how arts and culture will shape their place, as much can be documented and evaluated to achieve this.

Current “one size fits all” approaches to impact assessment fail to capture the diverse ways in which regional, rural and remote communities value arts and culture. The effect is that such communities are often left on the margins of decision-making about how limited arts funds are dispensed and allocated. Supporting communities to continue to leverage their unique creative capacities and strengths to lead place-based impact requires a more nuanced and flexible approach to impact assessment, which enables the tangible and intangible values of local stakeholders to be meaningfully articulated. Greater sensitivity to place in unravelling the diverse values ascribed to arts and cultural experiences – including tangible values such as economic outcomes as well as intangibles including liveability, capacity building, and social cohesion – may provide a much-needed means of increasing the relevance of funding and assessment models for regional communities.

The overarching goal of this research project is to develop methods that centre the voices of these communities and find rich new ways that will capture, account for and more clearly articulate the full impact arts and culture offer diverse communities. This article has outlined findings from the first stage of our research and, through the analysis of the ten interviews, has posed some of the possible social outcomes of arts and culture in central western Queensland and Burnie in Tasmania – including liveability, social inclusion, employment and capacity building. In its next stage, this research will investigate value in holistic and meaningful ways by undertaking a formal assessment of the *Dress the Central West* and *Paper on Skin* projects.

## Notes

1. Burnie City Council; Performing Arts Connections Australia; Red Ridge Interior Queensland; Regional Australia Institute; Regional Arts Australia; Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications; Remote Area Planning & Development Board (RAPAD).
2. Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data from the 2016 census.
3. <https://burnieartscouncil.com/paper-on-skin/about-the-competition>
4. <https://www.redridgeinteriorqueensland.com/dress-the-central-west>
5. <https://www.arts.qld.gov.au/case-studies/dress-the-central-west-telling-the-regions-stories-with-wearable-art>
6. <https://www.bighart.org/>
7. <https://vimeo.com/454282363>
8. Museum of Old and New Art, based in the state’s capital. <https://mona.net.au/>
9. <https://www.bighart.org/>
10. <https://www.bighart.org/projects/project-o/>
11. <https://vimeo.com/454282363>

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