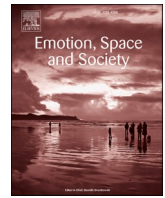




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# Tracing memories and meanings of festival landscapes during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has deeply affected mass gatherings and travel and, in the process, has transformed festivals, festival landscapes, and people's sense of place in relation to such events. In this article we argue that it is important to better understand how people's memories of festival landscapes are affected by these larger shifts. We worked from the premise that information-rich cases could provide some initial insights in this respect. To that end, we interviewed seven individuals who are regular and longstanding in their engagement with festivals in one place, lutruwita/Tasmania, the island state of Australia. Key findings suggest that pandemic experiences mediate the range of meanings participants give to festival landscapes and their interpretations of such landscapes can be described as attachments and detachments, encounters, and reorientations. We conclude by proposing that participants' efforts to draw on memories, reflect on emotional geographies, and recast autobiographies help them adjust to crises, rethink their ways of moving to and from festival sites, and reframe their sense of place in relation to significant cultural events. Such insights have application beyond both the island state and the participants involved.

## 1. Introduction

A decade ago, a discussion in this journal posited the importance of festivals in research on emotion, space, and society. There, Duffy et al. (2011: 17) suggested that "festival spaces forge a sense of belonging to others". This idea remains intriguing because of its focus on festival spaces, concerns with belonging, and use of the word 'to,' which does some heavy lifting about how festival spaces create affective connections implicit in the term belonging (Stratford 2009). More than a 'time out of time' (Falassi, 1987), then, festivals deeply interconnect with our lives (Frost, 2015) and memories (Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004).

Duffy and colleagues referred to festival spaces; here, we use festival *landscapes*. In part that is because we understand landscapes as comprising spaces, places, and movements; in part because we focus on festivals in landscapes that *belong to* lutruwita/Tasmania, Australia's island state. For us, festival landscapes constitute and emerge with(in) place-based and mobile practices by which people give meanings to events (Ryan and Wollan, 2013). Among those practices are 'simple' acts of coming, commingling, and going. In cycles, seasonal festival landscapes offer a sense of spatio-temporal continuity (Palang et al., 2005), their appeal stemming from anticipation, immersion, and memory

making.

The onset of COVID-19 in late 2019 meant that festival events around the world were cancelled, scaled down, or placed online (Döing, 2020). This article is based on an argument that since the outbreak of the pandemic there has been significant change in both how people remember engaging with festival landscapes and how they reflect on the meanings they give to those landscapes. Exploring the emotional, spatial, and social impacts of the pandemic in relation to festivals is important because such events seem to foster meaningful encounters and engender sense of belonging (Duffy and Mair, 2021; Gibson and Connell, 2011). On that understanding, our study was guided by two questions: How are people's memories of festival landscapes entwined with shifts in sense of self, place attachments, mobilities, and social lives during the COVID-19 pandemic? How do these shifts affect the meanings people give to festival landscapes? Our work contributes to a growing body of geographical research on the pandemic and its effects (Bissell, 2021; Burton, 2021; Jellard and Bell, 2021; Praharaj and Han, 2021). It is also consonant with understandings in human geography that memories are always historically, socially, and politically situated and emplaced (De Nardi and Drozdowski, 2019).

Patently, the pandemic has profoundly affected travel and mass

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gatherings, two key practices out of which festival landscapes emerge (Alonso-Vazquez and Ballico, 2021). Around the world, disrupted movements of people and things in, to, and from those landscapes have changed festivals' annual cycles, rhythms, and forms. To better understand those disruptions and their effects on remembrance and meaning-making, we conducted a qualitative study in lutruwita/-Tasmania between March and May 2021 at a time of major disruption to its well-established festival cycle. We interviewed seven people—festival organisers, attendees, and performers—whom we knew in advance were likely to be 'information rich' informants (see Stratford and Bradshaw 2021). We asked the participants what meanings they give to festival landscapes. We then considered how those shifting meanings influence participants' place attachments, understandings of journeying, and social lives during the pandemic. Our work is thus positioned at the intersection of research on memory and landscapes, festivals, and geographies of the pandemic.

In what follows, we provide light conceptual scaffolding about landscapes and memory and changing festival landscapes during COVID-19, before outlining the research design. Thereafter, we focus on three themes derived from analysis of interviews that pertain to festival landscapes—attachments and detachments; encounters; and reorientations. Our conclusion maps out three points of wider significance and points to areas of possible new research.

## 2. Landscapes and memory

Connections between landscape and memory are well known (Lowenthal, 1985; Schama, 1996). In geography, memory is widely understood as a spatial and social activity (Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004). It has been theorised as elemental to testimonies about the coexistence of past and present. Indeed, McHugh (2009: 201) argues that our "passage through time and place is not a succession of states. Our experience is that of duration, a dynamic continuation of movement and sensation."

The 'memory landscape'—a term adapted from the German Erinnerungslandschaft—is a concept through which geographers such as De Nardi and Drozdowski (2019: 430) have explored how the material and symbolic elements of both memory and landscape "are (re)produced and maintained with purpose ... sometimes to be a social binder, sometimes to assert (or challenge) identity and/or to keep groups together".

Our personal and collective lives are, however, also entangled with memories and landscapes in less intentional and tangible ways—processes that are in the centre of more-than-representational approaches (De Nardi and Drozdowski, 2019; Lorimer, 2006; McHugh, 2009; Thrift, 2004; Waterton, 2019). These approaches have opened avenues to understand how landscapes, bodies, and lives are entwined, and how landscapes and selves are emerging, fluid, and temporal. As Ingold (1993: 152) has emphasised, to "perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance ... of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past".

Fluid landscape memories help to situate and locate us in collective histories and are important in changing expressions of identity and self-continuity. Here again, scholars have seen emplacement as central to processes of memory-making: "Each spatialised, felt, moment or sequence of the now-being-laid-down is, (more or less), mapped into our bodies and minds to become a vast store of past geographies which shape who we are and the ongoing process of life" (Jones, 2005: 206). Yet, we do not simply retrieve unaltered memories as images from 'stores' of fixed pasts or, indeed, of fixed places. Instead, remembering is "always a fresh, new creation where memories are retrieved into the conscious realm and something new is created" (Jones, 2005: 208).

Studies of ephemeral landscapes have received less attention than those perceived as more permanent. Perhaps ephemeral (and, indeed, seasonal) landscapes—such as festival landscapes—seem harder to 'grasp.' Yet, the transformations they engender can be material and durable, embedded as they are in "situated and performed cultural

practices" and in ways that generate and reinforce a "collective sense of belonging, cultural identity and place attachment" (Atha 2019: 118). However transient their forms, our journeys to, from, and immersion in festival landscapes linger in people's memories and shape their senses of self and place (Green, 2016, 2018).

## 3. Changing festival landscapes during COVID-19 times

Changing landscapes and selves are intertwined with memories and experiences of place, some of them peaceful, others not. Little wonder, then, that individual and collective experiences of crises have been common threads in studies of landscapes and memories, in which ideas about absence, loss, and transience have featured (see Butler, 2018; Taylor, 2020).

Festival landscapes are commonly characterised by recurring cycles and associated with specific locations. Yet the pandemic has disrupted these patterns of use, spatial transformations, and place-making. Since its outbreak, scholars have sought rapidly to understand how people's movements, sense of place, and social lives have been affected (Bissell, 2021; Burton, 2021; Jellard and Bell, 2021; Low and Smart, 2020). As forms of social gatherings in landscapes, festivals have gained attention in both media (Lewis, 2021; MacDonald, 2020) and research (Davies, 2020; Duffy and Mair, 2021) because of the heightened risk of virus transmission. Cancelling or downscaling events to mitigate risks has had detrimental economic and social consequences, including those related to accessibility (Davies, 2020). Individuals and groups have been offered—or have invented—virtual alternatives (Döing, 2020; McCaleb, 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Karampampas, 2020). These innovations have kept businesses and professionals economically afloat during the crisis, and provided people with opportunities to maintain social connectedness and engagement with culture and arts. Yet, physical separations—of events, locations, audiences, and performers—invite us to ask how these changes affect the meanings people give to festivals in an age of risk (Duffy and Mair, 2021).

In lutruwita/Tasmania, several annual, ephemeral events are associated with iconic landscapes and seasons. Across the main island in the archipelago, festival events occur each year that vary in size, location, target audience, and format. Held in June in deep winter, Dark Mofo is scattered across locations in the capital city of Hobart, attracting over 19,000 visitors in 2019. Its summer sibling, Mona Foma, has been 'commuting' between Hobart and the city of Launceston in the island's north. In one southern township nestled in the Huon Valley, the annual Cygnet Folk Festival has internationally become an icon in folk music fans' festival calendars. Both the Fractangular Gathering outside of Buckland on the east coast and the PANAMA festival in the Lone Star Valley in the northeast are held over weekends on secluded rural properties with open paddocks and bushlands, each hosting around 1000 people each year. Erratically timed, small, and less known electronic dance music parties, 'bush doofs' (Canosa and Bennett, 2021), are held on abandoned pine plantations or in the bush for a few hundred people who gather, camp, and party. Participants in this study have been attending, hosting, or performing at one or more such events over several years.

During COVID-19 several such festivals have been cancelled because of public health restrictions (MacDonald, 2020). Cancellations have been linked to people's decreased movements between Australian states, affecting events' viability. A large island—68,401 km<sup>2</sup>—lutruwita/Tasmania has a small population base—541,506 people in December 2020—and until borders opened on 15 December 2021, the 232 cases recorded included only, though sadly, 13 deaths (Tasmanian Government, 2021a, 2021b). By April 2022, there were over 110 thousand cases and 34 deaths.

So, festivals remain precarious enterprises, even though Tasmanian residents travel to different regions to attend them. Without additional numbers from interstate and overseas, festival lives and landscapes are at risk.

Internal journeys by Tasmanians have been valued parts of festival experiences and important temporary departures from everyday life, a trend observed elsewhere (Fjær and Tutenges, 2017). In Tasmania, outmigration is common—especially among young adults—but many who live interstate regularly return to be with loved ones, and festivals provide occasions and rhythms for these visits (Hawkins and Ryan, 2013). As (Massey, 2005: 139) has observed, such successions of “meetings, the accumulation of weavings and encounters [that] build up a history”.

There was a complete ban on festivals and other gatherings at the height of the pandemic in Tasmania’s autumn and winter of 2020. From December 2020 larger gatherings were permitted with caps on numbers and physical distancing measures. The effect was that sociospatial practices associated with festivals—such as dancing and standing while drinking—were banned. Instead, the Public Health Director ventured the following: “say you were having a concert in a field ... you could ask people to bring blankets and have people spread out ... We want people to think imaginatively about how they do events” (in Baker 2020, n.p.).

#### 4. Research design

Underpinned by a phenomenological, hermeneutic approach the main method of data generation in this study involved semi-structured interviews to reach “an understanding [of a phenomenon] dialogically” (Gadamer, 2006: 52). Following ethics approval by the University of [redacted] Human Research Ethics Committee (#23305), seven participants were recruited. Lest this number be viewed as impossibly small, recall that doing in-depth interviews with a few knowledgeable participants can generate significant insights on a matter under investigation (Stratford and Bradshaw 2021).

Participants were adults over 18 who had attended a festival in Tasmania and had a [thwarted] intention to attend again in 2020/2021; were living in Tasmania; or had a strong connection to Tasmania (for example, they were born in Tasmania and then moved interstate). They were recruited via an email list and Facebook page provided by one festival organiser, and by snowball sampling. Before recruitment, potential participants were given an information sheet, were screened according to the selection criteria, and invited to ask any questions about the study.

An interview guide included prompts about how people’s lives had changed over the last year and been affected by COVID-19, how they remembered past engagements with festival landscapes, made meanings from such engagements, and how the pandemic had affected their approaches to festivals. One researcher conducted online interviews with the seven participants between March and May 2021. As Mason (2018) has shown, online interviews are never location-free, and the physical separation to participants was another sociospatial shift wrought by the pandemic, but it rendered interviews safe and feasible. Active listening and flexible use of prompts encouraged participants to explore aspects of lived experience in conversation. Suitable for the inductive, phenomenological approach used and for the reflective, retrospective types of questions asked, photo elicitation also engaged participants in story-telling, enabling them to share personal photographs of Tasmanian festivals (see Clark-Ibáñez, 2004).

Participants were affiliated with one or more festivals described above, as organisers, performing artists, stallholders, and attendees. Some were born here, some have migrated from other Australian states or overseas, and one has been moving back and forth between Tasmania and the Australian mainland for work. All have been allocated a pseudonym and we do not refer to specific festivals in case a participant could be identifiable given that information.

Lisa lives in Tasmania and, with her partner, has run a music and performance festival here for many years. She is well-connected with other festival organisers and participates in annual events on the island with family and friends. Because of uncertainties related to COVID-19, she cancelled her festival in 2021. Marion has been to Tasmanian

multiple-day festival events as attendee, stall holder, and artist. During COVID-19, she missed travelling and creating experiences at public events. Adam produces circus and magic shows worldwide and performed via an online platform during successive lockdown periods in Victoria, where he lives. He has participated in Tasmanian festivals over many years. Eva works in Tasmania’s entertainment industry and COVID-19 meant all her jobs were initially cancelled in 2020. She normally goes to a major festival or event once a month in Tasmania, interstate, or overseas, and attends smaller public events several times a week. As restrictions eased over the austral summer of 2020/2021, she could work again at a major Tasmanian festival. Ana lives in Hobart and has been active in creating an annual science festival; it moved online in 2020. She regularly attends Tasmanian music and arts festivals, enjoys making her own costumes, and finds the events invaluable for meeting with friends and family. Grace moved from Victoria just before one lockdown there in 2020. She has visited the island several times to attend festivals that are elemental to her social life, and she sorely missed them in 2020. Travis lives in Hobart and regularly attends multiple-day music events, often in rural or remote locations. Attendance is crucial for staying socially connected with friends. He felt isolated during the lockdown but has since worked at festivals as stage designer and DJ.

Interviews with each participant lasted up to sixty minutes, were recorded with the Zoom software, transcribed verbatim, and inductively analysed using a framework suggested by Tan et al. (2009) based on Ricœur’s hermeneutic phenomenology. Transcripts were read several times and analysed and coded *in vivo*<sup>1</sup> using participants’ words. The meanings of words or phrases were interrogated using codes developed in step one to understand which parts of texts referred to similar ideas. Main themes were developed to group, tabulate, and describe those parts and add key quotations. Ideas and codes allocated to one theme were then examined again and grouped into subthemes. In a last step, factors external to the text such as the interviewer’s own experiences, beliefs, or knowledge and understanding of the participants’ context were applied to the analysis. They were then discussed with other members of the research team, who had also interrogated the transcripts. In the process, the researchers moved back and forth between the first (explanation) and second (naïve understanding) steps to develop an in-depth understanding.

#### 5. Festival landscapes – attachments and detachments

Landscape is an uncanny and contested concept in the humanities and social sciences. As Wylie (2007: 1) has described it, this idea presents “a tension between proximity and distance, body and mind, sensuous immersion, and detached observation. Is landscape a world we are living in, or a scene we are looking at from afar?” Research on festival landscapes suggests the former: such landscapes are co-constitutive of experiences of embeddedness and interconnectivity that create lasting attachments (Ryan and Wollan, 2013). Certainly, participants in this study conveyed such attachments by imagining, planning, anticipating, and journeying to events—mobilities play a significant role in shaping how people both adhere ephemerally or lightly to festival landscape and simultaneously detach from other places for a time (Fjær and Tutenges, 2017). Several examples support this finding.

Many festival performers travel to Tasmania in annual cycles. For Adam, who remembered vividly his journey to the island in 2020, such mobility had become impossible during a long lockdown in Victoria. The inability to leave home and perform live in public spaces had deeply affected his professional practice, leading him to start “a live Zoom

<sup>1</sup> *In vivo* analysis here means a process of thematic analysis that uses the words spoken by participants themselves to develop codes and themes, not the NVivo computer software.



variety show in response to the pandemic and being locked down.” For Marion, the spatialities of departure from home were remembered as particularly meaningful as she reflected on the Tasmanian lockdown and travel restrictions that seemed to immobilise and enclose: “there is this kind of intensity with everybody. It’s this like we all need to go and explode. And that, to me, is where a festival can give people [space and time] out of our comfort zones. In some way we go out of our home zone.”

Even so, participants spoke about creating a “little home base,” or about experiencing festival places “like a second home” over the years. For Grace, attending the Cygnet Folk Festival in the Huon Valley in Tasmania evoked memories of her home place in the United Kingdom and of green hills enmeshed within a soundscape—an experience she missed when the festival was cancelled in 2020:

It has a very wholesome feeling about it. That reminds me not just of being at home here, but of being at home back in the UK. Lots of really traditional Irish, Celtic Folk music gets played there ... [and] sings to my memories of the mountains and the valleys ... themes ... traditional in Celtic music ... So, I was really sad that that wasn’t on.

As (Green’s 2016, 2018) studies on music experiences have shown, it is useful to know people’s individual biographies and collective memories to understand how music performances become enplaced phenomena. In Grace’s case, before she moved to the island just before the lockdown in 2020, she organised her journeys to Tasmania around the folk festival schedule and reinscribed this sense of home. Its cancellation acerbated feelings of isolation and homesickness.

Again, accounting for the ephemeral occupation of festival landscapes, it is noteworthy that organisers and performers also develop place attachments as they engage in work to transform the spaces and places in which events occur (Dilkes-Frayne, 2016). Participants in our study shared memories of how they engaged with these transformations in practical, creative, and intentional ways: building stages, establishing camps, fencing in areas, creating art installations, driving vehicles, and creating paths through paddocks or bushlands or leveling earthen floors with their feet when dancing. These spatial alterations enabled them to help create a festival atmosphere and were well remembered as meaningful and socially bonding activities. They also described putting a lot of time, thought, and energy into rendering festival landscapes to foster experiences for themselves and others. Travis describes his engagement with a bush doof landscape:

... creating scenery, creating space, helping create space that people feel comfortable and have a good time. That’s the part that I really enjoy ... A lot of thought goes into that, and it was team effort ... And that’s what I really enjoy— thinking of what will make people feel comfortable and happy. (Travis)

Rather than perceiving the landscape as detached from themselves, or as merely visual, participants also remembered their embodied engagement in transforming festival landscapes in terms of excitement, frustration, and exhaustion. For instance, Lisa described her encounters at the PANAMA festival, suggesting it was “a peaceful site ... quite remote. And it’s the blackwood forest, huge blackwood, hundred-year-old trees, the trees are giant ... Very picturesque. The grass is ... spongy, green grass, barefoot soft—except you gotta watch out for the wasps and the jack jumpers”<sup>2</sup>

In rural settings, co-creations often meant gathering and reassembling material found on location:

[At a doof], we built a hot tub out of riverbed stones ... all that wood was just all driftwood down from the shorefront there where we pulled it all up and built the dragon tent. Definitely utilising natural

materials ... If you use what’s already there then it blends in with that whole environment and ties into how people see it and how people feel in it. (Travis)

In such settings, although transformations often leave traces in the landscape well beyond the duration of a festival event, participants described their work as intentionally ephemeral, caring, and respectful. Marion described how “it’s that kind of thing that I like—that you can create it, but it doesn’t impose, and it can just stay there and naturally just be reabsorbed.” Yet sometimes intentions to shape space were thwarted by others—including from the more-than-human world, which she noted after creating a labyrinth out of natural materials at a festival event held on a rural property:

So, the rocks all came from the site and that was what the sheep decided to kick around because ... where we put it was right on their walking path. So that was interesting—to get help to divert them and [to learn] what do you need to do to divert a sheep off its normal path. (Fig. 1)

This account shows how participants experienced festival landscapes as animated and changing—in our terms, as dynamically spatiotemporal. As (Jones, 2005: 209) has suggested in relation to movement, memory, and landscapes: “we are nothing more and nothing less than agents, next selves, ‘passing’ through. The collective trace of our ‘passings’ constitutes the making and remaking of place.” Especially where participants had revisited festival landscapes over several years, they recalled traces of animation and change associated with different patterns of use. For Lisa, these were entwined with childhood memories:

I’ve been to that [PANAMA festival] site since I was nine years old. So ... that would make it 15 years I’ve been going to that property ... [and] remembering what it was like when there was the Circus Festival, the trees [were] so much lower and you could see so much more hillside around you and there was a bit of unfortunate logging action happening on some of the hillsides, and that was like, oh, you know that looks ugly ... And there is a beautiful little lake, more like a dam I guess ... we were allowed to swim in it. But they don’t allow people to swim in it any more ... I guess that makes sense, otherwise you’re stirring up the habitat ...

But Lisa was also reflected on memories accumulated over time in ways that are revealing of other spatiotemporal dynamics. Noting that the festival which she herself organises, normally, on an annual cycle, she made observations about wider environmental changes and what these meant for the festival experience:

Since 2013 ... every summer [our site] just got drier and drier and drier. And I remember seeing these marshy areas when we first arrived ... But the summers were getting—those boggy spots were getting drier and drier and 2020 was the driest year of all. There was no creek. There was just a stagnant puddle. The grass was—it was



Fig. 1. Labyrinth at Fractangular Gathering. Source: Author 1, permission granted by participant.

<sup>2</sup> Venomous Jack jumper ants (*Myrmecia pilosula*) are native to Australia and dangerous to some humans.

practically like a dust pit ... There are some discomforts to a dusty site compared to green grass and ... lushness.

Participants' memories also reveal how they felt transformed by festival landscapes in ways that resonate with ideas of these events as rites of passage (Green and Bennett, 2020) "celebratory moments that can give participants aesthetic experiences that for a short period in time may reveal our existential ground" (Ryan and Wollan, 2013: 99). Adam felt these effects in remote or rural settings where "there is something special ... You're very close to nature ... your circadian rhythms they're kind of tapped in, cause you're watching the sunset, watching the sunrise sometimes [laughing]." Grace felt "connected to the landscape ... surrounded ... in a beautiful way. It feels like something ... really primal inside of you, something that humans have done forever ... to gather around sound and nature and just experience that and feel freedom."

For Ana, urban settings could prompt other kinds of freedom, among them being able to shed concerns about "wearing more 'out there' things," and show aspects of herself that otherwise might not be visible. For her, "if I was on the street just on a Wednesday I'd have to [explain her outfit] to people. Whereas at a festival [such as Mona Foma or Dark MoFo] ... it ... flies under the radar" and people feel freer "to do silly things." With COVID-19 disrupting annual rhythms and leading to festival cancellations, Ana remembered looking into her wardrobe and feeling "melancholic":

these twelve months—it's a really long quiet dark time. So, yeah, a lot of the costumes had been packed up for the whole season—it starts to feel like clutter when you have not used something for such a long time and when you got a whole bunch of costumes that are very thematic, and they only get used one or two times a year.

In ways that mirror how Ana's sense of self was affected by her sense of detachment from both conventional norms of behaviour in a regular festival cycle and her sense of melancholy during one disrupted by the pandemic, Grace described similar effects in relation to the spatial separation of one festival from the 'outside world' by a gate. For Grace it was a powerfully embodied act to step into this other space:

You know, those social expectations that come with adulthood all of a sudden get removed at a festival. And we can start to become the children that we are inside. And I don't know why that is. I don't know what happens when you walk through the gate of a festival; where you leave all of that behind; and you step into what feels like, for me, you step into being a much more authentic version of yourself. Or at least a freer one.

The sense of freedom attached to festival spaces and their temporalities link back to discussions and theories on their sometimes carnivalesque attributes. Based in Bakhtin's work on the carnival in medieval times (1984), festival scholars Ravenscroft and Gilchrist (Ravenscroft and Gilchrist, 2009: 40) see the temporary inversion of the social order at modern festivals as 'a bounded license': transgressive behaviours in terms of dress or interpersonal contact are bounded spatially and temporarily for the event. Grace notes the gated entry point into and out of this space. Yet, festival landscapes are not void of order and discipline. Rather, as Ravenscroft and Gilchrist (2009: 41; 45) argue, organisers and attendees engage in the establishment of a revised, temporary code of conduct, with an implicit agreement to return to the normal law and order outside of the festival time and space.

Participants felt a sense of loss and nostalgia for the absence of these previously recurring patterns of transgression. Lisa, who cancelled her event for 2021, remembered feeling this grief at the time the festival would have usually re-occurred, having become used to annual patterns: "leading up to that weekend I was being a bit nostalgic, 'Oh, we would've been in 'bump in'. Oh, we would've been run off our feet doing this and that' ... And I felt a bit of a sadness that we weren't there doing that."

## 6. Encounters

Festivals help reconfirm and strengthen community bonds (Gibson and Connell, 2011). These capacities remain theoretically linked with Durkheimian reading of the festival as a ritual of community and "a tool for 'revivify[ing] the most essential elements of the collective consciousness. Through it, the group periodically renews the sentiment which it has of itself and of its unity'" (Durkheim, 1976 [1912]: 376). Festivals are also important settings where people interact spontaneously with others not part of their 'group' and whom they may otherwise not have met (Low and Smart 2020). Missing such interactions during COVID-19 has raised questions about the future of festivals as part of the complex dynamics of "group making, remaking and unmaking" (Leal, 2016: 1).

In our study, participants reflected on how festivals are socially connecting events and shared how reduced interactions during the pandemic had affected their sense of connectedness. Travis described it thus:

I really appreciate being close to my friends, and I have a great network of friends who support me in what I want to do ... go to doofs with, to festivals with, and that's kind of our thing, putting events on together. So, I remember feeling quite disconnected from that ...

Then referring to his first live festival performance after the lockdown, the most important moment involved reconnecting with friends (Fig. 2):

The majority of the people you can see in the photo are all very close friends of mine. That's what we were talking about before, that connection with friends that was obviously missed during lockdown. And then come out of lockdown and play that first set and have all friends there I hadn't seen in months! So that was a very special feeling.

In a similar vein, Adam spoke of connection to a community that appreciates his work at Tasmanian festivals and remembered a sense of continuity and a collective history of gatherings. Speaking about one performance at Fractangular Gathering near Buckland, he described this



Fig. 2. Performance at Tasmanian bush doof. Source: Author 1, permission granted by participant.



moment as “Quite special ... Perhaps because of the Circus Festival ... It’s not there now but it’s been a staple entertainment diet for a lot of people in Tasmania for many years. So, our work is appreciated ... [and] you feel that they ... come again to attend your performance.”

Continuity also affected how Marion experienced connecting with others at multiple-day events, such as Fractangular Gathering, and being immersed in and affected by the festival landscape and weather together: “When you go and you camp, you get burnt together, you get wet together, you dance together, whatever, there’s—it creates ... an embrace for me.” Marion’s observations signal her embodied experience of affect. The festival landscape, as bodies share experiences of movement, sun, and the elements, creates the circumstances for affect to be transmitted between and among each other (Brennan, 2004), and to engender various emotional responses such as feeling embraced.

Eva described a similar sense of bonding at different Tasmanian camping festivals: “You’re bonded by sharing the same things that you have to do. In a camping festival you have to make sure that you’ve got enough shelter, and you’re warm enough and you’ve got enough food.” Her insights are reminiscent of work by Ingold (2007: 19), in which he describes humans relating to each other: “to inhabit the open is not to be stranded on the outer surface of the earth but to be caught up in the transformations of the weather-world”.

For participants, being in festival landscapes also meant the possibility to spontaneously ‘bump into’ people. Ana suggested that “in Tasmania you just ... run into people. You can go practically anywhere, you don’t have to meet up with anyone, it’s sort of a small-town situation. You can just go out alone and end up with people that you know.” Eva stressed how sense of community was not limited to people already known; rather, having “a shared collective experience of the same event that we can talk about means that we feel like community even though I don’t know everyone.”

Participants also recalled how expanding one’s social life by meeting new people was an important element of festival experiences missed because of COVID-19 restrictions. For Grace, who had just moved to Tasmania when the restrictions hit, this sense of loss was pronounced:

I think [the pandemic] stunted my growth in building a home in Hobart, and especially with events and activities ... I was going to about twelve festivals a year ... by myself. And so not having ... even day events ... where people connect through the music, through dancing, through—you know—just being in the space together. I found that was really hard.

Even if spontaneous encounters at festivals were only ‘one offs,’ some participants described them as meaningful. For Ana, the spatial surroundings of such encounters prior to COVID-19 were conducive to them: “I remember just bumping into some people from Sydney [at Mona Foma in Launceston in 2020] ... We went around the sports centre just lying on these achromats, chatting to one another. Just like ‘ok, let’s just be friends for right now,’ almost like children ‘oh, we’re friends now,’ like playing at the playground.” Her experience of the same festival in 2021, however, was limited: “This year [it was] just a bit quieter, a bit more focused, fewer strangers, fewer people from out of town. Less randomness, in a social aspect, less of those unplanned, unexpected encounters with strangers.”

The pandemic also required organising teams to separate and disperse people to mitigate the risk of virus transmissions. Reflecting on a major festival in the summer of 2020, Eva described how “a large precinct that you could fit five or eight thousand people in with eight on nine stages ... food vendors and ... lots of people mingling [where people could] ... move around” shifted under COVID-19 in 2021 to a “decentralised model. So, rather than having one precinct hub we had 58 venues”.

Participants also thought about (lost) freedom to move to and around festival landscapes, encounter strangers, and engage in face-to-face interactions with others in place and touched on how festivals had become increasingly oriented to online formats. Ana has found digital events

“less attractive. I feel less affected when I’m online ... [It is] less satisfying, not getting to see people in person, not being in the same room, you are talking through the camera into the void ... a bit of an emotional toll.” When able to attend face-to-face events again in the summer of 2021, Ana felt even more motivated “to get [her] fix”.

## 7. Reorientations

Festivals involve stimulating renegotiations of values, norms, roles, discourses, traditions, and rituals (Gibson and Connell, 2011), and thus are sites of sociocultural transformation (Rowen, 2020), including during periods of life crisis (Picard, 2016). In this light, Marion suggested that the pandemic has affected people’s perceptions of change such that, “[There is] an underlying fear that things are ... outside of your control”. In turn, Travis described how “when we came out of the lockdown ... community connection was amplified ... hugging each other again. It was like, ‘Holy shit, I hadn’t touched another person in so long!’ [laughing] Not that we should’ve been doing that.” Ana was more circumspect: “We’re still figuring out how to be around other people. Like when you see other people hug you think ‘should they be doing that?’”.

More constrained by regulations and required to show those in clear sociospatial practices, festival organisers implemented policies to ensure physical distancing and keep staff and attendees safe. Nevertheless, they found it difficult to enforce these rules considering people’s desire to reconnect. Eva described how “the policy was that staff were not allowed to touch and make physical greetings or be too close to other staff members or members of the public, even ... family members ... it was really hard trying to enforce [because] a lot of people had not seen each other for a year”.

Despite the complications their reflections revealed, participants expressed strong desires to reengage with festivals by gathering with people in place—rather than online. The affective benefits of such embodied, emplaced connections motivated such desires. For Adam that pull manifests as having “the ability to be a conduit for communities to come together in a public space as a group of people,” which he described as a strong, core value in his life. “Energetically,” he said, “it feels a lot stronger when there is people in a space physically together.”

At the same time, participants were alert to the precarity of the festival as a phenomenon in pandemic times. For Lisa, cancelling her event meant more time to immerse herself in studies of sustainable festival models: “So, I’ve been quite excited to have the summer off to then have the time and space to go and be in the site in summertime, and sit there, and start to imagine this new event.” Reflecting on his experience of professional uncertainty and insecurity over the last year, Adam also referred to “the doubt put into the industry” and wondered “whether this is something I should pursue further or work in an area that I know that is a bit more stable” or that took account of his ageing experience. Others have been prompted by lockdowns to begin new projects in anticipation of live events returning. For example, in ways that resonate with Green’s (2020) finding that young people have shown resilience and creativity during the pandemic, Travis said that: “prior to COVID I was ... doing a little bit DJing ... giving a ... hand at a few events ... COVID was a good time for ... starting new things ... live streaming ... So, I knew ‘as soon it was all done, that is the time we strike’”.

These various reflections, are, we think, intrinsically interesting and they gesture to larger questions about the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of festival events that the pandemic has etched with greater urgency (Davies, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Quinn, 2018; Rowen 2020).

## 8. Conclusion

The idea that memories and festivals are emplaced is not new. Yet this study sheds light on how sociospatial changes specific to the COVID-

19 pandemic affect people's sense of self, place attachments, mobilities, and social lives and mediate memories of festival landscapes and the meanings given to them. Our findings lead us to three key points important to the scholarship of memory and landscapes, festivals, and geographies of the pandemic.

First, those who participated in this study remembered their engagements with festival landscapes as meaningful because, through collective and often creative activities, they formed attachments to place and to each other. They remembered being transformed by physical immersion in festival landscapes and spoke of changing patterns of behaviours and emergent and renewed sense of self. Although such landscapes were valued for and described in terms of their ephemerality and temporality, their annular cycles also offered a sense of sociospatial continuity. These forms of engagement were interlinked by journeys to and from festival landscapes, and by crossing physical or other dividing lines between festivals and the 'outside world.' Recurring patterns of transforming and of feeling transformed were then disrupted by the pandemic and their highly spatialised practices were given extra potency in hindsight, when seen in contrast to the immobility and entrapment experienced in the lockdown period.

Second, memories of being physically in a festival landscape affected how participants gave meaning to those events in their social lives. Confirming established findings in festival research, emplaced encounters with others in festival landscapes were remembered as engendering a strong sense of social connectedness and expanded social networks. Participants described missing the dynamics of physical and often spontaneous, encounters in festival landscapes during the lockdown. Engagements with virtual events were less meaningful for attendees and performers when compared with shared experiences in place. Alterations to festival landscapes to meet public health guidelines and prevent 'intermingling' were experienced as detrimental.

Third, people remembered meaningful experiences and engagements with festival landscapes in ways that entwined with their memories and ongoing experiences of the pandemic but also clearly understood that these were collective experiences tied to deeper structural questions. While COVID-19 was often described as prompting people to reconfigure and reassess relationships to festivals and their landscapes, other factors and events in people's lives were spoken about as enmeshed with the pandemic experience: professional reorientations, shifts in values, or the experience of ageing.

The first two points suggest the need for more research into change, absence, distance, and virtual encounters in festival settings, juxtaposing people's memories of pre-pandemic times with their labours to reinvent those settings and their affects. The third point emphasizes the need to consider what roles and functions memories and personal biographies play in people's experiences of, and consequent sociospatial adjustments to, crises such as the current pandemic. Either way, most people in this study were confident that public events would re-emerge and would remain a meaningful part of their lives. Perhaps, as [Duffy and Mair \(2021\)](#) have suggested, they will be "not unscathed but with a renewed sense of purpose".

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