

Crevice Craftivism: The Activist's Safe Harbour

Wendy Alexander, Tracy Sorensen, Vianne Tourle,
Margaret Sewell, Bernadette Mullaney

Abstract

Craftivism, a neologism combining craft and activism (Greer 2003, as cited in Freeman 2023), is among the myriad human social, political and artistic responses to the global climate crisis. This paper considers the experience of a small group of craftivists, the River Yarners, situated in Bathurst, a regional city in New South Wales, Australia. The group emerged from a 2015 grassroots community campaign to oppose water extraction of 10 megalitres a day from the local river Wambool / Macquarie for a proposed gold mine. The group's modest, but highly visible, contribution to the campaign was a yarned representation of the river, 20–40 centimetres wide growing to 80 metres in length during the campaign. The community action was ultimately successful, but the River Yarners did not disband. The group continues to work on fibre projects that respond to threats to – and opportunities for – enhanced river-system care, biodiversity, urban tree coverage, climate-change responsive development, and healthy local ecologies. Methodology: In 2023, its eighth year, the group engaged in a process of self-reflection, asking: “How do we understand the role of the River Yarners in our community and in our own lives?” Using collaborative autoethnography, five active members of River Yarners explored the group's emergent processes, practices and identities to write this paper. The structure of the paper is informed by the metaphor of river tributaries, each contributor's writing a tributary combining to create the flow of one river. Findings: this reflective process revealed that craftivism in this small crevice community generates personal and psychosocial benefits for the participants, creating an effective if unintended restorative sanctuary from participating in other forms of activism. In an era of worsening climate predictions, these findings suggest an opportunity for further research into the factors that sustain small craftivist groups and the psychosocial benefits they might generate.

Introduction

River Yarners formed in 2015 as an unfunded, spontaneous, participatory community project to create a unifying yarned/crafted item of protest against local river water extraction for a gold

mine (Nicholls, 2015). This project was a small part of a much wider community campaign involving a diverse coalition of residents, farmers, fishers, religious groups, environmentalists and Wiradyuri Elders. The initiating group began to create, and called for contributions of, hand-yarned fabric approximately 20 centimetres wide and of unlimited length. Over several months, the knitted, crocheted and woven river grew to an 80 metre representation of the local river *Wambool*¹ / Macquarie. The outcome of the combined community protest, of which the Rivers Yarners were just one part, was a local government decision in 2016 to defer any commitment to supply river water to the mine until environmental impact statements were completed. This led the mining company to abandon their plan to extract water from the Wambool / Macquarie River (Nicholls 2017), despite continuing with their mining development application.

River Yarners originally met weekly at Rahamim Ecology Centre.² One among the River Yarners was an environmental educator at Rahamim, making the connection for the group to meet at that location. Rahamim closed in March 2020 for financial reasons (Neaves, 2023), and River Yarners then began to hold its weekly sessions in participants' homes. River Yarners current participants are all residents of the local government area in which the 2015 protest action that spawned River Yarners took place. Some have participated since the group's inception, while others have joined in the interim. All have been and/or are involved in community activism; all are active makers in yarn and other crafts across many years. All current participants are tertiary educated, white, middle-class cisgender women; two hold creative arts PhDs. All have sufficient time away from other commitments to participate in River Yarners once weekly two-hour meeting.

As such, River Yarners is an in-community craftivist group, not an academic research group and not affiliated with an academic institution. Contributors to this paper are pre-existing members of River Yarners and were not recruited as research participants in a formal sense. However, all agreed to contribute to this paper in response to this journal's call for papers, and thus the autoethnographic work here reflects the *in-situ* group, not a group recruited for research purposes.

River Yarners acknowledge the Wiradyuri land on which the participants live, make and write this paper. When a group project aligns with concurrent action of Wiradyuri Elders and knowledge holders, River Yarners seeks an on-the-ground conversation with a representative of the Wiradyuri Elders, describing River Yarners proposed activity, and respectfully listening for any concerns, and amending the project in response.

River Yarners considers itself to be a *craftivist* group in the spirit of other such groups operating around the globe. The term craftivism is attributed to American Betsy Greer, who defines it as: "A way at [sic] looking at life where voicing opinions through creativity makes your voice stronger, your compassion deeper and your quest for justice more infinite." (Freeman 2023). In the Craftivism Manifesto, Baumstark (n.d.) emphasises the effort of craftivism and craftivists to

¹ Wiradyuri place names are italicised on first use.

² Rahamim Ecology Centre was a ministry of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea dedicated to environmental education. Rahamim was created in 2007 by the Sisters of Mercy at their Saint Joseph's Mount site, Bathurst, a former convent, which had been occupied by the Sisters of Mercy continuously since 1909.

make change: “A craftivist is anyone who uses their craft to help the greater good or in resistance to a greater societal ill.” This manifesto also describes how “a single individual crafting can make a difference, or they can craft together and benefit from the fellowship of other crafters.” The making in craftivism is with the hands and is often allied to making a difference beyond the production of a hand-made object, to subverting expectations, and to the historical trajectory of women’s craft and protest (Jacks, 2020).

In *Staying with the Trouble – Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (2016), feminist scholar Donna Haraway argues for social activism that moves beyond denunciation into “other ways to reworld, reimagine, relive and reconnect with each other” (p. 50). Invoking the theoretical work of multi-species scholars Pignarre and Stengers, Haraway argues the importance of “inventing new practices of imagination, resistance, revolt, repair, and mourning, of living and dying well” (p.51) as we face a world made potentially unlivable by human beings through our species’ assaults on Earth’s biological systems. Haraway emphasizes the usefulness of “material play” (p. 79) which emphasizes process over product, in which participants involve themselves in an embodied sympoiesis, or co-creation with the more-than-human world (that is, with the lively agency of the more-than-human material world) that includes plants, animals, fibre and fur.

Haraway gives as an example of such collective action the international crochet coral project instigated by the Australian-born, Los Angeles-based twin sisters Margaret and Christine Wertheim (see crochetcoralreef.org), which by 2016 had involved eight thousand people in 27 countries.

The involutionary momentum of the crochet coral reef powers the sympoietic knotting of mathematics, marine biology, environmental activism, ecological consciousness raising, women’s handicrafts, fiber arts, museum display and community art practices (Haraway 2016, p. 78).

While material play emphasizes process over product, Margaret Wertheim has observed that for those who view the crocheted reefs in formal and informal installations and exhibitions around the world, there is a chance to “stop for a moment and think about the power of little things” (Wertheim 2015, p. 72).

Despite the generative 2015 protest action resolving by 2016, the River Yarners have continued to stitch the river and, from time to time, produce yarned responses to various other local environmental concerns (see Gallery, below). For example: tree banners drew attention to street trees on death row (Ferrett, 2016); knitted leaves urged more urban street trees in downtown Bathurst (Bolt, 2021) and a yarn bomb on a fenced-off section of McPhillamy Park on the top of Wahluu / Mt Panorama, highlighted denial of public access (Bolt, 2022). In February 2022 River Yarners were invited to exhibit the river at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space, for the “Carbon Neutral” exhibition curated by Alexander Boynes (Haynes, 2022). The group also created a stop-motion video *The River* (see River Yarners (2022) [video]) for the Arts OutWest touring exhibition “While the World Waits”, a response to Covid19 by the regional arts community (Arts OutWest (2022)). River Yarners has regularly created entries for the annual Waste2Art competition, including a knitting machine made from a discarded car tyre, and in 2023 embroidered panels of a room divider showing two sides of the Belubula River’s future: one destroyed by mining, the other a rich river ecology left un-mined. The group has participated

in Bathurst's annual Heritage Trades Trail, displaying their craftivist application of knit and crochet traditions at a non-protest event (Morton, 2018). Most yarn for these projects is donated, including from deceased estates, making a connection between River Yarners' efforts and the work of yarners who have passed. All this activity, over the years, has created a "kit" of yarned objects – river, animals, leaves, banners – which is portable and can be repurposed and adapted by the River Yarners to new environmental concerns as they arise. The above works and any outings of the yarned objects kit are events that create the opportunity for onlookers to "stop for a moment and think" about the objects they witness (Wertheim, 2015, p. 72), and about the environmental concerns targeted by the objects and their makers.

Why yarners might write

Some members of River Yarners are on the mailing list for the Charles Sturt University Creative Practice Circle. When the crevice communities-themed call for papers for the *Journal of Creative Practice Research* was circulated, self-recognition of River Yarners as "crevice" occurred, and the idea to write about the River Yarners' experience was sparked:

Vianne: 'There's considerable writing and imaginative expertise held by the Yarners.

This paper will give pause to reflect and capture some of what we're doing!'

Tracy: 'I think it's fantastic to get our work written up like this so that it is citable and more "out there".'

Wendy: 'we could write a paper that is a rich account of each of our experiences, processes, feelings, individual and group projects, at any point(s) in time, either now, or in recollection. We could use a relevant metaphor to guide a structure for the paper, e.g. 'tributaries' to build a paper with each of our writings a tributary of the total flow that is River Yarners.'

(Extracts from email exchange among River Yarners, 23-25 June 2023.)

The group found that the metaphoric mantle of a crevice community easily wraps around River Yarners:

Crevice communities are small pockets of vegetation that are uniquely adapted to thrive in the harsh conditions of the rocky terrain of exposed mountain summits. They find footing in thin soil in the crevices that are protected from the strong winds. These fragile plant communities grow slowly and mature as low-lying shrub and forb communities. These exposed mountain top communities tend to be small and rare and, because of their unique growing conditions, differ greatly from those found elsewhere ... (MERE Project, Antioch University)

River Yarners is small, with numbers remaining less than ten over the years. The harsh conditions – sociocultural context – for these craftivists are local water-use politics, related environmental concerns, the overarching climate crisis, and the intellectual and emotional weight these conditions carry. A way forward – a footing – is sought in the communal making with fibre, while sheltered in a comfortable domestic or community space. A respite from aggressive

environmental destruction is created temporarily yet regularly. The group is slow growing. Fragile? The writings of participants suggest any human fragility is somewhat lessened in a group that regularly makes by hand around common concerns. Rare? Perhaps not, when considered globally: participants often share social media images that detail unfathomable yarned skill, in yet another form. This habit affirms for participants the place of River Yarners in a tradition of yarned protest and connects with international fibre artists/craftivists/crafters through the simple act of sharing, admiring, being inspired, and recognizing the work of fellow craftivists in the wider world.

Methodology

This paper uses the methodology collaborative autoethnography (CAE). Roy & Uekusa describe "two central components of CAE – self-reflection and collaborate" (2020, p. 384). For Arnold (2020), a key element of CAE, is "digging, questioning and reflecting to understand what it [the writing output] might tell us about the wider context" (para. 4). This autoethnographic work uses Hernandez, Chang and Ngunjiri's framework whereby "two or more autoethnographers in a research team ... pool their lived experiences on selected sociocultural phenomena and collaboratively analyze and interpret them for commonalities and differences." (2017, p. 251). The discussion section pushes these written experiences to become "not [just] about telling stories and asking what do they mean to me or us" (Arnold 2020, para. 4) but using the tenets of CAE to provide the opportunity for River Yarners to consider the context in which they make and take action. For River Yarners this context is multiple: the regional community in which the group makes and makes protest as craftivists; a wider craftivist world-community with which the group shares purpose; and the global (climate crisis) which is the local (climate crisis).

Current River Yarners were asked to contemplate a moment, or moments, of participation in the group and write one or more vignettes in response. Each contributor was also asked to consider the nature and extent of change (or potential change), personal or otherwise, arising from the River Yarners' efforts. Of the seven currently active River Yarners participants, five chose to write for this paper. The two non-writers were shown drafts of the paper and were privy to conversations about it on email and in verbal exchanges during weekly yarning sessions.

The final structure and flow of the text formed from these vignettes was not predetermined, as structural decisions were made ultimately in response to the tone, voice and content of each contribution. After all pieces were circulated to the group, a brief face-to-face discussion at the regular weekly meeting weighed up the option to either: (a) split and remix each contribution by theme and/or topic, or (b) to include each contribution sequentially as 'raw data' blocks (see example in Gleiman et al. 2015), followed by a collaboratively written analysis and discussion which enacts the autoethnographic work of placing these stories in a sociocultural context. The latter approach was chosen, keeping each vignette "whole" as raw data. In the first draft, the five personal vignettes (or "tributaries") produced many more words than could be used within the constraints of this journal, so the writers agreed to edit their personal vignettes to a maximum of 400 words.

Tributaries

These written contributions – tributaries – begin with writing from the instigators of River Yarners in 2015 and continue in the order in which those writing joined the River Yarners, adding to its flow.

Tracy

My mother taught me to crochet as a child. I have always enjoyed domestic craft projects: a bit of stitching, working with papier mache, whatever takes my fancy. While I am a professional writer, I allow myself to craft with gleeful, reckless abandon. When I was diagnosed with primary peritoneal cancer in 2014, I found that crocheting my threatened abdominal organs in the round, almost life-size, using amigurumi techniques (Sorensen, 2014), gave me a gentle, consoling activity that was at once absorbing, distracting and relevant. I noticed it made it much easier to talk to people about my troubling and complicated diagnosis.

In recovery, I wanted to research how crochet might support the climate activism I had been involved in since 2007. In January 2015 I enrolled as a PhD candidate in the School of Communication and Creative Industries at Charles Sturt University with this question in mind. As it turned out, it was not long before the two streams – craft and climate action – came together as part of the public campaign against using river water from the Wambool / Macquarie for a gold mine.

For me, a crucial moment in the campaign came when Bathurst Regional Council met to discuss the water extraction proposal on February 3, 2016. At the rally held on the street outside the council chambers, the yarned river twined around the garden beds and across the ground in front of the glass sliding doors into the building. Inside the building, River Yarner Wendy Alexander had slipped a knitted trout cod on a table facing the deliberating councillors. For me, this knitted fish represented the inhabitants of the watery realm, watching on as their future was decided. It felt like a small space for whimsy and gentleness within a community debate that at times was turning hostile.

For me, participation in the River Yarners has been a way of remaining active in the environmental movement without burning out. Our gatherings on Friday afternoons meander through gossip and politics and often subside into complete silence as members focus on counting stitches or thinking about something that was just said. It is quite unlike being involved in Bathurst Community Climate Action Network (I have been a member since 2007), which involves public activities that I often find stressful and/or exhausting to help organise and participate in. Working with the River Yarners, I have always felt refreshed and energised rather than depleted.

Vianne

Perhaps, in writing about it, I will capture (the) ‘something’ about my crazily idle lazy somewhat even out-of-all-proportion primary ambition to have an impact on the bigger world and on some very big shared worries, using a method which means we strive for some funky excellence in the “nanna-daggy crochet-knitting-fibre-and-needlecraft-generated” outputs themselves. And then

there's yarning presence itself – the personal exchanges, the multi-layered communications, dark humour, taut tensions, quick wit, focussed care, laughter and many kindnesses.

I learned basic crochet and knitting from my grandmother, but I had no real skill development nor grand object completion. The chunky yellow 12-stitch across knitted tie for my father, and the small granny square rug for my younger sister's birth were highlights. Now, it's river and trees, threatened species, water, impacts of mining with the Yarners – and there's still more fabric and fibre at home.

I find it wonderful that we tell stories and name the source of so many sections contributed to the River, even though we have had no formal method to document the contributions. When we were shooting the video *The River* (River Yarners, 2022) we laid it out across Centennial Park. We walked beside it, reminisced, remembered contributors, shared memories of the process, and we measured its length.

A fine fibre artist (whose work hangs on walls) told me that she was very disturbed by the yarned river "being pulled across the dirt" in our video *The River* (River Yarners, 2022). The stop-motion effect had hit home after all. At the time, my retort included "this is what rivers do, this is what water does." I am very protective of the many special bits, the yarned pieces that hold memories of contributors from across the region, and those which present simple ideas and provoke conversation.

When Alexander Boynes, curator of the Canberra Contemporary Art Space, hung lengths of the yarned river for the *Carbon Neutral* exhibition (February 2022), most was displayed on the walls in fabulously evocative curves, with some on the floor too. In this instance, I do think it became art; it had been transformed and it surprised us too.

I note that in this writing, my selections, word usage and edited storytelling are about making, about process and social interactions. For me, environmental causes are secondary to the joy of making. And I give thanks for the space we have created and share – I learn so much from group members.

Wendy

In River Yarners I have found my crew. Fellow travellers whom I admire and feel curious about. I can air spontaneous and erratic thinking around difficult environmental challenges. This group feels relevant and is part of an evolving me, as I shift to ways of being that I did not have time for in the past.

So, what *do* we talk / write about? For me, it is the feeling of self-affirmation, and a safe zone for self-expression and extension of self through talk and the *making*. Simply handling yarn that has the potential to become a thing through knit and crochet's stitch-making traditions is an exploration. I'm enticed by applying a spontaneous purpose to the made thing, and with River Yarners this purpose is within a prescribed zone of action, the climate crisis. We create items and moments that are positive provocateurs, engendering curiosity in an imagined viewer, for them to ponder 'why are these people stitch-by-stitch creating *this* yarned object in the face of that issue, and putting it in my path, where I might see it and wonder'? Or even, sparking a common purpose between that audience and River Yarners, generating viewers' own drive to make a

difference and create the world as they want it, and not remaining bystanders to unopposed destruction.

The spontaneity of the stitch-by-stitch process keeps me coming back. Less pattern more freefall of joy in the making. Together we create a talking point, a curiosity or a valid protest to say this is what we want for our shared future, in all its complexity, inconvenience, and vitality.

The attraction? Fellow travellers: the obligation feels low (attend, be/become relaxed, share, vent, *make*, dwell in/on common ground; repeat) and the reward: consistent and affirming; a solid, regular metering of days, weeks, years. I have not just "measured out my life in coffee spoons" (Eliot 1915, as cited in Eliot 1963) but am happy to have measured out days in stitch-by-stitch creations and conversations that look the crisis in the eye, and say why, or no, not this way, let's try this.

Margaret

I came to River Yarners in late 2019 through climate action, joining as the newly minted, yet woefully ignorant, secretary of a local climate action group.

2020 became the year of 2D data stripes, including a climate scarf: stripes representing the yearly global maximum temperature over a century, enabling reflection on my parents' experiences, and those of my children. A visceral moment for me was realising through forming these stripes that neither of my 90s children had ever experienced a year cooler than the year in which they were born. The scarf stripes for the last 25 years to 2019 became inexorably redder and darker. As others see the scarf, they start to look for their own birth years, and those of their children and grandchildren, and the difference in temperatures becomes clear.

From the River Yarners' genesis fighting for Wambool (Macquarie River), our focus moved to Wahluu (Mt. Panorama), then to the Belubula River by direct Songline. An unfinished embroidery of grasses, from a long-ago trip to the Coorong, was completed as part of an installation reflecting on the Belubula River, threatened by a tailings dam to be built on its headwaters. Living near the source of the Macquarie River, at the opposite extremity of the Murray-Darling basin, I was now aware that the water that we saved here eventually made its way to the Coorong. Potential pollution of the Belubula River from this proposed gold mine would feed into the Lachlan, also part of the Murray-Darling basin, and also impact the Coorong. This work brings reflection on where I have been, and who I have become.

Flowers on an embroidered top made by a friend were stitched onto a repurposed backing, and embroidered bees were added by my daughter, another statement on the effect of the proposed gold mine on biodiversity. Just as my mother had taught me fibre craft skills, I introduced my 20-something daughter to embroidery – an honorary River Yarner. And so, the circle continues.

Yarning the river is much more freeform and relaxed (as are our conversations) than following a complex pattern, as we form unique creations. However, for a complex knitted baby shawl and embroidered cot blanket for my grandson, River Yarners were my support group, offering advice on design, techniques, and importantly, when to stop. This was fitting, as our climate conversations and activism all work towards our shared vision of the future, where children do not face climate threats.

Bernadette

I joined the River Yarners to meet with others engaged in craftivism on issues around our impacts on our natural life-support ecosystems. Meeting encourages me to question, learn and be mutually supportive and positive.

To me, the shared causes create bonding and promote understanding, balance, resilience, solidarity and growth. The creations of the River Yarners point to an alternative way of thinking and valuing nature, and to caring for it sustainably.

My feelings are deep, and often not easily spoken, and using my hands to craft items helps this. Our talk often mentions destruction, loss, ignorance of others, the lack of opportunity to talk thoroughly with the power (which is often entrenched in legislation and vested interest) that is the prevailing status quo. The feeling of disempowerment due to decisions made elsewhere often contrasts to our spirits in the room.

Showing others our crafted items can be an innovative conversation starter, and may appeal to the creative, whimsical, fun aspect in the viewers. They may begin to see things differently – with pathos and the intimate connection that we each have to all of life and creation.

My strongest experience with River Yarners was around raising awareness and expressing solidarity with the original custodians, the Wiradyuri, on their campaign to retain the use of a piece of land atop Wahluu / Mount Panorama, which was being advanced through stages towards becoming a go kart track. This land had been a special women's site for thousands of years.

A River Yarners' member had the idea to use a gate image from the Strawberry Fields gate in Liverpool, England made famous by the Beatles. Our project to access the fenced off land and align with the Wiradyuri efforts to formally recognise their connection to it, became the 'McPhillamy Park Forever' project. I enlarged an image of the gate and traced out sections for each member to use as a pattern. Drafting the image of the very small gate up to the finished, metres-wide installation size was helped by what happens to be imprinted on our family-room floor – a square Lino design. It was very handy to kneel down and lay out sticky-taped together pieces of paper, using a rolling parallel ruler and a dressmaker's square.

The finished yarned work was assembled and placed on a fence at the contentious place. Despite the chances of its vandalism, removal, birds taking yarn for nests and weathering, it has remained in place for over a year now.

Analysis

A mix of meaning surfaces from the written output: positive self-care; interpersonal care, connection, understanding and reciprocity; a countering of hostile environmental politics through whimsy (humour, playfulness); and hope placed in hand-crafted items of protest that take the mode of micropolitical interventions (Anderson, 2017, p. 594).

In reading the vignettes together, the participants identified eight common themes ("commonalities", Hernandez et al., 2017, p. 251):

- Joy in the making

- Self-care and interpersonal care
- Facing and communicating difficult topics
- Finding one's tribe
- Reception and material play
- Political intervention
- Whimsy
- Way-making and personal evolution

Joy in the making

All yarners described relaxation and “joy in the making” (Vianne, Wendy); the “gleeful, reckless abandon” (Tracy) of freeform, relaxed pattern-free creativity. Bernadette places that joy in the context of current environmental concerns and their management: “The feeling of disempowerment due to decisions made elsewhere often contrasts to our spirits in the room”.

Self-care and interpersonal care

Personal benefits around the themes of self-care and interpersonal care were frequently described. Tracy: “Working with the River Yarners, I have always felt refreshed and energised rather than depleted”. Vianne: “And then there’s yarning presence itself - the personal exchanges, the multi-layered communications, dark humour, taut tensions, quick wit, focussed care, laughter and many kindnesses”.

Facing and communicating difficult topics

Manually creating with yarn in a small posse around a shared purpose is described as a means to address difficult concerns held personally and by the wider community. For personal health concerns, Tracy noted: “it [the making] made it much easier to talk to people about my troubling and complicated diagnosis”. Bernadette: “My feelings are deep, and often not easily spoken, and using my hands to craft items helps this”. And the making for Vianne addresses a “primary ambition to have an impact on the bigger world and on some very big, shared worries ...”.

Value is recognised in the yarned objects for communicating with others around climate change. Margaret: “As others see the [climate] scarf, they start to look for their own birth years, and those of their children and grandchildren, and the difference in temperatures becomes clear”.

Finding one's tribe

Making kin with others (see Haraway, 2019, p. 573), humans and beyond, is expressed in various ways. Wendy: “In River Yarners I have found my crew. Fellow travellers whom I admire and feel curious about”. Vianne: “I note that in this writing, my selections, word usage and storytelling are about making, about the process and social interactions”. For Margaret, deepening family and intergenerational connections through craftivist making hold significance: “Just as my mother

had taught me fibre craft skills, I introduced my 20-something daughter to embroidery ... so the circle continues”.

Reception and material play

The material creations of River Yarners offer an opportunity to build “a caring public through material play” (Haraway, 2016, p. 70). Tracy: “At the rally held on the street outside the council chambers, the yarned river twined around the garden beds and across the ground in front of the glass sliding doors into the building”.

Vianne describes the community building that occurred around creating such a large, yarned object as the river: “We walked beside it, reminisced, remembered contributors, shared memories of the process, and we measured its length”. An awareness of the varied public reception to this material play is expressed. Vianne: “A fine fibre artist ... was very disturbed by the yarned river ‘being pulled across the dirt’ in our video *The River*”.

When the exhibition curator Boynes created a curving vertical installation with the yarned river for the “Carbon Neutral” exhibition, the River Yarners themselves became the receivers, expressing surprise and wonder at their work when (dis)played under someone else’s hand.

Political intervention

Yarners’ interventions could be interpreted as a micropolitical intervention, or a “spark of hope” along the lines proposed by Anderson (2017): “For me, the hope of micropolitics is that it invites us to learn how to act in the midst of ongoing, unforced situations and experiment with ways of discerning and tending to the “otherwise” (p. 594). Tracy noted the moment a knitted trout cod was placed in the centre of a council meeting discussing river water extraction: “this knitted fish represented the inhabitants of the watery realm, watching on as their future was decided. It felt like a small space for whimsy and gentleness within a community debate that at times was turning hostile”.

Hope is placed in the potential of the yarned objects to make a difference. Wendy: “We create items and moments that are positive provocateurs, engendering curiosity in an imagined viewer”. Margaret: “our climate conversations and activism all work towards our shared vision of the future, where children do not face climate threats”.

Whimsy

Joanna Mann (2015) argues whimsy can be a “powerful political force” that is able to alter bodily dispositions and foster new ethical spaces and modes of political action” (p. 65). “By making city dwellers take notice of the spaces they inhabit, whimsy can restimulate the senses and instill a mood of possibility by inviting inhabitants to think differently. Key to this whimsy-as-politics, however, is its affective excess – that which circulates in and between bodies and cannot be pinned down” (p. 69). Items made by River Yarners include a magical gate to draw attention to a locked off public park, tree banners with positive life affirming words (LOVE, HOPE) to draw attention to trees on death row, and anatomically correct threatened species in knitted form. Bernadette: “Showing others our crafted items to can be an innovative conversation starter, and may appeal to the creative, whimsical, fun aspect in the viewers”.

Way-making and personal evolution

The contributions describe being able to “stay with the trouble” of environmental destruction. (see von Hellermann, 2021, on climate change burnout). Tracy: “River Yarners has been a way of remaining active in the environmental movement without burning out”. Participation is often linked with personal evolution: Margaret: “This work brings reflection on where I have been, and who I have become”. Wendy: “This group feels relevant and is part of an evolving me, as I shift to ways of being that I didn’t have time for in the past”. Bernadette: “Meeting encourages me to question, learn and be mutually supportive and positive”.

Discussion

In the same way that each participant’s yarned craftivist contributions to River Yarners’ projects are unique, and often novel and surprising, each text contribution and voice has been accepted into this paper as an idiosyncratic component of a unified whole-text. Moving beyond one-dimensional storytelling, this discussion harnesses the fundamental work of CAE to question and reflect on what the above findings “might tell us about the wider context” (Arnold 2020, para. 4).

River Yarners is described as personally restorative by its participants. Here, the “repair” (Haraway 2016, p. 51) is occurring in the maker who is taking a stance to protect and respect elements of the natural world including its complex inter-relationships, for example, river water and trout cod, street tree and urban cooling, gold ore and subterranean water flows. The group has endured for over eight years, despite its galvanizing protest action being resolved within the first six months. River Yarners does not keep minutes, does not have a leader or a hierarchy, nor a code of conduct. The group does not actively seek new members, instead anticipating that the public display of yarned creations might attract new yarners to attend. This does happen at times, although participant numbers remain steady at less than ten, over the years. Perhaps the shift from a community space to meeting in private homes has kept the group small, invoking the dynamics and advantages of this crevice community as described by its participants, where smallness is powerful in itself as a means to assure continuity and avoid climate change burnout (von Hellermann, 2021).

Play is evidenced in the vignettes, evoking joy and humour among the group, with less expression dedicated to protest outcomes – process over product, aligning with Haraway’s tenets of “material play” (2016, p. 79). Even though effective positive change for the environment is the overarching goal of River Yarners actions, this “product” is not sought at the expense of the process. It can be postulated that the play is a primary sustainer of this crevice community and is fundamental to generating the restorative properties described by the participants.

Further, in River Yarners, “making with” not only lively fibres (many donated from yarners who have passed) but also with fellow humans in this crevice community, is facilitating a “staying with” (Haraway, 2016). That is, such sympoiesis appears to be facilitating these activists’ “staying with the trouble” of complex times locally and globally (Haraway, 2016).

Findings

In the context of a climate challenged world, this autoethnographic work suggests smallness, togetherness, and a material playfulness that values process over product, while still targeting micropolitical intervention, are a source of individual succor for the participants.

As craftivists writing, the vignettes describe craftivism in River Yarners as a way to: address and communicate difficult environmental concerns; express joy in the making and through the materiality of yarn itself; and place hope in the potential influence of yarned objects. Further, participants describe positive personal benefits of their participation in River Yarners, through themes of care, whimsical political intervention, and ‘tribe’ finding. The writings focus less on the efficacy of River Yarners’ creative interventions, although all yarners outline an awareness of variable audience reception to their yarned objects.

The findings of this autoethnographic study suggest an opportunity for further research to explore factors that sustain small craftivist groups; the impact of craft as an activist method, particularly as an antidote to participating in other forms of activism; the personal and interpersonal benefits gained from craftivist activity; and the implications of these craftivist-engendered benefits for psychosocial wellbeing in an era of worsening environmental impacts and predictions.

References

- Anderson, B. (2017). Hope and micropolitics. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 35(4), 593-595. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775817710088>.
- Antioch University Adopt a Crevice Community. (n.d.). *Between a rock and a hard place: Crevice communities*. Retrieved October 12, 2023 from <https://www.antioch.edu/centers-institutes/monadnock-ecological-research-education-project-me/re/adopt-a-crevice-community/>
- Arnold, L., (2020, August 6). Doing collaborative autoethnography. *Lydia Arnold: learning, teaching, assessment, technology, higher education & action research* [blog]. <https://lydia-arnold.com/2020/08/06/doing-collaborative-autoethnography/>
- Arts OutWest. (2022). *While the world waits regional exhibition*. <https://artsoutwest.org.au/pf/while-the-world-waits-regional-exhibition/>
- Baumstark, M.C., Carpenter, E., Davies, J., Gooderham, T., Greer, B., Harvey, B., Marsh, R., Marvel, M., Miller, A., Nectar, I., Nielsen, A., Poppelin, E. & Varvis, C. Craftivism, ‘Craftivism manifesto’. Retrieved 17 October 2023 from <https://craftivism.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/craftivism-manifesto-2.0.pdf>
- Bolt, S. (2021, August 9). Bathurst's River Yarners campaign for more trees in the CBD. *The Western Advocate*. <https://www.westernadvocate.com.au/story/7377462/yarn-bombing-to-campaign-for-more-trees-in-the-bathurst-cbd/>

- Bolt, S. (2022, February 21). Bathurst's River Yarners create crochet gate to honour McPhillamy Park. *The Western Advocate*.
<https://www.westernadvocate.com.au/story/7627724/mcphillamy-park-forever-river-yarners-take-inspiration-from-the-beatles/>
- Eliot, T.S. (1963). 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915) in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, Faber & Faber, UK.
- Ferrett, R. (2016, June 21). Bathurst's River Yarners protest against loss of Durham Street tree avenue. *The Western Advocate*.
<https://www.westernadvocate.com.au/story/3980730/plane-speaking-on-loss-of-trees/>
- Freeman, S. (2023, June 30). How we define craftivism. *Craftivist Collective* [blog].
<https://craftivist-collective.com/blog/2010/06/how-we-define-craftivism-by-sophie-freeman/>
- Gleiman, A., Knolton, D. & Mokhtarian, K. (2015). The art of collaborative autoethnography: Exploring the evolution of a self-organizing, non-traditional doctoral cohort. *Open Access Library Journal*, 2, 1-11. DOI: 10.4236/oalib.1101634.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Haraway, D.J. (2019). It Matters What Stories Tell Stories; It Matters Whose Stories Tell Stories. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 34(3), 565-575. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2019.1664163>.
- Haynes, P. (2022, March 26). Carbon Neutral at Canberra Contemporary Art Space. *The Canberra Times*.
<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7651785/artists-articulate-climate-of-fear/>
- Hernandez, K-A.C., Chang, H. & Ngunjiri, F.W. (2017). Collaborative autoethnography as multivocal, relational, and democratic research: Opportunities, challenges, and aspirations. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 32(2), 251-254. DOI: 10.1080/08989575.2017.1288892.
- Jacks, S. (2020 April 24). *The power of women's work: craftivism*. NGV.
<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/the-power-of-womens-work-craftivism/>
- Lawrence, N. (2019) <https://www.instagram.com/p/B3Id24HJCl/>
- Mann, J. (2015). Towards a politics of whimsy: yarn bombing the city. *Area*, 47(1), 65-72. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12164>.
- Mapstone, P. (2015) Here are all the latest arrivals in "50 Years of Flower Power".
<https://50yearsofflowerpower.blogspot.com/2015/03/here-are-all-latest-arrivals.html>
- Morton, N. (2018, May 14). Bathurst River Yarners highlight threatened species. *The Western Advocate*.
<https://www.westernadvocate.com.au/story/5398588/river-yarners-are-keen-to-highlight-bathurst-s-threatened-species/>

- Neaves, S. (2023, September 23). That big Busby Street idea continues to inspire and influence. *The Western Advocate*.
<https://www.westernadvocate.com.au/story/8358471/that-big-busby-street-idea-continues-to-inspire-and-influence/>
- Nicholls, M. (2015, December 22). Environmental group criticises plan to sell Bathurst's treated effluent. *The Western Advocate*.
<https://www.westernadvocate.com.au/story/3597092/turning-up-the-heat-on-regis-resources/>
- Nicholls, M. (2017, July 10). Regis Resources shelves plans to buy Bathurst's treated effluent. *The Western Advocate*.
<https://www.westernadvocate.com.au/story/4773692/regis-resources-shelves-plans-to-buy-bathursts-treated-effluent/>
- River Yarners [River Yarners]. (2022, March 28). The River. [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ewnb6ofarM>
- Roy, R. & Uekusa S. (2020 July). Collaborative autoethnography: "Self-reflection" as a timely alternative research approach during the global pandemic. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 20(4), 383-392. DOI: 10.1108/QRJ-06-2020-0054.
- Sorensen, T. (2014, April 24). In The Trenches. *The squawkin' galah* [blog].
<https://squawkingalah.com.au/in-the-trenches/>
- von Hellermann, P. (2021). From Ecophany to Burnout? An Anthropologist's Reflections on Two Years of Participating in Council-Citizen Climate Governance in Eastbourne. *World*, 2(4), 521-537.
- Wertheim, M. (2015). "CO2 CA-CO2 LA Ocean", in Margaret Wertheim and Christine Wertheim (eds) *Crochet Coral Reef: A Project by the Institute For Figuring*, 69-76, Los Angeles: Institute For Figuring.
- Wilson, E.O. (2016). *Half-Earth: Our planet's fight for life*. Liveright.

Appendices - Images

Figure 1: Promotional flyer created by River Yarners, 2018.



Figure 2: Yarned community contributions from original 2015 River Yarners craftivist project opposing river water extraction for a gold mine.



Figure 3: A small section of River Yarners' yarned river.



Figure 4: A range of yarned creatures inhabit the river; many are created by regular River Yarners participants, others donated by community members.



Figure 5: ‘McPhillamy Park Forever’ gate, crocheted by River Yarners in 2021/22, which has remained in situ for almost two years.



Figure 6: ‘McPhillamy Park Forever’ gate, crocheted by River Yarners in 2021/22.

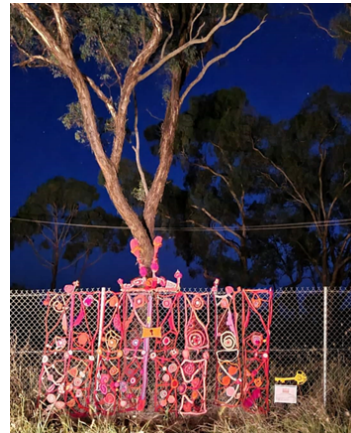


Figure 7: A portion of the yarned river is unrolled from its usual storage 'bale' during filming of the stop-motion animation *The River*, for the Arts OutWest touring exhibition *While the World Waits* (2022).



Figure 8: Promotional image for the Arts OutWest touring exhibition *While the World Waits* (2022) featuring the yarned river photographed aerially from a drone.

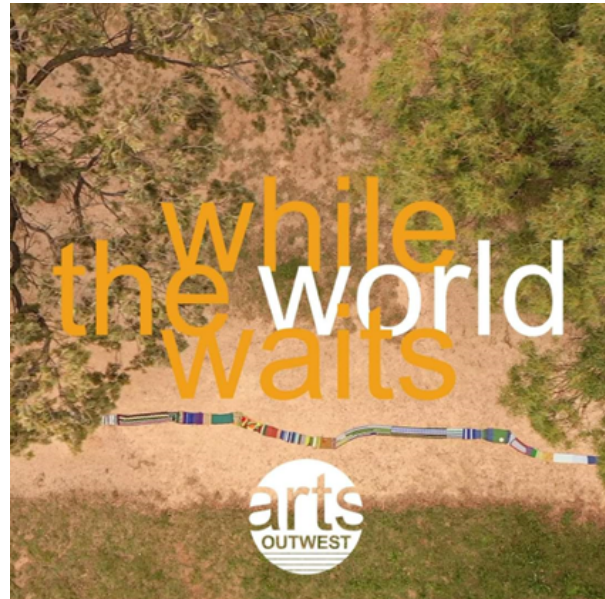


Figure 9: River Yarners yarned river in the “Carbon Neutral” exhibition, Canberra Contemporary Art Space; curated by Alexander Boynes (2022).



Figure 10: River Yarners travelled to Canberra to performatively crochet and knit alongside their installation in the “Carbon Neutral” exhibition, Canberra Contemporary Art Space; curated by Alexander Boynes (2022). Visitors to the gallery joined the activity by adding some rows, or chatting about art and activism.



Figure 11: Still from the stop-motion animation 'The River', by River Yarners in collaboration with Adam Kerezsy and Henry Simmons (2022).



Figure 12: Climate scarf knitted by Margaret, and modelled by her daughter Sarah, showing the yearly global maximum temperature over a century.

