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Welcome to Country: Geographical valuations and devaluations of First Nations' presence on Country in Australia

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Abstract

First Nations' custodianship of Country has provided incalculable benefits to Australia. Geographical devaluation of this custodianship has been central to settler colonial and later governmental economic and development policy that worked/s to remove First Nations from Country. Indeed, the negation of First Nations sovereignties to extract value from the environment for non-Indigenous dividends underpins the development and operation of state-directed economic activity in Australia. As a result, how First Nations are valued, or not, is tied to cultural, political and economic ideas about First Nations' presence on Country. Welcome to Country ceremonies exemplify the complexities associated with geographical valuations of First Nations' presence. Such ceremonies incentivise labour demands for Elder and older First Nations to enact language and culturally specific custodianship even as broader non-Indigenous institutions are hostile to self-determined development and Indigenous sovereignties. The article provides a theoretical account of the geographical valuations and modelling tendencies with respect to First Nations economic development that focus on the state as the key interlocutor. Where scholarship draws attention to the role of the state as recognising the cultural rather than economic dimension of First Nations activities, Welcome to Country ceremonies demonstrate the importance of regional and local scales of First Nations sovereign practices. First Nations and Elder capacities to perform these ceremonies are both a normalised and under-considered element of regional development activities. Welcome to Country constitutes an important case site for understanding the complex interactions between First Nations axiologies and non-Indigenous geographical valuations.

Keywords

First Nations, geographical valuation, Welcome to Country, economic development

The article first provides a brief overview of Welcome to Country ceremonies and their meanings as defined by Elders and Indigenous scholars. The article then positions and contextualises Indigenous labour within setter colonial racial capitalism and later government attempts to address the unequal economic positioning of First Nations that resulted from this capitalism. Following this, I discuss how

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Indigenous contributions to the dominant market economy in Australia have been conceptualised in research and policy domains. These conceptualisations are contingent on how non-Indigenous peoples translate the value of First Nations' presence on Country. I then provide a case study of the performance of Welcome to Country ceremonies in a regional context to illustrate how Indigenous resilience and presence on Country contribute to regional development activities. In particular, I discuss how First Nations are positioned in dominant development discourse and planning as a deficit problem to be addressed or added onto existing projects through cultural consultation rather than growth contributors to regional development activities that embed specifically Indigenous labour practices to place. First Nations are positioned within these dominant development discourses as needing to be connected to development rather than already being situated in the region through activities such as Welcome to Country that accrue non-Indigenous demand. Attending to localised practices of Indigenous sovereignty such as Welcome to Country is one way of accounting for Indigenous custodianship in the geographical study and valuation of place.

Settler colonisation and the devaluing of Indigenous sovereignties

Welcome to Country ceremonies are embedded in broader geographical valuation dynamics and the socio-political contexts of non-Indigenous recognition of Indigenous presence on Country. The inclusion of Welcome to Country ceremonies and Indigenous protocol in professional, civic and formal events has become normalised in Australia since at least the late 1990s (McKenna, 2014: 476). First Nations have always practised welcoming and acknowledgement protocols in relation to their own and others' sovereignty. The inclusion of some of these practices in non-Indigenous events signals a social and political shift in the non-Indigenous recognition of First Nations' cultural authority of place, even if this recognition is not always inclusive of a concomitant appreciation of sovereignty (see Randell-Moon, 2017). D'harawal scholars Gawain Bodkin-Andrews, Aunty Frances Bodkin and Uncle Gavin Andrews, and Gomeroi scholar Alison Whittaker (2016) provide the following definition:

> 'Welcome to Country' refers to a diverse and rich set of practices utilized by Indigenous Australians that not only convey a welcome to other Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous Australians, but may also confer a greater sense of protection, responsibility, traditional language, and awareness for those being welcomed. (p. 482)

Welcome to Country ceremonies typically take place at the beginning of an official, public, institutional or school event and can consist of speeches, the exchange of gifts, song and dance, and 'smoking rituals (a practice of cleansing and warding off bad spirits)' (p. 482). A Welcome to Country differs from an Acknowledgement of Country as the former can only be performed by an Elder or Custodian with the authority to Welcome visitors to their Country. The two are interconnected as explained by Alessandro Pelizzon and Dharawal-Yuin man Jade Kennedy (2012): 'the prospective visitor is *welcomed* to Country while at the same time he or she *acknowledges* the implications of entering said Country' (p. 64).

While sometimes being characterised by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples as 'brief and tokenistic' (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2016: 484), Welcome to Country ceremonies are vitally important exercises of sovereign knowledge that impart 'Indigenous epistemologies, axiology, and ontological perspectives' (p. 485). These axiological meanings relate to the role of Country and its centrality to First Nations (see Graham, 2008). Indigenous geographical axiologies place Country as the lawful arbiter of how the environment should be used and managed by humans and non-humans alike. All these actors are included in a Welcome to Country (Pelizzon and Kennedy, 2012: 67). The Welcome to Country functions to advise participants on 'how certain aspects of the Country can influence the proceedings and how people can ensure their own safety and the safety of others as they work together in Country' (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2016: 494). Quoting Palyku Traditional Owner Blaze

Kwaymullina, Pelizzon and Kennedy (2012) explain that 'Aboriginal peoples knowledge is grounded in space' (p. 65). They contrast 'an abstract geopolitical entity identified by arbitrary, man-made boundaries, which forms the basis of the Western concept of nationhood' with 'an Aboriginal understanding of Country [that] would emphasise the web of relations contained within a broader spatial domain and epistemologically construed in a narrative form' (p. 65).

The complex cultural and spiritual practices involved in Welcome to Country ceremonies insist on Indigenous geographical axiologies amid broader settler colonial histories premised on Indigenous removal from Country. Geographies of valuation are central to projects of settler colonisation involving the expropriation and commodification of Indigenous land. These projects are justified through the racialisation of First Nations which devalues Indigenous custodianship. Unlike other settler colonial territories, Australia was not invaded through treaties with First Nations. The principle of terra nullius, Latin for land belonging to 'no one', was used by British settlers to claim possession of Indigenous lands (see Behrendt, 2010: 171). The use of 'First Nations' in this article affirms Indigenous peoples' status as sovereign Nations and peoples. When British settlers invaded Australia at the end of the 18th century, they were able to profit from First Nations lands that had been sustainably managed for thousands of years (see Watson, 2018). Among others, Bill Gammage (2011) has outlined how individual First Nations agricultural and aquacultural land management techniques comprised an overall systematic approach to maximising the sustainability of the Australian landscape as an 'estate'. This was achieved through leveraging practices of efficiency with respect to land and water management based on empirical observation and science. These practices were carefully managed so that natural resources were not depleted. British settlers ignored First Nations land management and their sustainable economies. Settlers simply saw an uncultivated land prime for large-scale farming and resource extraction.

Brenna Bhandar (2018) highlights that colonial capitalism and accumulation were rationalised by 'twinning the production of racial subjects with an economy of private property ownership that continues to prevail over indigenous and alternate modalities of relating to and using land and its resources' (p. 7). Similarly, Chickasaw scholar Jodi A. Byrd, Alyosha Goldstein, Jodi Melamed and Chandan Reddy (2018) emphasise how 'economies of dispossession' are premised on 'the constitutive and continuing role of both colonization and racialization for capitalism' (p. 2). Settler colonisation as a long-term practice (Wolfe, 2006: 402) is supported by the racial science that constructed First Nations peoples as a 'dying race' who would ultimately vacate the land for British industry (Curthoys, 2008: 233). The concept of race and its attendant racial hierarchies were 'deployed to obscure the lasting ethical and material indebtedness settlers and arrivants have to Indigenous dispossession' (Byrd et al., 2018: 2). Drawing on the work of Charles W. Mills, Max Haiven (2017) describes this indebtedness as a form of financial illiteracy whereby contemporary economic discourse ignores the ruinous imposts of settler colonial and later market extractivist economies on contemporary sustainability and liveability. Returning to Byrd et al. (2018), dispossession 'is a relation of violence and taking that works at once to produce and delimit subjectivation, property, and value' (p. 3). By devaluing First Nations' economies and land management that existed prior to British settlement, colonial authorities and later Australian governments were able to profit from First Nations' unacknowledged labour.

When First Nations peoples did participate in settler colonial and state economic activity such as the pastoral industry, they were racially discriminated against and received lower wages than non-Indigenous workers or no wages at all (see Kidd, 2012). There are path-dependent economic costs associated with the impact of settler colonisation and disruption to First Nations' custodianship. As Tanganekald, Meintangk and Boandik First Nations Peoples scholar Irene Watson (2002, 2009) states, colonisation enabled the 'rampart and ravenous development of our natural world' (p. 6) and has facilitated 'a lifestyle that has murdered ours as it eats into the future of us all' (para. 9). She points out that over the past 200 years, Australia has experienced 'the highest rate of mammalian extinction in the world' (Watson, 2018: 129; see also Birch, 2017). The resilience of land and water as well as

flora and fauna that relied on First Nations management, through fire-stick farming or careful habitat manipulation, has suffered.

The destruction of First Nations' custodianship involved infrastructural violence that impacts contemporary First Nations' economic independence through either the lack of land and water assets or their devaluation through colonial and governmental appropriation. The current legal framework in Australia vests the state with sovereignty assumed through Crown possession (Watson, 2018: 125–126), and this extends to Crown presumptive rights to natural resources. Writing about the appropriation of the Navajo Nation's natural resources in the United States, Navajo Nation scholar Andrew Curley (2021) explicates settler colonial infrastructure as a beachhead whereby later non-Indigenous governments are working within infrastructural systems that preserved 'the state's advantageous position' (p. 398). In an Australian context, in the Murray-Darling Basin, 44 First Nations holdings in the basin amount to 0.12% and are worth around $18.4 million compared with the total market value of the basin at $16.5 billion (Hartwig and Jackson, 2020: v–vi; see Randell-Moon, forthcoming). Use of infrastructure to categorise land as 'improved' or 'developed' in contrast to 'vacant' land impacts Native Title claims. Native Title is the legislative framework through which First Nations can claim custodial access to land or assume freehold title depending on the relevant federal or state framework. The formation of the economic and legislative activity that constitutes the Australian state was fundamentally premised on the devaluing of First Nations custodial and sovereign relationships to land and the disregarding of these relationships as worthwhile labour.

Valuing First Nations' economies

It is necessary to situate contemporary discourse on First Nations' economies and development within the settler colonial geographical devaluation of First Nations' axiologies because devaluation directly impacts contemporary economic inequalities and informs how First Nations are constructed in dominant economic terms. That is, whether First Nations can be positioned within dominant economic paradigms as growth contributors or as deficits to be resolved through market intervention. Policy developed for First Nations has exhorted the latter to engage in the 'real' economy (see Woods, 2016) as a corrective to hundreds of years of economic inequality. This positioning can only occur through the a priori negation of the value of First Nations' contribution to the land and waters assets of Australia.

As Kaely Woods (2016) notes, First Nations are presented with 'development or culture' as a binary choice (p. 87). Such a 'choice' obscures the cultural values and norms of dominant economic frameworks via the language of market neutrality. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (2014) outlines the violence of state economic frameworks that require 'Indigenous modes of life' to be assimilated into the dominant non-Indigenous culture on the basis 'that this assimilation will somehow magically redeem itself by bringing the fruits of capitalist modernity into the supposedly backward world of the colonized' (p. 60). Byrd et al. (2018) also discuss the economies of dispossession as involving 'an ontological proposition' (p. 3) that coercively attempts to remake Indigenous economies and ways of relating to land 'translatable into value form' (p. 7). Coulthard (2014) suggests that the economies of dispossession have been reframed from 'exclusion and assimilation' to '*recognition* and *accommodation*' (p. 56) under ostensibly more liberal state approaches to First Nations. This enables the state to continue to accumulate and profit from First Nations land while insisting on the importance of Indigenous cultures (p. 75). Indigenous axiologies centre Country to all human and non-human activities, which include sustainable food economies. Indigenous conceptions of Country have generally been translated into non-Indigenous terms as spiritual and cultural rather than economic. For instance, Jeremy Beckett argues, 'the Aboriginal claimant for land was cast in the role of *homo religiosus* rather than *homo economicus*' (as quoted in MacDonald, 1998: 175). This translation has contributed to non-Indigenous socio-political support for cultural and spiritual uses of land and water but not economic

ones. As Gaynor MacDonald (1998) glosses this economy of land rights, if Indigenous Australians 'have a bit of religion or rain forest left, we will listen. If they claim Australia's agricultural heartland in central New South Wales, forget it' (p. 177).

How Indigenous modes of valuation can be translated into the kinds of economic outcomes expected in dominant policy and development discourse concerns both Indigenous and non-Indigenous research. These translations hinge on the values attributed to First Nations' presence on Country. Literature relating to the cultural sector and cultural economy has been used to directly value Indigenous economic activities. Indigenous cultures have direct and secondary market effects with significant contributions to the arts and tourism sector, and Indigenous presence has branding and market value for these sectors (see Langton, 2018). Country also has agency in facilitating tourist experiences (Bawaka Country et al., 2017). Valuations of culture in the cultural economy models could be viewed via Coulthard's (2014) thesis of recognition whereby Indigenous difference can be accommodated by the state so long as this difference does 'not threaten the desired functioning of the market economy' (p. 75). Solen Roth (2019) highlights how Indigenous wealth itself poses a threat to dominant economic logics. Because colonial discourses position 'indigeneity and wealth in opposition altogether' (p. 312), decolonising capitalism requires 'dismantling the idea that . . . the accumulation of wealth is inherently "not Indigenous" and that Indigenous economies can only concern subsistence and never growth' (p. 313).

Indigenous custodial practices have been translated into economic benefits for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. As mentioned earlier, generally Native Title was awarded to areas without infrastructure or economic significance to the state. Jon C. Altman, Geoffrey J. Buchanan and Libby Larsen (2007) show in their research that the Indigenous Estate (comprising land managed by or on behalf of Indigenous peoples) contains some of the most biodiverse and high conservation value land in Australia. This is because the land has been left alone by pastoral and other industries due to its low business value for exploitation. As Altman et al. (2007) note, 'there are numerous employment and enterprise possibilities in natural resource management on the Indigenous estate, and . . . there is likely a national under-investment in such possibilities' (p. 1). The value of fire-stick farming has been recognised in fire management regimes (see The Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Knowledge Group, n.d.) and through the use of environmental economic approaches. Elizabeth A. Wilman (2013) 'develops a delayed-response optimal-control model to describe Aboriginal fire-stick farming' to assess its contribution to 'a modern resource management context, where biodiversity preservation and reduced greenhouse gas emissions are broader societal goals' (p. 40). In the two costing hypotheses, where Indigenous peoples are on Country and maintain fire-stick farming or they are not, Wilman finds that 'Burning is made too costly by Aborigines being absent from the land' (p. 53). Because of 'the negative environmental impacts of commercial agriculture associated with private land ownership', there is cost-effectiveness to incentivise 'the positive externalities' generated by Indigenous land management and custodianship (Altman, 2004: 517). Such modelling attempts to explicate the debts owed to First Nations for their custodianship of Country and invert dominant economic assumptions of Indigenous deficit.

Jon Altman's research has been influential in providing economic models that account for ostensibly 'non-market' work and which identify the complexity of Indigenous engagement with the state and private market. In his hybrid model, economic activity is valued across a range of domains 'rather than the usual two-sector private (or market) and public (or state) model to more accurately depict the Indigenous economy' (Altman, 2004: 513). Altman costs the customary market, typically constructed as 'non-market work' but which nevertheless has cash value to individuals and communities (p. 514), in terms of the production of food and other kinds of commodity security gained through 'group rights to resources and associated obligations to share' (p. 514). Collective sharing and other kinship networks have value in covering gaps from the private market or state that may not otherwise serve some community members. Altman finds that 'Indigenous competitive advantage is embedded in the

customary, whether in production for use or in production for commercial exchange' (p. 521) and labour that could be contributed to the market may instead be used preferentially for customary purposes (p. 521).

Woods (2016) argues that dominant non-Indigenous economic modelling is premised on utility theory and 'individualism and material objectives', whereas 'non-monetary utility including Aboriginal cultural values' is needed to more fully account for the economic benefits of Aboriginal cultural activity (p. 79). Understood within First Nations notions of wellbeing, customary activities build 'social and human capital' that have 'spin-off benefits' beyond what can simply be obtained by purchasing commodities on the open market (p. 81). Partial equilibrium models from environmental economics and welfare economics have relevance to quantifying the social or public good of First Nations' cultural activity (pp. 85–86) in addition to research on the cultural economy (p. 86). Because the focus of the hybrid model is on how First Nations choose to engage with the private and state sectors through customary labour and how that labour is valued as a growth contributor to the community, the model challenges dominant economic assumptions of 'Indigenous underdevelopment' (Altman, 2004: 514) and draws attention instead to state failures to account for and recognise Indigenous-determined economic production as growth contributions to broader regional economies (p. 516). The hybrid model was specifically developed for the smaller proportion of Indigenous Australians considered to be living in 'remote' areas. It should be noted that 'remote' is a normative geographical term that presumes a non-Indigenous centre.

These examples illustrate the differing and intersecting translations of economic activity that accrues value by extracting resources from place and where value that inheres in place guides economic activity. Bardi and Yjindjarbandi scholar Dawn Bessarab and Noongar, Yamaji and Wongi scholar Simon Forrest note that colonial and Western notions of development are predicated on industrial and extractivist logics of productivity, whereas Indigenous axiologies are based on the Dreaming and how land directs 'productivity and wellbeing' (Bessarab and Forrest, 2018). Western understandings of development are linked to something 'requiring improvement' (Bessarab and Forrest, 2018). The authors use the Brewarrina fish systems as an example of how First Nations 'development' seeks a holistic and systems integrated approach to food security. The Brewarrina fish traps, devised by the Ngemba peoples, are estimated to be one of the oldest human technologies and worked to automate fish farming through landscape engineering. In these systems, the 'problem of food shortage during a drought' is solved in a sustainable and adaptable way through technology (Bessarab and Forrest, 2018). Ensuring wellbeing for all actors in a community differs from dominant development paradigms and associated conceptions of what 'developing' means (Bessarab and Forrest, 2018; see also Yap and Yu, 2019).

Steve Hemming, Ngarrindjeri scholar Daryle Rigney and Shaun Berg (2019) offer an example of nation building through the Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan Agreement between Ngarrindjeri leaders and the South Australian state. This was initiated by the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority and premised on contract law as a form of nation building where the non-Indigenous state vectors are required to come to terms set by the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority (p. 76). I wrote earlier of the notion of colonial beachheads where the infrastructure and resources arrogated by colonial authorities are later inherited by state governments, giving them an infrastructural advantage over First Nations. In this example, contract theory is used to invert colonial beachheads through the assumption of Indigenous a priori responsibility and custodianship of water resources.

Recent developments regarding the Uluru Statement from the Heart (n.d.), which calls for greater First Nations' involvement in parliament to address and change structural inequalities, exemplify how state recognition trades on economies of dispossession in exchange for civil and cultural rights. Economies of dispossession structure dominant state forms of valuation where the inclusion of 'culture' can be understood in 'non-market' terms or as direct contributions to the dominant market economy. Where custodial practices benefit the state (through cultural burning or the conservation of

biodiverse land holdings), the broader valuation of Indigenous axiologies is circumscribed by the state's recognition practices that tend to separate culture from development. These axiologies nevertheless do persist even if they are not economically translatable by the state. I now turn to the case study of Welcome to Country ceremonies to explore how Indigenous presence on Country may mediate regional development activities and embed specifically Indigenous labour practices into regional and local economies of place.

Welcome to Country and relational regional labour

I have discussed so far the culture or development binary construction of First Nations' economic possibilities in dominant economic paradigms and some extant research that attempts to provide models that include both culture and economy and which also challenge these problematic binaries as untenable and unduly deficit-focused. Welcome to Country ceremonies provide a unique case study of First Nations' economic activity because they involve both cultural and customary activity associated with lawful practices on Country and have a direct market value. Welcome to Country ceremonies are a form of procurement where there is no non-Indigenous competition, and the lack of explicit sovereign recognition or Native Title status does not pose an obstacle to this labour practice and cultural activity. Development and business activities on Country facilitated by Welcome to Country ceremonies, and Acknowledgements of Country, highlight the situatedness of institutional ventures on Indigenous land.

In both the commercial and cultural recognition of the labour involved in Welcome to Country ceremonies, they constitute a site of economic activity that potentially blurs the binaries between culture and the economy discussed in the previous section. The general trend in economic policy for First Nations has been a focus on 'real jobs' and the 'real economy' (Woods, 2016: 84). This is an exemplification of what Byrd et al. (2018) identify as the abstraction of capitalism that renders its processes seemingly objective. Despite this exhortation to engage in the 'real' economy, Woods (2016) points out that 'Government documents frequently acknowledge the value of culture to Aboriginal people and society in general, but not in economic terms beyond market value' (p. 84). Some examples of regional development in Australia illustrate this separation of culture from the economy. The New South Wales Government's Electricity Infrastructure Roadmap, enabled by the recent *Electricity Infrastructure Investment Act 2020* (NSW), has a section identifying the need for engagement and consultation with First Nations (NSW Energy, 2020). In the NSW Government's Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (n.d.) *Net Zero Plan Stage 1: 2020–2030*, there is one reference to 'connecting small landholders, including Aboriginal landowners, to carbon markets' (p. 20). Here, First Nations are positioned as needing consultation or connection with energy infrastructure and carbon markets rather than First Nations having any developmental or infrastructural role based on their own sustainable economies (see Randell-Moon and Hynes, 2022).

The Australian Government's Productivity Commission (2017) report *Transitioning Regional Economies* includes information on employment choice and mobility being related to Indigenous preference for staying on Country (p. 185). The report notes that adaptive capacity to national and global economic trends may be slowed by Indigenous population in some of the metrics – 'as the proportion of Indigenous population gets higher, each additional percentage of Indigenous population has a smaller influence on the region's adaptive capacity' (pp. 240–241). That is, First Nations' presence on Country and choice to stay in regional (and rural) areas is valued as a deficit. In these regional strategic plans, First Nations culture (if acknowledged) simultaneously impacts labour participation (through affecting employment choice or being linked to identity markers of disadvantage) while also being broadly linked to the cultural (such as heritage tourism) and energy sectors. This is despite '58 per cent of Indigenous businesses' being 'located outside major cities – 32 per cent are regional and 26 per cent in remote locations. This compares with the non-Indigenous sector where most businesses

are in major cities (74 per cent)' (Evans et al., 2021: 18). These planning strategies situate the region as a primarily non-Indigenous domain where Indigenous peoples can be included as an addition rather than central focus of growth and infrastructure development. First Nations' presence on Country is an infrastructural and productivity problem to be solved.

In an article on regional development, tebrakunna country, trawlwulwuy woman Emma Lee and Robyn Eversole argue that 'policy-makers tend to construe Indigenous groups as communities in need of assistance to overcome disadvantage, rather than as important regional development actors' (p. 1509). Regional policy and research 'requires attention to *culture*' and 'a conscious reframing of regional policy to incorporate Indigenous perspectives' (p. 1510). They identify three specifically First Nations contributions to regional development: 'deep regionalism', 'Indigenous worldviews' and 'reframing colonial relationships' (p. 1511). Welcome to Country ceremonies encapsulate all three by embodying deep regionalism and place-specific connection, and the promotion and maintenance of Indigenous worldviews, and the ceremonies draw attention to the antecedents of colonial forms of governance either implicitly or explicitly by promoting Indigenous authority on place. Despite Emma Kowal's claims that 'WTCs are most common in urban Australia' (as quoted in Pelizzon and Kennedy, 2012: 61), they are regularly performed in regional and rural contexts.[1] While Welcome to Country ceremonies can be dismissed as perfunctory and disconnected from the 'main' business of the event, they are nevertheless routinely included in the logistics of event organisation and play at least some developmental role.

The key insight of Altman's hybrid model is the potential to realign how regional development can be valued when cultural and customary activity is viewed as always already embedded in different kinds of economic sectors operating in a particular locale. Woods (2016) argues that there is a need for a more systematic approach to quantifying cultural activity and products that are not commodified. This includes ascertaining the value of 'cultural attachment' to place and how this value often reflects 'localised sociocultural influences' (p. 83):

> Building and sustaining cultural capital requires ongoing effort and investment. For Aboriginal people, cultural practices such as speaking languages, practicing rituals, and teaching the young are essential to ongoing, living culture and associated identity. This is a much broader understanding of the importance of culture compared to a narrow economic production framework that only counts the market value of food production, artefact sales or cultural tours. (p. 86)

Welcome to Country ceremonies encapsulate this maintenance of culture, and the localised value of culture is materialised through labour demand for these ceremonies. While these activities are commodified, they operate in an economic context where the use of 'cultural knowledge in the market meets financial needs while also enabling continuing connection to culture and country' (p. 87). Woods suggests using choice modelling to further investigate the labour supply of culture to the market, community and broader region (p. 87). Similarly, gaining insight into how Welcome to Country ceremonies are distributed among the appropriate older and Elder First Nations in a community who can perform them and how this labour is withdrawn or given for certain events and at certain time periods would yield a better understanding of the economies of Welcome to Country ceremonies. How this value is generated and negotiated between those who want to develop (such as the government) and those who grant permission – even symbolically – for development (Elders) clarifies the relational nature of value from an Indigenous perspective and embeds this relationality into civic and regional operations.

In terms of the non-Indigenous socio-political reception of Welcome to Country ceremonies, Mark McKenna (2014) notes the criticism from conservative politicians and others that the monetary compensation for the ceremonies undermines their 'authenticity' (p. 486). McKenna points out that this criticism is ironic given dominant political discourse which exhorts Indigenous peoples to engage in 'real' paid work. Roth (2019) too notes the notions of Indigenous 'authenticity' as acommercial work

'to thwart Indigenous communities' efforts to prosper from their own cultural resources' (p. 314). Aside from the fact that it is 'unreasonable to expect Aboriginal people to perform ceremonies gratis' (McKenna, 2014: 486), particularly given the logistical constraints of needing to travel to a venue for a short amount of time and then leave, the dismissal of monetary value overlooks the role of Welcome to Country ceremonies in the customary and cultural activities of regional economies. The payment fee is comparatively small depending on the amount of labour expended, that is, whether the ceremony is a short speech or larger performance involving multiple people. Given the labour demographic, the payments also intersect with pension and other social security imposts that may limit paid work. For instance, the first $300 of work earned in a fortnight does not impact pension payment (Australian Government, Department of Social Services, 2020), so Welcome to Country payments are generally less than $300. As a one-off contract fee payment, there is little workplace protection for the person performing the Welcome to Country. This lack of protection can also be exacerbated by culturally unsafe venues, events, and audiences (see Roman, 2018: 113). Sometimes this lack of safety is occasioned by non-Indigenous peoples making ad hoc requests of Indigenous peoples already attending the event to perform without payment (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2016: 484).

Consideration of the age of the labour force that can perform Welcome to Country ceremonies means that older and Elder Indigenous Australians are included in valuations of economic development opportunities and labour choice. If First Nations are generally excluded from regional development policy domains, older First Nations are even more so neglected in economic frameworks. Within Indigenous social and legal frameworks, Elders play an important role in maintaining the Dreaming, and their labour becomes more in demand as they age. This contrasts with non-Indigenous biopolitical frameworks that consign older people to non-labour spheres once bodily productivity becomes circumscribed (see Fletcher, 2016). Elders have instrumental development roles in Aboriginal community–controlled health organisations (see Aboriginal Community Elders Service and Harvey, 2003; Radford et al., 2019) and education initiatives (see Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, 2022). While these roles have been valued in terms of social and human capital and wellbeing measures, there is scope to more fully account for the role of First Nations social and cultural structures as inherently designed for ageing well (by keeping Elders active and employed) and their direct labour contributions to Indigenous and non-Indigenous business and development domains. A common element of Welcome to Country ceremonies is paying respects to Elders past, present, always. 'To pay respects to "Elders past and present" is to acknowledge another historical and cultural authority – more deeply connected with the country and more attuned to the intricate particularities of place' (McKenna, 2014: 488). Welcome to Country ceremonies incentivise labour demands for older and Elder First Nations and reinforce the cultural and legal resilience and maintenance of First Nations social structures.

Welcome to Country ceremonies form a now normative part of municipal and civic operations and constitute a significant site of Indigenous-specific procured labour for older and Elder First Nations. They serve both direct and secondary economic purposes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in the maintenance of local culture, language and sovereignty. In particular, the labour demographic required to perform these ceremonies are an under-valued and under-considered segment of regional development and economic planning. As the materialisation of First Nations demographic and axiological presence in rural and regional places, Welcome to Country ceremonies affirm how First Nations deliver value to regional and rural civic and municipal operations.

Conclusion

This article has examined the geographical valuations related to the presence of First Nations on Country in the settler colonial context of Australia. Presence on Country has been translated in dominant economic paradigms in deficit terms that devalue the labour of custodianship. Country has been abstracted as property through dispossessory economies that deny First Nations land as an asset base

and circumscribe economic development within extractivist logics. Because of the devaluing of custodianship, dominant economic and development paradigms construct First Nations as having to choose 'culture' or the 'economy' (Woods, 2016: 87). A range of research has been developed to complicate these binaries and account for Indigenous valuations of Country and cultural and customary activity therein. Per Coulthard, the exclusionary and then assimilatory logics of colonial and state processes have shifted to incorporating a recognition of Indigenous culture. This recognition tends to separate culture from processes of Indigenous-determined economic development. Coulthard (2014) summarises this trajectory of state power and Indigenous struggle as 'one that was once deeply *informed* by the land as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations . . . to a struggle that is now largely *for* land' (p. 86). Roth (2019) argues that the cultural economy has some capacity for decolonisation and Indigenisation provided Indigenous peoples are not added onto non-Indigenous economic conceptualisations of value as a settled matter (p. 331). Rather, non-Indigenous peoples can engage Indigenous cultural products on the terms and conditions of Indigenous economies and corresponding values (p. 331). Melamed (2011) also discusses the importance of Indigenous-led cultural and economic development inserting

> its own signifying systems into public discourse in order to displace the structures of legitimate knowledge, to contest dominant systems of representation, and to try to open them up to cultural meanings and epistemic orientations originating in indigenous-led interpretative communities. (p. 183)

Welcome to Country ceremonies offer an innovative economic case study on geographical valuations because they exercise Indigenous-led axiological understandings of place and First Nations' presence on Country. The non-Indigenous demand for these ceremonies arguably incorporates a recognition of the development activities that take place as *informed* by the land. In the incentivisation for Welcome to Country ceremonies, choice is exercised by older and Elder First Nations in performing them, while at the same time the ceremonies are a continuation of custodial relationships not entirely reducible to wage labour or cultural commodities. There are complex socio-political valuations associated with these ceremonies. The non-Indigenous appropriation of Country is situated alongside the explicit positioning of First Nations' authoritative presence and knowledge of Country. Do Welcome to Country ceremonies decolonise or Indigenise (per Roth) the development activities they precede? As discussed earlier, the ceremonies can be dismissed as simply perfunctory before the 'real' business begins. At the same time, it is not uncommon for this business to be delayed and put on hold until the appropriate Elder arrives. There is then a relational reciprocity to Welcome to Country ceremonies that is normalised and place-based as a requirement for non-Indigenous activities to develop and proceed. Set within a regional and local scale of valuation, Welcome to Country ceremonies challenge some of the dominant market binaries of 'culture' and the 'real' economy that is reproduced in relation to accounts of First Nations' economies.

Welcome to Country ceremonies are then an opportunity to account for the ways First Nations' relationships to Country contribute to regional development activities, particularly in relation to understandings of regionalism, localism and place-based attachments and how Country and non-human actors have agency in these domains. From a policy and governance perspective, 'It is increasingly recognized that community and culture are at the heart of regional innovation processes' (tebrakunna country et al., 2019: 1516). Research using a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies has examined how localism informs municipal operations and policy implementation in complex ways that relate the general to the particular (see Cox and Evenhuis, 2020). As tebrakunna country et al. (2019) note, however, 'Any community may identify with a place or leverage its attributes; but the time scale of Indigenous communities' place knowledge and place attachment is of a completely different order' (p. 1511). Further empirical research on the practices of regionalism and localism engendered by Welcome to Country ceremonies would contribute Indigenous understandings of value and valuation to geographical scales of economic and development activity. This

research could include more direct mapping of the labour practices and costs of performing ceremonies, attention to the labour demographic performing the ceremonies, and the secondary economic outcomes and social and human capital associated with the maintenance of language and law. Such research would more broadly acknowledge the centrality of these practices and older and Elder First Nations to regional development activities, economic opportunities and growth, and promotion of regional and rural place-based values to First Nations and non-Indigenous communities alike.

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Note

1. For instance, in the regional city of Dubbo, which has a population of 50,000, Council minutes note a Welcome to Country: https://www.dubbo.nsw.gov.au/ArticleDocuments/278/Minutes%20-%20Ordinary%20Council%20Meeting%20-%2021%20September%202022.pdf.aspx?Embed=Y. Narromine, a smaller town outside of Dubbo with a population of 6000, also minutes an Acknowledgement of Country at the beginning of Council meetings: https://www.narromine.nsw.gov.au/council/council-meetings

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