

ASSUMPTIONS OF CREATIVE PLACE

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Research Methods | Literature Review

Practice and policy for rural arts and culture in the United States is still quite murky even though it has been continually developing through recent years. Creative leaders and policy makers are working to understand the potential role of arts in rural culture and rural economies. Emerging policy and research in rural creative industries seems to be starting to make some headway, with recent literature turning a critical eye towards existing practices and policy. It seems to still be unclear just how effective rural arts policy might be toward generating social and economic development, or what the best methods exist for cultivating creative rural places. The lack of rural arts specific research, especially grounded in the United States, makes it very difficult to fully comprehend the possibilities, strengths and challenges of implementing rural arts strategies.

My specific research interest is especially un-documented, as it attempts to combine several aspects of the arts sector that are not usually associated together all at once. The questions stemming from my research focus on exploring how rural culture and aesthetics might allow for cultivation of contemporary art practices, and how experimental contemporary art could serve as a catalyst for creative innovation in rural communities and regions. In the study *Rural empowerment through the arts*, McHenry (2011) discusses the arts as a vehicle to empower local residents to find “local solutions to local problems” as well as build resilience and civic participation. I am specifically interested in researching how these ideas might manifest themselves within a rural artist collective or residency, a similar idea to much of the current literature revolving around creative clusters and their strengths in sustaining rural art practice.

In the current body of literature, these different themes are all disconnected, but they are each discussed more individually throughout several different sources within a rural context. Through an analysis of five relevant sources, I was able to explore central ideas to my research,

including the role of arts in rural development, creative collectives and the integral role of place. These themes were reinforced in some way throughout the five sources, with each providing a varying perspective. Each of them speaks directly about the creative industry, some supporting and others criticizing the current theories as well as how creative practice can exist in rural context.

Much of the research relevant to building supportive structures for rural arts seems to be centered on building creative industry or creative economies in rural regions, encouraging diversification, building resiliency and empowering local residents to find innovative and creative solutions to local problems. While these are all lofty ideals, many of the sources point out that most of the current theory simply adopts urban practices and transplants them into a rural context in which they ignore major differences between urban and rural economies, cultures and ideas of creativity. This is extremely problematic, and sources such as Richard Florida's *Rise of the Creative Class*, while very valid in an urban context, must be read with a very critical eye in regards to rural implementation. Florida poses certain questions that are important to consider in thinking about why people live where they live, and why they decide to move elsewhere. He also points out that what people want now is different than what previous generations wanted from where they live (Florida, 2002). While these main ideas of place and the relationship between place and people are important for consideration, much of what the author discusses in relation to creative class and the elements of place that draw creative class are rooted in an urban context and cannot be easily transferred to a rural context. Such ideas may not be feasible nor in the best interest of a rural community, yet Florida's work has become part of a standard theory of creative industry development built from urban case studies.

These ideas were called into question by other articles which observe theories of “creative industry” or “creative class” with a more critical lens and with a more rural focus. They identified that much literature confirm the role of “creatives” as “saviors of the city,” pointing out that much of this alludes to the idea that alluring creative people [into the city] can improve social and economic development, looking at creativity in a limiting way as an economic tool (Bell and Jayne, 2010). The idea of the creative class and the theories behind it have largely been discussed in relation to cities, and much of the literature supports this with such generalizations about the power of the creative class or creative industry to revitalize urban neighborhoods. Some authors, including Bell and Jayne, warn against this one-size-fits-all perspective, and encourage that arts leaders and policy-makers consider differences in creative geographies. The object of such studies is to better understand the characteristics of creativity in the countryside, including different practices, markets, aesthetics and purpose, and to understand the lives of rural creative workers in order to implement strategies catered to the specific place rather than superimposed over it. Disregarding this could potentially lead to realities differing from theory, such as a study on Shropshire, England in research showed that creative industries not typically included in the urban “model” were actually the most sustainable and successful, a result that did not match up with the expectations of current creative industry theory (Bell and Jayne, 2010).

Much of the critique carried throughout the literature has to do with current creative development placing more emphasis on a “people climate” over a “place climate” (Bella and Jayne, 2010). Place seemed to take on significant importance throughout all of the sources. Due to the case study nature of these research studies, there were good examples of creative clusters situated at odds with the dominant theory of metropolitan creative industry or creative clusters. It seems that most of these studies have originated internationally, out of the United Kingdom and

Australia, which is valuable in providing international examples of an issue rooted in globalization, but the available research seems lacking in literature featuring rural examples of successful creative clusters and creative development within the United States. Even with the great emphasis on place, much of the research also makes note of social capital or the value of people and the creativity of these people in making such enterprises successful, especially because of the small size and rural nature of such projects.

On the other hand, as demonstrated by the themes present throughout these five articles, it seems that it is the close relationship of people and place that is so important to the development of successful creative endeavors in rural areas. Almost all of the sources analyzed here stressed the importance of building strong creative networks in rural communities to provide a supportive framework that can better allow for durability and growth. Such networks and creative clusters can provide a more institutional framework to support artists and creative activity in locations that can sometimes be hostile to growth and entrepreneurship. In *Thinking creative clusters beyond the city*, Harvey and others studied a small rural based cluster that provides a good example of an organized conglomeration of artists and creative businesses that supports networking, studios and materials, professional development opportunities, and resources for cultivating more sustainable creative endeavors (Harvey, Hawkins, Thomas, 2012). This case study was unique in its focus on professional training for creative workers in a rural county. The study of these sort of rural creative clusters that are more organically suited to rural locations are very relevant in considering how an artist collective or artist residency also might be situated in the same context, with great emphasis on artistic community. Such studies challenge mainstream ideas of urban creative industries and “explore other geographies of

cultural production,” especially when they might be re-interpreted to accommodate dispersed rural practitioners (Harvey, Hawkins, Thomas, 2012).

While much of the literature focuses on collective creativity in regards to place, the research by Graham Drake, *This place gives me space*, emphasizes that this can actually obscure the relationship between place and the individual creative person who may find place to be a source of inspiration and innovation (Drake, 2003). The interesting thing is that at the base of these concepts, once paired down to their essences, they can be adapted to both urban and rural situations. In this case it is the uniqueness of place that serves as a catalyst for inspiration, and often rural places are good examples of instances in which that uniqueness has been isolated and preserved better than in an urban area that is constantly changing. These unique elements of place play a key role in developing specific related aesthetics, and it is interesting to consider how artists might use place and these aesthetics of place to create unique cultural products and identities.

Each of the sources included in this review used a very similar set of ethnographic approaches in their methodologies, most commonly utilizing interviews as a main source of primary data. This made sense since the authors often made conclusions about intangible ideas such as creativity, and were often working to determine how artists were interacting with place and with each other. They also relied heavily both on analysis of existing literature to frame their studies, and on case study to provide concrete examples of how these ideas were actually being manifested in rural locations. This allowed them to study whether more mainstream concepts of “creative industry” and “creative clusters” might translate differently in a rural context. Due to the economic nature of arts and cultural in terms of rural development, most used both qualitative and quantitative studies to provide a rich and detailed analysis, studying both primary data collected through interviews, surveys and focus groups and secondary data providing economic and industry information in order to more concretely situate the qualitative data.

The important points in these readings tended to overlap in recognizing oversimplification of ideas about what creative industries and creative places should look like or where creative cultures and creative clusters can exist. As stated by Drake (2003), “current theory also tends to underplay the significance of creative enterprises located outside highly networked clusters where workers are operating in relative spatial or economic isolation.” We need to be more open in thinking about creative place and creative people, while recognizing that there are different challenges and strategies for both urban and rural areas.

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