**Steek-Aboot: The role of ‘women’s work’ in the recuperation of craft practice in Scotland**

**Abstract**

We contend that traditional constructions of textile-focused craft work are highly gendered, often pejorative and considered amateur due to their associations with ‘women’s work’ and its attendant domestic setting. In contrast, many contemporary practices of craft are increasingly associated with progressive agendas of gender emancipation, individualisation, environmental sustainability and locally rooted ethical production and consumption (Jakob & Thomas, 2017). This article explores craft as an embodied and experiential practice, towards making visible ‘women’s work’ and worth as a rich form of cultural wisdom, which contributes to Feminist recuperations of traditional craft techniques, specifically knitting. It builds on previous work calling to redress the historic devaluing of textiles craft production (Lippard 2010; Parker 1984). The research explores how Fair Isle and Sanquhar hand knitting as a body of knowledges and practices can be viewed as a form of material cultural assets, which can support the future sustainability of craft practitioners and their communities, in distributed geographical contexts. Situated in the Scottish craft context and geographically located in Shetland and Sanquhar with a particular focus on what are oftentimes referred to as ‘remote and rural’ geographies we introduce five research portraits, derived from interviews with craft practitioners. The research portraits reveal both ‘knitted and narrative’ structures, which demonstrate how practitioners have ameliorated the long-standing obfuscation of the role of craft and its contribution to cultural identity and wider economies. In so doing cultural assets yield an emotional and intellectual approach that literally unpicks the political economy of craft exposing its relations to production whilst at the same time binding together ‘tacit wisdom’ and gender narratives.

**Introduction**

The authors have a combined experience of over ten year’s research within the craft sector

in distributed geographies and island communities located in Scotland. This article has a particular focus on Shetland and Sanquhar. The Shetland archipelago is located 100 km north of Scotland, almost equidistant from Bergen in Norway as it is from Aberdeen in Scotland. Lerwick, the capital, is Shetland's only town with a population of approximately 7,500 of the 23,080 total population of the islands. Shetland comprises around 300 islands and skerries, of which 16 are inhabited (Shetland Island Council 2018). Traditionally, the island economy has been reliant on agriculture and fishing, having received an economic boost over the past three decades due to public spending funded by the oil and gas industries (McHattie *et al* 2018). Shetland has a rich history of craft work, including the internationally recognised traditions of Fair Isle knitting and lace making (Scott & Marr 2012). Shetland knitting, generically described as Fair Isle (Turney 2009), can be dated back to the sixteenth century (Rutt 1987). Fair Isle knitting is typified by banded, coloured patterns using two colours in each row with garments sometimes including a dozen or more colours, these patterns are first mentioned by Samuel Hibbert in his 1922 account A Description of the Shetland Isles (ibid). The Ancient and Royal Burgh of Sanquhar, with a population of 2,021 is located in Dumfries & Galloway in the Scottish valley of Nithsdale. Traditionally an industrial mining economy, Sanquhar has long been associated with the woollen trade, hosiery and textiles (Rutt 1987). The annual ritual of the Common Riding is associated with Border Counties (Sanquhar is barely 96 km from Carlisle) with the Riding of the Marches, an annual boundary marking event occurring annually in August, with a cavalcade of around 100 horses led by the Cornet, Lass and Ensign.

It is worthy of note that both Lerwick and Sanquhar have museums with textiles collections located in their respective towns. The Shetland Museum and Archive’s Textile Collection is a Recognised Collection of National Significance in Scotland and Sanquhar’s Tolbooth Museum hosts the Sanquhar knitting history and textile archive. These sparsely populated communities have deep ties to place-based textiles and cultural assets that inform contemporary craft-work. Historically, Fair Isle and Sanquhar hand knitting has played a significant role in these particular economies. Whilst detailed exploration of the barter-truck system is out with the scope of this article it does merit mention pertaining to the particular economies of Shetland. The barter-truck system was characterised by a complex web of economic and cultural transactions, which had a profound effect on women’s identity as producers as well as on their relationships with other women (see Abrams 2005: 100). Despite the presentation of hand knitting as a domestic handicraft in Shetland during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century it integrated women into the market and enabled them to construct an identity for themselves based on their relationship with production and the wider economy (Abrams 2006). Nonetheless, there has been a long-standing obfuscation of the role that craft-work, with a textiles focus in particular, has played in women’s cultural identity and economic production. This is linked to levels of informal labour and the highly gendered undertaking of such work. As Abrams argues ‘the vicissitudes of the census data recording women’s work are well known to historians; suffice to say here that work conducted at home or regarded as assisting in the family enterprise was seriously under-recorded’ (2006: 154). Niedderer and Townsend (2015: 627) contend ‘when compared to design, craft can be perceived as an inferior practice, which cannot compete in terms of the use of technology, mass-production, related economic value and possible functionality’. Paradoxically, contemporary practices of craft are increasingly associated with progressive agendas of gender emancipation, individualisation, environmental sustainability and locally rooted ethical production and consumption (Jakob & Thomas 2017). This builds on previous work calling to redress the historic devaluing of textiles craft production (Lippard 2010; Luckman 2013; Parker 1984).

We have conducted extensive research with women hand knitters in Shetland and Sanquhar. In this article, we offer five research portraits that reveal these women’s intimate knowledge of the influences of their local historiography and geographic context on knitting practices, for example, using vernacular materials and incorporating iconographies of the past. The research portraits aim to make visible women’s work and worth. In doing so, our purpose is to revalue the knowledge and experience that historically has been overlooked due to its gendered association towards developing a deeper understanding of craft practice and the role it plays in the 21st Century.

**Literature Review: Knitting on the Round**

It is important to contextualise craft, in particular textiles and fibre-based craft. This extends to an acknowledgement of the historic undervaluing of craft work and how Feminist discourses (Lippard 2010; Parker 1984) have contributed to reframing and repositioning them. Feminist efforts towards the reclamation of craft from the 1960s and 1970s onwards have exposed significant tensions in the perceptions of textiles and fibre-based craft commonly linked to their highly gendered associations.Historically, textiles especially needlework including knitting and sewing, have been derided, largely due to their production being associated with the domestic sphere, and the association with the feminine (Literat & Markus 2019). Hand knitting is highly gendered in both historic and contemporary accounts - a domestic pursuit - associated with the home and thus women (Turney 2009). Feminist critiques have called for a redressing of this devaluing of textiles craft production (Lippard 2010; Parker 1984) and have specifically problemitised the stereotypes of feminine patience (Parker 1984). They have also rejected the idea that craft served solely to keep women busy, which ignored any self-expression, politicisation, creativity and economic self-sufficiency that might be generated from such place-based activities (Waterhouse 2010).

This has contributed to knitting being viewed as invisible labour, largely unrewarded, positioned economically and socio-culturally without value. As already noted, this prescript dismisses the economic importance of knitting as an occupation, income generator and in enhancing self-sufficiency. The devaluing of craft work is associated with the notion that knitting is a lifestyle choice. It is also a highly precarious and fragile sector with a large preponderance of portfolio work and low wages (TBR 2014). In addition, issues around the transmission of traditional craft skills held in the hands of an ageing population and cutbacks in craft training in universities, FE colleges and schools combine to present further challenges for the future of craft (Luckman & Thomas 2018; Bennett 2018). As Hackney (2013: 172) notes, how craft and the work of craft has been regarded raises questions of ‘agency, connectivity (social and familial) and community, creativity, economics, space, and health and wellbeing’. This in turn is tied to the wider role of cultural reception and the importance of interdependence and subjectivity in undertaking craft work, which could be described as ‘communal knowledge’ (Jeffries 2016: 13).Adopting a Feminist epistemology, informed by situated knowledge (Haraway 1988) - located in specific geographical contexts - we aspire to make the invisible visible and in doing so give voice to the embodied and lived experience (Parry 2007) of textile-based craft workers, which have been traditionally obscured or misrepresented in accounts of the creative economy.

The relations between landscape, mythology and iconography, including vernacular traditions and materials (such as yarn and fibres derived from native sheep) are associated with cultural heritage. These traditions are maintained and sustained through the creation and recreation of myths, narratives, memories and artefacts (Turney 2009) within communities of hand knitters. The origins of patterns and their genesis is beyond the purview of this article (including the legend that Fair Isle knitting was derived from the shipwrecked Armada), that being said the oldest examples of Fair Isle knitting can be dated to 1841 (Rutt 1987). The motifs and patterns of Fair Isle and Sanquhar knitting simultaneously represent traditional techniques and contemporary innovation. Colour-work (stranded knitting) and a banded pattern combined with geometric motifs is referred to as Fair Isle and largely associated with the Shetland Isles. In contrast to Sanquhar knitting, Fair Isle knitting has no specific pattern *per se* and is largely characterised by OXO motifs with no more than two colours in any one row and the use of diagonals to create symmetry (see McGregor 1981; Turney 2009). Fair Isle knitting is highly personalised to individual craftswomen and as such they are reluctant to repeat a piece, this differentiation is what sets Fair Isle knitting apart from mass manufactured machine knitting (Rutt 1987). Sanquhar knitting and Sanquhar gloves are defined by two contrasting colours [predominately black and white] and dambrod and check designs. Dambrod designs are not strictly chequerboard patterns as the name suggests but a grid-iron or graticule pattern of horizontal and vertical [black] lines, two stitches or two rows wide over a white ground (Rutt 1987). Dambrod patterns comprise of a grid of black lines on a white ground, filled in with diamond or saltire variations. The most famous of which is the Duke pattern named after the Duke of Buccleuch. Other patterns include the Rose, Rose and Trellis, and Cornet and Drum. In addition to, check and tweed patterns, which are variations on the Shepherds check used in tweed weaving (ibid) incorporating all-over patterns in diagonal checks and small motifs scattered on a spot-pattern background. Sanquhar glove cuffs are usually knitted in black and white ribbing or broken ribbing. It is traditional for Sanquhar glove knitters to work the wearer’s initials into the wrist band. Albeit, the myth that the initials were to identify those lost at sea is dispelled by Sanquhar knitters. Place-based knitting can be viewed as examples of the resurrection of the past as a sign of authenticity in an increasingly inauthentic world. In doing so, the meaning(s) attributed to craft-work combine a desire for difference and a propensity for nostalgia (Turney 2009). It could be contended that individual identity accounts are created through – knitted and narrative – structures including local historiographies, personal biographies and preferences. In this manner, place-based artefacts, patterns and rituals together contribute to collective cultural scripts geographically located in communities.

**Methodology**

This article presents empirical research with knitting practitioners located in Shetland and Sanquhar. These are presented as five research portraits, two from Sanquhar and three from Shetland. The methodology of portraiture, first articulated by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) and later developed with Jessica Hoffman Davis (1997), aims to explore participants’ lived experiences of craft work and how meanings are constructed within a particular context. Portraiture is oriented toward an exploration of ‘goodness’ as characterised by participants, rather than diagnosing or imposing pathologies as defined by the researcher. For the portraitist, goodness does not simply imply a search for what is positive or coherent about a research subject. On the contrary, rather than interpret competing or contradicting meanings and experiences as problems to be resolved, the portraitist takes such tensions and complexities as constitutive of what makes a particular research context ‘good’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983; 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997).

Portraiture offers a methodological approach for exploring the lived, everyday experiences of participants. Through the creation and presentation of in-depth narratives the aim is to present research accounts that are compelling, empathetic and accessible (Hempston 2015: 468). By embracing this ‘humanistic impulse’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997: 12) it is intended that the research portraits presented are the subtle synthesis of rigorous analytical procedures and community building (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997). Portraiture allows for the development of highly context contingent and situated reflections on individuals craft practice. The emphasis is on the unique as well as the shared experiences of the participants that embodies the valuing of multiple ways of knowing (Straka 2019). In presenting these portraits, we seek to widen the audience for our research by adopting a less esoteric language for sharing findings and insights, which encourages identification with the lived, and everyday experience of others (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997).

The research portraits enabled us to combine rich material that may have fallen outside of the scope of other forms of analysis. In so doing, this approach captures hidden areas of participant’s lives (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs 2020). The qualitative research from which the portraits were assembled was a combination of engagement and immersion in the field of study by the authors over ten years (circa 2010-2020). The work draws on a series of funded research and knowledge exchange projects relating to the creative economy in Shetland and Sanquhar. The empirical data was predominantly generated from in-depth interviews with participants. Developing the portraits created what Hempston (2015) refers to as a back-and-forth shift in focus during the interpretation process whereby each individual’s unique account is balanced within the broader contextual landscape. The craft workers were selected for the portraits due to their engagement with the research, namely hand knitting, their interest in the recuperation of craft practice and the longstanding relationships we have with them over the extended nature of our engagement. The interview transcripts were synthesised and thematically analysed in order to elicit layers of meaning. This allowed us to gain geographically located understanding and develop situated knowledges that are both partial and fully formed. In this manner, critical and situated knowledges sustain the possibility of ‘webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology’ (Haraway 1988: 584). As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997: 185) acknowledge portraiture is an iterative and a generative process. In the initial analysis, participants’ statements were grouped into an organising schema, which as the process of analyses developed, integrated these relationships between the relevant and focal thematics. Accordingly, themes emerged from the data that provided the shape and form of the resultant research portraits.

**Research Portraits**

Five research portraits are offered below that illuminate women’s craft practice, specifically hand knitting, in Shetland and Sanquhar. The research portraits interweave new insights into place-based craft practice. These extend to alternative socio-cultural models and new narratives that challenge traditional accounts of craft. We juxtapose the research portraits with the two Sanquhar knitters, Margaret and Agnes who are in their seventies and eighties respectively with the three Shetland knitters, Anne, Marion and Alice, ranging in age from their twenties to sixties. Through the research portraits we trace themes of: intergenerational relations; the transmission of knitting skills; the historical legacy of knitting; and the role ‘cottage industry played in the economic liberation of women. The intimate relations between people, place and practice and the narratives surrounding them are highlighted. We draw attention to the invisibility of labour linked to gender, the intense fragility and precarity of skills and the sustainability of women’s livelihoods.

**Sanquhar Knitting**

**Margaret**: **Patterns and Patronage**

Interdependence / Co-dependency

Intergenerational Mother / Daughter Relations

*My mother taught me, she learnt later in life and it would be through the Rural. The actual knitting of the gloves was a very closely guarded secret amongst the women folk of that time and then it was expanded round about the 1950s.*

Early History / Historical Legacy

*At one time in about the 18th century it’s well documented that it was a cottage industry. It [Sanquhar knitting] was exported to the territories in huge numbers, stockings and gloves. Then, of course, they had the American War of Independence and they stopped importing things from the UK. It almost killed that cottage industry off, it survived in a smaller measure, but certainly not to the extent that it did then.*

Cottage Industry: Women Working from Home

*Due to Sanquhar being in a sheep growing area there was always plentiful supply of wool locally. There were carpet mills, which used the wool as well and they produced a yarn called ‘drugget’ - a mixture of wool and cotton or wool and linen - and that was what they used to knit gloves.*

Patterns and Patronage

*There’s sixteen different patterns but some of them don’t have a name, some of them don’t have a history. We don’t know where they’ve started from, there’s one or two that we do but certainly not them all. We’ll start with the Duke pattern, it’s the one that’s most recognised, it’s often referred to as ‘thee’ Sanquhar pattern. And the Duke of Buccleuch who has Drumlanrig Castle, gave a large order for gloves to boost the industry at that time after the decline and that was what was called ‘the Duke pattern’.*

Place Based: Old Narratives / New Narratives

*[It’s] just the intricacy and the complexity of it and it’s very dramatic, because it’s two patterns, traditionally black and white but any colour combination can be used. We wouldn’t have all these visitors coming to this area that come specifically for the Sanquhar pattern, they wouldn’t come if that wasn’t there. It’s part of a tradition, tourists are very interested in the history. There’s three principals at our riding of the marches: there’s a cornet, a cornet’s lass and an ensign and every year the cornet gets gifted gloves knitted in the cornet’s pattern and the cornet’s lass and the ensign, their gloves are knitted in the Duke pattern.*

Documenting Patterns

*I took it upon myself to record them and put into print, five have been done already […] that’s five of the sixteen [glove patterns] that have been recorded with issues in print and the rest are in the pipeline. Documenting the patterns takes a long time. When I first started off it took me about two or three years to do the first one, the rest have followed on easier from that. I feel it’s important that they are recorded because if nobody records them these things disappear sometimes.*

Knitting on the Round

*[Sanquhar gloves] are knitted on four needles - on the round - it’s a big advantage if you can knit on the round before you learn to do the pattern. Well for me, personally, it’s about eighteen hours [to knit a pair of gloves]. But bearing in mind I’ve knitted all these years so it’s maybe not a true reflection on how long it would take somebody to knit them. I’ve done them all, the square patterns I just find easy, the other ones are not so easy, I’ve to refer to a pattern for them. The gusset - in between the fingers - that’s unique to Sanquhar knitting.*

*The stitch count for a pair of gloves is the same whether it’s a lady’s or a gent’s glove. The sizing is determined by the ply of the yarn and the size of the needles. For a lady’s glove, average size, you would use a 15 needle, that’s a 1.75mm and a 3 ply yarn. And a gents is 4 ply and a 14 needle, which is a 2mm. And if you want to adjust the sizing you go to a bigger or a smaller needle.*

*I can talk you through this glove here. You start off by casting on the number of stitches you need, which is 80, or thereabouts, depending on what cuff you do, there’s many different cuffs as well. And then you knit the cuff on the round and then when you get to the bit where - it’s the tradition to put the wearer’s initials into the glove - the initials are knitted at this point. And then you start the pattern itself and you just knit again, on the round, and you increase stitches, which ultimately forms the thumb. And once you’ve got all your increases done for that, you go onto the next pattern and then you do two patterns over that and that’s for one and a half blocks. And in the next round you take these two pattern blocks off and you replace it with one block, which you can see in there. And then you knit the rest of the hand and then you knit the fingers and this is where the little gusset comes into play, in here. And that’s created because, when you knit the first finger by doing one block from the front, one from the back and then you cast on a block which is on the inside. And when you go to the next finger, again you take one block from the front, one from the back and cast on for the inside of the finger. You have to lift stitches at the bottom of this one, which gives you too many stitches, so you have to decrease from here and in doing that, that creates the little gusset. It’s unique to Sanquhar knitting and that happens on three fingers, there’s three gussets, and then when it comes to the last one you don’t need to cast on any stitches, you have the correct number. And then you go back and do the thumb, so you have to lift the stitches where you have cast on your block there and knit your thumb.*

Precarity / Fragility

*[Sanquhar knitting] it’s probably a bit vulnerable, there’s not as many people do it now as what used to. But they used to teach it in school here but that stopped in 1976 […] there’s not an awful lot of people left who can knit Sanquhar gloves.*

Knit to Live: A Human Thread

*I knit because it’s inbred, I’ve inherited it from both sides of my family, that’s why I do it. But the tradition of it and the look of it just appeals to me, and I think it’s important to keep the tradition going.*

**Agnes: ‘Steek Aboot’ (Stitch About)**

Interdependence / Co-dependency

Intergenerational Mother / Daughter Relations

*I was knitting when I was seven, I think, and everybody seemed to knit then so it was quite easy to see what went on. My mother taught me to knit, my mother was a good knitter but also I grew up with the phrase ‘that’s it, you are back on the pattern’.*

Knitting on the Round

*I had previously lived in Shetland for seven years, I was a member of the [Orkney] Isle of Sanday knitters before I came to the Scottish Borders. One of my friends in St. Boswells gave me this, it’s precious, just a negative of a Sanquhar glove and that set me of on my Sanquhar journey. Although I had been in the Borders for a few years and I had been speaking about Sanquhar. I’d never been to Sanquhar and I was a bit nervous! I was aware that knitters were quite secretive in the past, and I’ve discovered since, very much so in Sanquhar. My husband was a minister in the Church of Scotland and we were in the parish of St Boswells […] and he says, ‘the strangest thing has happened: the session clerk of Sanquhar Parish Church has phoned to say would I be interested in their vacancy.’ And I was here [in Sanquhar] with nobody knowing what I had done but I thought oh that’s good, they’ll be doing something here and I’ll be able to just relax and do something else.*

*When Richard Rutt, Bishop of Leicester (*A History of Hand Knitting: 1987*) was doing his history book he was in contact with me. By the time I came to Sanquhar he was still working on his book so I got him to contact Jane Forsyth, a maths teacher at the local school. She worked with him to produce the chapter that’s in his book […] and when I opened it I saw this wonderful chapter on Sanquhar, but even better, it had given me a mention!*

Transmitted Orally

*Before you started to graph [the Sanquhar pattern] and document it, was the pattern transmitted orally from mother to daughter? Oh yes, that was the tradition, there’s no doubt about that. I think the first time it was ever written down was through Miss Mary Forsyth, for the girls at the school – just a typewritten thing.*

Early History / Historical Legacy

*In the 1930s I suspect knitting was kind of disappearing a bit and she [Mary Forsyth] was a domestic science teacher at the [Sanquhar] school and she couldn’t knit gloves when she came here but one lady could still remember how to knit them and taught her. Then she persuaded the education authority to put it on the curriculum of Sanquhar Academy, knitting, yes for fourteen year old girls! So that went on until about 1976, so a great contribution.*

Precarity / Fragility

*There has never been a large number [of glove knitters] and it’s difficult to say why. I’m convinced that in the thirties it was almost lost. I have another note - in the thirties - before Mary Forsyth started in the school, the story is that a woman from the Temperance Hotel was the last woman to have the Sanquhar pattern in her head. She taught the banker’s wife and daughter and they taught Miss Mary Forsyth. If you are a knitter you have to know how to construct it and I suspect this woman was the last woman who knew how to construct [the Sanquhar pattern]. If that is true - Richard Rutt reminds you of that in his book - that so many people who had written about the past had romanticised a lot of it so you can’t be sure.*

Old Narratives / New Narratives

*I’m not sure where the patterns came from - not the same source as the Shetland knitters -so we’ve got Fair Isle, which is little patterns, in Shetland, and then you’ve got bigger patterns which have come from Norway and they keep saying that all that Fair Isle knitting came via the Baltic. But Sanquhar knitting is reputed to be older than Shetland […] and from oh gosh, Egypt and that area. I saw a photograph of a (Coptic) sock found there, dated 1100AD and I was so stunned because it was the (Duke) pattern with the vertical line missing […] it’s something to do with [Muslim / Islamic religions] not replicating animals and flowers, it all had to be geometric, so it’s difficult to know where the source really started, it’s impossible. I was knitting a cuff the other day and I was knitting the dice pattern it’s probably the earliest one. The bit round the top, which I’d call the midge, although locally it’s called steek-aboot: stitch about. I was sitting knitting and I thought I’ll have a rest and go and have a look at Richard Rutt’s book. And I’m looking through it and I stopped […] there were cushions, Egyptian cushions, found in a tomb and it had the dice and steek-aboot, and I had been knitting them here just a day or a couple of days before. And I was excited by that.*

Innovation from Tradition: Digitising Sanquhar Pattern Charts

*I’ve created [digitised] charts and patterns for new knitters and young knitters […] because they can follow charts now in a way that, in the past we couldn’t, because of their computers and things. What was surviving were the traditional patterns…*

**Fair Isle Knitting**

**Anne**: **A Balancing Act**

Based in the North mainland of Shetland and inspired by the textile heritage of the islands, Anne creates knitting and jewellery. She also runs online knitting and crafting workshops.

Interdependence: Intergenerational / Education

*Growing up in Shetland I was surrounded by Shetland knitting […] I learned to knit in my Granny and Grandad’s croft house in Unst in the early 70’s. As I grew up I was in awe of the beautiful lace that was produced in the isle and of the knowledge and skill of the adult knitters around me. Struggling myself to follow patterns, my love of knitting only truly emerged when I laid by the patterns and simply cast on and let my own designs emerge from the needles.  My passion has led me to incorporate Shetland knitting techniques into my work.*

*Thankfully, there’s enough skilled folk around still that can pass those skills on [but] I would like to see some kind of work done on developing more Shetland knitters to be tutors. I mean folk maybe have their own ideas for their own practice, but as a community […] like pattern design and publication of patterns - specific educational things - that could make a huge difference to makers in Shetland.*

Making a Living: Balancing Work and Family

*I used to hand knit and sell things but the income was so small that I didn’t really count it. That was in my twenties, but in my early thirties I designed eh, I started knitting jewellery out of wire […] and I saw that that had potential to be something that I could create and sell, and that coincided with me starting a family too. So I combined the two and became self-employed and I had bits and pieces of commissions. I’ve got a website that I’m proud of and I combine making and selling jewellery with teaching. I run a lot of workshops and I developed a thing called ‘Speed Crafting’ seven years ago. I carried on just doing what I could whilst also the family was growing […] I think really I need to go in a direction of working to commission, but it’s quite hard because my children are still too young to look after themselves.*

Precarity / Fragility of Practice and Livelihood

*There’s an enormous making community in Shetland and there does tend to be an attitude of ‘well I’m sitting at home anyway […] so as long as I can cover my materials then I don’t really care to make any profit’. Quite a lot of folk are working in a job and then they’re doing this at night and the other side of that […] especially when it comes to knitting, it’s what everybody can do so then it’s not valued. It comes in a burst at the end of the year, with ‘Wool Week’ and Christmas ‘Speed Crafting’ and any orders that I have. That’s quite difficult to cope with and maybe March or April, May, June, when there’s no money coming in, and emm […] yeah, it’s hard, and I always have one eye on the Shetland Times looking for a job to be honest.*

**Marion: Models of Production**

Marion works mainly from her home on an island off the Shetland mainland designing knitted headbands, scarves, cowls and wraps. Originally, from Shetland she returned to the island later in life, changed career and set up her knitwear business.

Intergenerational / Education

*I suppose every child […] learnt knitting and also Fair Isle knitting so I was selling knitting to the shops for pocket money, that kind of thing. And it was at a time when you did some machine knitting at school.*

*So when I found out about the college and the Textile Facilitation Unit (TFU) facility, I attended business planning courses and a course on computer based design for knitwear and I got a business gateway grant start up and that was when I started the business.*

Models of Production

*I decided from the outset that it was just going to be myself running it I decided not to do garments so I focused on scarfs [...] with garments you have to do about six different sizes so one person can’t really manage a business like that. I work with various local services, so I buy in various services. There’s the TFU obviously, you know they invoice me. There’s the machine finisher who’s based in the Island of Yell and so once the scarfs are knitted they’re taken up to Yell for the machine finishing part of it so you know my orders to her have built up. So I suppose rather than having employees I’m kind of outsourcing more, there’s more time.*

Old Narratives / New Narratives

*I'm interested in the wealth and variety of Fair Isle pattern, and the way it keeps changing and developing with the continuous movement of people due to industry, war and migration. You see this effect in the pattern developments here in the 1940s and the 1970s, for example. And then there are patterns that have been inspired by other media: some are said to have come from linoleum designs, which were themselves inspired by Victorian floor tiles, these in their turn were inspired by the walls and floors of Moorish palaces.*

Precarity / Fragility

*I know it will be quiet in January again but then I’m hoping that the takings from Christmas will tide me financially over that month.*

**Alice: Innovation from Tradition**

Alice is a textile maker (machine and hand knitting). Born and based on the mainland of Shetland she graduated from Shetland College with a BA in Contemporary Textiles.

Education

*Originally, as you know I started with machine knitting but I am gradually building up my skills in hand knitting, it just wasn’t fashionable in the 90’s and although some bairns loved it at school I had no interest.*

Precarity / Fragility

Models of Production

*I think the textile industry in Shetland is like, in some ways, it’s so strong and then in other ways it is so vulnerable. When I was at college - they have the textile facilitation unit there - with the big industrial machines. When I was near the end of college they were like, oh you could get this made, you know, you could make this in here, and I was very aware myself how I didn’t really want to rely too much on other people. I kind of saw it as being very much my own thing because I think, because you can kind of see how fragile in some ways that some things are, so for me personally, I have kind of tried to do a lot of it myself. That’s kind of allowed me to, I feel like that is kind of what’s helped me get to where I am, because I am doing it myself and not really relying too much on other people.*

*I think, try and keep it in Shetland, but I think if you do go out Shetland you lose a bit of the authenticity, because there are lots of things that are made all over.*

*I mean I wouldn’t be able to make enough money from my own stuff.*

Innovation from Tradition

*So, when I decided, when I started into the hand knitted patterns it was like a kind of contemporary take on traditional ideas, so that’s kind of I think what people kind of come to me for, kind of thing. So that’s in the way that Shetland is extremely important to what I’m doing and is my main inspiration as well, so it kind of works both ways. When I finished college, I started my blog and I didn’t really start that with the intention that it was going to be a big thing […] and that is just people wanting to see what’s happening in Shetland and, I mean Instagram, I have about 10.9k followers.*

*Growing up with technology, I can see for older ones and stuff, I mean, it’s hard to learn but because for me it’s like you got Instagram when everyone was getting it, so it’s not too difficult for me to get to grips with it.*

Community of Practice

*There is a good community of makers in Shetland. So if you are willing to meet them and things, it does kind of work out for you, but then also there is a lot of people doing quite a lot of the same things, not the same things but we are all kind of, so you […] you can’t share too much.*

Place-based: Old Narratives / New narratives

*I have also started in the past two years - I collect vintage knitwear – and I have been collecting [Shetland Fair Isle] knitwear so now I have quite a good collection. I go to meet with tour groups and show them the stuff, so I think that’s another avenue to it as well. I suppose my thing is the vintage knitwear part of it.*

**Discussion**

Intergenerational learning was of significance across the portraits. Sanquhar knitting was part of the curriculum at Sanquhar Academy introduced by Mary Forsyth (Rutt 1987) and taught to 14 year old girls thereby connecting craft practice as a cultural asset embedded within the wider community. According to the interviewees, knitting was no longer part of the curriculum from 1976 and they reflect on the attendant vulnerability and fragility of Sanquhar glove knitting within two generations. Notwithstanding this both Margaret and Agnes have invested considerable time in documenting the patterns, Margaret has published five Sanquhar glove patterns: the Duke; Cornet; Rose; Drum and Trellis; and Glendyne; and Agnes has digitally coded and recorded the Sanquhar patterns as part of the wider A’ the Airts Sanquhar Patterns Project.

The research portraits from Shetland also demonstrate the significance of intergenerational learning in the development of women’s knitting. All alluded to knitting techniques, hand knitting, machine knitting, Fair Isle motifs and their particular conventions. These include only two colours being used in any one row or round - and related processes - linking, washing and dressing on a Shetland ‘horse’ for ganseys and a glove board for mittens. Knitting was a perpetual presence in their early lives whether it was fashionable or not and whether they enjoyed it or not. Of note, was the role of training and education in the shaping of their skills and experience both within schools and the textiles degrees and courses available through the Shetland College and the Textile Facilitation Unit (TFU). Knitting tuition was part of the curriculum in Shetland schools until 2010, when it was controversially withdrawn (Carden 2019). A Shetland councillor leading the campaign to make cost savings argued that although ‘knitting was a necessity for Shetland families 50 or 60 years ago… these days knitting machines could do the job cheaper and quicker’ and claimed that ‘machine-knit was ‘as good as any hand-knitted garment’ which was ‘unfortunately a dying art’ (Robertson 2010). Thus, displaying a profound lack of understanding of the significance of the practice. If history teaches us anything from Sanquhar, when knitting was removed from the curriculum in 1976, then there are future concerns for the survival and legacy of the practice of Fair Isle knitting. This withdrawal of knitting from school curricula accompanies a broader trend which has seen increased disinvestment in the provision of craft-related subjects at school and within Further and Higher Education settings (Bennett 2018).

The knitted objects crafted by the women could be viewed as ‘knowledge artefacts’ as they embody both materiality and deep process wisdom. This cognisance of both intangible and tangible cultural heritage was evident across the portraits from both locations alongside a sophisticated acknowledgment of some of the mythologising of the origins of patterning. The knitted objects represent place-based cultural assets, which act as important sources of contextually located knowledge and resources, cultural appreciation, personal meaning and identity. They are forms of ‘tacit wisdom’ often transmitted orally, across generations and act as sites for the cultural construction of situated knowledge(s). Present in the narratives of Margaret and Agnes is evidence of the rich relational networks and deep ties that can be seen as a form of ‘knowledge weaving’ through the repetition of complex patterns. The practitioners used craft work, specifically knitting to enact personalised versions of cultural scripts that recognise the legacies of the past and the significance of place-based practices.

Across the portraits there was a sense that their knitting practice both reflected and combined responsibilities to the preservation of heritage including the Sanquhar pattern documentation and recording by Margaret and Agnes but also amongst the Shetland practitioners, for example, blogging about a vintage Fair Isle knitwear collection or working closely with the Shetland museum. There was also a commitment to authenticity with a desire not to ‘offshore’ any production elements and to use vernacular materials, such as Shetland wool. Preservation and documentation was a collective and community endeavour linked to the shared cultural assets that reside in these specific locations and craft contexts. The research portraits reveal the ‘tacit wisdom’ that resides in craft practitioners, but also illustrates how new narratives have been developed as part of a process of reinvention. It is striking that Agnes, now in her eighties has embraced digital technology to code, document and preserve the Sanquhar pattern. Similarly, in Shetland there was evidence of innovative mediations using digital technology in order to ensure the sustainability of their craft businesses. The sophisticated use of social media drew on imagery from the Islands and craft practice as well as evidencing forms of self-entrepreneurship (McRobbie 2015). Across the portraits women - innovating from tradition – was manifest through drawing together the interdependencies between traditional cultural artefacts and innovation principles and practices.

As already referred to in relation to the decimation of provision of craft skills within formal education in both Shetland and Sanquhar, the perilous practices and the livelihoods they support is highlighted. Our insights from our extended engagement with the knitters and the wider community indicate that there are fewer than five knitters left in Sanquhar who can hand knit Sanquhar gloves. As well as the precarity of knitting skills, the fragility of individual women’s livelihoods particularly in terms of portfolio work and the challenge of receiving appropriate remuneration for their work was deeply felt particularly across the Shetland portraits. This challenge was seen to be rooted in how value was ascribed to their work including the pejorative language surrounding craft as a ‘lifestyle choice’ for practitioners.

We contend a more expansive view of craft is required that situates the relationship craft makers have to their place-based, community and practice context and how they relate to the material world. This more expansive view of craft resides in recognising a plurality of value beyond economic that includes education and intergenerational learning, the sustainability of practices, people and place and new alternative models of production. Acknowledging this we argue would help make ‘women’s work’ and worth visible as a rich form of collective and cultural wisdom. This, in turn, would contribute to Feminist recuperations of traditional craft techniques, specifically knitting. We call for a repositioning of craft practice that reflects craft as a mode of being in the world that resides in the tacit wisdom of women’s narratives and practices. Future research will focus on further developing relations with craft practitioners, the sustainability of hand knitting, alternative economies and the transformation of craft discourse more broadly. This includes the wider cultural significance and the role digital technology can play in articulating cultural assets and reflecting timely issues surrounding the implications of Covid-19 and crafts contribution to individual and collective wellbeing.

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