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## **The place of Shetland knitting**

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## **The place of Shetland knitting**

### **Abstract**

Shetland has become synonymous with certain kinds of knit textiles, which have influenced the development of its landscape, economy and relationship to other places. Three distinct elements are important when considering Shetland knitting in relation to place: geographies of scale, e.g. small islands within a community of practice and creative economy that are global; typologies of space, e.g. domestic, educational, industrial and online spaces; and place identity, e.g. conceptions of “Shetlandness”. Examining each of these elements before presenting recent activity around the Shetland *hap* as one example of how they mesh together in practice. It builds on a 2016-17 study of contemporary Shetland hand knitting with further ethnographic research on Shetland’s knitting culture.

Keywords: space and place; textiles; knit; island; Shetland

### **Introduction**

Shetland is a group of small islands on the northerly edge of the UK with a total population of around 23,000. It is a significant site for major international industries (North Sea oil since the 1970s, as well as commercial fishing), Shetland has been regarded as “something of a Petri dish for studying the effects of increasing global linkage on peripheral cultures” (Ashmore 2013, 273). Shetland knitting is at the crux of different models of textile production, from mass production to amateur craft, making it an illuminating place through which to study “geographies of making” (Carr and Gibson 2016). Three distinct elements are important when considering Shetland knitting in relation to place: geographies of scale, e.g. small islands within a community of

practice and creative economy that are global; typologies of space, e.g. domestic, educational, industrial and online spaces (far from distinct in reality); and place identity, e.g. conceptions of “Shetlandness”. Examining each of these elements before presenting one example of how they mesh together in practice, this article explores the role of textile-making processes in mediating off- and online experiences of place.

### **Place identity**

While knitting is part of the way Shetland is marketed to the outside world (see Promote Shetland website, 2019, 2019, <https://www.shetland.org/live/creative-community>), its significance is not only a matter of branding. Shetland knitting – whether as process or product – is part of the “repeated everyday actions and interventions that work on both the neighborhood and the individual” through which “places are made” (Benson and Jackson 2013). While some local knitters express anxiety about an intergenerational loss of skills, knitting by hand and machine is still a more mainstream activity in Shetland than elsewhere in the UK, and Shetland knitwear has its own localized fashion cycles; a recent vogue for fair isle “hoodies” in the islands has receded, for example, while yoke cardigans are often to be seen on women and girls of all ages.

The way in which knitting is valued within Shetland as a skill, a commodity and an activity has changed hugely since the mid-twentieth century, reflecting not just the “hedonization” (Maines 2009) of textile craft processes across the developed world, but the transformation of Shetland’s economy and “way of life” (Nicolson 1976; see also Abrams 2005, Turney 2009) since the North Sea oil boom. Events that are knitting-related trigger local discourses about social change. For example, the 2010 removal of knitting tuition from schools (Newington 2014; Lovick 2010; Marter 2010; Matthews 2015) provoked reflection on the past and future of education and employment in the

islands. Similarly, 2017 changes made in 2017 to the funding of Shetland Wool Week (*Shetland Times*, December 6, 2017) were met with discussions about gender equality, the demographic pressure of an aging population and changing economic imperatives as the post-oil years inevitably grow closer.

While the idiomatic phrase “stick to your knitting” suggests concentrating on one’s own discrete area of expertise, with knitting serving as the proverbial limited, individualized task, knitting in Shetland is anything but disconnected from wider concerns. It forms what Ashmore (2013, 274), calls an “identity vector”, linking disparate “cultural phenomena” such as (of many possible examples) tourism, crofting, the Up Helly Aa fire festivals, education and contemporary fashion. Shetland knitting is one among many ways of “doing islandness” (Vannini and Taggart 2012), a process through which place is created and experienced.

### **Typologies of space: fireside, hillside, factory, classroom, newsfeed**

The title of Fryer’s (1995) work on Shetland knitting between 1600 and 1950 locates it “by the Fireside and on the Hillside”. This encapsulates knitting’s role as part of Shetland’s crofting economy, and also reflects the continuing association of so-called “heritage” or “traditional” textiles with domestic spaces and rural landscapes (Turney 2009). However, as Fryer’s (1995) conclusion and the work of others (e.g. Abrams 2005) demonstrates, Shetland knitting has, for generations, been located in other kinds of space as well: in classrooms and factories within Shetland, for example, and in the homes and imaginations of knitters following purportedly “Shetland” patterns elsewhere (Shetland Museum and Archive web-site, 2016, <https://www.shetlandmuseumandarchives.org.uk/education/museum-store/research-projects/authenticity-in-shetland-lace-knitting>; Chapman 2015).

Knitting's history as "a domestic practice" (Turney 2009, 5) underlies its use as a symbol of the private sphere, the family, and the feminine. Interviews with Shetland knitters routinely show the importance of familial connections, especially maternal ones, to the making and circulation of knitted garments. However, the idea of domestic space and women's domestic labor as separate from industry has never held true for the Shetland knitwear sector, as Abrams' work (2005; 2012) demonstrates. The "discovery" of Fair Isle knitting by the outside world – which knitting machines could not copy" (Fry 1995, 136) in the post-war years, coupled with longstanding piecework business models, enabled a "maker culture" (Carr and Gibson 2016) that defied categorisation in terms of binaries like amateur/professional or craft/manufacturing. The proliferation of basic knitting machines in family homes in the mid-twentieth century added to the blurring of domestic and industrial space. A Shetland knitter in her early 50s remembers her mother's home-based knitting career:

it was quite a lot that she did at times and like she also ran the croft, so if she was behind then sometimes we would fall asleep to the sound of this machine going back and forth, the rhythm, the sound in the house... (Anonymous interviewee recorded December 8, 2016, Shetland)

More straightforwardly industrial spaces are of course also important sites for Shetland knitting, from now-closed factories such as Adie's in Voe to Jamiesons' of Shetland at Sandness and Hoswick Woollen Mill (both in operation today). Within Shetland College (part of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI)), the Textile Facilitation Unit, with its Shima Seiki machines, provides manufacturing services to both design businesses and textile students. [Fig. 1. Textile Facilitation Unit, UHI (Shetland College), 2018.]

While transmission of Shetland knitting skills has often been domestic and familial (Arnold 2010), formal educational spaces also have a role. Knitting tuition was part of the curriculum in Shetland schools until 2010, when the decision to withdraw funding for it (at a time when oil and public revenues were under pressure) sparked discussion of the changed place of knitting in Shetland's contemporary economy and anxiety among some expert knitters about the future of the practice. Since 2016, a voluntary group called ShetlandPeerieMakkers ("peerie makkers" means "little knitters" in dialect; see Brough Lodge Trust website, 2016) has been organising children's knitting groups which use school buildings but are outside the formal education system, with a system of volunteer tutors and a teaching method that aims to create a "lightsome" atmosphere, not quite recreating either the domestic or educational experiences of the past but promoting and enacting the idea that Shetland knitting "belongs to the community" (interviewee). [Fig. 2. ShetlandPeerieMakkers in action, 2018.]

Depending on how you define it, Shetland knitting as a practice extends beyond Shetland itself, carried through instructional literature such as knitting patterns, stitch dictionaries and the contents of online fora. In their project "Authenticity in 'Shetland' lace knitting", Carol Christiansen (textile curator at the Shetland Museum and Archives) and Roslyn Chapman investigated knitting patterns that were identified as "Shetland" in nineteenth century pattern books, finding the basis for that identification variable and sometimes mysterious (Shetland Museum and Archives website, 2016, <https://www.shetlandmuseumandarchives.org.uk/education/museum-store/research-projects/authenticity-in-shetland-lace-knitting>; Chapman 2015). Recent publications inviting the reader to participate in Shetland knitting include those by authors based elsewhere who have developed long relationships with Shetland and its

knitting experts (e.g. Sato 2011; Davies 2016a; Crawford 2018) and those by Shetland-based knitters themselves (e.g. Shetland Guild of Spinners, Weavers and Dyers 2018; Hazel Tindall and Elizabeth Johnson 2018).

It is nothing new, therefore, for Shetland knitting to occupy a kind of imagined space, its practitioners forming a dispersed “community of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991) that is also an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983). However, the internet has given this discursive space a new relationship to Shetland as a place.

### **Scale and distance**

The internet and in particular the “making and doing” (Gauntlett 2011) culture enabled by Web 2.0 has opened up Shetland knitting to a community of leisure knitters that is global, avidly interactive and much larger than Shetland’s population. The existence of this dispersed but participatory social context affects how Shetland knitting is practiced and understood within Shetland. The international leisure knitting community is highly interconnected and commodified (Humphreys 2008; Orton-Johnson 2013). This community is interested in localized textile practices as heritage and as inspiration for the products – objects, materials, patterns, publications, courses etc – that circulate through global markets (Pierce 2014; e.g. Starmore 2010; Davies 2016a; Ozolina 2018). For people in small places with unique textile histories, like Shetland, this presents commercial opportunities and practical challenges and provokes self-reflection on the way in which certain forms of making are valued.

Compared to a time when so many of the population were engaged in the production of knitting as a commodity, the commercial role of leisure knitting is much less obvious. Nonetheless, craft tourism, online sales and publishing make certain types of small business possible, whether teaching, designing patterns or making and selling

materials and equipment. For example, the biggest craft tourism event in Shetland, Shetland Wool Week, has created a regular platform for local knitters to enter into these types of business activity, which are often undertaken on a very much part time, self-employed basis, as is typical of the craft sector of the creative economy (see Dawkins 2011; Luckman 2013; McRobbie 2016). Shetland Wool Week has grown, over the last 8 years, to host around 600 visitors, who travel from across Europe, North America and even Australia as well as from the rest of the UK. The event is almost at capacity; numbers attending are limited by local accommodation and facilities.

There is no such limitation on engagement with Shetland knitting through the internet. To give a sense of relative scale, the number of users of Ravelry, a social networking site for knitters founded in 2007, passed 4 million in 2014 and 6 million in January 2016, against Shetland's 23,000 people and much smaller population of active knitters. While historically, even Shetland's most skilled or influential knitters were often anonymous outside their immediate communities, online engagement brings the knitter out from behind their knitting. Being connected to such a global community can be exhilarating, and opens up possibilities for mutual learning and friendship. This potential for person-to-person communication, the online knitting world's tendency towards "fandom" (Cherry 2016), and the interest in island lives as well as island knitting also has its challenges. For an individual who might publish an occasional pattern, and even for professionals, managing relationships with distant customers can be daunting. A Shetland designer and business owner said:

Somebody commented that that was why they thought Shetland folk didn't put out designs, because they were that much hassle...what other industry has the same kind of openness, so many people interested and able to comment?...folk feel that they can contact you if they have the slightest question, because they

feel like you're there as a person... (Anonymous interviewee recorded January 17, 2017, Shetland).

The undesirable exposure entailed by online engagement is not evenly distributed across society. As Patel's (2019, 15) work shows, social media are "potentially fraught with risk, especially for women makers of colour," and the exclusionary whiteness of many online and offline craft spaces has been the subject of much recent discussion within international knitting networks (see <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/2/25/18234950/knitting-racism-instagram-stories>). The way in which the knitting of small places like Shetland is portrayed is part of this global conversation.

Shetland knitters are generally enthusiastic about the recent surge of international interest in knitting as a process, particularly given anxiety about skills "dying out" with the end of commercial knitting as a widespread occupation. In one sense, anxiety about the future of knitting skills seems strange; it could be argued that, in the age of the Youtube video, they have never before been so securely recorded, shareable and accessible. However, this does not take account of the range of types of knowledge and "worldviews" (Marchand 2008) that are bound up with the learning of "skills", especially when they are rooted in particular places.

### **Place happens**

One example of the way in which participative online-mediated communities and place-based maker cultures interact is a recent "buzz" around the hap (a wrappable garment, like a shawl). The contemporary reimagining of a once-common part of Shetland vernacular dress has had several contributing factors, including but not limited to Louise Scollay's "Hapalongs" of 2015 and 2016, Kate Davies' (2016) *Book of Haps*, and *The Happening*, an exhibition connected to (though not organized by) Shetland Wool Week.

I will outline a recent convergence of ‘happenings’ to illustrate how on and off-line, local and international dimensions of Shetland knitting intertwine to produce a multi-layered sense of place.

Louise Scollay, creator of the *Knit British* podcast and from Shetland herself, used Ravelry to organize two “Hapalongs”, ie hap knitalongs, in 2015 and 2016. (A knitalong is a group of knitters undertaking and discussing projects at the same time, using the same pattern or a common theme.) The Hapalong discussion forums included conversations about both the concept of the hap and the specific history of “what was once a very humble garment” (Scollay 2015), such as how it relates to the Shetland hand knitting industry and to the less everyday garments made for sale. Issues about historical and contemporary inequality, the status of women’s work and different modes of making recur in these discussions. Scollay gave a talk about the project at Shetland Wool Week 2016, and participants in attendance displayed the wide range of haps they had produced.

Kate Davies, a knitting pattern designer and author with a long-term connection to Shetland (see Davies 2012, 2014, 2016a, 2016b), brought together designs and essays by fourteen writers and designers, including several from or based in the islands, in *The Book of Haps* (2016). Like many of Davies’ publications, the book uses scholarly writing and stylish photography to convey the sense of a complex, historically and geographically situated hinterland around the patterns themselves.

Also in 2016, a local branch of the Scottish Women’s Institute gathered around 80 haps, many of which had been in storage in family homes near the Shetland village of Ollaberry, and put them on display in the village hall, calling the event “The Happening”. This was not the first time the group had displayed local knitting, but the decision to make haps the theme was partly inspired by Davies’ *The Book of Haps*

(which features a granddaughter of 'one of the ladies' (interviewee) on the cover). The hap exhibition was so popular with Shetland Wool Week visitors that the display was extended, as an interviewee explained: "we were just thinking to do it for two days, but then we extended it to four days, and I think they're saying next year can you do it for the week". The tourists took many photographs and shared them on social media. The available information about each hap's maker (and the presence of some of those makers in the flesh) was a major attraction of the exhibition. One visiting knitter, Sarh Moran, wrote in her blog:

It was the photos and the stories that pushed me over the edge. Whenever I see a hand knit in a charity shop I have to buy it because I feel so bad for the knitter who put in all the woman hours just to have her work discarded - has she died, gone into a home, given her work to someone who just doesn't appreciate it...there is never a name, no credit given where it is surely deserved...It was one of the best things that I experienced in Shetland. (<http://www.didyoumakeityourself.com/2016/10/shetland-wool-week-2016-day-2.html>)

During the exhibition, one of the demonstrating hand knitters (whose elaborate hap was especially widely shared on social media) was persuaded to agree to teach a class for a local audience. With little or no advertising beyond word of mouth, 18 women aged 30s-70s met regularly in Ollaberry, 34 miles from Shetland's main town, to knit what they saw as the standard, "traditional" Shetland hap. While many could remember relatives making similar garments, instructions would not have been written down or preserved, so they had the feeling that this knowledge was both meaningful and almost lost to them. While they may have knitted haps from patterns before, they wanted to be able to knit a hap the "right" way. In order to teach this method, the

teacher wrote out a pattern for her version of the garment and distributed a new stage of the instructions at each meeting. With its low-tech approach this class contrasted with, yet paralleled, Louise Scollay's Hapalongs. The offline and hyperlocal class – which involves the re-evaluation, formalising, and transmission of a garment seen as “traditional” and belonging to Shetland – has come about as a result of the international audience for Shetland hand knitting, in terms of both tourist visitors and online interaction. The class has now been running for two years and the resulting haps have, in turn, been displayed at Shetland Wool Week, continuing the cycle of influence between craft tourism and local practice.

## **Conclusion**

While the “place” of place-based textile practices is often imagined as a static, romanticized repository of “tradition” (Turney 2009) where change amounts to loss, textile making in places like Shetland is part of the everyday, inventive and always changing practice through which “place” is constituted. In contemporary Shetland, different textile “maker cultures” (Carr and Gibson 2016) meet and influence each other; the leisure knitting community of practice, preoccupied with the making process as sensual indulgence and creative outlet, encounters a context where knitting was, until unusually recently, a widespread utilitarian activity with the focus on commercial production. The “DIY” ethos and affordances of web 2.0 (Gauntlett 2011), which have fuelled a symbiosis of physical making and the user generation of digital content, enable a newly interactive relationship between knitters in Shetland and “Shetland knitting” as a globally accessible set of aesthetic and technical forms. One impact of this change is the degree to which Shetland-based, locally driven skill transmission is buoyed up from beyond the islands, as when social media cheerleading produced a class from the

Happening, or when crowdfunded donations contribute to the sustainability of ShetlandPeerieMakkers. Another is that the images and narratives of “Shetlandness” produced by “Shetland knitting” as a global brand are increasingly open to the influence and challenge of individual Shetland knitters. Local knitting expertise is distinguished not just by technical “know-how” but by close familiarity with the industrial and social changes that knitting has been part of, and with its role as a participatory way of being in a place.

This article is based on a short paper I presented at the 2018 Textile and Place conference at Manchester School of Art, and on elements of the project report *Shetland Hand Knitting: Value and Change* (2018). The author would like to thank the ShetlandPeerieMakkers task force, coordinator and tutors for all their help with her research.

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Figure 1. Textile Facilitation Unit, UHI (Shetland College), 2018.

Figure 2. ShetlandPeerieMakkers in action, 2018.

Figure 3. Jamieson's of Shetland shop window display featuring Shetland dialect, 2017.

Figure 4. Jamieson and Smith wool brokers' mural, 2017.

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