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Producing and consuming 'maker cultures': Shetland knitting as production, process and product

Recent attention to 'maker cultures', beyond 'modernist binaries of home and waged production, of artisanal pre-industrial trades against big manufacturing' (Carr and Gibson 2016: 310) is driven by economic and environmental concern. Innovations like hackerspaces and diverse maker movements (Davies 2017) seek to develop new configurations of cultural production and consumption, amateur- and professional-ism, and private and public space. However, while the limitations of 'modernist binaries' (Carr and Gibson 2016: 310) may be highlighted by today's concerns, these limitations are not new. As Adamson (2010: 2) points out, the frequently stated 'objective of "crossing boundaries" serves only to produce boundaries that never existed in the first place'.

Multiple 'maker cultures' with differing ideas about work and leisure, public and private, invention and reproduction, converge on Shetland textiles. Shetland's knitwear industry sold (and on a smaller scale than its mid-20th century peak, continues to sell) to international mass markets while combining hand knitting and domestic workspaces with mechanised and factory-based techniques. In today's age of 'folk fashion' (Twigger-Holroyd 2017) this model of production fuels Shetland's appeal to an international community of leisure hand knitters, whose presence is felt online and through craft tourism. Shetland's reputation as a fount of knitting expertise is an asset to knitwear businesses (Shetland weaving, once also a significant local industry, is comparatively little recognised). However, SMEs have difficulty securing skilled staff, from hand knitters to digital programmers, and longstanding 'maker cultures' that were once vital to Shetland culture as a whole are threatened if not lost. As 'maker cultures' themselves - as opposed to knitted objects - become objects of consumption, the fetishization of craft processes does not assuage anxiety about the loss of physical skill and communal cultural expertise, but prompts a reassessment of their value.

This paper builds on recent ethnographic research with Shetland hand knitters. A scoping study on the changing value of Shetland hand knitting was initiated by a local voluntary organisation called ShetlandPeerieMakkers (which exists to provide hand knitting tuition to Shetland children) and carried out by the University of the Highlands and Islands' Centre for Rural Creativity between September 2016 and January 2017. Combining desk research, semi-structured interviews and participant observation, this project produced an account of the contemporary cultural ecology of Shetland hand knitting, examining craft education, tourism, online social worlds and rural creative industries through the perspectives of local knitting experts.

As Stalker and Burnett (2016: 196) argue, 'remote islands...are increasingly positioned as entrepreneurial spaces that arguably offer 'good' sustainable models of practice for both cultural and natural heritage resource'. The Romantic vision of islands as places left behind by 'the arc of Modernity' (Srnicek and Williams 2016) is twinned by the notion of islands as laboratories or natural experiments (Baldacchino 2004), whose peripherality in relation to urban centres is imagined as the cutting-edge. Does 'alternative hedonism' (Soper 2013: 255), or the aestheticization of the 'intimate, useful, and meaningful' (Metcalf 2007: 18), enable craft in the immediate shadow of the North Sea oil industry to offer more than an island escape?