

Tales from the 'Life-Place': in what ways can contemporary fibre arts practices be understood to be 'telling tales' of extinction and ecological collapse?

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MA ARTS & PLACE

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the ways in which fibre arts practices can be understood to be 'telling tales' of extinction and ecological collapse. Presenting findings from desk and primary research, the essay discusses both the implicit nature of this storytelling as it can be read through the materiality of the fibres, and the explicit nature, as it is articulated by the practices of the fibre artists. The study finds that the value of fibre arts practices lies not only in their potential to tell tales of extinction and ecological collapse but of regeneration and care for both human and more-than-human communities.

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Introduction

This essay will attempt to identify, discuss, and analyse the ways in which the work of contemporary practitioners working with fibres (predominantly from sheep fleece) can be understood to be articulating issues of extinction and ecological collapse. The study adopts a methodology which aligns closely to the constructivist paradigm as defined by Gray and Malins, that is to say, one:

which is characterized by a 'relativist' ontology (multiple realities exist as personal and social constructions) and the epistemology is subjectivist (the researcher is involved); as a consequence, methodologies are hermeneutic (interpretative) and dialectic (discursive).

(Gray and Malins, 2017, p. 19)

The study draws on desk research and original research undertaken in the form of interviews (in conversation format) with a small group of UK based creatives. It also references the creative practice of the author where it has informed the line of enquiry followed. This use of multiple research methods attempts to activate the concept of "triangulation" to achieve "a more meaningful and balanced understanding" of the research question under consideration (Gray and Malins, 2017, p. 121). The author recognises that each of these approaches offers advantages and disadvantages (Gray and Malins, 2017, pp. 104:120), and due consideration of the ethical implications of conducting original research has been made, in line with the guidance provided by the Dartington Arts School. The approach taken was to introduce the same themes to each conversation to give the discussions a coherent focus, but a prescribed list of questions was not used, in order to allow a discursive dimension. As has been acknowledged, the presentation of the data gathered is interpretative, though care has been taken to present a full picture of the complexities and contradictions inherent in the responses of the interviewees. The structuring of the research to include close observations of the practice of the fibre artists alongside conversations underlines the author's support for Barrett and Bolt's contention:

that artistic practice be viewed as the production of knowledge ... Drawing on materialist perspectives, including Martin Heidegger's notion of "handability", our exploration of artistic research demonstrates that knowledge is derived from doing and from the senses.

(Barrett and Bolt, 2017, p. 1)

In this way, the work itself has been considered equally informative as the comments made by the practitioners.

Whilst the small number of interviewees (5) is acknowledged as a limitation, a clear set of criteria was applied to the selection of participants for the study. Each of the artists interviewed was selected on the basis that their practice involves work with rare-breed sheep fleece fibres, expresses an interest in ecological issues and exemplifies a connection to place. It is recognised that numerous other practitioners could also have been included, and that the findings of the study must therefore be recognised as representative rather than universal for artists who fit these criteria. Despite the use of the term 'fibre arts practices' the study makes no attempt to make a distinction between definitions

of 'craft' or 'art' in relation to the practices under consideration. This is since the practitioners themselves exemplify a comfortable acceptance of the potential of their work to transition between these two categories, and the fact that the work that they produce defies categorisation that seeks to situate 'art' and 'craft' in oppositional positions. The study instead focuses on what can be learned from these practices to exemplify how fibre arts can be understood in general to be 'telling tales', and it is hoped that the point of intersection of the three properties common to the practitioners selected will be shown to provide particularly fertile ground for both familiar and new engagements with themes of extinction and ecological collapse.

Whilst the terms extinction and environmental collapse are commonly understood, the exact understanding of these terms as referenced here will be clarified. Throughout this essay, the word 'extinction' will be used to refer to the 6th mass extinction event which we are currently experiencing, as described by the *Frontiers in Conservation Science* paper published in January 2021:

The IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) estimates that some 20% of all species are in danger of extinction over the next few decades, which greatly exceeds the background rate. That we are already on the path of a sixth major extinction is now scientifically undeniable ([Barnosky et al., 2011](#); [Ceballos et al., 2015, 2017](#)).

(Bradshaw, et al, 2021, p. 2)

The use of the term 'ecological collapse' is understood to reference the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction 'Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction 2022'. An online summary of the report states:

Despite progress, risk creation is outstripping risk reduction. Disasters, economic loss and the underlying vulnerabilities that drive risk, such as poverty and inequality, are increasing just as ecosystems and biospheres are at risk of collapse. Global systems are becoming more connected and therefore more vulnerable in an uncertain risk landscape.

(United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2022)

In an article on the UN report, Ahmed writes that it draws on the planetary boundaries framework that identifies 9 key ecosystems which, if pushed beyond a scientifically determined limit (as determined by the Stockholm Resilience Centre in 2009) "will dramatically reduce the 'safe operating space' for human habitation" (Ahmed, 2022). Ahmed continues that "the report notes that at least four of the nine planetary boundaries now seem to be operating outside the safe operating space" (Ahmed, 2022). The use of the term 'ecological collapse' in this essay refers to the ongoing collapse of ecosystems and biospheres caused by the continued breaching of the 'planetary boundaries' as outlined by the Stockholm Resilience Centre.

The pressing need for cultural engagement with the theme of the climate emergency has been well documented (Hayoe, 2020, pp. 105:111), (Atkin, 2020, pp. 113:119) and (Rodriguez, 2020, pp. 121:128) as the urgency of the environmental crisis continues to escalate. In addition to the pressing nature of the subject matter, the selection of the research question chosen for this dissertation was

also influenced by limited discussion of textile or fibre-based arts practices within the field of Arts and Place critical theory (as far as the desktop research undertaken has revealed). This may be the result of the relative infancy of Arts and Place as a field of critical enquiry but is also likely to be informed by the lengthy tradition of limited serious engagement with textiles and fibre arts practices within art historical and critical discourse (Gipson, 2022, pp7-9), (Parker, 2010) and (Hessel, 2022).

This situation has improved more recently, with a growing interest in the consideration of textile-based practice as situated within feminist and post-feminist discourse which explores the rich potential of textile work to speak to gendered, racialised and class-based positionalities (Freidman, 2022). Increasing discussion of fibre arts practices (incorporating animal and plant fibre-based practices as well as textiles) can be found in contemporary craft-based discourse, offering readings of the work as informed by and exemplifying complex economic, social and political discourses (Black and Burisch, 2021). These readings of fibre arts work as illustrative of subjective and 'situated' perspectives underscore the rich potential of fibre arts practices to be highly relevant to place-based readings of creative work, in particular if Malpas's assertion of the inescapable connection between (subjective) experience and place is followed:

The crucial point about the connection between place and experience is not, however, that place is something only encountered 'in' an experience, but rather that place is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience.

(Malpas, 2017, p. 31)

If the dynamic relationship between place and experience is accepted along with readings of fibre arts practice as a site of valuable expressions of diverse subjective positionalities (including those of historically marginalised practitioners), the exciting potential of fibre arts to contribute to arts and place discourse is evident. Indeed, critical interest in fibre arts practices understood as related to place-based creative enquiry can be seen to be gaining momentum. This may be in part due to efforts to de-colonise collections and open critical discourse to foreground non-European and North American making practices, which historically have placed greater 'value' on textile and fibre arts than that afforded by the traditional Western canon's insistence on the superiority of painting and sculpture. It also seems to echo the calls for global environmental action which recognise that voices from indigenous communities and the global South need to be projected more loudly across political and cultural sites of power (Thomas, 2022, p. 40). As T. J. Demos states in his writing on contemporary art and the politics of ecology:

What we need then are new methodologies to acknowledge the voices of the historically oppressed peoples, which stand to strengthen the basis of ethico-political solidarity around ecological concerns by joining with current struggles for cultural and environmental survival.

(Demos, 2016, p. 23)

Examples of the recent increased interest in fibre arts practices related to place and/ ecological concerns can be seen at the Tate galleries who have shown 3 major exhibitions by fibre arts practitioners in the last 3 years, including '*From Where I Stand*' by Otobong Nkanga in 2020, the 2022-3

presentation of the Tate Modern Turbine Hall commission '*Brain Forest Quipu*' by Cecilia Vicuna and the current Tate Modern show on Magdalena Abakanowicz (Tate, 2023).

A further example of the growing critical interest in fibre arts practices as specifically related to place-based and/ or ecological concerns is shown by the relatively high number of the fibre artists working in this area selected for inclusion in the 2022 Venice Biennale as part of '*The Milk of Dreams*' exhibition curated by Cecilia Alemani. These included Bronwyn Katz (South Africa), Britta Marakatt-Labba (Sapmi/ Northern Sweden), Myrlande Constant (Haiti), Safia Farhat (Tunisia) and Igshaan Adams (South Africa). According to curator Alemani, the exhibition articulated that:

the looming threat of environmental disaster remind(s) us every day that as mortal bodies, we are neither invincible nor self-sufficient, but rather part of a symbiotic web of interdependencies that bind us to each other, to other species, and to the planet as a whole.

(La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, p. 45)

The potency of fibre arts practices to 'remind' us of our place in the ecological 'web' of interdependencies will be explored in this dissertation as it attempts to define the ways in which contemporary fibre arts practices can be understood to be 'telling tales' of extinction and ecological collapse.

The essay will begin with an exploration of which qualities of fibre arts practice might be said to offer them this particular 'potency' and to make the case that both their material properties, and their relationship to the most basic of human survival needs, means that these works align with the exploration of ecological concerns in a way that is distinct from other forms of creative practice. Chapter 2 will continue with the presentation of the findings of the research undertaken with UK based practitioners to investigate the relationship between working with the fleece of rare-breed sheep and presentations of extinction and ecological collapse narratives within the practitioners' work. The complex interweaving of food and fibre production in UK sheep farming communities will be considered in reference to the practitioners' fibre choices and their concerns related to the qualities of the fibres and the impact of their production in relation to traceability, sustainability, ecological regeneration and localism. The final chapter will attempt to situate the qualities of fibre arts practices that have been shown to be 'telling tales' of extinction and ecological collapse within wider eco-criticism and Arts and Place theoretical discourse. At this point, the capacities of the fibre arts to offer 'new' narratives for living with extinction and ecological collapse will also be explored.

Before beginning the discussion, it is perhaps important to reference the concept of 'storytelling' as it is understood in this essay. The idea of storytelling, telling tales or narration is used here not to convey a sense of a single linear narrative, but rather leans into the notion of story as expressed in the catalogue accompanying '*The Milk of Dreams*' exhibition referred to above:

... inspired by sci-fi author Ursula K. Le Guin and her theory of fiction, which links the birth of civilization not to the invention of weapons, but to tools used for providing sustenance and care: bags, sacks, and vessels. As we are told by Le Guin, stories and technologies are neither Promethean nor apocalyptic, but rather containers that open spaces for the expression of life.

(La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, p. 48)

As will be discussed, the notion that the fibre arts have the potential to serve as 'containers that open spaces' for the telling of our stories has many compelling threads to unravel.

Chapter 1: - Containers that open spaces: the particular potency of the fibre arts to tell stories.

As a point of departure, the particular capacities of the fibre arts to 'interweave' narrative threads of ecological awareness will be considered. It will be argued that this capacity emerges from the inescapable relationship between the materiality of the fibre of choice and the wider ecological fabric of interconnected eco-systems. The entangled nature of the embodied human experience to many of the fibre-based making processes, as well as the historical longevity of the relationship between humanity and fibre-based production, will also be shown to be significant to the capacity of the fibre arts to articulate experiences of living through the current era of unprecedented ecological collapse.

The earliest known example of fibres manipulated by a human hand to form a length of cordage dates from 15,000 B.C and was found in the caves of Lascaux, along with the celebrated Palaeolithic paintings (Wayland Barber, 1994, p. 51). Whilst limited evidence of the fibre products created over the next 22,000 years remains (due to their organic nature), ample evidence of their production remains in archaeological finds and as cloths depicted on pottery and other artefacts. Thanks to this wealth of evidence, it is recognised that fibre arts have been used to provide bodily protection, convey meaning and enable all kinds of life-supporting processes (from leading animals to making baskets to store and transport food) for probably 20,000 years (Wayland Barber, 1994).

From simple plant-fibre cordages to the polymer based acrylic fibres that emerged as by-products of the fossil fuel industries, fibre arts practices have both evolved in response to, and served as records of, the development of our societies. The reasons for this particularly close relationship between fibre arts and the narration of the human experience are understood in this essay as three-fold:

- 1) The haptic and embodied connection between the fibre arts maker and their material
- 2) The link between the material chosen, the place in which the material grew and the wider ecological framework
- 3) The often-intertwined nature of the relationship between fibre and food production and the significance of these things to meet our basic survival needs

Each of these aspects will be considered below, with a particular focus on the capacity of the fibre arts to narrate the contemporary experience as it is informed by awareness of extinction and ecological collapse.

The connection between the body of the maker and their materials will first be considered, in an attempt to answer the question, how does our embodied relationship to fibre arts entangle us in ecological systems? The processes of working with fibre arts involve a significant degree of embodied, haptic labour. Collecting, preparing and perhaps growing fibres such as fleece (for felt and wool), flax, sisal, cotton, etc. are all intensely physical work. Whilst many contemporary practitioners have the option of reducing their physical labour by sourcing ready prepared materials, it is striking how many contemporary fibre arts practitioners prefer to be actively engaged with their materials at every stage of their process (Connolly, 2022). Consider the experience of the interview subjects working with sheep wool. Whilst they may not be personally involved with every stage of the process, they have an awareness of it, and that someone's physical labour has gone into each stage of production (Burns, 2022), (Connolly, 2022), (MacDonald, 2022) and (Somme, 2022). Beyond the labour involved in caring for the sheep themselves and possibly the land they graze, the first step of the process is the removal of the fleece from the body of the sheep, a process that involves extensive manual handling of the

sheep and the fleece. This process is followed by washing, carding/ combing and spinning the fleece, all physical processes that are labour intensive and require skills learned by the head but practised by the hand. If we then consider the act of making with the material, again, all require repetitive, time consuming and hand-heavy involvement- felting (which happens prior to spinning), knitting (even when working with a knitting machine), weaving, crochet, binding, knotting, stitching- all leave the hands tired and often arms and shoulders aching. Making within fibre arts can be understood as a highly physical, rhythmic process, which supports consideration of fibre arts practices as highly embodied activities, see Groth (2016) and Nottingham Trent University Craft and Embodied Knowledge Research Group (2023), perhaps more akin to rhythmic, repetitive bodily processes such as walking than other creative processes:

I think it's about repetition ... I realised, say for instance the act of walking is a repetitive act and I realised that was what I was feeling, just from the action of walking and craft, craft can do the same thing. It can be meditative. You can't live that way all the time, that's just how it works, but certainly you go into a different mindset with making.

(Somme, 2022, p. 62)

It can be argued therefore that this highly sustained physical, embodied way of making places the fibre artist in a close and physical relationship to their materials, in a way that is perhaps intrinsically different to other art making processes. If it is also considered that fibre artists are very often thinking of the material properties of their work from the perspective of the potential relationship with a physical body, the link between the fibre arts and the embodied experience draws even closer. This intimate relationship of the physical body (in both working with and handling of) to fibrous organic materials speaks to the entanglement of our bodies with fibre-arts practices and (through them) with the wider ecological framework. Indeed, as quoted in the recent Tate exhibition guide, fibre artist Magdalena Abakanowicz conceives this relationship between maker and fibres as extending from our fibrous bodies themselves:

I see fibre as the basic element constructing the organic world on our planet. It is from fibre, that all living organisms are built, the tissues of plants, leaves and ourselves, our nerves, our genetic code, the canals of our veins, our muscles ... We are fibrous structures.

(Tate Modern, 2023)

Another example of fibre arts practice that critically engages with fibrous bodily and ecological entanglements is the work of the American fibre artist, Tali Weinberg. Weinberg is a weaver by training and has developed an extensive body of work that eloquently articulates narratives of ecological damage on both a bodily and planetary scale. Weinberg's work 'Bound' (2017-19) (Figures 1 and 2) is an example of the use of climate related data to tell the story of the entangled relationship between embodied 'lived' experiences and the environmental crisis. The work, which is shown in different figurations, is composed of 300 pieces of plastic tubing, with each piece bound in threads of different colours to represent annual average temperature data from 300 different global locations (size as shown in Figure 1- 183cm x 305cm x 4cm).



Fig. 1: Tali Weinberg 'Bound 1.5' in 'Beyond Measure', Lewis Project Space, Tulsa (2019) © Tali Weinberg

The work is compelling, not only for the attention to detail in announcing the climate data information so precisely and so accessibly (we can read that the world is heating up through our basic recognition of red as a signifier of heat), but also through the level of care Weinberg takes with her material choices to foreground our bodily 'entanglement' with the extractive and polluting petrochemical industries (Weinberg, 2019). The use of 1500 feet of plastic (petrol-derived) medical tubing as the support for the work serves as a mechanism to remind us that:

Petrochemical pipelines penetrate the globe, physically entwining the fate of organisms from deep geologic time, present, and future. There is a relationship between the damage done to the earth and the damage done to our bodies by the petrochemical industry, and yet our lives are also reliant on and entangled with this industry.

(Weinberg, 2019)

The choice to work with plastic tubing as a support sits in high contrast to the threads Weinberg has used to 'bind' the global temperature data to the plastic tubing; these are threads dyed with plant or insect-based dyes that reach back to ancient global practices of working with cloth in a way that harmonises with the natural world (Weinberg, 2019). Through the interweaving of the 'natural' plant-dyed fibres and the medical plastic tubing with temperature rise data, the work materialises a complex entanglement of bodies, place, illness and ecological collapse. This work could therefore be said to be both highly localised and globally tentacular (Rogers, 2019) and (Brady, 2019), with its 'tentacular' qualities highlighted by the presentation format chosen by Weinberg illustrated by Figure 2.



Fig. 2: (Detail of) Tali Weinberg 'Bound (i.1)' in 'Land(s)craping', Living Arts Gallery, Tulsa (2018) © Tali Weinberg

The characterisation of the potential of place-based ecological storytelling in the fibre arts to be both highly localised and globally tentacular is a fitting one, since it articulates the particular capacity of fibre arts practice to simultaneously connect to that most highly-localised place (that is the 'place' of our physical, embodied selves) and to places both geographically and temporally distant, through the inescapable intertwining of its material properties with the wider ecological fabric of our planet. It is this link between the material chosen by the fibre artist, the place in which the material grew and the wider ecological framework which will now be considered. For whilst it is true that provenance of materials, environmental impact of making practices and awareness of supply chains are becoming more conscious areas of enquiry for multiple art forms, for example, painting (Denholm, 2020) and photography (Sustainable Darkroom, 2023), it could be argued that nowhere are these concerns more prevalent than in the area of fibre arts practice, due to the close relationship between fibre arts and the wider textile and fashion industries. Indeed, many of the participants interviewed for this study, see Burns (2022), Connolly (2022), MacDonald (2022) and Somme (2022), clearly articulated that they have consciously changed their practices out of a desire to separate themselves from the exploitative practices of these industries, as described for example by PETA in relation to the global wool trade (PETA, 2023). As weaver Lucy MacDonald said "For me, the textile industry is horrific in environmental terms ... I don't want to be part of it" (MacDonald, 2022, p. 57).

The huge environmental impacts of textile production processes are widely documented, for example a 2015 report from the European Parliament cited the global textile and footwear industries as responsible for 10% of all global greenhouse gas emissions (European Parliament, 2022). Added to this the problems of water misuse and pollution, the use of land to grow cotton and other textile crops at the expense of localised food crop growing and the use of fossil-fuel derived petrochemicals in fibre production mean that working with commercially sourced fibres of any kind inescapably connects the maker to a vast web of ecological damaging threads. Consequently, many ecologically conscious practitioners are turning to a range of solutions to avoid adding to the problem of ecological damage and textile overload. These solutions include working with reclaimed and recycled fibres, using locally sourced 'natural' fibres (hemp, flax, wool, etc.) and even growing or

rearing their own fibres in an attempt to distance their practice from the global network of exploitative and damaging textile industry practices (Burns, 2022), (Connolly, 2022), (Knapp, 2022), (MacDonald, 2022), (Somme, 2022) and (Southwest Fibreshed, 2023)

The approach which favours working on a highly localised sourcing and production model is one which appears to hold a great deal of appeal to many fibre artists, and is exemplified by the growing Fibreshed movement which began in California and is now established in regions of the UK (Fibreshed, 2023). Based on geographically defined communities, the movement brings together fibre growers, producers, makers and consumers in a circular, field-to-field model which “engenders appreciation, connectivity, and sensitivity for the life-giving resources within our homelands” according to founder Rebecca Burgess (Fibreshed, 2023). Not only does the Fibreshed model provide an ecologically responsible place to source materials, it offers fibre arts practitioners a way to be part a movement which offers a different kind of ecological narrative, one that attempts to run counter to those of collapse and extinction:

the Fibreshed ethos goes *beyond sustainability*, to something that is truly *regenerative*, and it does this by considering the whole system in which fibres, textiles and garments are not only **produced**, but also how they **worn** and how they are **disposed of**.

(Fibreshed Southwest England, 2019)

In an article for The Fashion Studies Journal, Fibreshed Southwest England founder Emma Hague writes eloquently about the potential of place-based, highly localised fibre production to keep within the limits of local resources:

Foundational to the Fibreshed model of textile production - “local fibres, local dyes, local labour”- is a place-based approach to developing models of textile and clothing production that are tailored to the challenges and opportunities that we see in our locality; where we produce and consume within the limits that our local resources allow; where our garments carry with them the ‘life-place’ of their region.

(Hague, 2022)

This highly localised model points clearly to material choices driven by a desire to situate fibre-arts practices outside of globalised, industrialised and ecologically damaging supply chains, and through this material-driven act of refusal, enables fibre artists working within the Fibresheds to weave highly localised, place-based narratives of potential ecological repair into the work. This ‘return to the local’ speaks to historical and cultural practices as well as contemporary ecological narratives, and raises questions around the idea of the ‘local’ as both profitable (in ecological terms, for community building and for continuity of place-based cultural traditions) and problematic (to what extent does the local deny contemporary globalised systems, exclude those who may identify or be identified as non-local or ‘other’ and privilege singular, dominant narratives over multiple histories?).

It is interesting to consider here a highly localised behaviour from the more-than-human world that resonates closely with a discussion of the human drive to ‘re-localise’ fibre production processes. This behaviour is driven by the hyper local place-based instincts of native, upland sheep known as hefting:

Hefting is the basis for shepherding on unenclosed mountain and moorland in the British Isles. This uses the homing and herding instincts of hill sheep making it possible for individual flocks owned by different farmers to graze 'open' fells with no physical barriers between them.

(The English Lake District World Heritage Site, 2020)

Hefting relies on the 'local knowledge' of the female sheep, which enables them to graze safely on open country, and pass their knowledge of the best place to graze, shelter from the wind or rain, drink in dry weather and move from pasture to pasture, down to their offspring. This centuries old practice relies on the sheep's intuitive knowledge of place, gained through four season grazing and year-round acclimatisation to shifting weather conditions. This is a practice which is now being challenged in some upland areas of England, with the sheep being brought down to pasture over winter, to allow the moorland grasses time to recover, reducing damage to the important underlying peat carbon sink (The National Trust, 2023). This ecologically driven behaviour change has led to concern from some in the sheep-rearing and fibre arts communities (Rumble, 2022) that the sheep will begin to lose their knowledge of the hefting practices, which will leave them less able to survive over winter in the traditional way, and cause them to become reliant on additional food sources provided by the farmer; a serious concern for sheep farmers already surviving on minimal incomes. Will the drive to protect upland grasslands ultimately lead to a decline in the already perilous numbers of some of the rare breed native sheep who graze them?

This example calls to mind the practice of fibre artist Claudy Jongstra of the Netherlands, who articulates the dynamic nature of this relationship between animal and plant conservation in her practice. Indeed, her work offers a strong example of an ecologically aware fibre-arts practice which incorporates a desire to 'give voice' to the 'life place' from which the materials in her work originate; in this case her organic farm and studio in the rural Friesland province in the northern Netherlands (Jongstra, 2021).



Fig. 3: Claudy Jongstra 'Charlestone Farmhouse' (2021) Screen shot from online video 'Atelier Talks 2'.
Film by Lourens Lente (2021)

The work, 'Charleston Farmhouse' (2021) (Fig.3) is an example of Jongstra's place-based practice, and the degree of attention she gives to the material qualities of her work. The felted piece (340 x 225 x 5 cm) is made almost entirely from wool from Jongstra's flock of rare, indigenous Drenthe Heath sheep. It is worth noting here how Jongstra's work illuminates extinction narratives through her choice to work with fibres from the fleece of rare breed Drenthe Heath sheep, a highly endangered ancient breed that once widely grazed the heathlands of Northern Europe. In an interview with Sotheby's magazine, Jongstra described her decision to start working with and breeding these sheep:

When I discovered this indigenous Dutch breed, at first for the wild luscious quality of its raw wool, I immediately realized that giving their wonderful fleece a new purpose would help save this sheep breed from extinction.

(Sotheby's, 2021, paragraph 10)

This statement is an unequivocal iteration of the importance of both fleece quality and the drive against extinction of the species for Jongstra, and is quite unusual for its directness, as will be illustrated by the discussion of the fibre choices being made by the UK artists interviewed for this study in Chapter 2.

Once harvested, cleaned and processed, the fleece is dyed on Jongstra's farm, with organic plant dyes produced from the farm's own dye garden. On her farm Jongstra has created a highly localised, sustainable supply chain for the materials she uses, a process she describes as involving "holistic production cycles (that) bring living material narratives to light. In this way, materials become journalistic expressions of their own evolution" (Jongstra, 2019). That is to say, in Jongstra's work, we see the physical traces of the growing processes of her materials in the finished pieces themselves. In this way, Jongstra's practice can be understood as a great example of the way that fibre arts can so successfully activate and illustrate the link between the material chosen by the artist, the place in which the material grew and the wider ecological framework.

Whilst Jongstra's commitment to sustainability in her practice is clear, and she has used her platform as a highly successful artist to share her knowledge and advocate for the wider adoption of sustainability practices (Jongstra, 2022), it is important to recognise the unusual and privileged situation of her working methodology. For whilst Jongstra is far from unique amongst fibre arts practitioners in working with wool from her own sheep, see Connolly (2022) and Fibreshed Southwest England (2023), she is perhaps unique in commanding the price tags she does for her finished work, for example 'Charleston Farmhouse' is valued at between 75 and 100,000 euros (Gallery Viewer, 2023). If we wish to consider broader based examples of fibre arts practice as connected to the telling of ecological tales, it is necessary to turn to the often-intertwined nature of the relationship between fibre and food production, since these twin aims are often the objectives of financially viable small scale sheep husbandry. In large-scale commercial sheep farming, the link is even more evident, with Ian Hartley, CEO of the British Wool Marketing Board contending that "99.9% of UK sheep farmers' wool will always be a by-product of the meat industry" (Betrand, 2014, paragraph 6).

When thinking about the particular capacities of fibre arts practices as related to the contemporary experience of extinction and ecological collapse, then the significance of the entwinement of fibre and food production to meet our basic survival needs becomes highly relevant. This relationship

between food and fibre production in sheep farming is global, ancient and for millennia has delivered the mechanisms humans have used to meet basic needs for survival- food and warmth. It is tempting to consider that the return to localised and fully traceable fibre production methods (as exemplified by the Fibreshed movements and the practice of Claudy Jongstra) can offer scalable solutions to problems of impending global food shortages and environmentally unsafe textile production that are contributing to the exceeding of boundaries precipitating environmental collapse (Ahmed, 2022). However, it is important to consider the potentially problematic nature of the turn 'inward' to the hyper-local. For whilst there is much to recommend the model, the potential for scalability to allow it to offer any sort of alternative to the current mainstream model of fibre production is highly questionable. As explained above, in the UK, fleece is predominantly produced as a by-product of the meat production which provides the driver for commercially farming sheep. It can therefore be supposed that if regeneratively farmed sheep are to be the solution to a sustainable textile industry, they must first and foremost be part of a sustainable and ecologically positive food industry.

There is however substantial debate over the question of the role of organic, pasture-fed livestock in any ecologically viable food system. There are strong arguments for the role of sheep in pasture based, localised farming practices, as Price states in an article for The Rare Breed Survival Trust :

We increasingly hear arguments that favour the removal of meat from our diets “for the sake of the environment” but native breed keepers are in a strong position to counter that view by demonstrating that farming with native livestock can offer a sustainable solution. High levels of animal health and welfare, a natural forage-based diet and the low food miles involved in good quality local food production all have a part to play in sustainability and can all be delivered by our traditional native breeds.

(Price, 2022, paragraph 16)

The counter argument runs that, due to the vast amount of grazing land needed per head of sheep to keep these practices truly sustainable, this type of farming remains too costly and land intensive to make it a scalable solution. According to George Monbiot:

In the UK, my estimates suggest that some 4m hectares of hill and mountain are used for sheep farming ... Four million hectares is 22% of the entire farmed area. It's roughly equivalent to all the land used to grow grain in this country, and 23 times the area used for growing fruit and vegetables. But, in terms of calories, lamb and mutton supply just over 1% of the UK's food.

(Monbiot, 2022)

Setting aside the issue of the best use of land to meet the needs of future food shortages, it also important to consider if wool from sheep fibres actually does offer the most sustainable solution to meeting our need for warmth and shelter from clothing. Despite the claims of organisations like The Campaign for Wool, it cannot be assumed that it is an entirely positive relationship environmentally speaking:

Wool Month is a great time to celebrate the amazingly natural and renewable resource that is wool ... We hope to inspire more people to consider the environment and choose wool when

purchasing clothing. Wool is 100% natural and renewable as sheep in the UK grow between 1 and 3 kgs of raw wool annually that must be sheared for the health of the animal. It is also 100% biodegradable and therefore does not contribute to landfill, or micro-pollution in the ocean.

(The Campaign for Wool, 2022)

A report entitled 'The science behind the wool industry. The importance and value of wool production from sheep' supports these claims about biodegradability, stating that wool fibres "readily biodegrade in seawater and would only persist for a period of months" (Doyle et al, 2021). But perhaps a more nuanced view is presented in a report entitled 'Environmental impact of textile fibres – what we know and what we don't know' (Sandin et al, 2019). The report claims to have compiled all the publicly available data on the environmental impact of fibre production and to have assessed it in relation to industry agreed definitions of sustainability, which include key points such as 'feedstock availability', 'economic potential' at commercial scale and 'social sustainability', i.e. 'the solution must not have any negative impact on social sustainability' (Sandin et al, 2019, p.5). It is interesting to consider their findings on wool fibres in relation to this expanded notion of sustainability, i.e. one that encompasses wider social impacts on human communities and acknowledges economic factors as significant for scalable sustainability, see also Doyle et al (2021). In reference to the environmental impacts of wool production, the report states that wool is generally considered to be 'climate intensive' due to the methane emissions produced by the sheep and the fact that methane is considered a more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. Despite stating the fact that over a 200-year period methane emissions can be seen to break down to biogenic carbon dioxide and this can be understood to mitigate the majority of the emissions produced, the report continues:

it should be acknowledged that with the current consensus on climate impact assessment method, namely GWP100, methane emissions from sheep are seen as a significant contributor to climate change and thus wool most often yields a high climate impact in relation to other fibres.

(Sandin et al, 2019, p.29)

However, in her article 'The Golden Hoof', Knapp gives a comprehensive overview of the potential of pasture-fed sheep farmed as part of a regenerative system to mitigate these negative impacts, citing Powell who highlights the ability of sheep :

to reverse climate change by rebuilding soil organic matter and restoring degraded soil biodiversity; resulting in both carbon draw down from the atmosphere and improving the water cycle.

(Powell (2018, p. 6) in Knapp, 2020, p. 4)

In addition, when considered in relation to water usage, wool is found to yield a significantly lower impact than cotton, though comparable or greater than many of the other fibres considered (Sandin et al, 2019, p.52). Overall, however, Sandin et al conclude that 'the data suggests the common separation into "good" and "bad" fibres, based on generic classifications of fibre types, is too simplified' (Sandin et al, 2019, p.25).

In the face of these complexities, it is difficult to argue conclusively for the expansion of the pasture-fed, regenerative, local model as a scalable solution to meeting either food or fibre needs in the future. However, this does not mean that the model is not without value, and it is the 'value' of this model that will be revisited in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2: Absent bodies: rare-breed sheep fleece, materiality and extinction narratives.

This chapter offers a focused enquiry into the practices of a small group of UK fibre artists working with rare breed sheep fibres as a lens through which to consider the relationship between fibre choice and extinction and ecological collapse narratives. The material choices practitioners are making will be shown to connect them to a wide web of concerns including traceability, sustainability, ecological regeneration and wider community benefit.

The research findings will be shown to articulate a diversity of motivations for fibre selection and to expose the complexity inherent in working with a material which reinforces awareness of imminent extinction. Certainly, this was my own experience as I began to explore the potential of the fleece itself as a narrative device for 'making meaning' within my own creative practice. As part of the MA Arts & Place course I had been working with site-specific materials (plant matter, yarn from local sheep flocks, etc.) as a device for allowing site to 'speak' directly within the work. As an extension of this interest in the potential of the material itself to 'make meaning', I obtained four raw sheep fleeces, as material artefacts to 'stand in' for the four most endangered sheep breeds in the country, with a view to making a creative body of work on the theme of extinction.

The fleeces were selected after consultation with the Rare Breed Trust's 'Sheep Watchlist' 2022 which states that there are 27 native rare breeds of sheep on the watchlist, four of which are identified as a priority breeds (The Rare Breed Survival Trust, 2023). The Trust website also provides 'biographies' for the four priority breeds obtained. There was the Welsh Mountain Pedigree, which dates from the 13th century and is described as "a maternal hill breed" able to thrive in extreme environments, the Lincoln Longwool, massive, and "with a long and lustrous fleece", the small and slim North Ronaldsay, which is still mainly found on its native island, the northernmost of the Orkneys, where a dyke keeps the sheep on the seaward side, meaning that the breed has evolved to primarily eat seaweed. The last fleece was a Whitefaced Woodland, which originated in the Pennines (biographical information from The Rare Breed Survival Trust, 2023). It is helpful here to understand what it means to qualify as a priority breed in extinction terms - using the pre 2020/21 calculation methodology, which was based purely on the number of breeding ewes currently registered as meeting breed standard- the four priority breeds each have only 500 to 900 breeding ewes left in existence. More specific data puts the number of breeding ewes of the Lincoln Longwools at under 800 (Lincoln Longwools, 2023), and the remaining female breeding North Ronaldsays at less than 600 (Lockhart, 2022). These startlingly low numbers sit alongside the stories told by the biographies and consultation with each breed specific Society, which reveal long histories, rich traditions and highly place specific connections (Lincoln Longwools, 2023), (Whitefaced Woodlands, 2023), (North Ronaldsay Sheep Fellowship, 2023) and (Welsh Mountain Sheep Society, 2023). It's clear that these variations between the breeds carry rich resonance for lovers of animals, wool, the countryside, heritage, community, and local traditions, and that much stands to be lost if these four breeds are allowed to become extinct.

When these types of emotive narratives begin to circulate, it is easy to slip into culturally sanctioned and well-rehearsed tropes of eulogising species at imminent threat of demise (Heise, 2016), so it is important to consider the ways in which the extinction narratives activated by encounters with the rare breed fleeces could be seen to being constructed in relation to wider cultural contexts. This topic

is usefully introduced by Heise in 'Imagining Extinction' (2016), in which she explores the way that decisions over what is, and what is not, worth striving to save are societally sanctioned and culturally constructed. The feelings of remorse and regret that accompany the possibility of extinction for native breeds with a history deeply entwined with our own localised historiographies are not universally echoed when news of the demise of another species of 'foreign' insect is received. In fact, this culturally based differentiation begins long before the extinction discussion begins, at the point of species description and classification. According to Heise, who asks us to acknowledge that all stories of extinction are, in truth, partial, culturally specific and laden with implicit and unexamined value-based assumptions, "biodiversity, endangered species, and extinction are primarily cultural issues, questions of what we value and what stories we tell" (Heise, 2016, p.5).

It is worth keeping in mind this understanding of extinction stories as culturally driven as we consider how narratives of extinction are being woven into the practices of the fibre artists under consideration. Whilst evidence from the research carried out as part of this study certainly points towards a deliberate choice to select rare-breed native UK fleece to work with on the part of the fibre-arts practitioners considered, it would be an oversimplification to characterise this choice as exclusively driven by concerns about extinction (Burns, 2022), (Connolly, 2022), (MacDonald, 2022), (Rumble, 2022) and (Somme, 2022). On the contrary, whilst a general opinion about the importance of keeping the breeds alive as a preference was commonly expressed, this was far from the most passionately articulated driver of behaviour. In fact, weaver and rare breed sheep/ fibre consultant Rebecca Connolly gave the following diverse list as motivations she has encountered for people choosing to work with rare breed sheep/fleece:

- Suitability of the breeds to the land available- "the Shetland is a small breed of sheep and it sort of suits a small farming enterprise. It won't be like a massive 40-acre field, it will be a bit of a slope here and a little wood."
- Fleece colour preference- "the rare breeds are coming into their own because people avoiding dye want to keep coloured breeds, it's actually a design element."
- Ease of care- rare breeds are hardy- "It could be a very practical thing with the breeds that thrive in certain quite hard situations like the Herdwick."
- The physical properties of the sheep- "There is a lady in the Guild, she has her own Shetland sheep and she loves the Shetland, so I would think for her it's the joy of having a sheep that she can handle herself physically as it's a small sheep."
- The aesthetic and traditional appeal of the breed- "It (the Shetland) looks right in the landscape- they turn the clock back. You'd never get Shetland sheep down here ... they are not native to here and it's more that people kind of like them ... could be they like the look of them in the field."
- Fleece quality- "There's a lady called Liza ... I would say she is driven by the quality of the fleece."

(Connolly, 2022, pp. 49:50)

Across the interviewees, of all the diverse motivating factors that dictated people's choice to work with fleeces of a particular rare breed, the usability of the fleece (or of the yarn ultimately produced), was the most common reason given. All the subjects talked about their preference for rare-breed fleece as being driven by creative/making based factors. Discussion of the physical properties of the

fleece and resulting yarn was frequent. The various fleeces were individually described as springy, coarse, smooth, silky, fibrous, soft, etc. and their suitability for spinning, carding and ultimately working with in felting, knitting, weaving, etc. was given high priority (Burns, 2022), (Connolly, 2022), (MacDonald, 2022), (Rumble, 2022) and (Somme, 2022). For example, knitwear maker Ria Burns described her choice to work with Shetland wool as driven by the way that the fibre translated into her knitwear designs. That is not to say that Burns is not motivated to choose rare breed native wool by ecological and extinction related concerns, but that her final, breed-specific choice was driven by factors related to her creative practice (Burns, 2022).

Another very strong element to breed-specific fibre choice articulated was also design driven, in that it relates to the colour palette provided by that particular breed, see (Burns, 2022), (Connolly, 2022) and (Somme, 2022). This is a nuanced perspective from which to consider the relationship between the materiality of the fleeces and extinction narratives, for whilst the popularity of rearing North Ronaldsays (for example) may be increasing as more fibre artists want to access the range of colours that the fleeces of this breed can provide; that does not mean necessarily that those fibre artists are seeking out the North Ronaldsays in an awareness of the fact there remain only 600 breeding ewes left in existence. For the most part, in contrast to the choice made by Jongstra discussed above, they are not choosing North Ronaldsay yarn primarily to keep the breed alive. Indeed, in cases where there is an awareness of the hyper fragility of the breed's future survival, it does not automatically mean that concern over this fact is expressed as concern about the potential extinction of the breed per se, but rather that it may relate to the fact that the source of these particular coloured fibres may no longer be available, as is shown by the range of views reported by Connolly (2022).

The question of motivation to work with these fibres is further clouded when the question of why these coloured yarns are so sought after is considered. For many of the subjects of the study, the answer to this question circles back to the themes of place-based and ecological narratives. Many people spoke about the desire to have access to a wide a range of colours in undyed yarns as motivated by a desire to avoid having to purchase commercially dyed yarns, i.e., products which add chemical pollutants to waterways (Burns, 2022), (Connolly, 2022), (MacDonald, 2022), and (Somme, 2022). According to an article from the industry website 'Textile Today', 200,000 tons of polluted wastewater from textile dyeing processes is discharged into waterways across the world every year (Akter Baly, 2022). It is not just the volume but the impact of the wastewater which is so problematic:

Textile dyes degrade the aesthetic quality of water bodies by increasing biochemical and chemical oxygen demand (BOD and COD), impairing photosynthesis, inhibiting plant growth, entering the food chain, providing recalcitrance, bioaccumulation and potentially promoting toxicity.

(Akter Baly, 2022, paragraph 3)

Is it any wonder that ecologically concerned fibre arts practitioners are exploring natural methods of achieving colour? In addition to those colours found naturally occurring in rare-breed fleeces, Connolly spoke about the wide range of colours that it is possible to achieve through dyeing with locally available plant materials, particularly when combined with variations in water composition:

Coreopsis is an example of yellow that grows wild in this area, so in the perfect world you would have sheep as part of a holistic regenerative farming practice, you would be dyeing their wool (if you want to dye) totally with local plants. Madder is another one that grows here so you've got the yellow and the red, and the only other one which historically has grown here is woad. They're all local, and it's argued that in the traditional dyeing world you can get every colour you want from those three, so you don't need to import ... and you can alter the colour by whatever the qualities of your water. Historically, Stroud was known for its strength of scarlet and you got that brightness because of the quality of the water, so if you're in an area, say you're in Cornwall where you've got tin in the soil, that's going to enhance the property of the natural dye.

(Connolly, 2022, pp. 46:47)

In addition to naturally occurring colour variation, another strong motivation expressed for working with rare breed yarns was to keep the possibility of making traditional, place-specific patterns and designs alive, and preventing the 'extinction' of historic and culturally important making practices. For example, Connolly (2022) spoke about the Fair Isle tradition of patterns based entirely on the range of natural wool colours that can be obtained from the fine-fleeced Shetland sheep which includes: "Shetland black, shaela (dark grey), sholmit (pale grey), moorit (brown), mooskit (dark fawn), eesit (pale fawn) to unbleached white" (Riddiford, 2012). This list itself demonstrates the cultural and linguistic significance of this highly place-specific yarn, a significance which is recognised by the presence of a Fair Isle sweater knitted entirely with undyed Shetland wool being held in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A Museum, 2023) and the extensive archive on Fair Isle knitting held at the Shetland Museum and Archives (Shetland Museum and Archives, 2016- 2023).



Fig. 4: Fair Isle sweater, unknown maker, 1920s, Shetland Islands, hand-knitted two-ply wool.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London (date unknown)

Perhaps then this relationship between rare breed sheep survival and the fibre arts community can be understood as one of tightly woven co-dependencies, which can be characterised as a generalised concern about extinction and ecological collapse narratives which is punctuated by highly particularised creative drivers or hyper-local tradition related concerns which are driving behavioural choices. This interplay between generalised ethical principles and acts of ethical behaviour in practice will be explored further in Chapter 3.

However, It is worth first returning to the material encounter with the 4 rare-breed fleeces referred to earlier in this chapter, in an attempt to further interrogate what the material qualities of the fleece can tell us about extinction narratives being told by fibre arts practitioners. In order to understand these qualities, it is important to explain the experience of the encounter with a full, 'raw' sheep fleece. What is so startling in the encounter is the absence of the flesh, the lack of the body that is made by its very absence startlingly present. A fleece is both utterly present and 'real' in the physical, material sense, and also undeniably a stand in, or a signifier, for the absent body of the living, breathing sheep that was until very recently attached to this now limp, curiously flattened, not yet entirely inanimate, version of itself.

Standing in a sea of lifeless fleeces, each one a representative of a breed with less than 900 breeding ewes still in existence, is an unmooring experience. Each fleece is clearly distinct- vastly different in size, weight, fibre density, texture, colour- so there is no mistaking who is who. The nimble, chocolate brown North Ronaldsay (dainty legs and springy fleece), the mighty Lincoln (vast reams of spiralling locks of creamy fur spilling across the floor), the lustrous Welsh Mountain and the tangled mat that was a Whitefaced Woodland. Heads, legs, tails for the most part still intact. Burs and plant debris still attached, bringing home their connection to the land they graze. This is evidence of living, eating, defecating bodies- lifeless, flattened on the floor. If the experience of the fibre artist is recognised as an encounter with the fibres of the fleece, and the fleece is recognised as a direct referent to the sheep as a material body, then perhaps thinking about rare breed sheep extinction in this context can be said to be rooted firmly in a grounding of materiality. That is to say, a grounding that acknowledges both the sheep and fibre artists as embodied beings in an interconnected relationship, in which notions of 'response-ability' (Haraway, 2016, p. 28) and 'ethical practices' (Alaimo and Hekman, 2015, p. 147), can take precedence over the sentimentality which characterises much extinction related discourse. Indeed, as the research undertaken has shown, for fibre arts practitioners, the material dimension (tactile, textural and colour qualities of the fleece) is very much at the foreground of their thinking about their relationship to these sheep teetering on the edge of extinction.

Following Alaimo and Hekman's assertion that "attending to materiality erases the commonsensical boundaries between human and nature, body and environment, mind and matter" (2015,p.152), it is interesting to consider the practice of fibre-artist Yuli Somme, which can be understood to slip between these 'boundaries' as they are commonly understood. Somme is a fibre artist working predominantly with felting, using fibres from sheep fleece sourced locally to her workshop on Dartmoor. Like many of the practitioners encountered as part of this study, Somme's fibre arts practice has been a central and sustaining thread through her life, and she speaks eloquently about how her personal experiences have informed the evolution of her work. Somme's positionality is one of a committed eco-activist, in that she enjoys making work which ask people to question the systems that support the societal choices that we are making (Somme, 2020) and (Somme, 2022). In her current practice, Somme is 'prodding' at the burial and funeral care system, by providing an alternative 'burial vessel' for dead bodies, in the form of felted shrouds. The shrouds offer an enveloping and soft alternative to the cardboard or 'wood' (often composites of toxin-releasing veneers and chipboard) coffins of the mainstream, which have often been shipped from far off overseas destinations (Somme, 2022).

This work also draws on Somme's deep interest in the history of the English wool trade, through which she learned about the 16th century law stipulating that all bodies must be buried in wool shrouds. It also emerged from Somme's passion for increasing awareness of the ecological impact of material choices amongst craft makers, initiated by her involvement in the *'Treading Lightly'* exhibition in 1999 (Somme, 2022). It is Somme's deep interest in both the local ecological context and the relationship of her materials to the wider global systems that makes her fibre-arts practice such a compelling example for this study. As a member of Fibreshed Southwest England, Somme's practice embodies key aspects of the organisation's philosophy- local sourcing (she began by collecting raw fleeces from neighbours' farms) and regenerative farming, as the fleeces are now sourced from farms that follow the 'field- to-field' method, which ensures entirely organic growing practices are used, meaning the fibres produced are entirely biodegradable, and can therefore be 'fed back' into the soil (Fibreshed Southwest England, 2019).

What makes Somme's practice so interesting, is that she considers both the shrouds and the bodies they contain as part of this regenerative, soil to soil process. Preferring to make shrouds for burials in natural, woodland burial sites, Somme speaks eloquently about the valuable nutrients that are released back into the soil and enrich it as part of the decomposition of the buried bodies. This perspective can be understood as a recognition of our bodies as material 'vessels', made up of the same mix of atomic 'stuff' and microbial inhabitants as the soil (Somme, 2022, p. 63). This is a material understanding that places the human body firmly back into the ecological fabric of the cycle of life, death, decomposition and renewal, and brings to mind Donna Haraway's ideas of cross-species 'becoming-with':

We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities ... Critters- human and not- become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling.

(Haraway, 2016, p. 97)

Understood in relation to Somme's positionality as an 'eco-activist', passionate about care for all living things- sheep welfare, gut biomes, the terminally ill seeking to stitch a creative expression of themselves onto their own shroud (Somme, 2022)- this fibre-arts practice can be seen to stretch across divisions of localised and global production or creative versus ecologically driven decision making, and perhaps to occupy a new space; a space of care-based agency that sits in full awareness of narratives of ecological collapse and imminent extinction. For these reasons, Somme's practice can be considered to be connecting the lived experience of embodied mortality in the present with the imminent mortality of most of life on earth, as we move ever closer to the 6th Mass Extinction event (Bradshaw, et al., 2021). In this way, Somme's work can be understood as a fibre arts practice occupying a positionality which recognises that "valuing, caring for and protecting the natural world proceeds best from particular, sensuous, emotional and (in a related materialist sense) spiritual involvements with it" (Curry, 2011, p. 133).



Figure 5: Photo of burial party carrying hand-felted heritage shroud made by Yuli Somme (2022).
Image courtesy of Yuli Somme

It is the reading of place-based fibre arts practice as operating from a positionality of cognisant ‘active care-based agency’, informed by an understanding of ourselves as embodied, materially grounded beings that form part of an interdependent ecological web, that will be more thoroughly explored in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Tight knit ecologies: fibre-bound communities of care.

In this chapter, consideration will be made of place-based fibre arts practices telling tales of extinction and ecological collapse as situated within (and contributing to) both human and more-than-human 'communities of care'. It will be suggested that this positionality enables the fibre arts practices under consideration to be viewed as 'holding space' for telling stories both of extinction and preservation, and of ecological regeneration as well as collapse. With consideration of eco-feminist and ecological care-based understandings of ethical practices, these complex narratives will be shown to be emerging not from perspectives of denial or dismissal, but rather as stemming from grounded, community and materially bound positions.

During the course of the interviews and research conducted for this study, a repeating driver has been shown to be that of community. All the subjects interviewed identified supporting communities involved in the production of rare breed/ locally produced fibres as hugely important to them. The subjects spoke about supporting neighbours and farming friends, and about their desire to keep rural communities viable (Burns, 2022), (Connolly, 2022), (MacDonald, 2022), (Rumble, 2022) and (Somme, 2022). The structure of the commercial wool economy in the UK was deplored as de-valuing fleece, livestock, farmers and rural communities:

You know all my life I've just thought this is so wrong, having understood the history of the wool industry, and you know if only we had gone down the path of just doing it locally and valuing the skills and the knowledge that we have in this country, which is now disappearing so fast.

(Somme, 2022, p. 65)

Interview subjects also spoke about the importance of a collaborative, wholistic, community-based approach to the field to finished fibre product process:

There's lots of investment at each stage of the game (of fleece processing and fibre production) and also it's about recognising each stage has its own skill set and its own massive infrastructure that goes with it, and the learning that goes into every stage of that process, and that's why you do need a community model.

(Connolly, 2022, p. 48)

Having people who are experts in every little bit of it is the benefit of working with local experts- it's the skills sharing in the community.

(MacDonald, 2022, p. 57)

In addition, the importance of inter-generational community sharing was stressed:

It was amazing how much she knew and taught me about the fleece. People often say to me if it's wool it must be really scratchy because they have no idea about the different types of wool. People just used to know all of this stuff, the older people still do, but in our generation, it's just been lost.

(MacDonald, 2022, p. 56)

Subjects also talked extensively about the significance of forming their own, personal connections (as sheep farmers, spinners, processors, dyers, makers and consumers) which enables them to support the people they identified as their 'community'. Rumble described how she knows who all the White Faced Woodland breeders in her local area are "so it's a family in that way ... a community of people" (Rumble, 2022, p. 59). Many of the interviewees described communities unified by a desire to farm ethically and ecologically, taking care of the land, and placing a 'proper' value on the fibre at all stages of the production and making cycle (Burns, 2022), (Connolly, 2022), (MacDonald, 2022), (Rumble, 2022) and (Somme, 2022). However, the issue of 'value' was also recognised as highly contested, and the notion that end-point products from a fibre-arts practice rooted in ecologically sound and care-based practices are often perceived as 'expensive' was described as problematic by many of the interviewees:

That's the thing that really cuts me I suppose, because I've tried to price my products so that there is one that is affordable and what I find heart-breaking actually is sometimes being accused of being too expensive, and it's like I'm at fault, and that is the case you know for so many of us working in this area.

(Somme, 2022, p. 65)

Those practitioners who choose to work in this way place a 'value' on the regenerative farming practices and ecologically sustainable elements of their making practices behind their work. Increasingly, these makers are connecting with collectors and consumers who also recognise that 'value' and are prepared to pay the increased costs that are attached to this way of making. Of course, not everyone is willing or able to accept these increased costs, which means that the reach of these products remains limited by the financial wealth as well as the values of consumers. MacDonald explained that it can be quite hard to talk to customers about the cost issues associated with traceability and sustainability of yarn, and that people have a range of responses about it "Some people do value traceability/ sustainability, and some people are incredibly rude about the cost involved in it ... it's not for everybody- it's quite a niche market" (MacDonald, 2022, p. 57).

Whilst potentially limited to relatively financially affluent consumers, communities of growers and farmers, makers and producers, collectors and consumers are beginning to form- driven by shared value systems based on narratives of ecological protection and the regeneration of wider rural ecosystems. The organic development of these 'ethical practice' based communities brings to mind the idea of 'emergence strategies' as key to the ecological thinking that will be useful for constructing new systems for the era of ecological collapse. To quote Adrienne Maree Brown "Emergence shows us that adaptation and evolution depend more upon critical, deep, and authentic connections, a thread that can be tugged for support and resilience" (Maree Brown, 2020, p. 38).

It is also important to recognise here that these understandings of community ties can also be considered to stretch beyond the human to include the more-than-human. In much the same way as fibre artists understand their creative making practices as symbiotically entwined with the material qualities of their fibres (see Chapter 2), they understand their practices to be entangled with the plants and animals that provide them with the materials that they need. It is perhaps helpful to refer here to the work of Donna Haraway in her 2016 book 'Staying with the Trouble: making Kin in the Chthulucene' which both describes the complexity of the inter-relationship of human and more-than-

human life on earth and posits possible future ways of living collaboratively on the planet. Haraway asks us to understand the world as an interconnected web and to recognise the co-dependence of all the organisms on the planet, urging us to think in terms of “sympoiesis” (Haraway, 2016 p. 5) or ‘making with’ as an alternative model for being in this changing world. If the idea of ‘making with’ is considered in relation to the practices under consideration in this study, it is interesting to ask to what the extent the material qualities of the fibres themselves can be understood to influence the practices of the makers. It may be possible to argue in this way that these practitioners do have a symbiotic relationship with their materials, which would mean that the work they produce can be understood as a collaboration with the fibres themselves.

A case study will now be shared which posits the idea that the this ‘sympoietic’ relationship between maker and materials also has the capacity to influence not just the work produced, but the maker themselves. This is the example of the evolving practice of knitwear designer and maker Ria Burns. Burns began her career studying fashion design, before specialising in knit. Her background as an activist and already well-developed interest in ecological issues led her to ask questions around the sustainability and traceability of her materials. Initially, Burns worked with old-stock commercial yarn, before a connection through a friend led her to start working with Shetland wool. In the Shetland, Burns had found the yarn that suited both her designs and her preference for native, traceable, sustainable wool (Burns, 2022). Up to this point, Burns’s story of materials driven and ecologically aware decision making largely echoes many of the other subjects considered for this study, however how Burns’s practice developed next points to an additional layer of ‘entanglement’ to her work with fibre.

Burns’s strong identity as a designer means that, whilst the provenance of her yarns is of great importance to her, equally important are the capabilities of the yarns to meet her creative requirements. Burns’s designs require a strong and vibrant colour palette, and this is where she found the Shetland wool to be lacking. Rather than change her sourcing route, Burns decided to solve the problem herself, and began dyeing her own yarns. In line with her ecological principles, Burns wanted to dye using only natural organic dyes, and to keep her supply chain as localised as possible, so she began growing her own dye plants. Burns is far from alone in this practice, and the community of natural plant-based dyers certainly overlaps with that of fibre artists working with native wools, and is often driven by the same concerns of local, traceable, sustainable, ecologically safe material requirements. What is interesting about Burns, is the extent to which she identifies that this entanglement with the plants involved in the creation of her dye garden has influenced not only her practice, but her personality.

In an interview for this study, Burns described how her close involvement with growing her dye plants has had an impact on her behaviour, describing how she ‘slows down’ to the pace of the plants and enjoys not being in total control. Burns describes herself as impatient “but not when I am growing - it’s teaching me a bit more tolerance and patience” (Burns, 2022, p.45). Burns also described how dedication to the dye garden and years of trialling new plants has led her to achieve her ‘signature’ range of intense, vibrant colours from her own garden; a palette far removed from the typical muted tones normally achieved with the process. So successful has Burns’s collaboration with her plants been, that she is now as much in demand as a natural dye tutor and consultant as she is for her knit wear, and is currently looking for a plot of land to scale-up her growing operation. Burns is relaxed

about the way her practice is evolving and enjoys her ‘sympoietic’ working practice with her plants, so much so that she now describes her knitwear collections as ‘plant led’ rather than concept or trend led (Burns, 2022). Rather than perceive this as a problem, it appears to be a source of delight to Burns, who is considering labelling her yarns and products with not only the names of her plant ‘co-creators’ but also the year of production, so that her collections become a colourful record of stories of entanglement with each plant over the years of their collaboration (Burns, 2022).

Following Haraway’s thinking on the practice of ‘other worldly conversations’ (Haraway, 2016) “in which various nonhuman entities participate as subjects rather than objects” (Alaimo and Hekman, 2015, p.150), it seems impossible to understand the plants themselves as anything other than subject-actors in these ecologically engaged fibre arts practices. Following this position, perhaps it becomes necessary to ask to what extent the ovine producers of the fibres themselves can also be said to be co-authoring the tales being told? The answer to this question may be that the sheep are perhaps the most vocal authors here, if we take the time to listen to the story that they are telling, for a great deal can be learned from the very fibres of the fleece themselves. According to experienced fleece spinner, Rosie Rumble, the story is to be found by ‘reading’ the physical properties of the fleece, as the ecological narrative of each sheep’s life is materially manifest in its fibres (Rumble, 2022). This story is written through the sheep’s encounters with the weather, the plants it has eaten, and periods of illness or hunger, and is physically discernible through variations in the very fibres of its fleece. Like the growth rings in a tree trunk, the individual fibres of the strands of fleece carry the story of the sheep’s physical experiences. In this way, a skilled spinner like Rumble can tell you the story of an individual sheep’s ecological entanglements through ‘reading’ the narrative of its fleece. The symbiotic relationship between environmental factors and fleece is also discussed by Doyle et al. (2021, pp. 15–23) and Knapp in her 2022 article ‘The Golden Hoof’ (Knapp, 2022, p. 4). As Emma Hague of Fibreshed Southwest England said, “our garments carry with them the life-place’ of their region” (Hague, 2022).



Fig. 6: A photograph of North Ronaldsay sheep on North Ronaldsay, showing their food source (seaweed) and the dyke wall that prevents them from leaving the shoreline. Photo Oliver Dixon (2015) © Creative Commons Licence

It has been shown previously that fibre arts practitioners are entwined in sustaining both human communities, for example those around particular rare breeds or specialised making practices, and extended more-than-human communities, encompassing sheep, plants and tentacular ecological networks. It could also be argued that these practitioners are not only sustaining existing communities but are also actively building new ones, for example with the Fibreshed movement and through setting up informal processing and selling networks. The idea that these communities share a commonality, not just of interest in fibre related processes, but a common ethos, characterised by the ways in which they model ethical practices of care will now be proposed.

It is perhaps useful here to distinguish between ethical principles and ethical practice, and to recognise that to hold a position of principle can also be to hold a position of passivity. To move from principle to practice, one first needs to understand a sense of one's own agency. When thinking about agency in relation to narratives of extinction and ecological collapse, it is helpful to turn again to Haraway and her term 'response-ability' (Haraway, 2016). 'Response-ability' is the term Haraway uses to articulate our differentiated potentiality to 'take' responsibility, and to make clear that, whilst we may all (human and more-than-human alike) be actors in the same interconnected ecological drama, we are not all equally able to have agency over what we do in response to the ecological collapse unfolding around us. It is interesting to view the fibre arts practices under consideration through this lens of 'response-ability' and consider the extent to which the behavioural choices of this group can be understood as not only grounded in ethical principles, but manifest as 'response-able' ethical practices. An example of this is evident in this excerpt from the interview conducted with Yuli Somme:

EY: "Would you say that those decisions in your practice are connected to your wider concerns about the ecological crisis?"

YS: "100% - yes ... you know you don't have to have a veneer coffin from China to put your body in, so it's almost allowing people to carry their ethical practices of life into their death."

(Somme, 2022, p. 64)

It is interesting to consider the relationship between the 'sympoietic' dimension of fibre arts practice and the materiality of the fibres themselves and this idea of ethical practices. According to material feminist thinking, it is coming into a conscious relationship with the material outcomes of our choices, (that is the material impacts of our ethical positions when we act in accordance with them), that hastens the move towards ethical practices:

Ethical practices- as opposed to ethical principles - do not seek to extend themselves over and above material realities, but instead emerge from them, taking into account multiple material consequences.

(Alaimo and Hekman, 2015, p. 147)

Perhaps then the decisions taken by the fibre-based artists under consideration here can helpfully be understood as a part of an ethical practice emerging from the material realities of working with the fibres themselves. An ethical practice both emerging from material realities and mindful of material consequences.

It is worth at this point returning to some of the other ideas that have been considered through this study alongside that of materiality; namely an awareness of the situated, place-based nature of these fibre arts practices, and their entanglement with extended ecological communities. These practices have been shown to weave a particular fabric with these thematic threads, one that brings to mind the assertion of material feminism that:

Particular ethical practices, situated both temporarily and physically, may also allow for an openness to the needs, the significance, and the liveliness of the more-than-human world.

(Alaimo and Hekman, 2015, p. 147)

It could be argued that it is the particular capability of these fibre-arts practices to articulate an awareness of the needs, significance and liveliness of the more-than-human world that makes them such effective storytellers of narratives of extinction and ecological collapse.

The way that fibre-arts practices articulate not only awareness of, but care for, the needs and 'liveliness' of expanded ecological communities will now be explored. The following definition of 'care' taken from 'The Care Manifesto' exemplifies the type of care that the fibre artists under consideration here can be understood to exemplify:

Care is our individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow the vast majority of people and living creatures on this planet to thrive- along with the planet itself.

(Chatzidakis et al, 2020, p. 6)

Following the thinking outlined in The Care Manifesto, it is also helpful to break this definition down further into 3 active practices- 'caring for' - hands-on care work, 'caring about' - emotional investment'/ attachment and 'caring with' - recognising and embracing our interdependence (Chatzidakis et al, 2020, p. 6). The embodied, haptic 'hands on' dimension of fibre-based arts practices has been well discussed in this study, and it is considered here that these 'making' activities manifest 'caring for' in action. The extent to which these 'caring for' behaviours extend to more-than-human actors in fibre arts practice has been noted, and it is within the legacy of eco-feminist thinking that this idea can be situated. As Plumwood wrote in 2002:

There is no good reason to think that the particularistic kinds of ethical relations feminists have discussed are any less relevant to interspecies ethics than to intra-human ethics, that these inter-species relationships are of necessity any less multidimensional, complex, rich and varied than our relationships with humans

(Plumwood (2002, p.187) in Curry, 2011, p. 133)

Whilst there is no denying that the dialogues between feminism, eco-criticism and theories of care are in themselves multidimensional and complex, as well as at times contentious and problematic, see (Curry, 2011) and (Thomas, 2022), the strands that can be unpicked from within these dialogues have also been shown to be rich and productive.

The commitment of the fibre-arts practitioners under consideration here to 'caring about' is exemplified through their engagement with community, history, localised 'sense of place' and animal welfare. The issue of 'caring with' (that is embracing interdependence) could be seen to be more problematic, in that the 'turn to the local' exemplified by many of the practitioners could be said to display a disengagement from the damaging practices of globalised textile production, rather than a continued engagement which strives to improve the system for all those impacted by it. However, as has been discussed, this localising of practice can also be understood as a desire to reclaim 'responsibility', i.e. to only engage in practices over which one is able to exercise agency in line with one's ethical principles. This is of course a choice which many actors in that global industry (both human and more-than-human) simply do not have. Such arguments remind us that there is no border around the local; everyone's 'local' is someone else's remote. Whilst not the intention of the practitioners under consideration, perhaps these hyper-local fibre arts practices could in fact be said to illustrate T.J. Demos's assertion of "the ultimate impossibility of a local sustainable practice within a globally unsustainable system of ecologies" (Demos, 2009, p. 28).

Despite the limitations of their methods, it could still be argued that the practices of the fibre artists under consideration demonstrate 'promiscuous care' - understood by The Care Manifesto (2020) as 'an ethics that proliferates outwards to redefine caring relations from the most intimate to the most distant'. In the case of the practitioners under consideration, that manifests as a complex set of care-based practices that acknowledge the connected web that forms the ecological fabric of our world, and also recognise the limitations on operating ethically as an individual whilst engaged in global systems. Continuing to follow Donna Haraway's thinking about life as 'complex worlding' made up of a fabric of tangled threads resonates here:

Each time I trace a tangle and add a few threads that first seemed whimsical but turned out to be essential to the fabric, I get a bit straighter that staying with the trouble of complex worlding is the name of the game of living and dying well together on terra.

(Haraway, 2016, p. 116)

The subjects of this study do evidence a recognition of the importance of 'staying with the trouble' and their practices evidence their efforts to acknowledge the truth of living in this era of extinction and ecological collapse. Their work can also be understood to highlight the value of care as a means of living productively; care for the planet, for one another, and care that recognises our 'mortal, embodied selves':

The old English word 'caru' (root of care) means care, concern, anxiety, sorrow, grief, trouble and reflects the ambivalences of care - a reality where attending fully to the needs and vulnerabilities of any living thing ... can be both challenging and exhausting. For instance, hands-on-caring, however rewarding, also puts us in contact with what may be the most daunting ... aspects of peoples' mortal, embodied selves.

(Chatzidakis, et al., 2020, p. 27)

The discussion of the complex entanglement of fibre-arts practices to both the life and death of fibrous materialities has shown that, by their very nature, the fibre arts cannot help but stay close to telling tales of extinction and ecological collapse. In addition, the exploration of their close entwinement with the embodied human experience has shown their potency as ‘containers that open spaces for the expression’ of both life and death (La Biennale di Venezia, 2022). Furthermore, through their manifestation of ethical care-based practices, the work of these fibre arts practioners can be understood both to carry a narrative of regenerative, ecologically restorative processes that are resulting in flourishing, connected communities, and to expose the complexities of ‘living and dying well together’ (Haraway, 2016, p. 116) in these challenging times. Perhaps it could be said then, that the tales that fibre-arts practices are telling:

include ways of being and behaving in the world without which ... ecocentrism must fail: an appreciation and reassertion, against modernist abstract universalism, of the value of life as embodied and embedded, situated and engaged, local and particular; and against an inflated rationalism, the value of intuition and feelings, and finally, the potential importance and value of what cannot be rationally calculated, economically or otherwise.

(Curry, 2011, p. 132)

This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the practice of a fibre artist whose work can be understood to embody just these ‘ways of being in the world’. This is the work of Lucy MacDonald of Arra Textiles, in particular her ‘Seasons of the Sea’ collection of hand-woven tapestries, produced for the Collect Art Fair in 2022.



Fig. 7: A photograph of ‘Upwelling’, ‘Winter Storm’ and ‘Oceanic’ from Seasons of the Sea Series, all Lucy MacDonald (2022) (Date and photographer unknown) © Lucy MacDonald

A skilled weaver, trained in both Scotland and Finland, MacDonald began work on this particular collection in early 2000, just prior to the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic. Composed of three large (136cm x 100cm x 4cm) and 5 small (76cm x 57cm x 4cm) handwoven tapestries, this collection evidenced Macdonald’s interest in giving voice to situated, place-based narratives, both conceptually and materially:

This collection was created over the course of 24 months and explores themes of sustainability, traceability and connection to place. Sourcing materials as close to the studio as possible was a hugely important factor when creating the Seasons Of The Sea artworks.

(MacDonald, *Collect Open*, 2022)

In an interview for this study, MacDonald described how the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic led her usual supplier of yarns to shut their doors, leaving her concerned about where she might source materials, however (she explained) “My neighbour Diana just turned up in Covid and left some fleeces from her Ryeland sheep on the doorstep” (MacDonald, 2022, p. 56). In the light of the themes previously discussed, it is interesting to observe how the collapsing of globalised supply chains led here to the activation of a hyper-local, neighbour to neighbour supply solution. This narrative echoes that described by Christine E. Nieves Rodriguez of her experiences in Puerto Rico after the hurricane in 2017, which left her neighbourhood without ‘official’ assistance, and activated neighbour to neighbour organising of basic supplies (Nieves Rodriguez, 2020). Relating this experience to predicted future situations (caused by the impacts of the climate emergency), Rodriguez asserts that “The times we will be facing are going to require us to recognise that the most important thing around us is community” (Nieves Rodriguez, 2020, p. 366).

Going forward, MacDonald intends to move towards a fully sustainable and traceable supply chain situated within her own community and has plans to source her fleece from a friend’s newly established flock of Shetland sheep, brought onto the land to ensure the viability of a croft. In this way her practice will be supporting (and supported by) two highly place specific enterprises- one the survival of a native rare sheep breed and the other the survival of a historic way of life.



Fig 8: Photo of Lucy MacDonald spinning fleece
(Date and photographer unknown) © Lucy MacDonald

Returning to the ‘Seasons of the Sea’ collection, having solved the problem of fibre sourcing thanks to her neighbour, MacDonald sought ‘local and particular’ sources of dye material to achieve the colour palette to create her seascapes based on local views. To solve this problem MacDonald was able to call on kinship ties to source her materials, in that her Grandma helped her to identify and source suitable plants from her garden. On her website, MacDonald writes about how these plants have left an indelible trace of both person and place in the works:

She died before I got to the yarn dying phase of the project but the tapestries are full of the colours which were in her garden and some of the yarn has a faint smell of lavender or eucalyptus when I'm weaving with it which is nice. We don't have her or her garden anymore but I feel like I still have a small part of them as these wall hangings wouldn't exist without either.

(MacDonald, *Collecting Dye Plants*, 2022)

In this way, these tapestries can be understood to exemplify the capacity of the fibre-arts to articulate "the value of life as embodied and embedded" (Curry, 2011, p.132). Indeed, the value of MacDonald's 'Seasons of the Sea' tapestries can be measured by many different mechanisms; the raw materials (in this case gifted by a relative and neighbour), the time and labour that went into producing them (almost 2 years of work) or monetary (as evidenced by the 5 figure price tags of the largest pieces at Collect fair in 2022) (MacDonald, 2022). However, this study would hope to have evidenced that these tapestries are perhaps most 'valuable' due to their capacity to articulate the complexity of the maker's experience of living in these times of extinction and ecological collapse, that is, their capacity to tell the tales from the maker's 'Life-Place', and perhaps to articulate the "importance and value of what cannot be rationally calculated, economically or otherwise" (Curry, 2011, p. 132).

Conclusion

This essay has considered the ways in which contemporary fibre arts practices can be understood to be ‘telling tales’ of extinction and ecological collapse, using a mixed methodology of desk-based research, conversations with a small group of fibre arts practitioners and the consideration of wider Arts and Place critical discourse. Whilst the group of practitioners under consideration is small, the reach of the threads that have been unravelled by an examination of their practice is significant; both in terms of the global reach of ecosystems that have been shown to be connected to the fibre arts, and temporally, as has been shown by the discussion of the millennia old relationship between humanity and the fibre arts.

The essay has also explored the gravity of the narratives of extinction and ecological collapse being disclosed by the fibre artists under consideration, relating difficult truths about extinction rates, the extreme precariousness of the rare-breeds under consideration and the proximity of overwhelming ecological collapse, supporting Settele’s assertion in the UN report from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services that:

Ecosystems, species, wild populations, local varieties and breeds of domesticated plants and animals are shrinking, deteriorating or vanishing. The essential, interconnected web of life on Earth is getting smaller and increasingly frayed.

(United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, 2019, paragraph 11)

It is this story of the ‘fraying’ edges of the ecological fabric that the fibre arts practices discussed have been shown to articulate so well, either through the intention of the artist, the material properties of the fibres themselves or the wider connection of the fibres to their ‘life-place’ and associated ecological damage and regeneration stories. Perhaps it can be concluded then that the most compelling story being told by fibre arts practices is in fact the complexity of trying to live ‘well’ (i.e. without contributing to ecological harm to our planet) in these times of extinction and ecological collapse.

Whilst the practices of the interviewees evidence their deep care to minimise their ecological impact (through traceable supply chains, sustainable materials and natural dye processes) it has been shown that it would be difficult to identify one approach as more ‘successful’ in this sense than another. The potentially problematic nature of the return to ‘localism’ exemplified by many of these practices has also been acknowledged. Yet all the practices considered have been shown to exemplify attempts to live ‘well’ and act with ‘response-ability’ (Haraway, 2016), through the efforts of the practitioners to minimise the ecological impact of their work in so far as they are able. This essay has argued that this tells a tale of awareness of ethical principles enacted as ethical practices- behavioural choices made from a consideration for the material impacts of actions and steeped in narratives of care, for human and more-than-human communities, as well as the wider wellbeing of the planet. The complexities of the efforts of fibre arts practitioners to exemplify ‘living and dying well together’ (Haraway, 2016, p. 116) through their practices have been acknowledged, as has the necessity of narratives of care and community for living well in this era of extinction and ecological collapse.

Through the examples given, the work of contemporary fibre artists has been shown to tell stories of tenderness, consideration and openness to responding to the needs of the more-than-human, and to sit comfortably within eco-feminist, care-based and community focused positionalities. It is this capacity of the fibre arts to exemplify and propose revised ideas of community, value and practice driven by consideration of the material impacts of the work that underlines their potential to contribute new perspectives and enrich the Arts and Place critical thinking of the future. Indeed, in the introduction to 'Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet', the editors underline the necessity for multiple and diverse ways of 'telling tales':

Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet is itself entangled ... It juxtaposes many genres to show how varied storytelling styles might inform each other both in learning about our challenged planet and in forging strategies for living with others in the yet-to-come.

(Tsing et al (eds), 2017, p. M10)

It is hoped that this essay has introduced the rich and varied storytelling styles and capacities of the fibre arts and has excited further curiosity about the potential of these works to act as "containers that open spaces for the expression of life" (La Biennale di Venezia, 2022, p. 45).

The essay will conclude with words from Burns, who shared her passion for the potential of her sustainable organic wool dyeing, an openness to a truly responsive relationship with her natural materials and the realism of an outlook framed by long experience of social and ecological activism. As she talked about the potential of scaling up sustainable and traceable textile production systems, Burns acknowledged that it may not be possible (or indeed desirable) to replace the current system with regenerative farming systems, but that it is the modelling of a different way of doing things that carries value. Burns also described that working in this way enables her to feel comfortable doing what she really enjoys whilst knowing that it is also climate beneficial. As Burns concluded "What are the options? Doing this keeps me sane" (Burns, 2020, p.45). A fitting recognition of the way that contemporary fibre arts are ultimately telling tales from the life-places of the practitioners themselves, revealing the conflicted, compromised, and complex realities of living in this era of extinction and ecological collapse.

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Appendix A - Ria Burns Conversation Notes & Transcript- Fibre arts practice, extinction and ecological collapse

Emma Yorke in conversation with Ria Burns

Date: 28/11/22

Location: Ria's studio

FIRST FEW MINUTES OF INTERVIEW NOT RECORDED AS INTERNET CONNECTION UNSTABLE

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

EY- So I just really want to know how you came to have that ecological awareness and interest in the source of your materials as part of your practice?

RB- I suppose that aspect concerning the work mostly started with my undergrad degree which was in fashion design and you know it's just been working my way through from that

INTERVIEW NOT RECORDED HERE AS INTERNET CONNECTION UNSTABLE

Emma notes-

Ria has always been involved in activism and during her degree realised that she didn't want to work with the exploitative supply chains that are part of mainstream fashion. As her designing grew so did her questioning of material sources. She started working with dead stock yarn from mills in Bradford to stop it going into landfill. Then a friend who owned a mill introduced her to Shetland wool clip. Although it was commercially dyed the source was traceable and British. As Ria said it led her to ask more questions "which is always the way with sustainability".

Discussion about how Ria's practice has progressed to fully traceable local yarns, regeneratively farmed, and naturally dyed from her own dye garden. The only element of the process that is not fully local/ traceable/ sustainable is the alum used as a mordant to set the dyes (although it is biodegradable).

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

RB- sometimes it's a bit overwhelming because that's how I kind of feel at the moment, I feel like the more you know because I feel a bit like this (*the use of alum*) is such a kind of small thing isn't it? In my head it's bigger! To be able to get the whole 100% process I think you would have to make some compromise in terms of colours ... my output is as good as I can make it ... customers are not necessarily interested to that level of detail.

EY- but I'm interested to know how you feel about it, you've got the background in activism and you're very engaged, you're not coming to it really just as someone who is interested in it you know, it's bringing together two things you're really passionate about ...

RB- yeah - it's like sourcing from Fernhill Farm, where I am confident in what comes from the farm, like 100% I know exactly what happens there- I have been up there enough times to the farm and I know the farmers and you know how beautiful that is.

INTERVIEW NOT RECORDED HERE AS INTERNET CONNECTION UNSTABLE

Emma notes- discussion about Fernhill Farm recently being recognised as a farm using regenerative agriculture processes

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

EY- so the soil to soil thing, is that particularly important to you? Like more so than just the natural, traceability of materials side of things?

RB -it's really important to me. If I do produce things I think it's really important they can return to the earth.

EY - I hadn't I thought of it before I started these interviews; I hadn't really realised that it is quite beneficial for the soil for the wool fibre to be returned to the soil.

RB- yes the wool is excellent for the soil health as it releases nitrogen into the soil.

INTERVIEW NOT RECORDED HERE AS INTERNET CONNECTION UNSTABLE

Emma notes- discussion about Ria using wool waste from her workshop to mulch her dye garden.

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

EY- Do you have any feelings about the kind of breed of sheep that gives you the wool?

RB - I work with Shetland wool because it works with my designs, and I started with a Shetland actually from on Shetland. It's confusing, so with the Shetland the breed of sheep from actually on Shetland is one source, but there's also Shetland sheep that aren't on Shetland. Now I use wool from the Shetland sheep at Fernhill Farm, well, they are Shetland crossed with Romneys.

EY- but it's quite important isn't it for them to have that exporting wool economy from the island communities?

RB- yes but it's massively popular world wide- going to Shetland is kind of like a pilgrimage for knitters! There's so much heritage and things like Shetland wool week which is huge.

EY- So, in terms of choosing yarns, where would you put the things in terms of your priority for you? Like is it how the yarns actually work when you're knitting with them, as in the product, you know the product you're going to end up with, part of the making process? Or is it the sort of the regeneratively farmed thing that's most important?

RB- I would say they are all important - provenance and traceability, workability (lots of people round here use Cotswold wool but I find that a bit too coarse, the Shetland has extra softness to it) and regenerative farming practices. In fact, I started working with them at Fernhill after they approached me and asked me to try out their yarn, and now I order it and they spin it for me.

INTERVIEW NOT RECORDED FROM HERE ON AS INTERNET CONNECTION LOST

Emma notes from discussion-

RB quote - "If you have to make stuff, you should make it as sustainably as you can. It's nice to overcome people's perceptions of what a British wool and naturally dyed product can be and challenge some preconceptions."

Making in this way helps to open people's eyes to what can be sourced locally.

Discussion of the way that Ria enjoys sharing her knowledge and skills through explaining to customers and through teaching. Ria explained that quite a few of her students do go on to set up their own natural dyeing set ups.

Ria feels it is important to show people how things can be done in a different way. Most people say to Ria 'It must take a long time' and it does! It's a very 'process heavy' craft and "you have to enjoy the slowness, which I see as a benefit" says Ria.

Discussion on costs of producing (more expensive than using other yarns) and notions of 'value'. Ria says she selects her selling locations carefully as the cost is an issue and "It's hard to overcome that with people" and that she is very mindful of that when she is designing- "I do think about that when I am designing. It's all quite classic and long lasting. The fashion comes in the colour."

I asked Ria if she feels that the design side of things is still the most important thing in her practice. She said that it is hard to say at the moment, and that things have changed since she started growing her own dye plants, and her seasonal designs are "plant led not trend led and you've just got to accept that." Year on year the plants will do different things, depending on the weather. Ria explained that she used to find it frustrating but now she embraces it as "part of the storytelling of the brand" and she just accepts that the plant yields mean she just has to accept "here are the colours of this year."

We discussed this as a kind of active co-creation with the plants themselves and Ria described the same experience with the quality of the fleece itself- describing that the feel/ quality can vary significantly and the different wool quality means that "the sheep have had a different year."

RB- "I'm never taking it for granted- I've nurtured some of the plants for up to 3 years."

Discussion of this type of practice involving taking the long view and requiring effort and care. Ria described herself as naturally impatient "but not when I am growing - it's teaching me a bit more tolerance and patience."

"It just seems to be different."

"I never thought I would end up being a horticulturist when I started my knitwear career."

"It's incredibly hard work but very rewarding."

Ria described how the dye part of her practice is becoming bigger and that now people are asking her for the dyes themselves - for fully traceable British dyes (she gave the example of the British leather firm who have asked her for naturally dyed leather samples). Increase in circular economy practices using waste products.

We talked about the potential of scaling up this type of textile production system- Ria "We can't replace the current system with regenerative farming fashion systems" but it is modelling a different way of doing things and people really warm to this process and the local aspect of it. Ria described that it helps her to feel comfortable doing what she really enjoys doing knowing that it is climate beneficial ...RB - "What are the options? Doing this keeps me sane."

Appendix B - Rebecca Connolly Conversation Notes & Transcript- Fibre arts practice, extinction and ecological collapse

Emma Yorke in conversation with Rebecca Connolly

Date: 4/11/22

Location: Rebecca's studio

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

RC- Fibreshed is an organisation that started in California and what they were promoting was we've got a community of people here and we've got natural resource, and let's just think about using that community of people to not use and abuse natural resources but regenerate and nurture that natural resource, so how do you do that?

So if you're looking at wool fibre because it is a Fibreshed (but not just wool fibre as in includes cotton, hemp, flax), you would look at ok you've got a natural resource which is ground and people are natural resource and you've got the people so it's no good thinking about out of your natural resource because to do that you need the people that are interested in doing that

EY -so do you think it came from the idea of community initially?

RC- I think it came from the regeneration of land and there are people that are interested in that concept so when you look at your natural resource you think ok what kind of regenerative natural resource is going to make sure it's there for the future, so they started looking at ok, instead of using it for housing or intensively farmed poultry let's think of what we can do with it that's going to regenerate. So that could be the way they would farm a crop, what crop they might farm? So, they could be farming hemp over something like cotton because hemp will feed and nurture and regenerate the soil.

So, you've got the community of people interested in the concept of let's secure our food security for our future and let's regenerate it using practices which will be regenerating land and in doing so we've got the community of people with the knowledge.

NATURAL DYES- that's how I got into it and I thought I'm really interested in the way that wool is farmed and people who want to ensure the diversity of the genetic pool of our sheep, so you spend all this time focusing on that and then you just shove it through some petrochemicals, why do that? That's how I got into it, so it's about using land, using the local resources and thinking about if you're going to use local resources that extends to local dyes as well.

EY- so do you think it's particularly important that the local dyes come from the same geographical location or just that the content is non-toxic?

RC- I think the best example of the practice would be you've got a farm that farms holistically, regeneratively, that includes sheep in there, for a farm just from sheep is possibly not as regenerative as it could be if you had cattle as well, and if you grow their own food that's going to feed them in the winter. You stick to what's natural to our environment and plants that grow wild; in the perfect scenario you would be picking from the wild in a sustainable way so you didn't exhaust that. Coreopsis is an example of yellow that grows wild in this area, so in the perfect world you would have sheep as part of a holistic regenerative farming practice, you would be dyeing their wool (if you want to dye) totally with local plants. Madder is another one that grows here so you've got the yellow and the red so the only other one which historically has grown here too is woad dyes that grew here. They're all

local, and it's argued that in the traditional dyeing world you can get every colour you want from those three, so you don't need to import Logwood for purple, you don't need to import.

EY- It's the primary colours for mixing every colour.

RC- it's the fact that you can alter the colour by whatever the qualities of your water. Historically, Stroud was known for its strength of scarlet and you got that brightness because of the quality of the water the water, so if you're in an area, say you're in Cornwall where you've got tin in the soil, that's going to enhance the property of the natural dye just like if you're growing a plant in your garden if you feed it with alkaline food it's one colour, like a rhododendron, and with an acidic one it's another.

So that's how you can get every colour that you could possibly want from those three. They're all sustainable being grown here, theoretically in the wild, so that you can actually be farming and producing the fleece and using the dyes that you can grow or forage locally, and then you put in the artisans that can turn that into a product. It could just be the fleece off the sheep's back, it could be something I'm going to turn into yarn, and then felt with it, it's all those processes and everybody in place to be able to make that happen.

What the current situation here is, I've known my work did not qualify (to be Fibreshed registered) because for every customer that says I want to produce something in the natural colours, somebody wants synthetically dyed colour.

EY- how did you get started?

RC- so it was off the back of one particular project, there was a farm in the Forest of Dean called Coldcroft Farm. It's a small farm that promotes the local breeds in Gloucestershire, so they have sheep attached to that area (which is Ryeland sheep), they also have Gloucester cattle and pigs and the main bit of their businesses is that they work with Shire horses. They would not say that they are regenerative farming, you couldn't attach the organic regenerative label to them, but just what they were doing I felt ticked a box for me, then they wanted blankets produced and designed and woven so that would be a product that they could sell, so they could say, you can buy our lamb, you can buy our sheepskins, you can buy our wool and you can buy blankets. Every stage was farmed in the Forest of Dean and in an environmentally friendly way, then I designed it. It was processed from fleece into yarn by the Natural Fibre Company which is in Cornwall (so for the Fibreshed we're in the Southwest Fibreshed so that ticked that box) so I designed it and then we commissioned the Bristol Weaving Mill to weave it as well, and so the only thing that we can't do is finish it, as in our area we have no finisher. So, I'll take the cloth that's been woven and then they'll do the twisted tassels and they might do some hemming, might sew labels on, but the most important thing is they do the washing and tensioning - so there is nowhere in southwest to do that unless you want to do it in your own bath, which I have to do. You have to take your tassels on an individual blanket and then you'd have to hand twist every individual one, so even that product which I felt ticked every single box there's still one box which can't be ticked.

EY- is there still no one now?

RC- from that we've only got one contract weaver in the whole region, so if a client (this is what's happening with one of my clients), might have 20 or 30 blankets, so my latest wants 400 blankets and the waiting list for the weaving Mill in Bristol was too long. So at that quantity, to get them (the contract weaver) to deal with that, the price point was going to be too expensive, so where do you go from there? You have to go out and seek out a contractor that will weave that quantity at that reasonable price to make it sellable.

EY- so it's that really is about the community then isn't it? It's part of the system a bit like an ecological system isn't it - if one part isn't functioning the whole kind of web doesn't quite work.

RC- I mean it's quite difficult isn't it that when you try and really localise. So what you could do- you could produce something that doesn't need wet finishing, so that would be a rug for example that doesn't need wet finishing, the action of it on the floor does that, but the wool doesn't suit that, it's too fine, too good and isn't suitable for that purpose... so let's take it back to the breed that we keep ... but we have got to try and get those facilities in place that you want to take it as regional - that's the sort of Holy Grail because otherwise even the producers of the high grade wool are limited in terms of the economic viability of it in terms of producing the higher value product. It's true that the higher value product is going to have the most value to them ultimately and a lot of people come to me with the words 'I want to add value to my sheep enterprise' and 'what can I do'? so I say what's the minimum can you do to the sheep, and have what they can have is sheepskin rugs so they felt the back of a sheepskin to make the rug, so that's like the minimum. You could just sell the fleece to hand spinners, or you could go for that or this company's businesses that will process your fleece into a very loosely carded roving type and then I'll leave with that, so I'm guessing that doesn't want finishing because it's for a rug, so it's how far you want to go. There's lots of investment at each stage of the game and also it's about recognising each stage has its own skill set and its own massive infrastructure really that goes with the learning that goes into every stage of that process, and that's why you do need a community model.

I'm just trying to think if there's no one that does the whole process. There's a guy in South Wales who supplied the Black Welsh Mountain for the course and he will take the fleece and he will turn it into woven product, but he doesn't own sheep, so works with whatever comes and then people like Hampen Farm (those are two of the originating Fibreshed members), so they do the sheep, they get their yarn processed by the Regional Fibre Company ... actually, no they don't, now they've gone to this chap in Wales who turns the fleece into blankets, so it's really difficult to do the whole process, if you take it right the way through to product.

Linking through to what you were saying about Rare Breeds ... the Rare Breeds are coming into their own because people avoiding dye want to keep coloured breeds, it's actually a design element, if you're doing a jumper in colours of the original product. People want something else to go to, like the traditional colours that are used in Faro- there's a lovely piece in the V&A which just uses the natural colours of Shetlands in a Fair Isle jumper

They've been bred out because people wanted lots of white wool that you could dye chemically so the original model of the British Wool Marketing Board is that they wanted vast quantities of white wool and when I got into the game when I was at university it they kinda turned the blind eye if you had a few non-white, just sell it to a few local spinners, then as time has gone on the British wool marketing board now has put a grade it's called ??, for non-white. So the Rare Breed thing seemed to come about because they weren't farmed because they weren't white and wool still being a product that people wanted to sell from them. (their sheep). The Wool Board was set up to just say to farmers like, produce as much as you can and off we'll deal with the fleece, we'll guarantee to buy it off you and that was the whole model it was set up to do. Over time that's changed, because people have just thought it was actually, you know, I quite like the idea of trying, not just saying it's problem, you take care of it and pay me a pittance, I'm going to try selling my own, be it sheepskin or whether it be fleece whether it be turned into yarn, and then they began thinking about the colours which breeds come in ,actually in those colours and then using this is a kind of circle back to the way people did things before we kind of went down the route of wool boards and more of a kind of homogenized approach to things. I think it's off the back of, ok we've got these massive farms, like big agriculture, big sheep production delivery and I think it's the growth of the smaller enterprises but it's very much you know holistic farming system where they grow vegetables, they grow cereals, they do forestry, they do sheep, they do pigs, so it's movement back to that sort of family farm that almost died out,

because it was always take that hedge out, we don't need that, and take that stonewall down, we just want big areas that we can farm.

EY- From people you talk to who are involved in that sort of movement/direction do you have a sense of what motivates them to make that change?

RC- a lot of it comes from the land they happened to have access now, not sure about inherited or purchased. For example, one of my customers bought a 40 acres farm, they were high flying, had a lot of money behind them, so they have a holistic enterprise where they do some yurts and there's holiday cottages and they do some sheep and they do some conservation, so I think I would say it's all compatible with that idea. There are not any big flocks of some of these Rare Breeds because the bigger flocks are all about profit and big sheep and more lamb, and the smaller sheep, if you think of a Shetland, the Shetland is a small breed of sheep and it sort of suits a small farming enterprise. It won't be like a massive 40 acre field, it will be a bit of a slope here and a little wood that fits in with that older style.

EY- do you think people have that sense of it being just something that's kind of better, in a sense at its ecologically motivated, or is it sort of they just prefer the idea of a sort of independence?

RC- I suppose it's about going back to having your own sort of food security, farm, sheep. There is the lady in the Gloucestershire Guild, she has her own Shetland sheep and she loves the Shetland, so I would think for her it's the joy of having a sheep that she can handle herself physically. It's small sheep and it produces these wonderful colours, it looks right in the landscape- they turn the clock back. You'd never get Shetland sheep down here, maybe up North but they're definitely breeds that wouldn't have been farmed here, they are not native to here and it's more that people kind of like them so I think it's selected for their own needs: could be they like the look of them in the field, it could be a very practical thing- the breeds that thrive in certain quite hard situations like the Herdwick.

There's this woman who keeps Herdwicks here - you know they're normally in the Lake District- and that's the other benefit isn't it of the native breeds, they have adapted specifically- some sheep now have a natural resistance to a condition because of the terrain that they have developed in.

One breed, I think it's the North Ronaldsay, they only live outside of this dyke so that they won't interfere with the agriculture on the island. small farms in the small Enterprise not quite would suit that are particular to rain and what they like and who wouldn't want to block with all those lovely colours and your feels yeah it's beautiful but as I said if you want to think about adding value that can be easily processed into yarn and sold and people do sell the R&D

EY- you might not be able to answer this question, but is it kind of economically viable, like if you really thought that how much money does it cost to keep the sheep?

RC- just about! My customer came, and they've got a flock of Hebridean, and it was a husband and wife team, and he said 'I have to prove that you can make £1,000 animal during its lifetime' to me; what could we do to that to add enough value so that in each year he be getting £250?

EY- would you say that was coming from an unusual approach for people interested in this business?

RC- very. Most people don't calculate value in that way, and they haven't done it because they haven't come back to me. Because Hebrideans, they're not worth it, their wool is good but it's not what you do and they're not normally kept down here, so it must be about the look of them. It must be something about the big double horns, but it's one of those things that are different value systems, seeking out the diversity of colour. She has a ewe that's producing a colour that's not particularly interesting, she has one of those already, that would be reason for it to go.

EY- what to be sold on to another flock ?

RC- yeah and then you've got the new No Kill Flocks...

EY- that's really interesting, I haven't really made that connection between the breeds and the colour of the fleece.

RC- There are a mix of motivations, maybe I love that breed, that's really pretty, and people who are interested in the end product obviously because I think about one of my customers, it's this company, she's a vet, her husband is in marketing and she's got a smallholding where she is trying to bring her children up to connect with the land, so they've got chickens and they've got some pigs and they've got two flocks of pedigree, so this is all about keeping stock that will keep the bloodline going. She's got pedigree Black Welsh Mountain and Ryeland, and she's got more coloured Ryeland which is the brown coloured, so when she's breeding and enhancing the flock, she's looking at coloured over white and the black Welsh Mountain sheep and I think she's motivated by the colour. Always beginning with the breed characteristics. If you look at the breed characteristics of this breed Society standard, it will say that the black Welsh Mountain sheep should be this colour, because typically black Welsh Mountain does have slight redness, but she says that she's breeding hers to be as black as she can and she's getting prizes at all the shows so the breed standard it may say it desirable to have a little bit of red but they look at hers and they just say they're the best.

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RC- If she wants a pink and pistachio green and mustard and I don't think it sits well at all, so as a designer I have just got to go to her with swatches from her colour palette and say 'they don't seem compatible with the natural colour that you're getting in the body but let's just put them together with these colours in-between' or something like that. My thing is British wool complimented with natural dyed colour so that's what I would kind of like to be known for, but I will do other things because I have to make a living.

EY- what made you come to that?

RC- I did a textiles degree at Bath Spa and within that you could specialise in either Interiors or Fashion. I chose Interiors and then within that there were four disciplines -knit, weave, embroidery and print, and fell into weaving because I didn't want to do the others. I'd embroidered and stitched since I was a child so I didn't feel like it was a lot to learn. To do print you have to be good at drawing and painting and capturing and then you'd digitally manipulate images for prints. There's some chance I might have done that but that's the way it was done I just thought that it's not really me, that's really dry. So the weaving teacher I had was fantastic, and I thought I would get so much from him and not many people wanted to do it. I just thought (I did it in my 40s) I'm going to get a lot of value from this, so that's why I did it.

I think when you're doing Interiors and woven as a student you start off with cotton because it comes in lots of colours, but then I quickly realised that it was actually the wool I like to work with better and then that then took me to here, I just saw there's wonderful natural product properties to this material, why would you want to chemically dye it? So that took me into natural dye. So then at the same time the Campaign for Wool was sort of in its infancy (I think it been up and running for a couple of years) and I did some competitions while I was a student and I did designs in wool, and then that got seen by the Campaign for Wool and exhibited in London as a student anniversary exhibition.

So I kind of went down the route of working with the wool naturally, or something like it, and also liked the idea of wool supporting a British community in the way the cotton definitely doesn't, and my Welsh heritage attachments all about Welsh woven textiles, I think it's kind of those circles around supporting agricultural industry, so I would never send my woven textile designs to India, because

although they are artisans and they are in a communities that are struggling, they're not my priority, my priority is much closer to home.

EY- do you have a sense of what makes you so passionate about that kind of local placed-based community and landscape?

RC- I'm not a city girl so definitely its connection to the nature and the country, that's part of it. I went to Agricultural College as my first university, so I find it interesting what's going on around me, I know what's in that field and might query what are they doing, and what time of the year does that come into flower, that sort of thing that can interest me, and I guess you've got a lot knowledge and understanding which then kind of builds the interest doesn't it?

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RC- Have a look at this Facebook group called 'Women with Wool'. I know these people but have not met them or worked with them directly but if you just go on (I think you've got to apply) there's certain people like this there's a lady called Liza and she's got natives, so why is she keeping them? They have brilliant qualities, they're quite cute but it's something about them that says to her 'I want to keep them'. She keeps Shetland, which is a more conventional thing for people who keep chickens and small numbers, and she's got Teasewaters and Teasewater is, I think, could be one of the endangered breeds, so I would say she is she is driven by the quality of the fleece.

Then there's a lady called Anne who keeps Blue Texels. So the Texel is known as a white breed, so she is obviously seeking outbreeding for the blue, the blue Texel specifically. So I don't know what her motivation is, it's not rare breed so I don't know what her motivation is. By reading some of these posts you might as you get an insight into what the motivation is- it'll be quiet read through some of the content!

There's a great lady called Jenny and she is the Ambassador for a company called Eco Ewe and they keep Norfolk Horns, I think it's called North Norfolk Farm which she is regenerative farming and they suited that and I'm pretty sure she is down that way, Norfolk. I think she writes and she's just got an article about Eco Ewe in 'Countryhouse and Townhouse' magazine and they wanted to do something about spinning and knitting.

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RC- Because the Jacob are one animal out of 40 native breeds but I guess maybe at some point somebody bred them to get a black and white animal, you got sheep with black face and white bodies, why is it black and white face but a white body? One of the best resources for wool is the Natural Fibre Company, on the Natural Fibre website is all sorts of information about breed type what is suitable for the qualities of its wool, and if you cross cast that back to the Rare Breed Survival Trust you'll get an idea of which ones have been widely kept that are rare breed.

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EY- There seems to be lots of women leading on this?

RC- I'm getting enquiries from not just the women but it's often driven by her and her husband is the sort of marketing one. I seem to be getting quite a lot husband and female partners coming together so whoever is driving the project they are definitely both on-board and it's a bit like, you know, I've done my bit in the City, let's have children and move to the countryside and buy a bit of land from the revenue from our flat in London -we can buy 40 acres of land, that I think it's coming through.

EY- has that increased over the last few years?

RC- yes

EY- it would be interesting to talk to some of those people about what their motivation is.

RC- there's one woman and her company is called the Golden Fleece company and she's a young woman I'd say she's in her late 20s early 30s, and she seems to be going it alone, she seems to have quite an active life outside of this but she has bought in Cotswold sheep from a flock that was really very well thought of, she's bought in some of his stock and she's selling quite well just selling the fleece, ok she's gone as far as having it processed into what's called carded. She showed me and she had hand picked every little bit of vegetable matter out of it, it's just beautiful. So we haven't gone as far as converting into yarn yet but I think she's just taking her time because she's got to have the money to invest in that, but she's very passionate about the breed, she is definitely, definitely it's the breed.

EY- where is she based?

RC- she's not in the Cotswolds- she's just south, in Wiltshire I think.

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RC- she doesn't embrace the whole idea of natural but her model is all about supporting the landscape that she is in in Yorkshire, and her products are driven by, I would say, they are driven by her relationship with her community so she makes the product in accordance to the wool she can get locally. I think it's driven by you know why would I not use stuff from my local farming community? That would be, I would say, her driver, that's what she's interested in. So, she's not a natural dyer.

EY- so she's coming from a different direction?

RC- yes, not sure whether you call this art but it's definitely to do with place.

EY- how in your mind do you distinguish what's a kind of creative arts based piece of work for you, if you are weaving a commission do you have a sense of that as two separate things or is the weaving just always a creative artistic activity?

RC- I consider myself an artisan as opposed to an artist because I am very very much driven by the material. When you go through a degree based education in textiles, it's very much like you go out and you do all your research nothing to do with weaving and it's not materials lead, it's you looking at all sorts of things. It's very much about placement and colour that sort of approach. I don't see that as an artistic thing I see that as a technical weaving thing- how am I going to design and make that and what structure am I gonna use, is this gonna use the properties this (material) has got in an interesting way? I guess that's why you say that it's artisan isn't it, because it's always struggling with those interests and those examples with the stripes, and you know the big thing for me is to say, ok you want stripes, do you want one stripe, two stripes, are they repeating every 10 inches? And all the other things and you can't give all that choice to your customer because I'll just have to actually make a design decision of all those variables - what you think is going to look good.

EY- people who come and say 'I just want to add value to my sheep farming', do they end up being quite directive about what product should look like?

RC- no, generally they take it from me! If I haven't done that work with someone before I try and give them like a sample and say 'Do you like this you? Do you want a honeycomb or is it something really subtle? Or do you want something in your face, something say you know that's got circle patterns, what do you like, what is attractive or not attractive to you?

EY- when you help to do these designs for people do you go to their farm?

RC- generally not, you don't actually go to the place. I don't really see the sheep generally.

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I was involved in the Cambrian Mountains initiative to create products that would use a wool normally seen as valueless, because it's that people want their wool to go through the Wool Board because the Wool Board grades their wool, so if you're collecting wool from 20 farms those farms might have different breeds, different qualities, so if it goes through the Wool Board, the Wool Board will say ok we've got this amount and this is like a fine grade, this amount so on, so then the producer can say ok we want to buy-back the fine grade and the rug grade because they've got in mind two products that they want this wool to go into. So, it's gone to the British Wool Marketing Board, and they bought back their own wool but not all of it, just the two grades that they're interested in.

EY- does that sort of save them a job?

RC- yeah, it saves someone a job . On this project they had a rug wool and they had a fine 9A wool. So they chose designers to make products with Cambrian wool for the campaign launch and then the key members of the team have kept going with Cambrian wool.

People do recognise that the Wool Board do have a role to play, it's like I want certain services up from the Wool Board but they also want the traceability to get their own wool back again to work with. What the Wool Board can do, is they can arrange the scouring of the fleece and the scouring is the first wash nobody wants to do! A wash to get all the stuff out of it.

EY- and even today is there still a national kind of like, bottom end level wool industry in the UK?

RC- yes, if you look in the shop and if you managed to find one that is clearly identified as British wool (there are a couple of organisations one of them is 'Woolyknit') so it's British and it's made in Britain and that's about all you can say about it. Ok it's got the British Wool KiteMark but we don't have any idea what kind of wool it is, what kind of breed it has come from.

EY - and where would they source this from?

RC- it would be either directly from the wool auctions but they're really for the big boys, there's probably about 15 buyers and they will buy from auctions

EY- from the wool board?

RC- yeah so the wool buyers are buying like tons at a time, so then a company like this would go to one of those wool buyers who then would sell a particular grade on to them for processing.

EY- are they based in the UK or are they international?

RC- International, so you get the fleece off the sheep, it goes through the marketing board so nothing's done, so you wouldn't want to pack that up in that state, it's full of all sorts of stuff, so they've worked out the best thing they can do is process it by scouring it and then the wool can be vacuum packed into these big bales and they will stay ready for somebody buy them. So what the auction buyers do is they buy the raw fleeces, they scour them, they bail them up and then they sell

those bales on to the next person in the chain, so that could be somebody who wants a great British wool for their products, so say somebody in America wants a British wool for their product as part of their brand, they would then go to one of the auction buyers and buy these big bales.

EY- what sort of scale would that be?

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RC- I'm trying to help this chap out at the moment find the British wool supplier for his product - like a knitted dishcloth it is 100-percent wool and it's designed so you put compost in them and you plant your little sapling and then when the sapling roots start coming through the whole thing goes in the ground. He's driven by commercial opportunity to replace plastic, so he's come to me because currently because it's constructed in Albanian yarn and knitted in Egypt. He's a businessman not a farmer, this is purely economic, not driven by a social conscience for the Egyptian producers. I make a 3 mile round trip on my bicycle to get milk that I can put into my reusable glass bottles and pay more than it costs in Waitrose which is just a couple of miles away from me, to get it from where they farm. My drive for that is to support my local community, a better product and less travelling here. He sees that there's a benefit to the grower to do that.

EY- it's interesting because each one of us would instinctively not want to buy plastic - it looks nice, feels nice, it's good for the environment, then you factor in that it's been flown probably?

RC- this is the problem, that customers are asking him questions, so he's trying to source English wool and we're having problems because English wool, if you want it cheap, the cheaper grades are far coarser, and so I'm hitting a brick wall, I can get the wool but I can't get it at a price point.

EY- I guess unless there's someone who would be happy to sell their wool to him without going through the grading?

RC- that's my next idea, I'm going to see if one of my clients out there could be the right fit for this opportunity. I was talking to this Woolboard guy, he was saying how much do you want, he said it comes in 350kg bales, so you can't buy less than that. So, if you think roughly on a commercial sheep, you're getting 2kg per sheep, it's 150 to 175 sheep in one bale but he normally is dealing in much bigger quantities with customers, because he's quoted me on a 5 to 10 tonnes price. So, this is why they will accept people where all the producers in the region are going together like a co-operative. That's what it used to be when I had sheep, four sheep and you have to register with the Wool Board and they have to buy it, you have to sell it. What I'm saying is when I started in agriculture the whole model was it went through the British Wool Board even if you had 4 sheep in the garden, it all went that way. So, over the years what's happened is somebody has had a few sheep of their own and spins their own wool, so doesn't go through the marketing board, it never touches it and they don't even know about it and for many years the marketing board would like turn a blind eye if it perceives that you had something that really wasn't worth their while trying to sell. Say if it was you actually not selling the fleeces onto other people they wouldn't care and that's just grown and grown until it got to this point like the Cambrian project, where quite a big quantity went through the Wool Board and then they somehow kept it so they could identify it back, so that's been driven by the needs of people in the industry.

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EY- And they're very interested in place?

RC- I don't think they have too much of a qualm sending it off for processing. I don't know, it could be that they have it processed in Wales.

Because the original project, it was a company called Curtis Wools, who is not Welsh based, but is organic. 85% of the land is used for sheep farming and the fleece is just a by-product. They don't spin their own yarn so I think any orders are spun by The Natural Fibre Company, they must be able to handle that, I mean they must have got an organic licence. I would think there's only one other one I know in Wales which can do organic processing because they don't have other non-organic wool in there. Yes, the whole time you are going to clean down everything, get every fibre out of the machinery, to be able to process organically, quite a lot of people can farm organically but it's all very well but the status is a little bit green-washing. There's a company called Paintbox which lots of people use for their dyeing and they are called an organic dyer, but if you investigate them, you'll find it's just like, what would you say is an organic dye?

EY- I would think that you would use plants

RC- so that's the first thing you think, but organic status is governed in textiles through something called The Global Organic Textile Standard and they have certain things like you're not allowed child labour, you're not allowed to use heavy metals, but they make no reference to the fact they are oil based, petrol based, that's fine.

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RC- they farm Dorset sheep and all their product goes into making wool duvets so they found a product and they happened to believe that the Dorset wool suits the product.

EY - in terms of the like the wool carpets and stuff does that tend to be British wool?

I've got a carpet from Roger Oats- that's a British wool carpet isn't it?

RC – it is British, they were based up in Hereford and their weaving is now done by a company down in Devon. I think they have still got looms up there and they do hand weaving and product development and the rest is woven elsewhere in the UK, and I think if you look at their product range they definitely had a Shetland range that was undyed and I'm pretty sure that they have the British Wool Woolmark. The British Woolmark is something that when it started out you would get the Woolmark if you a paid for the licence to use it and you had to have 51% British wool in your product. So, when you go and look at anything with the Woolmark you know that 51% of that or more is British.

EY- I would have assumed 100%.

RC- so what's happened over the years is they've realised that's not good, and I think driven by their customers, they said, ok I want my product which is 100% British wool to be identified as such so they've now got three labels I think it is- there's the platinum Range for 100% British,

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EY- do you think is it still significantly more expensive to get the British wool products?

RC- authentic traceable is like the top, that's like the model with the Cambrian, as well as 100% British wool so that is quite a lot more recent, this authentic trace approved brands. But you know there's a ball of wool, and it loses its label and the label is applied by the processor and they can only have the information that comes from the grower, so yes there is a real community around it.

RECORDING CUT OUT AND CONVERSATION FINISHED OFF

Appendix C - Lucy MacDonald Conversation Notes & Transcript- Fibre arts practice, extinction and ecological collapse

Emma Yorke in conversation with Lucy MacDonald of Arra Textiles

Date: 9/12/22

Location: Zoom call

Notes taken down during the conversation (which was not recorded).

EY- Can you tell me how you got started with your Seasons of the Sea project?

LM - I had been thinking about sourcing UK yarns but too expensive (£105 per kilo)

- Then the mill I used in York closed because of Covid
- My neighbour Diana just turned up in Covid and left some fleeces from her Ryeland sheep on the doorstep
- I taught myself to card and spin them. I started with a foot pedal spindle but I broke my ankle, so I had to get an electric one.

EY- What was the experience of working with a new yarn like?

LM - The Ryeland was new to me but Diana was very knowledgeable about all the qualities of the fleece and it's very fine with a long staple - it's the closest British wool to Merino

- "It was amazing how much she knew and taught me about the fleece. People often say to me if it's wool it must be really scratchy because they have no idea about the different types of wool. People just used to know all of this stuff, the older people still do, but in our generation it's just been lost."
- "There's a huge disconnect between the raw material and the finished products."
- Also people have no idea about the amount of skills and time required to make products like this- "With those pieces it was 18 months from starting them to Collect." "The majority of the work was before the weaving even started- it was 5 months of weaving."

Lucy described how it was because of the lack of other work during Covid that she had the opportunity to make the Seasons of the Sea series (3 big & 5 small tapestries).

LM- "I'll never have the chance to have the time to make them again."

Lucy explained that she has decided to keep the 3 big tapestries for herself as she doesn't think she could make them again and also because she dyed all the yarn with plants mainly from her Grandma's garden who helped her identify and pick the plants. She described how close she was to her Grandma and how they used to always walk around her garden together and her Grandma would update her on all the plants. Sadly her Grandma died before the project was completed.

LM- "I'd just started to learn about plant dyes just before she died. Without her I couldn't have thought about that."

- "When she died, we moved a lot of her plants to my parents garden."

EY- Can you tell me about the materials you are working with now?

LM explained how she recently got funding for a huge new electric drum carding machine and how she intends to start working with fleece from her friend Ruth's flock of Shetland Sheep that she grazes on her croft

LM- "I'd like to be able to have all my raw materials traceable and sustainable."

EY- Can you explain your motivation for that?

LM- "For me, the textile industry is horrific in environmental terms ... I don't want to be part of it."

Lucy then explained how she believes the personal stories behind her work help her customers to connect to the wider environmental issues - people really connect to the personal elements like the fact that the wool came from her neighbour's flock, from two sheep called Roy and Cobweb, and the plants from her Grandma's garden- people connect to it and understand it and can relate to it.

LM- "It works because all the works are connected to real places - it gives the work a sense of being a 'full circle'- there's nothing hypocritical in the making process- and people respond to that."

Lucy said that she's happy working with wool because it's a bi-product of sheep farming and the sheep need to be shorn, although she knows some environmentalists/ vegans who are against the use of wool. But to her the fact it is a naturally occurring material is important and she thinks the scale of production is important

LM- "If you use too much of anything it's bad- as long as you keep the production small scale it's better."

- "It's always a bit of a compromise- I want to make art but I also need to live."

Lucy explained that most of her other products are made using merino wool and woven at the Bristol Weaving Mill. The yarn has been spun and dyed but a mill in Yorkshire but the fleece might have actually come from Australia. She says that she has asked the yarn supplier about provenance but they are reluctant to say exactly where it comes from ... Lucy also gave the example of Shetland wool to explain the lack of transparency over provenance ...

LM- "They call it Shetland but it's not from the Shetlands Isles or from the fleece of a Shetland sheep!"

Discussion on the difficulties of getting clarity on provenance due to complexities of labelling laws.

Lucy explained that she would like to move to working solely with wool from her friend Ruth's flock, in order to have totally traceable fibre, but then the price of her goods would have to go up.

Lucy said that it is quite hard to talk to customers about the issues with traceability of the yarn and that people have a range of responses about it -

LM- "Some people do value traceability/ sustainability and some people are incredibly rude about the cost involved in it."

- "It's not for everybody- it's quite a niche market."

EY- Is the sense of being part of a fibre-based community important to you when you are looking at using more traceable/ sustainable fibres?

LM- "It's a really nice side effect ... I am friends with Diana now and her granddaughter comes up and helps me ... a little community has sort of arisen out of the project and I am hoping it will grow ... it's nice to support other local small businesses ... and it's really nice dealing with people rather than faceless corporations or the big businesses like some of the mills."

LM- "Having people who are experts in every little bit of it is the benefit of working with local experts- it's the skills sharing in the community."

EY- Is there something special for you about your location and how it impacts your work?

LM- described how because of Covid, - "the work for Collect was very much about where I am." Lucy talked about her plans for the future in terms of going on residencies and using local plant dyes and yarns to create local sea and landscapes. She really wants to carry on with this place-based worked but it is currently very expensive in terms of time and materials as she has to dye each colour before she can start making. She's hoping to make a 'colour library' of yarns to have ready for making future smaller pieces.

Appendix D - Rosie Rumble Conversation Notes & Transcript

Emma Yorke in conversation with Rosie Rumble

Date: 21/11/22

Location: Zoom call

RR described how she got involved with the local flocks and farmers when The Wool Campaign was taking off and the intention was to add value to the fleece.

RR talked about the reasons why she has been involved/ her interest in the rare breed White Faced Woodland (WFW) sheep-

- The WFW is very local to here- from Penistone (near Sheffield) and was originally called Penistones
- They were bred in woodlands in the Hope Valley between Edale and Hope
- They can survive with very little human intervention
- "a rectangular sheep with a leg at each corner"
- "a kick back from a very primitive sheep"
- Merino fleece got into the bloodstock in the 19th century and now the WFW can produce a very fine fleece with a little intervention - "it can be fine or rough like carpet"
- "Just lovely sheep- very good mothers."

RR talked about how the WFW are no longer restricted to their original moorland and woodland pastures in the Peak District-

- "My beef is when you breed these sheep in lowland pasture they loose touch with their patch and the moorland instinct. They know their own patch and they pass that on to their offspring"
- Discussion about 'hefting' and how each flock stick to and know their own patch of ground and where to graze and shelter at different times of the year

RR described the relationship between this localised grazing and the fleece-

- how you can 'read' the sheep's diet and the weather and periods of illness in the strands of fleece themselves
- how the 'feral' diet of heather etc. influences the material qualities of the fleece

RR described how ecological conservation/ climate change is impacted the local moorland and traditional grazing patterns-

- the National Trust who own much of the area are now preventing winter 'over grazing' to help regenerate the peat rich land and prevent soil erosion and flooding lower down in the valleys.
- The moors now look green thanks to plug planting of cotton grass, sphagnum moss and heather

RR described the change for the WFW flocks-

- Now the sheep overwinter off the moor
- The fleece will be better because of their more substantial and regular feeding and less exposure to extremes of weather (the breaks in the fleece show periods of stress or distress - the individual locks of fleece will be weaker in the middle)
- You can check the strength of the fleece by stretching out the lock- if it pings back it is healthy, if it breaks it shows the sheep has experienced periods of ill health or stress
- All the rare breed fleeces will have a different natural springiness (or ping) which gives them their particular usage- e.g.-

- The Lincoln Longwool - has a wavy fleece which is lustrous and strong. "The tighter the crimp, the finer the fleece." Good for coarse, worsted suit material.
- The Ryeland - is very springy and is a good fluffy, jumper wool
- Blue faced Leicester is considered the finest of British breeds.
- RR personally prefers the WFW yarn for spinning

RR talked about the community surrounding the sheep in her area-

- In the Kinder Scout area she knows who all the WFW breeders are
- "so it's a family in that way" "a community of people"

RR described how some traditional farmers burn or bury their fleeces.

Appendix E - Yuli Somme Conversation Notes & Transcript

Emma Yorke in conversation with Yuli Somme

Date: 23/11/22

Location: Yuli's Studio (Bellacouche in Chagford)

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

EY- I'm really interested in your work- I feel like care is a big part of your practice in terms of the whole ethos behind your work, the way you're working with and taking care of people at that end-of-life stage, also because of the ecological awareness and the way you choose materials and the way that your work shows care for the ecological fabric. I suppose I'm interested to know how more about that work and around your work in the context of place-based practice- on the 'Borrowed Time' video you talked about sourcing yarn locally from the sheep around you.

I would love to know how it's come about in the context of your creative practice, and also more about the question around consideration of the ecological fabric, I know that you have said on your website that you are working around trying to get to a carbon-neutral community, I just would really love to hear you just talk about any of those ideas in relation to your work.

YS- First can we swap the word yarn for fibre because I don't work with yarn, felt is the unwoven fibre.

EY- Yes of course.

YS- I think fundamentally what's happened to me in my life has influenced my way of working. It started with the death of my father when I was in Norway, a different country and the whole experience wasn't just the normal grief of losing a father, but it was the inadequacy of the adults around us, three siblings, to help us voice grief, as well as a few months later moving from our community to a very different community in South Devon. It affected my childhood and in very different ways all three of us.

And then I remember at school enjoying history, particularly when we got on to the wool trade for some reason, I mean as a child I loved history and knitting, I didn't know anything about weaving, I didn't know it was the things we could do actually where I came from, I was too young. I loved it without thinking about it. So, learning about the history of it and these words coming up -spinning and carding and weaving - lovely words within it- and then learning about the 1666 Act of Burial in Wool, it just always really stuck with me.

RECORDING CUT OUT HERE

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

Later on, I started thinking about making something about materials and the environment- we've got plastic in the environment, we've got chemicals - so I tried to think about my materials, and I did an exhibition called 'Treading Lightly' about makers and their materials. I made a sort of whole tableau of birth marriage and death from wool- a little wool nappy for the beginning of life and a nice mat that the baby would lie on, and then I did two wedding capes, and a shroud as well, just symbolic really.

And then after this. a lady called me and said 'Please could you come and measure my husband? He's alive but he's dying and this is just what we want to do on our land' (a natural burial with wool

shroud) and I just thought rather than freak out, I just said 'Yes, that would be alright, I'll come', and it started from there.

RECORDING CUT OUT HERE

Yuli talked about craft and making practices as meditative

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

YS- I think it's about repetition, and I know that it was maybe, I don't know Gandhi talked about it, I mean he was a great inspiration for me, but I realised, say for instance the act of walking is a repetitive act and I realised that was what I was feeling, just from the action of walking and craft, craft can do the same thing. It can be meditative. You can't live that way all the time, that's just how it works, but certainly you go into a different mindset with making.

EY- I used to do painting but it's a totally different kind of connection with the work for me if I'm working on painting or with the repetitive processes of stitch or weave - they really clear my mind, whereas painting that's more of an emotional response to me, I can't make paintings unless I feel I have something emotional I need to process. Maybe craft-based work is actually much more complementary to coping with life!

YS- That's really interesting because that's part of the endless discussion about the difference between art and craft, and I think craft has been the poor second cousin for years to art, and it's seen as art is more creative I suppose because it's pure emotion.

EY- But it's all about self isn't it? That's why I find craft to be much more collective, you know thinking collectively, and I find when I'm working on a textile piece people come and they want to engage and it creates a space for conversation, where as if I am painting, I need to be silent and private.

RECORDING PAUSED HERE

Yuli took a phone call

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

EY- Could you tell me where notions of care fit into your practice? I suppose I am not thinking about it in terms of physical care, I was thinking about the whole ethos of what you provide, the process as it takes your time and attention, which to me is a way we express giving care.

YS- Thinking about things is a kind of care, people find that helpful definitely, because you haven't got that sort of thing hanging over you, because your body is you, you know what happens to it when you die is important. It is kind of a very personal decision and so once you have thought about that because within that you're thinking about telling your children or whoever around you what you want and not leaving it in a mess.

EY- So they're taking care of their family?

YS- Yes, so it is for carers, and you're almost opening a channel for people to start thinking about all of those things.

EY- And I'm guessing people can find you if they want a particular type of experience, and there's also a physical side that you might never have thought of -imagining the physicality of being wrapped in one of your shrouds as opposed to a box that's kind of plastic, maybe come from China- and you know if you're somebody who cares about all those kinds of things, which is just like speaking another language ...

YS- Yes, it is a lot about language actually. I've been thinking about it such a lot recently because I am changing the website and I'm working with somebody at the moment, we're having a lesson this afternoon on the back side of the new website, so I have been writing a lot about how, that is the words that you use for it, and how I have to keep reminding myself, 25 years ago before I did this, how, what a boon it was for me to talk about it, it was like a phobia you know, and I know that that's how a lot of people think and feel. And until you know that, it's very difficult. I met a lovely young woman the other day, she's got a tiny little girl but she's worked in a hospice and so she's got that sort of touch with reality and acceptance and not running away from the words or the experience at all, she's completely embraced it and that's what many people including myself haven't had.

But we need it, we need the words, so I feel like I've got to be really careful how I word things because for me it was such a cathartic experience thinking into what happens to my body when I die. If I'm not being cremated, what's going to happen to it and of course I am a person, and a gardener and I get dirt under my fingernail so I understand the earth and you know I like to think of the earth and soil being the planet's only natural cleaner, basically it's the cleanest thing.

Nature is so clean and hygienic when you really think about all the chemicals and you know that the medical stuff that goes into landfill or gets burnt, really we rely on this artificial way of being clean, ultimately you know that's why people are getting super sick at the moment because we're too clean, we haven't mixed in with covid in 2 years and it's making people really sick. I like to think of the earth and the soil being the ultimate cleaner and when you start thinking about it like that and also that your body is not you, you're a case, you're this thing, this body and this mind but within you you're sharing it with all these microbes with little heads and maybe eyes!

EY- So do you think that sort of started your thinking about the natural burials and the role of the materials within that?

YS- Yes absolutely, because I knew nothing about the funeral industry when I started except this reliance on plastic and veneered coffins and imports- a massive, massive business that was pretty ghastly. I hadn't been to many funerals up until that point you know, I hadn't even been to my father's funeral, my uncle and aunts' funerals that's about all I went to. And a child's funeral, actually a stillborn, that was very very sad.

So, I hadn't had any of that connection that in a natural life you would have. You know now we have cleaned so much of that out of our lives, haven't we? In the past really people would have had so much greater contact with dead people in their life as well as, you know, as with the end of life.

As a society, we are disconnecting our lives from these things and not connecting with each other but also we are disconnecting with nature fundamentally; nature is everything you know and therefore because of our disconnect with our mortality and how we deal with death that it is it's all part of the same thing to me.

EY- I think of it like it is a great big denial isn't it? It's like a kind of cultural/ society sanctioned denial of these things.

YS- There is a case for actually challenging things. I've been thinking and writing about recently the idea of 'let's bring our dead back here' rather than 'up there'. You know traditionally we've got graveyard right in the centre of the town. Nowadays we couldn't have a graveyard in the centre of town, and imagine if we said let's have it right in the middle of the new housing estate, can you imagine the uproar that would cause? 'We can't have that - think of the children!' you know all that sort of thing, and I long to kind of delve into that, why do you think that now and why did our predecessors not think that when it was fine to have a churchyard right here? And we used to have them all right by the pub you know!

EY- I guess the move to move graveyards out of the town maybe came about when people thought about disease? I don't know when that came in, but in many villages the pub and the church face onto each other. I think that's something I really recognise, that there is just no space for the conversation around mortality or even about illness. If people become seriously ill it becomes a taboo subject that people feel very worried about speaking about.

I also do think it is it's really interesting to draw that connection between the denial about that and the kind of ecological illness if you like, of culturally just kind of accepting it, and it's like we all know about it, but we don't let that knowledge impact on what we do, you know a lot of people are still living very separately to the knowledge - it's off somewhere over there and then life just carries on over here ...

YS- And that's why I'm suggesting let's bring it back to here where we live and actually walk on the graves and not think of the graves in a Victorian way of this is sacred so you must not walk on it, because we don't walk on the grass and the lump in the churchyard. In the natural burial sites I've been to you, you can wander around and actually over the burial sites.

RECORDING CUT OUT

Yuli talked about 3 friends who lived together and how at the funeral of 1 of them, 1 of the others danced on her grave, and after she danced she said that she was also going to be buried in that plot, so it's like almost 'I'm dancing on my own grave.'

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

EY- It's interesting because it is so culturally specific, there are many cultures in the world that the grieving process involves some kind of dance or a way of being collective in grief. I suppose you know when we sing hymns at funerals that's as far as we tend to go culturally, it is a communal act, but maybe not that kind of outpouring of grief.

YS- It would be great to have dance at a funeral because dance releases your body in such a physical way.

EY- Grief is such a physical, embodied process, and that's why I'm really interested in people working with textile processes who are working with an awareness of grief in their practice, about if people feel that offers some sort of mechanism that helps them kind of cope, helps them live positively alongside that narrative.

RECORDING CUT OUT

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

YS- I don't know what the tradition is exactly, but in the old days because there were so many deaths during childbirth, often when a woman got married she would have her trousseau that she would build up, but within that she would have already have made her own shroud in case she died in childbirth.

RECORDING CUT OUT

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

YS- I think about what we're doing, have we got to make it today? If it all stopped, we would have enough clothing and textiles in the world to last 50 years and we could be mining it from landfill and it would still be there you know. I can't bring myself back to thinking any other way, so for me you know the wool that I source has got to be at least organically farmed, and you know some of it I'm beginning to be able to acquire and process from regeneratively farmed farms like Fernhill, which is one of the first farms to be certified regenerative, so they've followed you know a certain sort of training.

EY- and would you say that those decisions in your practice are connected to your wider concern society ecological crisis?

YS- 100% - yes. As well as the material, you know you don't have to have a veneer coffin from China to put your body in, so it's almost allowing people to carry their ethical practices of life into their death. It's a way for humanity to process mortality actually. There's all the mythology about after lives and all that. It's up to people what they think about that, everybody has a different thought about that, but what I feel is that if there is a god, it's Gaia, you know if we want to think of her in terms of gods you know to me she is the god that we should look to and respect and just fall in with her, she's there to look after every living thing.

EY- we can learn so much from the rest of the animal world and the more than human world, I have recently doing some work over with a big garden and the main gardener said to me, look if you ever want to know anything about how to live, just look at the plant world to teach you- they all work together to support the main species - the growth of the trees, and they just have this interrelated way of being to solve all their problems.

RECORDING CUT OUT

TRANSCRIPT STARTS

So, Yuli, we have talked about sourcing fibres, sourcing from regenerative farms like Fernhill that's your preference, but do you have a particular feeling about that in terms of proximity to you, in terms of locality, is that important to you?

YS- Yes, I try to source locally. Originally, I would be able to get a friend with his long wheel based vehicle and we would go round to all the farms that I knew were organic certified and we would collect all the fleeces and take it down to Buckfastleigh where there was a processing mill. They used to be able to wash the wool for me.

EY - So you took the raw fleece?

YS- Yes, they washed them for me and then they would make carpet underlay for Axminster Carpets and I built up a fantastic relationship with them, they were so kind and great people working there who were highly skilled. But after a few years they were bought up by a foreign company who closed them down. You know if it was tragic because they were fantastic and it was really cheap for me to do that, it made it very cheap.

Then you know the problem with fibre in this country is the only fibre in this country that we can grow commercially, and process commercially, is wool, we used to commercially produced hemp and flax for linen and process all of that here but we've thrown it all away and it's gone for economy's sake, to make it cheap, to China or Eastern Europe.

So, if I do buy a hemp for the handles that is made in China or in Eastern Europe, it is organically certified hemp but it's just so annoying because of that carbon footprint and all the shipping that goes into. You know all my life I've just thought this is so wrong, having understood the history of the wool industry, and you know if only we had gone down the path of just doing it locally and valuing the skills and the knowledge that we have in this country, which is now disappearing so fast.

EY- It is that question of valuing isn't it which is so critical I think, because now we are in a state where people do value it to a degree but most people can't afford it, so if you want to access these kinds of very local, handmade, bespoke products, it's become unaffordable for most people.

YS- That's the thing that really cuts me I suppose, because people will come to me as well and I've tried to price my products so that there is one that is affordable and what I find heart-breaking actually is sometimes being accused of being too expensive, and it's like I'm at fault, and that is the case you know for so many of us working in this area.

Last night I was talking with the climate group I work in and talking about the affordability of food and having a monthly food market and it just makes me so heartbroken that it really is out of the reach of most people, but the problem is that we are just so used to having things cheap that the food comes way down the list of our priorities - food and shelter and clothing.

EY- I think it's about where we place value isn't it, because the things that people make with locally sourced materials for food or fibre, they are not expensive when you think about the work and the kind of level of quality and care that goes into each stage of the production, they're only expensive when you think about them relative to other things you can buy.

YS- I mean I can't afford a lot of stuff but actually somebody might be buying that stuff who's a lot poorer than me, and do you need all that stuff, all that makeup and cosmetics? But it's important to me to buy good food and know where it's come from, even though I've never been a wealthy woman and it's difficult to find the money to mend the roof ...

My sister, she had her way of coping with things and it was to buy new clothes and she says that it would make me happy for about 10 minutes but it didn't solve my problems but I did it, it was almost like an addiction you know?

EY- I kind of think that kind about social media, it's kind of the same isn't it, lots of things we have now as a society are about quick fixes, like sugar you know it is all kind of addiction, it's almost a distraction mechanism that stops people from having to really look at what it's going on...

YS- like any addiction really, it's just a quick fix and it's not going to help us with what is really going on.

INTERVIEW FINISHED

Appendix F - Interviewee Consent Forms

Consent Form for Master's Dissertation Research

Title of Research Project:

Tales from the 'Life-Place': how are place-based narratives of extinction and ecological collapse being woven into contemporary fibre arts?

Name and title of Researcher, and Details of Project:

Emma Yorke (MA Arts & Place student, Dartington School of Arts)

This project (Sep 22-Jan 23) will investigate what contemporary fibre-based practice can tell us about the relationships between care, materiality, place, creativity and narratives of extinction and ecological collapse.

Despite a large-scale collapse of the commercial wool production industry, the UK remains home to different communities centered on sheep rearing and wool production. This study will focus on those communities involved in small-scale, localised practices; namely the Fibreshed communities centered on locality-based, ecologically focused production, and fibre-based artists who take a deep interest in the provenance, materiality and production conditions of their material.

Through primary research (interviews) with selected community members, an attempt will be made to understand the relationship between narratives of extinction and ecological collapse and interviewees understanding of (and choices related to) the study's primary area of interest; that is the 'weave' of care, place, materiality and creativity in contemporary textile practice. It will also attempt to explore to what extent the relationship between fibre artists and place can be understood as integral to 'making meaning' within their practice.

Using desk-based research, these findings will be considered in the framework of wider arts and place-related critical thinking, with reference to eco-criticism, eco-feminism, place-based writing and contemporary critical discourses around 'care'. The findings will be contextualised through reference to case studies of individuals within the communities.

Definition of invited participants:

Individuals engaged in fibre-arts practice connected to UK based wool/ sheep farming communities. Selection criteria based on relevance of practice to themes of study.

Data or information to be collected, and the use that will be made of it:

Interviews of between 30 and 120 minutes will be carried out in person or on Zoom.

Interview to cover the practice and motivations of the interviewee.

Interviews to be recorded/ transcribed using online software and note taking.

Post interview transcription will be stored in a Word file on my computer and added to with my own notes.

The notes will be identified by the participant's name (i.e. the research is not anonymised).

How will the information supplied by participants be stored?

A copy of the notes will be emailed to the participants for their records and a copy stored on my computer.

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Copies of the dissertation may be held both online and in paper form both by myself and by Dartington School of Arts.

The dissertation (or extracts from it) may be widely disseminated in the form of articles, blog posts, conference presentations, research forums, etc.

Contact for further questions:

Emma Yorke

emma.yorke@postgrad.plymouth.ac.uk (until end of Jan 2023)

emmayorke@hotmail.co.uk

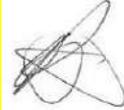
Consent: PLEASE COMPLETE

I voluntarily agree to participate, and agree to the use of my data for the purposes specified above. I can withdraw consent at any time prior to end of December 2022 by contacting the interviewer and my contribution will be anonymised.

Note: Your contact details are kept separately from your interview data.

Printed name of participant: Ria Burns

Signature of participant:



Contact email or telephone (optional): hello@riaburns.co.uk

Signature of researcher: Emma Yorke

Date: 3/11/22

Consent Form for Master's Dissertation Research

Title of Research Project:

Tales from the 'Life-Place': how are place-based narratives of extinction and ecological collapse being woven into contemporary fibre arts?

Name and title of Researcher, and Details of Project:

Emma Yorke (MA Arts & Place student, Dartington School of Arts)

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Contact for further questions:

Emma Yorke

emma.yorke@postgrad.plymouth.ac.uk (until end of Jan 2023)

emmayorke@hotmail.co.uk

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Note: Your contact details are kept separately from your interview data.

Printed name of participant: REBECCA CONNOLLY

Signature of participant:



Contact email or telephone (optional): rebeccaconnollydesign@gmail.com

Signature of researcher: Emma Yorke

Date: 3/11/22

Consent Form for Master's Dissertation Research

Title of Research Project:

Tales from the 'Life-Place': how are place-based narratives of extinction and ecological collapse being woven into contemporary fibre arts?

Name and title of Researcher, and Details of Project:

Emma Yorke (MA Arts & Place student, Darlington School of Arts)

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Emma Yorke

emma.yorke@postgrad.plymouth.ac.uk (until end of Jan 2023) emmayorke@hotmail.co.uk

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Note: Your contact details are kept separately from your interview data.

Printed name of participant: LUCY MACDONALD

Signature of participant:

Contact email or telephone (optional):



Lucy@arratextiles.co.uk

Signature of researcher: Emma Yorke

Date: 9/12/22

Consent Form for Master's Dissertation Research

Title of Research Project:

Tales from the 'Life-Place': how are place-based narratives of extinction and ecological collapse being woven into contemporary fibre arts?

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Consent: PLEASE COMPLETE

I voluntarily agree to participate, and agree to the use of my data for the purposes specified above. I can withdraw consent at any time prior to end of December 2022 by contacting the interviewer and my contribution will be anonymised.

Note: Your contact details are kept separately from your interview data.

Printed name of participant: Rosie Rumble

Signature of participant: ROSIE RUMBLE

Contact email or telephone (optional):

Signature of researcher: Emma Yorke

Date: 21/11/22

NB- digital signature consent also given via email

Consent Form for Master's Dissertation Research

Title of Research Project:

Tales from the 'Life-Place': how are place-based narratives of extinction and ecological collapse being woven into contemporary fibre arts?

Name and title of Researcher, and Details of Project:

Emma Yorke (MA Arts & Place student, Dartington School of Arts)

This project (Sep 22-Jan 23) will investigate what contemporary fibre-based practice can tell us about the relationships between care, materiality, place, creativity and narratives of extinction and ecological collapse.

Despite a large-scale collapse of the commercial wool production industry, the UK remains home to different communities centered on sheep rearing and wool production. This study will focus on those communities involved in small-scale, localised practices; namely the Fibreshed communities centered on locality-based, ecologically focused production, and fibre-based artists who take a deep interest in the provenance, materiality and production conditions of their material.

Through primary research (interviews) with selected community members, an attempt will be made to understand the relationship between narratives of extinction and ecological collapse and interviewees understanding of (and choices related to) the study's primary area of interest; that is the 'weave' of care, place, materiality and creativity in contemporary textile practice. It will also attempt to explore to what extent the relationship between fibre artists and place can be understood as integral to 'making meaning' within their practice.

Using desk-based research, these findings will be considered in the framework of wider arts and place-related critical thinking, with reference to eco-criticism, eco-feminism, place-based writing and contemporary critical discourses around 'care'. The findings will be contextualised through reference to case studies of individuals within the communities.

Definition of invited participants:

Individuals engaged in fibre-arts practice connected to UK based wool/ sheep farming communities. Selection criteria based on relevance of practice to themes of study.

Data or information to be collected, and the use that will be made of it:

Interviews of between 30 and 120 minutes will be carried out in person or on Zoom.
Interview to cover the practice and motivations of the interviewee.
Interviews to be recorded/ transcribed using online software and note taking.
Post interview transcription will be stored in a Word file on my computer and added to with my own notes.
The notes will be identified by the participant’s name (i.e. the research is not anonymised).

How will the information supplied by participants be stored?

A copy of the notes will be emailed to the participants for their records and a copy stored on my computer.

All of the interview notes (identified by participants’ names) will be included in an Appendix to the dissertation when it is submitted for marking. References to the interviews (identifiable by interviewees’ names) will be made through the body of the dissertation.

Copies of the dissertation may be held both online and in paper form both by myself and by Dartington School of Arts.

The dissertation (or extracts from it) may be widely disseminated in the form of articles, blog posts, conference presentations, research forums, etc.

Contact for further questions:

Emma Yorke
emma.yorke@postgrad.plymouth.ac.uk (until end of Jan 2023)
emmayorke@hotmail.co.uk

Consent: PLEASE COMPLETE

I voluntarily agree to participate, and agree to the use of my data for the purposes specified above. I can withdraw consent at any time prior to end of December 2022 by contacting the interviewer and my contribution will be anonymised.

Note: Your contact details are kept separately from your interview data.

Printed name of participant: Yuli Somme

Signature of participant:

Contact email or telephone (optional):

info@bellacouche.com

Signature of researcher: Emma Yorke

Date: 3/11/22

