

Introduction: Island textiles and clothing

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Abstract: This special thematic section of *Island Studies Journal* explores textiles and clothing from an island studies perspective. While there are many examples of textiles and clothing associated with particular islands, an explicitly island studies approach to them has not been fully developed. Such an approach offers the scholar of textiles and clothing a comparative perspective on disparate examples, and invites investigation of ‘island-ness’ beyond its frequent use in branding for a limited range of ‘heritage’ products. Within island studies, the often-remarked combination of materiality and symbolism in textiles and clothing provides insight into ‘island-ness’ in the round, encompassing environments, economies, communities and cultural imaginaries. This section includes work on the *pánu di téra* of Cape Verde, cloth circulation in Madagascar, and textile craft and the creative economy in Shetland.

Keywords: clothing, crafts, dress, islands, textiles

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There are many varieties of textiles and clothing that are associated with islands in one way or another. Certain islands are synonymous with types of cloth, such as Harris tweed (McClellan, 2017), Maltese lace (Markwick, 2001) and Fair Isle (Butler, 2015) or Aran knitting (Carden, 2014; 2018a). Others are home to specific garments, such as the *pánu di téra* of Cape Verde (Nolasco, 2018) or the ‘island dress’ of Vanuatu (Cummings, 2013). Island-dwellers participate in the globalised textile industry as workers and consumers, act as “heritage entrepreneurs” through textile craft (Rodgers, 2011; see also Zorn, 2004), and are periodically invoked as inspiration for international fashion brands (e.g. Alexander McQueen©, 2017). However, an explicitly island studies perspective on textiles and clothing has not been explored. An island studies approach to this topic—that is, one that centres and problematises the significance of “island-ness” (Baldacchino, 2004, p. 272)—is worth pursuing. For a scholar of textiles, the many examples of textiles linked with particular islands invite consideration in comparative perspective, and investigation of their “island-ness” beyond its usefulness in romanticised branding. For a scholar of island studies, the often-remarked combination of materiality and symbolism in textiles (Miller 2005) offers a way to approach island-ness in the round, encompassing environments, economies, communities and cultural imaginaries.

Both islands and textiles have been theorised in terms of borders, edges and liminality. Baldacchino (2004, pp. 273–274) suggests that ‘island-ness’ is marked by two characteristics, namely ‘locality’ (a sense of a discrete, bounded place) and an often overlooked ‘externality’ (“the filter, broker and interface of/for the island with the rest of the world”), and that the importance of these two characteristics is inversely proportional to the size and population of the island in question. The idea of ‘islandness’ as a sense of place that is dominated by its own continuous edge, which provides containment and connectivity, resonates with work on textiles and clothing as boundaries that both separate and communicate. For example, Entwistle (2000, p. 327) observes that “Dress lies at the margins of the body and marks the boundary between self and other, individual and society”, and Miller (2005, p. 6) describes

clothing as “the carapace that conducts and connects [...] rather than separates our sense of what lies within and outside ourselves.” Similarly, Pajaczkowska (2005, p. 229) argues that textiles act as “neither object or subject, but as the threshold between.” If islands are places dominated by their edges, textiles and clothing can be thought of as all edge, acting as mediating surfaces with no ‘inside’ of their own.

Another point of overlap in writing about islands and textiles is the long association of islands, craft and the pastoral. Harling Stalker and Burnett (2016, p. 195) point out that the “doctrine of islands” as “either places to escape to or to escape from,” both otherworldly and hyperreal, echoes escapist fantasies about craft and the pastoral (Adamson, 2007). This contributes to the frequent positioning of island textiles and clothing as ‘craft’ items in contrast to the global textile and clothing industry. However, as Carr and Gibson (2016, p. 311) argue, the conceptual boundaries between craft processes and mass manufacturing are ill-defined and not always helpful. Moreover islands are not, of course, pastoral sanctuaries from global economic forces and islands and islanders are deeply shaped by and active in international industries, including textile and clothing manufacturing, design and distribution. The Shetland knit textile sector offers an example of how inadequate simple distinctions between craft processes and industrial production can be: throughout the 20th century knitwear was a major local industry, exporting to international markets, while reliant on a combination of hand and machine techniques, and home and factory production (Laurenson, 2013). This industrial history fuels Shetland’s appeal to an international, online-mediated community of leisure hand knitters, who enable a growing craft tourism sector in the islands, and an intensified heritage gaze on even the islands’ contemporary textile practices (Carden, 2018b, forthcoming). As Price and Hawkins (2018, p. 10) ask, “for whom is making a hobby, done as an amateur, or as part of an everyday vernacular? For whom is making labour, work, a way to make a living? [...] These lines are blurred, tense and often co-productive.”

In the context of the UK and Ireland, the first kind of ‘island textiles’ that come to mind are well-known textile ‘traditions’ such as Aran and Shetland knitting and Harris Tweed. In each of these cases, the relationship between the textile product and its place of origin is emphasised in images and narratives through which a small island identity and related national identities are co-constructed. For example, the design history of Aran knitwear is shaped by transatlantic Irish migration and tourism, and a narrative about a drowned Aran islander fisherman whose family identify his body by his patterned jumper resonates with the journeys of ancestral tourists to the island of Ireland (see Carden, 2014). As a symbol of Irish nationhood, the Aran jumper offers a material shorthand to make political claims about what Ireland is or should be. During the successful 2018 campaign to repeal the eighth amendment to the Irish constitution, legislation to remove the bar to abortion, the Irish comedian Aisling Bea performed in an Aran jumper spray-painted with a crossed-out figure 8. Shetland knitting such as Fair Isle colourwork has been incorporated within Scottish national branding (Peach, 2007) while simultaneously associated with the Shetland Islands’ locally celebrated Nordic connections and distinctive ‘sub-brand’ (Grydehøj, 2011; Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2014). Harris Tweed has been used to represent Scottishness (Black et al., 2015), upper class Englishness, and Britishness in general (McClellan, 2015). All these textiles are enlisted into the construction of complex national and diasporic identities as symbols of the rural, remote, authentic and resilient (among other things). They are each linked to a mythologised historical narrative of textile production as part of a subsistence economy, which is embedded within their contemporary presentation as design classics and souvenirs.

The original impetus for this special thematic section was the editor’s curiosity as to how the UK and Ireland’s cluster of island-related textile crafts relates to examples elsewhere in the world, and to other kinds of textile products and practices, from utilitarian non-clothing textiles such as ropes and nets to the international garment industry, patterns of re-use and the contested drive towards a circular economy. While not all of these issues are addressed or

exhausted within this section, the articles included offer a variety of ways to think about textiles and clothing from an island studies perspective, demonstrating the potential of this approach to enrich the study of both textiles and clothing and islands “on their own terms” (McCall, 1994; Baldacchino, 2008). The articles gathered here demonstrate that island textiles and clothing in disparate contexts—Cape Verde, Madagascar, and the Shetland islands—do possess certain common roles, as objects of exchange (whether through gift or trade networks), part of the symbolic apparatus of nationhood and mediators between the transnational and the intimately local, even familial. However, even in these few articles, the range of practices involving island textiles and clothing and the approaches with which they can be studied is striking. The articles by Nolasco (2018) and Ducros (2018), which examine island textiles and clothing in the context of colonialism (whether Portuguese colonialism in Cape Verde or French colonialism in Madagascar) particularly demonstrate the importance of the ongoing discussion within island studies (among other subject areas) about the far from finished work of decolonising the field (Baldacchino, 2008; Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2016; Grydehøj, 2018). As well as the issues of insider and outsider voices and fraught categories of ‘islanders’ and ‘mainlanders’, following the thread of textiles and clothing reveals the complex place of islands within overarching global power relationships, both historically and in the contemporary world.

In ‘Designing national identity through cloth: *pánu di téra* of Cape Verde’, Nolasco (2018) examines the changing role of a particular type of fabric once used “as a form of currency” and an important part of an international trade network in “both goods and enslaved people.” Nolasco traces the development of the *pánu di téra* as a symbol of Cape Verdean nationhood post-independence, and draws on her empirical research in Cape Verde to discuss craft and commoditisation in the context of contemporary globalisation and tourism.

In her article ‘Reclaiming islandness through cloth circulation in Madagascar’, Ducros (2018) presents a historiography of Malagasay textiles, from gifts of cloth forming “the ultimate diplomatic conduit” to the mass production and cheap labour of the contemporary globalized apparel industry. Demonstrating how “cloth is useful for underscoring processes of local-global integration,” Ducros argues that while Anglophone historians have often struggled “to place the island of Madagascar” within its Indian Ocean context, textiles scholars have “had no difficulty placing the island at the center of intricate centuries-old networks.” She suggests that an island studies approach to Malagasay textiles offers a way to attend to “relationalities, circulations, and diplomacies that go beyond cloth itself.” In doing so, Ducros makes a case for the relevance of the so-called ‘Great Island’ for island studies, in whose literature it has rarely featured.

In ‘Craft, textiles, and cultural assets in the Northern Isles: innovation from tradition in the Shetland Islands’, McHattie et al. (2018) present findings from and reflect on their ‘Innovation from Tradition’ workshops, which employed a design innovation methodology positioning “local people as central drivers of innovation.” Organised around the themes of “practice, place and people,” their research on craft and the creative industries advocates an asset-focused approach to the “unique opportunities, resilience and rich history” of island communities. McHattie et al. approach island textiles as part of the creative economy, locating them within a UK research and policy context that is primarily focused on the urban. While the discourse of the creative industries and creative economy is often preoccupied with geographical proximity as a catalyst for economically productive creativity (as seen in the notion of ‘creative’ hubs, clusters, quarters, etc.), it forms an increasingly important part of the economic and policy context of even small island textile producers in the region.

Hemmings (2015, p. 12) observes that “attention to the complex narratives of multiple cultural influences told by textiles has gone somewhat unnoticed outside the field of textile scholarship.” Overall, this special thematic section suggests that it is worth paying attention to island textiles and clothing in order to trace some of the complex narratives of multiple

influences that constitute “island-ness”. Contemporary concerns about climate change, automation and inequality add urgency to work on ‘geographies of making’ (Carr and Gibson 2016; Price and Hawkins 2018) and alternative perspectives on the global fashion and textiles industry (Fletcher 2016). Island studies has more to add to these conversations.

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