

**Working the fabric: resourcefulness, belonging and island life  
in the Harris Tweed industry of the Outer Hebrides of Scotland**

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

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Joana S. Nascimento

Social Anthropology, School of Social Sciences

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### **Note on illustrations**

Except where clearly stated otherwise, all photos and drawings in this thesis are by the author.

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## Abstract

### **Working the fabric: resourcefulness, belonging and island life in the Harris Tweed industry of the Outer Hebrides of Scotland**

The University of Manchester, School of Social Sciences, Social Anthropology

Joana S. Nascimento

Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities, 2019.

Harris Tweed, a woollen textile that can only be produced in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, has been trademark protected since 1910 and covered by its own Act of Parliament since 1993. According to this legislation, a tweed can only be stamped with the Orb trademark if it ‘has been handwoven by the islanders at their homes in the Outer Hebrides, finished in the Outer Hebrides, and made from pure virgin wool dyed and spun in the Outer Hebrides’ (1993). Despite this localised production model, the cloth is exported to over 50 countries and trademark protected in over 30. And while the emphasis on provenance might suggest that only people born and raised in the islands would be involved in its production, my research draws attention to the inclusive possibilities that the concept of ‘islander’ holds in this particular setting, suggesting alternative ways of thinking through notions of rootedness and belonging. Proposing an expanded concept of productive work and labour, in this thesis I foreground the active ways in which people of different origins and backgrounds navigated island life, both making a living and becoming part of its fabric by participating and elaborating on local practices and pursuing particular visions of good lives.

Based on thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Isle of Lewis and Harris (the Outer Hebridean island where the Harris Tweed industry came to be concentrated), this research involved spending time learning from workers in the various workplaces where Harris Tweed is made – woollen mills, domestic loomsheds, Harris Tweed Authority offices, and tweed vans. This focus on the lives of workers, workplaces and work processes, I argue, offers a unique lens through which to examine the diversity of lived experiences and productive social processes that emerge as people variously navigate the complexities and contradictions of contemporary global capitalism. Further, I suggest, examining the workings of the Harris Tweed industry as well as its social and personal implications highlights the need to redefine an expanded concept of work / labour that accounts for the layered meanings and analytical potential it holds.

In a region described as economically fragile, Harris Tweed has long offered local employment, contributing to population retention – despite its vulnerability to shifting global markets. I discuss how people’s awareness of their shared circumstances as fellow *islanders* – facing particular regional challenges whether they were ‘locals’, ‘returners’ or ‘incomers’ – revealed a sense of shared precariousness and shared responsibility, highlighting particular resourceful practices and outlooks on the possibility of change. Discussing how people drew on (and reinterpreted) local histories and ‘shared repertoires’ as they navigated and made sense of their present and imagined futures, I highlight how inclusive notions of belonging encompassed people’s active engagement with local practices and moral understandings, revealing how various kinds of work contributed to making the material *and* social fabric of the islands.

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No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning;

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## **A note on pseudonyms and illustrations**

To preserve the anonymity of my interlocutors, all names used in this thesis are pseudonyms. Some of their biographical details have also been changed.

Except where clearly stated otherwise, all photos and drawings in this thesis are by the author.

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## Acknowledgements

When I first visited the Outer Hebrides in 2014 I was struck first by the hospitality and friendliness of the people I met, and secondly by how sunny the weather was in October – I’d been warned of the gale-speed winds and endless rainfall. On that first trip – after visiting mills and weavers, learning about the industry, and being kindly offered lifts and tea by people who spotted me waiting for the bus or looking lost – I was hooked. While the sunny skies only held up for a few days, quickly unveiling the temperamental weather I would eventually become used to, my initial impression of people’s hospitality has endured and my gratitude to them only continues to grow.

My greatest debt is thus to the many people in the Outer Hebrides who welcomed me into their homes and workplaces, often before they even knew me at all. Having promised to keep their accounts anonymous, I am unable to mention them by name in these acknowledgements, but I am profoundly grateful to each of them. Many thanks then to every weaver, mill worker, manager, and Harris Tweed Authority employee for the time and lessons they have offered me. Thanks to their relatives and friends as well, who often found themselves helping me as I variously navigated island life and sought to learn about local experiences of work and life. I am also grateful to the many workers and volunteers involved in local historical societies (in particular Comman Eachdraidh an Taobh Siar, Comunn Eachdraidh Nis, Stornoway Historical Society and Seallam), libraries (Stornoway Public Library and Lews Castle College Library), and archives (Tasglann nan Eilean Siar and Harris Tweed Archives). I would also like to thank the people who welcomed me at Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and at the studios of BBC Radio Nan Gàidheal in Stornoway, as well as each of the mills – Harris Tweed Hebrides (HTH), Kenneth Mackenzie Ltd (KMK Ltd) and The Carloway Mill. I am also grateful to Mary Smith and Calum Alex Macmillan for their help with the translation of ‘The Loom Song (*Òran na Beairt*)’, a composition by Murdani Mast (Murdo ‘Mast’ Kennedy) and John ‘Seonaidh Beag’ Macmillan, quoted in one of the chapters below.

The Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester has provided not only the funding to support this research project (School of Social Sciences Studentship, Fieldwork bursary and SERB funding for conference attendance), but also

the ideal collegial environment in which to pursue it. I'm infinitely grateful to my supervisors Petra Tjitske Kalshoven and Soumhya Venkatesan for their generosity and intellectual engagement. Their insightful comments and questions have importantly shaped my own ideas and informed many of the discussions in this thesis. I'm also grateful to the PGR seminar convenors and internal reviewers (Maia Green, Jeannette Edwards, Chika Watanabe, Soumhya Venkatesan, Katie Smith, Rupert Cox), and to the many fellow PhD students who participated in discussions that would importantly inform my ideas before and after fieldwork. I am grateful, in particular, to Marisol Verdugo Paiva, Vlad Schüler Costa, Diego Valdivieso, Akimi Ota, Paulina Kolata, Guilherme Fians, Noah Walker-Crawford, Tom Boyd, Tree Kelly, Stephanie Meysner, Jeremy Gunson, Anna Ellmer, Matt McMullen, Francesco Montagnani, Rosa Sansone and Jong-Min Jeong for their thoughtful engagement, friendship and support.

Thanks also to Jamie Wintrup and the whole Wintrup family, whose friendship and support helped make this project possible.

Many thanks to my friends and family in Portugal, and especially to my mum and dad – their enduring support not only encouraged me to embark on this project in the first place, but sustained my energy and commitment throughout. This thesis is dedicated to them.

### **Note on pseudonyms**

To preserve the anonymity of my interlocutors, all names used in this thesis are pseudonyms. Some of their biographical details have also been changed.

## Abbreviations

HIDB	Highlands and Islands Development Board
HIE	Highlands and Islands Enterprise
HTA	Harris Tweed Authority (Harris Tweed Association before 1993)
HTWA	Harris Tweed Weavers' Association
SCF	Scottish Crofting Federation
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union
WCC	World Craft Council

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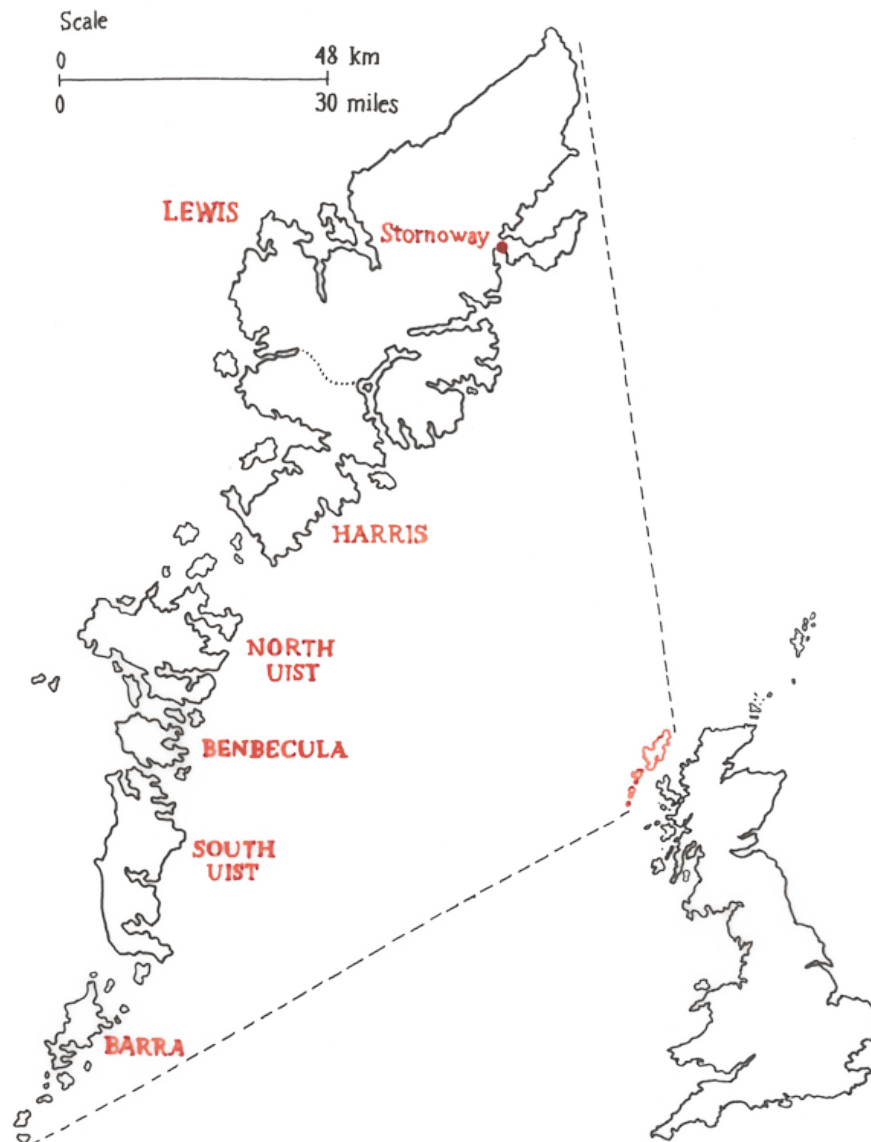


Fig. i.1. Map of the Outer Hebrides.

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## Introduction

### Working the fabric

In this Act “Harris Tweed” means a tweed which —

(a) has been handwoven by the islanders at their homes in the Outer Hebrides, finished in the Outer Hebrides, and made from pure virgin wool dyed and spun in the Outer Hebrides.

(b) possesses such further characteristics as a material is required to possess under regulations from time to time in force under the provisions of Schedule 1 to the Act of 1938 (or under regulations from time to time in force under any enactment replacing those provisions) for it to qualify for the application to it, and use with respect to it, of a Harris Tweed trade mark.

(Harris Tweed Act 1993:6)

## 1. Introduction

‘When I was growing up, I just assumed this was what everyone else did anywhere in the world’. Kim<sup>1</sup> chuckled, amused by the certainty of her childhood belief. ‘It was all around you, the weaving. Especially here on the West side. We had a loom, and so did most houses up and down the road. You could hear them – *clickaddy-clack, clickaddy-clack* – when you walked through the village’. Taking a break from her weaving work, Kim invited me into her kitchen for a cup of tea. She continued – ‘It was only when I moved to the mainland to study and work at 18 that I realized “hold on, they don’t all have looms in their houses like we do back home”’.

Eventually, while she was ‘away’ in the Scottish mainland, Kim realized just how singular the weaving industry from her islands was. The hard-wearing, woollen cloth that her family and their neighbours were busy weaving in their domestic loomsheds on the west side of Lewis when she was growing up had long been known, around the

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<sup>1</sup> To preserve the anonymity of my interlocutors, all names used in this thesis are pseudonyms. Some of their biographical details have also been changed.

<sup>2</sup> The Harris Tweed Act of 1993, quoted at the very beginning of this chapter, contains the most recent legal

world, as ‘Harris Tweed’. Trademark protected since 1910, Harris Tweed can only be produced in the Outer Hebrides, a group of islands located off the West coast of Scotland. Moreover, a cloth can only be called ‘Harris Tweed’ and stamped with the recognizable ‘Orb’ trademark (Figs. 0.1 and 0.2) if it has been hand-woven at the homes of the islanders using wool dyed and spun on the islands. Since 1993, Harris Tweed has become the only cloth in the world protected by its own Act of Parliament.<sup>2</sup> This legislation emphasizes how ‘it is vital to the economy of those islands that the integrity, distinctive character and worldwide renown of Harris Tweed should be maintained’ (Harris Tweed Act 1993:1).

The geographical situation of the Outer Hebrides – located so far to the west of Scotland that they’re also known as the Western Isles – along with their economic fragility, declining population, and distinctive social and cultural history, have provided sound justification for this legal protection. The ‘remoteness’ of these Gaelic-speaking islands, the harsh weather, striking scenery, and the ‘preservation’ of a ‘crofting way of life’ have also captured, for over a century, imaginations around the world. While Harris Tweed can only be produced in the Outer Hebrides, the rugged woollen cloth that was once known locally simply as *clò mòr* (Gaelic for ‘big cloth’) is exported today to over 50 countries, and is trademark protected in over 30.



**Fig. 0.1.** HTA-issued label over Harris Tweed in a grey Herringbone pattern. (Image courtesy © HTA)

**Fig. 0.2.** Stamping of the Orb trademark (n.d.) (Image courtesy © HTA)

<sup>2</sup> The Harris Tweed Act of 1993, quoted at the very beginning of this chapter, contains the most recent legal definition of Harris Tweed, building on the wording of earlier trademark legislation (from 1910 and 1934).

The centrality of provenance in descriptions of the Harris Tweed industry might suggest that the production of the cloth would lie in the hands of a select group of people, perhaps ‘born and bred’ (Edwards 2000) on the islands, maybe descendants of a weaving family, possibly taught by relatives who passed specialized skills, knowledge and values on from generation to generation. While this was certainly the case for some of the weavers I met during my fieldwork, it quickly became clear that the industry was more demographically diverse than I had anticipated. A significant proportion of people employed in the Harris Tweed industry today come from sharply contrasting backgrounds, and several were born and bred elsewhere – in the Scottish mainland, in England, or in another European country. At the same time, the region’s long history of labour and educational migration meant that most ‘local’ islanders were also ‘returners’ of some kind – and that several Harris Tweed workers had arrived at their present position after a diverse career history.

Though she came from a weaving family, Kim told me that she ‘had never imagined’ she would eventually become a Harris Tweed weaver herself. When Kim moved away 20 years earlier, she left the familiar ‘crofting way of life’ behind her, going to University in Glasgow and taking on work in different mainland cities. For a long time, Kim was certain that her work and life would mostly be lived ‘away’, with occasional visits to the island where she was born and grew up. Circumstances, however, changed. Moving back to Lewis three years before – and eventually finding work as a weaver – was an unexpected plan that only emerged in the sequence of significant transformations in her personal and professional situation while living in the Scottish mainland. After the company where she was working decided to move her position to a different city and she found herself working in conditions that made her job ‘horrible’, she discussed the possibility of a change with her husband – who had also been working at a job he disliked. They had both wanted to do crofting, and ‘had been talking about it for ages’. So when a relative ‘back home’ in Lewis fell ill and her husband was offered redundancy, they took the leap and relocated to her family croft.

When Kim moved back to Lewis, she did not know how to weave – despite ‘coming from a weaving family’, and having observed her parents’ and siblings’ involvement in the industry when she was growing up. In fact, the idea of trying to become a weaver did not arise until a few months after she and her husband had decided to move. Initially, the

plan was ‘all about crofting’,<sup>3</sup> and waiting to see what income-generating jobs might be available when they got there. When the opportunity to get a loom emerged, weaving suddenly seemed like the perfect option. ‘After all’, she reasoned ‘weaving and crofting have always been an ideal combination in this area’. Eventually, she was taught to weave by Vickie, a German woman and fellow Harris Tweed weaver who had moved to Lewis about seven years earlier, and who had been recommended to her as a potential weaving mentor. Kim detailed how much she had learned from Vickie – the mechanics of the loom, the weaving principles, and the mental preparation for the prospect of occasional ‘quiet’ periods, following fluctuations in international orders that might slow down production and leave her loom temporarily ‘empty’.

As my fieldwork progressed, I soon realized that ‘locals’ (people who had been born and raised in the Outer Hebrides), ‘returners’ (‘locals’ who had spent time living, studying and working ‘away’ before relocating to the islands), and ‘incomers’ (people from elsewhere who had moved to the islands) were all involved in the industry as *islanders* – just the term used in the legal definition of Harris Tweed.<sup>4</sup> And when shifts in global demand for the cloth shaped fluctuating work prospects, the possibility of labour

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<sup>3</sup> Crofting is a term generally used to describe the practices and livelihood strategies associated with a small-landholding system that became common throughout the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which survives, with certain practical and legal transformations, until today. While particular histories and current crofting practices vary across the Highlands and Islands, a common feature of crofting in these regions concerned the small size of plots made available to tenants. In Lewis and Harris, these small plots are also often located in the least fertile areas of the islands (since the best land was reserved by landlords for commercial sheep rearing and later for deer-stalking grounds), requiring tenants to seek some additional form of income-generating work to complement the limited returns from the land. This situation was profitably exploited by landlords during the 19<sup>th</sup> century boom in kelping, a labour-intensive industry that absorbed the hands of local populations seeking to pay their rents on small crofts and faced with the absence of alternative employment options in the region (see Chapter 1). The occupational pluralism that is still observable today throughout the islands was often described by my interlocutors in reference to these histories, drawing attention to the livelihood strategies of crofter-kelpers (in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), crofter-fishermen and crofter-weavers (see Chapters 1 and 4). The relationship between occupational pluralism and crofting histories in this region has also been discussed by Mewett (1977).

<sup>4</sup> For further discussions on the use of terms like ‘local’ and ‘incomer’ in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland see for example Macdonald 1997:129-162; Masson 2007; Oliver 2011; Jedrej and Nuttall 1996; McKinlay and McVittie 2007. It is also worth noting that the term ‘incomer’ has similarly been used in this region to refer to people from the same island – e.g. a woman who moved into her husband’s neighbouring village after their wedding could still be called an ‘incomer’ (Mewett 1982a: 125; see also Macdonald 1997: 146 on the same practice taking place in the Isle of Skye). Jedrej and Nuttall (1996) also discuss the use of the term ‘white settlers’ in the Scottish Highlands and Islands to refer to particular ‘incomers’. However, while that expression is also mentioned briefly in other studies (e.g. Macdonald 1997; Oliver 2011), I never heard it while living in the Outer Hebrides.

The concepts of ‘home’ and ‘away’ (often invoked alongside categories like ‘local’ or ‘exile’) have long been used by islanders to make sense of local experiences of migration, belonging and place-making, and to reflect on this region’s enduring histories of displacement and re-settlement (see e.g. Mewett 1982b, 1988; Oliver 2011; Macdonald 1997:129-162; Parman 2005 [1990]),

uncertainty was imagined and experienced not only by incomers as it might be expected, but by *islanders* across that spectrum – locals, returners, and incomers. Anthropologists have variously explored the relationship between people, place, and the production of various kinds of things – and the social implications of place-based and industry-centred notions of belonging (e.g. Mollona 2009, 2005; Hart 2005; Yanagisako 2002; Kondo 1990). In this thesis I argue that examining the Harris Tweed industry by focusing on the lived experiences, enduring and shifting understandings of workers who are variously involved in the industry offers an opportunity to unsettle established assumptions and narratives around concepts of rootedness, belonging, uncertainty and inclusivity.

For thirteen months, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the Isle of Lewis and Harris, the Outer Hebridean island where the Harris Tweed industry came to be concentrated.<sup>5</sup> Between August 2016 and September 2017, I spent time in the workplaces involved, in different ways, in the making of Harris Tweed – domestic loom sheds, woollen mills, tweed vans, the offices of the Harris Tweed Authority – learning from workers, sometimes working alongside them. Conducting participant observation in these contexts directed my attention to the ways in which work processes, workers and workplaces conjured certain moral understandings, implicated individuals in particular social relationships, and constantly tested people's expectations, assumptions, and visions of lives worth leading.

Focusing on the lives of workers employed in an industry that is peculiarly rooted in a 'remote' location, but fundamentally connected to the whims of a global market, also offered an opportunity to reflect on how people variously make sense of their place in the world as they navigate the volatility, paradoxes and opportunities of contemporary global capitalism. Most strikingly, learning about workers' lives and about their everyday experiences of work in this localised and peculiarly structured industry revealed the prevalence of inclusive social dynamics that contrasted with more parochial, kinship-centred or otherwise exclusionary notions of 'community membership' observed in other places similarly described as 'insular', 'remote' or 'self-contained' (e.g. Strathern 1981; Edwards 2000; Rapport 1993; Cohen 1987; Jedrej and Nuttall 1996). In the Harris Tweed industry, this inclusivity was experienced as part of

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed history of the Harris Tweed industry, including the origins and transformations in its trademark protection since 1910, see Hunter 2001. See also Thompson 1969 for a historical account that covers earlier weaving practices in the region, as well as the industry's development from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century until the 1960s. For anthropologists' discussions of the Harris Tweed industry see Ennew 1982, 1980a: 28-46; Parman 2005 [1990]: 76-96].

everyday work relations, and was rendered particularly visible during periods when occasional slumps in global demand for the cloth led to a slowing down in production. On these occasions, patterns of work distribution and attitudes towards fellow islanders – whether locals, returners or incomers – continued to be guided by ‘egalitarian’ principles, revealing inclusive understandings of a shared precariousness.<sup>6</sup>

In this thesis I show how these seemingly contradictory dynamics were experienced and discussed locally in relation to specific regional and industrial histories, and understood as part of particular personal narratives, family stories, and shared moral dispositions. Doing so, I highlight how anthropologists are ideally positioned to attend to the diverse and nuanced ways in which people experience and articulate their views on labour uncertainty, re-settlement, and belonging. Besides spending long periods of time in different workplaces and learning how to perform particular tasks – e.g. weaving, warping, filling pirns<sup>7</sup> – I also learned Scottish Gaelic, conducted interviews within and outwith the industry (i.e. with current and former workers; with people whose relatives had been involved in the industry; and with other islanders who had no direct involvement in it), and I circulated a questionnaire in one of the mills. I visited several local museums and consulted local archives (*Tasglann nan Eilean Siar*, Harris Tweed Authority Archives), libraries (Stornoway Public Library, Lewis Castle College Library), and records available in local historical societies (*Comunn Eachdraidh Nis*, *Comann Eachdraidh an Taobh Siar*, Stornoway Historical Society).

During my time in the Outer Hebrides I also became involved in a community wool-working group, attended several local events dedicated to Gaelic language and culture (e.g. concerts, public talks, theatre plays; musical and storytelling competitions during the Royal National Mòd; Highland dance and Piping competitions), and I learned how to

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth pointing out that, during occasional ‘quiet’ periods, when anxieties about work distribution grew among some of the weavers whose looms were temporarily empty, discussions and rumours never blamed *incomers* to the island – that is, people who had not been born in the Outer Hebrides but who had moved there. If anything, there might be some speculation about whether some *newcomers* to the industry (who were often assumed to be confident *locals* rather than incomers) might have joined (or re-joined) the weaving trade without asking industry officials whether it might be a good time to do so. However, I found that such speculation was not widespread, and actually widely disapproved of. During a meeting of the Harris Tweed Weavers Association, these rumours were publically denounced by several established members as ‘inaccurate’, ‘unwelcoming’ and ‘unfair’ to new weavers (i.e. *newcomers* to the industry – whether locals, returners or incomers to the islands), and suggested as one of the reasons why meeting attendance was not higher.

<sup>7</sup> Pirns (*iteachan* in Gaelic) are the small bobbins (or spools) of weft yarn placed inside the shuttles used in Hattersley looms (see Chapter 3). As a weaver operates the pedals, a shuttle is thrown across the loom to weave the weft into the warp.



weave baskets and other artefacts using local plants – including willow, heather, and marram grass.<sup>8</sup> Occasionally, I took part in croft work, cutting peats, shearing sheep, helping in separating the sheep from their lambs, and preparing them for the winter. I also went along on community coastal walks, and attended social gatherings and fundraising breakfasts at local historical societies and village community halls. Along with my time spent in Harris Tweed workplaces, engaging in these activities allowed me to take part in other dimensions of local life, and to meet people who would also become important interlocutors as I sought to learn about contemporary experiences of work and life in these islands.

## **2. An industry of paradoxes: Harris Tweed, the islands, and the world**

One of the puzzling features of the Harris Tweed industry – and part of the charm that has attracted consumers to the cloth for over a century – lies in its ability to survive as a reputed global-reaching industry despite (and, as I argue in this thesis, because of) its distinctive production model and manufacturing practices. Because of its legal trademark protection, Harris Tweed can only be produced in the Outer Hebrides, according to strict production practices that encompass both domestic hand-weaving and industrial mill work, establishing particular relations between different working elements in a way that might elsewhere be perceived as ‘inefficient’ or counter-productive. However, I found that for several islanders whose livelihoods depended on working for the Harris Tweed industry, its distinctive productive model was instead understood to match the specific geographical, historical and socio-economic circumstances of the islands, contributing to population retention and enabling the pursuit of particular ideals of a life worth leading.

Several months into my fieldwork, realizing the productive conversations surrounding this theme, I persisted in asking people how they would explain the workings of the Harris Tweed industry. Workers across the industry invariably began by telling me about its three main elements – woollen mills, self-employed weavers, and the Harris

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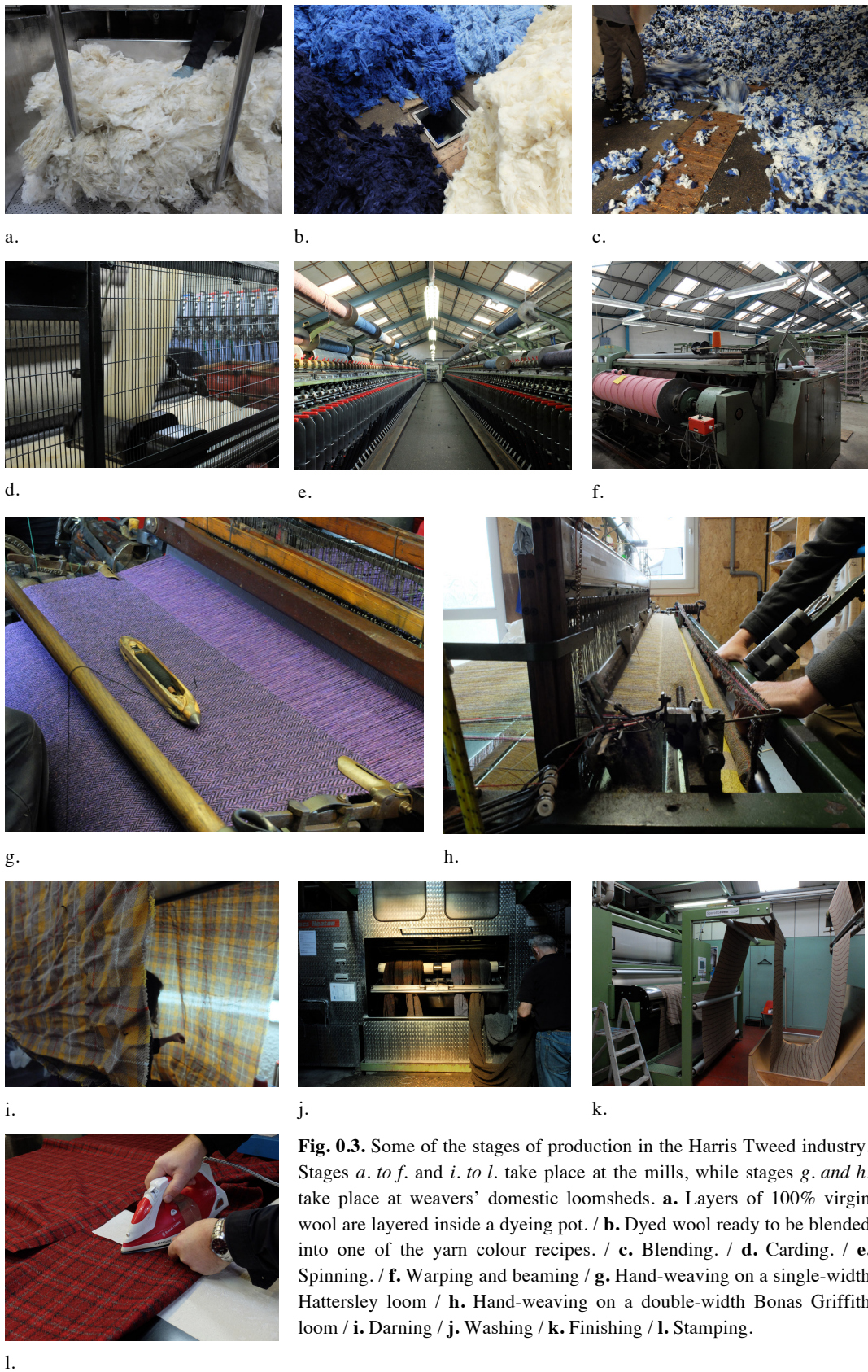
<sup>8</sup> Marram grass (*Ammophila arenaria*) is a plant that can be found in the sandy and wind-battered dunes of the western coast of the Outer Hebrides. With its fibrous, matted roots, and its resilience to harsh weather, marram grass plays a key part in keeping the integrity of sand dunes, promoting the proliferation of other species of plants in its surroundings. In the past, marram grass was used widely throughout the islands for making ropes and thatching the roofs of blackhouses.

Tweed Authority (HTA). They highlighted how each of these elements had a unique role to play, which could not be replaced or transferred to any other element. The relations between them, I soon realized, were not only seen as crucial, but *are* crucial to understand the nature of the Harris Tweed industry – not only as a manufacturing activity, but also as an enduring local project that encompassed certain moral and social commitments.

These discussions focused, in part, on the practical aspects of those relations. The local mills cannot weave the cloth in their premises, since Harris Tweed can only be stamped with the Orb trademark if it has been hand-woven at weavers' own homes. The self-employed weavers working from home rely on the mills for producing the right quality of woollen yarn (which they then use to weave the cloth) and for the industrial equipment and expertise required to wash and 'finish' the woven cloth, before it is inspected and stamped by the HTA. The vast majority of weavers also rely on work issued by the mills,<sup>9</sup> which have a wider reach into global markets and attract most customers' orders. The mills, in turn, rely on weavers' ability to complete orders in a timely manner and according to high quality standards so that the cloth can be stamped by the HTA with the Orb trademark and sent to customers around the world. Both weavers and mills rely on the HTA not only to promote and legally protect the industry's brand, but also to physically inspect and stamp each meter of the cloth. The HTA, a statutory body that does not produce nor sell any cloth, is funded exclusively through the stamping fees paid by mills (and weavers working as independent producers). Stamping fees are paid according to the length of cloth produced, so this revenue – and thus the Authority's ability to undertake promotional and legal responsibilities – also depends on shifts in local production, which are importantly shaped by fluctuations in international orders.

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<sup>9</sup> While all weavers working in the Harris Tweed industry are self-employed, they can either chose to work on orders issued by mills, or to work as 'independent producers', marketing their cloth, handling orders and managing their business autonomously. Nevertheless, even weavers working as small producers rely on mills to produce the yarn for weaving, and to wash and 'finish' their woven tweeds; like mills, they also rely on the HTA to inspect and stamp their woven cloths with the Orb trademark.



**Fig. 0.3.** Some of the stages of production in the Harris Tweed industry. Stages *a. to f.* and *i. to l.* take place at the mills, while stages *g.* and *h.* take place at weavers' domestic loomsheds. **a.** Layers of 100% virgin wool are layered inside a dyeing pot. / **b.** Dyed wool ready to be blended into one of the yarn colour recipes. / **c.** Blending. / **d.** Carding. / **e.** Spinning. / **f.** Warping and beaming / **g.** Hand-weaving on a single-width Hattersley loom / **h.** Hand-weaving on a double-width Bonas Griffith loom / **i.** Darning / **j.** Washing / **k.** Finishing / **l.** Stamping.

The protection afforded by the trademark and the Act of Parliament establishes these rules and limitations, but the responsibility for enacting them appropriately, and thus safeguarding the industry's reputation, is perceived to lie in the hands of workers operating across these three key elements – woollen mills, domestic loomsheds, and the Harris Tweed Authority (HTA). The only way the industry can work, I was told, is if these three elements are working in 'symbiosis'. This term – symbiosis – would frequently emerge as a way to summarize the responsibilities and complexities involved in maintaining a balanced relationship between those three elements. This symbiotic relation was variously described by reference to images or geometrical shapes that emphasized the supposedly 'egalitarian' nature of this dynamic, where mills, weavers, and the HTA were all seen to perform an equally important role. 'Not *one* of them is more important than the other', as various weavers, mill workers and HTA employees put it.

While various people explained this relationship as 'a triangle', one mill manager hesitated on using that image after realizing that once it was drawn on a piece of paper it seemed instead to suggest a hierarchical relation between the three, resembling a pyramid instead of a flat triangle. A circle connecting the three might be more appropriate, I was told. Some people also invoked the image of a Venn diagram, with three circles intersecting to create a unique shared centre where 'Harris Tweed' could exist.

There are, of course, significant power relations at play in this industry – not just within these three elements but also across them. Sometimes, these unspoken dynamics, along with occasional misunderstandings, contributed to the proliferation of rumours or feelings of restlessness among workers – particularly during periods when the industry seemed to be going 'quiet' and future work prospects appeared momentarily uncertain. However, I argue that focusing on the moral discourses and narratives of egalitarianism, symbiosis and responsibility that featured in workers' descriptions of the practical workings of the industry despite these power dynamics, can offer insights about the ways in which people variously made sense of their place in an industry that both challenges widespread business models, and is continually dependent on those 'ordinary' or routinised workings of contemporary global capitalism.

Writing at a time when the industry was particularly successful,<sup>10</sup> the historian Francis Thompson also highlighted the unusual combination of economic planning and social commitment that shaped the seemingly contradictory place of the Harris Tweed production model in international markets. In his 1969 book on the history of the Harris Tweed industry, Thompson described it as ‘an industry of paradoxes’ (1969: 27). Outlining the origins of local tweed production for domestic consumption, and the transformations that turned it from a small-scale cottage industry into a wide-reaching business, he pointed out the unusual and seemingly contradictory features of its growth. Since it had retained some of the traditional, localised and small-scale manufacturing processes and production models from its early days (particularly the hand-weaving in islanders’ homes), its vast global reach was seen as somewhat surprising in comparison with other industries. He pointed out how ‘the present-day stature of the Harris Tweed industry is out of all proportion to its actual size and method of manufacture’ (1969: 27). Moreover, Thompson observed that, despite those ‘paradoxes’, it had ‘succeeded where other industries, with more formally-recognised methods for manufacture and commercial organization, have often faltered and too often failed’ (1969: 27).

At the same time, Thompson pointed out another aspect that made the industry ‘unique’ – a certain commitment to concentrate not only on maximizing profits but also on safeguarding the place of the industry in island life, and acknowledging its important contribution to islanders’ livelihoods. In his words, the Harris Tweed industry

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<sup>10</sup> In the mid-1960s, demand for Harris Tweed reached the highest point in the history of the industry. This increase in production, visible in records documenting the number of meters stamped with the Orb trademark each year, reached its peak in 1966, when 7,632,150 meters of cloth were stamped (see Fig. 0.4 below). Hunter describes the global scale of this ‘unprecedented boom’ (2001: 278) and its local implications:

[In 1965] well over 70% of production went to export markets at a time when British industry was being urged to ‘export or die’. The mills were working double shifts to meet orders from the continent, America, Australia and New Zealand. In this happy situation the weaver was naturally seen as a key factor in the industry (...) Recruitment of young weavers became an urgent priority (Hunter 2001: 278-279)

This scale of production is hardly comparable to more recent trends, as the graph in Fig. 0.4 shows (for a detailed account of the peaks, slumps and other transformations that would take place in the industry in the years following the 1960s boom, see Hunter 2001). Nevertheless, the stamping figures for the year when I started doing fieldwork (1,551,374 meters in 2016) were viewed optimistically within the industry, especially in light of the radical decline observed in the previous decades (see Fig. 0.4 and Chapter 1).

Moreover, as Hunter also points out, the volatility of the industry (with its dependence on international markets’ demand) was evidenced shortly after the 1965-66 boom: by 1967 the numbers were already decreasing significantly. The 10% drop in production that year brought about a contrasting situation where ‘the mills were working one week on and one week off’ instead of the double-shifts implemented just a couple of years earlier, ‘as falling sales hit an island in which employment figures ranged from 19% to 27%’ (Hunter 2001: 281).

is also an industry whose organisers have an aim beyond that profit motive which is the *raison d'être* of commercial enterprise: they have a remarkable understanding and recognition of its social and economic value to the people of the Western Isles. In this respect the industry is unique. (Thompson 1969:27)

The enmeshment of 'local' moral economies in world-encompassing capitalist relations of production and distribution has been increasingly explored by scholars, with anthropologists drawing attention to the ways in which people's lives and imaginations are both shaped by, and contribute to the making of, the shifting dynamics of contemporary global capitalism. Some of this work has focused on examining more closely some of the localised social, political and economic dynamics animating global commodity and value chains, bringing a more critical lens to the study of these large-scale, interlinked processes (e.g. Tsing 2000, 2005, 2009, 2015; Cross 2014; Bestor 2001). A focus on the relationship between work processes, relations of production, and political-economic dynamics at different scales has revealed the uneven and unequal ways in which places, industries, and markets participate in contemporary global capitalism (e.g. Cross 2010, 2014; Bair 2005, 2011; Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Ferguson 2006; Herzfeld 2004).

I argue that paying attention not just to the organization of work and labour, but also to the ways in which workers understand the operational features (and histories) of those mechanisms, can expand our understanding of the resourcefulness involved in inhabiting, in meaningful ways, everyday experiences of labour uncertainty, flexibility, and the constant possibility of change. In this sense, my research builds on the contributions of anthropologists like Jamie Cross (2014) and Rebecca Prentice (2015), whose work has highlighted the ways in which workers' imaginations and subjectivities – as they work through the challenges and possibilities of contemporary global capitalism – expose the complexities, emotional affordances and moral understandings emerging in geographically localised workplaces. However, while their work emphasized the disruptive role of neoliberalism and other large-scale political-economic transformations in localised industries and workplaces, my research focuses on what happens in contexts where socio-economic disruption is experienced, instead, as part of a longer history of labour uncertainty and outmigration.

Moreover, I show the importance of examining how particular industries have emerged and developed, drawing attention both to peculiar alliances and complex regional

politics, *and* the shared moral understandings and personal motivations that these processes have entailed (see Chapter 1). The Harris Tweed industry was created and has sustained its continued existence thanks, in great part, to fairly non-standard alliances between private capital and governmental institutions – from the shared efforts that led to the 1910 Orb trademark protection and the 1993 Harris Tweed Act of Parliament, to the more recent state-sponsored investment in mills’ facilities and business plans (see Chapter 1). This kind of government support, along with other development policies, are sometimes explained in reference to the state’s perceptions of these regions as ‘problem areas’ (see e.g. Ennew 1982). However, while these descriptions reflect actual discourses and approaches to regional matters, I suggest that attention should also be drawn to the active role played by islanders in efforts to protect and advance the Harris Tweed industry – today and in the past. From weavers, mill workers and HTA officials, to investors and mill owners – local people’s resourcefulness, political views and personal convictions have, since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, importantly shaped the industry into what it is today. I argue that attention to these layered articulations can illuminate not only *how* an idiosyncratic production model has been retained, but how its retention has both *shaped* and *been shaped* by particular understandings of belonging, interdependence, and a shared responsibility for what islanders understand as the common good.

### **3. Crofting and weaving: resourcefulness, precariousness, and anticipation**

When I was visiting Kim, it became apparent that her views on current realities of work and life on the islands and in the Harris Tweed industry were informed by a particular understanding of local livelihood strategies. Like several other workers I met, Kim evoked the place of weaving within local household practices and socio-economic structures – ‘weaving and crofting have always been an ideal combination in this area’, she had pointed out. Since the cloth has to be woven from home and weavers are self-employed, I was often told, they were able to decide how to balance their time between attending to croft work and concentrating on weaving in their domestic loomsheds. At the same time, the limited size and fertility of crofting plots – inherited from 19<sup>th</sup> century landownership practices, improvement policies and profit-driven exploitation – has always required crofters to balance working the land with one or more additional income-generating occupations. As I was frequently reminded during my fieldwork, the

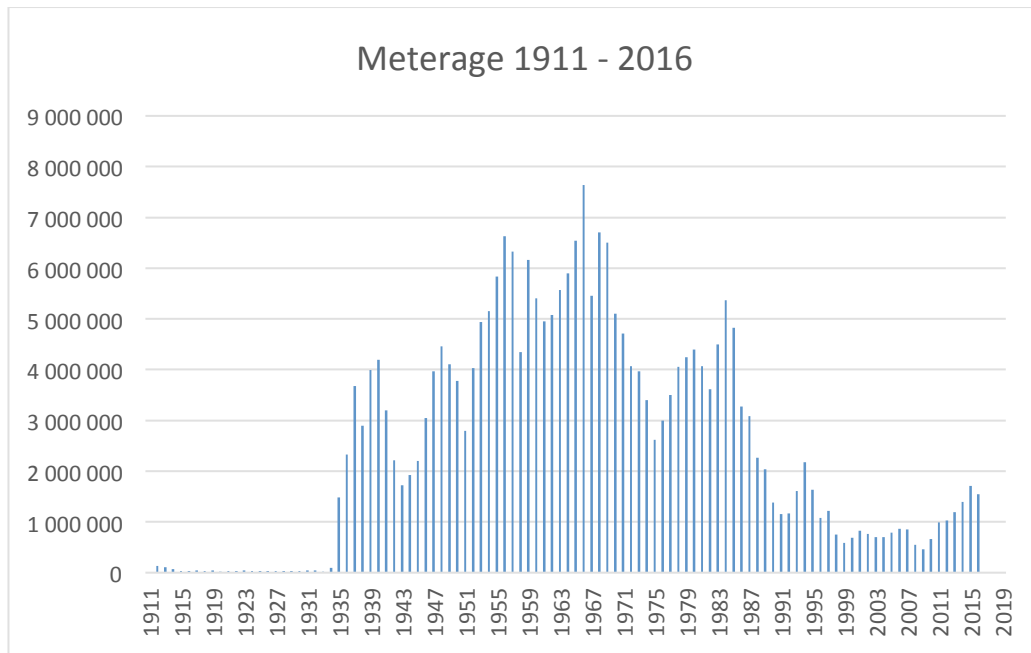
relationship between crofting and weaving was only one of the arrangements devised, over generations, to address the multiple challenges faced by people who had decided to make the Outer Hebrides their home. Living in these windswept islands involved more than coping with the ever-changing, harsh weather and limited access to fertile land. It had also required finding ways of dealing with the region's economic fragility, limited employment opportunities, and uncertain, ever-changing labour futures.

The history of the Harris Tweed industry exemplified, for many, both the uncertainty *and* the sense of possibility experienced by generations of workers seeking to make a living in these islands. While the Orb trademark (1910) and the Harris Tweed Act of Parliament (1993) have provided vital legal protection against counterfeiting and other threats against the brand, the industry has other vulnerabilities – and, over time, it has been periodically marked by significant peaks and slumps that have made and unmade local livelihoods at different points in the past (see Fig. 0.4). Fluctuations in global demand for the cloth have shaped these cycles since the early days of the industry, and while recent strategies within the industry have significantly contributed to reduce a dependence on seasonal demand and volatile markets, I found that the possibility of sudden change continued to inform many workers' perceptions and everyday experiences of work.<sup>11</sup> Since the industry's beginnings, recurrent responses to these shifts included seeking alternative sources of income, periodically relying more on the limited returns of crofting, or moving away from the industry (and sometimes from the islands altogether). At the same time, however, periods of relative stability and recovery have introduced new people to work in the industry, contributed in important ways to population retention, and affirmed the possibilities of working in an industry that allows for the pursuit of particular visions of lives worth leading.

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<sup>11</sup> While I focus on the ways in which workers themselves imagined, experienced, and dealt with the possibility of labour uncertainty, it is worth pointing out these recent efforts, within the industry, to minimise the impact of potential global fluctuations on local production. Plans to proceed with these strategies were already beginning to develop in one of the mills when I was conducting fieldwork in 2016-2017, and today they seem to be more widely pursued, as a representative of the Harris Tweed Authority explained to me in a recent communication (September 2019). According to mill managers and the HTA, in order to keep weavers busy and ensure they do not have to leave the industry in search for other work, mills have sought to diversify their markets beyond the fashion industry (e.g. interiors, accessories) and produce for stock in order to avoid seasonal fluctuations. According to the HTA, they also try to calculate more substantial deliveries before and after holiday mill closures. While it would be interesting to examine how these changes have shaped weavers' experiences and perceptions since the time when I conducted fieldwork, my observations are limited to ethnographic research conducted in 2016-2017.





**Fig. 0.4.** Meters of cloth stamped with the 'Orb' Trademark between 1911 and 2016. According to the HTA, 'the certification trademark was amended in 1934 to allow mill spun yarn to be used. Pre-1934 all yarn was handspun.' (Source: HTA November 2017, personal communication).

Considering both the ambivalence and resourcefulness that has marked experiences of work and life in the Harris Tweed industry, this thesis addresses some of the tensions, paradoxes, and shifting moral understandings that emerge in contexts where labour uncertainty, and a long history of economic fragility and changeability, colour people's everyday lives. Recent anthropological discussions on precarity and precariousness have offered valuable insights on the social complexities and lived experiences of different kinds of uncertainty, flexibility, and insecurity. Paying due regard to the degree of severity, persistence, and temporal length of these diverse uncertain conditions, anthropologists have highlighted the ways in which people across the world variously inhabit, navigate, and make sense of their past, present, and future lives. In my discussion of work and life in the Harris Tweed industry, I build on and contribute to this literature by considering, in particular, the articulation between localised livelihood strategies and the making of particular kinds of lives.

In particular, I am interested in the ways in which people's understandings of their own circumstances can offer diverse (and sometimes unexpected) ways of thinking through contemporary experiences of labour uncertainty and 'flexibility'. In her discussion of 'precarity', a notion that often refers to 'the fact that much of the world's population

lacks stable work and steady incomes' (2018: 1), Sharryn Kasmir points out the different ways in which scholars have mobilized this concept, and their diverse political and analytical implications. Sometimes employed in theoretical discussions and descriptions where contemporary labour realities are contrasted with Fordist ideals, its use is associated with particular claims – like the 'pronouncement that precarity is new and that it manifests a distinctive phase of capitalist development associated with neoliberalism' (Kasmir 2018:1). However, while useful in certain contexts, this sense of precarity's 'novelty' obscures not only the geographical and social unevenness of Fordism, but also its dissimilar place in particular regional histories and imaginaries (Kasmir 2018; Baca 2004; Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012).

A different way of thinking about precarity and precariousness, Kasmir points out, has involved thinking about precariousness as an ontological condition. Drawing on Judith Butler's distinction between 'precarity' and 'precariousness', Kasmir's exposition suggests alternative ways of thinking through the lived experiences and emotional implications of various kinds of disruption and uncertainty. In this 'critical distinction', Butler 'sees precariousness as a generalized human condition that stems from the fact that all humans are interdependent on each other and therefore all are vulnerable' (2018: 2). By contrast, precarity is 'unequally distributed' – something that is 'experienced by marginalized, poor, and disenfranchised people who are exposed to economic insecurity, injury, violence, and forced migration' (2018: 2; Butler 2004, 2010). Thinking through these conceptual propositions allows us to consider not only the circumstances that people find themselves in, but also the very particular and intimate ways in which they navigate and make sense of the challenges they encounter. In Kasmir's view, anthropologists' attention to 'emotion and subjectivity' shows how 'they are particularly attuned to the structures of feeling associated with precarious lifeworlds' (2018: 3) – including how these fluctuate and change, calling into question assumptions about the 'regularity' of everyday life (2018: 3).

This sense of precariousness as something that is variously defined, inhabited and understood by people as they navigate its manifestations echoes some of the insights I gathered from discussions with workers across the Harris Tweed industry – and with the self-employed domestic weavers in particular. In their knowledge of the industry's vulnerability to shifts in global demand for the cloth, workers in different areas of the Harris Tweed industry expressed how they nevertheless made sense of the relative uncertainty in their work and life in relation to concepts as diverse as freedom,

autonomy, resourcefulness, and the inevitability of change. Their often unexpected and optimistic understandings, expectations, and visions of what a good life might look like in contexts of potential labour uncertainty, resonated with the sense of possibility and ingenuity expressed by other people whose ‘flexible’ work conditions and livelihood practices have been researched by anthropologists in different parts of the world (e.g. Prentice 2012, 2015; Tsing 2015; Millar 2014, 2018).

Attention to these dynamics in the Harris Tweed industry invites questions that can contribute, in important ways, to further our understanding of contemporary realities and lived experiences of work. How can a cultivated attentiveness to the shifting manifestations and perceptions of uncertainty in people’s everyday working lives improve our understanding of the multiple dimensions, temporalities, and lived experiences of indeterminacy and change? How are particular regional and industrial histories perceived, and how do they inform people’s understandings, livelihood strategies, and personal outlooks on labour uncertainty and the persistent possibility of change? How are workers’ imagined labour futures shaped by childhood memories, family stories, and personal narratives surrounding their own career histories? How can notions of resourcefulness and experiences of anticipation open up new possibilities for thinking through the subjectivities, self-identities and imaginations of workers navigating flexible and uncertain labour markets and modes of production? What are some of the contributions afforded by concepts such as precariousness, indeterminacy, and possibility when trying to make sense of the diversity of lived experiences under contemporary global capitalism?

In this thesis I address these questions by considering not only the ways in which workers’ lives are shaped, imagined, and made sense of in relation to flexible labour markets; but also how people’s livelihood strategies, visions of good lives, and moral understandings offer new frameworks for understanding these experiences – and how they are, themselves, subject to constant transformation, unsettling and re-making.

#### **4. Working the fabric: land, labour and belonging**

Learning about the Harris Tweed industry by spending time with people who are variously involved in its making revealed the myriad ways in which labour processes

entailed not only the manufacturing of the cloth, but also the production of many other significant ‘things’ – selves, social relations, notions of belonging, experiences of work, visions of lives worth leading. In this thesis I reflect on the analytical possibilities afforded by the concepts of work and labour, not only by discussing the lives of workers, workplaces and work processes involved in the production of Harris Tweed, but also by proposing an expanded understanding of work and labour, and a reassessment of their potential as conceptual and analytical tools. My interest in these terms stemmed both from engaging with particular scholarly discussions, and from learning about certain local practices and discourses, within and outwith the Harris Tweed industry.

I argue that examining the intertwinement of people, place, and the making of various kinds of things through the lens of work and labour suggests alternative ways to investigate and conceptualize contemporary experiences of employment, place-making, and belonging. Researching the lived experiences of workers – whether locals, returners, or incomers – whose livelihoods and commitment to remaining on these islands are linked in important ways to the continuity of the Harris Tweed industry revealed how people made sense of their place in the world in relation not only to the kind of work they performed to make the cloth, but also as part of wider projects involving the production of self-identities, social relationships, and feelings of belonging. In many ways, the narratives and lived experiences of workers employed across the Harris Tweed industry echoed some of the dynamics discussed in scholarly literature on work and labour – but they also suggested alternative ways of thinking through old questions, and informed the formulation of new ones.

Today, the terms ‘work’ and ‘labour’ are often used interchangeably in the social sciences to refer to those activities that contribute to the livelihoods of people around the world, identifying practices that range from income-generating activities in formal and informal sectors, to wage-less occupations and unpaid household responsibilities that contribute in vital ways to social reproduction. While my interlocutors would also use both of these terms interchangeably to refer to the same things, and in this thesis they will often appear to perform the same role, it is nevertheless important to briefly consider how other scholars have defined and framed them, and how I build on their contributions in making my arguments. Addressing the question of whether a concept of labour is useful for anthropological research – and if so, how is it useful, and what kind

of concept should it be – Susana Narotzky (2018) begins by highlighting a definitional issue:

English-speaking scholars have often been using a distinction between ‘work’ and ‘labour’, where labour is defined as human effort which pertains to capitalist relations of production, and work describes the rest of human energy expenditure in relation to non-capitalist realms, whether these be reproductive tasks (which eventually became subsumed by the ‘care’ concept) or socially relevant, non-market-orientated tasks (generally but not solely reproductive) in the margins and interstices of the capitalist market system or non-capitalist historical or present-day societies (2018: 31-32).

However, she points out, this is a distinction that does not hold in other languages where a single word is used to refer to both (e.g. Spanish, French, Portuguese), or in some cases where even more categories exist to refer to diverse forms of ‘creative effort’ (Narotzky 2018: 32) – a common issue encountered by anthropologists in the field as they navigate relevant categories and conceptual distinctions. Moreover, Narotzky argues, attempts to neatly define ‘work’ and ‘labour’ as separate concepts can bring about significant analytical limitations:

The main problem with the work/labour conceptual distinction, in my opinion, is that it makes two presuppositions: first, that there is something inherently different between one form of effort expenditure and the other, namely the kind of value that is created; and second, that they cannot be simultaneously present in the human experience of energy expenditure (2018: 32)

I found Narotzky’s point particularly pertinent as I sought to make sense of the experiences and narratives articulated by my interlocutors as they navigated their own working lives. Moreover, Narotzky’s questions (2018:30), and other authors’ contributions in the same special issue on ‘Dislocating Labour’ (Harvey et al 2018) echoed my own concern with seeking an expanded concept of work / labour. Considering the Harris Tweed industry through these concepts, I suggest that the lens of work and labour can perform not only descriptive functions, but offer alternative analytical possibilities for making sense of people’s lived experiences, subjectivities *and* livelihood practices as they inhabit the various socio-economic realities of contemporary capitalism.

Other scholars have hinted at the broader analytical potential of the concept of work / labour, in ways that inform my own argument about the relationship between people,

place, and the continuous making of various kinds of ‘things’ – from commodities, to social relationships, individual subjectivities, forms of belonging and ideas of property. Before Marx’s ‘narrowing of his approach to labor’ (Roseberry 1997: 37) in the *Capital* (1977) – where he concentrates on labour in its relationship to capital – his early writings with Engels expressed a view of ‘labor as human essence’, which led him to criticize ‘an economic process that channelled workers into specialized, repetitive tasks, thus only partially developing a fuller human capacity’ (Roseberry 1997: 37). According to Roseberry (1997), in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels (1970) ‘began not with nature or with material “conditions”, but with a collectivity of humans acting in and on nature, reproducing and transforming both nature and material conditions through their actions’ (Roseberry 1997: 27). In this context, labour was imagined not only as part of livelihood strategies, but as an integral part of the ways in which people related to each other and to the world, acting on it and being transformed themselves in the process:

The process of provisioning, of interacting with nature and individuals through labor, was seen to transform both nature and the collectivity of individuals. (Roseberry 1997: 27)

Similarly, Polanyi’s conceptualization of labour and land as fictional commodities — that is, not originally meant to be sold on the market — highlights the importance of considering their existence beyond capitalist relations of production:

Labour is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself, which in its turn is not produced for sale, but for entirely different reasons, nor can that activity be detached from the rest of life, be stored or mobilized; land is just another name for nature, which is not produced by man (...). (2001 [1944] : 75)

Not only do Polanyi’s and Marx and Engels’s conceptualizations of human labour highlight the moral significance of people’s action in the world (independently of the commodification of their labour for profit generation), they also draw attention to the ways in which the world itself, as well as the way individuals, collectivities, and the things they produce, are transformed in the process. Such things do not only include tangible objects, but also social relationships, possibilities and world-views. In my view, this focus on labour as process is crucial to understand how it is not only jobs that are ‘worked at’, but also that people and the social fabric itself are constantly being ‘worked on’.

Fiona Mackenzie's book *Places of Possibility: Property, Nature and Community Land Ownership* (2013) shows how a more encompassing concept of 'work' can offer a productive analytical lens to make sense of particular social and political processes, considering how particular local histories and moral understandings suggest alternative ways to think about 'property' and 'nature'. Focusing on the case of the North Harris Trust, formed after the local community's purchase of the land comprising the North Harris Estate, Mackenzie introduces the notion of 'unruly pasts' to refer to those 'metaphors and material practices through which the land has been conjured in the effort to maintain a collective or common right' (2013: 36). In doing so, she shows how these concepts are not only providing a vocabulary for legal and moral claim-making, but actively *reworking* ideas of property and nature that have long been taken for granted as part of capitalist processes of production, models of private property ownership, and neoliberal discourses (Mackenzie 2013). In this process, Mackenzie points out, not only are these models questioned, but the places and people involved in their *reworking* are reframed and their relationships reconfigured, illuminating previously obscured or unanticipated political possibilities.

In a region threatened by depopulation, with a long history of displacement and high rates of out-migration, the proposals and projects developed by community buy-outs have created not only more affordable local housing, but also employment opportunities, and (especially through wind farms) a substantial income that is used to fund community-centred needs. Made possible by the passing of legislation contained in Part 3 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act (2003) concerning 'The Crofting Community Right to Buy', Outer Hebridean community land buy-outs have challenged the tendency of past absentee landlords to purchase the land to extract its resources rather than actually live on it. In the process, they have reframed established ideas about private ownership and the workings of capitalist markets, and conjured 'a politics of the possible that works against exclusionary claims and essentializing identities' (Mackenzie 2013: 47). In Mackenzie's view, this particular legislation 'allows a more generous configuration of sustainability and social justice than is likely through private tenure' (2013: 47).

Focusing on the making of more sustainable and fair futures in a regional context that has long been threatened by depopulation, local communities have justified their claims to collective land ownership and management by drawing on particular ideas about people's relationship to place. These ideas, Mackenzie points out, can be outlined in

relation to the metaphor of *dùthchas*, a Gaelic term that can be traced to a time preceding the Highland Clearances, the birth of crofting, and even the clan system, when the *tuath* was the predominant mode of social organization in the region (2013: 38-40). The metaphor of *dùthchas*, Mackenzie explains, can be ‘conceived as *both* an inherited right *and* an evolving right to land’ (2013: 38, emphasis mine). Mackenzie quotes Charles Withers (1988: 389) to clarify the meaning of the concept, which can be understood as

the expressed collective belief in the inalienability of the land; not in the sense of its formal appropriation through law as property or as a materially measurable commodity, but in the sense of land as *their* land, an inherited occupance, a physical setting with which Highlanders were indissolubly tied through a continuity of social and material practices. (Withers 1988: 389, quoted in Mackenzie 2013: 39).

This idea about a ‘continuity of social and material practices’ (Mackenzie 2013: 39-40) has remained a crucial part of local understandings of belonging, people’s connection to a place being conceived not as fixed right, but as a flexible entitlement that is justified through the on-going practices that emerge in that continuing inhabitation. Mackenzie quotes one of her interlocutors from Harris who articulated the local significance of these ideas:

There is no sense of ownership; it is a sense of belonging. You are part of the land. ... It is your heritage. ... In Gaelic, you never think about the land belonging to you; *it is you that belongs to the land*. The people belong to the land. That’s the only connection that’s made in relation to people and land. ... People belong to the land. ... Not just the land, but the whole concept of belonging to that land, everything that goes with the life we live here. ... (interview, May 1997, quoted in Mackenzie: 2013: 40).

At the same time, Mackenzie points out, in local discussions about community land ownership not only is the relationship to the land primarily described as one of belonging (rather than private entitlement), but this sense of belonging is also understood as something that is constantly worked on, something that is *made* rather than given. In this context, the idea of people’s ‘inherited right’ to live on this land is mobilized not as an exclusionary claim, but as an inclusive possibility that is granted to those who choose to use the land and live on it (Mackenzie 2013). In the particular case of the North Harris Trust, membership rules highlighted the establishment of an inclusive idea of ‘community’ that was ‘defined by residence rather than interest’



(Mackenzie 2013: 65). In Mackenzie's view, the significance of these 'criteria for membership' in the Trust, and their role in 'the negotiation of community', lies precisely 'in their opening up of rights to residents who had previously not had these rights and re-defining crofters' rights as such' (Mackenzie 2013: 67). Claims for the right of collective ownership were thus

based on an inclusive notion of community defined through place – where one resided – rather than through a fixed marker of identity – for example, a crofter with or without genealogical depth on the island. (Mackenzie 2013: 68)

In this process, Mackenzie points out (2013: 68), not only were 'boundaries of belonging' disturbed, but the meanings of the land shifted,<sup>12</sup> as the concept of *dùthchas*, conceived as 'an inalienable right to the land', was mobilized simultaneously in reference to inheritance, and as an open-ended inclusive possibility. (Nash 2002: 39; Mackenzie 2013: 68). The fact of inhabiting and 'working' the land through social and/or material practices became the central justification for claiming local people's rightful entitlement to the land, whether they had been born and bred in that area or not.

The idea of '*working* property', suggested in Mackenzie's discussion of recent discourses and practices surrounding 'community right to buy' legislation, offers a useful lens to examine the place of the Harris Tweed industry in Outer Hebridean political-economic and social dynamics. There are significant parallels between the practical motivations and moral concerns surrounding recent land reform movements involved in 'commoning' the land in the ways described above, and those associated with the trademark protection of the Harris Tweed industry today and in the past. Firstly, like these recent community land buyouts, the protection of the Harris Tweed industry has been, since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, primarily aimed at safeguarding the common good and promoting the well-being of islanders, recognizing particular regional and political-economic challenges that threatened their ability to remain in the islands. Today, these values remain at the core of the legislation and dictate the Harris Tweed Authority's responsibilities. Secondly, just like recent initiatives to secure community land ownership, the legal strategy involved in establishing the Harris Tweed industry's trademark protection in 1910 was also regarded as 'ahead of its time', a resourceful and

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<sup>12</sup> Mentioning the work of various scholars (Hunter 1976, 1991; Devine 1994; McCrone 1997; Hutchinson 2003; Mackenzie 2006a) Mackenzie points out how these 'meanings of the land' have long been 'a central signifier of identity in the Highlands and Islands' of Scotland, and how they remain so today (Mackenzie 2013: 68).

groundbreaking move that differed from other similar legal projects of the period (Hunter 2001:63). Thirdly, both projects have involved inclusive definitions of ‘community membership’, unsettling social boundaries and assumptions about hereditary entitlement by embracing more flexible, active, and on-going forms of belonging. Categories like ‘islander’ or ‘inhabitant’ are defined by local residency and activity, showing how belonging can be *made*, rather than just given.

In this context, the notion of ‘common property’ as defined by Blomley (2008: 318) and cited by Mackenzie to describe the status of community-owned land in the Highlands and Islands, could also be used to describe some of the workings of the Harris Tweed industry:

common property is used here to refer to a situation where “a resource is held by an identifiable community of interdependent users, who exclude outsiders while regulating internal use by community members”. Defined thus, common property is distinguished from “open access” regimes, which are not subject to any form of ownership or control (Mansfield, 2007b: 67, quoted in Mackenzie 2013:21)

This description reflects some of the social and operational complexities inherent to the Harris Tweed industry, illuminating the legal workings of a project informed by particular ideas of common good and collective property. However, while recent movements in community land ownership present a helpful lens to consider the particularity of moral claims described above, a focus on the Harris Tweed industry offers yet another layer of conceptual possibilities beyond the idea of ‘commoning’ as a particular kind of labour (Bodirsky 2018; Mackenzie 2013). Bodirsky proposes that we ‘adopt a perspective on property relations that sees them as mutually constitutive with relations of production’ (2018: 126). In this thesis I show how doing so entails paying attention to the actual lived experiences and social relations that emerge as relations of production are enacted in the everyday. Bodirsky hints at the importance of considering production beyond a narrow sense, echoing my own quest for an expanded concept of productive labour:

It is not only about the production of things needed for physical reproduction; rather, it is about the reproduction of whatever goes into the making of social life. It is about forms of knowledge collectively produced, shared, or withheld; it is about the labor that goes into the making or unmaking of social ties as much as into particular relations to the environment (...). (Bodirsky 2018: 126)

The Harris Tweed industry is itself a locus of working practices, centred around the labour processes and relations of production required for the making of a globally-exported commodity – but as this thesis will show, it is also a site where the production of many other significant things takes place. In this sense, a focus on this industry contributes to an anthropology of work and labour that is concerned not only with employment processes and experiences, but considers these dimensions as an important part of broader human circumstances, experiences, and imaginations.

In this thesis I consider how, just like discourses around community land ownership, the Harris Tweed industry could be seen as performing not only the production of *the fabric* known as Harris Tweed, but also the articulation of social ties and notions of belonging that played a crucial part in the making of *the social fabric* of the islands. In this context, the concept of work, as well as the metaphor of weaving (as an on-going process that is both limited by some structure *and* open to constant addition of new threads in the making of a shared mesh), offer productive frameworks to consider the various implications of the Harris Tweed industry's role in 'working the fabric' of these islands.

## **5. The thesis chapter by chapter**

Focusing on particular histories, workplaces and narratives, each chapter in this thesis offers different possibilities for thinking through the complex and open-ended nature of socio-cultural processes encompassing various kinds of productive work, as well as particular practices and experiences of belonging. Moving through different social settings and conversations, in each chapter I highlight the potential of ethnographic research to generate more nuanced understandings of contemporary experiences of work and life, and to suggest alternative conceptual and analytical possibilities.

In **chapter one**, I begin exploring the relationship between people, place, and the making of various kinds of 'things' – from artefacts and production models, to livelihood strategies and moral understandings. Considering particular regional and industrial histories, and observing how these were imagined and elaborated on in the present, I discuss how islanders' views – whether locals, returners, or incomers – suggested alternative ways of thinking about shared ownership and belonging. In particular, I explore how the concept of *resourcefulness* was invoked in this region to

make sense of particular practices *and* outlooks, enacted as people navigated what were described as specific challenges presented by ‘island life’. In this context, the notion of resourcefulness offers the opportunity to think more critically through widespread representations of the islands as ‘remote’, revealing how ideas about ‘remoteness’ are not only imposed externally, but also debated locally and effectively mobilized to make particular claims. Moreover, I suggest, the notion of ‘local resourcefulness’ helps locate discussions about the relationship between islanders and the Orb trademark within wider understandings of belonging in the region, particularly concerning a sense of shared precariousness and interdependence, and particular feelings of responsibility over the common good.

**Chapter two** takes us on a journey in the tweed van, following the work of mobile mill workers as they move between the mill and weavers’ homes, distributing work and mediating, in various ways, the relationship between rural domestic loom sheds, woollen mills, and the global market for Harris Tweed. Focusing on the tweed van – a key but often understated element in the Harris Tweed industry – reveals how these mobile workers not only enable the material production of the cloth, but frequently engage in overlooked forms of affective labour with vital social relevance. In their mediating role, tweed van workers offer a unique perspective from which to discuss the social complexities of contemporary global commodity chains, suggesting new ways to think through notions of scale and uncertainty by focusing on the localised lived experiences and concerns of workers implicated in sprawling and volatile global markets.

**Chapter three** focuses on weavers’ everyday experiences of work and life, discussing how their situation as self-employed workers based in domestic loomsheds encompassed particular understandings of time and diverse visions of what a good life may look like. Considering particular experiences of work-time and conceptual discussions on ‘value’ and ‘values’, I show how weavers’ views on labour flexibility and notions of ‘freedom’ offer alternative ways of thinking through contemporary labour realities. Attention to weavers’ views on time revealed not only how they organised and experienced work-time, but also their concern with finding ways of balancing work and life, highlighting both the possibilities and limitations that their particular position in this unusual production model entailed. In this context, I argue, weavers’ perspectives suggest more *active* ways of thinking about value / values, showing how working lives involve complex and *on-going* processes of valuing and evaluating.

In **chapter four** I open the discussion to include the views and experiences of workers involved in various sectors of the Harris Tweed industry, considering how their diverse understandings of present circumstances and future work prospects intertwine both with political-economic histories and individual life-stories. Examining the relationship between local histories of labour uncertainty and the ways in which people variously narrate their own professional and personal trajectories, in this chapter I suggest that a focus on workers' life stories and family histories can offer alternative understandings of contemporary experiences of labour uncertainty and flexibility. Using the concept of 'anticipation' to think through the ways in which different people think about *change* – both in relation to labour uncertainty and as a wider existential possibility – in this chapter I show how workers' personal narratives highlight ingenious livelihood strategies *and* diverse visions of what a 'life worth leading' may look like.

In **chapter five** I reflect on the relationship between shared references, everyday experiences of work, and particular notions of belonging. I introduce the concept of 'shared repertoires' to discuss the ways in which islanders – whether 'locals', 'returners', or 'incomers' – make sense of their place in an industry known for its long history and deep connection to the people of the Outer Hebrides. Doing so offers an opportunity to reflect critically on established notions of 'heritage' and 'tradition', highlighting how particular local references and cultural productions are not just drawn on, but variously interpreted, built on and departed from. I argue that the concept of shared repertoires offers a more dynamic, flexible way of thinking through processes of social and cultural production, highlighting how their participatory and open-ended possibilities suggest more inclusive notions and experiences of belonging.

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## Chapter 1

Where Harris Tweed is made:

‘remoteness’, resourcefulness and island life

‘Does the Harris Tweed industry belong to the crofters in the Outer Hebrides?’

(Excerpt of memorandum in support of the mill-owners’ interests, in Lewis Association Report, No.2, *The Harris Tweed Industry* (1944, p. 53, para. 40, quoted in Hunter 2001:157)

### 1. Introduction

*The Islanders and the Orb* (2001), Janet Hunter’s book on the history of the Harris Tweed industry, presents an in-depth account of the various arguments, negotiations and strategies that marked the development of the industry since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, shaping internal debates throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and ultimately guaranteeing its long-term legal protection. Hunter’s book offers a window into the complexity of these discussions, revealing controversial debates and disagreements, and highlighting how questions of definition were variously dealt with by Outer Hebridean islanders, whose concern with protecting the ‘Orb’ trademark and safeguarding local livelihoods generated ardent discussions about its rightful ownership. While today’s legal definition of Harris Tweed highlights precisely the connection between islanders and the trademark-protected cloth, clearly stating the industry’s crucial role in safeguarding local livelihoods (Harris Tweed Act 1993), Hunter’s book reminds us that this status was not simply granted in the past – but rather something that islanders often had to justify and fight for.

The question quoted above, asked rhetorically in 1944 by a group of mill owners who disagreed with proposals presented by the Lewis Association to address weavers’ complaints about yarn-supply shortages,<sup>13</sup> exemplifies the power imbalances that

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of this moment in the history of the industry, see Hunter (2001: 151-165).

marked earlier discourses and dynamics in the industry's history. The dispute evidenced weavers' discontentment with what they saw as local mills' mounting attempts to assert total control over an industry that weavers felt was also rightfully theirs – and the tendency to do so in ways that severely endangered weavers' livelihoods. Weavers' complaints, and their suggestion that they might have to seek yarn spun in the mainland if the issue remained unaddressed (thus having to weave and sell cloth that was not eligible to be stamped as Harris Tweed) seemed to strike mill owners as a surprising gesture of dissent. Who did weavers think they were to make these demands, seeking to mobilize external support for their cause, and threatening to produce something other than Harris Tweed to make their point? In these mill owners' view, the industry did *not* belong to 'the crofters in the Outer Hebrides', but instead to 'people who had invested capital in its development' or planned to do so in the future – and who should thus have greater decision-making powers (Lewis Association 1944: 53 para. 40, quoted in Hunter 2001: 157).

Despite mill-owners' self-assurance, broader opinions of the time contradicted their claims, and mills were ultimately made to find solutions to attend to weavers' requests for sufficient, timely and locally spun yarn for weaving Harris Tweed. The dispute highlighted the significant role played in the industry by weavers – without whom Harris Tweed cannot be produced, since the cloth has to be handwoven at islanders' homes in order to be stamped with the Orb trademark. It also revealed the extent to which not only weavers' livelihoods, but the very existence of the industry itself, depended on a balanced symbiotic relation between its various elements. In a region described as 'remote', economically fragile and threatened by depopulation, the ability to maintain this balance is still understood today as just one among many other resourceful practices required of islanders in order to guarantee the continuity of work and life in the region.

In this context, the very phrasing of the question quoted above invites considerations not only about the particularity of this industry, but also about the moral understandings associated more generally with claims to the rightful 'ownership' of region-specific economic activities, resources, and cultural forms. Conducting fieldwork in the Outer Hebrides, I soon realized that discourses about this kind of 'entitlement' referred not just to established notions of private property ownership, but often reflected particular understandings of shared ownership, inclusive belonging and ideas of responsibility for the common good. The concept of 'resourcefulness' – often used by my interlocutors to describe local approaches to the challenges of 'remoteness' or 'island life' – offered a



way of understanding the multiple ways in which ideas of entitlement *and* belonging were experienced and enacted, within and outwith the Harris Tweed industry. In this chapter I draw attention to the relationship between people, place, and the making of various kinds of ‘things’, discussing how these dynamics suggest ways of thinking about belonging not as a fixed idea or experience, but as an active, relational and open-ended possibility that entails connections between particular pasts, presents, and imagined futures.

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Kneeling on the rocky ground, my face inches from its surface, I peered through a powerful magnifying lens at a cluster of grey and orange lichens. ‘What are these?’ I found myself asking repeatedly, every time the lens moved slightly. Hazel stood patiently beside me as I explored this new amplified perspective. Odd landscapes of different colours and shapes emerged before my eyes as I looked closely around our feet using the lens she usually carried in her pocket.<sup>14</sup> Paying attention to these details, I eventually found some *crotal* – a lichen that was once the most commonly used wool-dyeing substance on these islands, yielding rich shades of brown.<sup>15</sup> The lichen itself looked grey and unremarkable at first, but the way it came off the rock when touched matched some of the descriptions I had read about crotal-scraping for tweed making. A spoon was usually employed to gather the lichen, which was then brought home, layered with the wool in a large pot of water, and boiled over a peat fire. In the past, it would have been unusual to find such a substantial amount of crotal so close to the family home – because of its popularity, the nearest sources were quickly depleted and people had to venture further away to collect it, before local resources were replenished.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This region is known for the sheer diversity of fungi and lichen species that can be found growing on surfaces like the one I was examining on this day. NBN Atlas Scotland lists over 3700 species of fungi and lichens recorded in the Outer Hebrides (Outer Hebrides Biological Recording 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Crotal, also known as crotle (and *Parmelia omphalodes* and/or *P. saxatilis*) is described as dyeing in colours that range from ‘rust’, to ‘copper’, to ‘orange’ and ‘brown’ (Casselman 2001:17).

<sup>16</sup> While crotal is no longer used as a dyeing substance in the Harris Tweed industry, crotal-scraping expeditions for domestic wool-dyeing were still remembered by some of my interlocutors. The past prevalence of the practice is also recorded in ‘crotal-scraping songs’, and mentioned, for example, in Finlay J. MacDonald’s trilogy of locally celebrated memoirs, recounting his recollections of growing up in Harris between the two World Wars. The second of these memoirs, titled *Crotal and White* (1983), provides a direct reference to the lichen’s dyeing properties and the popularity of its use in tweed patterns featuring crotal-brown and (undyed) white yarn. In it, MacDonald describes in evocative detail the process of going



**Fig. 1.1.** Celebrated Harris Tweed weaver Marion Campbell (MBE) scraping crotal from the rocks with a spoon in Harris (n.d.). The lichen would be used for dyeing the wool, which was subsequently spun and used in the weaving of Harris Tweed. (Image courtesy Harris Tweed Isle of Harris)

**Fig. 1.2.** Crotal (and other lichens and mosses) on a rock on the west side of Lewis. Crotal is the lichen that covers most of the rock in this picture, grey and thick like a blanket.

As Hazel and I walked through her croft, these and other discoveries invited considerations about past and present relationships between people, place, and the labour involved in the making of various kinds of things – not just artefacts, but also livelihoods, personal narratives, moral understandings, and collective histories. After a diverse career history in other unrelated professions, Hazel now worked from home as a basket weaver. Over the previous seventeen years, she had been learning from people, books, and artefacts about local basket-making traditions, which she preserved (and elaborated on) through her basket weaving practice. She also passed this knowledge on in basket-weaving workshops, which had become increasingly popular around the islands. In her croft, she planted, harvested and prepared her own willow.

As she showed me around her croft, our conversation moved between her experiences of settling in this rocky piece of land in Lewis after having moved from England, and her knowledge of our surroundings. Hazel's croft was peculiarly shaped, sitting right by the sea, its rocky and hilly edges following the contours of the coast. There seemed to be very little arable, fertile land available, making it hard to imagine how such a croft

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out to collect crotal with his mother, her friend, and the friend's daughter – and the social opportunities the task could afford.

would have been able to provide enough resources to sustain a family in the past. This croft represented, perhaps more strikingly than other equally challenging plots of land, the region's complex history of land clearance and dispossession at the hands of landlords – and the struggles of local people to simultaneously survive and challenge their harsh impositions (Buchanan 1996; Hunter 1976). Landownership patterns, household needs, and agricultural practices in the region have changed considerably since then (Mewett 1977; Hunter 1976), but certain crofting practices still play a relevant social and economic role in townships around Lewis and Harris. Hazel, for example, did not rely on this land for producing food – but she had managed to plant different kinds of willow in a flat area near the house, which she used for weaving the baskets that were then sold in different locations around the islands.

For several people I met, the continuity of crofting in this region, and the values associated with it, were an important part of why they had chosen to live on these islands instead of elsewhere. Today, several people still help each other in the peat cutting season, keep sheep, collect seaweed to grow potatoes – among other practices that complement the now more prevalent forms of non-croft income. I was given different descriptions of crofting engagements in the present, and was made aware of the diversity of practical reasons invoked for pursuing certain crofting practices to fulfil the needs of different households today. At the same time, I was made aware of the symbolic and affective dimensions that shaped people's experiences of working in crofting, including a sense of not only keeping a 'traditional' local practice alive, but the very values and social engagements that crofting was seen to enable, represent and reproduce. Among these were particular ideas of resourcefulness, autonomy and freedom, as well as notions of egalitarianism, neighbourliness and collaboration associated with earlier patterns of shared collective work (e.g. in peat cutting, or sheep dipping). Interestingly, contemporary views about the freedom and the 'good life' enabled by crofting contrasted sharply with the principles that shaped its origins as a small landholding system implemented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as will be further described below.

Walking through the rocky piece of land that had become her home since she had moved from England almost thirty years prior, Hazel pointed out traces left by roaming otters, and the mess of sea-urchins' cracked shells and other hard shellfish parts dropped by seabirds on the rocks. 'This here is their restaurant' she joked. The islands and surrounding seas are home to a well-known array of wildlife, drawing tourists and

constantly reminding local people of their co-existence in these islands. Both in her property and far out in the horizon, Hazel also pointed out significant traces of past histories of human labour and settlement. The dry-stone walls of a long-abandoned sheep fank stood solidly beside us; the ruins of an Iron Age broch<sup>17</sup> stood defiantly in the distance, reminding us of times when it shielded local populations and asserted territorial order.

Later on, sitting indoors, Hazel prepared the willow to start a new basket and told me about the place of basket-making among other crofting activities in the past. In the subsistence economy that was once common in this region, every household would have needed baskets and cloth, as well as other artefacts, tools, knowledge and skills. These resources would have been an essential part of crofting work and life, shaping daily routines and people's ability to sustain themselves and their families year-round. In this context, basket-making, like tweed-weaving, rope-making and other productive activities, would have been an integral part of a 'crofting way of life', their output designed for domestic consumption and use. Hazel pointed out how, 'in the past', before the production of these items became increasingly specialized in the hands of a few individuals, 'Harris Tweed was just one part of croft work, and creel-making<sup>18</sup> was another'. In those days, she added, several people 'would've had the skills for both'.

Tweed weaving eventually developed from a small-scale domestic occupation into a relevant job-creating industry, while the practice of making creels and other kinds of baskets was progressively lost during the twentieth-century. Hazel explained how difficult it had been to find someone who knew how to make creels and who might be able to teach her.<sup>19</sup> Today, Hazel is one of the few people on the islands who still has the

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<sup>17</sup> Brochs are round drystone hollow-walled fortifying structures from the Iron Age, found in different parts of Scotland.

<sup>18</sup> A creel (*cliabh* in Gaelic) is a large woven basket, shaped in a way that allows it to hang from people's backs with rope straps (Fig. 1.3). Today, creel-making, like the weaving of other kinds of baskets, is no longer a household necessity. In the past, however, creel baskets played a central role in the crofting home. Before tractors and cars became widespread, they were used every spring to bring 'the peats' back home from the moors. People would carry them on their backs, heavy blocks of peat filling the ingeniously devised baskets, which were suspended on hand-made ropes or woven straps. I was told about how these straps often left their painful marks on people's skin after the repeated return trips to the boggy peat-banks.

<sup>19</sup> Eventually, she found a man who worked as a Harris Tweed weaver – not as a basket-maker – but who could recall watching his father building creels as he was growing up. Though this man had never tried making a creel while his father had been alive, years afterwards he realized that he was actually able to build creels just from the memories of watching his father at work, all those years before. It was him who first taught Hazel how to weave creels 'like they used to'.

knowledge, skill, and ability to weave a creel from scratch – and possibly the only one actively making them. That, as she put it, ‘feels like quite a weight of heritage’.



**Fig. 1.3.** Carrying peat in creels. Until recent decades, especially in areas where peat roads did not exist, creels were commonly used to transport the cut peats back home. This often involved substantial (and repeated) walks through the moors all the way back to crofting townships closer to the coast. In this image, we can see ‘John Gillies with his sons Callum and Ian, carrying peat creels near their home on Eilean Fladday, off Raasay’, in 1940. (Image courtesy Gairloch Museum and Archive)

Sitting inside Hazel’s stone cottage, as she made visible progress on the frame basket she had just started weaving, we discussed how people have described their connection to these islands – today and in the past, in song and in casual conversation. Speaking about her own experience as someone who had moved in ‘from away’, she described how connected she felt to this place, and the role that her work had played in this process. The baskets that she wove to make a living were so intrinsically linked to this region, and in so many ways – through the people who had taught her, the traditions that informed their making, the memory of their necessary use in past ‘crofting ways of life’, the willow plants that she grew on this very land. People who visited the islands, and bought her baskets to take with them elsewhere, often spoke to Hazel about how much they valued these features:

A lot of the visitors often have [family] connections to the islands, and to take a piece of cultural heritage, in terms of their history, as well as willow that was grown here and was woven here, means a lot to them.

At the same time, Hazel described how her knowledge of these local histories had informed her own everyday experiences of working and living on the islands since she had moved there. As she sat weaving baskets, Hazel would sometimes find herself thinking about the work and life of previous generations who had inhabited this place in the past. At times, she thought of ‘people who have gone before (...) maybe even sat in this very house and done *this*’ – she said, as she looked down towards the basket in progress on her lap. She felt connected to those people somehow. The growing of the plant, Hazel added, also contributed to this sense of connection to the place through basket-making work, and the seasonal labour it required reminded her of the yearly rhythms so crucial to croft work in the past. Like several self-employed Harris Tweed weavers I met, Hazel also felt attracted to the freedom allowed by her own work arrangements as a self-employed basket weaver working from home. She equated it to the kind of flexibility and ingenuity that used to be necessary to perform croft work, and to make the most of the few resources and employment opportunities available on the islands:

I think island life is much more independent. It suits being self-employed, that’s always what croft work was really like, and I find that that suits me, to do a variety of different things, at different times and not be bound into having to travel to my place of employment. I really like working at home.

As will become clearer over the next chapters, Hazel’s views and experiences of a particular kind of ‘flexible’ work were, in many ways, similar to those voiced by several workers employed in the Harris Tweed industry today. At the same time, it is worth noting that Hazel’s distinctive position as an ‘incomer’ who made a living in an activity that might be perceived as ‘authentically’ or ‘traditionally’ Hebridean – and thus perhaps imagined to be restricted to those ‘born and bred’ on the islands – was not, in fact, an exception. While this region has long been represented as ‘remote’ and characterized by its ‘authentic’ and ‘traditional’ ways of life in isolated communities, the reality is much more complex and nuanced. This chapter (and this thesis) will highlight the need to explore local histories of dispossession, displacement and re-settlement, as well as local understandings of entitlement, interdependence and belonging, in a region where

landownership and capitalist relations of production variously shaped ideas of ‘community’ at different points in the past.

\* \* \*

Like several people I met in Lewis and Harris, Hazel’s experience of living and working in this region encompassed an acute awareness of past histories, practices, artefacts and lives. While living in the present and looking to the future, many people I encountered also described the way in which they perceived their work and life in relation to particular local pasts. Within the Harris Tweed industry, these reflections often concerned personal ways of understanding one’s position in an industry characterized by a long and eventful history. Sometimes this involved considering the ways in which fluctuations in global demand for the cloth had shaped their own or their families’ livelihoods in the past, leaving their marks on biographies, family stories, and expectations for the future (see Chapter 4). It also involved acknowledging the role of the industry in population retention, observing how ‘without Harris Tweed and the Orb protection, we probably wouldn’t be here on this island today’. More generally, however, most people seemed aware, to a greater or lesser degree, of the region’s convoluted history of land ownership and struggle. Some people’s knowledge of local political-economic history was sometimes revealed in conversations that concerned their understanding of the struggles of previous generations. Casual comments acknowledged the resourcefulness required to brave certain material, existential and moral challenges in the past. Often these histories provided parallels that helped narrate and make sense of personal struggles, aspirations and political ideals in the present.

Some of the legacies of these histories have become inscribed in the ways in which certain local institutions and shared practices are organized, and their long-term implications to local socio-economic circumstances are still felt – and discussed – today. In this chapter I argue that the peculiar development and persistence of the Harris Tweed industry – as a model and productive economic activity – reveals the importance of considering how past events, struggles and transformations are not only imagined and narrated today, but progressively elaborated on and diverged from in the making and re-making of values, narratives, and socio-political ideals. At the same time, I suggest that the Harris Tweed industry can only be understood in relation to the particular

geographical, social and political circumstances that have shaped – and been shaped by – the work and lives of generations until today. I argue that examining the place of the Harris Tweed industry in local political-economic histories *and* in enduring conversations about the region's 'remoteness' can offer a more nuanced picture of the ways in which ideas of common property and belonging can be variously understood, negotiated and mobilized.

## **2. People, place, and the making of livelihoods, values, and histories**

Anthropologists have variously written about the relationship between people, place, and the 'making' of various kinds of 'things'. Ethnographic research across geographical regions and diverse workplaces has highlighted the multiple ways in which localised labour processes, social relations and everyday experiences of work are intimately linked to large-scale socio-economic dynamics – not only materially through global commodity and value chains, but also in the imaginations and projects of individual workers (e.g. Tsing 2009, 2015; Bestor 2001; Cross 2014). Investigating the relationship between people, place, and the making of different kinds of things has also highlighted the ways in which various kinds of histories – from personal and family stories, to local and global narratives – contribute vitally to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary socio-economic forms and experiences. The Harris Tweed industry offers a unique lens through which to consider not only how local experiences of work are enmeshed in world-encompassing economic dynamics, but also the particular ways in which this region has been implicated in global capitalism – today and in the past. Considering not only the practical workings of Harris Tweed's unusual production model, but also its moral and social implications, contributes to a more nuanced picture of contemporary capitalist 'forms' and a broader understanding of the lived experiences shaped by (and involved in shaping) them.

Introducing her research on the production of capital and 'culture' in Italian silk-making family companies, Sylvia Yanagisako highlights that 'all capitalist practices are the product of historically situated practices' (2002:6). However, she proposes an analytical model that 'is not one of distinctive "cultures of capitalism" or "capitalism cultures" but one in which diverse capitalist practices coexist in the same geopolitical spaces and flow across their boundaries" (2002:7). Convinced by her claim that diverse practices of



capitalism ‘must be empirically investigated rather than assumed’ (Yanagisako 2002:7), in this chapter I draw attention to the particular ways in which these shifting and diverse practices, and the kinds of labour realities they encompass, are intimately linked to regional and industrial histories – as well as their manifestations, enduring structures, and constant re-interpretations in the present. In doing so, I also build on some of the ideas discussed by anthropologists like Rebecca Prentice (2015) and Carla Freeman (2014), whose research on Caribbean labour realities explored not only the local effects of contemporary capitalism and neoliberal policies, but the ways in which local strategies and experiences were shaped by old ‘ethos’ and practices in dealing with new (or partly familiar) challenges.

Conducting ethnographic research in the Outer Hebrides, a region that has long been involved in capitalist relations of production despite popular representations of its ‘remoteness’ and ‘traditional ways of life’, offers unique opportunities for thinking through the intersection between past histories and contemporary political-economic realities. The Harris Tweed industry’s survival as a long-standing locally rooted institution is often attributed to the resourceful ways in which its practices have been subject to constant re-thinking and debate, while still drawing on ‘old ethos’ and enduring values. Regional scholars have pointed out how capitalist relations of production also shaped other local communities throughout the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, revealing examples of cosmopolitanism, innovation and entrepreneurialism that were at odds with more widespread popular representation of these places as ‘remote’, ‘ancient’ or ‘out of time’ (Ennew 1980a, 1982; Howard 2012, 2017; Watts 2019).

The regional specificity of the Harris Tweed industry is crucial to understand the particular ways in which social relations of production have been locally understood and experienced. The fact that the industry is still ‘alive’ today, in great part because of its ‘heritage-rich’ value *and* the constant resourceful involvement of islanders, also offers productive ways of thinking through the relationship between past histories and present imaginations – and how they are mobilized as part of these capitalist relations of production. In her study of ‘fishing villages’ in the eastern coast of Scotland – where fishing no longer takes place but remains a key part of local self-identity and external perceptions of their ‘romantic’ appeal – Nadel-Klein (2003) explores how these dynamics reveal some of the overlooked complexities and paradoxes of contemporary capitalism. She argues that we can ‘learn something about the conundrums of modernity

and perhaps of post-modernity’ by listening to the experiences of these ‘Scottish fishing villagers’ (2003:1). Doing so matters because

in their histories and in their present circumstances, they have experienced how capitalism can create and then dismiss a way of life. (2003: 1)

In the case of the Harris Tweed industry, which remains alive today, much can be learned about the ways local people have ingeniously and stubbornly sought to preserve it, the values that have motivated them to do so, and the different kinds of challenges they have encountered in the process – today and in the past. Unlike those ‘fishing villages’ where no-one fishes anymore, the Outer Hebrides are *still* the islands where Harris Tweed is hand-woven (even though production is presently concentrated in the Isle of Lewis and Harris). The industry is alive. It carries a rich ‘historical luggage’ and is considered a ‘heritage industry’, but it also goes on living and generating new ‘things’ in the process.

In this context, it becomes particularly relevant to consider the relationship between specific political-economic histories and enduring ideas about the particularity of these islands. How are discourses about their distinctiveness – e.g. their ‘remoteness’, their attachment to crofting, their harsh weather and dramatic landscapes, their historical reliance on labour migration and occupational flexibility, their ‘economic fragility’ – mobilized to make particular collective claims, as well as in support of individual understandings of one’s place in the world? How is the concept of *resourcefulness* – regularly mentioned by my interlocutors – useful to make sense of the ways in which people engage not only with their material surroundings, but also with specific political-economic conditions, as they navigate the particularities of ‘island life’?

### **3. ‘From the land comes the cloth’**

Weeks after Hazel introduced me to her pocket lens, I was again instructed to look through other magnifying glasses. On these later occasions, however, I stood beside Harris Tweed workers who directed my attention to details in the woven cloth, pointing out yarn colours and pattern-weave features that could better be perceived up close, amplified. Standing in a mill’s finishing department, as I watched the inspection and stamping of each meter of the cloth, I was invited to peer into a similar lens, this one

shaped like a printer's loupe.<sup>20</sup> Two mill workers and a Harris Tweed Authority inspector instructed me on how to check if the woven yarn was *really* following the right pattern – under two, over two, under one, over one, and so on. Though this could also be seen by the naked eye, the lens offered a striking perspective over the textured, hairy, perfectly criss-crossed woven pattern.

On a different occasion, as I stood in a weaver's domestic loomshed in Harris, looking out over white sandy beaches, against a backdrop of turquoise seawater and broad, changing skies, I was told to look into a magnifying lens and notice the number of different colours found in each string of woven yarn. The multiple blues, greys, greens, purples and even copper-browns that could be found when an apparently plain blue piece of Harris Tweed was examined closely and magnified invited comparisons with the landscape around us. This realization echoed what I had heard about Harris Tweed and the islands before – that the colours of the cloth were also the colours of the landscape and that, in both, 'when the light changes, everything changes'. The chromatic relation between cloth and landscape, as well as the resilience and weather-proof qualities of the cloth, had made Harris Tweed particularly popular among the country 'hunting, fishing, and shooting' gentry. Some of the patterns provided an ingenious form of camouflage in the glens and moorlands of estates throughout the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

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<sup>20</sup> A printer's loupe is a kind of magnifying glass that can also be found in printmaking workshops to check, with precision, the register of other kinds of coloured 'webs' as they become imprinted on paper.



**Fig. 1.4.** Some of the indigenous plants used, in the past, for producing natural wool dyes in the Outer Hebrides (Source: Thompson 1969: 38).

In the past, it could be said that the landscape itself became part of the cloth, embodied in its materials. The wool used to come from local sheep, and it was dyed, before being spun, using the many natural dyes found around the islands, boiled in fresh spring water. Several plants and lichens were used to produce colours ranging from different tones of blue, red, orange, yellow, brown, black. Crotal, the brown-dyeing lichen mentioned above, was one among many other wool-colouring substances – water-lilly root stained black, woad dyed blue, St John's wort produced yellow, among many other possibilities. Today, the yarn used in Harris Tweed manufacturing is no longer dyed using local lichens and plants. However, the deep colours that these natural dyes generated remain key references for the industry's yarn colours and pattern designs. Not only are some of the colour names drawn from the original sources – like 'crotal brown' – but the colours

themselves mirror those of earlier cloths and their celebrated patterns (Fig. 1.5.). Like back then, the wool is still dyed (and its different colours blended) *before* being spun into multicoloured threads. And though the dyeing substances are different today, it is still possible to spot various crotal browns, woad blues, St. John's wort yellows, water-lily root blacks, among many other tones composing multi-coloured yarn shades. Some of the pattern designers I spoke to cited the local landscape as one of their key inspirations – though they also highlighted the importance of imagining what kind of pattern might work for a particular kind of garment, and what colours might suit a particular style or season.



**Fig. 1.5.** Palette of dyed wool used as reference for specific yarn colour ‘recipes’. In different mills, the term ‘crotal’ was used to identify a variety of shades of brown that evoked the appearance of the old lichen-dyed cloth.

The phrase ‘from the land comes the cloth’ (drawn from the Gaelic expression *bhon chroit an clò*, which would be more accurately translated as ‘from the *croft* comes the cloth’) has recently become popularized as the title of a photography book commissioned by the Harris Tweed Authority. In it, the photographer Ian Lawson (2013) presents images of the islands’ landscapes alongside images of the Harris Tweed

cloth (and the materials and processes leading to its manufacturing), as well as short texts recounting personal tales of meeting local people and travelling through the islands. The visual parallels between the light and colour of local landscapes, and the depth and diversity of hues found in the cloth, are striking – and postcards showcasing these similarities have proved popular among tourists and tweed buyers alike.

This project fits within the industry's wider promotional history, which has long been characterized by efforts to represent, in different ways, the deep connections between the cloth and this region. Promotional narratives have variously emphasized these associations. The harsh weather, and the resilient tweed made to brave it. The poor, infertile land, but impressive-looking landscapes of peat moorlands, rocky hills, lochs and lochans and beaches. The hard-work and industriousness of islanders, despite hardships and persistent uncertainty – their resilience and 'ruggedness' comparable to that of the cloth itself.

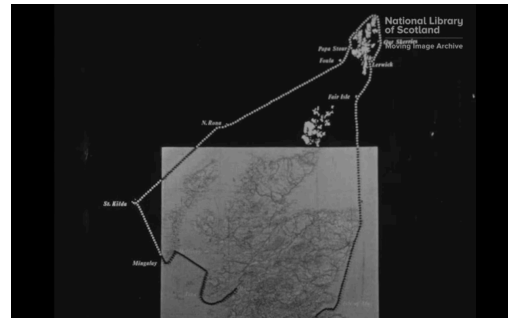
For decades, these narratives have captured imaginations around the world, shaping perceptions of the region and demand for the cloth. However, the idea that Harris Tweed comes from the land – or from *the croft* – can also offer clues to understand the industry's distinctive geographical, social and political origins. This land, where the cloth is said to come from, has long been inhabited by people whose lives and opportunities have been shaped by challenging environmental circumstances – both 'natural' and political-economic. The emergence of Harris Tweed as a commercial textile industry is inseparable from its place within the particular forms of land ownership, resource management, and changing economic practices and demands that marked the social history of the Western Highlands and Islands of Scotland. While the domestic production of the woollen cloth initially fitted within a subsistence economy, using the wool from local sheep and producing garments for family members, its transformation into an exchangeable resource followed in great part from the need to cover basic household needs and to pay rents to landlords – first in kind, and later in cash.

The transition from clan-based relations to landownership and crofting played an important part in these and other fundamental changes in local political-economic relations. The 'traditional crofting way of life' presented in twentieth-century tourist brochures and tweed advertisements (e.g. Figs. 1.8 and 1.9.) had in fact been rooted, since the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, in capitalist relations of production, involving land and labour exploitation, and entailing the islands' involvement in global markets – despite

their apparent economic insularity and geographical remoteness from metropolitan centres. In the introduction to *The Making of the Crofting Community*, James Hunter proposes outlining precisely some of the power dynamics involved in these processes. He acknowledges the challenges posed by the region's natural circumstances, where 'the land itself is poor and could not (...) be more unsuited to the task of maintaining a smallholding population', and observes how 'of all the numerous uncertainties of the crofter's condition (...) none is more permanent than the weather'. Nevertheless, Hunter states clearly how his project entails focusing on the political, rather than the geographical dimensions of these processes – dealing 'more with the exploitation of man by man than the unalterable conditions which have long defied men's efforts to create a prosperous agriculture in the Highlands':

[T]he difficulties inherent in the Highland's geographical position and circumstances are a constant backdrop to crofting history, and they should never be overlooked. That they are relatively unemphasized in this account is not because they are judged unimportant but because crofters have always considered the hardships that are the unavoidable consequences of their natural environment to be more bearable than those that have resulted from human action. The excessive and ostentatious comfort of a privileged few; their oppressive and unjust conduct: these have always seemed less tolerable than the vagaries of the climate and the general scarcity of resources. (Hunter 1976: 1-2)

While I support Hunter's call to focus on political-economic processes, in this chapter I show the importance of locating them in relation to particular understandings of this region's geographical position. To do so, I focus on three ways in which the concept of 'remoteness' came to be used in the Outer Hebrides to variously make sense of, disagree with, and sometimes act on, past and present situations. Firstly, I explore its role as a fiercely contested concept caught between the imaginations of 'visitors', the lived experiences of 'locals', and the shifting understandings concerning both its 'material' manifestations and imagined social implications. Secondly, I describe how the perceived 'remoteness' of the islands in space *and* time became the backdrop against which particular forms of capitalist extraction came to be justified, and the source of powerful imaginaries that supported the emergence, protection, and commercial success of the Harris Tweed industry. Thirdly, I explore how geographical remoteness has been framed as a way of both explaining particular socio-economic circumstances, *and* mobilizing political and public support in order to address them.



*Left:* Title frame (00'02"). *Right:* Film frame showing the route taken by the cruise, depicted as going beyond the edges of the map on the way to the 'remote islands' featured in the film (25'45").

#### 4.1 Remote from where?

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we are on our way again, sailing to the north. We sail the length of Scotland. And sometime during the night, we sail *right off the map*. (National Trust for Scotland 1958, 01'58", emphasis mine)

For long, certain areas of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland have been perceived as a kind of *Ultima Thule* – an old European concept identifying a place imagined to exist beyond the horizon, at a northern edge (Gillis 2004: 21-22, 42, 52-53).<sup>21</sup> This sense of the unknown just within reach is also expressed, in Edwin Ardener's view, in other European conceptions of 'unrealized places' (2012 [1987]: 522). Ardener points out that 'for Europe, "remote areas" of the globe have had a different conceptual geography, and have been perceived to exist on a different time-scale from the "central" areas' (2012 [1987]:521, 1975, 1985). He observes that, while 'the age of discovery' showed us that the "remote" was actually compounded of "imaginary" as well as "real" places' (2012 [1987]: 521), there are nevertheless 'pockets of imaginary places' that have 'remained still unrealized within the European centre' (2012 [1987]:522). Despite their relative geographical proximity to ordinarily assumed European (and British) 'centres', Ardener points out that parts of Gaelic Scotland (with their inhabitants, 'the Gaels') were among those 'pockets of imaginary places':

When the far Antarctic was made real, Brittany and the Gaels were still 'unrealized', still 'removed' from the canons of Western realities, or indeed *remote* (Latin *removeo*) (2012 [1987]:522).

The Outer Hebrides, a set of islands positioned at the very northwestern 'edge' of the British 'mainland', with the largest proportion of native Gaelic speakers in Scotland, have long appeared as particularly fertile locations for the projection of ideas of 'remoteness' – and a sense of their being 'out of time' or 'at the end of the world'. At the same time, however, considering North Atlantic geopolitical histories reveals their shifting relation to different assumed 'centres'. Before the islands' integration as a British territory, when their perceived northwesterly peripherality became more prominent, the Outer Hebrides used to be identified instead, in Viking routes, as 'the Southern Isles' (*Suðreyjar* in Old Norse).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> 'Ultima Thule' was also the theme of a recent edition of the Hebridean Book Festival (2017), an event that has become increasingly popular since its first edition, drawing people to the islands during the darker and usually less tourist-busy Autumn months.

<sup>22</sup> Between the 9th and 13th centuries AD, the Hebrides, along with the islands of the Firth of Clyde and the Isle of Man, were part of the Norse territory known as the 'Kingdom of the Isles'. They were known in this context as *Suðreyjar*, or 'Southern Isles', as opposed to the *Norðreyjar* (the 'Northern Isles') of Orkney and Shetland. (Grohse 2013: 257)

I argue that, while popular projections of ‘remoteness’ and ‘marginality’ have long offered incomplete representations of the islands’ place in an interconnected world, they can still tell us something about the tensions that emerge when powerful imaginaries shape not only external perceptions, but also local experiences and livelihoods. Building on anthropological research that engages with similar discourses (Watts 2019; Tsing 1993, 2015), I suggest that paying attention to visitors’ impressions about the ‘remoteness’ of the Outer Hebrides or their position at ‘the end of the world’ reveals, in productive ways, not just the pervasiveness of these notions, but also the meaningful ways in which certain imaginaries are expressed *and* contested.

For many visitors, the idea of the islands’ remoteness was amplified by the experience of reaching them after travelling (usually northwest) through narrow winding Highland roads, spending time in a ferry that takes two hours and a half to cross the sometimes turbulent Minch, and venturing through single-track roads as they made their way around the islands. But even those visitors who had arrived by plane at the local Stornoway airport would articulate in vivid terms their experience of the islands’ ‘remoteness’ as they explored the simultaneous ‘emptiness’ and ‘ancient feeling’ of its various landscapes. Vast peat moorlands, deserted sandy white beaches, rocky ‘lunar’ hills (that were actually used as the film set for Jupiter in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: Space Odyssey*) allowed imaginations to wander. Sitting next to ‘modern’ houses there were also visible traces of centuries of human occupation – ranging from pre-historic monuments and buildings (standing stones, fortified structures, domestic dwellings), to remains of Norse occupation, and ruins of several stone blackhouses still used well into the late twentieth century. Place-names sounded foreign, people spoke Gaelic (and English), and not even the wind-turbines nor recently built houses seemed to displace most visitors’ sense that this was an isolated, far-removed and (vaguely defined as) ‘ancient’ place. Learning the fact that the Outer Hebrides stand on a bedrock of Lewisian Gneiss, one of the oldest and hardest geological forms in the world, usually added to this feeling.

The diversity of traces of human occupation should hint at the eventful and cosmopolitan past of the islands – but they often further inspired fantasies of the islands’ existence not just out-of-the-way, but also out-of-*time*. Somehow, this also had the effect of making many visitors remark, often loud and clear for whomever was around to hear, on their newfound realization. ‘This is *so* remote!’ some would say, in awe. Others

would look around and tell each other how ‘*we’re* so remote’. Others, still, would directly address people they perceived to be ‘local’, telling them ‘*you’re* so remote here’. As fieldwork progressed, I gathered a growing list of stories from islanders – including locals, returners and incomers – who recounted their frequent encounters with these exclamations. What they told me offers insights on the diverse ways in which ‘remoteness’ came to be imagined – and sometimes repudiated – as a label for the life and place they had decided to call home. It also reveals the productive dynamics that emerge when people seek to articulate their self-identity and a sense of their place in the world in opposition to particular categories perceived as inaccurate or essentialising (even if they help justify material circumstances that they recognize).

One of my informants described, gleefully, how her mother had once caught a mainland government official by surprise, when he came to visit their village in Uig (a parish in the Southwest of Lewis). As soon as he remarked ‘you are really remote here’, her mother quickly fired back – ‘remote from where?’ – reportedly leaving him unable to articulate a suitable answer. Another one of my acquaintances, a man who had moved from England to the islands twenty five years earlier, complained about how frequently he would hear visitors remark on the ‘remoteness’ of the place – especially whenever he was out in places on the West side of the Lewis. This part of the island was precisely the place where he felt the most at home in the world – it was where he had decided to live and where he had managed to establish himself. He could not see what was so ‘remote’ about it.

In Ness, at the very north of Lewis, I was told that visitors commenting on the place’s remoteness were sometimes given an answer they found surprising: ‘Remote? But this is the centre of the Universe!’. According to some Niseachs,<sup>23</sup> being told that ‘you’re so remote here’ did not make any sense for many local residents, for whom the idea of being in ‘the centre of the Universe’ was less spatial and more social. I was told that this perspective was linked to the sense of being surrounded by ‘what matters’ and by the people one knows and cherishes – that’s what made people feel as though they were ‘in the centre’, rather than ‘at the end of the world’. In some ways, this idea echoes the *relational* notion of belonging suggested by two Gaelic phrases commonly used to ask people where they are from – when someone asks ‘Cò às a tha thu?’ or ‘Cò leis thu?’, they are literally asking ‘*who / what people* do you belong to?’ (or ‘who are your people?’) (Glaser 2007:146).

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<sup>23</sup> Gaelic term commonly used in Lewis to identify people from Ness (*Nis* in Gaelic).

Another one of my interlocutors, who had grown up in Ness at a time when access roads were not as good as today, told me about how, despite this distance from ‘town’ (Stornoway), they never felt ‘remote’ or ‘isolated’ from the rest of the world. There were local shops that fulfilled most needs. And ‘local’ people had plenty of worldly experiences they shared – she remembered growing up listening attentively to the stories told by the many men who had worked in the merchant navy and then moved back to the islands when they retired; and from relatives who occasionally travelled away to work in fishing boats and in other seasonal jobs. In the summers, relatives who lived in the USA, in Canada or Australia would come to visit their families, along with those who had moved to Glasgow and other British cities, filling the villages with their different accents.

Locating perceptions of ‘remoteness’ in the gaze of different actors can help us make sense of contemporary experiences of work and life in regions marked, in various ways, by the material effects of that label. At the same time, however, it is important to consider how people’s views are constantly susceptible to change, shifting to accommodate multiple understandings and changing circumstances. Despite the frequent denial of ‘remoteness’ as a descriptor, many people I met in Lewis and Harris would nevertheless occasionally remark on the material effects of their distance from the mainland, particularly when it was made visible through the failure of transport links and other infrastructure. This geographical distance was also the subject of countless jokes and humorous banter about the everyday ‘troubles’ of island life, frequently heard in casual conversations and found in written descriptions of the place.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, many local people also mobilized the implications of the islands’ geographical and political ‘peripherality’ to explain how certain ‘island values’ persisted, and how specific practices ‘stayed alive’. Crofting and the Harris Tweed industry were described as two of the institutions that embodied, in their respective histories, examples of islanders’ ‘resourcefulness’ in the face of the islands’ ‘remote’ position, as well as their views on ‘freedom’, ‘solidarity’, and the pursuit of the

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<sup>24</sup> One example of local humor regarding the islands’ geographic ‘remoteness’ features in the novel written by Kevin MacNeil, titled *The Stornoway Way* (2005). In it the main character, who at the age of 30 has just moved back to Lewis after having lived ‘away’ in the Scottish mainland, introduces the readers to the Islands by reference to an unusual image. In the chapter titled ‘Learn your own way to hold the map’, following an illustration featuring the map of Scotland inverted and turned upside down (locating Lewis where the Scottish metropolitan areas would originally be and vice versa) he states: ‘we do not live in the back of beyond, we live in the very *heart* of beyond.’ (2005:13-15).

‘common good’. Crucially though, these values and practices were described to me as meaningful not just because of their long-established roots – but precisely because of the ways in which they had allowed people to stay or relocate to the islands over time, pursuing personal ideals of work and life, and challenging depopulation. Moreover, they were simultaneously deemed responsible for making possible the continuity of local life, and understood to be constantly re-made through people’s actual living, working, and imagining.

#### 4. 2. ‘Remoteness’, *frontiers*, and *provenance*

The political-economic history of the Outer Hebrides has been importantly shaped by external projections and perceptions of its landscape and populations – and by the ways in which individuals and groups have acted on those perceptions. I will briefly discuss here two episodes of local history that demonstrate the moral and practical elasticity that constructions of ‘remoteness’ can lend themselves to – and which also reveal the structural origins and shifting values associated with two enduring local institutions. The first one concerns the birth of crofting, with the commodification of land and labour after the 19<sup>th</sup> century transformation of the clan-system into profit-making landownership centred on a capitalist model of extraction and production. The second one involves the emergence of the Harris Tweed industry as a philanthropic project, following the dispossession and displacement caused by the Highland Clearances, considering the charitable response to their effects and the powerful imaginaries generated around them.

The emergence of crofting as the dominant system of landholding and management in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland dates only to the early nineteenth century,<sup>25</sup> and was profoundly intertwined with the establishment of capitalist relations of production and resource exploitation in this region. The clanship system that had preceded it, characterized by kinship ties and paternalistic relations between the chief and its clan, had been in place for centuries before significant political-economic changes eventually eroded it and led to a shift to landowner-tenant relations. In this new order, where both

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<sup>25</sup> In his 1976 book, *The Making of the Crofting Community*, James Hunter points out that ‘[a]t the beginning of the nineteenth century crofting was virtually unknown in the area with which it is now most associated – being confined to a few parts of Mull and western Inverness-shire’ (1976:29) (see also Gray 1957:67, referenced in Hunter 1976:29)

land and people's labour were commodified in order to fulfil landowners' quests for profit, important demographic, social and economic transformations would take place. These processes involved the disruption of previous socio-cultural beliefs and practices, replacing the kinship-based logic that had structured land distribution, management and use, and introducing instead strategies for 'improvement' (a notion that often encompassed not only natural resources, but also beliefs about populations' backwardness and moral failings), commercial production, and profit-making.

The emergence of crofting took place precisely as part of a series of strategies devised to maximize the profit that could be extracted from Western Highland and Island properties – usually to the detriment of the wellbeing of the people who actually lived in them. These efforts coincided with the increasing popularity of eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment ideals of 'improvement', which 'combined a belief in the importance of human reason with an optimism over humanity's ability to "improve" society and nature' (Fleet et al 2016:141). Despite later understandings of crofting as a potentially 'liberating' system,<sup>26</sup> its early workings illustrate the degree of control exercised by landlords over tenants' work and life, whose labour was crucial for substantial profit-making. In the Outer Hebrides, the crofting system was effectively 'created and conceived as an adjunct to the kelp industry' in the early nineteenth century (Hunter 1976:19). Both in Lewis and in Uist, 'crofting was being promoted as the best way of maximizing rents through combining kelp manufacturing with agricultural smallholding' (Fleet et al 2016:144).<sup>27</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the devastating 'bust' that followed the 'boom' in the demand for kelp would render visible the vulnerable situation in which vast populations had long been held – dispossession, famine, and forced displacement ensued. After the demise of kelping removed the need for the vast labour force that had gathered in these regions,

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<sup>26</sup> Over time, the relationship between people's labour, life and land under crofting tenure has changed, being perceived and experienced in vastly different ways. The crofting model, originally designed as an 'optimized' and oppressive solution to maximize the profit of landlords' exploitative ventures, would later be elevated as a possibility for maintaining one's 'freedom'. It was mobilized by local populations to challenge, for example, the plans imposed by later proprietors like Lord Leverhulme, and in discourses opposing some of the perceived pressures of wage-labour arrangements (see e.g. Hutchinson 2003). More recently, crofting has also acquired particularly positive tones regarding the kind of lifestyle it allows and the values it is seen as enshrining in the present.

<sup>27</sup> In Lewis, James Chapman was appointed as Chamberlain between the 1790s and 1810s by Francis Mackenzie, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Seaforth, and there he 'oversaw the creation of thirty-four crofts in Bernera by 1807, probably the earliest crofts created in the Outer Hebrides' (Fleet et al 2016:144). Since then, the division of land into these small plots intensified, and crofting eventually became the dominant form of landholding throughout the islands, significantly shaping local ways of life, power dynamics, and demographic shifts.

landlords' response to what they considered to be a 'redundant population' involved encouraging – or in some cases forcing – people's removal from their birthplace. This process, which came to be known as the Highland Clearances, took place largely between the 1770s and the late nineteenth century.

At the same time as local struggles for land rights were taking place, a number of philanthropic and 'development' projects were being planned with the aim to improve the living conditions of the people of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. These efforts were undertaken by a diversity of actors who were moved by the plight of crofters – from wealthy 'philanthropic persons' and 'benevolent institutions' in different parts of the country, to some of the local landlords themselves. Some of these projects involved promoting the development of 'regional crafts', introducing educational initiatives and seeking markets for the products of these activities. Sometimes, individual actors would get personally involved in these projects. In the case of the Harris Tweed industry, the involvement of Lady Dunmore (who was married to the proprietor of Harris, Alexander Murray, 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Dunmore) is cited as having played a crucial role in its development and promotion (Hunter 2001:27).

The creation of the agencies like the 'Scottish Home Industries Association' and the 'Highland Home Industries and Arts Association' in 1889 was motivated by socio-economic concerns – but their establishment was also linked to the promotion of particular educational principles and values. In the Highlands and Islands these philanthropic initiatives were often discussed in paternalistic tones, emphasizing their potential role in improving not only the material welfare of local populations, but also in 'improving' and cultivating the character of their 'race'. The Highland Home Industries and Arts Association stated these objectives clearly. Acknowledging that 'the hand cannot compete with the machine when rapidity of production and an immediate profit are aimed at', the association's statement of objectives nevertheless defended the potential advantages and benefits of hand-made 'home industries' (Scott 1914: 43, quoted in Thompson 1969: 63). Not only did they affirm the belief that there was 'undoubtedly an appreciation of home-made fabrics' and thus a market for them, but also how these occupations might benefit the moral and aesthetic dispositions of local populations:

It is equally beyond doubt that the revival of such industries would greatly promote thrift and add to the comfort and to the self-respect of the poorer classes of people engaged in agricultural and pastoral occupations. By the working up of the wool in the

home, time now lost would be filled by healthy and interesting occupations, the artistic faculty of the race would be revived and stimulated, (...) and more comfortable homes would result. (Scott 1914: 43, quoted in Thompson 1969: 63)

The early success of the Harris Tweed industry is often attributed to the powerful imaginaries associated with the landscapes and populations located in these enigmatic 'remote' places. While the unique qualities of the cloth itself were key to ensure continued demand from various markets, scholars have highlighted how its initial commercial success was linked to customers' perception that they might be supporting the livelihoods of people inhabiting a more 'traditional' way of life (Thompson 1969; Hunter 2001). The dispossession and displacement caused by the Clearances offered compelling arguments for this early concern. Later, awareness to the fragility of local livelihoods in this 'remote' place would also garner support for achieving the Orb trademark protection (registered in 1910). Throughout the twentieth century promotional materials often represented, in a romanticized way, the kind of 'traditional way of life' that customers might contribute to preserve with their 'informed purchase' (Figs. 1.8 and 1.9) (see e.g. Ennew 1982).



**Figs. 1.8. and 1.9.** Promotional materials issued by the Harris Tweed Association sometime during the twentieth century (n.d.). (Image courtesy © HTA)



Today, the tone and content of promotional materials has become less focused on describing local lives as ‘traditional’, while still emphasizing the historical relationship between the production of the cloth and local people’s livelihoods. Offering a broader window into local landscapes, people, and production practices, these materials have allowed different audiences to learn more about the Outer Hebrides and the industry’s contemporary manufacturing practices. Nevertheless, the perceived ‘remoteness’ of the islands, and the unique history of the Harris Tweed industry, continues to capture imaginations around the world.

At the same time, the economic fragility of the islands, associated in part with their geographical position, continues to be invoked in efforts to preserve the integrity of the brand around the world. In discourses that echo some of the claims made by groups redefining the possibilities of cultural and intellectual property rights today (see e.g. Geismar 2013; Geismar et al 2017), Harris Tweed Authority representatives highlight not only the collective entitlement and enduring connection between the cloth and local people, but also its crucial role in creating jobs and allowing the sustainability of ‘island communities’. In this context, the idea of ‘provenance’ – also invoked in efforts to safeguard other region-specific industries and products around the world – is affirmed in relation to the essential material, social and economic roots it is seen to establish and preserve. As will be discussed below, this was one among other ways in which local people and institutions mobilized regional circumstances to justify particular political claims – simultaneously rejecting essentialising notions of ‘remoteness’ and resourcefully mobilizing the particularity of their geographical position.

#### *4.3. ‘Remoteness’, resourcefulness, and Island Proofing*

Ardener (2012 [1987]) discusses the theoretical possibilities contained in the notion of ‘remote areas’, arguing that a focus on ‘remote areas’ as only ‘physically removed’ ‘obscures the conceptual phenomena associated with ‘remoteness’ (2012 [1987]:522). Some of the key ethnographic examples invoked in Ardener’s article are located precisely in the region where I conducted fieldwork – which, in his words, and as ‘the cognoscenti will recognize’, can be described as ‘an area in which canonical levels of “remoteness” can be found’ (2012 [1987]:524). Critically, though, Ardener’s analysis of the long-established ‘remoteness’ of the Western Highlands and Islands of Scotland

focuses not only on their geographical position, but crucially on the ‘basic economic and political factors’ that have variously contributed to the sense of their ‘remoteness’ (2012 [1987]:524). Ardener’s analysis of the construction of ‘remoteness’ in this region encompasses the Highland Clearances, landlords’ imposition of ‘improvement’ plans, and the ‘cultural appropriation’ and ‘symbolic expropriation’ of Gaelic identity by those same landowning elites (2012 [1987]:524-526). These processes, he argues, require considering the ways in which people’s experiences and self-identities in areas considered ‘remote’ are enmeshed in a set of paradoxes – and how those tensions highlight the paradox of the very concept of ‘remote areas’ (2012 [1987]:527-30).

Ardener’s argument becomes particularly helpful to make sense of contemporary experiences of ‘remoteness’ because, while it hints at now-established critiques and discussions on centre-periphery dynamics, it goes beyond that dichotomy with a productive proposal. ‘The lesson of “remote” areas’, Ardener suggests, ‘is that this is a condition not related to periphery, but to the fact that certain peripheries are by definition not properly linked to the dominant zone. They are perceptions from the dominant zone, not part of its codified experience.’ (2012 [1987]:532).

Ardener’s reflections echo some of the lessons I learned on a visit to the offices of *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* (Western Isles Council) where I met with the local Head of Economic Development. Here I came to understand how local authorities were made aware of their ‘peripheral’ situation in relation to central decision-making bodies located in mainland cities – in ways that involved, but were not limited to, their geographical distance. Very often, a different kind of ‘distance’ became visible when gaps in communication and ‘understanding’ generated ill-informed perceptions, and these in turn shaped policy and decision-making processes that misinterpreted the particular features and needs of the islands.

Considering the significance of these ‘gaps’, I was told, local authorities in various Scottish islands had recently proposed a joint plan that invoked the peculiar position of these territories – not just as ‘rural areas’ or ‘remote areas’, the official terms under which they were usually grouped by the state, but as ‘*islands*’. It was in the offices of *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* that I first heard about the concept of ‘island proofing’ – an idea that, as the local Head of Economic Development told me, might significantly shape ‘island futures’. Essentially, the Island Proofing proposal introduced the notion that these territories should be treated not just as generally ‘remote’ or ‘rural’ – but as

islands, with particular histories, enduring strategies and institutional structures, as well as specific practical needs related to their distinctive material circumstances. The apparent simplicity of this proposal revealed the extent of the ‘gap’ between local needs and central state institutions’ understandings.

One of the aims of this legislation was to ‘bridge’ that gap. Among other solutions, the Island Proofing plan proposed greater participation of local agents in centralized decision-making processes, properly informed consideration of island features and needs, as well as granting local bodies additional decision-making powers. The island-proofing proposals have since been considered in consultations for the drafting of a future ‘Islands Bill’, along with discussions on issues and ideas such as ‘Empowering Island Communities’, ‘A National Islands Plan’, ‘Statutory Protection to the Na h-Eileanan an Iar Scottish parliamentary constituency’, and ‘Amendment of the Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004’ (Reid-Howie Associates 2016).

Anthropologists have variously explored how groups and individuals mobilize their geographical, political-economic, and social ‘peripherality’ not just to explain particular local circumstances, but also to mobilize support for certain political and moral claims (e.g. Harms et al 2014, Tsing 1993). In the process, their participation in these discussions renders visible the ways in which concepts such as ‘remoteness’ are, in fact, ‘relational categories’ (Harms et al 2014). As Harms, Hussain and Schneiderman put it, ‘remoteness is not simply a static condition found somewhere out there, beyond the pale; rather, it is always being made, unmade, and transformed’ (2014: 362). This is why, as they argue, ‘remoteness’ can be constructed in ‘urban’ places, in the same way that ‘it is also possible for the *edges* of nation-states to be perceived as the *centre* of their own socio-cultural formations’ (2014: 362, emphasis mine). As discussed above, several of my informants would agree with the terms of this formulation, recurrently challenging and dismissing descriptions of their ‘remoteness’, while recognizing its material effects (and the resourcefulness required to brave them).

The Island Proofing proposal was only one among other strategies pursued by the local council to address the ‘economic fragility’ of the islands.<sup>28</sup> Among other local projects,

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<sup>28</sup> Government support for these initiatives in the present should be understood as part of a longer history of regional and national politics, including earlier reports of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland as ‘problem areas’. Ennew (1982) points out the significance of these descriptions in the early/mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, highlighting their role in shaping ‘development plans’ and policies in the region. These have included government support for the Harris Tweed industry (e.g. asserting its legal protection, partially funding infrastructural developments and business plans), and the creation of government agencies to support local

support for the Harris Tweed industry had become a key priority – especially after a nearly ‘fatal’ and often-recounted episode that took place in the early 2000s. In fact, my visit to the offices of *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* (Western Isles Council) followed from a recommendation I was given during a coffee break in one of the Harris Tweed mills, after having heard the story of how the industry had nearly disappeared around 2006. After telling me about this particularly low period in the history of the industry, the mill manager I was speaking to told me I should ‘definitely go and see the Head of Economic Development’ at the Western Isles Council. If I was trying to understand the place of the Harris Tweed industry in the context of the wider economic life of the isles in recent years then, I was told, he was the person to speak to.

## **5. Protecting the Harris Tweed industry, local livelihoods, and the common good**

The beginning of the cautionary, almost mythical story I was told (which was also relayed in several newspaper and magazine articles discussing the eventual ‘revival’ or ‘renaissance’ of the Harris Tweed industry, see e.g. Harper et al 2009) centred around one man’s decision to buy a Harris Tweed mill in 2006, and the effects of an initially ‘imprudent’ management strategy – as different people described it to me. The Harris Tweed industry has always been characterized by periodic peaks and slumps, with production rates being shaped by fluctuations in global demand for the cloth. However, at the time when this investor bought this mill, the industry was in a particularly bad shape. Decline in demand for the cloth had been left unaddressed by local producers for years, several mills had closed their doors and become derelict, and an aging weaving workforce gradually got fewer and fewer commissions. At that time, a local mill owner whose family had owned multiple Harris Tweed mills in the past, was seeking a buyer for one of the Stornoway mills that still had functioning productive facilities. A businessman from Yorkshire, with many years of experience in the textile industry of that region, eventually offered to buy the Stornoway mill.

This investment, which would prevent yet another Harris Tweed mill from closing down, was initially seen as a vital opportunity to keep the industry alive and preserve

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businesses and emerging projects more broadly (HIDB – Highlands and Islands Development Board, created in 1965, and more recently HIE – Highland and Islands Enterprise, which replaced HIDB in 1990 [HIE 2015]).

local jobs. However, as I was repeatedly told, this investor's business initial vision (which would later change, as I describe below) seemed to reveal not just his misjudgement of the situation of the industry, but also a misunderstanding of the long-standing values and operational features of the Harris Tweed industry. At a time when competition from other Harris Tweed producers was dwindling and in the brink of disappearing, this investor's management strategy was to limit the availability of the cloth even further in order to become the exclusive source of Harris Tweed in the world – and eventually the sole producer of Harris Tweed jackets as well. Moreover, I was told, this new mill owner had planned to limit the number of patterns available for production to a strict list of six, obliterating thousands of (past and future) pattern design possibilities. His plan to sell only Harris Tweed jackets – instead of the cloth itself, like it had always been the case – and in only six patterns, contrasted sharply with the workings of the industry. This strategy failed. Several thousands of these jackets remained untouched in warehouses and shops around the country. Weavers' looms sat empty, at the same time as customers around the world were trying to purchase the cloth but realizing they were suddenly unable to do so. By 2006 - 2007, the implosion of the industry seemed imminent.

On the different occasions I was told this story, my interlocutors frequently expressed their incredulity at this strategy. '*How* could someone think this would work?' they wondered. Mills had '*always* produced cloth', fulfilling orders for existing or commissioned patterns, instead of manufacturing 'finished' products – and in such a limited range of patterns, of all things! What would happen to the thousands of patterns that had been invented before, and to the endless possibilities for future designs? The ability to make them, the skills required to do so, would eventually be lost. And how dull would weavers' lives become as they were made to weave the same *six* bland patterns over and over again? And then, what would happen to the livelihoods of hundreds of islanders when domestic weaving and mill work dwindled without external orders, and the collapse in the industry led to the closure of all mills, and the disappearance of the industry altogether? Eventually, a group of people had recognized the emergency, stepped in and intervened just before it was too late, propelling the industry's 'revival' or 'renaissance' – but, some islanders wondered, 'what would be of the islands' if that had not been the case?

The 'revival' of the industry, announced in newspaper and magazine articles after 2008 (see e.g. Harper et al 2009), followed the initiative and 'resourcefulness' of a group of

individuals – comprised of both locals and incomers – to buy another local mill (which was nearly derelict) and capture significant investment to bring its production back to life, restoring customers’ ability to place orders, developing a comprehensive marketing strategy, and participating in global textile markets once more. I was told how this new strategy was still steeped in established production practices and old expertise – but how it also incorporated innovative elements that would allow the industry to gradually flourish again. At the same time, the investor from Yorkshire who had bought the other Harris Tweed mill acknowledged the need to rethink his initial management strategy, eventually reverting to some of the ‘old’ practices that had characterized the workings of the industry, and at the same time investing in newer equipment and updated marketing plans. In this process, he also enlisted the help of a ‘local’ manager, whose significant experience and intimate understanding of the Harris Tweed industry (as well as his experience working in textile mills in the mainland), I was told, contributed in important ways to that mill’s recovery and development.<sup>29</sup> Propelled by the initiative of those individuals who had decided to recover a derelict mill and attempt to save the industry, other mills and weavers around the islands were thus able to collectively benefit from this ‘renaissance’ *and* contribute, themselves, to its sustainability.

The resourcefulness of the people who had acted to ‘rescue’ the industry was praised on the islands, as was their commitment not only to preserve the ‘heritage-rich’ industry – but in doing so also safeguarding the livelihoods of islanders, ultimately supporting people’s choice to live and work on these islands.<sup>30</sup> This connection between the continuity of the industry and the viability of population retention in this region has been emphasized since the first efforts to trademark-protect it in the early twentieth century (Thompson 1969; Hunter 2001). It was stressed by weavers and other local actors as they battled to maintain the legal definition of Harris Tweed at different points in the twentieth century (Hunter 2001). It was confirmed in the 1993 Act of Parliament, which stated the importance of preserving the cloth’s reputation to ensure the welfare of island populations. And it remains today as a key argument used by the Harris Tweed

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<sup>29</sup> By the time I was conducting fieldwork (2016-2017), the mill owned by the investor from Yorkshire had become the second largest producer of Harris Tweed. The newer mill mentioned above, established ten years before I conducted fieldwork in reaction to the near-collapse of the industry, had since become the largest one, accounting for about 75% of the production of Harris Tweed.

<sup>30</sup> When I moved to Lewis to conduct fieldwork, three mills were active again. The number of weavers had also increased, after different training schemes were offered, and grants for buying looms and building loomsheds were provided through UK government and European funds. Today, the industry employs a total of about 350 people in Lewis and Harris.

Authority in meetings around the world, in their efforts to defend the importance of respecting the trademark protection in order to safeguard local jobs otherwise difficult to replace in these ‘remote’ islands.

Today, while the industry remains vulnerable to fluctuations in global demand for the cloth, discussions between mills and the Harris Tweed Authority have resulted in more concerted efforts to actively ‘care’ for the industry and generated resourceful ideas aimed at reducing local vulnerability to international shifts (e.g. by diversifying markets and producing for stock). Since that initial ‘renaissance’, these and other transformations have enabled the industry to recover and grow, allowing weaving to return to places where looms had long ceased to be heard. I was told, for example, about the hopeful return of weaving to a village in Uig, twenty-five years after the last weaver had abandoned their loom. Celebrated by one of the mills in their company blog, the story also circulated around the islands and even made it to national newspapers in August 2015 (see e.g. Munro 2015). It described the revival of weaving in Uig in 2015, represented by two local men who had taken up weaving in two villages (Valtos and Gisla) after the industry started showing signs of recovery. This had allowed them to remain in the area with their families, an achievement that was seen as a significant contribution to population retention in a place long afflicted by its decline. The return of weaving to the peninsula also carried some symbolic weight, since the industry had played such a key role in local livelihoods in the past. There had once been at least 100 weavers working in Uig, with weaving being the main source of income for many families. During the post-war years, when the industry was at its height, 34 of these looms were active in homes in the Valtos peninsula alone. However, after the sharp decline in the industry in the 1980s, weaving had gradually disappeared from Uig, with the last weaver retiring in the 1990s (Munro 2015).

While these may seem like small numbers, they are actually quite significant in the context of Outer Hebridean demographics, where every single job that is saved, created, or removed can have significant effects for local communities. Schools in several villages, for example, depend on the number of pupils living in that area in order to remain open – and their closure is a possibility (and a sign) dreaded by most small townships. The symbolic and practical significance of Harris Tweed’s renewed place in local people’s livelihoods was stressed by the chairman of one of the mills, an ‘incomer’ who has lived in Lewis for many years. His words, quoted in these newspaper articles,

emphasized the connection between the future of the industry and the future of local communities, stating the interdependence of their sustainability:

It is great to see weaving back in Uig. This sums up why the Harris Tweed revival is so important. It allows weavers like D.I. and Calum George to remain in their own communities, earn good livelihoods and raise their families here. We just need to keep it going and ensure a strong, stable future for the industry. (Quoted in Munro 2015)

In an industry known for its longevity and celebrated for its ‘traditional’ values, these conversations about the need to ‘breathe life’ into old practices while respecting and learning from established legacies offer an opportunity to consider the ambiguities and complexities involving imaginations of the past in the present. They highlight how people can come together in the pursuit of preserving an ‘old’ industry not only by ‘remembering’ it for what it was, but actively seeking to keep it alive for the benefit of a wider community, and with the goal of its future sustainability.

Discussions on ‘tradition’ and ‘memory’ are often key to understand people’s relationship with certain histories, embodied in traces of what once was. At the same time, as the Harris Tweed industry shows, it is equally vital to examine how people discuss future possibilities and draw attention to the need for constant renewal and resourceful engagements to address new challenges – even as they seek to ensure the continuity of old practices. The sense of a need for constant renewal was also rendered visible, for example, in the industry’s welcoming attitude towards new weavers, regardless of their status as ‘locals’, ‘returners’, or ‘incomers’. This was the case even as industry officials faced the challenge of finding a balance in workforce numbers in case demand for the cloth fluctuated. In this industry, the interdependence and joint participation of a diverse group of people in everyday work processes, and their role in ensuring the continuity of the industry, further highlighted local models of belonging *with* – rather than simply belonging *to* – a group of people, an industry, a place.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this chapter I discussed the relationship between people, place, and the making of various kinds of things – from willow baskets and Harris Tweed, to production models and moral understandings – showing how particular local practices and social dynamics



offer alternative ways of thinking through ideas of common property, shared responsibility and belonging. Attention to particular regional and industrial histories, and to the way they were understood and elaborated on in the present, highlighted the important role played by ideas of *local resourcefulness* in making sense of shared experiences of 'island life'. At the same time, contextualizing the origins and development of the Harris Tweed industry within particular descriptions of the islands' geographical and political-economic situation offered an opportunity to think critically through the concept of 'remoteness'. Considering local understandings of the islands' challenges, as well as external representations of their perceived peripherality, showed how ideas of 'remoteness' and descriptions of regional specificity are variously articulated, imagined, contested, as well as drawn on in the making of particular claims. The diversity of these descriptions and their practical implications highlights the importance of considering how concepts like 'remoteness' are used not only to describe certain regions, but deployed (and challenged) as people articulate particular imaginations and lived experiences of inhabiting those places.

Drawing attention to the notion of resourcefulness, in this chapter I showed how it could both be examined as an ethnographic concept *and* employed as a versatile analytical tool. On the one hand, the idea of resourcefulness, and *local* resourcefulness in particular, was invoked by several of my interlocutors to make sense of the ways in which islanders – including incomers – dealt with particular local challenges in ingenious ways, today and in the past. This notion of resourcefulness was invoked to explain not only the practices and skills involved in braving material limitations and environmental circumstances – e.g. using local plants to weave baskets and braid ropes, or local wool and lichen dyes to make the resilient weather-proof cloth that would be known as Harris Tweed – but also in addressing particular political-economic conditions. In this context, the history of the Harris Tweed industry offered significant examples of this resourcefulness – from the early efforts to make it into a viable commercial industry in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the innovative initiative to trademark protect it in 1910, to the multiple occasions throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century when islanders stepped in to ensure the continued protection and development of the industry in the face of different challenges.

The very production model retained by the Harris Tweed industry, which safeguarded local livelihoods across so many rural households around the islands by preserving the home-based hand-weaving production (as well as island-based mill work for all other

stages), was also seen as a resourceful solution in itself. Moreover, as I will discuss in Chapter 4, the idea of resourcefulness was often invoked to explain local patterns of labour migration, occupational pluralism, and diverse career histories – seen as ingenious and necessary approaches to local unemployment, labour uncertainty and economic fragility. In this sense, the idea of resourcefulness was used to describe a diversity of practices *and* outlooks understood as peculiar to local experiences, generating particular responses to limited economic opportunities, uncertainty and change.

In this context, the idea of resourcefulness as a creative, ingenious practice and outlook could be used more broadly to discuss the inclusive and dynamic ways in which islanders – including ‘incomers’ to the islands and ‘newcomers’ to the industry – became involved in practices and shared circumstances that fostered a particular sense of belonging and community membership. Paying attention to islanders’ discussions on the continuity of the Harris Tweed industry revealed not only their appreciation of the vital role it has played to ensure population retention, but also their understanding of a shared sense of responsibility for keeping the industry alive. This, in turn, was seen as an important contribution to safeguard their own and other people’s ability to work and live on the islands. This idea of interdependence, strengthened by an acknowledgement of particular local challenges (e.g. ‘remoteness’), highlighted a sense of shared precariousness and collective responsibility over the ‘common good’ that suggests alternative ways of thinking about collective property and belonging. In this context, the concept of resourcefulness shows how inclusive forms of belonging can be conceived both as active, open-ended, always in the making, and also premised on more established ideas of commonality such as a sense of shared precariousness.

The multiple ways in which the notion of resourcefulness was deployed to make sense of local experiences and attitudes hints at the potential that it holds as an analytical concept. Considering this region’s history of dispossession and displacement, often associated with the imposition of external forces and powerful actors, could suggest the need to make sense of local experiences with reference to concepts like ‘resilience’ or ‘resistance’ (Abu-Lughod 1990; Scott 1985, 1990; Wright 2016). While some of the local histories could be described as involving various forms of *resistance*, I suggest that focusing instead on the way notions of *resourcefulness* were employed to make sense of region-specific challenges can improve our understanding of certain social, region-centred, personal and collective moral projects.

In this chapter I discussed how a sense of ‘ownership’ or ‘entitlement’ over the Harris Tweed industry has been understood locally as a ‘responsibility’. The duty to preserve the industry not only for those who profit from it as mill owners, or for those who work for the industry as mill workers or weavers, but to all of those who have decided to make these islands their home – as ‘crofters’ or ‘islanders’ – and also depend on local jobs and population retention in order to do so. Decentring analysis from the concept of resistance (even when explicit forms of power and dominance are at work) allows us to consider the unexpected and sometimes contradictory ways in which allegiances and livelihood strategies come into being, and draws attention to the multi-layered intersections of politics, environmental realities, and moral projects.

A recent announcement made by the mill owner from Yorkshire whose story was mentioned above offers yet another example to support the need for researchers to examine the social and moral dimensions of relations of production, and the ways in which they evolve and transform over time. Nearing retirement age, instead of selling his Harris Tweed mill, the investor has decided to *gift it* to the local manager whose help he had enlisted years before and who has continued to ensure the success of the business.<sup>31</sup> Both acknowledging the local manager’s commitment and resourcefulness, and stressing the importance of protecting the industry to benefit the welfare of islanders, the English investor declared:

[The local manager] and I have worked together for a number of years. He is an exceptionally able, totally honest and a superb man and manager.

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<sup>31</sup> This mill owner’s decision to gift the mill to the local manager echoes, in some ways, Lord Leverhulme’s own decision as a landowner in Lewis several decades earlier. After years seeking to implement his own development plans (several of which were met with resistance from islanders, see e.g. Hutchinson 2003), and having decided that it was time to leave the island and settle his own financial situation, Lord Leverhulme decided to *gift* some of the land he owned in Lewis to local people, instead of selling it to a new external proprietor. The final lines of a speech he prepared to address islanders declaring this plan read:

‘I hope you will receive my proposals as indicating my desire when leaving Lewis to do all in my power to secure the future welfare, prosperity and happiness of its people.’ (Lord Leverhulme quoted in Hutchinson 2003:204)

Created in 1923 by Deed of Trust, the Stornoway Trust is Scotland’s oldest community landlord, stewarding ‘a 69,000 acre estate which is home to almost 11,000 people, and which includes the Parish of Stornoway and a small portion of the Parish of Lochs’ (The Stornoway Trust, n.d). For more details on Lord Leverhulme’s activity in Lewis, see Hutchinson 2003.

I have come to believe the iconic name of Harris Tweed *belongs to the people of the Western Isles*. It is not something for financial vultures to buy and strip out all the cash, leaving the company bankrupt.

Harris Tweed fabric is an integral part of the Western Isles and, as such, should be owned and produced by the islands and any profits should remain there to enhance the life of the people.

(Quoted in Leask 2019, emphasis mine)

## Chapter 2

### Following the tweed van: road stories, productive encounters, and local experiences of a global industry

#### 1. Introduction

On a wet Thursday morning, mill workers prepared the ‘tweed van’ ahead of its daily ‘pick-up and delivery’ journeys around the Isle of Lewis and Harris. I waited to board the van with the driver and his assistant, observing the elaborate and time-consuming process. In a rush of paperwork and weaving supplies, heavy metal warp yarn beams were carried into the back of the large van. Bulky white bags, containing weft yarn cones, were thrown in along with them. Each beam and bag was carefully labelled with weaving tickets, where tables with numbers offered coded instructions to weavers. In this busy environment, where mill workers from different departments were brought together to prepare the tweed van, casual banter blended with careful directions and professional coordination.

Every day, tweed vans travel around the islands to ensure the connection between the work done at the mills, and the work done at weavers’ own homes. Moving between these two productive settings, tweed van drivers and their assistants help mediate the relationship between mills and weavers, ensuring that the distinctive production model enshrined in the industry’s trademark protection is upheld. Mills receive most of the orders for Harris Tweed and possess the infrastructure to produce the yarn used for weaving, to prepare the warp beams and weft cones used in weavers’ looms – and to darn and ‘finish’ the cloth after it is woven. The woven cloth is also later inspected by a Harris Tweed Authority representative and stamped with the Orb trademark in the mill premises. However, since the cloth has to be handwoven at weavers’ homes, tweed vans need to take the instructions and materials needed to fulfil these orders straight to weavers’ domestic loomsheds.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Tweed vans are driven to individual weavers’ homes to deliver the heavy metal beams with the appropriate warp (sometimes carrying enough yarn to weave up to 5 or 6 tweeds, each with an approximate

In their rounds, tweed vans are also responsible for collecting the woven tweeds from weavers' homes, so the cloth can be returned to the mills to be darned, washed, finished, pressed, inspected and stamped. After the cloth has been woven at home on a mechanical loom powered exclusively by human labour, weavers fold it in neat layers and tie it with ribbons made of *fuigheag* – on each end and in the middle – so it can be lifted into the tweed van without coming undone.<sup>33</sup> Weavers also sign the paperwork required to have the cloth stamped (stating that it has been hand-woven according to the requirements specified in the Harris Tweed Act), and to get the appropriate payment according to the number of metres they have woven. Weavers are individually identified by a unique weaver's number issued by the Harris Tweed Authority, and they are paid by the mills by the piece. Occasionally, when a 'draft change' is required to weave a different pattern in the same loom,<sup>34</sup> it is paid separately at a fixed rate. Since draft changes add to production costs and delay weavers' work, they are among the key variables involved in mills' strategies for work distribution – a process known in the industry as the issuing of tweeds. This practice, which determines the distribution of work among home-based weavers, involves matching customers' orders with individual weavers' looms.

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length of 58 metres, making beams extremely heavy to lift) which will be fitted into weavers' looms; as well as large sturdy plastic bags filled with the appropriate number of weft cones (or 'bobbins'); and, importantly, a punctured card and an instruction paper slip (or 'ticket') that describes, in detail, the pattern to be woven.

<sup>33</sup> *Fuigheag* is the Gaelic name for the strip of waste cloth that is removed from the edge of the tweed as it is being woven.

<sup>34</sup> A 'draft change' is a skilled, time-consuming activity that requires careful, concentrated labour. When weavers need to 'change draft' to weave a new pattern (that is, one that is different from the one they had been working on before), this involves changing the setup of the loom by reordering individual heddles in each of the four shafts (or 'boards') along the whole width of the loom. When using double-width Bonas Griffith looms – which constitute the majority of looms being used today on the islands to weave tweeds for the mills – this means manually changing the order of at least 1392 heddles, through which 1392 woollen yarn ends will be passed.



**Fig. 2.1.** A mill worker checks the ticket with weaving instructions on a ‘beam of five’ (that is, a warped beam with enough yarn to weave five lengths of tweed – each piece about 58m long), before placing it on the back of the tweed van for delivery.

In this particular mill, the preparation of the tweed van takes place under the supervision of Seòras – the mill employee who has the responsibility of issuing tweeds, determining the work distribution among weavers and making sure that the production schedule is fulfilled through this allocation. As he moves through the mill, Seòras carries around a list of weavers’ names and numbers, ordered according to their location on the island. This long list is filled with pencil and yellow highlighter annotations, different handwritten marks, codes and comments populating its margins and offering hints that assist Seòras’s decision-making process.<sup>35</sup> Along with the individual paper ‘tickets’ and ‘issue cards’ that are sent with the materials for weaving, and a complicated Excel spreadsheet located in a digital network shared with the mill’s offices (which is constantly being updated), Seòras’s annotated list of names allows him to keep track of

<sup>35</sup> These annotations include, for example, information about the patterns that some weavers are currently working on, which can determine if a draft change will be needed, or whether it makes more sense to allocate a particular order to a weaver who is already working in the requested pattern (and thus would not need to change draft on his or her loom on this occasion).

the work being done by about 130 weavers who work for this mill – and to communicate to tweed vans what their daily delivery and collecting duties will be.

Needing to assign work to about 130 self-employed weavers who work for the mill, Seòras's position is a complex and often stressful one. Not only does he need to keep track of customers' orders (with priorities that can change every day), but his role in deciding when individual weavers will get work means that he is riddled with social responsibilities towards an external workforce that is often oblivious to the complexity of his role. Inside the mill, however, his responsibilities are well-known. Some of the mill workers involved in the daily preparation of the tweed van occasionally comment on it, imagining how Seòras's brain 'must always be ticking', constantly devising how to prioritise orders and effectively distribute work. As he moves between departments in the mill, Seòras's phone is frequently ringing with calls from the office, or from weavers inquiring about future assignments.

The topic of work distribution and the issuing of tweeds is an important one for any weaver, particularly in an industry that is vulnerable to fluctuations in global demand. It can be a source of anxiety, speculation and rumour among weavers, especially during the months when the mill is perceived to be 'quiet'. Weavers' perceptions of work distribution practices, as well as their constant guessing and pulse-measuring of the industry's 'health', have long been an integral part of their job in the Harris Tweed industry. For many weavers, who work from home and far from the mills, the complex process of 'issuing tweeds' (as well as Seòras's role within it) is mostly invisible and often misunderstood, frequently leading to confusion during 'low' periods. For self-employed weavers, real fluctuations in (as well as their imaginations of) global demand for the cloth were rendered particularly visible when their looms remained 'empty' for a number of days, after the latest cloth they wove had been collected by the tweed van, but no new warped 'beams' had been delivered to allow them to resume work.

Since 1910, the Harris Tweed industry's trademark protection and its increasing presence in international markets has brought work to a region otherwise offering limited job opportunities and threatened by depopulation. Harris Tweed's distinctive production model, according to which weavers must work from home, has contributed in important ways to population retention – even in some of the most rural and 'remote' parts of the islands. Despite its extremely localised production, the cloth is exported to over 50 countries, and trademark protected in over 30 countries. At the same time,



however, the industry's reliance on global markets has long made local workers vulnerable to changes in worldwide demand for the cloth, peaks and slumps periodically rendering employment prospects relatively uncertain. In this context, tweed van workers find themselves in a complex mediating position that extends beyond enabling material productive relations, performing a layered role that is often overlooked in descriptions of the industry. In this chapter I argue that following the tweed van affords a unique lens into the diverse localised experiences of the global capitalist relations that this industry has long been enmeshed in.

Much has been written about the ways in which large-scale socio-economic processes shape lives and livelihoods around the world. Across disciplines, studies of global commodity chains have suggested new ways of addressing these dynamics. The genealogy of research into these processes, which proliferated rapidly since Hopkins and Wallerstein coined the term 'commodity chain' in 1977, reveals both their potential and their challenges (Bair 2009; Leslie and Reimer 1999; Foster 2006). Anthropologists have contributed to these debates by showing the complex implications of global processes, highlighting not just flows, but actual encounters, productive tensions and 'friction' (Tsing 2005). Proposals to consider the 'social life' (Appadurai 1986) and 'cultural biography' (Kopitoff 1986) of things, discussions about 'multi-sited ethnography' (Marcus 1995; Falzon 2009), and injunctions to 'follow the thing' have informed theoretical and methodological developments – as well as disagreements – within the discipline.

In a critical discussion of conceptual and analytical approaches to 'the global situation', Tsing points out how 'the use of circulation as a ruling image for global interconnections' risks obscuring certain relations of production (Tsing 2000:337). Focusing on circulation, Tsing acknowledges, 'shows us the movement of people, things, ideas, or institutions'. However, she argues, 'it does not show us how this movement depends on defining tracks and grounds or scales and units of agency' (2000:337). In this chapter I follow Tsing's suggestion that anthropologists should focus not only on what circulates or flows, but also on 'the social conditions that allow or encourage that flow' (2000:337). The image Tsing evokes in her provocation is compelling:

If we imagined creeks, perhaps the model would be different; we might notice the channel as well as the water moving. (Tsing 2000:337)

In this sense, Tsing argues, a focus on labour and on the forms of ‘channel making’ that both enable and result from transnational flows could offer ‘alternatives to conventional models of circulation’, rendering visible the complex social, political and economic implications of these movements (2000: 337-338).

In this chapter I build on some of these ideas by showing how following the tweed van can contribute, in multiple ways, to more nuanced understandings of the social relations and individual subjectivities emerging in – and produced by – the multi-scalar implications of the Harris Tweed industry. Attention to the movement of the tweed van highlights not only the infrastructural conditions that allow this unique production model to operate, but also their intertwinement with the different kinds of labour performed by tweed van workers as they move between weavers’ homes. Focusing on the movements and interactions that take place as tweed van workers perform their job reveals the emergence of particular socialities, everyday work experiences, and diverse understandings of what a good working life can look like in contexts marked by relative labour uncertainty – offering a window into localised experiences of national and transnational political-economic processes.

Travelling with tweed van workers, after having spent several months working alongside weavers and learning from mill workers sitting in their respective ‘static’ workplaces, also revealed unexpected methodological and epistemological possibilities. In this chapter I address some of these possibilities, showing how working alongside tweed van workers, and partaking in the rhythms and movements that characterized their mobile and multi-sited workplaces and practices, afforded unique ethnographic insights.



**Fig. 2.2.** Photograph of the Albion van ordered by Kenneth Mackenzie Ltd – a Harris Tweed mill based in Stornoway – seen here being craned from the old *Loch Seaforth* ferry in Stornoway in 1957 (image courtesy Stornoway Gazette). It would be, at the time, ‘the largest vehicle on the roads of Lewis and Harris’ (*Eilean an Fhraoich* Annual 1957: 36). This photograph featured in the front cover of the local newspaper, and the subtitle underneath its reproduction in the Annual summary of newspaper stories, the *Eilean an Fhraoich* Annual, read:

‘Another sign of progress in the Harris Tweed trade – a huge Albion Chieftain van, built of aluminium, being landed at Stornoway for Messrs Kenneth Mackenzie Ltd. The van, nearly 28 ft. long and 8 ft. wide, travels approximately 600 miles per week through Lewis villages collecting tweed from the crofter-weavers. There is a crest on the side of the van – crossed shuttles.’ (1957: 36)

## 2. On the road

The preparation of the tweed van can be a lengthy task, sometimes requiring operations in certain parts of the mill to be momentarily paused or delayed as particular workers are mobilised to complete the undertaking. Heavy warped beams and bags with cones of weft yarn are placed together by the gate. They are then compared with the distribution list for the day, and finally thrown into the back of the van or noisily wheeled in on an old metal cart. Soon, however, mill workers will be able to return to their departments – perhaps on time for a quick tea break – where they will continue working until the end of the day. Yet for tweed van workers this is just the beginning of a workday that will

mostly be spent outside the mill, driving through winding roads and meeting weavers throughout the island.

Once the tweed van is appropriately loaded, after a few changes and amendments to weaving assignments, we finally leave the mill and get on the road. It is now well past 9am. Tweed van workers travel in pairs, so I'm offered the middle seat between Angus, who drives the van, and Iain, who carries the list of daily assignments, and who is always the first to hop off when we reach individual weavers' homes. At each stop, Iain will be the first of us to greet weavers, as he examines individual driveways, assists Angus with tricky reversing manoeuvres by gesticulating broadly behind the van, or quickly picks up bags left by weavers on the side of the road (on the rare occasions when there is no need to reverse the van close to weaving sheds for deliveries). Whenever we stop, I join them by collecting some of the lighter items, assisting with smaller tweeds and carrying large white bags with empty weft cones. I also join in the brief conversations that take place in these fleeting encounters with weavers, as their work is speedily delivered and collected before we head to the next weaver's address on the list.

Over the rest of the day we will be travelling extensively through the roads of Lewis and Harris, stopping off at weavers' homes in different villages along these crucial arteries. For decades, tweed vans have performed fundamental mediating duties within the Harris Tweed industry, circulating in roads that have significantly shaped local lives in rural townships throughout the islands.<sup>36</sup> However, despite their important role in enabling the production of the famous cloth, tweed vans are often absent from mainstream descriptions of the industry, which usually privilege three main elements: the mills, the weavers, and the Harris Tweed Authority. In this chapter I draw attention to the material and social role performed by tweed vans and their mobile workers as they move through the arteries that have, for decades, allowed the network of home-based workers to make a living – and in the process to contribute, in various ways, to the 'making' of the Harris Tweed industry.

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<sup>36</sup> Along with tweed vans, other mobile 'institutions' that circulated on island roads used to play a crucial role in local lives. Especially in the most 'remote' parts of the islands, rural populations used to rely on periodic visits from the mobile bank, the library van, and the mobile grocery shop, along with buses and postal service vans. While services like the library van and the mobile grocery shop are less widespread today, these vehicles can still occasionally be seen on local roads.

In this context, I propose examining how tweed van workers' everyday experiences on the road can illuminate not only the practical, material, productive role played by particular infrastructural conditions, but also the diverse social and subjective dynamics that emerge while navigating local roads and mediating work processes. Recent discussions in anthropology have highlighted how a focus on infrastructure can enrich our understanding of social and political-economic realities in contexts around the world (e.g. Larkin 2013; Harvey and Knox 2012, 2015; Appel et al 2015; Venkatesan et al 2018; Di Nunzio 2018). In this chapter I draw on some of these ideas, but I focus in particular on the ways in which anthropologists have explored the place of roads in local imaginations, political-economic dynamics, and socio-economic practices (e.g. Klaeger 2012; Dalakoglou 2010, 2017; de Pina-Cabral 1987; Gluckman 1940; Harvey and Knox 2012; Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012, 2015).

There are striking parallels between what I learned 'on the road' with tweed van workers, and the dynamics observed for example by Dalakoglou (2010, 2017) on the Albanian-Greek cross border motorway, and in Klaeger's (2012) research into the rhythms and socialities emerging in the work of roadside hawkers in a suburb of Accra. Similarly, in this chapter I extend my analysis beyond the infrastructural role of roads to examine the ways in which work processes, individual subjectivities and emergent socialities intertwined as tweed van workers' labour 'circulated' on local lanes. In this chapter, I invite the reader to join Angus, Iain, and myself as we leave the mill and travel through island roads on our way to dozens of weavers' domestic loomsheds. These journeys, I suggest, illuminate how certain large-scale political-economic dynamics are experienced locally, and rendered visible through tweed van workers' mobile labour practices and everyday conversations.

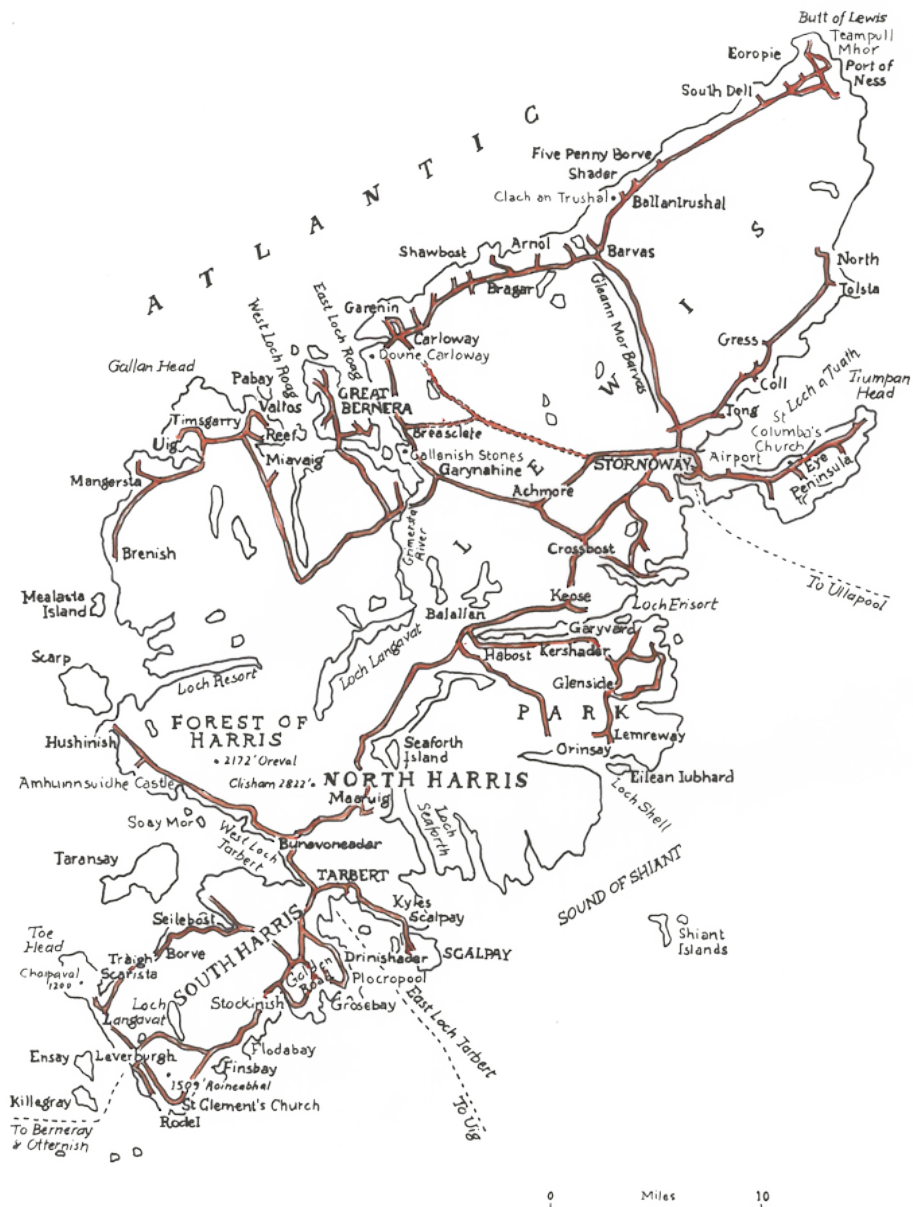


Fig. 2.3. Map of the Isle of Lewis and Harris, the largest of the Outer Hebrides.

### 3. Following the tweed van

After leaving the mill, Iain checks his own handwritten list of assignments and announces the plan for the day. Even though Harris will be our central ‘assignment’ this Thursday (trips to Harris take place fortnightly, in part because they require longer travelling times), we begin by heading northwest towards Stornoway, away from the western coast of Lewis where the mill is located. There has been a slight change of plans

in the office, and a delivery needs to be made to two weavers' homes in town before we head south, to cross the 'Harris hills' into Tarbert. There is no easy direct route northwest to go to Stornoway, so we need to follow the usual circular route that connects western townships to eastern ones. First we head north along the western coast, the Atlantic Ocean to our left; then we speed eastwards through Barvas moors, the expansive peaty landscape stretching for miles on both sides of the road.

Ten minutes into the journey it already feels like coffee time, so Iain brings out his gigantic coffee flask and offers both Angus and me a hot drink in a bright blue plastic camping mug. A former fisherman, with experience balancing a cup of tea while moving around a small fishing boat in the roughest of seas, Iain explains how it is possible to do the same without spilling the whole cup as we drive speedily through the sinuous and undulating island roads. It will take a while before I master the technique. For now, Angus passes the offer for coffee and focuses on driving.

As we reach the first weaver's house in Stornoway, I begin to get a sense of certain challenges Angus and Iain face as they try to perform their job. The driveway to the domestic loom shed where we are delivering a beam is located on a steep, irregular slope, and loose gravel escapes noisily under the heavy weight of the tweed van's wheels as Angus tries to reverse the vehicle closer to the small building's door. Below, right in front of us, there is a busy road. The task seems impossible, though they have no choice but to complete it in order to get as close as possible to the loomshed where they will deliver a particularly heavy beam. Driveways vary from house to house all around the island, and some of them can prove to be a real nightmare for a pair of workers who are required to carry heavy weights of long, awkwardly shaped warp beams into usually small, cramped sheds. Their access is sometimes made even trickier by broken or improvised steps that can be real occupational hazards.

This is part of the unusual nature of Angus and Iain's 'workplace' – they work *for* the mill, but mostly *outside* the mill. Their days are spent on the road, in and out of this van, travelling around Lewis and Harris as they take work to individual weavers' doors. Later on, as we discuss the challenges and benefits of the job, Angus admits that, for him, the chance to be out driving is one of the good things about this job, especially in comparison with the confined situation of fellow mill workers. He points out that, even though he could complain about many things, it certainly 'feels good being out in the fresh, better than being stuck in the mill all day like the other guys'.

Iain agrees. Asked about weaving work, they have similar opinions. They see it as a boring occupation – and one that is ‘not for everyone’. They tell me about the isolation of weavers. ‘You don’t see anyone’, says Iain. ‘You only see the dog’, adds Angus. ‘It’s like an old man’s game’. Iain and Angus wonder if weavers would ever want to wear, themselves, the cloth they have woven, or whether they might actually ‘resent it’. They imagine that, after so many hours

weaving it, and looking at it as it is coming out of the loom, all the work they have to do... and then the loom maybe starts playing up and it takes hours to fix it... maybe they will resent it at the end when it’s finished, and maybe they don’t even want to think about wearing the tweed themselves.

While some of these imagined scenarios contrast sharply with the actual experiences of many weavers I met and spent time with – as discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 – several weavers agreed that theirs was certainly ‘not a job for everyone’. Like Angus and Iain, some weavers emphasized that, to be a weaver, ‘it has to be *in* you’, or ‘it has to be *for* you’, or ‘you have to be built for it’, sometimes quoting Gaelic expressions that encapsulated this idea in their very grammatical structure (see Chapter 4).

Patience, dedication, discipline, rigorous work practices and an eye for detail were among the most repeated terms used by weavers as they discussed the qualities required to do their work. Weavers also emphasized the importance of knowing how to detect mechanical problems and to appropriately repair their looms – a crucial part of the skills and knowledge required to perform weaving work. They often mentioned the significance of ‘experience’, as well as a ‘natural disposition’ for some of these things. ‘Enjoying one’s own company’ was also cited as an important personal characteristic, and ‘patience’ was a virtue mentioned in reference to different kinds of challenges – from dealing with loom problems, to enduring the potential uncertainty of work distribution. These personal qualities, skills, and practices were often framed in moral and vocational terms, as will be further discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

However, in Angus’s view, ‘patience’ was precisely one of the things that ‘many new weavers’ seemed to lack. Angus clarified that he was referring, in particular, to the impatient ways in which certain weavers expressed their concern about perceived fluctuations in present work distribution, and their anxiety about whether they would be getting enough work in the near future. He explained how, in his view, many weavers



today seemed more optimistic than earlier generations in their expectation that the industry could offer a consistent stream of work, allowing them to be full-time weavers. Drawing on his observations of a time when the industry went through a slump in the past, he explained how, during that period, weavers' expectations of steady weaving work were much lower. They would still weave Harris Tweed when orders came their way, but they had to diversify their sources of income by taking on additional jobs outside the industry (and sometimes travelling for seasonal work) in order to make a living. Earlier patterns of crofting-weaving and occupational pluralism also supported his views. Back then, he pointed out, when the industry was going through low periods caused by slumps in global demand, full-time weaving did not appear as a possibility. He thus wondered if the recent revival of the industry had had a part to play in these expectations, as new weavers joined the workforce unaware of past rhythms, and established weavers became used to improved work prospects.

In their experience driving the tweed van around the islands, Angus and Iain had continuous first hand experience of the 'impatience' that seemed to result from these expectations, being exposed to questions, comments, and rumours on these issues every working day. The format of their job effectively placed them in a multi-layered mediating position – not only did they physically connect mills and weavers, making production possible, but they were also the human faces of the mill that weavers most commonly saw and expected to get information from. Many of the weavers who work for the mills don't actually need to visit the industrial production plants, so the tweed van effectively performs both material and (only semi-acknowledged) social roles on behalf of the mill.



**Fig. 2.4.** The back of the tweed van, as it begins to fill with woven tweeds collected from weavers' domestic loomsheds, as well as empty warp beams (like the one visible on the right).

As we moved between weavers' loomsheds, these short visits began to reveal interesting patterns. When we stopped, Angus and Iain moved quickly, transporting heavy beams and tweeds between loomshed and van. They often stood chatting before getting back on the road, as weavers sought to learn more about whether the mill was 'busy'. Occasionally, these brief conversations moved away from work concerns, and good-humoured comments were exchanged before we left. For weavers, the arrival of the tweed van provided an excuse for a work break. For some, it offered the opportunity to interact with someone after hours or even days working on their own. Moreover, it soon became clear that the tweed van not only brought work to weavers, but was also expected to hold valuable information about how much work they might get in the near future. When different weavers enquired about 'how busy' the mill was, they often used the same formulation to imply a number of other unspoken questions, with implications that ranged from local politics to global trade.

Sometimes weavers seemed to expect tweed van workers to measure the pulse of the industry through their everyday presence in the mill – a context mostly out of weavers'

sight. Being in the mill, it was assumed, tweed van workers might be exposed to conversations about upcoming orders and new international customers; it was imagined that they might also be able to assess how ‘busy’ different departments seemed to be, how much yarn was being produced, warped, and beamed – and translate this into a ‘forecast’. Conversely, during ‘quiet spells’, when weavers felt they might be getting fewer tweeds per month, asking how ‘busy’ things were implied enquiring, indirectly, about how ‘busy’ *other weavers* were – an attempt to assess the ‘fairness’ of local work distribution. ‘Empty looms get people talking’, I was often told.

I watched how tweed van workers tried their best to provide diplomatic answers to questions they didn’t often feel equipped to answer; and how weavers appreciated having someone to speculate and discuss these issues with, given their distance from the mill. Anthropologists have variously discussed the ways in which different forms of ‘affective labour’ (Hardt 1999) emerge in context of formal employment. In this case, tweed van workers helped diminish the gap between mills and weavers, facilitating production, and mediating ‘remote’ workplace relations. Nevertheless, the relevant social and affective labour they performed was largely unacknowledged within the industry, and seemed unremarkable even to tweed van workers themselves. Angus and Iain only referred to these interactions briefly as examples of how their work could sometimes feel repetitive and monotonous. ‘We get asked the same question every single day, sometimes many times a day’, they explained. ‘They all ask “*is it busy?*”’.



**Fig. 2.5.** Driving the tweed van through the winding single-track Golden Road on the east side of Harris, Iain's plastic coffee cup in the foreground.

#### **4. Road stories and personal narratives**

Having sorted the Stornoway deliveries, we head south. Our next planned stop is in Tarbert, the second largest town on the island of Lewis and Harris. It is situated in the isthmus that connects North and South Harris, past the mountain range known locally as the Harris hills. Conversations like the one above take place throughout the day as we drive along stretches of road that require less concentration than narrow, bumpy ones, and while we are far from weavers' loom shed deliveries. The tweed van's work trip to Harris has this particularity – the houses we need to visit are more spread out than in places like Ness or the townships in the western side of Lewis, so the time spent driving gives us room to discuss the matters that affect the islands, the industry, their work and life, at greater length.

Particular roads, landmarks and landscapes introduce themselves into conversations, as we drive through and past them. As we approach the well known Harris hills and glimpse the road sign that reads *Faillte do dh'Eilean na Hearadh* (Gaelic for 'Welcome

to the Isle of Harris’) they jokingly ask if I have brought my passport. Before the road was built, these mountains formed a natural border between North Harris and South Harris, crossed either on foot or avoided by sea on small boats along the coast. We discuss how people speak Gaelic slightly differently in Harris and in Lewis despite being on the same island, the pronunciation and vocabulary varying slightly between the two previously ‘less connected’ parts of the island (before this road was built). Throughout my fieldwork I often heard about the important role played by particular roads in this region, in conversations that underlined the vital changes that their construction brought about for local populations. These conversations emphasized the importance of considering not only the possibility of ‘connection’ associated with infrastructural forms like roads, but also, as anthropologists have variously discussed, the sense of disconnection and ‘remoteness’ rendered visible by – and described in reference to – the breakdown, absence, or delayed construction of roads and paths (see e.g. Argounova-Low 2012a, 2012b; de Pina-Cabral 1987, Dalakoglou 2010, 2017).

Specific island roads were sometimes alluded to as people discussed wider social and political situations. On more than one occasion, people mentioned particular roads to illustrate the historic inequality in public funding of infrastructure throughout the islands. For instance, when a comparison was drawn between the condition, narrowness and length of road networks in the southern and in the northern islands of the Outer Hebrides, the contrast between them was cited as the result of a past division in local administration, which saw the islands being managed by two separate councils based in the Scottish mainland.<sup>37</sup> Even today, I was told, the condition and distribution of those roads showed traces of this past. In my interlocutors’ explanations, the roads themselves were understood to render visible the fundamental differences in how the two mainland councils had approached and managed the regions since 1889 – one supporting the development of infrastructure more than the other, and thus explaining why Lewis was ‘better connected’.

But road stories, I soon realised, were mobilized locally not only in arguments about regional politics and socio-economic circumstances, but as part of various kinds of narratives – personal stories, family histories and local myths – capturing imaginations and remaining a part of a recognizable canon. Discussions about the roads that were

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<sup>37</sup> Until the islands eventually became a unitary council area in 1975 (today *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar*, the Western Isles council), Lewis was part of the county of Ross and Cromarty, while Harris and the rest of the southern Outer Hebridean islands were part of Inverness-shire.

built and repaired thanks to the implementation of Job Creation Scheme in the 1980s<sup>38</sup> would usually invite opinions about its tangible effects on particular townships, and questions about the government's actual goals at the time. But these stories would also as often veer into more personal accounts, where people described their own (or their relatives') experience of working in these employment schemes, detailing days of 'working alongside people you knew, your neighbours and friends', often toiling in the rain, but also 'having a laugh'. There were also stories of collective efforts to persuade politicians to get roads built, some of them featuring individuals whose personal commitment to the cause made their names memorable. Kenny Mackay, a man from Harris who became known for his persistent effort to convince regional authorities to build a road to Rhenigidale, was one among other examples.<sup>39</sup> Before the road was eventually built and opened in 1990, that village in Harris could only be reached by boat or on foot.

The popularity of local road stories, and their place in discussions about regional politics, local myth, and personal or family stories, can be related to Argounova-Low's (2012b) observations on the relationship between roads and narratives, as well as Dalakoglou's (2010, 2017) reflections on the politics and poetics of particular roads. Moreover, I argue, the experience of travelling with tweed van drivers and assisting their work throughout the day revealed the ethnographic and narrative potential of this approach. Not only did these trips reveal striking parallels between the structure of roads and narratives (Argounova-Low 2012b), but they also rendered visible how particular narratives and socialities emerged *from* the experience (and in the moments) of travelling together through particular roads.

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<sup>38</sup> The Job Creation scheme implemented in the Outer Hebrides was part of a wider government program, initiated in 1975 'to contain unemployment, particularly among young people' (Prattis 1979: 296). It was terminated in 1977. Prattis describes the implementation of the program in the Outer Hebrides as a particularly successful example, contributing not only to lower the rate of unemployment and adding to basic infrastructure, but also to 'strengthening township and community solidarity' (1979: 199). In his view, 'the Western Isles experience with job creation may provide a model of community involvement and new-won solidarities that other communities in Scotland and elsewhere may yet seek to emulate' (Prattis 1979: 300). See also MacKay et al (1980) on the impact of the Job Creation scheme in crofting communities.

<sup>39</sup> Kenny Mackay's struggle to get this road built is the subject of a recent short film titled *Faith in Here* (2017) and directed by Jamie Edmunson.

After our deliveries in Tarbert we head south along the sinuous, narrow and well-known Golden Road that takes us along the rocky and uneven eastern coast of Harris. When we go over hills, the water of the Minch shimmers to our left, and the silhouette of the Isle of Skye emerges vaguely in the horizon. Occasionally, after a curved stretch, lily-filled lochans, a flock of sheep, or a few houses appear. Sometimes, a dangerous-looking drop just beside the road renders visible just how challenging this route can get, and puts Angus's driving skills and road experience on display as he coolly keeps the van moving. Driving through the winding Golden Road, our hot-cup-holding skills are particularly challenged, as we discuss the stories we each heard about how this stretch of road received its gilded name. Was this name informally given because of how expensive it had been to build the road (requiring explosives to break through the hard rocky Harris features)? Or was *actual gold* involved in any way in its history?

Throughout the day we drive through famed roads, striking landscapes, historical landmarks and archaeological sites of renown – several of which sit in close proximity to people's houses in townships all around the island (e.g. St. Clement's Church in Rodel, Southern Harris; or the Callanish standing stones on the west side of Lewis). People travel from across the world to visit these places, circulating around the islands on scenic roads that frequently challenge their driving skills as they appreciate their surroundings. For Angus and Iain, these landscapes and landmarks are an integral part of their usual workdays. And while their days do look different according to where they are dispatched, certain parts of the job remain the same. Driving and working with few proper breaks, snacking on petrol station food, memorizing addresses and visiting dozens of weavers' loomsheds, planning delivery routes, carrying heavy beams, collecting woven tweeds, making conversation with weavers, and patiently answering, house after house, questions about the present and future situation of the industry.

Travelling with Angus and Iain, I soon became attuned to the rhythms of their movements and conversations, noticing how they changed according to our itinerary and the condition of roads, in ways that echoed the fluctuating rhythms in the work of the Ghanaian roadside entrepreneurs described by Klaeger (2012). While being mostly *on* the road, instead of just *beside* the road like Klaeger's interlocutors, the work of tweed van drivers revealed a similar 'continuous engagement with differential speeds, rhythms and related time frames' (2012: 537). Variations in this pace shaped, for example, the content of particular conversations, and their level of engagement with certain topics –

from brief moments of humorous banter, to longer thoughtful discussions about their own working lives.

These conversations would deepen as workdays progressed, especially when we drove through itineraries that involved fewer pauses for collections and deliveries – places like Harris, Lochs and Uig have fewer weavers than Ness and the west side of Lewis. Sometimes, in making their points, Angus and Iain described their own backgrounds and work experiences, and used these as examples to explain wider employment circumstances in this region. One day, enumerating the different kinds of jobs they had before the current one – exemplifying a wider regional trend of occupational pluralism and diverse career histories (Mewett 1977, 1988) – Angus and Iain emphasize how, on these islands, ‘no job is forever’. In their view, being ‘versatile’ and ‘remembering that being an island there are limitations on what jobs are available’ are some of the crucial skills required to live and work here. They say that you need to ‘go with the flow, take what appears’, and point out how ‘there’s always someone behind you’. Angus clarifies what this awareness of having ‘someone behind you’ means:

We complain about [carrying] beams of five [tweeds], they’re heavy – but it has to be done. And if it’s not done by us, then two other guys will do it. There’s always someone behind you, someone after your job.

They also discuss how, in their view, getting work on these islands very often depends on social and kinship ties. ‘It’s who you know’, Angus points out, and how you know them, that can sometimes bring employment opportunities and shape your livelihood.

When they talk about their work, Angus and Iain sometimes mention the influence the weather may have on their views on it. One time, as I scribbled down in my notebook and repeated out loud what one of them had just said – ‘if it’s a good day, the jobs is GOOD’ – they jokingly stopped me. ‘Hey, don’t sugar coat it!’ they exclaimed, and gave me a more precise description to write down instead. ‘If it’s a good day, the job is *a wee bit easier*’ – paused, then continued – ‘if it’s a bad day, it’s horrible’. As I made sure to write every single word, we all laughed out loud, realizing the stark contrast between their initial sunny description, and the last gloomier one.

Despite the challenges posed by their work – including the monotony, physical demand, and absence of timed lunch and tea breaks (which other mill workers rigorously follow and enjoy) – Iain and Angus admit that they enjoy the freedom this job affords them in



comparison with their fellow workers in the industry (particularly weavers and other mill workers). They describe some perks of their occupation, and I am also able to witness myself how their day is often marked by jocular exchanges with weavers that seem to genuinely amuse them.

One day, as we are driving north along the west coast of Lewis, I ask Angus and Iain whether they were happy living here or if they ever considered moving ‘away’ again to work. Angus is quick to answer. ‘I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else’, he says – and his timing could not have been better. As we turn a tight corner of the road, driving on a high hill, the scenic Dalbeag beach begins to emerge in front of us, perfectly framed by the valley to our left. As we indulge in this locally well-known, fleeting view that can only be glimpsed from the road, Angus continues. ‘I could make better money in the mainland’ he admits. ‘But I would have to give up on all of this, the sheep, the lifestyle...’ he concludes, continuing to drive and looking vaguely towards the small rocky beach below, as the expanse of the Atlantic Ocean gradually takes over the landscape before us.

## **5. Conclusion**

Descriptions of the Harris Tweed industry usually centre on three main elements – woollen mills, self-employed weavers, and the Harris Tweed Authority. In this chapter I drew attention to the movements of the tweed van instead, a less discussed but equally crucial element in this unusual production model. Moving between perspectives, I showed how localised production and global processes become intertwined and are rendered visible in workers’ everyday interactions, work experiences and personal narratives. While I drew attention to workers’ local experiences and perceptions of fluctuations in global demand for Harris Tweed, these are only some of the ways in which workers imagined their place in an interconnected, moving and changing world.

Tensions between knowledge, imagination, and different kinds of movement shape workers’ everyday lives, and their perceptions of themselves and their work. Following the global trade of matsutake mushrooms, Tsing found that gaps in knowledge led certain workers to imagine what took place in later stages of the commodity chain, their fantasies resulting in the proliferation of ‘misconceptions’ about the circulation and

consumption of matsutake in distant places (Tsing 2015: 58). Tracing the global trade of Atlantic bluefin tuna, Bestor (2001) found similar tensions between misinformation and imagination. Following the tweed van revealed how diverging perceptions, imagined possibilities and narratives within commodity chains emerge even in close geographical and social proximity. In the Harris Tweed industry's unusual production model, focusing on the encounters between industry workers who inhabit disparate modes of employment uncovered the productive role played by everyday exchanges. They shaped how workers imagined each other's work and lives, and revealed the role played by tweed van workers in mediating local imaginations, expectations and experiences of large-scale socio-economic processes.

Anthropological research on work and labour has suggested new ways of thinking through global processes by showing how people *participate* in large-scale socio-economic processes. I argue that this participation includes not only adopting subversive strategies like 'thieving a chance' (Prentice 2015) and defiantly persisting in a 'labour of aspiration' (Cross 2014), but is also exercised in the ways people imagine their lives and narrate the place of their work in the world. For several workers I met, potential labour uncertainty was described as integral to the life *they* had chosen to lead – which had involved making informed decisions about moving or remaining in a place known for its economic fragility and limited job opportunities – rather than blamed on shifting global demand.

Workers' knowledge of Harris Tweed's global reach was often mobilized, instead, to discuss their relationship to the product of their work. As they sat at their looms, some weavers found themselves imagining where the tweed they were weaving would be going after it left their sheds, what it would be made into, who would touch and wear it. One weaver speculated that 'maybe it will be in a catwalk in Paris next season'. Another described opening an 'international magazine', recognizing a pattern he had woven before, and wondering if the model might be wearing 'a bit of the cloth that came out of my loom'. Weavers' interest in the future lives of the cloth that they spent their days making was one among other ways in which many of them expressed their personal engagement and enjoyment of their job. Travelling with Angus and Iain after having spent many hours in weavers' loomsheds, I was able to gauge how these tweed van drivers' imaginations of weavers' working lives compared, and in some ways contrasted starkly, with weavers' actual accounts and experiences of work.

Focusing on the complex mediating role played by tweed vans revealed both their material infrastructural function as crucial links in this global commodity chain, and the ways in which certain knowledge gaps emerged in the spaces between different workers' job titles, responsibilities, and workplaces. This was rendered visible, for example, in tweed van drivers' incomplete perceptions of weavers' everyday experiences; and in many weavers' overly optimistic expectations of tweed van drivers' ability to convey accurate estimates on future work prospects, as well as their unfamiliarity with the variables involved in 'issuing tweeds' (the process handled by Seòras in that particular mill). At the same time, understanding the social and personal implications of the work performed by tweed van workers demanded moving beyond a focus on infrastructure and knowledge gaps, to focus precisely on the multiple layers involved in workers' everyday experiences and practices on the job. In this chapter I showed how these layers were brought together and made visible both in fleeting encounters at weavers' loomsheds, and in longer periods spent driving together through island roads. Doing so offered a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences, imaginations and expectations of workers employed in a localised industry that is importantly shaped by the vagaries of global demand.

In this chapter I drew attention not only to the particular socialities that emerged as part of tweed van workers' mobile and multi-sited labour, but also to the ways in which those interactions and movements illuminated diverse experiences and subjectivities within the industry. Social relationships were cultivated as tweed van workers delivered and collected weavers' work, and in the process performed overlooked forms of affective labour in fleeting but meaningful encounters. At the same time, the time spent working and driving together through island roads, sharing hot drinks, scenic views, and personal stories, rendered visible not only the peculiarity of tweed van workers' labour with its specific rhythms, but also their own views on work, life, and place-making.

In the introduction to *Friction*, Tsing stresses the need to engage the 'sticky materiality of practical encounters' in the study of 'global connections' (2005:1). Tweed van drivers and weavers certainly taught me the importance of doing so. While large-scale political-economic processes were not always at the forefront of our discussions, they made themselves visible whenever we considered the mediating role that their job entailed across different scales – not only between weavers and mills, but also between local production and global demand. In this context, the encounters and narratives that emerged as we moved through the islands highlighted the importance of investigating

‘concrete trajectories and engagements’ (Tsing 2000: 350), showing how ethnographic research locates and illuminates people’s enmeshment in world-encompassing processes, enriching our understanding of labour and life in contemporary global capitalism.

## Chapter 3

### Time, work and value in Harris Tweed weaving

#### 1. Introduction

On a sunny Wednesday afternoon I walked into Alasdair's loomshed and found him standing next to his old Hattersley loom, looking down and listening attentively to a man who was on the floor, kneeling down beside the heavy metal warp beam on the back of the loom, his face close to the complex metal structure. They were so engrossed in conversation that they did not immediately notice my arrival. Ever since I had started my weekly visits to Alasdair's loomshed – which had begun three months earlier and gradually turned into informal apprenticeship sessions – I had never seen or heard of this man. His name was Seumas, and I was soon to learn that his presence usually meant loom troubles. Unfortunately, the 'good spell' marked by his absence was about to end, as his assistance with the temperamental loom became increasingly necessary. After this day and for the following few weeks I would see Seumas often, as Alasdair's concern about his loom's 'temperament' grew, along with his annoyance at the slowing down of weaving work, marked by constant interruptions resulting from some indecipherable loom malfunction.

During my weekly visits, when I assisted Alasdair's work in his loomshed by filling pirns (*iteachan*)<sup>40</sup> and he taught me how to weave, I would occasionally help him with

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<sup>40</sup> Pirns (*iteachan* in Gaelic) are the small bobbins or spools placed inside the shuttle, which is thrown from side to side rhythmically with each pedalling to weave the weft into the warp of the cloth. One of the main differences between the older (single-width) Hattersley loom and the more recent (double-width) Bonas Griffith loom (both used today to weave Harris Tweed) lies in the way the weft is passed through the warp. Unlike the Hattersley loom, the Bonas Griffith uses a rapier system that picks up the yarn coming from a larger bobbin (or cone) located near the loom, instead of a shuttle with small pirns that need constant replacement. In practical terms, weavers using the Hattersley loom need to spend time periodically filling their own pirns in a separate machine (a pirn winder, see Fig. 3.2.) – a task often allocated to relatives or neighbours – before they can load their shuttles to continue weaving. Conversely, most weavers using Bonas Griffith looms today work weaving orders for the mills, where mill workers operate cone winders to prepare the weft yarn required for each commission. These cones with weft yarn are then placed in large bags and delivered by the tweed van to individual loomsheds, along with the relevant warp beams and instruction tickets (see Chapter 2). Though these cones also need to be periodically replaced while weaving, they

small loom repairs or maintenance tasks. However, I soon discovered that looms can be afflicted by severe, obscure problems that often require lengthy and painstaking ‘detective work’ (a common expression used by many weavers I met). Though Alasdair would usually try to sort these faults out himself, successfully assessing and addressing most of them, some elusive loom problems proved so challenging that, at a certain point, he just would not know ‘what else to do’. It was on these occasions, when multiple attempts at probing and experimenting failed to deliver an answer, that he sought help from a fellow weaver (*breabadair* or *figheadair* in Gaelic). In these moments, Seumas was the man Alasdair would always call. When Seumas left the loomshed later that evening, having eventually solved the problem, Alasdair told me that he was his trusted ‘loom doctor’.



**Fig. 3.1.** A single-width domestic Hattersley loom, one of the two kinds of handlooms used to weave Harris Tweed today. Introduced to the islands in the early 1900s, the Hattersley loom became the most common equipment for producing Harris Tweed throughout the twentieth-century, and is still used today primarily by weavers working as ‘independent producers’. Its more recent counterpart, the double-width Bonas Griffith loom (Fig. 3.3) was introduced in the 1990s (following discussions and experiments taking place since the 1970s, see Hunter 2001:287-355), and is most commonly used today by weavers completing mill orders.

**Fig. 3.2.** Using a pirn-winder to prepare the pirns (also known as bobbins or *iteachan* in Gaelic) that will fill the shuttles employed for weaving in a Hattersley loom.

A weaver himself, Seumas was known to be very good at ‘reading’ into the mechanical problems of these old metal ‘beasts’, as some people referred to them. When called, he would gladly come to Alasdair’s loomshed and could spend up to four hours – sometimes longer – looking, prodding, probing, testing, fiddling, patiently spending time

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contain significantly more yarn than the small pirns used in shuttles, and thus require fewer interruptions in the weaving process.

with the loom. Knowing how precious weaving time is, and recognizing that an idle loom does not generate any income for its weaver, Alasdair would always insist on paying Seumas for the time spent examining and fixing his loom, since it kept him away from his own loomshed and weaving work. Despite their decades-long companionship and Seumas's continuous refusal to accept any payment, Alasdair would insist on making him take it. 'I don't want him to get tired of me', Alasdair once told me after Seumas left, explaining how he sometimes had to call Seumas once every 2-3 weeks to have a look at the loom, especially when a persistent problem appeared unsolvable to him.

Alasdair and Seumas were both born and bred in Lewis, and both of them had travelled 'away' looking for work when they were young. However, they followed very different occupational trajectories before they eventually returned to the islands after retiring. Alasdair used to work as a dentist in the mainland; Seumas went through many different jobs in Glasgow (including driving various kinds of vans and lorries), and had travelled the world working in the Merchant Navy. Now in their seventies, they both worked in their domestic loomsheds as self-employed Harris Tweed weavers. However, though they shared a common concern with the threat of potentially time-consuming (and thus *expensive*) loom problems, their current employment arrangements also exemplified two possible and distinctive ways of being a Harris Tweed weaver today.

Alasdair, my weaving mentor, worked as an 'independent producer'. He bought the yarn from the local mills but, besides weaving, he also designed, marketed, attracted orders, and sold his own cloth. A sign by the side of the road announced 'Harris Tweed handwoven here', advertising the location of his domestic loomshed and drawing visitors from all over the world as they drove through island roads. In Alasdair's workplace, alongside his loom and numerous work tools, lengths of tweed and handmade scarves were neatly displayed for sale. When Alasdair's weaving work was interrupted by the arrival of visitors, he would welcome them into the loomshed. Sitting at his loom, he would tell them about the history of the industry and about his own involvement with it. He also described how the loom worked and offered a brief demonstration. After the explanation, he pedalled for a few minutes and handled the shuttles expertly, his gestures and the movements of the loom captivating the audience gathered around it, its deafening sound silencing everyone sharing the small room. Afterwards, visitors asked questions, bought lengths of the cloth, petted his sociable dogs (three Border Collies who helped with the sheep), and wrote comments in his

leather-bound visitors' book. Alasdair would also ask them, in turn, about their journey, where they came from, what jobs they had – before they eventually bid us goodbye and got back on the road, usually furnished with lengths of Alasdair's own Harris Tweed. We would then resume work until new visitors eventually stopped by.<sup>41</sup>

Seumas, on the other hand, worked as an 'independent weaver'. Like Alasdair, he was also self-employed, but his work involved weaving patterns issued by the mill, defined according to mill customers' orders. Tweed vans brought the appropriate yarn to his loomshed, and later returned to collect the woven tweeds (see Chapter 2). He would then be paid by the piece after the tweed was measured at the mill, his weekly earnings reflecting the number of meters he had managed to weave. Since Seumas had no involvement in designing nor selling the tweed he wove, his loomshed was a quiet workplace, no road sign announcing that a Harris Tweed weaver could be found working in the small building beside his house. Unlike Alasdair's job, his position did not entail performing a public role introducing the industry and his own work to unknown visitors. He also used a more recent double-width Bonas Griffith loom, instead of the old single-width Hattersley loom<sup>42</sup>. However, despite these disparate work arrangements, after Alasdair's and Seumas's tweeds were woven, they would *both* be inspected and stamped with the Orb trademark by a Harris Tweed Authority inspector.

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<sup>41</sup> The frequency of these visits varied widely throughout the year, shaping what our workdays looked like during different seasons. In the Winter the loomshed was usually quiet and we could spend a whole day without visitors. However, as Spring approached, visits from tourists would become increasingly frequent, reaching a peak during Easter break and throughout the Summer months, only beginning to wind down in the Fall. Sometimes weather conditions would also allow us to predict the likelihood of visitors, but often their changeability – 'four seasons in one day', as local people summarized island weather – rendered our predictions unreliable.

<sup>42</sup> As noted above, both the double-width Bonas Griffith loom (Fig. 3.3) and the single-width Hattersley loom (Fig. 3.1.) are used today to weave Harris Tweed. However, as the name indicates, they are used to weave cloth of different widths (after washing and finishing the single width is usually 75 cm wide, and the double-width 150 cm). Moreover, the newer double-width Bonas Griffith loom is more commonly used by weavers working on mill orders, while the single-width Hattersley loom is predominantly used by weavers working as independent producers.





**Fig. 3.3.** Working on a double-width Bonas Griffith loom.

Thus, even though Alasdair and Seumas were *both* Harris Tweed weavers – and the cloth they each produced would equally be called Harris Tweed – they inhabited two disparate work regimes that shaped not only their relationship to mills and potential customers, but also their everyday working lives. As I learned from spending several hours in different weavers’ workplaces – often working alongside them – inhabiting these different arrangements entailed not only particular skills, dispositions, and labour practices, but also distinctive ways of understanding the intertwinement between ‘work’ and ‘life’.

Weavers would sometimes explain how the choice between these two employment models – weaving for the mill or weaving ‘for oneself’ – seemed to match different people’s temperament, and to reflect some of their priorities and lifestyle expectations. A weaver I met in Harris argued that ‘they should really be referred to as two stories’ that exist within the industry. In her view, these were not just two possible ways of making a living as a Harris Tweed weaver today, but two arrangements that reflected the meaningful ways in which individual weavers defined their place in the world, how they imagined themselves conducting their work and leading their lives. These two possibilities, and the way they were enacted, could be seen to represent not only

personal preferences, but family histories, individual personalities and even moral dispositions.

This suggestion, along with the perspectives of several other weavers I spent time with, allowed me to get a picture of the diversity of motivations, aspirations, and everyday experiences of work and life in the industry, illuminating the significance of these distinctive work arrangements for weavers' perceptions of their own – and other people's – work. Developing a close relationship with weavers also allowed me to learn about the ways in which these two different arrangements had significant practical implications in how weavers organized their time and conducted their everyday work. For some, their workdays included navigating and tolerating possible fluctuations in work distribution; for others, their position required finding ways of juggling weaving work with their public role informing visitors, running a small business, marketing and selling their own tweeds.

However, despite these different priorities, responsibilities and expectations, spending time with weavers also alerted me to the fact that they were united by significant similarities in their working lives, and frequently acknowledged their shared condition. Focusing on these shared circumstances, and observing how they emerged despite different working arrangements, allowed me to learn more about local understandings of what 'being a Harris Tweed weaver' meant today, and the different practical and moral implications associated with this role. Significantly, these understandings involved particular ways of thinking about time, work, and life. In seeking to learn about these self-employed, home-based weavers' everyday experiences of work and time, I became increasingly attuned to the ways in which ideas about different kinds of *value* permeated multiple dimensions and narratives of Harris Tweed weaving work today. In this chapter I argue that attention to the words and experiences of Harris Tweed weavers, whose work conditions are uniquely shaped by the industry's distinctive production model, allows us to rethink and reframe the usefulness of concepts such as 'time' and 'value' in relation to anthropological discussions on work and labour.

I argue that focusing on self-employed home-based workers' everyday practices and ideas about time, as well as considering their hopes, strategies, anxieties and aspirations, can offer invaluable contributions to the study of work and life under contemporary capitalism. Drawing insights from weavers' words and from extensive periods of fieldwork (and apprenticeship) in their workplaces, I show how attention to experiences

of time and notions of value allows us to appreciate the complex relationships between instituted rules, individual workers' subjectivities, and the social and political realities that both shape and emerge within contemporary workplaces and labour regimes. At the same time, by explicitly drawing connections between workers' perceptions of time in the context of their workdays, and their role in the production of various kinds of 'value' (embodied not only in the cloth, but also in the making of relationships, selves, and visions of a 'good life'), I open up possibilities for thinking through the moral, social, and economic complexities of labour regimes characterized by flexibility and relative uncertainty.

## **2. Time and value, work and life**

### *2.1. Work time, 'value' and 'values'*

Questions surrounding the concept of time have featured prominently in scholarly discussions about work, variously shaping debates about the ways in which labour is organised, managed, and experienced. Anthropologists and other social scientists have examined the category of time in relation to notions of productivity, workplace discipline and consent, as well as its place in describing experiences and ideas concerning the relationship between 'work' and 'life'.

Scholarly discussions about work and time have also drawn attention to the concept of *value*, generating productive questions about how people variously estimate, compare, and 'judge' the world around them, and how they 'spend' their life. Sometimes broadly defined, the concept of value (or 'values') has been used not only in reference to labour and commodities under capitalist relations of production and exchange, but also to discuss particular moral understandings and visions of 'lives worth leading'. Various authors have referred to the openness of the concept of 'value' (e.g. Graeber 2013; Robbins et al 2016), highlighting how 'it often seems as if the term could mean almost anything' (Graeber 2013: 219). However, the same authors have stressed the potential that the concept holds to address precisely those concerns that have long been a crucial part of the project of anthropology – and have encouraged anthropologists to engage critically with the concept rather than dismissing it.

Robbins and Sommerschuh (2016) outline two ways in which anthropologists have considered the question of ‘value’ – a structuralist camp that ‘treats values as objective phenomena embedded in cultural structures’, and an action-oriented camp that ‘conceives of value as something that must be continually produced by human activity’ (2016: 1). Critically discussing these two approaches and affirming how value theory can potentially contribute to a ‘field of enquiry into the dimensions of social life’, Robbins and Sommerschuh propose a third approach that seeks to ‘transcend this division’ and bring together contributions from each of them (2016: 1). In their view, this concept should remain a key part of discussions within the discipline, since

greater attention to value would return to anthropology a perspective that was foundational to it but has increasingly gone missing over the years: the interest in what really matters to people around the world and how cultures differ not simply as systems of power, production, or meaning, but as schemes that help to define what is ultimately good and desirable in life (2016: 8).

Graeber has expressed a similar concern, considering how some anthropologists seem ‘uncertain whether a single, unified anthropological theory of value is even desirable’ (2013: 2019). In his view, a move away from theorizing value within the discipline would be ‘very bad news for the project of anthropology’ (2013: 219). Before proposing what he calls an *ethnographic* theory of value, Graeber points out that anthropology ‘could be said to have emerged around questions of value, and such questions have remained just below the surface of just about every important theoretical debate’ (2013: 220). In this sense, he suggests, the very distinction between the singular and plural uses of the concept of ‘value’ offers clues to the significance it potentially holds:

The entire field of anthropological value theory since the 1980s has been founded on a single intuition: the fact that we use the same word to describe the benefits and virtues of a commodity for sale on the market (the “value” of a haircut or a curtain rod) and our ideas about what is ultimately important in life (“values” such as truth, beauty, justice) is not a coincidence. There is some hidden level where both come down to the same thing (2013: 224).

Drawing on Marx’s discussions on ‘production as people-making’, as well as his theory that value emerges from labour power during labour time, Graeber suggests that the ‘value/values problem’ is ‘much less of a mystery’ if we ‘examine the matter from the perspective of work’ (2013: 223 - 224). In this way, he suggests, it becomes clearer why

we often use the term ‘value’ to refer to labour that has been commoditized (as labour power) – which can be quantified and compared – and the term ‘values’ to refer to forms of unpaid labour (such as housework, and the idea of ‘family values’), as well as ‘those aspects of the world of work (loyalty, integrity) that do defy any calculus of profit’ (2013: 224). In this chapter I build on Graber’s proposal to consider this idea of value / values in relation to work by considering how it furthers our understanding of the diverse ways in which people understand their own working lives and everyday experiences of work-time. To clarify how these discussions on labour, time and value can inform anthropological engagements with contemporary realities of work and life, it makes sense to briefly examine how scholars like Marx and E.P. Thompson theorized workers’ experiences and circumstances at the dawn of industrial capitalism.

## *2.2. Work time and Marx’s labour theory of value*

Marx’s labour theory of value is one of the earliest – and most widely discussed – attempts to highlight the social, political and economic implications of the relationship between labour, time, and value. Briefly described, Marx’s argument places workers’ labour in productive processes at the centre of estimations of ‘value’. While Marx also went on to discuss the ‘exchange value’ and ‘use value’ of commodities, the idea that the worker’s labour power (during labour time) becomes embodied in the product he or she makes and endows it with ‘value’, remained a crucial aspect of Marx’s argument. Marx’s distinction between labour and labour power – the latter being defined as the workers’ ability to perform the ‘socially necessary labour’ to produce commodities, the first defined more broadly in terms of human activity (see Introduction) – highlights those moments when labour is performed (labour time), and draws attention to the relationship between production and reproduction. According to Marx, capital did not buy the worker’s labour, but rather his or her *labour power*, for a limited period of time, in exchange for wages. This labour power was then ‘congealed’ as value in the commodities produced by the worker during labour time. In this context, a commodity’s ‘value was determined in, and as a result of, production whereas [its] price was determined in the market’ (Roseberry 1997: 32).

While Marx’s labour theory of value has been widely critiqued in the social sciences, deemed too narrow or inadequate to account for the complexity and diversity of social and economic processes surrounding labour realities, anthropologists have variously

drawn on and engaged critically with some of its theoretical propositions. One dimension of Marx's 'law of value' that has featured in scholarly discussions on labour focuses on his treatment of work processes as 'equivalent' – a crucial condition, in his theory, for 'value' to be estimated in terms of labour time. For Marx, commodities are comparable among them because they are the product of human labour – that is a key quality they share, which makes them suitable for comparison. However, as anthropologists have pointed out (e.g. Roseberry 1997, Firth 1979), this argument rests on the assumption that 'to the extent that qualitatively different kinds of labour can be compared at all or made equivalent, in Marx's view (and that of classical political-economy), they can be measured in terms of time – the average number of hours or days that go into making a particular commodity' (Roseberry 1997: 32).

Raymond Firth points out the importance of examining how Marx's concept of 'socially necessary labour time', with its 'analytical reduction of skilled to unskilled work' to fit the logic of his argument, 'robbed the concept of work of a very important criterion, the *quality* of the activity' (Firth 1979: 185). 'Involved in this', Firth continues, 'is not merely the possible satisfaction in creative activity which can arise even in relatively simple technical manipulations, but also the pervasive identification of job accomplishment with personal status' (Firth 1979: 185). In this sense, Firth suggests, anthropologists are better placed to address these questions more critically, being able to show for example how it is that 'in a "given society" the "value" of a commodity produced by skilled labour is *not* equated to the product of unskilled labour' (Firth 1979: 185).

Firth and Roseberry's comments on Marx's work are provocative and suggest productive ways of thinking through actual lived experiences and evaluations of labour in contemporary capitalism. Interrogating these dimensions of Marx's labour theory of value, I argue, offers an invaluable opportunity to think more critically about conceptual relationships between work, time, and value. Doing so highlights how anthropologists can advance theoretical and conceptual discussions by offering more nuanced readings (and representations) of labour processes. Ethnographic research can show how labour processes are often *not* equated as 'equivalent' by those who perform them, and demonstrate how they rest instead on particular understandings of qualitative differences between work responsibilities, experiences of work-time, 'values' and ideas of 'value'.

At the same time, considering Marx's labour theory of value in light of the specific capitalist moment he focused on (instead of seeking to test its 'validity' in examining other particular socio-economic contexts), reveals the significance of considering the relationship between labour, time, and value in relation to particular relations of production and reproduction. As Roseberry suggests, Marx himself 'stressed the historical uniqueness of capitalism and of the concepts useful for the analysis of capitalism' (1997: 34). It thus makes sense to consider how, following this reasoning, 'the labor theory of value could only be relevant under capitalism, in a situation in which quantitatively different kinds of labor have been reduced, socially and economically, to a common standard' (Roseberry 1997:34, Marx 1977: 152, 168). Doing so allows us to consider Marx's conceptual reflections on particular political-economic transformations taking place at a significant moment in the history of industrial capitalism.

I argue that considering the political and economic history of industrial capitalism matters for understanding how it is that certain 'values' and moral expectations came to be associated with particular forms of production, exchange, and accumulation that are still very much relevant in the present. I am interested, in particular, in exploring how scholars have theorized the relationship between the establishment of particular production models, and the emergence of related perceptions of time, forms of discipline, and modes of consent. Building on the work of E.P. Thompson, David Harvey and Kathleen Millar, I explore how work-related perceptions of time – shaped by certain social and economic orders – become a relevant part of workers' subjectivities, everyday practices, and visions of what 'good lives' might look like.

### *2.3. Work time, discipline, and everyday experiences of work*

In the nineteenth-century, the emergence of industrial capitalism brought about significant social, political, and economic transformations. In this context, new modes of production and exchange would importantly shape the ways in which manufacturing processes were organised, and the ways in which time was measured, valued and experienced. As Marx and E.P. Thompson pointed out, these transformations shaped not only labour practices and relations of production, but also the everyday lives and subjectivities of those involved in its operation. Transformations in the organisation of work-time shaped people's perceptions and understandings of time, forms of workplace discipline, and ideas about work and leisure time, with powerful and enduring effects.

Focusing on a later historical period, in *The Condition of Post-modernity* (1989), David Harvey would similarly draw connections between certain modes and regimes of accumulation, and changing perceptions and experiences of time. Portraying the temporal and spatial transformations involved in these processes, Harvey's description of the transition from Fordism to a regime of 'flexible accumulation', paralleled, by a 'space-time compression', highlighted the need to consider how these changes were taking place 'in labour processes, in consumer habits, in geographical and geopolitical configurations, in state powers and practices' (1989: 121).

In this context, Harvey affirmed the importance of challenging 'the idea of a single and objective sense of time or space, against which we can measure the diversity of human conceptions and perceptions' (1989: 2004). Instead, he proposed that

we recognise the multiplicity of the objective qualities which space and time can express, and the role of human practices in their construction (1989: 2014).

In anthropology, ethnographic approaches to the study of time in relation to work practices have allowed precisely these 'human practices' to take a more prominent place in their conceptualization (see e.g. Ong 2009; Smith 2009; Parry 2009a, 2009b). More generally, however, even when the notion of 'time' has not been central to their descriptions and theoretical discussions, anthropologists have variously exposed the relationship between temporal notions and particular ways of organizing, challenging, or imagining quotidian experiences across a diversity of periods and settings. At the same time, anthropologists studying work and workplaces have also drawn attention to the particular ethics and politics involved in the creation or 'crafting' of particular selves (Kondo 1990; Prentice 2015; Yanagisako 2002, Tsing 2015) within particular work environments and work 'times' in different social and cultural contexts.

These and other approaches have highlighted the subjective dimensions of work experiences, exemplifying some of the tensions between theoretical and institutional discourses on work, and the actual lived experiences of those individuals involved in labour processes. At the same time, ethnographic attention to work-time has allowed anthropologists to reframe earlier discussions on the relationship between particular experiences of time and modes of accumulation. Kathleen Millar's research on the lives of Brazilian *catadores* (poor urban dwellers who collect recyclables for a living), for example, suggested that paying attention to the 'micro-temporalities' of wageless work 'reveals how precarious forms of labor in contemporary capitalism constitute processes



of subject making that both parallel and diverge from the transition to wage labor that Thompson describes in his social history of capitalism' (2015: 28).

Drawing on Thompson's concept of 'time-sense' (1967) to describe how these wageless workers experience and structure their workdays, Millar draws attention to the value placed by her interlocutors on their ability to combine, at their own will, 'productive' work time with moments and activities ordinarily understood to exist outside formal work processes and contexts. Despite the precarity and challenging work conditions they endure, these wageless workers cherish what they call 'a different rhythm of life' – something that represents 'an important dimension of a life well lived' (2015: 28). In her analysis Millar highlights how examining the micro-temporalities of these wageless workers' days offers alternative ways of thinking about experiences of work and time in contemporary forms of capitalism. Doing so, she suggests, adds a different angle to discussions that have focused more commonly on experiences of time as being 'ruptured' (Jeffrey 2010), 'stopped' (Allison 2012), or 'at a standstill' (Shoshan 2012; Millar 2015: 30-32).

In this chapter I build on some of Millar's contributions, similarly considering how particular temporalities emerging in the everyday working lives of self-employed home-based Harris Tweed weavers suggest new ways of thinking about what a good life may look like for people whose livelihoods are entangled in labour regimes characterized by flexibility and relative uncertainty. While the kind of work and degree of precarity experienced by Millar's *catadores* and my own interlocutors are significantly different, I argue that paying attention to the way in which people variously inhabit, experience, and narrate their relationship with work-time offers similarly illuminating understandings of actual lived experiences, expectations and aspirations. However, while Millar's argument focused mostly on lived experiences of these micro-temporalities (and the kind of value *catadores* found in the possibilities it allowed), in this chapter I expand on this discussion by including other significant dimensions of work-time. In the following sections I outline some of the ways in which Harris Tweed weavers described not only their ideas of what a good work-life balance consisted, but also how they generated particular strategies, models, and visions of what a good life might look like under the particular productive model they were implicated in.

### **3. Weaving work and life**

#### *3.1. Working from home*

Learning about weavers' working lives involved spending a long time in their loomsheds and their domestic surroundings – often working alongside them – and becoming acquainted with their individual work habits, rhythms and practices. The domestic context in which these encounters took place made me, at certain times, acutely aware of the peculiar arrangements that the production model maintained by the Harris Tweed industry allowed, generating spaces and times that were managed and inhabited in a diversity of ways across households. Since the cloth has to be 'handwoven by the islanders at their homes in the Outer Hebrides' (Harris Tweed Act 1993), spending time in people's workplaces – which were really part of their homes – allowed me to get a sense of the different ways in which people enacted their visions of how the intertwinement of work and life could be not only managed, but imagined and elaborated on.

As time went on, I became increasingly aware that some weavers sometimes found it difficult to establish a strict division between 'work' and 'life' – and that some even found the attempt to disentangle them to be pointless. For some, weaving was seen as a vocation, a practice that drew their interest and their existence to such an extent that it was seen as an integral part of their self-identities and particular ways of inhabiting the world. For others, who had grown up with weaving all around them, often filling pirns after school for their weaving relatives, weaving had always been intertwined with other domestic rhythms. For others, the tendency to spend long hours in the loomshed was linked to their awareness that demand for work might change at anytime, or that loom problems or other issues might also arise unannounced to interrupt or delay their work, thus compelling them to make the most of the 'good times' while they lasted.

However, some weavers pointed out, while the proximity to home made certain logistics easier to navigate, this closeness also created the illusion of constantly being 'at home' when one was actually really 'at work'. In their view, this situation placed them in a limbo where it was sometimes difficult to establish a 'work-life balance'. For these weavers, thinking about the distinction between what could be considered 'work' and 'life' allowed them to establish certain boundaries that they saw as necessary in their pursuit of a 'good life'. This exercise led some of them to establish certain self-imposed

rules – like avoiding extending their time in the shed and ending up working ‘night shifts’ – in order to dedicate time to their family life. Some weavers spoke about their caring responsibilities towards family members, while others mentioned, more generally, the importance of actually ‘being present’. They described how easy it was ‘to fool yourself into thinking you are *present for people* because you are supposedly working at home’, but to find themselves weaving long hours instead, locked away, on their own, in their loom sheds.

While these views were voiced by weavers in the present, reflecting recent ideas about the need to consciously manage weaving time in order to accommodate certain responsibilities and ideal lifestyles, they also echoed the experiences of earlier generations of weavers, and the views of weavers’ sons and daughters. Màiri, whose father worked as a weaver when she was growing up, told me how her childhood had been profoundly shaped by the relationship she developed with her father, who would always be at home to welcome her when she returned from school, every single day. She spoke about their long walks together through the moors, sometimes doing some kind of croft work like gathering their sheep. On these walks, her father would tell her about the things said to have taken place out there in the vast peaty moorlands, he taught her the names of hillocks and streams, and explained how certain places took their name from past events, practices and beliefs. This particular experience of the moor, and the stories she learned on these walks, would profoundly shape her imagination and eventually influence her later life and career choices (including particular research projects and art pieces she developed).

Màiri described how she reacted with sheer horror when her father, ‘probably teasing’ her to see what she would say, commented one day on how he might stop weaving and go back to a ‘regular job’. Despite her young age, she immediately realised what this would mean for their current arrangements – and she ‘was having none of it’. Fortunately, she concluded triumphantly, her father did continue weaving throughout her childhood and teenage years.

### *3.2. Time, work and family life*

One Monday morning I got on the local bus and prepared to meet a young couple of weavers whom I had never met before. Both of them worked at the loom and, after

having moved in from England, were raising a young family in one of the depopulating rural areas of the island. A friend who also worked as a weaver insisted I should meet them to get a different perspective from her own on ‘what it can be like to work as a weaver today’. When I arrived the house was quiet, but I could hear the (by now very familiar) rumbling sound of a double-width Bonas Griffith loom inside their large wooden weaving shed. I knocked on the door, and walked in to find a slightly surreal picture. David was sitting at the large loom, absorbed in pedalling, at the same time as holding what looked like a miniature wooden guitar – it was an ukulele, I soon realized – as though he was about to play it. He was so engrossed in these activities (and the loom was so loud) that it took him a few seconds to realize I had opened the wooden door and was standing there waving at him.

Eventually welcoming me into their loomshed, David began by telling me ‘well, you got *me* this week! If you had come in next week, you probably would have found Rebecca at the loom instead!’. He later clarified what he had meant by this, outlining how, as a couple, they worked in a peculiar system of shifts. The rhythms of this schedule are dictated by whose turn it is to weave a ‘warp beam’<sup>43</sup> for the mill, and how long that task takes for each of them. David and Rebecca own only one loom – which they managed to buy at an affordable price at a time when the industry was depressed and its previous owner was trying to get rid of it – but they each have their own individual weaving number, and they never get involved in weaving each other’s beam. Whoever begins work on a beam takes over the loom and works exclusively on it until that piece is finished being woven.

According to David, not only did this system prevent mistakes and potential confusion in weaving appointments by the mill, but it also allowed them to enact what they believe to be a fairer division and distribution of labour in their home. In this system, they established two main sets of tasks: weaving responsibilities, and all other domestic responsibilities. The time each of them allocates to either of these two duties is

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<sup>43</sup> A ‘warp beam’ is an essential part of the loom, where the warp yarn threads that go through the loom are placed in preparation for weaving. The length of the warped threads contained in one beam defines the length of the cloth to be woven. In the Harris Tweed industry, weavers working with double-width Bonas Griffith looms could receive beams containing enough yarn to weave a minimum of one and a maximum of six sets of tweed cloth, each of these lengths of fabric usually measuring around 58 meters. After washing and finishing, the cloth woven in double-width Bonas Griffith looms is on average 150 cm wide, double the width of the cloth woven on the single-width Hattersley looms (75 cm). For weavers like David, Rebecca and Seumas who worked with the mills, these beams would be prepared by beaming technicians in the mill facilities, and would be delivered by the mill’s tweed van to their door, along with weaving instructions on a ticket and the cones (or bobbins) prepared with the appropriate weft yarn (see Chapter 2).

determined according to whose turn it is to weave a beam, and it can vary widely depending on whether loom problems or other unplanned issues arise). This week, it was David's beam. Once he was done with it and his tweeds were ready to be collected by the mill's tweed van, they would shift roles. Rebecca would take the seat at the loom, while David would take over all domestic, crofting, and child-rearing responsibilities.

David explained how their system followed from their own decision to be *present* for their children's upbringing, having control over their work-time at home and pursuing a lifestyle that they saw as more desirable than others – despite potential labour uncertainty in the future. Moreover, he pointed out, 'despite being incomers' they found that local crofting practices, rhythms and ethos – and the crofting-weaving model they allowed – matched their planned lifestyle perfectly.

### 3.3. *Patience, uncertainty and perceptions of time*

*A' bheairt sin nach fhaighear ach cearr, 's e foighidinn a's fhearr a dheanamh rithe.*

The loom that's awry is best handled patiently.<sup>44</sup>

Patience was hailed by several of my weaving interlocutors as a virtue. It was seen as a vital quality that all weavers should be equipped with in order to perform their job properly. Being patient as a Harris Tweed weaver, I soon realized, referred not only to one's relationship with unpredictable looms, but also entailed a particular ability to accept and withstand a diversity of possible changes and practical limitations that might interfere with their work and ability to make a living. 'Being a weaver', in this sense, entailed not only specific skills and knowledge, but also a particular attitude that would shape one's ability to endure and navigate the potential labour uncertainty that has long marked the condition of weavers, whose job has been at the mercy of the peaks and

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<sup>44</sup> Featured as the very first line of a selection of *Gaelic Proverbs and Phrases* published in 1882, this entry is followed by a short note that illuminates the broader meaning of the phrase, which continues to be relevant today on the isles, both within and without the Harris Tweed industry:

The word *bhairt* has various meanings, but in its primary use seems to have been equivalent to the word 'loom,' which meant other tools and engines, as well as weaving looms. In the above proverb, however, the weaving loom seems to have been in view, and the meaning to be, that if it be found to be out of gear, it is better to handle it patiently than to try to put it right, at the risk of breaking the threads. 'What can't be cured must be endured' expresses nearly the same idea, but not exactly. (Macintosh 1882:1)

troughs of volatile global markets since the very beginnings of the industry (see Introduction, Fig. 0.4).

This sense of uncertainty and lack of control over one's future livelihood prospects was sometimes rendered visible when fluctuations in work distribution patterns generated rumours and led weavers to reconsider their career choices. When there were rumours that the industry might be 'slowing down', and when a weaver's loom was 'empty' for more than a week, that weaver might start wondering whether something was wrong (perhaps there was a mistake in the latest tweed they returned to the mill?), and even beginning to consider alternative jobs to take on. A weaver I knew to be generally relaxed about these rumours confessed to me one day that, a few weeks prior, he had seriously considered taking up a shelving job at the local Tesco supermarket in Stornoway after his loom was left empty for longer than usual. He admitted thinking, at the time, 'maybe this is it then'. Maybe the industry was going to go down for good, he reasoned, and so it might be time to draw up an alternative plan. A similar outlook would become apparent as I spoke to other people (within and outwith the industry) who had chosen to live on these islands. For most, the decision of remaining or moving there had entailed acknowledging the region's employment limitations, and coming to terms with the possibility of having to change jobs at some point in the future.

However, I soon realised, this concern with local employment prospects was not experienced by weavers as an all-encompassing worry that dominated their every working day. Instead, it was made visible on specific occasions, when the industry's momentary slowing down prompted a temporary flurry of rumours, worries, and calls for collective action – before quietly fizzling away. At the end of a Harris Tweed Association (HTWA)<sup>45</sup> meeting, as the crowd made their way downstairs, I heard

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<sup>45</sup> The Harris Tweed Weavers' Association (HTWA) was formed in 1993, 'when a large majority of Harris Tweed weavers withdrew from the TGWU [Transport and General Workers Union]' (Hunter 2001: 345). According to Hunter, this happened after relations between weavers and the TGWU became increasingly strained in the late 1980s over 'disagreements about collections of dues, local expenses, arrears and differential rates for pensioners' (2001: 345-346). No longer involved in the Harris Tweed industry when I conducted fieldwork, the TGWU had been the main channel for weavers to voice their concerns during much of the 20th century. When I conducted fieldwork, the HTWA was the only organisation that brought weavers together in discussions about their work conditions, but it was not a Union and, in some weavers' opinion, had limited bargaining power. One of its main projects had involved the creation of a 'spare parts scheme', funded collectively by weavers' monthly contributions, and aimed at stocking spare parts locally, to make them available quicker and at lower prices when weavers needed to repair their looms (instead of having to order parts individually from the mainland and endure the lengthy wait). Nevertheless, the HTWA periodically gathered weavers in meetings like the one I attended, giving members the opportunity to voice their concerns and proposals. One of the striking discussions during this meeting involved concerns over membership numbers, and led weavers to call for HTWA representatives to reach out to new weavers,

someone remark beside me that ‘when the industry is busy, each weaver is alone in their shed pedalling away and trying to make the most of it’ – and that ‘only when mills go quiet do people come out and start talking to each other’. However, this weaver continued, ‘that doesn’t last long enough to organize anything or try to change anything, and as soon as the orders are back, each weaver goes back to their loomshed and stays there until the tweeds are all woven’.

This image reminded me of my own experience spending time with self-employed weavers over the course of the year. Visiting a weaver when they have a beam to work on, and visiting the same weaver when their loom is empty, I soon learned, could lead to very different conversations. After all, I had been told, ‘empty looms get people talking’ (see Chapter 2). This is a time when fellow weavers phone each other to check whether they (or anyone they know) has a beam; when weavers visit each other and express their hopes and fears for the industry’s future; and when rumours, gossip, and mild complaints get voiced and circulated.

‘Empty looms’ also seemed to affect people’s perception of time, shaping individual understandings of the intertwinement between work and life at different moments. On the one hand, some weavers pointed out, the frequency of work distribution can significantly shape workers’ perception of the passing of time. When the work is regular, its regularity does not seem to merit comment – or, when it does, people simply say ‘it’s been busy’, usually following that comment with a knock on the wood. However, when a loom remains empty for a few days or weeks, conversation and mild speculation emerges, as well as people’s sense that, in the absence of work, time feels like it takes longer to pass. If a loom is suddenly empty for seven days, I was told, this one week, which would otherwise be perceived as an unremarkable period of time, suddenly becomes significant – and it ‘feels so much longer’ than those usual seven days.

On the other hand, these cycles of ‘empty’ and ‘filled’ looms also led people to reflect on their own working lives, appreciating how their ability to endure these recurrent shifts had shaped their biographies and self-identities over time. The image of the patient weaver – whose ability to ‘endure what cannot be cured’, like the proverb above

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making them feel welcome to join the Association. One weaver exclaimed ‘we need all of us in this association - it’s not my association or your association, but it should be of all weavers. If it’s the only voice at all that we have in the whole industry, we need it to represent the views of all weavers, not just some of us. So increasing membership should be a priority.’

suggests, was praised – offered a virtuous model of resilience and resourcefulness that helped make sense of individual challenges in the face of labour uncertainty.

However, weavers' views on fluctuating work rhythms – and on the ways of addressing and dealing with them – can vary widely. Some of the more experienced weavers argued that rumours about potential unfairness in work distribution practices mostly stemmed from newcomers' misunderstanding of the way mills worked (see Chapter 2). Importantly though, in discussions among Harris Tweed workers, 'newcomers' are defined not by where they are born and bred (unlike 'incomers'), but in reference to their shorter experience in the industry. In their view, this inexperience explained their unease.<sup>46</sup> Concerned with these discussions, some seasoned weavers proposed bringing back the 'Distribution Center', a centralised and supposedly 'more transparent' system of allocating work that had displaced rumours of this kind in the past.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, besides the potential impact of unpredictable global trends on the volume of orders, and some weavers' apprehension over the possibility of unequal work distribution, it quickly became apparent that these self-employed weavers' livelihoods were also vulnerable to other more mundane threats. Loom problems, physical injuries, illnesses, among other unpredictable turns of events were some of the challenges that could determine (and undermine) one's ability to be at the loom for long enough to

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<sup>46</sup> Within the Harris Tweed industry, and especially among fellow weavers, the term 'newcomer' was used to identify those weavers who had only recently began to weave (and who were also sometimes called simply 'new weavers'). The term did not differentiate between those weavers who were 'born and bred' on the islands, and those who had moved to the islands from elsewhere (the latter were usually known more generally locally as 'returners', or 'incomers') (See Introduction).

<sup>47</sup> In the past, rumours about distribution practices concerned the perception that weavers who lived in rural areas were being allocated less work than weavers who lived in Stornoway, where most of the large mills were based - their convenient proximity reducing production times and costs (Hunter 2001:212). The Distribution Center was created in part to address these concerns, its establishment in 1977 offering what was seen as a more transparent solution that involved working with mills, but remaining an independent body committed to 'allocating work impartially throughout the island' (Hunter 2001: 321). Its impact on the distribution of work to areas outside of Stornoway fundamentally shaped the history of the industry and the socio-economic development of rural villages, and importantly marked individual biographical narratives (see Chapter 4). The Distribution Center was closed and nearly forgotten after a big dip in the industry in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, when I was conducting fieldwork I noticed an emerging call for its return. Many weavers who either remembered the Distribution Center, or who had heard about its significance from relatives and fellow weavers, brought it up during the HTWA meeting mentioned above, discussing it with passion. Several weavers told me, on other occasions, about the benefits that its re-establishment could bring. Some weavers also wondered aloud whether its system would still work today, given the slightly different configuration of the industry, volume of orders per mill, and the criteria for work distribution currently favoured by each mill. Regardless of individual positions, the presence of the Distribution Center in weavers' conversations hinted at the continued concern with guaranteeing fairness and equality within the industry, echoing an on-going local commitment to supporting the livelihoods of people across the islands.



make a regular and sufficient income. For self-employed weavers, who were paid by the piece in weekly cycles, these fluctuating rhythms, no matter how slight, could still have a significant impact on their livelihoods. In various way, their experience of work and life echoed some of the uncertainty that has marked the lives of other so-called flexible workers studied by anthropologists in other parts of the world, inhabiting different socio-economic circumstances and productive models, but similarly having to endure and navigate fluctuating conditions, shaping their subjectivities in the process and often elaborating themselves, in inventive and skilful ways, alternative livelihood strategies, and mutually supportive allegiances.

### *3.4. Time, labour flexibility and 'freedom'*

Like many 'flexible' workers inhabiting diverse labour markets in different parts of the world, Harris Tweed weavers also found unique features that made their work and life arrangements desirable, despite the potential disruption and future uncertainty that they also entailed. Spending time with weavers, I was soon made aware of the different ways in which workers envisioned their ability to enact particular ideals of work and life, expressing a diversity of possibilities for what 'good working lives' might look like for themselves and their families. Most weavers I spoke to articulated, in different ways, their views on the 'freedom' that their work arrangements allowed (see Chapter 4). Even though they were not entitled to sick pay or other benefits that protected mill employees, many weavers still saw themselves as comparatively much better positioned than fellow Harris Tweed workers who they perceived as being 'stuck' in the mill, with imposed timetables and work arrangements.

I was told that, over different generations, local Harris Tweed weavers had long expressed similar views on the freedom allowed by weaving Harris Tweed from home. Janet Hunter (2001) describes how particular local understandings regarding past models of work and life (like crofting-weaving) informed efforts to retain the 'home-woven' characteristic as part of the industry's legal definition and trademark protection. Judith Ennew, who conducted fieldwork in the island in the 1970s, also recounts how some weavers spoke about being free, and how that contrasted with their idea of working in a factory:

‘(...) some weavers do seem to enjoy the work, like the man who said: ‘Harris Tweed has been good to me. I left being an electrician 21 years ago to start. I like to be free. You can please yourself. When you are working as a weaver, you are working and being paid by results and we have produced something for everyone’s benefit. There’s monotony in every job, but I’d hate to work in a factory.’ (1982:186)

For many of my interlocutors, the possibility of working from home, and the sense of being free or ‘independent’ from mills (while still working to fulfil their orders), allowed them to imagine seemingly boundless possibilities for how they might choose to lead their lives. These ranged from more mundane possibilities in their everyday conduct – for instance, the ability to decide when to take a coffee break, run errands in town, or listen to an audiobook while working – to a more overarching sense of control over their own time, work, and life. The feeling that ‘there’s no one looking over your shoulder’ – an expression I would hear from multiple weavers – encompassed both of these ideas, expressing the intertwinement of certain practical implications and the existential conditions they were seen to allow. For some weavers, these particular work arrangements were also perceived to enable the pursuit of more creative and fulfilling lives during their work-time, contributing both to their individual satisfaction and to the income necessary to support their household.

Despite inhabiting different kinds of relationship with mills, both those weavers producing cloth for mills and those working as ‘independent producers’ (the ‘two stories’ mentioned above) shared, to a certain extent, similar ideas about their freedom. In this sense, the term *independent weaver*, which was ordinarily used within the industry to refer to *all* Harris Tweed weavers regardless of these distinctions, underlined this shared sense of autonomy. At the same time, however, it is important to consider how the title of ‘independent weaver’, along with certain narratives about ‘freedom’, sometimes seemed to contradict the practical realities of weavers’ work arrangements, and workers’ place in wider political-economic structures and dynamics. The situation of self-employed weavers should thus be examined critically by considering the intertwinement of these narratives with the structural and institutional circumstances that imposed certain limitations on otherwise seemingly boundless ideals of freedom. Doing so highlights particular social dynamics, lived experiences, and contradictions that might otherwise remain obscured.

Examining weavers’ ideas of ‘freedom’ and experiences of labour flexibility demands acknowledging that they were nevertheless part of a highly regulated industry with strict

production requirements, weaving for a mill that expected orders to be fulfilled not only according to high quality standards, but also in a timely manner. In this sense, their experience of work did not depend exclusively on personal preferences, but was also determined by the need to follow the mill's expectations for the swift completion of orders – something that might also affect their reputation and determine their selection for future work assignments. At the same time, weavers' position as self-employed workers rendered them particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in demand for the cloth (and other oscillations). In this way, the very job that allowed them to live where they had chosen and to pursue a life they saw as worth leading, might also, during low times, reveal how susceptible they were to disruptions in the industry (and in their own lives). Depending on circumstances, their ability to make choices might be severely limited precisely by their vulnerability not only to the vagaries of global markets, but the myriad circumstances beyond their control.

Nevertheless, even though weavers acknowledged that their 'freedom' was sometimes the reverse side of the 'precariousness' coin, in their narratives they often chose instead to focus on what they 'got out of the job' despite this uncertainty. In the following section I examine some of the ways in which different weavers described seeing their work, focusing on some of their discussions with fellow weavers, as well certain everyday practices that I would gradually learn more about as I spent time in their workplaces. I suggest that focusing on these exchanges and experiences reveals particular ways of thinking about everyday work-time expenditure *and* longer-term perspectives or life plans, and can thus contribute to more nuanced understandings of the place of individual self-identities, subjectivities and choice-making in the study of manufacturing contexts and contemporary realities of flexible work markets within global capitalism.

### *3.5. Time, productivity and work rhythms*

In everyday experiences, work-time becomes more readily visible in the concrete tasks and rhythms that mark individual workers' assigned responsibilities. Several islanders I met – including weavers and non-weavers – recognized that a significant part of the labour involved in the making of Harris Tweed involved performing repetitive, time-consuming or physically demanding tasks of different kinds. Ennew also noted similar impressions in the 1970s:

Far from getting any creative pleasure from producing the cloth, many weavers loathe the work, seeing it only as an instrumental means to producing a cash income. Isolated in small huts, half deafened by the incessant clatter of the loom, with eyes trained (often in poor light) upon repetitive patterns like herringbone, watching for broken threads, many find the job monotonous. As one weaver stated, 'I put cotton wool in my ears and count the coin as I do it'. One Lewis man recently put his loom symbolically outside the house and swore that 'even if tweeds were paid £100 a time', he would never return to the work. Another described the hard work of keeping the treadle in motion, as 'like cycling uphill all day long'. (1982: 184-185)

However, despite the effort, skill and dedication involved in weaving work, the weavers I met reported a diversity of views that unsettled any ideas about the uniformity of their individual experiences and perceptions of work. Spending time in weavers' loomsheds, I began to notice, for example, how repetitiveness was experienced. Two examples come to mind that may help illustrate the complexity of these experiences, and challenge the notion that 'counting the coin' – in this case by keeping track of meters woven – necessarily implies dreading the repetitive work involved in these tasks, doubting their value, or dismissing weaving as a non-creative occupation.

Using a simple system that involved a click-meter and a mark made with adhesive tape, a weaver called Duncan kept track of every single meter he wove. Working with beams brought from the mill in the tweed van, he would regularly check how much he had been able to weave during a given span of time, sometimes in half-hour intervals. While he did celebrate when he had been able to keep up a good weaving speed (especially since this usually meant that the loom was running smoothly, with no mechanical problems in sight), he rarely expressed any dissatisfaction with the task, nor any eagerness to get the job done and over with. In fact, sometimes he seemed to be keeping track of meters woven as a kind of personal challenge, echoing to a certain degree the kind of productivity 'games' performed by the shopfloor workers described by Burawoy in *Manufacturing Consent* (1979). Even though he mostly wove patterns assigned by the mill, Duncan was also known among weavers for speaking at length about weaving as 'an art form'. He cultivated this personal interest in weaving by experimenting with smaller scale weaving (e.g. using tablet and inkle looms) in his free time, and helping other people with their own table looms. He had also long wished to be able to design and weave his own tweeds. Over the course of my fieldwork, he had worked hard to restore an old Hattersely loom, which would allow him to do so. By the end of my

fieldwork, he had begun designing and weaving his own tweeds in the successfully restored loom, doing so alongside his work weaving mill orders in his other loom (a double-width Bonas Griffith).

Niall, another weaver who worked weaving orders for the mills in his domestic loom shed, had a completely different approach and understanding of the ‘quality’ of his time spent weaving. In Niall’s loomshed there were no traces of devices for keeping track of meters woven. Instead, there was a conspicuously large CD player and soundsystem, surrounded by neatly stacked CDs, most of them albums by heavy metal bands. Niall explained that when he first started to weave he had tried keeping track of how many meters he had woven, but soon realized that this process was driving him ‘mad’. At some point, acknowledging the frustration that this was causing, he just gave up on counting altogether. He decided that he would simply keep on weaving, without counting, all the way until a beam was finished (with the necessary breaks, of course). Instead of timing and tracking the meters woven, he played loud music while he pedalled the loom, describing how much he enjoyed weaving with this soundtrack, pedalling to the rhythms of the songs. As long as there was loud music, Niall told me, he just kept weaving away without a worry about how much or how little he had woven. He took breaks when he felt he needed them, following the rhythms of his body and of mealtimes, free from self-imposed weaving quotas. He would only learn about how many meters he had woven after the tweed was checked back into the mill – he was then notified after the finishing department had measured and confirmed the length of each tweed, assigning the appropriate payment by the meter.

### *3.6. Pride, vocation, and self-discipline*

Spending time around weavers, I found several opportunities to learn about the way they spoke about their own work to other people. On one of these occasions, I listened attentively as Alasdair sat at his loom, speaking to an audience of five tourists who had arrived together in a rented minivan, after driving around the island looking for a Harris Tweed weaver they could watch working. When asked about how he felt about his job, Alasdair listed three of the things he enjoyed the most about the weaving work – the tweed itself, the old Hattersley loom, and the ‘exercise’:

Och I love it. I like that you're making a nice product; then I enjoy working with this loom, the Hattersleys are extremely rare now, so I like to keep the old way of weaving alive; and also, you may notice, you get a bit of exercise.

Alasdair's speech was optimistic and focused on what he personally found to be the best parts of this job. In some ways, it echoed the experiences of other weavers I met who spoke earnestly about the good times, as well as the most difficult experiences they had had while working as weavers. Despite the known challenges faced in their profession – including the potential labour uncertainty discussed above – several weavers I met described finding a profound satisfaction in their work. Some of them spoke about how 'fulfilling' and 'meaningful' it was for them to do this kind of work. One, for instance, said:

I get great satisfaction from it. I enjoy *producing* something. (...) At the end of the day I can say 'I did *that*' [points at tweed on the loom]. 'That's how many meters I have personally [woven]. That is my work right there'. And that's really very, very satisfying-

In addition to this sense of producing something tangible, some weavers also described finding particular satisfaction in specific tasks and parts of their work. Some of the independent producers described the process of designing the patterns, doing all the work required for setting them up, and eventually enjoying the thrill of seeing them emerge from the loom as they began to weave a new cloth. Some weavers confessed their attraction to the 'mechanical' aspects of the job, enjoying tasks that involved the maintenance and fixing of the loom. Some of them would have spent considerable time and energy devising ingenious 'hacks' and improvements to their workplace set up and loom arrangements ('all within the Harris Tweed Act regulations', they would emphasize). A few weavers who worked on orders issued by the mill described enjoying getting very complex patterns that involved changing draft – a skilled and time-consuming task that involved changing the order of over a thousand individual heddles to set up a new pattern. In fact, the complexity of this task, and the risk of weaving mistakes it entailed, made it one of the most dreaded for many weavers, even if some of them did enjoy it. For other weavers, their favourite thing about the job was being able to choose when and how long to work for, 'without anyone looking over your shoulder', as mentioned above – and allowing them to decide when to dedicate their time to other pursuits. Many weavers also emphasized that, despite the uniqueness of the industry and its peculiar work arrangements, for them weaving was also just a regular job – a way they had of making a living and staying on the islands.

Regardless of their individual work arrangements and personal understandings of their role, every weaver I met highlighted the need to ‘put in the hours’ in order to actually get the work done. Most of them told me about the importance of ‘self-discipline’, training oneself to weave without requiring the usual external pressures found in other kinds of workplace and production models. Being self-employed and paid by the piece, attention to productivity is of course a key feature of weavers’ everyday experiences of work. However, the diverse ways in which people attended to this requirement and described the place of productivity in their work experiences offered alternative possibilities for thinking about workers’ lives and subjectivities, complicating scholarly discussions about the relationship between time, discipline, and manufacturing work under capitalism.

The notion of ‘self-discipline’ was widely used locally – along with ‘patience’, ‘attentiveness’, and the ability to ‘enjoy one’s own company’ – to identify some of the key characteristics that a Harris Tweed weaver should possess in order to successfully endure and navigate the lifestyle and particularity of his or her role. This set of virtues, the relevance of which was repeated by several people familiar with weaving work and life, was used to describe an ideal kind of disposition that would allow an individual to follow this path. ‘Being a weaver is not for everyone’, I would frequently hear. This was a view that prevailed among many people (including non-weavers), and it suggested a widespread ‘local’ sense of weaving work as a kind of vocation. Several stories were told to illustrate this belief. Sometimes, these stories consisted of variations on a narrative that involved someone getting a loom, learning to weave, going through a ‘rough time’ in the job, and getting rid of the loom once they realised it was ‘not for them’ or that ‘it was driving them mad’. On various occasions I was also told that weavers were ‘exceptional creatures’, regarded by some as ‘odd’, ‘extraordinary’, or both.

Several weavers I met would also remark on the unique character of their work, and the satisfaction they drew from it despite potentially uncertain futures. Weavers sometimes described how these challenges came hand in hand with a sense of purpose and pride associated with the role of ‘being a Harris Tweed weaver’, sometimes pointing directly at this tension. For example when David remarked, in the middle of a three-hour interview:

See, if I say anything that sounds slightly negative about the job, I'm trying to give you a balance. Because, personally, I think it's the best job in the world. (...) But it would be naive of me to say 'it's the best job in the world' and just smile at you, and then you don't go away with any information, do you?

During this conversation, David spoke eloquently about the challenges of time-management, the advantages of work-time flexibility, and the pride he had in spending his working time weaving Harris Tweed. He pointed out 'how grim' the realities of 'child labour and workers' exploitation' were in other industries around the world, and argued that it was crucial to have production practices 'humanized' in order to prevent exploitative practices. He spoke particularly about the impact that seeing 'a face' may have on consumers, who might then be more open to understand the circumstances in which people live. He discussed examples of different industries, from Rolls Royce engineering to coffee growing, and drew a parallel with his own views on the work he performs, every day, as a Harris Tweed weaver:

I think that part of the [Harris] tweed industry is, people get to see it. *You're seeing it.* And there's something there. (...) I'm a human, and I've got a face, and I'm a person, and I've got a life. (...) And I think when you humanize something, then the opportunity to exploit the worker goes. (...) I think the positive side is, with Harris Tweed, it's humanized. (...) I'm happy to say 'I did this'. It's like the work thing. You know when you said about work? (...) I'm happy to work unsupervised. But I'm also happy to say 'This was me'. (...) wear it with pride. It's made with pride.

Speaking to different Harris Tweed weavers, I found that this sense of pride in one's work was expressed with varying degrees of enthusiasm. On some occasions, I was told not to expect much 'vanity' from islanders, who were depicted locally as people who preferred to be perceived modestly as equals, rather than to stand out proudly and risk being seen as arrogant individuals. Generally, however, a sense of thoughtful engagement with their own work came across in the many anecdotes, descriptions, and opinions voiced by weavers I met. Especially when talking about their everyday experiences of work and life, many described their occupation as 'special', 'fulfilling', or 'meaningful'. Along with those weavers who described their occupation primarily as an income-generating job (rather than 'a passion' or something to be proud of), these workers rendered visible the importance of considering the complex place of 'value' and 'values' in lived experiences of work and labour today.



#### 4. Conclusion

In this chapter I argued that focusing on the varying ways in which workers describe the relationship between time, work and life can provide crucial insights to anthropologists (and other researchers) seeking to learn about the lived realities of work – and to devise new ways of thinking about and conceptualizing *work* and *value* today and in the future. I suggested that focusing on different notions of *time*, on the role that time plays in labour management and workplace organization, and on the ways the concept of time is used by workers to describe everyday employment and other lived experiences, can highlight realities, categories and strategies that may otherwise be overlooked.

I suggest that seeking to learn about workers' subjectivities, social lives, and aspirations in relation to their everyday experiences of 'work-time' should be central to research on contemporary labour realities. Observing the widespread tendency to label people's experiences in contexts characterized by economic (and existential) uncertainty in relation to what is perceived to be their main 'cause' – e.g. 'neoliberal subjectivities' – I argue that there is value in keeping these categories more open, and to speak instead about workers' or individuals' subjectivities. In this context, the concept of value / values offers particularly productive avenues for examining and understanding the intersection of structural circumstances and individual experiences. As a subjective experience, 'value' allows us to think through workers' lives and livelihoods in ways that highlight not only their place within particular productive systems, but also their own role in producing particular moral understandings as they navigate everyday experiences of work-time.

In this sense, I suggest that we should pay more attention to the *active* ways in which people engage with ideas of value and values. Considering the experiences and perspectives of Harris Tweed weavers offered an opportunity to think not only about the place of value / values in people's lives, but also about the vital role played by processes of *valuing* and *evaluating* in making sense of their own choices. There were multiple ways in which these on-going valuing / evaluating processes became apparent in weavers' narratives and decision-making processes. They were visible, for example, in discussions about 'freedom' – in descriptions of making choices in the name of freedom; in the notion of freedom as something that you strive to; and in speaking of 'freedom' as

an act of valuing itself. The on-going, active quality of valuing / evaluating was also evoked in discussions about attempts to find a balance between work-time and non-work-time, including considerations about how this is not just about cost and income, but about being present for one's family and pursuing particular lifestyles. It became apparent when people admitted the challenges of finding this work-life balance, and the constantly emerging attempts to address the implications of its imbalance. It was also present in discussions on the life-enhancing possibilities of work, as well as in the acknowledgement that 'work is still work' even if you value it in that way, and describe it as meaningful or fulfilling. Among other examples, these conversations rendered visible the importance of considering not only value / values, but also the active ways in which processes of valuing / evaluating shape people's choices, moral understandings and experiences of work and life.

## Chapter 4

Weaving lives and livelihoods: anticipation, personal narratives,  
and the pursuit of a good life

*An rud a thig leis a' ghaoith, falbhaidh e leis an uisge.*

What comes with the wind, will go with the rain. (Gaelic proverb)

### 1. Introduction

On a Saturday afternoon, Vickie left her loom for a few hours and met me in Stornoway. She had decided to take a break from her weaving work to come into town and do some food shopping in one of the island's two large supermarkets – both located in Stornoway – and we took the opportunity to meet up. Vickie worked as an independent weaver for one of the Harris Tweed mills, and she had quickly become one of my main interlocutors.

As we sat chatting in the living room, the light coming in from the southern facing windows kept changing. Bright sun flooded the room for a few minutes, before a heavy cloud plunged us into darkness, the rain gently tapping on the glass before the sunbeams returned temporarily, blinding and warm. Witnessing these changes take place before our eyes was a vivid reminder that, on these islands, it is not uncommon to have 'four seasons in one day', as people would frequently remark. Both the weather and our conversation would remind me of the Gaelic proverb quoted above, a poetic expression suggesting an acceptance of change and transient circumstances. Along with personal narratives from my interlocutors, this proverb would come to mediate my appreciation of certain local understandings of work and life, against a backdrop of constantly changing weather, light, and opportunities. 'What comes with the wind, will go with the rain'.

Sipping black coffee, Vickie guided me through her career history and personal experiences. As the interview progressed, Vickie explained how she saw her current

situation and self-identity not only in relation to her work, but as part of a wider set of circumstances:

*Joana:* So what would you say you are, or what would you say you do today?

*Vickie:* Today? I would say I live in Lewis. Weaving is part of my present situation, which is 'living in Lewis'. Living in Lewis, weaving Harris Tweed – that's part of living here. (...) In Gaelic it makes more sense. When I say 'I'm a weaver' in Gaelic, you say it like 'It's a weaver that is in me' [*S e breabadair a th'annam*]. Like you say about hunger, 'the hunger is on me' [*Tha an t-acras orm*]. A weaver may be in me now, but you don't know in the future. I may move away, and then maybe a weaver is not in me anymore. Something else may be in me. Things can change.

I remember being taken by the wealth of revelations encompassed in such a short answer, and by the way it suddenly reframed our previous informal conversations and interactions. As the interview progressed not only did I realize that there were many things I did not know about Vickie's life experiences despite our growing closeness over the previous months, but I was also made aware, in moments like this, of the way she combined personal impressions with understandings rooted in the Gaelic language and island life as she narrated her own life story. In a few words, Vickie simultaneously expressed an intimate understanding of her professional and existential situation, and hinted at the ways in which it related to complex socio-economic issues observed more generally in this region.

Speaking about her work as a weaver, Vickie highlighted the relationship between labour, vocation and place-making, drawing these elements together as a way of making sense of her current circumstances, and what it meant for her to live in Lewis. She also expressed an acceptance of the possibility that these circumstances might change in the future. Invoking the sense of transience suggested by Gaelic ways of speaking about personal circumstances – from jobs to physical conditions – she hinted at the ways in which this tacit resignation seemed to match local ways of understanding (and dealing with) uncertainty and change. In a region marked by a history of uncertain employment, labour-related migration, and depopulation, accepting the possibility of *change* matched the outlook of many other islanders I met.

Vickie's background brings an additional element of interest to this situation. She was not a native Gaelic speaker, nor had she been born and bred on these islands. Vickie was a German woman in her early fifties, who had moved to Lewis less than a decade before,

and who had been working as a Harris Tweed weaver for about five years at the time when we sat down for this interview. Before, Vickie had studied Geology, but she had ended up working in the financial sector for many years, until she decided to change how she was leading her life. Even though she had always been interested in making things (a talented knitter, she completed many technically complex projects for herself), Vickie had never before considered finding an actual job in this kind of industry. It was her move to the islands that had changed this outlook.

Vickie had visited Lewis for a few months, about seven years prior, while on an English language course and, long story short, ‘fell in love with the island’ and decided to move there. In the beginning, while living on her savings and looking for ways of making a living on the island, Vickie realised that working as a Harris Tweed weaver might be the perfect option for her at that point. While the income would be modest, she reasoned, becoming a weaver would allow her to lead a life she found more fulfilling, working in something she was profoundly interested in, and giving her the possibility of working from home with ‘complete freedom’ to choose when and how long she would be at the loom for.

Vickie had worked hard to convince ‘industry people’ that she was truly committed to this plan and really wanted to find a loom (*and* to learn to weave properly, *and* to get the certification to be able to do so). She eventually managed to achieve all of these things, and now Harris Tweed weaving was her sole source of income. She had started learning Gaelic when she moved to the island and continued to be very interested in learning about local history and exploring different places on long walks. With her binoculars, she was able to spot whales from her kitchen window, and to identify birds while out in walks through the moors and across the machair. Like other weavers, she became very good at fixing her loom and was committed to making no mistakes in the tweeds she wove. Like any weaver, she sometimes also worried about the industry’s ability to distribute enough work to all weavers, particularly during times when mills seemed to be going ‘quiet’ and when tweed deliveries became less frequent (see Chapters 2 and 3).

Vickie’s answer to my question suddenly made visible certain circumstances and perspectives that, as I would begin to notice, were similar to those expressed by other people who had decided to make these islands their home – whether they were locals, returners, or incomers. While each of these individuals had very particular backgrounds and experiences, they seemed to share this common understanding: in order to live on

these islands, there were certain challenges they would have to face, and perhaps sacrifices they would have to make. Labour uncertainty was one of such trials – and, as I have discussed in earlier chapters, it was not a new phenomenon in this region, nor in the Harris Tweed industry (Mewett 1977, 1983a, 1983b, 1988; Prattis 1979; Mackay et al. 1980).

In this context, many of my interlocutors recognized the importance of being flexible and resourceful – something visible in their diverse career histories and willingness to embrace various forms of occupational pluralism (Mewett 1977; Prattis 1979) in order to be able to afford to work and live on these islands. At the same time, as I will consider in this chapter, enduring these trials involved not only accepting the possibility of change, but also committing to an often profound sense of purpose, and to particular narratives and visions of what a ‘good life’ might look like, even in contexts and times of moderate (and enduring) uncertainty. Within the Harris Tweed industry, a sector that has long been vulnerable to shifts in demand from global markets, workers’ personal narratives, knowledge of local history, and resourceful understandings of ‘change’ often played a powerful role in people’s commitment to their work.

However, while some of these views – especially those voiced by weavers – may suggest that working in this industry was mainly about the choice to sustain a lifestyle that aligned with certain ideals of a life worth leading, it is important to acknowledge that, for most of my interlocutors working across different roles and departments, it was primarily a way of making a living. For most, working in mills or as weavers at home was their main – and sometimes only – source of income. Given this tension, in this chapter I build on research that has centred on livelihoods and ‘provisioning’, but I expand the emphasis on production and reproduction to explore, in particular, what can be learned by focusing on workers’ biographies and personal narratives – and by considering their place within (and their imaginations of) specific regional and industrial histories.

Unlike the previous chapter, which focused mostly on views voiced by weavers, this chapter opens the discussion up to include the perspectives of mill workers and managers (as well as those of weavers). I examine, in particular, how workers’ biographies and personal narratives not only reframe diverse experiences of migration, resettlement, and labour uncertainty, but also how they reveal particular ways of

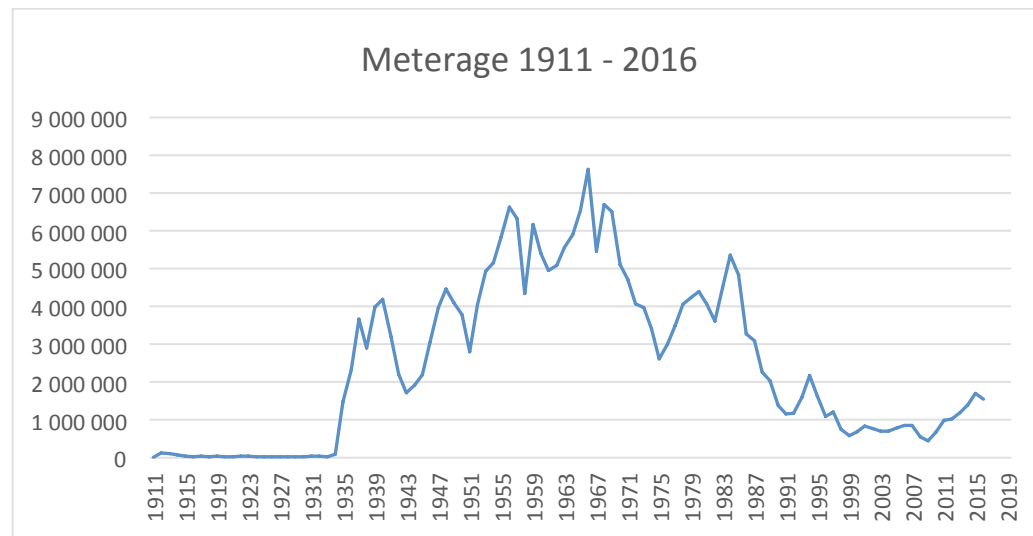
thinking about the past, present and future, shaping different visions of what a good life may look like.

Scholarly discussions on work uncertainty and flexibility have highlighted the novelty of labour precarity in several parts of the world, describing the disruption brought about by widespread changes in global capitalism and regional political-economic processes. However, as Kasmir points out, discussions that foreground the novelty of precarity have been criticised for ‘forgetting that precarity has always been a feature of capitalist societies and that precariousness has perpetually characterised working people’s lives’ (2018:1). Similarly, my research suggests that in order to understand the complexity and diversity of labour experiences in contemporary capitalism, attention should be turned to particular regional histories and legacies. In this chapter I focus on workers’ personal narratives and biographical accounts, exploring how they intertwine with particular local, industrial, and individual histories. Drawing on these materials, I argue, will provide a more layered picture of the multiplicity of experiences and backgrounds that characterize the lives of workers employed in the industry today – from incomers, to locals and returners. At the same time, doing so allows us to consider how unique practices and ideas of *resourcefulness* relate to experiences of *anticipation* and inform the production of particular worldviews, as people variously imagine and navigate different kinds of change.

I also consider some of the methodological implications of working with biographical and personal narratives – from conducting life history interviews, to using sources such as memoirs and edited collections of workers’ personal recollections. My reflection on the issues and potential contributions of these materials and methodological engagements builds on the work of anthropologists who have aptly deployed some of these approaches in their own projects, in a variety of contexts and across a diverse range of research themes (e.g. Caplan 1998, 1999; Mintz 1960; Simpson 2009; Yarrow 2011; Malkki 2015; Niehaus 2014; Rogaly and Qureshi 2017; Di Leonardo 1987). At the same time, considering how workers’ life stories have been variously collected, transcribed and made available in edited volumes, I suggest how they can be approached as particular kinds of historical sources (e.g. MacDougall 2000, 2009; Fergusson 2007; Neat and MacInnes 1999).

I propose that workers’ personal and professional narratives can illuminate, in unique ways, our understanding of people’s lived experiences and imagined possibilities in

‘predictably unpredictable’ employment circumstances. Moreover, I consider how anthropological research and ethnographic fieldwork can benefit from a more critical and deliberate engagement with multiple temporal realities, experiences and conceptions (both in the field and as part of later writing up processes), and the role that anthropologists play as particular kinds of chroniclers.



**Fig. 4.1.** Metres of cloth stamped with the ‘Orb’ Trademark between 1911 and 2016, showing the fluctuation in yearly production figures (Source: Harris Tweed Authority 2017, personal communication).

## 2. Living through the highs and the lows

### 2.1. Anticipation: from labour histories to personal narratives

Throughout my fieldwork, everyday conversations would frequently contain reminders of the manifold ways in which the Harris Tweed industry had touched the lives of islanders, even when they had not been directly involved in it. Certain patterns began to emerge in these exchanges – several conversations centred on childhood or teenage memories, and many observations included variations on the following themes, mentioned both in informal discussions and recorded interviews:



- ‘I used to fill pirns<sup>48</sup> for our neighbour who was a weaver. I’d go by his shed every day after school to do it, then he’d give me some coins when I was done for the day’.
- ‘My mother would always manage to convince me to go and fill pirns for my dad when he was weaving, even though I got *so* bored doing it. She would say “och, your poor father...” – and off I’d go to his shed.’
- ‘Very recently I learned that some boys were getting coins for filling pirns for their neighbours – I never got any of that back then when I was filling pirns for my dad! If only I’d known...’
- ‘Every year we got a different tweed skirt made from the tweed we wove at home. I used to love it!’
- ‘I still don’t understand how people can claim to have liked their tweed skirts when they were growing up – I always thought they were so itchy!’
- ‘My family didn’t weave but I used to hear the neighbours’ looms going *clickaddy-clack*, *clickaddy-clack* in the sheds – they were loud!’
- ‘I remember hearing the looms around the hills in the village as I walked to school, and sometimes I also heard singing coming from the loomsheds as well, along with the looms going *clickaddy-clack*. Maybe there were two people in, working and singing together’.
- ‘I remember when all the mills were running in Stornoway – growing up we would hear the really loud sirens calling the workers every morning, and there were also buses bringing people in to work from the villages around town.’
- ‘My uncle used to work in *mill x*.’
- ‘I worked in *mill x*, where I remember my dad having worked too, then on *mill y* after *mill x* closed.’
- ‘My father used to weave on an old Hattersley, and so did I as soon as my legs were long enough to reach the pedals of his loom. But then there was a slump in the industry and I went on to work in other things.’

Some of these recollections took people back to periods when the industry seemed to be relatively stable. Their portraits of neighbours and relatives making a living by sitting for hours weaving in their loomsheds, and their memories of workers heading to busy mills, suggested that they had lived through a ‘good spell’ in demand for (and thus production of) Harris Tweed. However, I slowly began to notice that some of these comments would develop into tales about change and uncertainty as well, illuminating individual experiences of living through these transformations while growing up.

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<sup>48</sup>As I mentioned before, pirns (*iteachan* in Gaelic) are the small bobbins (or spools) of weft yarn placed inside the shuttles used in Hattersley looms (see Chapter 3). As a weaver operates the pedals, a shuttle is thrown across the loom to weave the weft into the warp.

Memories about relatives working in the industry would sometimes turn into very personal, intimate conversations about the material and existential consequences of the peaks and slumps that have characterized work in this industry since its earliest times. Often, these histories were used to make sense of present circumstances, invoked as people outlined their livelihood strategies, and explained how they were tailored to cope with this well-known ‘predictable unpredictability’ in the region.

As fieldwork progressed, I became increasingly aware of the widespread anticipatory understanding that characterized people’s impressions of contemporary economic circumstances, as they framed them in relation to particular regional and industrial histories. Often, this anticipatory understanding informed not only practical strategies to deal with the well-known possibility of economic fragility and ‘change’ in this region, but it also shaped people’s individual outlooks as they narrated their past, present, and imagined future circumstances, highlighting the region’s vulnerability to the shifts of global markets.

The concept of ‘anticipation’ has been fruitfully deployed by anthropologists researching local responses to climate change. I suggest that it can also be productively mobilised to improve our understanding of labour uncertainty in regions whose populations are similarly exposed to volatile and supra-local dynamics – even if they are of a different nature. In climate change studies, the concept of anticipation has allowed researchers to consider the ways in which members of communities whose lives have been, for many generations, shaped by significant environmental transformations, see the world, relate to it, make sense of it, and balance their expectations with experiences of becoming (Nuttall 2010:25-26). Introducing the concept of anticipation and its potential for illuminating these realities, Nuttall compares it to the concept of adaptation, along with the concepts of vulnerability and resilience:

While adaptation is a reactive response to climate change, anticipation is more about intentionality, action, agency, imagination, possibility, and choice. It is also about being doubtful, unsure, uncertain, fearful, and apprehensive. (2010: 21)

In this sense, anticipation opens up possibilities for considering not just the ways in which ‘socio-ecological resilience’ develops by employing certain strategies of adaptation in contexts that have historically dealt with environmental unpredictability (Berkes and Jolly 2001), but also the complex social, cultural and personal implications of these transformations, and their impact on ways of imagining and planning potential

futures (Nuttall 2010). Studies of adaptation have emphasized the importance of place-specific analysis, particularly on locations where people ‘have always lived with a high degree of environmental variability’ (Berkes and Jolly 2001:2; Balicki 1968; Langdon 1995). The concept of anticipation, however, allows for a more nuanced understanding of people’s lived experiences of these transformations:

Anticipation helps to orient human action – and emphasizes that people make the future, at least the immediate one, whereas adaptation helps to influence or constrain human action. Adaptation is reactive. Anticipation is predictive or proactive; it can take possible future events and the hope of achieving certain goals and ambitions into consideration. (Nuttall 2010: 23)

In accounting for successful strategies and hopefulness, as well as the ‘uncertainty, anxiety, nervousness, fear, (...) disappointment and disillusionment’ (Nuttall 2010: 25-26) involved in anticipation, this conceptual framework allows researchers to identify and represent, with greater complexity and nuance, the emotional burdens, challenges, possibilities and opportunities that emerge in these processes.

Studying the Harris Tweed industry highlighted the need to consider the place of these shifting circumstances in people’s own life stories and personal narratives, shaping particular experiences and strategies at different points in their lives. Spending time in workplaces over several months offered an opportunity to observe how shifts in the industry were discussed and experienced not only in reference to yearly variations in production (see Fig. 1), but also in relation to fluctuations during shorter timeframes – days, weeks, months. Conversations about these oscillations would frequently emerge in weavers’ loomsheds – being self-employed and paid by the piece, weavers seemed particularly attuned to these changes. They would sometimes refer to recently observed patterns in work volume, and employ these to predict what might happen over the next couple of weeks. For example, if they had been receiving ‘beams of five’<sup>49</sup>, one after the other for the previous two months, they might base *both* their optimistic *and* pessimistic predictions on those numbers, as well as on their experiences of earlier years (e.g. ‘if it has been this busy, it will probably continue like this at least for the next month’ or, *by contrast*, ‘it’s been so busy lately, I feel like this is too good to last for long’). These estimations might also be based on conversations with tweed van drivers (see Chapter 2), or on information gleaned on occasional phone calls with the mills.

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<sup>49</sup> As briefly explained in Chapter 2, the term ‘beams of five’ was used in the industry to identify warp beams containing enough yarn to weave five tweeds, each of them usually measuring on average 58m.

These predictions shaped people's understandings of their present circumstances, and informed not only strategies for addressing potential change, but also their outlook on future possibilities. At the same time, these predictions were also informed by people's knowledge of past fluctuations, an awareness often confirmed in conversations with Harris Tweed workers with decades of experience. For many of my older informants, fluctuations in global demand for Harris Tweed, and the consequent fluctuation in local job prospects, had become intimately linked with their own biographies. From their perspective, oscillations in the Harris Tweed industry were not simply 'historical facts', but moments and situations that they had experienced first hand. Stories about these transformations included tales of relative deprivation – even though most people I spoke to made a point to highlight that, despite difficulties, 'we never went hungry'.

During the twentieth century, weaving or working in the mill might have become the main source of cash income for many families, but the widespread continuity of crofting (before its progressive decline in recent decades) ensured that there were usually options to turn to and feed a family when demand for the tweed dropped. In their small plots, croft tenants would have planted vegetables, potatoes and oats; a flock of sheep could provide wool and meat; a couple of cows would ensure that there was milk and the possibility to make any dairy products at home (see e.g. Mewett 1977). Living on an island in the middle of the Atlantic was also, in this case, a great advantage. The plentiful sea offered an abundance of fresh fish and seafood that, in different parts of the islands, ensured the survival of many families. 'We might have been poor, but we were always well fed', one informant who grew up in a village in Ness, in the north of Lewis, told me. There were also rumours of poaching in certain parts of the islands, with the occasional salmon or deer secretly caught and shared, in clear defiance of the legal exclusivity that forbids any unauthorised hunting and fishing expeditions in the lochs and hills owned by largely absent landlords.

In some cases, however, work uncertainty and the periods of unemployment that accompanied the slumps in the Harris Tweed industry led many people permanently away from the trade – and often from the islands as well. Yet another instance of the region's long history of out-migration, the movement of people away from the islands in association with the fluctuation in global demand for Harris Tweed highlighted the perpetuation of a problem that had taken place in similar circumstances at different points in the past. The islands' reliance on a single industry that required significant

amounts of labour, but whose existence depended heavily on external demand, was not a new phenomenon, as Mewett has perceptively examined (see e.g. 1977, 1983b). At different times, the kelp industry and the fishing industry kept large swathes of the local population employed, but also at the mercy of external demand and technological transformations. In fact, in comparison with these two industries, the cyclical fluctuations in employment in the Harris Tweed industry involved much lower numbers than when either of the former collapsed. Nevertheless, the problem for the region was not simply the unpredictable nature of work in the Harris Tweed industry – but the lack of alternative employment opportunities (and limited diversity of trades) available locally.

The realities and individual experiences of migration from (and to) the Outer Hebrides, at different moments and from different areas of the islands, are complex and diverse. However, at least in the case of Lewis, limited employment opportunities have featured quite highly in the list of reasons for individuals (and families) to decide to try their luck and live elsewhere – at least temporarily (for a detailed analysis of different patterns and types of migration, see Mewett 1988. See also Ionad Nàiseanta Na H-Imrich 2007). They have also importantly shaped, over the years, the ways in which families and communities of origin have experienced and managed this exodus (Mewett 1982b, 1988). Many of my informants described how their families were, in some cases temporarily and in other cases more permanently, separated from their younger members as they moved to the Scottish mainland, to England, or abroad for work or to study.

At the same time, while past fluctuations in the Harris Tweed industry had spelled the threat of material poverty, eventually forcing many individuals and families to move away from the islands to look for work in the ‘mainland’ or abroad, its unpredictability had also brought the occasional promise of growth and progress. In different moments throughout the twentieth century, this tension marked not only the variation in tweed output (accounted for by the number of meters stamped with the Orb trademark, see fig. 4.1), but shaped the fears, as well as the hopes and aspirations, of different people throughout the islands. In crofting villages across Lewis and Harris, and sometimes within the same household, opinions divided sharply on whether it might be worth investing in looms or entertaining any prospects of future employment in the industry. The ways in which this ambivalence has been expressed throughout the years, and how it has shaped people’s dilemmas and decisions until today, is worth considering.

## 2.2. *New looms, old concerns, renewed hopes*

In his popular trilogy of memoirs, Finlay J. MacDonald provides a vivid account of his childhood and adolescence in Harris, detailing the experience of growing up in a small village with his family through the years between the two World Wars (2009 [1982, 1983, 1985]). In these recollections, MacDonald aptly draws connections between his own personal experiences and the ‘historical’ events that were taking place in the ‘background’ at both a global and local level. In these books he details, for example, the local impact of a slump in world-wide demand for tweed, caused in great part by the economic depression in countries which would have imported the cloth. While MacDonald’s descriptions emphasize the serious distress caused by this fluctuation in his own and his neighbours’ family homes, his account also highlights local people’s perseverance and hopeful – though often unrealistic – expectations of sudden improvement. In the second of these memoirs, *Crotal and White* (1983), MacDonald describes an example of such persistence and personal motivation, portraying his own father’s wish to become a weaver despite visible signs of decline in the tweed industry – and the unexpected success of that venture.

Then, for the umpteenth time, my father announced that he was going to get a loom, and the usual argument ensued.

‘A loom? Now, of all times? You must be out of your mind. What use is a loom to you when the house is stacked with unsold tweeds?’ My mother was well accustomed to this old aspiration of my father’s. ‘And anyway you can’t weave.’

‘I was talking to my father when I was in Tarbert last week, and he knows somebody who’s selling a loom and would be willing to wait for payment. He’s coming down for a few days next week to teach me. I think times are getting better. They’re even saying that there’s going to be a Harris Tweed stall at the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow, and a competition for the best weaver.’

‘And you’ll be winning it?’

‘I wouldn’t be surprised!’

My mother dropped the subject; she was learning not to rise to what she manifestly regarded as his off-beat sense of humour.

‘And where are you putting this wonderful loom that’s going to weave us gold? In the bedroom with us and four children?’ She glanced hastily in the direction of my brother and myself (...).

Father had obviously put a lot of thought into this latest scheme of his without mentioning it to anyone, probably because he knew that most people would laugh him out of court for going into the weaving business when the Harris Tweed market was as stagnant as a pool left behind by a summer high tide. He had arranged to get some corrugated iron from somewhere and, although she didn't know it, my mother's own brother - the ship's carpenter with Sopwith — was home on holiday and had agreed to come and put up a lean-to hut against the rear of our little house. (1983: 127-128)

Despite the unpredictable future of the Harris Tweed industry at that particular time, MacDonald's father persisted and went ahead with this idea to buy a loom, build a makeshift loomshed at the back of the house, and learn how to weave. Fortunately, by the time his plan was actually taking shape, a positive turn in the industry's fortunes turned out to favour the seemingly foolish venture. The coincidence of personal planning and a good spell in demand for the cloth would, as MacDonald describes in his memoir, fundamentally shape his father's experience of work and life, and transform his whole family's hopes and expectations:

The loom was to represent a major change in our lives. Where my father had been lacking in enthusiasm for the croft, and had seen it only as a place of living, not a *way* of living, he found in the loom a chance to express himself; and perhaps it's not too fanciful to think that it allowed him express the poetry that was undoubtedly in him, and which would have found its expression in writing had he been born in another place or even two generations later on. (...)

(...) Just as the taste of crowdie and cream has been for me the lingering taste of the bitter-sweet of childhood, so the very word tweed evokes the phrase *crotal and white* and it, in turn, evokes the memory of the year we got the loom, and the year that things began to get better.

I think my mother really began to believe that things were on the mend when she sold her first tweed in many months, just shortly after her fourth boy was born. It was as if Providence had at last stepped in to ease the burden that was becoming too heavy. My father's pleasure in the loom was having an enlightening effect on the whole household; he hadn't yet actually started weaving full lengths of tweed on it, there was a big enough stockpile in the house to keep us going even if the market surged instead of just beginning slowly to gain momentum. So he spent his time practicing and experimenting with patterns, and when he wasn't at the loom he was his old good-humoured self again. Perhaps the fact that he now seemed to be able to afford a regular supply of tobacco for his pipe had something to do with it, or perhaps the fact that he was able to resume getting his daily paper again. (1983: 128-131)

This kind of relationship between employment and personal satisfaction was described in similar ways by some of my interlocutors, for whom a sudden change in the industry's fortune represented comparable transformations in their own or their parents' work experiences and ability to provide for their family. Many people I met whose parents had been lucky enough to live through a 'good spell' in the industry often expressed their gratitude in statements that emphasized how the industry's good times had literally 'raised them'. One of the mill workers, for example, told me: 'the Harris Tweed industry was good to me, to my family'. He detailed how both of his parents had held positions in the industry (a common feature of many households at different points in the past) – 'my father was a weaver, my mother was a darner at the mill, so me and my siblings, we were all raised on Harris Tweed'.

Raising a family while being substantially dependent on the fortunes of an unpredictable industry seemed to have importantly shaped individual subjectivities across the islands, as well as a diversity of personal views on how to cope with potential volatility and impermanence. However, these ideas were not exclusively held by 'locals' or 'returners', but also drawn on by 'incomers' who became interested in local labour histories as they sought to make a living themselves. For example, David and Rebecca, the weaving couple I mention in Chapter 3 (who had moved from England and had been raising their very young children in a crofting township in Lewis) were keenly aware that, so far, they had been fortunate. David spoke about their initial difficulty looking for work when they moved to the islands, and how it seemed particularly hard to find any opportunities because 'we didn't know anyone'. However, he acknowledged, their timing 'couldn't have been better'. They were only able to afford to buy a loom because, when they decided to do so, 'the industry was so low'. At the time, the man who sold them their double-width Bonas Griffith loom was trying to quickly get rid of it, so they got it for a very low price. Not long after they bought their loom, the industry began to show signs of a slow recovery, and except for a few 'slower' months, it had been providing them with steady work ever since. David also told me how they had been embraced by 'industry people' despite being 'incomers' to the island and 'newcomers' to the industry, receiving training and being offered weaving work by mills in a way they saw as 'pretty inclusive'.

While their decision to spend most of their savings buying a loom without knowing how to weave nor whether things would get better in the industry might sound as an imprudent gamble, David explained how it had actually been a carefully considered



strategic decision, which they weighed against other options. David emphasized the importance of investing in tools that might contribute to safeguarding their livelihood – and how the loom seemed like a potentially productive beginning. As an incomer, David's decision to buy a loom was partly informed by what he had heard about the Harris Tweed industry's highs and lows, rather than by having experienced the consequences of these fluctuations himself. However, other workers I met located their present circumstances and decision-making processes in relation to their past experiences within the industry, often recalling their own childhood or adolescent years and how changes in the industry fundamentally shaped their upbringing and their own views and aspirations. Calum, whose story I will return to later in this chapter, was one of these workers for whom being brought up in a Lewis township by a weaving father really made a difference to how he imagined his future in relation to past experiences within the Harris Tweed industry.

Now retired and in his mid-eighties, Calum's father had worked as a weaver for most of his life. Back when he was weaving, he was also involved in the TGWU (Transport and General Workers Union) as a delegate for the industry.<sup>50</sup> Calum told me about how he learned 'the weaving' from his father, and remembers witnessing himself, the transformations that occurred in their township and around the islands once an important change was made to the industry. The introduction of the 'Distribution Center', he recalls, was seen by some people as 'the best thing that happened to the industry', bringing fair distribution of work and improved life conditions. Now in his early fifties, Calum described how modest their house was when he was born, before the Distribution Center existed and at a time when the industry was not providing sufficient work to support families in his village:

We lived in a small... how shall I put it... it was like a prefabricated house. Two rooms, there was like a bedroom and a living room / kitchen. There was no running water. There was no toilet. And initially there was no electricity. We stayed there until I was about five.

Later, after the introduction of the Distribution Center, things got better. At a time when mills were busy, this system ensured that work reached more households, instead of

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<sup>50</sup> Although Calum's father was long retired, he remained interested in the history of the industry and had, among other interventions, written a text to complement a recent book's account of an episode in the industry's past, providing an outline of his own experience of these events. In our conversations, Calum would frequently draw on his father's extensive knowledge and experience of the industry to explain how contemporary circumstances related to past practices and events.

concentrating the work in fewer loomsheds, reportedly favoured because of their convenient proximity to the large Stornoway mills of the time (Hunter 2001: 212). Establishing what were seen as ‘fairer’ work allocation practices, the Distribution Center allowed even those families in rural areas, located far away from the mills ‘in town’, to be able to make a living by working at the loom. After the Distribution Center came into being, and following a ‘high’ period in demand for Harris Tweed, Calum and his family eventually moved to a council house and their life conditions improved.

Calum referred to his childhood memories to provide an example of the fruits of a ‘fairer’ and ‘more transparent’ work distribution system, describing how it had become clearly visible in the socio-economic fabric of his own school:

*Calum:* And there was an equality to it as well, you know? Because when we’d go to school, you know, there was no such thing as... there were no rich kids in school. But also, there were no poor kids! Because everybody’s families, I would say at least 90% of the families were from weaving backgrounds. Some others were from a fishing background, but then you can see parallels between that as well. (...) But like I say, in school there was nobody there who was (...) better off than you. And there was nobody there who was worse off than you. So there was a sense of equality, if you like.

As fieldwork progressed, I became increasingly aware of the ways in which personal narratives about past events – such as those presented by Calum and other interlocutors quoted above – would play significant role in how people spoke about the future, and expressed a belief in their ability to act on personal convictions and aspirations. At the same time, certain work and life decisions were often also framed in relation to particular informed stances that led people to consider, in different ways, what their choices might be in relation to particular ‘external’ limitations and restrictions. In the following section, I highlight how practices of *anticipation* (not just adaptation) and notions of *resourcefulness* (not just resilience) characterized people’s livelihood strategies in an uncertain labour market. In doing so, I reveal how these plans both shaped, and were shaped by, individual personal narratives, biographical accounts, and moral understandings of what a good life may look like.

### 3. A life worth leading: ‘local’ livelihood strategies and the pursuit of a good life

#### *3.1. Resourceful lives and livelihoods: occupational pluralism and diverse career histories*

‘It’s just so difficult to find specialized technicians to fix certain appliances here!’ a friend of mine complained casually, as we drove through Barvas moors in her newly fixed car. ‘Since I moved to this island’, she continued, ‘I’ve come to realize that lots of people here will offer to fix anything – and only later do you learn that they didn’t actually have any relevant training or any clue about how to sort it. They will gladly give it a try, regardless.’ Despite her protests, my friend conceded that, so far, this had mostly worked out for her. After a few initial setbacks, her stove had been fixed, her car was working well, and other appliances did not yet require additional work. With an ambivalent tone, she praised local resourcefulness, but she also emphasized how unsure she felt about the possibility of future, more complicated, technological breakdowns.

This was not the first time – nor would it be the last – I heard someone commenting on the challenges of living on the island in terms of addressing technical needs. For people working in the Harris Tweed industry in particular, the threat of breakdowns in any sections of the complex mill machinery and the enduring possibility of loom problems in individual loomsheds were ordinarily shared concerns. Getting specialized technicians to come from the mainland to island mills or to individual weavers’ loomsheds every time a technical problem emerged was not really viable option. In these workplaces, trained maintenance engineers and individuals with a ‘mechanical mind’ were equally respected, their abilities to dive into broken machines and decipher their problems widely valued. Among weavers, the ability to fix looms was regarded as one of the most prized qualities a weaver could have. I was told about the advantages of having not only a mechanical mind, but also a ‘mechanical sensitivity’ – something that allowed weavers to have a *feel* and *listen* for changes and potential loom problems *before* they even materialized or developed into full breakdowns. One man whose fine-tuned loom and unparalleled mechanical abilities became famous among fellow weavers was commonly referred to, with a certain reverence, as ‘the loom whisperer’.

More generally, I was often told about local people’s abilities to ‘do many things’ and ‘be good at them’. I soon learned that these considerations often referred not only to people’s convenient talent for fixing and making ‘things’, but also to what was

perceived as a disposition and ability for finding ways to make a livelihood even in the context of scarce employment opportunities. In this sense, ideas of 'local resourcefulness' expanded beyond attempts at tinkering and fixing mechanical problems. More widely, resourcefulness was seen, along with 'adaptability' and 'flexibility', as a key quality required to successfully make a living and to make a home of these islands. Along with 'hard work' and 'persistence', a multi-faceted kind of resourcefulness was understood to contribute to this possibility. Getting a job was also, as I was reminded on many occasions, very much 'about who you know', emphasizing the importance of social ties and the ability to make certain claims on different kinds of relationships. In this sense, both 'knowing people' and being open to take on new jobs without previous experience were understood as two equally valuable positions to resourcefully address the challenges presented by the region's economic fragility and labour uncertainty.

Within the Harris Tweed industry, I found a striking diversity of backgrounds, both regarding length of employment in the industry, and individual career histories. While some people had only recently become involved in mill work or weaving, most of those who declared having worked in the industry for 20, 30, or 40 years, or 'all my life' had only been able to do so by taking up other occupations during the times when slumps in the industry led to mill closures, redundancies, and periodical absence of weaving work. Some of my informants, who had started weaving in their teenage years, then moved 'away' to study and work in unrelated fields, and later moved back to the islands after retiring, would still describe themselves as having worked in weaving 'since I was a teenager' or 'all my life'. Despite their long-term absence, they justified their narratives of life-long weaving by mentioning how they kept doing it when they came back on holidays, weaving on parents', uncles', or neighbours' looms.

In the Harris Tweed industry, the greatest scope of career histories at the time of my fieldwork seemed to be among weavers, whose backgrounds ranged from modest, labour-intensive occupations, to more prestigious and better-paid professions. Weavers' previous occupations ranged from fishing, building, joinery, welding; to working in offshore oil rigs, driving lorries, emptying bins, or travelling around the world with the Merchant Navy; to being employed as university lecturers, fitness instructors, dentists, financial traders and business managers. Within single biographies there were often surprising turns – like Vickie's case mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, which included a shift from studying Geology to working in Finance, and only much later to

Harris Tweed weaving in the Outer Hebrides. Moreover, two of my weaving interlocutors had been distinguished with MBEs, one for services to the Harris Tweed industry, the other ‘for services to crofting and the community in the Western Isles’.<sup>51</sup>

The diversity of backgrounds among Harris Tweed weavers today contrasts with the more limited range found in earlier decades, revealing an interesting shift in ideas about the value, status, and self-worth involved in working as a weaver. Different people told me about the ways in which the perceived prestige of the weaving job varied at specific times in the past. This ranged from periods when it was seen as a job chosen only by those ‘left behind’ and unable to find other jobs at home and in the mainland, to periods when it was considered a respectful occupation that allowed hard-working, skilled individuals to sustain their families. In recent years, views on the profession varied more widely and included, among other more practical reasonings, narratives about pursuing particular ideas of a ‘fulfilling life’.

In mills, recent improvements in the industry created attractive work opportunities, captivating both older generations (with and without previous experience in the industry), and a younger workforce keen to live and work in Lewis, some being able to remain in the villages where they were brought up, in proximity to the mills on the west side of the island or in Stornoway. Skills, knowledge and experience required to perform the different jobs available in mills and departments varied widely, as did the backgrounds of current employees.<sup>52</sup> In one of the mills where I spent time – across departments such as the dye house, carding and spinning, the yarn store, the pattern room, the office, maintenance, driving, and finishing – individual workers described how their previous experience included working in trades and jobs<sup>53</sup> such as:

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<sup>51</sup> There are a few Harris Tweed weavers and independent producers who have been distinguished with MBEs. Besides my interlocutors, at least two other well-known Harris Tweed weavers were also distinguished with MBEs in their time – Marion Campbell, the celebrated Harris weaver who kept employing the most traditional dyeing, spinning and weaving techniques until the 1980s, received an MBE for services to the Harris Tweed industry in 1985; and Angus ‘Ease’ MacLeod, an independent producer from Lochs who received an MBE for his work with the Crofters Union in 1987.

<sup>52</sup> While some jobs required external training and extensive experience in related fields, most of the workers I spoke to said they had learned their current occupation ‘on the job’, being trained by their managers and fellow colleagues. Some people had had the experience of working in other mills, and a few had worked from home as darners or as weavers in the past. For some of the youngest employees, however, working in the mill was their first job ever.

<sup>53</sup> The terms featured in this list were the ones used by informants themselves – there may be a sense of repetition with certain trade names, but I found it might be relevant to retain the terminology used by individual workers to describe their own past professional experiences.

Armed forces	Engineering	Lorry driving
Bar work	Fish factory	Mussel farming
Building / Construction	Fish farming	Offshore on oil rigs
Bus driving	Fishing	Oil fabrication yard
Care home	Gas conversion	Painter and Decorator
Carpet yarns	Grass cutting	Precision / Design
Civil Engineering	Hospitality	Retail / Shops
Cleaning	Hotel work	Taping & Filing
Computing / IT	Joinery	Tiling
Cook in a school canteen	Kitchen porter	Welding
Delivery man	Labouring	
Design in woollen mill	Landscaping	

While some of these mill workers' career histories were a combination of vaguely related occupations – some had worked in construction and tiling, others in engineering and design – many career histories involved unusual twists and turns, which were often framed in terms of 'what was available' at the time when they were looking for a job. These occupational twists were common across different occupations and departments, and they often generated interesting conversations about the ways in which certain experiences might have contributed insights and helped their performance in current jobs.

Seòras, one of the busiest and most in-demand workers in this mill, whose current job involved overseeing production timelines and work distribution to weavers, had previously worked in 'computing (IT), labouring, weaving, and as a delivery man', before eventually being recruited to his current position (see Chapter 2). Though this job was often a demanding one, requiring constant concentration, organisation, and quick decision-making (at the same time as dealing with many weavers' questions and requests), Seòras explained that he enjoyed it because of the skill it required, and the fact that it was 'an interesting position' that involved performing 'many different roles'. As he learned this role from another employee, Seòras added, his previous experiences in both weaving and in computing had proved useful – though he was 'still learning new things every day'. In his view, this was a 'very interesting and challenging industry to work in', and one in which 'you get a sense of pride in your own work'.

In departments like the pattern room, a key area of the mill where design, sample weaving, and the handling of orders and customers' requests came together, workers'

backgrounds were also diverse. While these included particular skills, qualities and previous experiences that contributed to workers' abilities to perform the jobs they were currently expected to do at the mill, conversations about different backgrounds also turned to the ways in which certain past choices and experiences had allowed individuals to cultivate personal interests and to pursue other activities as part of their everyday lives, shaping them in meaningful ways.

Tormod, a pattern weaver<sup>54</sup> in this department, described how he had learned the weaving from his father, then had taken up joinery – which would become his favourite kind of work – and worked in construction, before having a serious health problem that had prevented him from working for a while. In the period while he was recovering, he had decided to enrol in the Gaelic course at the College in Stornoway, where he had the chance to improve his written Gaelic, and to cultivate his interest in local history and myth. Though he had grown up in a Gaelic speaking home and was a fluent Gaelic speaker, his generation had been prevented from using the language in school and he was thus never taught how to read and write in any language other than English. Now in his early sixties, he had returned to weaving but did so as a mill employee, a pattern weaver working in the premises of the mill, following the timetable of the mill, and enjoying associated work benefits and job security. As a pattern weaver, his cloth could not be stamped as Harris Tweed – despite performing the same tasks as a Harris Tweed weaver in his home, he did so in the mill, not in a domestic loomshed as a self-employed independent weaver. Nevertheless, the skills and knowledge required to do the job were the same, as was the quality of the cloth he wove. His background in weaving had prepared him for the job, and he was good at it.

Brian, an experienced pattern designer employed by the mill, had also moved between unexpected occupations. Now famous around the islands for his design work – which involved skilled hands-on methods for experimenting with 'blending' colours into particular yarn shades, which he then used for designing patterns – he had had a fair share of professional experiences before settling on his latest job about ten years earlier. As a teenager, Brian had started learning how to weave with a neighbour in Stornoway at the time. Shortly afterwards, he started working in Stornoway mills where, after being employed in different departments, he was trained by one of the mills' pattern designer,

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<sup>54</sup> Though their work is done in the same way as Harris Tweed weavers working from home, using the same loom and yarn, Pattern weavers working in mills are not called Harris Tweed weavers. Since they perform their work inside the mill, their cloth cannot be certified, stamped and called Harris Tweed, even though its quality would be difficult to distinguish from the tweed woven in a home.

and eventually took on design responsibilities himself. However, after a significant slump in the industry led to mill closures, Brian found himself working in unrelated areas. As the North Sea oil began to create jobs in the 1970s, Brian joined an oil fabrication yard, where he learned how to weld. He eventually moved up in the industry to work as a safety inspector, a job he took seriously and that he only gave up on many years later after disagreements over what he perceived as inadequate safety procedures. After this, he just ‘took whatever the job centre offered’, and went through a series of odd jobs that included working in fish farming – ‘that was the worst, maybe the only job I wouldn’t do again, the worst job in the world’ – before applying to work as a Harris Tweed Authority stamper. However, only a couple of days before his interview for that job, he was contacted by the management of this mill and invited to work as a pattern designer. When we met, he had been working as a pattern designer in this mill for about ten years, and had now reached his retirement age while in that position.

During my fieldwork, as his retirement month approached, Brian allowed me to shadow him around the mill as he did his work, moving between departments as he asked questions, checked which colours were being blended or moving through the carding machines, visited the pattern room and checked on what the patterns he was experimenting with looked like as they came out of the in-house pattern weavers’ looms, checked with the beaming technicians whether the pattern he ‘wrote’ had been properly warped – among many other ‘checks’. As he would emphasize both in our time together in the mill and in a later interview, his job was not just about coming up with designs, but very much about ‘checking, checking, checking’. From keeping an eye on customers’ communications, to following materials and instructions all the way through the mill as they were being employed in the making of the yarn and cloth he designed – these were responsibilities he described as being a crucial part of his role as a pattern designer. He cited the costly consequences that any mistake made at any point of the production process and left unnoticed might bring to the mill – the wrong yarn shade, warping, beaming, or any other mistakes, would threaten the integrity of the planned final product. Mistakes found halfway through production might entail a significant waste of valuable material, energy, and time, since correcting the mistake to fulfil customers’ expectations meant dumping the mistaken work in progress and start working with new material on a corrected one.

Despite the apparent disconnection between the different jobs he had worked in before returning to pattern design, Brian was quick to find parallels between these experiences,



particularly in relation to ideas of ‘work ethic’ and a sense of responsibility that he carried between jobs. In order to illustrate this point, he spoke about his time as a welding inspector. In the same way that he made sure to ‘check, check, check’ his instructions and tracked the work materials as they travelled through the mill, Brian was very strict on his welding inspections. He would only sign off on work that he had carefully examined and deemed to be fit to be used. Once, he recalled, he was asked to approve a structure that had been sloppily assembled. Its sharp edges posed, in his view, a clear threat to anyone who might be climbing on this structure in an oil rig, so he refused to approve it before it had been properly prepared. He pointed this out to his colleagues, reminding them of the responsibility they had for the safety of any other workers who might in the future be hanging precariously from this structure while working in it. He emphasized how dangerous an unexpected sharp edge cutting into a worker’s hands climbing a ladder might become in that context, despite seeming like a small detail during this manufacturing stage.

As he prepared to retire, Brian followed this commitment until his very last working week – and he also made sure to pass it on to the young apprentice who had been learning from him. He had been reminding her of this in their everyday work together; later, in a piece of paper he prepared for her before leaving, among other handwritten instructions and advice, the three words stood out in pencil, underlined – ‘*check, check, check*’.

### *3.2. Work satisfaction, place-making, and the pursuit of ‘good lives’*

Across the three mills I spent time in, the production managers and managing directors I met had similarly diverse backgrounds, their biographies marked by a previous involvement in the Harris Tweed industry being interrupted, in most cases, by slumps in the industry. Their current position in management was usually informed by extensive experience in this and other related industries – carpet yarns and other woollen mills in mainland Scotland and England, mill engineering and maintenance. Some had formal training, having attended the local college, technical colleges in the mainland, or graduated from University. Some had worked as Harris Tweed weavers or in other mill roles before, and one manager in particular had worked in almost every area of the Harris Tweed industry in the past – he had been a weaver, chief executive of the Harris

Tweed Authority, weaving instructor at the local college, and now chief executive of a Harris Tweed mill.

I also learned how, across the three mills active today, some of those individuals in managing positions played a crucial role in the everyday functioning of the mill, spending considerable amounts of time among workers in the shop floor following production, and frequently being called to provide advice or to solve complex technical problems. As I spent time in these contexts and observed these interactions, it became increasingly clear that, for many mill workers, their relationship to the authority of certain management personnel was informed by a sense of respect for their proven years of experience and resulting ability to address problems, rather than by an uncontested idea of hierarchical difference.

Across different departments and roles, different people mentioned how finding a job in the mill had allowed or encouraged them to stay on the islands. In a questionnaire I circulated in one of the mills, which was filled in by 41 employees (about 50% of the total workforce, but comprising most of the workers employed on the day shift), when asked where they would like to live if they could chose anywhere in the world, twenty seven respondents selected option d): 'I wouldn't want to live anywhere else'.<sup>55</sup>

For some people, the opportunity to work in one of the mills at a certain stage in their lives and being able to live on the islands was significant. For some, it meant that they were able to fulfil their decision to raise their children on the islands and sustain their families with a job near home. For others, it meant they were able to keep sheep, work in crofting, go fishing, and pursue other interests that they could not imagine continuing if they were to live and work elsewhere. And for many of those who were reaching

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<sup>55</sup> This questionnaire was circulated in the last few weeks of my fieldwork in one of the mills, and included questions on topics ranging from experience working in the industry, to Gaelic-speaking abilities, hobbies, and experiences of living and working in Lewis. I had hoped that this anonymous questionnaire, which included several questions that allowed for longer replies and a large text box for any additional comments, might bring up additional information that I had missed during workday conversations. I also thought it might show the prevalence (or rarity) of certain discussions and views I had learned about in particular departments of the mill but not in others.

This particular question asked: *If you were given the choice of continuing to live in Lewis, or to live anywhere else in the world, how seriously would you consider moving? (Please circle one of the options below (letters a. to d.), and fill in the blank if applicable):*

The possible options were: *a) I would seriously consider moving to \_\_\_\_\_.* / *b) I would consider moving to \_\_\_\_\_, on the condition of being able to return to live on the islands later on.* / *c) I would stay on the islands, but I would consider moving from where I currently live to \_\_\_\_\_.* / *d) I wouldn't want to live anywhere else.*

retirement age, it was a unique opportunity to spend their later years precisely where they had chosen. In one of the mills, a production manager briefly described his employment history in this way:

Having begun my textile studies in the Stornoway College I continued my studies in a college in Yorkshire. Having worked in 3 mills in Yorkshire, I then moved to Kilmarnock as a carding engineer and then to Glasgow a nightshift superintendent, all in the carpet industry. I moved back to Stornoway in 1980 with a young family as a spinning manager, had a few years offshore and then came to where I am at present. I am now in the twilight of my life and I enjoy the peace and quiet which is available on this island in abundance.

Some of the younger mill workers I spoke to also had optimistic expectations and plans to 'stay around'. One of them, in his early twenties, described how he had started in the mill and expressed his hope that a 'bright future' for the industry would allow him to continue working in it for many years to come. In his questionnaire, he stated:

I never really had any experience with Harris Tweed or the mill before I started working here. I always assumed it was just some old people in their sheds. I came over to visit my brothers when they were working here and I was intrigued at how it was produced. It wasn't until a year or two later my brother said there might be jobs available and I was totally fed up of my job at the time, so I came over and got the job. I've now been working here for longer than at my previous job. I still enjoy working here just as much as the first day – and hopefully I can be here for a long time and help Harris Tweed grow further.

Outside the mill, mixed backgrounds and an intimate understanding of the possibility of change were also part of the experiences of many weavers whose motivations to persist in the trade (despite acknowledging its uncertainty) were very much about certain ideas of what a fulfilling job and a good life might look like. Some weavers I spoke to, despite having spent much of their lives moving between jobs unrelated to the Harris Tweed industry, stressed how they still saw themselves primarily as Harris Tweed weavers, and some expressed their aspiration to be remembered as such when they eventually retired.

Calum's case, whose childhood memories were mentioned earlier in this chapter, was one of these examples. As he told me about his diverse career history and recent occupational pluralism – coming back from 'offshore', driving buses, and doing odd jobs while he waited to be given enough tweeds to weave full-time – he emphasized how he had done it in order to afford 'living here and returning to weaving'. If he had

been given a choice, he said, he ‘would have *never* left the industry’. When he was a teenager he was taught to weave by his father, eventually working at the loom and making a bit of money while he finished high school. Calum explained how this early experience had drawn him to the trade – he truly enjoyed the work. Back then he could see himself spending the rest of his life doing it. But Calum’s father, having lived through the recurrent peaks and slumps that have long characterized the Harris Tweed industry, had different ideas for his future. Calum explained:

‘(...) I wanted to carry on weaving, but my father wouldn't let me. (...) He was dead-against me carrying on weaving. (...) Purely because of the uncertainty in the industry. So, I was a bit annoyed at that – just to put it mildly.’

So, instead, Calum’s father advised him to consider alternative options, telling him:

‘You know, go out, get yourself a trade, and if you want to come back to weaving, come back to weaving. But at least you'll always have your trade to fall back on.’

Following his father’s advice, Calum trained as a commercial vehicle mechanic and found work in local garages. However, despite seeking other work in order to avoid the volatility of the Harris Tweed industry, Calum’s career would still be marked by the unpredictability that has characterized employment trends more generally in this region. It forced him to move between plans, jobs, and training opportunities in order to keep his home and family on the island.

However, in Calum’s case, the memory of his father’s weaving when ‘times were good’, shaped his own outlook and persistence even when faced with repeated employment changes, challenges, and disappointments. Telling his life story, Calum described an array of job changes and training experiences, exemplifying the kind of ‘occupational pluralism’ that has historically characterized livelihood strategies in this region (Mewett 1977). He always kept an eye on the tweed industry though – even as he worked in various garages, opened and closed his own, worked in a local oil fabrication yard, and in a civil engineering company. In the meantime, he considered other strategies to improve his employment prospects on the islands. He passed his lorry license, then his bus license.

Eventually, he found himself at a ‘wee bit of a loose end’ and finally ‘started making enquiries about working away from home’. When the opportunity to work offshore in

the oil industry emerged in 1997, Calum took it. When we spoke, though, he had recently given up that well-paid, relatively stable job in order to be ‘home’ with his family and to give weaving another try. While he was yet to be assigned enough tweeds to make a living by weaving alone – we first met when he was driving the local bus – Calum emphasized how he thought of himself as a ‘Harris Tweed weaver’. Regardless of the other skills, jobs and work experiences he accumulated, he declared:

If somebody asked me (...) and if I’m fortunate enough to reach the age of retirement, if somebody asked ‘what were you’, I would say ‘I was predominantly a Harris Tweed weaver’.

For other weavers I met, the idea of being ‘a weaver’ was also an important part of how they saw themselves and their own work. Catherine, who had grown up in Lewis but had moved ‘away’ – like many islanders – to study and work, eventually chose to return to the islands to raise her son. Now in her early forties, she described what ‘being a weaver’ meant for her after working several other unrelated jobs, how it related to her sense of self, and how it also defined a set of conditions for a happy and fulfilling working life:

*Catherine:* I get a great satisfaction from telling people this is what I do. It’s very satisfying to say you are *a ‘something’* anyway. Rather than just ‘I work in *a...*’. It’s nice to have an actual job title. But this is so unusual. And so... unique. And it always starts a conversation when you tell someone what you do. And, I don’t know, I just – I get great satisfaction from it. I enjoy *producing* something. (...)

*Joana:* (...) so would you say it’s a meaningful kind of work?

*Catherine:* Yes. I read an article about the... One of the secrets to happiness being... having a job that you actually produce something – it doesn’t matter what it is. (...) But if at the end of the day you can point to something and say ‘I did that’. And it’s not so much say, on a production line, making match boxes, because you could say, yes ‘I did that’. It’s something that involves a bit of skill, and a bit of craftsmanship. Apparently, people in these jobs have the highest level of job satisfaction. Because they’ve put something into this, and this is what’s come out of it. And it’s unique to them. And I... I’d have to agree with that.

Other weavers I met shared the sense that their job allowed them to pursue what they saw as a ‘life worth leading’, not only in terms of individual job satisfaction, but also in terms of their personal beliefs and moral stances. For David and Rebecca, an English couple of weavers with a young family who had moved to Lewis a few years earlier (see

Chapter 3), the ‘flexibility’ inherent to the job of a Harris Tweed weaver was an essential part of the lifestyle they had chosen and valued, despite possible income and work uncertainty. David spoke at length about how Harris Tweed weaving fit with their choices, expectations, and ideas of what constituted a good life. He emphasized that this was a job that worked for them because it matched the kind of life that they had chosen to lead, where you may not ‘get rich’, but you may ‘get fit’ – and not just from pedaling the loom. David explained how uncertainty about future work assignments meant that they might not be able to afford ‘expensive luxuries and mortgages’, but how this job allowed them to be their own bosses, free from the constraints of a fixed timetable:

*David:* You’re never going to get rich at this job, right? I guarantee you that. (...) You might get fit, but you ain’t gonna to get rich, I guarantee you that. But (...) there’s a seesaw to any job. And the downside of this job is its uncertainty. There’s no constant income. That that’s not guaranteed. So it doesn’t suit everybody. There’s uncertainty about the work that you get, and how long the work will last for. (...) The industry could fall flat on its thumb. Because you’re working as a self-employed person in a fluctuating industry, if your life circumstances need you to be seeking out loans and debts and mortgages and things like that, it’s not viable. Right? This is the parallel of life. And also, you’re never going to become a millionaire. But on the flipside of that, to a certain extent you’re your own boss. I haven’t had to ask anybody to speak to you today. You know what I mean?

He continued weighing the ‘pros and cons’ of the job, ultimately highlighting how vital this flexibility was for him and Rebecca – particularly as they were raising young children, who they wanted to be present for:

Right. If the school phoned up and said ‘your child has fallen over can you come and see him at the school’, I haven’t got to speak to my boss and ask my boss ‘can I go and collect him?’, right. Which might mean that I wouldn’t work this afternoon. But, and this is the other seesaw, right? If I go and my son gets injured and I take him to the hospital this afternoon, if I don’t work this afternoon, I’m not getting paid for this afternoon. Right. This is the seesaw. (...)

[Today] the kids will be home at three o’clock and then I can get back inside [to see] my children. So yeah, that makes life satisfying. But, so... there’s no holiday pay, there’s no sick pay, there’s no constant guarantee of work, [so] it doesn’t suit everybody. (...) But the other side of it is, if I need to go and do something this afternoon, I’ll go and do it. But then the flipside of that is it might mean I’m out here until eleven o’clock to catch up. So you can choose (...). You can stop working, but you’ve still got to work. (...)

You do what you can. It was our life choice. And... it's not just an economic choice to say that we raised our children. We chose all this. And... I wouldn't change it for the world. And we're lucky that the industry was busy, or is busy now. And we're lucky that it's in a period that we were raising our kids. (...)

But that's another aspect of the job. That the job's flexible in that nature – *the flexibility is a real plus*. A massive, massive plus to life. But if we chose to lead a different life, then the flexibility would be a pain. (...) Does that make sense?

It was our life choices that allowed us to be flexible. (...) And if you've got a job that allows you to be that flexible then *yipee!* Yipee to that. Because it's allowing you... it's taking that rigid nature away from everything.

Later in this conversation, David discussed how certain expectations and moral stances could fundamentally shape one's experiences of work and life. He emphasized how the possibility of doing 'honest work' should be pursued and celebrated, citing his own experience working in Harris Tweed weaving as one that allowed him to maintain his 'dignity' and feel 'proud' of what the work he did and the kind of life he led:

Work can be honest, and profit can be honest. It just depends on people's life expectations. So if I think I'm going to drive around in a Jaguar, and extend my house to double its size, and retire when I'm 50, and go on cruises, I'm not. Because I haven't got a job that allows me to do that. But I've got a job that I've got some pride in. (...)

And pride's expensive. If you got pride, you generally don't accumulate money. (...)

Which makes pride dear. But (...) there's something more than just money in the world. We've all got to make money, and we've got to have money – but man if you can accumulate it and maintain your dignity, then that's a special thing. And having a job that you're happy doing, that you can be productive with, that's something special as well. They're not all like that.

They're not. There's not many like it. Man, and if you can find one then *bockeroo!* – you've landed on your feet. Sink your fingers into it and hang on to it for as long as you can. (...)

But that's a thing that a lot of people never, they... I can remember being at school, no one talked about this at school. And they had careers opportunities and all that. And they never said, like no one ever talked about, whether you are going to be able to maintain your dignity.

They had been lucky with their timing so far, David admitted. They could afford buying their loom because someone was trying to get rid of it very cheaply after the industry hit a historic low. Shortly afterwards, demand for the tweed increased, making them, as David put 'lucky that the industry [has been] (...) busy in a period when we are raising our kids'.

The different ways in which David and other Harris Tweed workers – either employed in mills or working as independent weavers – narrated their lives and daily experiences of work revealed not only how they saw themselves today, but also how these impressions related to past experiences and future aspirations. Discussing the individual perceptions and experiences of the industry’s *predictable unpredictability* often led to conversations about how workers understood their lives and moral values more generally. Focusing on workers’ personal narratives emphasized how different people inhabited their present conditions, anticipated the future, and made sense of their choices and beliefs in relation not only to their current skills, knowledge, and work practices, but also in connection to wider events and imagined possibilities.

#### 4. Conclusion

Anthropologists have aptly described different ways in which workers’ responses to structural challenges, changing and difficult circumstances exemplify particularly skilled, cunning, or sensitive practices (e.g. Prentice 2012, 2015; Mollona 2009; Gershon 2017). Some authors have proposed that some of these strategies and practices could be grouped together under specific categories describing people’s place within wider socio-economic circumstances. In recent writings on work, labour and job-seeking, expressions such as ‘self as enterprise’ (e.g. Kelly 2013), ‘self as business’ (e.g. Gershon 2017), ‘neoliberal subjectivities’ (e.g. Prentice 2015), among others, have become increasingly prominent. While these expressions are sometimes helpful in characterizing particular sets of circumstances observed in labour markets in contemporary transnational capitalism, I suggest that they also risk obscuring the actual lived experiences, worldviews, and shifting outlooks of the individuals whose practices they seek to describe.

Focusing on the multiplicity of workers’ lives, stories and histories involved in the making of Harris Tweed, I discussed some of the ways in which anthropological research into the conditions and experiences of workers – particularly those finding



themselves in uncertain or flexible employment – can benefit from a critical engagement with the memories, reflections and future projections expressed in their biographies and personal narratives. I presented two ways in which workers’ narratives and subjectivities can contribute to more nuanced understandings of past, present, and imagined futures for working lives. Firstly, I focused on the Harris Tweed industry’s history of peaks and slumps to examine how workers’ narratives in the present placed themselves and their family histories in relation to those fluctuations in the past. Secondly, I presented different examples of workers’ backgrounds and diverse career histories to explore the relationships between anticipation strategies, professional choices, and ideas about where and how to lead a ‘good life’. A common thread between different narratives was their development in a context of regional labour uncertainty, where particular ways of facing the constant possibility (and the lived realities) of *change* have developed, shaping discussions, expectations, and life plans in important ways.

Learning about various individual experiences of these changes provided insights on the possibility of regarding them not simply as unexpected troubles, but rather, as some workers pointed out, an inherent part of life and a fairly predictable feature of career trajectories in this region:

*Calum:* The way I view it is... nothing stays the same. Things are constantly changing, constantly evolving. There’s no point in you getting comfortable in something, say, ‘right this is going to last for five years, or ten years’. (...) My view on it is – it lasts the length of time it lasts. And let’s just work at it while it’s there.

The concept of anticipation, along with the insights drawn from personal narratives and biographical accounts, can offer unique contributions to an anthropology of work and labour that is concerned not only with the historically-specific emergence of particular livelihood strategies, but also with the place they occupy in people’s everyday experiences, individual subjectivities, biographical narratives and long-term expectations. As people navigate labour uncertainty from a position that is informed by various kinds of histories – regional, industrial, familial, personal – their practices of ‘anticipation’ reveal precisely the nuanced ways in which individual practices and outlooks are uniquely shaped.

Considering these questions, it becomes crucial to reflect on the role played by anthropologists as particular kinds of chroniclers – and the responsibilities that this position entails. In my own research, reflecting on the ways in which people’s

narratives, optimism and hopefulness shifted according to current preoccupations, circumstances and job prospects highlighted the importance of long-term ethnographic fieldwork. As narratives on ‘freedom’ and ‘loving one’s job’ were sometimes replaced by worried silence or more sober descriptions, I was constantly reminded of the complexity and ever-changing nature of people’s lives, relationships, and outlooks.

Thinking about anticipation and its articulation with personal narratives highlighted how long-term ethnographic fieldwork can contribute, in unique ways, to developing research practices that reflect a greater awareness to potential changes not only in ‘the world’, but also in people’s lives. Paying attention to the ways in which these transformations shape individual narratives, expectations, and opinions at different times has profound implications for the making of anthropological knowledge. Moreover, considering how individuals frame their own biographies, stories, and opinions in relation to broader social, economic and political issues offers invaluable insights to readers and researchers seeking to understand labour uncertainty, in both the near and distant futures. In this context, the ethnographer can play a vital role as a chronicler that considers both the complexities of particular ‘presents’, and the importance of bringing different ‘voices’ together, through time, into a dialogue that can inform anthropological knowledge-making in particularly nuanced ways.

## Chapter 5

### Manufacturing repertoires: the politics and poetics of production, ‘tradition’ and representation

#### 1. Introduction

One of the distinctive features of the Harris Tweed industry is its long and eventful history. The enduring reputation of the hand-woven woollen cloth, along with the industry’s longevity, its exclusive connection to these islands, and the peculiar manufacturing model it has retained despite recurrent challenges, are some of the features that have made the Harris Tweed industry widely recognizable for its ‘heritage value’. Since the early days of the industry, the reputation and commercial success of Harris Tweed have partly derived from its association with particular ideas of ‘tradition’ and ‘authenticity’, supported by promotional materials that, for a long time, highlighted the *preservation* of particular local practices (see Ennew 1982). While I learned, during my fieldwork, that the continuity of the Harris Tweed industry resulted not simply from preservation and repetition, but from the ingenious intertwinement of old *and* new practices as islanders strived to ensure its development over time, I also realized the continued relevance of terms like ‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’ in its existence.

In many ways, the continued appeal of the industry’s heritage value could be located within broader trends, observed across the world, to protect and memorialize particular practices and expressions labelled as traditional, perceived as crystallised relics of the past and deemed valuable in part due to their longevity. Anthropology has been at the forefront of critically informed approaches to the study of what has been variously referred to as a ‘memory fever’ (Huyssen 2003), ‘memory craze’ (Berliner 2005), ‘heritage industry’ (Hewison 1987) and ‘heritage crusade’ (Lowenthal 1998) – expressions ‘coined to characterize an increase in public attention to the past, especially its commemoration and preservation’ (Macdonald 2013:3). In particular, the discipline has revealed the importance of studying micro contexts and dynamics in order to understand localised expressions, views and lived experiences of what have been

described as ‘global processes’. Focusing on the ‘European memory complex’, Macdonald emphasized the importance of looking at differences among regional contexts and histories within Europe itself, in order to learn about ‘the various ways of performing history and memory, as well to hear the numerous voices that can be involved’ (2013:4). Highlighting the contribution that anthropology can offer to the study of what appears to be a global trend, Macdonald quotes Bendix’s claim that ‘only such micro approaches, in fact, can properly reveal the local specificity of a global heritage regime’ (Bendix 2009:255, quoted in Macdonald 2013:9).

Seeking to understand the implications, complexity and diversity of ways in which past events, expressions and accumulated knowledge are celebrated and memorialized, requires acknowledging how these processes are shaped by present circumstances, and thus subject to change in different ‘presents’. In the case of so-called ‘heritage-rich’ industries that remain active today (and the regions that came to be defined in part by their continuity), much can be learned from local populations and specialized workers about the role played in their lives by the recognition and valorization of local occupations, crafts and other ‘traditional’ practices. Herzfeld’s work, for example, revealed some of the ambiguities and tensions that emerge when artisans are ‘caught up in the paradox of what we might call “the globalization of locality”: the emphasis on preserving tradition and heritage, whether as theme parks or as “collectibles”’ (2004:194).

Considering these dynamics requires examining not only how local people engage with particular region-specific histories and references, but also how particular regions and local practices are depicted and perceived by ‘external’ audiences. Ideas of ‘heritage’ and ‘tradition’ can shape, in important ways, the establishment of particular representations of places, people, and ways of life. The narratives and depictions featured in promotional materials, travel literature, journalistic reports, among other wide-reaching ‘image-making’ media can affect, in important ways, social, political and economic dynamics at a local and regional level (e.g. Ennew 1982, 1980a; Munz 2012). These expressions can reflect, in themselves, certain ‘hierarchies of value’ (Herzfeld 2004) and hegemonic tensions, often revealing power inequalities in the establishment of dominant narratives. Sometimes these processes privilege the political and economic interests of a few, revealing relationships of power that sideline precisely those populations and regions that end up being affected by the popularization of particular

(and often essentialising) descriptions and characterizations (e.g. Venkatesan 2009a, 2009b; Tsing 1993; Munz 2012).

At the same time, however, considering the political implications of terms such as ‘heritage’ and ‘tradition’ demands recognizing the creative ways in which individuals and groups have also mobilized particular categories, conventions, and narratives about the past to defend alternative political possibilities, projects and aspirations. From collective disputes over local resources and land use, to the proliferation of movements advocating for the recognitions of indigenous and intellectual property rights, anthropologists have variously explored how diverse groups and individuals across the world draw on heritage-related terminology and narratives that can contribute, in important ways, to legitimizing and advancing a diversity of claims (e.g. Mackenzie 2013; Geismar 2013; Anderson and Geismar 2017). Efforts to uphold the Harris Tweed industry’s reputation and ensure its continuity have presented similar arguments, successfully mobilizing terms like ‘tradition’ and ‘authenticity’ to support them. Significant legal and institutional support has resulted precisely from invoking both the socio-economic *needs* of the region, and the value of its *cultural specificity* – from the 1910 Orb trademark protection, to the 1993 Harris Tweed Act of Parliament, and the more recent 2018 awarding of the ‘World Craft City’ status to the islands (making it the first region in the UK, and the second in Europe to receive the distinction from the World Craft Council – WCC).

Studies describing the socio-economic processes taking place in regions where particular industries and occupations have become conflated with the ‘cultural identity’ of the people and places they’re associated with, have revealed the diversity of social dynamics, individual subjectivities, and political tensions they involve (Nadel-Klein 1991, 2003; Munz 2012; Herzfeld 2004). I draw on some of these observations to highlight the importance of interrogating and examining, from a local perspective, the perceived and promoted heritage value and cultural richness of industries like Harris Tweed (and regions like the Outer Hebrides). At the same time, I propose moving beyond the concept of ‘heritage’ and employing instead the concept of ‘repertoires’ to interrogate and examine the role played by certain shared references (including elements that might usually be grouped under the category of ‘heritage’) in the lives and imaginations of people who work in the Harris Tweed industry today.

Doing so I build on Macdonald's (1997) reflections on the concept of 'repertoire' and its usefulness in considering the flexible and variable ways in which notions of culture and identity are enacted and reimagined. Like Macdonald, I show how this term allows us to consider the complex and layered ways in which people engage with local histories and practices in the present, revealing the importance of reconsidering not just assumed cultural boundaries, but 'the ways in which "bounding" is performed' (1997: 247). Similarly, I argue that this concept can be taken even further to examine the flexible, productive and inventive ways in which people not only engage with existing repertoires, but actively contribute to the constant *making* and *remaking* of particular cultural productions, narratives, skills and knowledge. I argue that focusing on *shared* repertoires, in particular, both denies the stagnation and stability often suggested by terms such as heritage and tradition, *and* draws attention to the participative and layered ways in which repertoires are produced, highlighting their role in the production of inclusive forms of belonging. Before considering particular examples of shared repertoires – from language, to work practices and pattern designs – it makes sense to briefly examine how earlier representations of the industry focused on so-called 'traditional' practices, contrasting with more encompassing and participative representations in the present.

## **2. 'Representing' the industry**

Harris Tweed producers and the Harris Tweed Authority have long been involved in promotional efforts that emphasize the historical connection of the cloth to the land and the people of the Outer Hebrides. Today, the Harris Tweed Authority, as well as the mills, weavers, retailers, and designers making products out of the cloth, are all involved, in different ways, in representing the industry to external audiences. Current promotional materials offer a window into production practices taking place in weavers' loomsheds and in industrial woollen mills. However, this has not always been the case. Writing in the early 1980s, Ennew described how depictions of the Harris Tweed industry (and, by extension, of the region that it was bound to) were primarily made available, throughout the twentieth century, in advertising campaigns that presented a partial and often essentialising picture of local life (Ennew 1982:170).

Drawing on her fieldwork experience in the 1970s, and examining media reports and promotional materials, Ennew described the prevalence of portrayals that privileged romanticized images of an idealized traditional way of life. Ennew positioned these images ‘within a complex of ideas about the Hebrides’ that she described as ‘the Hebridean myth’ (Ennew 1982:171), located more broadly within mainstream constructions about the ‘Celtic Fringe’, which she defined as ‘formed from those areas of the United Kingdom which have been mythologized as wild and natural since the eighteenth century’ (Ennew 1982: 171-172).

Ennew’s analysis highlighted how promotional materials and media reports contributed to reproduce ‘the dichotomies produced in the Celtic Myth’ (Ennew 1982:175), by focusing on production processes but purging those elements that might be perceived as less ‘traditional’ or ‘authentic’ (Ennew 1982). In several of these representations, the role of the spinning mills and mill workers – markers of modernity and industrial labour, sometimes equated with ‘falling standards’ (Ennew 1982:174-175; Thompson, 1975: 4 of unpaginated pages) – is either absent or understated, and essentially ‘glossed over in advertising material’ (Ennew 1982:175).

Throughout most of the twentieth century, Harris Tweed workers were frequently represented in internationally-circulated media as engaging in production practices that had already become largely obsolete within the industry. Ennew points out how, in a TV program produced in 1976, for example, the worker chosen to represent the industry was a weaver who, unlike the vast majority of weavers at the time, engaged in the entire process of production of the cloth she marketed, employing ‘traditional’ manufacturing methods from shearing, spinning and dyeing the wool, before proceeding to hand-weave it (Ennew 1982:172). While the program provided, like Thompson’s book (1969), relevant information about ancestral production practices, the fact that this information was presented as representative of a contemporary situation wrongly suggested that weavers were generally responsible for hand-spinning their own yarn at home – long after mill-spun wool had become the staple of the industry, fully included in the legal definition of trademark protected Harris Tweed since 1934.

The fact that, in some of these depictions ‘chronology is collapsed, and past and present production processes are not clearly distinguished’, Ennew argues, exemplifies some of the strategies used in ‘the production of the Hebridean or any other Myth’ (1982: 173-175). In emphasizing the role played by these past depictions of the industry in the

‘construction, retention and representation’ of Harris Tweed as a particular kind of cottage industry, Ennew points out the apparent absence of voices, experiences and views of ordinary workers, and how this may have contributed to a disjuncture between certain anachronistic representations and contemporary labour realities.

More recent portrayals of the industry that focus on manufacturing processes contrast, in important ways, with earlier representations of production practices and local ways of life. Not only have mill-based production processes and mill workers started to be featured in more recent reports, but weavers have themselves become increasingly vocal, their willingness to play a public role in representing the industry supported and promoted by the Harris Tweed Authority. These transformations have encompassed, among other factors, an emphasis on the pedagogic mission of the Harris Tweed Authority, the widening of access to communication technologies like the Internet and social media, and an increase in weavers’ ‘open loomsheds’ that welcome visitors. More recently, mill tours have also become popular among tourists. In this process, the local image and social status of industry workers, and of weavers in particular, has become less stereotyped and monolithic. As I would soon learn from several interlocutors, these changes have also shaped, in important ways, how Harris Tweed workers themselves saw their work, evaluated their role within the industry, and made sense of their place in the world.

Exploring the implications of ‘global hierarchies of value’ (Herzfeld 2004) as well as processes of ‘heritagisation’ in the lives of workers requires understanding the creative ways in which these notions are perceived and co-opted locally. At the same time, considering the role played by words such as ‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’ in workers’ everyday lives and labour experiences allows us to ask certain questions that can unsettle assumptions about the charged meanings of those kinds of expressions, precisely by considering the contexts of their usage. However, I argue, scholarly discussions about the ways in which people make sense of the past in the present, and how they elaborate on established legacies according to particular understandings of various kinds of pasts (local, industrial, autobiographical), would greatly benefit from a more critical understanding – and distancing from – overgeneralizing analytical concepts such as ‘heritage’.

I propose, instead, that we examine the making, transmission, and continuous development of knowledge, imaginations, and cultural productions within the Harris



Tweed industry through the lens of the concept of ‘repertoires’. In the following sections I show how considering the production of various kinds of things as part of a constellation of *shared* repertoires – from cloth, to songs, pattern designs, and personal understandings of ‘inheritance’ – allows us to move beyond the analytical limitations of terms like ‘heritage’ and ‘tradition’ altogether.

### 3. Shared repertoires

As I sought to learn about the history of the islands, I was gradually introduced to the various ways in which the past of this region has been archived, studied, and celebrated not only by external authorities and local scholars, but also by ordinary people throughout the archipelago. History books researched by local and non-local academics, as well as memoirs written by islanders of various backgrounds, sat side by side in the Local History section of the well-furnished Public Library in Stornoway. Voluntary-led local historical societies proliferated throughout the islands, demonstrating the success and appeal of the *Comainn Eachdraidh* (Historical Society) movement that began to take hold in Lewis around 1977, when the first of these institutions was created in Ness (*Comunn Eachdraidh Nis*). The website of *Tasglann nan Eilean Siar* (Western Isles Archives) lists 22 Local Historical Societies (including the ‘Western Isles Transport Preservation Group’) in the Outer Hebrides. In these societies, visitors can find a diversity of materials, from archives containing local genealogies collected by members, photographs, oral histories, and personal documents; to small exhibitions featuring a diversity of artefacts and documents, mostly loaned or donated by local people and institutions.

In Ness, a considerable section of the local historical society’s small museum is devoted to Harris Tweed weaving. An old Hattersley loom takes up most of the space inside the life-size replica of a weaver’s domestic loomshed, surrounded by tools and other paraphernalia that one might find in a Harris Tweed weaver’s workplace. In the Gearrannan blackhouse village in the west side of Lewis, where recently refurbished blackhouses<sup>56</sup> accommodate visitors and offer a historical interpretation of life in this

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<sup>56</sup>A blackhouse (*taigh-dubh* in Gaelic) is a domestic dwelling with thick stone walls and a thatched roof made of turf and straw, usually held down by rocks suspended from heather ropes. For a long time, blackhouses were the most common kind of domestic dwelling in this region, but throughout the twentieth century, with government support, they started being replaced by more ‘modern’ concrete and plaster ‘white

kind of dwelling (which was still being used well into the twenty-first century), a retired weaver occasionally offers weaving demonstrations on a functioning Hattersley loom. Nearby, a weaver who works in his domestic loomshed every day, weaving cloth that will be stamped with the Orb trademark and sold as Harris Tweed, welcomes visitors into his loomshed and tells them about his work, about the history of the industry, and the workings of the loom.

Beyond history books, archives, museum collections and demonstrations, past events and practices also feature prominently in local storytelling, with tales blending fact and fiction, historical characters and mythical narratives. Storytelling of this kind was a key part of entertainment in *ceilidhs*<sup>57</sup> (a formerly widespread practice that has now nearly disappeared), and also filled the verses of countless Gaelic poems and songs that are still performed today. Until recently, township bards throughout the islands would also compose songs that chronicled mundane events taking place around them, often in a humorous manner, crystallising them in compositions that survive until today. An example of this kind of composition, locally celebrated and recognized by several of my interlocutors, is *The Loom Song*. Made popular by The Lochies, a ‘Gaelic Supergroup’ from Lewis, it was written by Murdani ‘Mast’ Kennedy (1926 – 2010), a retired seaman from Lochs parish in Lewis. Having travelled the world aboard several ships, he eventually returned to the islands and ended up working – initially reluctantly – as a Harris Tweed weaver. In the verses of the song, Murdani captures the frustration of many weavers I met as they navigated the random ‘loom problems’ they ran into:

#### **Òran na Beairt**

le Murdani Mast  
air a sheinn le Seonaidh MacMhaolain

Sèist:

'S i bheairt a rinn mo shàrachadh;  
'S i bheairt a rinn mo shàrachadh;  
Nuair a chuir mi innte spàl

#### **The Loom Song**

By Murdani Mast (Murdo ‘Mast’ Kennedy)  
Song by Seonaidh MacMhaolain (Seonaidh ‘Beag’ MacMillan)

Chorus:

It's the loom that has worn me out  
It's the loom that has worn me out  
When I put the shuttle in it,

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houses’ (*taigh-geal*). Parman explains that the ‘black’ and ‘white’ distinction did not necessarily refer to their actual colour (even though blackhouses were prone to have darker inside walls due to the soot released by the fire located in its center), but it symbolized an opposition between ‘old and new, dirty and clean’ (in the past, cattle also lived in blackhouses, under the same roof as the family) (Parman 2005[1990]:55-56). Today, most people live in ‘white houses’, but blackhouses remain a part of the local landscape – whether in ruins, or recovered and turned into weaving sheds, storage units, or refurbished domestic dwellings.

<sup>57</sup> Today, the widespread image of a *cèilidh* is that of an event where dancing is the central activity. However, in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, a *cèilidh* used to centre on visiting practices, with long evenings spent sharing stories, poems and songs at one of the neighbours’ houses – sometimes called *taigh-cèilidh* (ceilidh house) if its owner became a recurrent host.

*Bhris i se h-uile snàth a bh'ann.  
'S i bheairt a rinn mo shàrachadh.*

It broke every thread that was there.  
It's the loom that has worn me out

*Ged nach eil mi eòlach oirr',  
Tha eagal orm nach còrd i rium;  
Tha na h-iomallan innte cho dlùth  
Agus chan eil sùil far 'm bu chòir dha bhith.*

Although I am not familiar with it,  
I'm afraid I won't enjoy it;  
The heddles are so close together in it,  
and my eye does not lie where it should.

*'S a bheil sibh an dùil am pàigh i dhomh,  
No am buin i ri mo nàdar-sa?  
Ma bhios sin fìor, gun tèid mi fhìn  
A-null air sgriob a dh'Astràilia.*

Do you think it will pay for me?  
Or suit my nature?  
If this is true then I will go  
On a trip to Australia!

*'S e chanas cuid dhe mo chàirdean rium,  
" 'S ann ort a bha am fàilligeadh;  
Bha thu gun diù agus 's tu bha faoin  
Nuair a thug thu 'n taobh-sa phlàigh bha sin."*

Some of my friends say:  
"Haven't you made the foolish choice.  
You were without regard and you were daft  
When you brought that pest here".

*'S ged bheirinn Eachann Sheòrais thuic'  
'S gun cur e i an òrdugh dhomh,  
'S e chanas e rium, "Chan eil innt' ach a' bhrùid  
Thàinig a-nall à Uig — 's nach bu chòir i sin."*

Even if I was to fetch Eachann Sheòrais [Hector George]  
So he would put it in order for me,  
He'll only say "She's but a brute,  
That came from Uig but should have remained  
there".

[Gabh an t-sèist às dèidh gach rann.]

[Repeat the chorus at the end of each stanza.]

Several of the weavers I met knew this song intimately, recognizing in the lyrics something of their own struggles. However, the song was also well-known among other islanders outside the industry, and its subject was recognizable even to those who could not speak Gaelic, because of the familiar rhythmic sound that marked its melody – an instrumental hook that mimicked the unmistakable *clickaddy-clack, clickaddy-clack* of the Hattersley loom. These and other local songs offered windows into the imaginaries and lived experiences of local bards and their neighbours. The widespread local awareness of cultural productions like *The Loom Song*, as well as novels and memoirs that chronicled islanders' experiences, also revealed how shared experiences and references were articulated and enthusiastically celebrated by those who recognized them. I was told about the way these references often helped people make sense of their own experiences and place in the world, conjuring images and memories in vivid, and sometimes emotionally-charged, ways.

One interlocutor once told me about the book she found 'most accurately depicted island life' – the novel titled *The Stornoway Way* (2005), written by Lewis-born author Kevin MacNeil. Although she had not been born in Lewis, she had spent most of her childhood and teenage years on the island, before moving 'away' to the mainland to work and study, and eventually deciding to move back to Lewis to raise her son. She had encountered this book while working 'away', and described it to me in the following terms:

It may be quite difficult to fully understand if you haven't grown up here, and there are countless in-jokes and references which will only be understood by an islander, but I first read this book while I was living away [in England] and my heart ached for my home and my people. It's a work of fiction which contains more fact than any amount of "tourist press", devastatingly beautiful and tragic.

When she found out that I was learning Gaelic and interested in local place-names, however, she told me that I might actually be able to understand at least *some* of these in-jokes.

Very glad you mentioned that you're learning Gaelic and about your interest in place names - in *the Stornoway Way* you'll see numerous footnotes relating to both. The mischievous author lists many Gaelic place names on the Island, but instead of giving their true meaning he makes up completely plausible alternatives, do not be fooled!

\* \* \*

In the case of the Harris Tweed industry, different people can draw on different strands of certain shared references to make sense of their engagement with the industry and the experience of living in this region. These may range widely, from a recognition of certain stories, songs and sounds (e.g. the loud '*clickaddy-clack, clickaddy-clack*' of the Hattersely loom); to memories of 'filling pirns' for weaving relatives or neighbours; to the ability to visually identify and name different woven pattern designs; to the technical knowledge of certain mill work or weaving work practices; from shared emotional experiences, understandings of, and ways of dealing with everyday work uncertainty, boredom, frustration, satisfaction and joy; to particular ways of relating to the product of one's own work. There are also particular cultural productions, shared languages, and skilled practices that have become more visibly associated with the making of Harris Tweed, and which are often invoked as tangible evidence of the industry's heritage value.

In this chapter I propose using the concept of *shared repertoires* to address the active and open-ended ways in which cultural practices and productions that are often described as forms of 'heritage' are continuously and collectively *made*, rather than

given. While I build on anthropologists' critical engagement with the politics of heritage making, including their recognition of those processes as deliberate efforts 'to canonize culture, to single out, fix and define particular historical legacies as 'essential' and constitutive of the collective' (Meyer et al 2018: 1), I show the analytical potential of moving beyond the concept of heritage. I suggest that the concept of shared repertoires illuminates, in more nuanced ways, the role played by particular shared languages, skills and knowledge, cultural expressions, visual vocabularies, and regional understandings in workers' everyday experiences of labour and life. At the same time, I build on Macdonald's argument on the significant role played *both* by 'overt cultural markers' (e.g. language) *and* 'other, outwardly less visible, and seemingly more messy, means through which belonging is articulated in everyday life' (1997: 12-13). I argue that the concept of shared repertoires shows precisely the importance of considering specific vocabularies and references selectively drawn on by our informants, without losing sight of the less obvious but equally vital understandings and references that inform notions, practices and experiences of belonging.

With a layered etymology and a multiplicity of meanings, the concept of 'repertoire' has been deployed by scholars of different disciplines in various ways. While the term is more commonly used in the fields of music and performative arts, referring for example to '[a] stock of dramatic or musical pieces which a company or performer has prepared or is accustomed to play; a person's stock of parts, tunes, songs, (...).' (OED 2018), other disciplines have relied on its alternative conceptual possibilities. Earlier definitions of the French *répertoire* included 'index, list, inventory', and a 'body of transmitted knowledge' (OED 2018), origins that may explain the current use of the English term in fields as diverse as linguistics ('verbal repertoire'), discourse analysis ('interpretive repertoires'), management ('genre repertoire'), molecular biology and biochemistry ('immune repertoire'), anthropology and sociology ('cultural repertoire') (Balbuena 2011:48).

Drawing on Balbuena's argument (2011) I emphasize the dynamic and participative possibilities of repertoires. A scholar of comparative literature and Jewish studies, Balbuena has suggested how this flexibility has made the concept of 'repertoire' particularly productive for examining, for example, the poetry and languages of the Sephardic Diaspora:

"Repertoire" has been imagined, or depicted metaphorically, not only as a list, but also as "a toolkit", "a building block", or "a set of resources". Such images emphasize the

flexibility of the repertoire and the different degrees to which it can be mobilized by either individual or collective agencies. Individuals or groups can choose to pick one or more elements from a pool at their disposal, a process that is thus infused with fluidity and variation. (Balbuena 2011: 48)

At the same time, as Balbuena points out, the Latin root of ‘repertoire’ hints at the open-ended, creative possibilities it allows – it includes ‘both discovery (in the latin *repertus*) and invention (in the Latin prefix *re*, or “again” + the verb *parere*, “to produce”)’ (Balbuena 2011: 47). It is this productive tension between shared repertoires and individual lives that I address here, discussing how certain shared references and ‘languages’ are understood locally, integrated into people’s perceptions of themselves, their work, and their place in the world. I concentrate on the ways in which people’s daily experiences of work are uniquely shaped by combinations of shared understandings and individual interpretations, occasionally creating opportunities for self-expression and self-discovery, within *and* beyond the contexts and moments of work.

#### 4. ‘Speaking our language’<sup>58</sup>

The loom does not make the same music  
In Lewis and in Leeds  
The Lewis looms have Gaelic.  
(Derick Thompson 1982)

Not only are the Outer Hebrides known as the only place in the world where Harris Tweed can be produced, but they are also the region with the greatest proportion of native Scottish Gaelic speakers today (see Fig. 5.1). Both of these elements have played an important part in the everyday experiences of islanders, shaping occupational opportunities, ideas of ‘belonging’, and people’s sense of self. Drawing a parallel between these two important aspects of local life can highlight the role that they have played in defining certain shared repertoires and individual self-identities, as well as

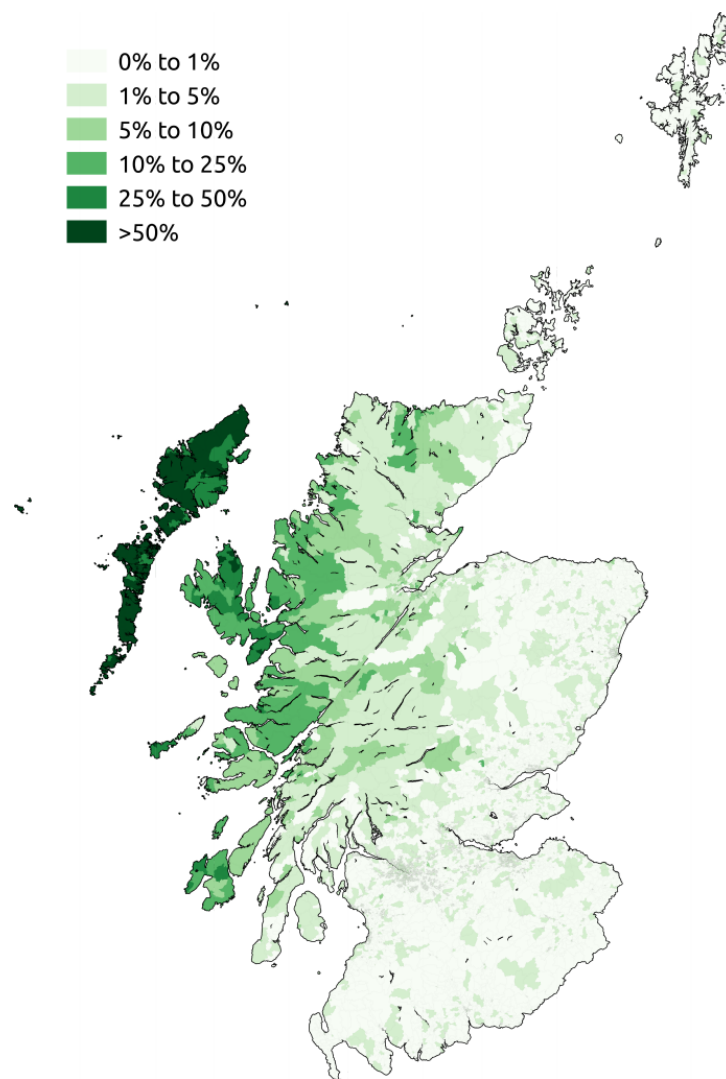
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<sup>58</sup> *Speaking our language* is the title of a popular TV program devised for Scottish Gaelic learners, aired by the BBC for the first time in 1993. The episodes are still transmitted on BBC Alba today and they have also been made available for streaming on YouTube.

their potential for generating inclusive formulations that encompass ideas of ‘commonality’ and ‘difference’.

Even as number the number of Gaelic speakers decreased sharply during the twentieth century throughout the *Gàidhealtachd* – a term still used today to refer to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, denoting their previous history as predominantly Gaelic speaking regions – the Western Isles continued to be known as the ‘Gaelic heartlands’. However, despite the continued presence of Gaelic in everyday conversations in the Outer Hebrides, there has long been a sense that the language faces a sustained threat of disappearance. Over decades, this feeling has been addressed and discussed by Gaelic speakers themselves – both in informal conversations and in more formal and documented ways – informing efforts to bring about a ‘Gaelic Renaissance’ (see Macdonald 1997).

Described by speakers as ‘more than just a language’, Gaelic has long been understood as encompassing a ‘culture’ that includes particular practices, worldviews and moral understandings. ‘External’ awareness to the significance of this cultural complex in the Highlands and Islands has long influenced national legislation and policy-making. Repeated efforts, between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, to increase the use of English and prevent the use of Scottish Gaelic in the region were shaped by the idea that Gaelic language and culture were in part to blame for political instability, associated with a sense of local independence from the authority of centralised governments. Among other initiatives, the passing of the Education (Scotland) Act 1872, which sidelined the Gaelic language and forbid generations of native Gaelic speakers to use their language in school, would contribute to a sustained decline in Gaelic speakers and in the standing of the language throughout the country. While recent Government efforts to reverse the effects of this legislation have led to a significant transformation in Gaelic learning practices, I met several older people who still remembered being beaten in school if they were found speaking Gaelic. Today, despite speaking Gaelic fluently, they were unable to write in their own language. Their situation contrasts with that of more recent generations, whose ability to embark on government-supported programmes designed to increase the standing of the language – such as Gaelic-medium education – meant they were able to both read and write in Gaelic, even if they used English more frequently in their everyday lives.



**Fig. 5.1.** Geographic distribution of Gaelic speakers in Scotland (2011), representing the proportion of respondents in the 2011 census aged 3 and above who stated that they can speak Scottish Gaelic. (Map by SkateTier [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)])

While recent efforts to improve the situation of Gaelic in Scotland have brought about a renewed hope for its future, a sense of vulnerability and loss informed, for decades, the writings and initiatives of Gaelic-speaking scholars, language activists, authors, artists and musicians. Some of this work highlighted the political dynamics that led to the progressive deterioration of the place of Gaelic in the Highlands and Islands, describing the ‘internal colonialism’ and discriminatory policies that marked the relationship between this region and various English and Lowland powers in the past. Among other authors, Derick Thompson (born and raised in Lewis) and Iain Crichton Smith (raised in



Lewis) have written rather poignantly about these issues, discussing how a fear of linguistic, cultural and identity loss encompassed their experience of bilingualism and affected their personal lives, imaginations and worldviews. Discussing his experience as a bilingual writer, Iain Crichton Smith (1989) quoted Derick Thompson's poem (see above) to refer to his own divided sense of self, describing how his bilingual and 'bicultural' self perceived and experienced, in a profound way, fundamental differences between the English and Gaelic worlds he inhabited.

Recent efforts to preserve and stimulate the continuity of Gaelic in Scotland have seen the emergence of vocal Gaelic-supporting movements, and the proliferation of policies and legislation aimed at reversing the effects of past 'faults'. Though the implementation of these plans have sometimes been contested, and involved complex social and political negotiations at a local level (see Macdonald 1997), they have contributed to improve the standing of the language and the possibilities for learning and cultivating it today. Despite some initial reticence, these initiatives eventually received enthusiastic support at a local level from many Gaelic speakers and non-Gaelic speakers, locals and incomers alike. This has become visible in the success of initiatives like the implementation of Gaelic medium education in Primary and Secondary schools, the popularity of higher education courses delivered in Gaelic and/or on Gaelic-related subjects; as well as the proliferation of Gaelic media jobs and other 'heritage' related employment where Gaelic language abilities are valued.

In Lewis, I met several incomer parents, for whom Gaelic was not the first language, who spoke passionately about their decision to place their children in Gaelic-medium education since primary school. Among the reasons for their choice, many parents mentioned the potential educational benefits brought to their children by the opportunity to grow up bilingual in this region, being offered the ability to access and engage with more than one linguistic and cultural world from a young age. More generally, this surge in interest and support for the language is thought to have brought back to Gaelic-speaking areas a more generalized sense of pride and confidence in the language, with the potential to reverse the sense of existential loss that several people have feared, mourned and written about for decades.

In the Outer Hebrides, Gaelic is still heard in everyday conversations – on the bus, in the supermarket, among neighbours and friends, on the radio. *BBC Radio nan Gaidheal* is based in Stornoway, and when I visited the local studios I was told that every single staff

member at the time was a Gaelic speaker – including an incomer colleague from England whose Gaelic was considered flawless. The long-standing influence of the language in this region is heard in the local English accents, found in a wealth of local place-names (some borrowing from Norse as well), documented and transmitted in songs, poems and stories. Its prevalence is also found in the richness of work-related and occupation-specific vocabulary, particularly regarding those activities that have long been part of the region’s history – fishing, crofting, Harris Tweed weaving and other wool-related work.

The wealth of Gaelic work songs, composed to accompany particular kinds of labour and often emerging while work was underway, attests to this legacy. As Thomas McKean points out, ‘the currency of song ran through nearly every aspect of working life in Gaelic society – from milking to churning, from reaping to rowing, from spinning to waulking’<sup>59</sup> (2007:131). While several of these activities are no longer common, or no longer involve as much singing as they used to in the past, this legacy remains documented in songs that have been recorded, archived, studied, and reinterpreted by musicians and researchers until today. In relation to the Harris Tweed industry, Gaelic waulking songs have been particularly celebrated and given visibility, with repertoires being sang in the local and national Mòd<sup>60</sup> by waulking groups (where actual re-enactments of the work process take place) and being reinterpreted by well-respected musicians as they tour the world.

For several people I met, the experience of working in the Harris Tweed industry was intertwined with their experience as Gaelic speakers. Some highlighted how Gaelic used to be ‘the language of the mills’, and how the fact that it was widely spoken in the workplace helped preserve specific vocabulary and keep the language alive through its quotidian local use. In the past, when new workers entered the mills in Lewis, I was told, even if they had grown used to speaking English in their everyday lives, they found

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<sup>59</sup> Formerly performed collectively by hand (or in some regions by foot), waulking is a key step in finishing the tweed. Before it was mechanised and performed in mills, tweed waulking involved rhythmically beating the cloth against a piece of wood, soaked with a solution that usually included urine, to shrink the woven web and improve its water-repellent properties. Involving vigorous physical work, waulking sessions were described as vibrant social occasions, when songs were sang and improvised to the rhythm of the waulking.

<sup>60</sup> Organised by *An Comunn Gàidhealach* (The Gaelic Association) and taking place yearly, the Royal National Mòd (*Am Mòd Nàiseanta Rìoghail*) is the most significant among other Mòds taking place throughout Scotland. In brief, a Mòd is an event celebrating Gaelic language and culture, and involves a set of different competitions in modalities that range from storytelling and poetry readings, to choral singing, psalm precenting and various kinds of traditional music. In 2016, when I was conducting fieldwork, the Royal National Mòd took place in Stornoway.

themselves surrounded by Gaelic speaking employees and had no option but to brush up on their language skills and use it as well. Today the Gaelic-speaking panorama in mills is slightly different, with English having taken over as the predominant language. However, the presence of Gaelic is still strong in certain departments and is the chosen language for everyday interaction between some of the workers I met. In one of the mills I spent time in, this linguistic preference was sometimes remarked on or made visible through humorous exchanges among Gaelic speakers and non-Gaelic speakers, who teased each other over the ability to speak the language, sometimes leading to the occasional ‘name-calling’. Drawing on the ‘historical’ division between those brought up in Stornoway, where English was usually more prevalent, and those brought up anywhere outside ‘town’, where people would have been raised in Gaelic speaking families and environments, fellow workers would use the locally common terms ‘maw’ and ‘townie’ in jest to refer to these distinctions.<sup>61</sup>

For certain weavers I met, Gaelic was an essential part of how they had learned to weave, and so it remained an essential part of their everyday work experience. Many had been taught to weave by Gaelic speaking relatives, neighbours or mentors (or had grown up around Gaelic speaking weavers who they helped *a’ dheanamh itchean* (‘filling pirns’), so their knowledge of weaving work, loom parts and mechanical problems was informed by the language. For many weavers today, seeking assistance from fellow weavers often involved being able to relay a loom problem on the phone using Gaelic vocabulary to refer to specific loom parts or mechanisms, sounds and movements. In the case of weavers using the old single-width Hattersley loom, which is renowned for its many individual moving parts, this required being familiar with an array of specialized terminology in Gaelic (though conversations I heard routinely moved between English and Gaelic).

Mòrag, a single-width weaver in her early thirties, told me about how important it was for her to continue using Gaelic in her everyday life, and particularly how she made herself ‘stick to speaking Gaelic’ when discussing loom problems or other weaving-

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<sup>61</sup> It is worth noting that while the term ‘maw’ has long had depreciative connotations, suggesting a kind of rural backwardness and being symbolized, among other things, by someone’s ability to speak Gaelic, it has also long been used humorously among locals and employed jocularly as a self-descriptor. Nevertheless, its use hints at the ambivalence that has historically characterized certain discussions about the value and reputation of Gaelic as a language, particularly in relation to ideas of progress and ‘modernity’ that became associated with the ability to speak English (and thus access to the legitimacy and powerful positions associated with it). More recently, however, transformations in public discourse and in the kinds of opportunities offered to Gaelic speakers have significantly shaped a general sense of self-esteem and self-confidence, perhaps rendering ‘insults’ like ‘maw’ less offensive.

related matters with fellow weavers. She described how this mattered for keeping this ‘heritage’ alive – both the weaving and the Gaelic terminology used to speak about it, which she saw as closer to ‘original’ ways of speaking about weaving work in this region. At the same time, she described how speaking Gaelic and weaving Harris Tweed fit together as part of a lifestyle that she had envisioned for herself – and that she saw as echoing the local practices of previous generations. In Chapters 3 and 4 I discussed some of the different ways in which working in the Harris Tweed industry was described by workers as allowing them to conduct a lifestyle that they saw as aligning with particular moral dispositions, aspirations, and ideas about how to lead ‘a good life’. Similarly, Mòrag’s commitment to preserving and bringing to life certain practices deemed ‘traditional’ revealed both a sense of a moral duty, and a very personal vision of what a good life might look like in the present and the future.

Having moved to the Scottish mainland in her early twenties to work and study, Mòrag eventually moved back to the island to take care of some of her relatives. As she found herself back in the village where she had grown up, juggling caring responsibilities with the opportunity to learn how to weave (and eventually becoming a weaver), her perspective on work and life also shifted. In her view, leading a good life in this place included having access to certain ‘modern comforts’ and technologies, and simultaneously pursuing certain ‘traditional’ practices and livelihood strategies that used to be common to most households in this village. Besides working in Harris Tweed weaving and speaking Gaelic, Mòrag collected seaweed to plant her potatoes, and cut peat for her family’s winter fire. Though she was only in her early thirties, Mòrag pointed out how much and how quickly things had changed since her childhood, when these practices were widespread, conducted collectively and collaboratively. Today, she found herself mostly on her own as she collected seaweed by the shore or cut peats in the moor, the absence of people reminding her of how much of a social dynamic there used to be in these labouring moments in the past. In this context, weaving Harris Tweed, and speaking to fellow weavers about that work in Gaelic, helped to anchor some of the cultural meaning and social value what she saw as having been lost in several other local working practices.

More generally, the ability to speak about work (whether in English or in Gaelic) presupposes the knowledge of other kinds of shared ‘languages’ and ways of knowing. Studying the Harris Tweed industry, trying to learn about it by spending time with workers and learning to work, made it clear that there were certain shared repertoires

and understandings that were not always easy to articulate but assumed to underlie the experiences of fellow workers. The shared references that united weavers in their *métier* included particular sets of technical and practical skills and knowledge, as well as particular practices, rhythms and subjective experiences of work and life – specific aspects that weavers recognized set their job apart from other occupations. Some of the weavers I met would even speak about weaving as a more *world-encompassing* occupation, with common principles and practices that united practitioners beyond the islands and the Harris Tweed industry. The acknowledgement of shared skills, knowledge and understandings that came with working in weaving thus informed a sense of self-identification with a broader occupational community – making some people feel, as one weaver put it, as though they were just one among many other ‘weavers of the world’. This weaver began by explaining that

Different people (...) may have a connection to [cloth-making] that has nothing really to do with Harris Tweed. See, making cloth is a funny thing. It’s... I think it’s something that’s ingrained in you. It can get underneath your skin.

In his view, the unique dispositions and experiences involved in the work of ‘making cloth’ placed Harris Tweed weavers among *other* weavers as well, connected by shared practices and understandings beyond borders and potential language barriers, as fellow members of

[a community of] weavers of the world. A community of practice that is more... sort of universal. You know, if I saw a weaver from... where do you come from? (...) If I went to Portugal, and I saw one of those wooden looms, and if I saw somebody working it – even though I couldn’t speak the language, we would be able to communicate. (...) I could understand what he or she is doing. (...) So it’s not just about Harris Tweed, (...) there’s a wider connection.

This cosmopolitan sense of belonging, which ran along the sense of a shared condition with fellow Harris Tweed weavers at a local level, highlighted how certain occupational commonalities were imagined to bind weavers together despite their other differences. This idea of a connection established through work – encompassing the particular practices, understandings, self-identities and requirements of the job – exemplified how inclusive notions of belonging were articulated.

In some ways, these ideas echo the inclusive possibilities of belonging suggested by a recent application, initiated by the Scottish Crofting Foundation, to have crofters<sup>62</sup> formally recognised as ‘indigenous people of the Highlands and Islands’. In a supporting document that draws on UN legislation and invokes the example of the Sami of northern Europe as references for this application, proponents highlight the inclusive nature of their application:

It is important to stress that the SCF [Scottish Crofting Federation] consider that indigenouness is an inclusive concept, and is primarily to be regarded culturally, rather than racially or genetically. (MacKinnon 2002: 8)

Explaining that the goal of this application is to prevent the further decline of crofting in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland – which crofters and their supporters attributed, in part, to the ‘elements within government’ perceived to ‘have encouraged this decline’ – the document highlights the importance of safeguarding the practices and principles that characterized ‘the crofting way of life’. In their view, this would enable people who have decided to live as crofters to do so, regardless of their birthplace or genealogy:

Regardless of their family background, if a person has chosen to adopt and promote elements of the traditional culture of the Highlands and Islands then they should be considered indigenous. This is in accordance with Highland tradition – as the Gaelic proverb puts it: “The bonds of milk [nurture/culture] are stronger than the bonds of blood [nature/race]”. (MacKinnon 2002: 8)

The sense that there are particular region-specific (or industry-specific) ‘elements’ that can be drawn on as people make decisions on how to lead their life, simultaneously shaping a sense of their place in the world and their membership to particular communities, suggests alternative ways of thinking through ideas of indigenouness and belonging. Moreover, as I explore in the following section, recognising the relevance of these ‘elements’ allows us to explore how they are not only drawn on, but elaborated on and departed from, showing the productive, participatory and open-ended possibilities of notions of belonging premised on shared repertoires.

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<sup>62</sup> As Macdonald points out, the term crofters ‘is not synonymous with “Highlanders”, “Gaels” or “Gaelic speakers” because the crofting areas include the Northern Isles, and (...) not all those living in the ‘crofting communities’ are crofters legally defined’ (1997: 258).

## **5. On production: between inherited and living repertoires**

Researching the Harris Tweed industry, it soon became clear that workers were involved not only in the manufacturing of the actual cloth, but implicated in productive processes that entailed the making of particular narratives, songs, selves, subjectivities, social relationships and moral understandings. Following Stobart's focus on the intertwinement between Kalankira musical and agricultural production to explore how the notion of 'production' can become a 'useful way of thinking about identity and processes of relatedness' (2006: 7), I propose focusing on some of the 'products' that emerged alongside the manufactured cloth. Doing so, I suggest, not only decentres more economic understandings of production – as Stobart points out, 'for the capitalist mode of production, only labour that accumulates capital is deemed 'productive' (2006: 7) – but also offers a broader understanding of 'production' where notions of 'tradition' and 'innovation' become more visibly intertwined.

### *5.1. Shared work, rhythms, and patterns*

Seeking to learn about enduring practices and experiences that encompassed the production of Harris Tweed, I began to notice the continuity and widespread interest in two kinds of 'expressions' that accompanied local work processes: music and textile design. As fieldwork progressed, I found that both songs and woven patterns featured prominently in many workers' discussions about their experiences of work, sometimes inviting considerations about tradition and innovation. Often, conversations about either of these expressions revealed how they could emerge simultaneously as vehicles for articulating ideas about collectively inherited repertoires, *and* potential sites for individual self-expression and exploration. I was aware that work songs had played a key role in the past when several painstaking wool-work processes were performed by hand, and that most people on the island could tell a 'herringbone' from a 'plain weave' pattern. But, I wondered, to what extent these expressions were relevant for contemporary work experiences and whether they shaped, in any relevant way, workers' understanding of their own occupational role and the place of their work in the world.

For centuries, and like in many other places in the world, song has played a key role in several Hebridean work processes. Local wool work in particular was often accompanied by song, and records of Gaelic work songs attest to their presence (and composition) during most of the processes involved in its transformation. There are extensive records that include sheep-shearing songs, crotal-scraping songs, carding songs, spinning songs, warping songs, weaving songs, waulking songs. Singing and working, whether individually or in groups, was widely understood to make hard work processes feel ‘easier’ or more enjoyable. Waulking sessions, for example, were not only occasions to beat and tighten the weave of the cloth, but social events where songs were improvised and reinterpreted, gossip was exchanged, and social relationships elaborated on. The process involved repeatedly beating a cloth that was soaked in urine and other substances (such as an unpleasant-smelling oil known in Gaelic as *eòlan*<sup>63</sup>) against a piece of wood, and though in some places foot-waulking took place, in the Outer Hebrides it was commonly performed by hand, making it particularly hard on the body. In this context, rhythmic singing helped the time pass, and sometimes performed, in itself, additional social functions. Matchmaking songs, for example, were known to be ‘sung towards the end of the proceedings’ (MacLeod 1986: 4), usually before work gave way to ‘a dance’, where other neighbours would join and socialize.

In Harris Tweed manufacturing today, the waulking of the cloth, as well as several of the wool-work processes that used to be performed by hand along with these task-specific songs, are now mostly mechanized. However, despite significant technological changes, music is still heard in mills and in loomsheds, shaping the labour experience of several workers I met. In some departments the radio was often on, and even in some of the noisiest areas of the mill workers were sometimes seen wearing their headphones.

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<sup>63</sup> Reference to this oil is made in a Gaelic song, as pointed out by MacLeod (1986: 2-3):

‘The tweed, which would be anything up to 70 yards long, would be soaked in a solution of stale urine and water, in order to neutralise the oils that had been used for dressing the wool. This oil was the melted livers of dog-fish, called *eòlan*, and it would seem to have been just as unpleasant to handle as the cloth impregnated with urine solution. A verse of a song expresses this:

*O ill òig, na bi cho tàireil  
Ged tha’ n t-eòlan air mo làmhnan;  
Chionn gun d’fhuair thu òg ann d’àrach  
Dh’fhàg siud blàth do chomhdach*

Young man don’t be so uppity  
Though my hands have *eòlan* on them;  
Because you were brought up amongst it,  
Your clothing is warm.’



While I did not see anyone singing in mills, I was sometimes told of the musical abilities of certain workers, who were known to sing or play instruments outside work.

In loomsheds, however, some weavers described how natural it was for them to sing along with their looms. One weaver in particular, when discussing the differences between working with the old Hattersley loom and then moving to the more recent Bonas-Griffith loom, focused on how one of them was much better to sing along with than the other. The Hattersley loom, he pointed out, ‘had the right rhythm, it kept you going’, he reminisced joyfully. The newer Bonas-Griffith, on the other hand, was frustrating because it didn’t have the same ‘feel’ to it, nor the same quality of rhythm that carried the singing. One weaver who had never worked with the Hattersley loom before, however, praised the Bonas-Griffith loom because it allowed his hands to be free for longer while he worked. In that way, he could easily pick up his ukulele and play tunes at the same time as he wove. He had tried it with a guitar before, but settled for the ukulele because the bigger instrument turned out to be ‘impractical’. The ukulele was now hanging on the wall right behind his weaving seat, and he could reach it as easily as he would reach a tool for fixing the loom.

Other weavers I met did not usually sing, but emphasized the importance of playing music while they did certain kinds of work. Some weavers enjoyed listening to music while they ‘tied in’ the over 1000 individual warp knots in the loom before weaving, since it ‘kept them going’ (and helped their concentration) through the repetitive and sometimes back-breaking task. Others enjoyed listening to music while they wove, and one weaver in particular described only being able to weave while listening, in loud volume, to his favourite heavy metal and rock bands on the large stereo that shared his workplace with the noisy Bonas-Griffith loom. While some weavers kept track of their work by counting the metres as they wove, and others kept an eye on the clock on the wall, this weaver described how he just kept weaving until the end of an album, and how it was the timing (and ‘feeling’) of the music that determined the timing of his work (see Chapter 3).

Conversely, the repetitive nature of certain jobs also informed not only people’s work experiences, but also their ability to come up with songs. Local composers and singers were known to compose while they worked, often informed specifically by the speed, rhythm, and nature of the task. Murdani Mast (Murdo Kennedy), the bard whose ‘Loom Song’ was quoted earlier in this chapter, described the way songs sometimes would just

‘come to him’ when he was alone ‘at the weaving’, but also when he was on his own on the top of a ship, moving to the rhythm of the waves:

When I’m composing a new song, I need to be on my own – coming home from the fishing, at the weaving, or on watch. At sea, we’d all take turns to be ‘farmer’, that was the name for the lookout in the forecastle. You’d be up there for two hours. You didn’t have to steer the ship, you just had to be there and keep a lookout. That was a very good place for making songs. The rise and fall of the ship, the rhythm of the waves, the porpoises jumping, the night sky, remembrances of home – any of these might bring a tune to my mind and whole verses would suddenly come in with a rush. Every now and then I’d ring a brass bell to show them, up on the bridge, that I hadn’t fallen asleep! Then back to the song. In those days I never wrote anything down. Every song I made in my head, and I’ve kept them there for 50 years. (Murdo Kennedy, quoted in Neat et al 1999:65)

While none of the weavers I met would describe themselves as composers or even ‘proper singers’, music featured prominently in some people’s descriptions of their work. More generally, the islands’ rich history and repertoire of work songs allow us to draw some parallels between past and present experiences, strategies, and feelings. The idea that, in the context of waulking, ‘the work was rhythmic, and therefore made easier by singing’, or the suggestion that ‘songs kept the limbs in unison and helped relieve the monotony of the work’ (MacLeod 1986:4), echoes some of the experiences and sensations expressed by some of my informants when trying to convey what everyday work *felt* like. Even though most of these ‘musical moments’ are not recorded, and only a fraction of songs ever sang in the history of the islands have become part of an archived repertoire that can be recovered, played and reinterpreted today – they are nevertheless integral to local work experiences.

Pattern design is one dimension of Harris Tweed manufacturing in which several workers have had the chance to leave their mark in a more tangible way, today and in the past. In this industry, the design process is undertaken both by designers working at the mills, and by some of the weavers themselves – particularly in the case of those who work as ‘independent producers’. Certain Harris Tweed patterns have become iconic – for example, the immediately recognizable ‘Herringbone’ has long held its status as a ‘classic’ Harris Tweed pattern. Particular tartans, I was told, are also fashionable again. But, I soon learned, Harris Tweed weavers and pattern designers have long been reinventing these ‘staple’ designs and constantly working on coming up with completely

new ones, combining a variety of colours and shapes that showcases the vast creative potential that these four-shafted looms can serve.

Some of the weavers I met emphasized how important it was for someone attempting to design a pattern to actually understand not only the basic workings of the loom, but its full technical potential. One of my interlocutors highlighted the valuable set of skills, knowledge and creative potential cultivated by weavers every day as they performed their work, and lamented that mills did not often seem to recognize the value that this workforce might bring to their own projects. In his view, mills should explore this opportunity by periodically consulting with weavers, asking for example *‘is there anything your loom can do that we haven’t thought about yet?’* or *‘how would you approach this design, these colours, would you change anything? How would it work?’* Moreover, he argued, recognizing weavers’ worth as sources of potentially innovative ideas might not only generate new patterns, but contribute to improve the workings of the industry and shape its future in other ways. In his view, mills were ‘really missing out’.

Not all weavers I met were equally interested in designing patterns themselves, but those who were often expressed their commitment to the practice passionately, voicing not only their taste for the creative process, but also their thoughts on questions of authorship, and matters of intellectual and cultural property. One weaver told me she could never imagine working in weaving without the design responsibilities – for her, the creative practice was not only a personally fulfilling activity, but also a way for her to contribute to the ‘growth’ of the industry. Another weaver who also valued her own role designing patterns pointed out the ambivalent position of weavers-designers in an industry that is trademark protected – but where this protection is for the industry as a whole, rather than catered to protect the creative work of individual pattern designers. On the one hand, she acknowledged, the trademark protection benefitted many people by safeguarding the jobs of many weavers; on the other hand, however, it overlooked the creative rights of those working to produce unique, original patterns within the industry.

The idea of the shared ownership of the industry, understood to ‘belong *with*’ (rather than just belong *to*) islanders in a broad sense, also echoed local understandings of collective rights over other cultural forms. In this region, ‘Traditional Song’, for example, is a category that encompasses those songs that, though certainly composed by someone in the past, are now considered to ‘belong’ to ‘everyone and no one’ in

particular. In this sense, they can be passed on and performed with limited or no concern for copyright issues, allowing musicians to reinterpret and record their own version of those compositions usually by simply adding ‘Traditional Song’ to their title on the list of recorded tracks. Along with pattern designs in the Harris Tweed industry, traditional songs offer yet another example of the different ways in which ideas about authorship and intellectual or cultural ownership can be expressed and exercised, offering alternative ways of thinking through these legal and conceptual questions. At the same time, the different practices and discourses involved in the making, re-making, and re-interpretation of these cultural productions renders visible how people variously understand and enact ideas of tradition and innovation. These examples allow us to consider questions of collective and individual ‘cultural property’ rights in a new light, showing how paying attention to people’s moral understandings and creative action in the world can unsettle conceptual dichotomies like ‘structure’ and ‘agency’, or ‘tradition’ and ‘innovation’.

### *5.2. Protecting the industry and ‘respecting the cloth’*

Since the early twentieth century, when the ‘Orb’ trademark was registered to define and protect the Harris Tweed brand, the industry has seen islanders striving to safeguard, in multiple ways, its integrity. The 1993 Act of Parliament was one among other measures taken to enforce this protection, and along with the 1910 trademark registration, it remains a significant landmark in the history of the industry. However, I was often told, efforts to protect the industry take place everyday, performed by workers across the industry as they variously work in the making of the cloth. I soon learned that protecting the industry did not just involve relying on the trademark protection, but actively seeking to enforce it – not only through legal action and educational efforts, but also by upholding the quality of the cloth being produced, at every stage of its making. From the selection of the wool, to the elaborate production of the coloured yarn, the pattern designing, hand-weaving, finishing, inspecting and stamping – workers across the production chain were expected to share this responsibility.

Nevertheless, the Harris Tweed Authority was still expected to play a particularly crucial role in this process, upholding its statutory responsibility for ‘promoting and maintaining the authenticity, standard and reputation of the world famous Harris Tweed cloth’ (HTA n.d.) in various ways. Besides employing inspectors who travelled the

islands visiting weavers' loomsheds to certify that their working conditions complied with the definition stated in the Harris Tweed Act, and who took turns visiting mills to stamp every yard of appropriately woven cloth, the Harris Tweed Authority was also expected to play a key role in negotiations well beyond the boundaries of the islands. Given the global reach of the cloth – exported to over 50 countries and trademark protected in over 30 – the Harris Tweed Authority was thus constantly in contact with individuals and institutions across the world.

Along with mills and weavers, local designer-makers who work with Harris Tweed in the making of garments and other objects, have also contributed to this sense that the history of the Harris Tweed industry is not neatly locked away in the past, but actively being lived, chronicled, enacted and presented by different workers today. Two of these designer-makers, whose shops included a visible workshop section where the manufacturing process could be seen alongside the finished pieces, spoke to me about their commitment to 'respect the cloth'. Each of these local designer-makers owned their own business, and had each cultivated distinct ways of working with Harris Tweed, their work and brands now recognizable and easy to differentiate among other locally designed tweed products. They had never worked together, had very different life stories, belonged to different generations, and held different views on many topics.

Nevertheless, when I visited each of their shops and eventually interviewed each of them in their respective workshops, I was surprised to find just how similar their views and values about how they should conduct themselves as designer-makers were. Only one of them used that expression that has stayed with me ever since our conversation – 'we need to respect the cloth' – but both of them expressed, in different ways, how they felt a sense of responsibility towards the industry. They both explained how, as a type of cloth with certain unique material qualities, Harris Tweed was not only ideal for their creations, but it also carried a very valuable reputation as a brand with a long history, exuding a sense of 'heritage' and trusted as a quality, luxury product at a global scale.

As incomers who had chosen to live on these islands and creative individuals committed to making things, they highlighted how Harris Tweed had also provided them with the unique possibility of doing both – making a living locally and leading fulfilling (though increasingly hectic) working lives. As they saw it, they had a responsibility to 'care' for the industry, contributing to keep it alive and well – and their role in this process was to

create objects that honored the quality and reputation of the cloth.<sup>64</sup> Emphasizing the inclusive opportunity created for them by the continued existence and established status of the cloth, both of them expressed a sense of gratitude that was compounded by the feeling that, despite being ‘incomers’, they were nevertheless understood to be fair beneficiaries of the industry – as much as any other islander.

### 5.3. *Inheritance and ‘living history’*

As I began to ask Harris Tweed workers across the industry about their perception of the history of the cloth, I gradually learned about the sometimes surprising ways in which people framed their understandings and their own involvement in particular histories. Often, people would bring up terms like ‘heritage’ and ‘tradition’ themselves, as they reflected on the longevity of the industry and listed certain practices that either persisted today, or were left somewhere in the past. Sometimes, however, workers would also reflect on the ways in which ideas about ‘heritage’ shaped the way they saw their own work. It made some of them proud to be able to say they were part of this industry, or that they were also playing a part in its continuity. Some people told me that the ‘heritage’ of the industry, its connection to the history of the islands, or even their own families, was part of the charm of their job. Other people insisted that they saw their work in the industry as just another income-generating job – even as they pointed out that their job probably existed, in great part, because the history of the industry captured customers’ imaginations.

Other times, however, people’s understandings of the widely used term ‘heritage’ would lead to unexpected discussions about various kinds of *inheritance*, sometimes extending beyond the confines of the industry and even the islands. David, a weaver who was born and bred in England and had moved to Lewis ten years earlier (see Chapters 3 and 4), told me about how his understanding of his work as a weaver in the present was intimately tied to memories of growing up ‘surrounded by Singer sewing machines’. His mother was a proficient seamstress, and his father had worked in the making of leather seats for Jaguar cars – a highly skilled role that, like his own position, was also paid by the piece (once finished and ready to install in the car, the reverse side of the leather of

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<sup>64</sup> As such, they both also had strong feelings against the proliferation of ‘low quality souvenirs’ made available in local shops, many of which made with Harris Tweed but manufactured in distant factories, then sent back to the islands to be sold to tourists.

each sewn seat was signed by the worker – that’s how his father was paid). He had never imagined he would end up in a related field, but now that he worked as a weaver he could not help but see this connection with his family’s occupational history as a kind of inheritance that helped him make sense of his own working life.

Similarly, for one of the local designers who worked with Harris Tweed in the making of garments and accessories, the term ‘heritage’ sparked in her mind ideas of ‘inheritance’, and memories of her own family’s involvement in what she saw as a related field. Born and bred in the north of England, she told me about how frequently she thought of all the women in her family who had made a living working in cotton mills. While she herself had never worked in any of these mills, she traced her long-standing interest in sewing and her previous work in the retail industry back to the work and lives of these women, and forward to her own work in the present as a designer whose products were carefully sewn using Harris Tweed – a textile industry as relevant to the islands as cotton had been to the English town where she was born.

At the same time, discussions on heritage and history also led to reflections on the nature of certain tasks considered traditional, which were featured in history books and as part of museum displays, but also remained an important part of some families’ and individuals’ practices in the present. Peat cutting, along with other crofting-related tasks, were among some of these examples. David, one of the weavers mentioned above, who along with his wife (and fellow weaver) was raising a young family in the north of Lewis after having moved in from England, spoke about how their current living arrangements involved practices that were featured in history lessons their children were learning in school. However, he emphasized, while teachers might speak about the peat cutting and other practices as part of a bygone history, their children were still actually ‘living’ that ‘history’:

... Our kids do it. So it’s not history to them, it’s life. So they... they come out and they cut it and they dry it and they burn it. So that aspect of it is part of their life.

Acknowledging that some of these practices had already been lost in many households since the introduction of other more convenient solutions, he joked that maybe at some point they would be the only ones in their village cutting peat for heating and cooking – and that tourists ‘might then have to seek the incomers in order to see that bit of history being enacted’.

## 6. Conclusion

Considering the longevity of the Harris Tweed industry, and the particular representations, cultural productions, and everyday work practices that are still part of island life today, in this chapter I proposed using the concept of ‘shared repertoires’ to examine how these different aspects variously shape – and are shaped by – workers’ involvement in the making of the industry. I argued that the lens of shared repertoires offers valuable analytical and theoretical possibilities to examine the politics and poetics of production, representation, and ‘tradition’, highlighting the complex and diverse ways in which shared references contribute to more flexible, participatory, and inclusive understandings of belonging and self-identity. The concept of repertoires is also productive in examining not only how particular pasts are understood in the present, but also how certain references are articulated, recognized, mobilised and departed from today, as people variously describe their work and make sense of their own place in the world.

Participating in an industry that came to be known, at a global scale, for its heritage value, Harris Tweed workers are acutely aware of the currency afforded by this kind of terminology, understanding how it legitimizes and illuminates the significance of local practices and cultural productions. At the same time, islanders have long been aware of the ways in which particular depictions of so-called ‘traditional ways of life’ have contributed to external understandings of the islands as ‘remote’ and ‘backwards’, shaping significant political-economic processes in the past (see Chapter 1). In this context, where terms like ‘heritage’ and ‘tradition’ are routinely used in conversations about people’s work experiences and their entanglement in local practices and institutions, it becomes particularly important to engage critically with these concepts – recognizing their role as emic categories, but resisting the urge to simply deploy them analytically.

The concept of shared repertoires allows us to move beyond this tension, since it simultaneously recognizes the role played by terms like ‘heritage’ and ‘tradition’ in actual promotional materials, media reports, and in our interlocutors’ descriptions of particular local practices, *and* it demands further exploring people’s engagement with these practices and interrogating their own use of these vocabularies. Looking beyond



institutional definitions, in this chapter I showed how focusing on individual understandings of these categories revealed the unexpected ways in which people interpreted this vocabulary to describe, in meaningful ways, how they saw their own work and life. Surprising conversations about occupational ‘inheritance’ (deriving from family), for example, discussed in the later part of the chapter, were among those unique revelations prompted precisely by allowing terms such as ‘heritage’ to remain a part of on-going dialogues, and querying interlocutors about their own use of those words.

In this chapter I showed how some people’s interest in preserving and cultivating particular practices understood to be uniquely local (and sometimes described as ‘traditional’) was frequently linked with a moral commitment fuelled by the fear of their disappearance. For several people, anticipating the possibility of this kind of ‘loss’, and envisioning the role they could play in preventing it, would also inform very personal understandings of what a ‘life worth leading’ might look like. At the same time, thinking about repertoires as sets of shared references that people could variously draw on, identify with, and contribute to, also highlighted the creative potential that the concept allows, revealing the openness, participatory nature, multi-temporality, and continuous reinvention inherent to processes of social and cultural production.

This openness, in turn, highlights some of the ways in which the concept of ‘shared repertoires’ can contribute to rethinking particular methodological and epistemological questions. Long-term ethnographic fieldwork and participant-observation offer researchers the opportunity to access, in unique ways, some of the shared references that compose the social and interior lives of our interlocutors. Moreover, employing apprenticeship as a field method, learning from and working alongside my interlocutors, further amplified the potential for understanding and identifying with some of these shared references, contributing to a more nuanced appreciation of their place in people’s lives.

In this context, showing how people variously understood, drew on, interpreted and departed from particular shared repertoires – from more coherent and identifiable cultural forms, to more diffuse and understated understandings – revealed how inclusive forms of belonging were enacted and expressed locally, particularly within (or in reference to) the Harris Tweed industry. As an analytical tool, the concept of shared repertoires thus offered alternative possibilities for thinking through notions and

experiences of belonging, *and* suggested more nuanced ways of investigating processes of cultural production and the interplay between notions of ‘tradition’ and ‘innovation’.

## **Conclusion**

### **On stamping and beyond**

#### **1. 'Finishing' as a new beginning**

I remember vividly the first time I witnessed the stamping of a length of Harris Tweed. It had been an exciting prospect for months, but I usually missed the day when the Harris Tweed inspector – also known as ‘the stamper’ – was visiting any of the mills. One lucky day, however, I arrived at a mill and was whisked away from the offices by one of the workers. She took me past the different sections of the production plant into the very last section of the Finishing Department, where the stamper was already hard at work. In this spacious room, at the very edge of the warehouse building, a few people stood assembled beside a large metal table, its surface completely covered by a length of a recently finished tweed. Before I was formally introduced to the Harris Tweed Authority inspector, we stood at the margins and watched him do his job.

It felt like a significant, almost solemn occasion. I waited in anticipation as the stamper looked through different sets of paperwork, carefully comparing tables, numbers and codes I did not yet understand. The stamping table turned out to be more than a table – it was more like an electronically operated device that allowed the cloth to be lifted from the ground on one side, draped over a high bar onto the large table where it lay flat to be measured, examined and stamped, and then rolled neatly into a cylindrical shape on the other side. This roll would then be carefully placed inside a protective plastic cover, appropriately labelled, and prepared for shipping. The stamping table was operated by one of the mill workers, who pressed the appropriate buttons for making the length of cloth move across the structure, and to pause the process whenever necessary. The occasion was also monitored and assisted by another mill worker, and sometimes observed casually by other workers who gathered around and chatted briefly on their way to a cigarette or coffee break.

After a few minutes scanning the documents and taking notes, the stamper signalled that he was satisfied with the paperwork for this particular tweed, and was ready to look at and stamp the cloth itself. I observed his every movement as he prepared the hot steam iron, which would be used to apply the delicate white beeswax stamp to the reverse side of the cloth. Then he got to work, skilfully stamping the very beginning of the cloth with the recognizable Orb trademark (Fig. 6.1). He then carefully scanned the cloth as it moved across the table, pausing it every few meters to add yet another Orb stamp, then another, and so on, until the whole length went past. At the end of each length of the cloth – usually divided into sections that were about 58 meters long – both the HTA inspector and the mill workers checked the number of meters registered by the stamping table as the cloth passed through it, making notes and comparing documents. A final stamp was applied at this end, before the fully inspected piece was labelled, packaged, and prepared for shipping. The paperwork was checked and signed by the HTA inspector and the millworker, then set aside, before a new length of the cloth was lowered to the table.



**Fig. 6.1.** Harris Tweed on the stamping table.

*Only then*, after inspection and stamping, could this piece of cloth be appropriately called ‘Harris Tweed’. Without this process, fully finished pieces should instead be called ‘unstamped tweeds’ and, as the Harris Tweed Authority and local mills emphasized in their promotional materials, they *could not* be sold as Harris Tweed. The overall physical qualities of the cloth remained the same before and after stamping, but the change in its legal and symbolic status depended exclusively on the final moment of inspection and stamping.

The moment of stamping was thus imbued with a transformative power, simultaneously signalling the end of the cloth’s production and its new beginning as a trademark protected commodity known as Harris Tweed, ready to be shipped across the world. It became clear that, while the people involved in the stamping process did not participate in earlier stages of the physical manufacturing of the cloth, their role in this transformation signalled how they were nevertheless implicated, in important ways, in the making of Harris Tweed.

In the following weeks and months, as I began to visit one of the mills with greater regularity, I would have the opportunity to observe the inspection and stamping process many more times. The longer I spent around the finishing department, the more attuned I became to the rhythms and routines of the stamping procedure. In the process, I would also get to know the stamper and millworkers in the Finishing Department, learning about their everyday experiences of work, and about the lives they led beyond the workplace. As time went by and I also learned about the work performed by employees across other mill departments, my understanding of the stamping process would also begin to change. What I had initially experienced as a singular, unique, unforgettable, *final* moment, would gradually offer, instead, yet another example of the open-endedness and generative nature of processes of production, circulation and exchange.

In fact, the transformations in my own perception of the stamping process emerged not only from particular methodological approaches, but also from the ongoing social engagements they allowed in the context of these layered productive dynamics. In my research, long-term ethnographic fieldwork entailed spending time learning from workers, in their workplaces, as they variously participated in work processes – but also as they lived their lives, took breaks, discussed other matters. Over time, this engagement sharpened my understanding of the industry’s workings, not only in their

material and practical manifestations, but also in terms of their social, symbolic, and subjective implications. In this context, as I became increasingly familiar with the stamping process (and the settings and people involved in its performance), I became increasingly able to see beyond the symbolic aspects of the stamping gesture (and its legal implications in granting a quality assurance mark).

In this process, the ‘stamping moment’ simultaneously retained its symbolic and legal weight, and invited questions about its actual practical, social, and subjective implications. As a key moment, stamping signalled the moment when a woven fabric ‘became’ Harris Tweed. It was widely considered as the last stage of this manufacturing process, taking place in the very last room of the Finishing Department, where a large garage door led directly to the outside of the mill. Stacked against the walls around the stamping table, the many rolls of already stamped tweed, neatly packaged and labelled, became increasingly visible to me, as my focus gradually moved away from the stamping moment to consider our surroundings. The presence of these packaged rolls of stamped tweed, as they awaited imminent shipping to different corners of the world, rendered visible the global reach of the industry (and offered a glimpse of some of the trends in demand).

At the same time, as the focus of my attention broadened to include not only the ceremonial and procedural aspects of the stamping process, but also the more mundane and routine aspects of workdays, the social and subjective implications of this work became increasingly evident. This focus on work and labour revealed how parallels could be drawn with the lived experiences and social realities involving workers in other workplaces across the industry (within and outwith the mills), who were similarly implicated in a ‘mutuality’ of production that involved the on-going relationships between people, place, and the making of various kinds of things. At the same time, it revealed the ways in which *particular* jobs also entailed *particular* kinds of ‘making’, involving not only different responsibilities, but also a multiplicity of ideas about what a ‘good job’ or a ‘good life’ might look like.

Harris Tweed stampers (known more widely as ‘inspectors’) divide their work time between mills, where they inspect and stamp the cloth, and a more mobile role on the road, travelling between weavers’ loomsheds and showing up unannounced to inspect the working arrangements and equipment used in individual workplaces. When I was conducting fieldwork, three inspectors shared these responsibilities in a weekly rota,

attending to the mills' fluctuating demand for stamping. This program could vary from week to week, depending on the number of orders received by each mill, as well as the speed at which weavers completed their weaving assignments, and the time it took to get the tweeds through the Finishing Department – where workers darn, wash, dry, steam, press, crop, and pick the cloth to perfection.

The stamping moment is the culmination of the various relations of production involved in the making of the cloth; but it is more than that – it is also, like the other stages of manufacturing, a site where particular social relationships are created and enacted. Seeking to make sense of contemporary experiences of work and life in this industry, I soon understood the importance of considering not only the relations of production but, as Burawoy (1979) put it, the social relations *in* production. Doing so highlighted how particular social bonds and power dynamics were distributed along relations of cooperation and collaboration, coexisting as people interacted across divisions of labour, and often contradicting assumed hierarchies and role expectations.

For example, in their role as HTA inspectors, stampers rendered visible the mutuality of the relationship between the Harris Tweed Authority and the woollen mills – without a stamper, a cloth cannot be certified as Harris Tweed; but the stamping takes place in mills, in a work process that is shared with millworkers. Both parties need to be present for the stamping to take place, and for the relevant paperwork to be signed. However, while at a first glance there appeared to be a seamless connection between the two teams, I soon learned that there was a friendly and unspoken understanding that while inspectors and mill workers worked together, their relationship was still marked by an awareness of their distinctive roles and affiliations. At the same time, in their role travelling between weavers' loomsheds to check whether work arrangements conform to the 'standards' stated in the Act of Parliament (1993), Harris Tweed Authority inspectors find themselves in an undeniable position of power. However, I was often told, many weavers actually seemed to enjoy these random visits from inspectors – having 'nothing to hide' in their work arrangements, many just welcomed the casual opportunity for 'a bit of a chat'.

The work conditions of Harris Tweed inspectors were also, I argue, an undeniable product of this industry's unusual model, offering everyday work experiences and opportunities that matched particular ideas of what a good working life could look like. Since the cloth needed to be stamped and weavers' loomsheds inspected, every single

meter of tweed woven contributed to ‘making’ their job position relevant – and generated the funding to support it<sup>65</sup>. One of the stampers told me about how ‘perfect’ this job was at this stage of his life, after having retired from teaching. According to him, there were ‘no challenges’ in this job, really. He worked two days a week, which he found ideal so ‘it didn’t feel too repetitive’. He also enjoyed the social and mobile aspects of the job, telling me how ‘it’s good to see people’. ‘You get to hear all the gossip’ he added laughing. He also liked how ‘you get to go around the islands’, describing the opportunity to ‘enjoy some scenic travelling’ as a ‘bonus’ that comes with the job. The opportunity to do something ‘completely different from what I was doing before’, he added, was also ‘a plus’.

Along with the time spent conducting ethnographic fieldwork in workplaces across the industry, these insights into some of the practical, personal, and social dimensions of the work of a Harris Tweed inspector would importantly shape my understanding of the ‘stamping room’ as a setting that indexed significant ‘productive’ potential. Not only did this place host the ‘conversion’ of unstamped tweed into Harris Tweed, but it also rendered visible how a multiplicity of symbolic meanings, productive relations, social dynamics, individual subjectivities and geographical scales could be evoked by a single setting and situation. In this sense, I argue, the act of stamping further supported the need to account for the layered implications of productive work and labour, considering not only people’s role in the making of material products, but also the ways in which several other things are created and elaborated on in the process.

In many ways, it seems apt to finish this thesis by exploring the new beginnings and productive questions suggested by the very act of stamping the cloth. As a work process, ‘stamping’ offers another example in support of my argument, in this thesis, about the importance of redefining an expanded concept of work / labour that highlights *both* the social complexity of work places and processes, and the versatility of the concept of work as an analytical tool. Thinking about the Harris Tweed industry through the lens of work highlighted the *processual* and open-ended nature of social relations, moral understandings, and cultural practices, showing how they can be worked *on* (or worked *at*). At the same time, it revealed the multiple *productive* implications of manufacturing work, showing how it entails not only the making of commodities, but the production of

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<sup>65</sup> As I mentioned before, the HTA is funded exclusively through the fees associated with stamping, and this income depends entirely on the number of meters produced and stamped.



particular selves, subjectivities, social entanglements, livelihood strategies, notions of belonging and visions of what a good life may look like.

Foregrounding the actual responsibilities and work experiences of the people involved in the stamping process – or in any other specific job across the industry – reveals how long-term ethnographic fieldwork contributes in unique ways to demystify manufacturing practices and economic processes by illuminating their social and personal implications. At the same time, framing the process of ‘stamping’ as a key transforming moment – rather than the final stage of a lengthy manufacturing process – allows me to introduce this conclusion as a similarly open-ended and ‘productive’ kind of moment.

\* \* \*

Discussing the work and lives of Harris Tweed workers, throughout this thesis I have highlighted the distinctive place of this industry in the production of unique notions, practices and experiences of belonging. Considering not only the industry’s longevity but the active role played by islanders in its continuity and development, in the previous chapters I discussed how concepts like resourcefulness, anticipation, value / values, and shared repertoires offer alternative ways of thinking through particular processes of social and cultural production. A crucial feature of the Harris Tweed industry is its exclusive association with a particular place and group of people – a connection that is central to its legal definition, and which has long been at the core of local efforts to protect it. At the same time, as my research shows, this is also an industry powered by a workforce that is not exclusively ‘born and bred’ on the islands, as the rootedness of the industry might suggest, but composed by a set of people with diverse origins and backgrounds, who are all equally recognised as *islanders* – and thus understood as legitimate and valuable participants.

Paying close attention to the workings of the industry and to the lived experiences of its workers highlighted the mutuality of the relation between the islanders and the Orb (Hunter 2001), revealing their continued interdependence since the industry’s early beginnings. Islanders benefit from the continuity of the industry, which provides local employment and allows people to pursue particular visions of lives worth leading; but

the industry would not exist without the participation and continued engagement of islanders, whose active involvement and appropriate conduct (e.g. respecting the cloth) are recognised as vital requirements for the success and survival of Harris Tweed. People's description of the industry as composed of three elements that need to work in symbiosis – mills, weavers, and the Harris Tweed Authority – further hinted at the centrality of notions of interdependence in local understandings of belonging. In this context, the stamping of the cloth marked a recognition of these dynamics, confirming their successful articulation and asserting the trademark's significance for protecting the livelihoods and welfare of islanders – whether they were locals, returners, or incomers.

The sense of egalitarianism and the possibility of active belonging suggested by the practices and experiences of people involved in the Harris Tweed industry echoed those observed more widely in this region, today and in the past (see e.g. Mackenzie 2013, Masson 2006, 2007; Kohn 2002; MacKinnon 2008). Examining these social dynamics through the lens of the Harris Tweed industry foregrounded workers' understandings of their shared precariousness – as fellow islanders, exposed to particular region-specific challenges – suggesting alternative ways of thinking through processes of place-making and belonging. Not only did the very history of the industry's legal protection reveal the continuity of a set of values concerning the need to protect the 'common good' in order to safeguard local livelihoods; but contemporary practices and discourses across the industry foregrounded a sense of belonging *with* – not just belonging *to* – that illuminated alternative possibilities for thinking about collective ownership, entitlement, and shared responsibility.

In this context, I argue, the concept of shared repertoires highlights precisely the participative, open-ended and on-going nature of social processes, revealing not only how historically-specific local references intertwine with personal histories and narratives, but also the inclusive potential that these dynamics allow. Considering people's engagement with particular shared repertoires – e.g. through their knowledge of, or involvement in, particular productive practices within the Harris Tweed industry – revealed how these references not only informed people's self-identities, but were also shaped and produced through their active participation. In this sense, the concept of shared repertoires both illuminated what seemed to be a particular regional ethos of inclusivity – and suggested new possibilities for researching and understanding entitlement and belonging, showing how ethnographic research into various kinds of *work* can unsettle assumed social boundaries and notions of membership.

In this sense, focusing on the work and lives of Harris Tweed workers revealed how people's everyday conduct can illuminate the on-going, active, and often unscripted ways in which social processes and cultural productions come into being. At the same time, focusing on the intertwinement of shared repertoires, inclusivity and work / labour in this particular setting revealed not only the significance of active engagements as people variously *worked* to enable the continuity of this industry and to address a sense of shared precariousness; but also the vital role played by *various kinds of work* in asserting and realizing particular understandings of belonging. In this context, I argue, examining the connection between shared repertoires, work and inclusivity allows us to consider how this ensemble has not only contributed to keeping this 'heritage industry' alive, but allowed it to support different visions of lives worth leading. In this context, the enduring connection between the islanders and the Orb – sealed every time the stamp was imprinted in the cloth by the HTA inspector – was affirmed not just as a reminder of particular local pasts, but also of resourceful ways of navigating the present, and *working together* towards possible futures.

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**Fig. 6.2.** Joana learning to 'tie-in' on a double-width Bonas Griffith loom. (Photo by G.M.)

**Fig. 6.3.** Yarn ends from a previous tweed (burgundy threads) tied into the yarn ends of what will become the next tweed (multi-coloured threads), before being pulled through the loom heddles to restart weaving.

As the tweed gets stamped in the Finishing Department of each mill and moves on its way to new beginnings, a parallel movement of renewal takes place in weavers' loomsheds. After the last woven cloth has been cut off from the loom and taken to the

mill for finishing and stamping, its remaining unwoven yarn ends stay in the loom. A new yarn beam placed in the loom announces the beginning of a new tweed. For the cycle to begin again, however, the yarn ends belonging to what will become the *next* tweed need to be tied into those remaining from the *last* tweed, in a process known locally as 'tying-in'. A time consuming task, tying-in is performed using a reef knot (also known as a weavers' knot) to link each individual thread. It's *the continuity* that these knots create between those old and new threads that will ensure the yarn is eventually pulled through each of the individual eyes of the heddles and the reed of the loom, and become ready to have the weft woven into them as a new weaving cycle begins again.<sup>66</sup> Later, when the weaving is again under way, the reef knot will remain a crucial motion, being deployed for adding new threads to fix any occasional yarn breakages.

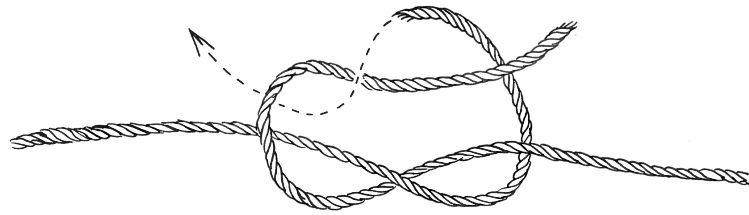
The process of *tying-in* new threads into old threads, which will serve as the beginning of yet another piece of fabric, offers a compelling metaphor for the active and open-ended nature of social and cultural processes (see also Ingold 2000, 2013, 2015). In this thesis I have highlighted the ways in which people variously 'tied themselves' into existing local 'threads' as they navigated the realities of island life, drawing on particular livelihood strategies, identifying with particular histories, and becoming affiliated, through active practice, with particular communities. Focusing on the history of the Harris Tweed industry, and examining the views and experiences of industry workers in the present, revealed the entanglement of work and life as people sought to make a living and pursued particular visions of a good life.

The choice to live on these islands, which was a vital part of these visions for several people I met, became visible in personal narratives and practices of place-making that highlighted a sense of shared precariousness imagined to unite islanders – whether locals, returners or incomers. The region's economic fragility and the enduring threat of depopulation were among the challenges that informed a sense of shared responsibility, shaping for example local people's commitment to 'respecting the cloth' and protecting the industry – and thus contributing to ensure that they themselves and others could continue to live on these islands. In this context, the sense of a shared condition as *islanders* informed ideas of a local resourcefulness that encompassed not only particular practices, but also moral understandings and forms of social engagement.

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<sup>66</sup> In a single-width Hattersley loom there are about 696 individual threads to tie-in, and about 1392 individual ends in a double-width Bonas Griffith loom.

In this thesis I have discussed how these dynamics became visible within the industry, but with a reach that had implications for the islands as a whole, further illuminating the interdependence and vital connection between the islanders and the Orb. Whether through shared work practices, understandings and relationships; or affective and active engagements with the place; or in the production and experience of shared repertoires – the work and lives of people involved in the Harris Tweed industry revealed inclusive possibilities of belonging that encompassed the flexible and open-ended intertwinement of old and new, local and foreign. In this sense, learning from Harris Tweed workers about their experiences and understandings illuminated precisely the industry’s role in the on-going production of the material, *and* social fabric of these islands.



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