

CROSS CURRENTS

Charlotte Linton
Listening for the call of place
Commissioned essay

In 2016, in my capacity as an anthropologist, I carried out ethnographic research with the weavers of Harris Tweed in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, and in 2018 I spent a year working with natural dyers of textiles on the island of Amami Ōshima in southern Japan, where I also utilised my skills as a designer. Common to these communities were the intimate relationships that craftspeople had forged with place, developed over many years. This correspondence was practiced on a daily, if not hourly, basis. On the island of Lewis, for example, weaver's sheds are kept on the croft or in their garden, with wool and loom being subject to the same Hebridean weather as the bodies of the weavers. Weavers must be attuned to their environment in order to maintain a consistent quality across a beam of cloth, which can be read like a barcode by Harris Tweed's darners. Fitting around the crofting calendar, weavers tend to work more in the winter, during the wettest time of the year when little grows outside but metres of cloth can be woven in a shed. Being a natural, organic material, the wool expands in the damp, which slackens the tweed as it stretches across the loom. To avoid a loose weave, the tension on the machinery – a pedal driven, (hu)man-powered, Bonas Griffith loom – will need to be adjusted, a process reversed if the damp lifts or as the loom itself warms up. Based at the various tweed mills, darners inspect the cloth and mend any faults and through observation can tell who's woven which beam, how a weaver was feeling on a particular day, whether they were tired or a bit sore, or when they paused to greet the postman. Although this detail is lost in the wash, when the wool is degreased and undergoes significant shrinkage, person, time and place are embedded through the imperfections that the weaver works to prevent, and the mill strives to erase.



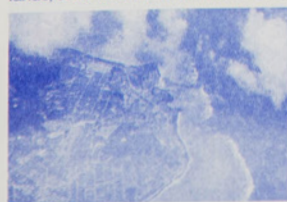
Darner, Harris Tweed Hebrides, Lewis, Scotland.

Harris Tweed is a good illustration of how place gains agency through its ability to impact human labour and act on our material culture. For a weaver to succeed, they must listen to what geographers Soren Larsen and Jay Johnson describe as the call of place, 'a summons to encounter, dialogue, and relationship among the humans and nonhumans who share the landscape'.¹ If the land's agency is exhibited through calling, humans must be open to receiving that call. For those of us who have forgotten, how do we learn to listen? In the *Arts of*

Living on a Damaged Planet, anthropologists Anna Tsing, Heather Anne Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt invite us to engage in 'noticing', a practice of attuning our senses to explore that which cannot be easily detected.² These are the workings of the natural world – atmospheric conditions or interactions with other species – but also the stories embedded in local folk knowledge. Tsing et al. suggest that magical beings and historical 'ghosts' who inhabit place could offer lessons on how to respect and reciprocate with the land on which we depend and too often exploit. Spirits do not necessarily need to take celestial form but might be present in the ruins of abandoned settlements, the growth of old trees, the remnants of well-trodden paths or in the biographies of redundant objects.

One might argue that artists and craftspeople are adept at the 'arts of noticing'.³ Many makers take an almost ethnographic or archivist approach to their work by forging connections with broad communities of human and non-human entities, not bound by time and space, in the pursuit of knowledge that results in a 'rush of stories'.⁴ These stories might be told by the maker in written or spoken form or they might be barely perceptible yet are experienced by the user through the material encounter. Expressed in the short term they might be present in the new growth of willow, shells that arrive with the current or in an object mailed from the other side of the Atlantic that spawns a new body of work. The use of centuries old techniques, such as leather tanning, that have been passed between multiple generations of makers across continents, or the referencing of industrial development and political histories that led to a mundane process such as the canning of food, might be evidence of longer-term engagements with place. Such openness to listening and connecting to the landscape, its inhabitants, its histories and its atmospheres is crucial to the quality and sometimes the quantity of creative output. Newly trained Harris Tweed weavers must absorb knowledge garnered by more experienced craftspeople that cannot be found in manuals, and navigate difficult histories that might generate conflict.⁵ Weavers can be islanders and/or newcomers from the mainland, and to make the best of the community they must also gain sensitivity to the social complexities of the industry that has experienced turbulence for many years.⁶ As Larsen and Johnson question: 'what happens when a place makes demands on us or forces us into an engagement we would rather avoid?'⁷

Coastal and island geographies, particularly those in rural areas, are vulnerable to patterns of migration that, in many circumstances, have had negative consequences for the health and welfare of small communities and their ecologies. From the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries settler colonialism, motivated by the pursuit of capital held in natural resources, violently displaced and dispossessed originating communities of their lands, cultures and traditional knowledge. But after the Second World War places as diverse as the Scottish Hebrides, Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada, and remote Japanese islands have experienced declining populations as workers and their young families have migrated to cities, and peripheral areas have suffered from a lack of state investment. In a circular motion, the term 'settler' has more recently been offered up to account for both the presence of urban gentrification – where wealthier outsiders move into city areas typically home to lower-income communities leading to rises in house prices, the arrival of new businesses, and ultimately the



Aerial view of Tokunoshima island, Japan.

displacement of those existing communities⁸ – and to describe the impact of the reverse pattern of urban to rural migration. Driven by the economic potential of tourism, the cost of city living, or a desire for 'nature' and 'community', for better or worse, pressure is returning to rural villages with migration from urban areas across the developing world. Echoing the historical character of settler colonialism, 'settler' contemporaneously invokes those moving into a community who bring their own politics, ideas and tastes to hybridise a 'new' settlement. Newly arrived residents bring with their move place-specific 'sovereignty' that reflects their own values, expectations, desires, contacts and experiences that must be reconciled with local conditions without alienating – or dispossessing – the communities that welcome them.⁹

Flows of migration and flows of knowledge also impact dyers on the island of Amami Ōshima, where incomers from large Japanese cities like Tokyo and Kyoto, use growing, foraging or the harvesting of dyestuffs to situate themselves on this subtropical island. Amami harbours textile traditions that are important to cultural identity, traditions that are heavily reliant on local natural resources for both their aesthetic and physical properties.¹⁰ A dyer must be attentive to the seasonality and availability of materials, needing to know the best time of year (or even day) to harvest, where to procure them from and which varieties will provide the best colourant. This means that the dyer by necessity forms a deep understanding of their ecosystem by watching the seasons, the changes in the weather, and even having an awareness of other species with whom one is in competition for resources. When engaged in the dyeing process itself skills that combine botany, chemistry, aesthetic judgement and environmental sensitivity are required to achieve flat, even and consistent colour that is fixed to a specific spot. Anthropologist Michael Taussig states that expanded knowledge of the science of colour and its chemicalisation has obliterated the connection to natural materials and processes.¹¹ But natural dyeing has the potential to counteract this effect, since the more dyers know about nature the more they can establish a connection through colour. Local intangible processes and techniques meanwhile can be passed between a diversity of peoples to keep the craft relevant to contemporary lifestyles, while knowledge exchange between old and new residents can

foster 'communities of practice'.¹² Among the makers with whom I've carried out research, those who had established a reputation and were commercially successful had also maintained connections across different geographies to absorb change and innovation that was occurring elsewhere. Their minds and bodies were open to listening to the environmental, social, economic and political conditions that their practice was subject to and they responded to these conditions with sensitivity and creativity. Creative work does not have to practice 'a

culture of Possession'¹³ but can be an exchange of ideas, images, materials, histories and techniques that acknowledge inequality and appropriation. If permission is asked, collaboration sought or wellbeing assessed to minimise harm, works can result that honour and sustain the environmental and cultural origins of place.¹⁴

While place-based making can heighten one's perception of local conditions, a skill that cannot be put into words, what happens when 'making in place' occurs temporarily? It could be argued that such makers are more attuned to listening to the call of place since listening can take on an intensity when the surroundings are new and new connections sought out. The design process doesn't stop at the studio door but continues at the dinner table, when walking or cycling to the shops, when engaging in the mundane and domestic. Rather than enforcing themselves on place, makers possess the skills to let places speak for themselves. Through collecting meaning and memory – weaving, tufting, tanning, dyeing, painting, drawing, beading, stitching, soldering – people, time and place are embedded in portable techniques and tangible objects that can foster discourse across geographies.



Preparing Ryūkyū indigo, Okinawa, Japan.

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1. S. Larsen & J. Johnson. *Being Together in Place: Indigenous Coexistence in a More Than Human World*. Minneapolis: University Press, 2017. p. 2.
2. A. Tsing, H. Swanson, E. Gan, & N. Bubandt. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet. Ghosts of the Anthropocene, Monsters of the Anthropocene*. 2017 Minneapolis: University Press. pp. G10-11.
3. A. Tsing. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. 2015. Princeton: University Press, p. 37.
4. *ibid.* *The Mushroom at the End of the World*.
5. See S. Parman. *Scottish Crafters: A Historical Ethnography of a Celtic Village*. 2005. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth.
6. J. Hunter. *The Islanders and the Orb: The History of the Harris Tweed Industry, 1835-1995*. 2001. Stormovay: Acar.
7. *Being Together in Place*, p. 10.
8. J-P. Addie & J. Fraser. 'After Gentrification: Social Mix, Settler Colonialism, and Cruel Optimism in the Transformation of Neighbourhood Space'. 2019. *Antipode* 51 (5): 1369-94. p. 1377.
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10. C. Linton. "Making It For Our Country": An Ethnography of Mud-Dyeing on Amami Ōshima Island". 2020. *TEXTILE*, 18.3, 250-277.
11. M. Taussig. *What Color Is the Sacred?* 2009. Chicago: University Press, p. 153.
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All photos courtesy of the author

CROSS CURRENTS

In 2021 Bothy Project, Fogo Island Arts and Fogo Island Workshops collaborated to realise *Cross Currents*, a residency and professional development project for craft-designer-makers based in Scotland and Newfoundland, Canada.

After an open call Florence Dwyer and Clare Robb went on residency to Bothy Project's Sweeney's Bothy, Isle of Eigg, and Nicole Travers and Larry Weyand were resident at Fogo Island Arts on Fogo Island.

Charlotte Linton

Charlotte Linton is a designer and anthropologist based at the University of Oxford whose research explores textile techniques, aesthetics and histories focusing on the social, environmental and economic relationships formed during production. Her work considers the role that traditional crafts play in sustaining rural social networks particularly in light of issues surrounding migration, wellbeing and sustainability. A graduate of Central Saint Martins and the Royal College of Art, London, Charlotte has worked as a designer in the fashion and textiles industry in London, New York and Paris.

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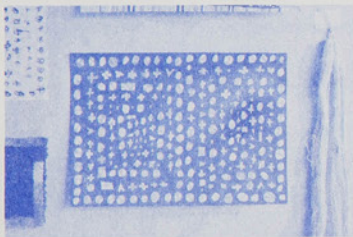
This essay *Listening for the call of place*, was commissioned to accompany posters produced by each maker as the *Cross Currents* project drew to a close. Find out more about the makers at www.bothyproject.com, or by scanning the QR code below.

Cross Currents proposed that residents explore the historical, artistic and social parallels between Scotland's West Coast and Newfoundland on Canada's East Coast. These topics were unpacked in a series of sessions led by: Chris Kabel (product designer, Rotterdam); Charlotte Linton (designer and anthropologist, Glasgow); Amy Prouty (curator and academic, Toronto) and Katy West (designer and educator, Glasgow).

Cross Currents builds on work undertaken by Bothy Project in *The Pioneers* (2016), where makers designed objects useful for its off-grid bothies, and Fogo Island Workshops, which has forged collaborations between designers and local makers to create furniture. Both organisations are committed to excellence in design practice which is informed by place-based artisanal knowledge and skills.

The project was generously funded through British Council Scotland and Creative Scotland's Connect and Collaborate programme, with additional support from Shorefast.

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1.



2.



3.



4.

MAKERS

1. Florence Dwyer
Drawing table at Sweeney's Bothy, Isle of Eigg, 2021
2. Clare Robb
Knotted thongweed, Isle of Eigg, 2021
3. Nicole Travers
I Honour You, Fogo Island, 2021
4. Larry Weyand
Detail from *All the Bathrooms I Bathed In*, 2022



Read about the maker's work here

Posters available from www.bothystores.com

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Fogo Island Workshops

