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Is it possible to weave together the past and the present to create a cloth of the future which is threaded with embodied knowledge and understanding in the face of collective disconnect?

KEYWORDS:

Connection, Heritage and Re-invent

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In this piece of writing, I aim to explore 3 key words, and I will particularly perceive these words through the lens of traditional crafts, as this reflects interest in my own practice. The words, 'Connection,' 'Heritage' and 'Re-invent' will be supported in contexts of traditional cultures from around the world, such as Japan, Peru and one I relate to myself, Wales. I will explore this through researchers such as Tanya Harrod, Matthew Crawford, and artists such as Corina Gertz, using images to support my points. This will lead me to create a question for my final year dissertation, as well as resources such as books and journals to aid that inquiry.

My first word, connection, means "a binding or joining together." (etymonline, n.d., A) I will be further exploring the meaning of connection in the terms of craft, looking at how craft binds communities and re-joins us to ourselves in the context of mental health. Antoine de Saint-Exupery wrote that "The greatness of craft consists firstly in how it brings comradeship to men." (Potts, Simms, 2011) Saint-Exupery recognised the importance of craft in connecting our communities and allowing us to form relationships through creativity, which I will explore later on. Comradeship is not only between people however- as Saint-Exupery states, but the relationship, the connection, can also be between the maker and the material, weaving together a unique and intimate affiliation. "As the maker transforms clay into pot, the clay transforms the maker into a potter." (Kumar, 2010) There is a sense of interconnection when it comes to making, you cannot have a craft without the maker, nor the material. This is the 'greatness' of craft, it allows you to connect with yourself, to create a comradeship with yourself. It allows you to become a potter, or a quilter for example. "The power of the human spirit...transforms willow wands into baskets, stone into sculptures, wood into wardrobes, sounds into songs and words into poems." (Kumar, 2010) To craft is to transform, allowing one to grow through creativity. Connection, therefore could be argued as being a form of growth, using these skills allows you to grow through learning.

Craft also allows a community to grow through connection. Historically, in colonial America, women would come together to "quilt, talk and share." (Proeller, 1997) 'Quilting bees' were very popular, as they "provided companionship in isolated communities." (Quiltingbees, 2023) Utilising craft in this way not only allowed women to connect with themselves, as I explored earlier, but allowed them also to form connections through relationships whilst working together on quilts. "Mutual cooperation is associated with enhanced neuronal responses in reward areas of the brain. This tends to suggest that social cooperation is intrinsically rewarding." (Potts, Simms, 2011) Therefore, this suggests that crafting together in guilds such as 'Quilting bees' allowed communities to 'bind' and come together as it was "intrinsically rewarding", creating 'comradeship' as well as a sense of cultural pride and identity. This shows that the guilds are much more than 'craft clubs.' Today, guilds and societies "are emerging that are specifically aimed at boosting mental health" (craftcouncil, 2022) and creating these positive neuronal responses. "textile craft [helps people] cope with depression and negative feelings, while offering social support and positive relationships." (craftscouncil, 2020) This suggests that craft can not only connect you to your community, but also allows you to reconnect with yourself in a positive way. This juxtaposes crafting as both an individual and communal experience, presenting the conclusion that craft can be unique and universal at the same time.

Welsh quilting, similar to colonial American quilting, used to be a large part of how Welsh residents connected to the land and their community. Welsh quilts used to be "entirely home grown, made with local cloth from local sheep and filled with sheeps wool collected from the hedgerows." (Jenkins and Claridge, 2008) This connection with the land allowed an intrinsic understanding of the world around them- craft binds the maker with the earth and the earth is then reflected in the craft. This

idea of connecting to the earth through craft can be seen today through movements such as the 'Transition town.' Noticing the effects that climate change, usage of oil and general economic instability has on the community, these towns aim to create a "Strong, connected, self-sufficient community" (Everything connects, n.d.) through various processes, including craft projects. "Learning new crafts and skills not only equips us for a world in transition, but also helps us connect to it." (Everything connects, n.d.) Using craft, therefore, allows us not only to understand the world around us, but allows a form of self-expression towards these issues, thus further deepening our connection and understanding of the current world issues today.

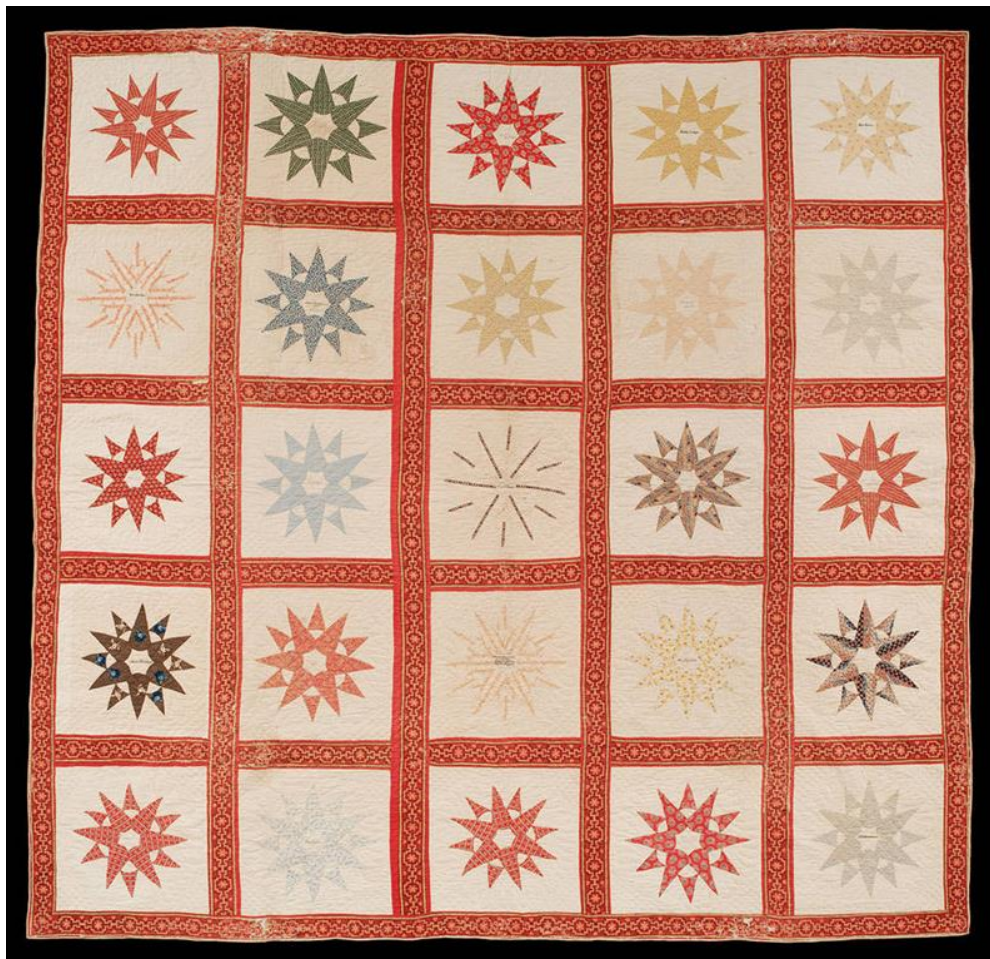


Figure 1

The idea of connection is expanded further through tradition, where quilt-making 'bees' were held in 19th century American communities for girls "about to get married...." As seen in figure 1, this 'Brides Quilt' was made for a couple in 1846. Symbols of a rising sun had associations "with the dawning of a new day." (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2019). Not only does this show that quilts are a way to celebrate a connection, created through connection, but the use of symbols permit one to relate to the quilt, it has evolved into something further, a connection is created through sentimental value. This leads me onto my next word, Heritage.

Tanya Harrod states that "there is nothing inherently 'green' about craft practice." (Brown, Kumar-Mitchell, 2004, pg 73-74). This is due to heritage, which means the "condition or state transmitted from ancestors," (etymonline, n.d., B) and is at the very heart of craft. We can see this in various cultures, from the quilts of Wales to Sashiko stitching of Japan, which I will explore further on. Essentially, without heritage, we cannot have craft, "Textile is, by nature, ephemeral," (Knight, 2023

pg 40) but knowledge of the textile craft can be eternal. Sashiko textiles is proof of this, it is described as a story of “loss and rebirth,” (Hayes, 2019) the circle of life where heritage comes into play, without loss and rebirth, we cannot inherit, but the cycle of ‘loss and rebirth’ can continue for eternity, thus so can textile knowledge. “The sashiko made by our ancestors reminds us of the importance of things, of gentleness and of strength.” (Hayes, 2019) This suggests that it is not only knowledge of craft practice that can be inherited, but the deeper meaning behind it, for example, families who have given quilts to museums have said they have “associated stories with the quilt.” (BBC News, 2022). The craft therefore becomes multi-layered and a deeper connection is created to the craft and ancestors due to this, “textiles are treated as modes of communication,” (Lyndem, Bhandari, 2022) not only through symbolism, as seen in the American bridal quilts, but also metaphorical, spiritual communication, as “The practice of arts and crafts is a spiritual practice through which we honour the material world” (Kumar, 2010) and thus our heritage, as it is connected and intertwined with the ‘material world.’ Honouring this connection is important in the modern day where cultural appropriation is common. Cultural appropriation of textiles means the understanding of the craft is lost, although physically the craft is alive, the heritage, the knowledge from ancestors is gone and therefore so has the craft. This is an area I could explore further, in particular looking at the journal ‘Cultural appropriation with reference to textiles handwoven in Nagaland, India’ by Nisaphi Lyndem and Vandana Bhandari. In the face of cultural appropriation, crafts such as sashiko and other “quilting traditions provides an important ‘example of the perseverance of tradition in the face of a rapidly shifting global society.” (Hayes, 2019) In other words, perseverance of retaining the true meaning of craft through understanding their heritage.

Heritage within crafts are physical manifestations of tradition and cultural identity, highlighting the importance of keeping these traditions alive- not only for the individual to whom they belong but to humanity in general, “arts and crafts are woven into the fabric of society,” (Frost, 2019) therefore traditional craft and the heritage that comes along with it is a symbol of humanity. Passing down cultural knowledge through practice, as Matthew Crawford states, “directly evokes the relationship between the skilled and the apprentice... a kind of philosophic friendship.” (Potts, Simms, 2011) Therefore, this shows the power within connecting and understanding heritage craft, the formation of a personal ‘relationship’ is created, however it also allows cultural protection, as ‘knowledge is power.’ This ‘philosophic friendship’ allows cultural heritage and identity to remain part of the ‘fabric of society.’ “The history of indigenous peoples has been protected in this way for many centuries” (Munoz Morales, 2022 pg 22) (‘this way’ meaning through traditional craft.) In a way, craft and textiles have become a voice, speaking of the past to defend the future, craft has become a way to communicate heritage, which, as I mentioned earlier, is an important part of civilizations. For example, the Centre for traditional textiles of Cusco, established in 1996, aims to “preserve the quality of textiles and to make sure that Inca and pre-Inca techniques from Nazca, Huari or Chimu... continue into the future” (Echavarria, 2021, pg 22-27).



Figure 2

The artist Corina Gertz addresses these issues through photography. Her work, as seen in figure 2, addresses “the threat to cultural heritage posed by globalisation”.(Gertz, 2022, pg12) This is done by allowing the clothing and craft to communicate alone, the images are layered, representing heritage not only through craftsmanship, but through “origin, family and social status.” (Gertz, 2022, pg12) These photos highlight humanities diversity as well as communicating individual identity, it allows one to tell stories without the constraints of the written word, presenting a powerful image of protection of cultural identity thus presenting the power of heritage within textile crafts. [craft] “seems more like the beginning of a new and more resilient movement of expansion.” (Brown, Kumar Mitchell, 2004) Heritage craft is the expansion into understanding or even re-discovering one’s cultural identity. This leads me onto my next word: Re-invent.

The word ‘Re-invent,’ will be explored in the context of craftivism, as well as in the context of how traditional textiles can evolve to become applicable with today’s modern creative industry. Neil Cunningham articulates that “We are at a fascinating inflection point, where crafts, old and modern, are intermingling, and opening many new avenues.” (Fitzpatrick, Reilly, 2019), almost becoming a modern-day twist to the 19th century “arts and crafts” movement whereby people are rejecting globalisation in favour of re-connecting with craft heritage. Take weaving for example, this ancient technique “traces back to Neolithic times – approximately 12,000 years ago” (weavedesign, n.d.), yet these traditions have been re-applied in the modern day through small businesses who focus on preserving these traditional methods, whilst ‘opening avenues’ for communities, such as the company ‘We Are KAL’. They employ “home-based weavers who are following their tradition.” Creating products in this way “[connects] the future to the rich heritage of a culture,” as “in weaving

the artisan's reflection on their culture and environment is revealed.”(seen in figure 3 below) (We Are KAL, n.d.) Suggesting that heritage craft can evolve in this modern world as a way to sustain communities, and create sustainable economies whilst also carrying tradition and meaning, allows these communities to take back their heritage whilst also allowing their culture to grow and evolve- they are re-inventing what it means to craft in this current climate. For example, crafts purpose is now about preservation of cultural identity, rather than, for example, a quilt made for warmth, or a basket made for carrying. This idea is supported in other cultures: “embroidery in Mexico in the 21st century has transcended colonial historical processes, resisting, and fighting for recognition and cultural vindication [through] business models that challenge the dominant economic system through community and autonomous social values” (Munoz Morales, 2022, pg 22). Which leads onto my next point of re-invention- craftivism.



Figure 3

Craftivism was a term coined by activist Betsy Greer. “It refers to the use of politically engaged crafting methods as a strategy to examine and challenge contemporary issues and policies,” (Fitzpatrick, Reilly, 2019). In other words it can be used to re-invent thought, permitting growth through “empowerment, action, and expression” all of which is achieved through craft. Especially in indigenous cultures, which have been subject to colonialism, craftivism has become a way to take back their heritage and re-invent the narrative around their culture. “Crafting is not only a way of embodied knowing, it can represent covert action when done in a protest or resistance context.” (Fitzpatrick, Reilly, 2019). In fact, cultural preservation could be seen as a form of activism against colonisation and globalisation, as seen in “Nahua women [who] decided to start a project around the rescue, conservation, improvement, diffusion and commercialization of traditional garments and textiles.” (Munoz Morales, 2022, pg 22) However, craftivism can be extended further than this, craftivism has the power to re-invent society by challenging those who are in authority. For example,

“The Arpillera movement in Chile allowed ordinary women to defy a military dictatorship by embroidering their sorrow onto scraps of material as a means of protest and resistance, memorializing the disappeared” (Fitzpatrick, Reilly, 2019). This shows that traditional crafts can help communities in numerous ways, not only creating economic evolution (as I explored earlier), but creating a voice. Allowing the community to speak about the world they want, giving them an opportunity to shape and re-invent it.

My three words; Connection, Heritage and Re-invent, all have one thing in common: Power. Craft “is the power of patience and practice, the power of imagination and endurance, the power of our own hands, feet and voice.” (Kuma, 2010) It can create relationships to community and the world around us, hold multi-layered meanings and stories and fight for justice- it is the embodiment of “the human spirit.” (Kuma, 2010) Yet in a world of globalisation, mass consumption and general disconnect from ourselves, is adapting, evolving and connecting to craft enough to keep it alive? Is there more that can be done in the face of what can only be described as a crisis of ‘human spirit,’ so that connection to craft and therefore our heritage can be woven into the future? Antoine de Saint-Exupery described craft as “greatness,” (Potts, Simms, 2011) yet all the essences that make it ‘great,’ which I announced earlier, could be challenged in the face of cultural appropriation and impersonality of our contemporary lives. For example, “though craftsmanship was once integral to everyday life, today, the artisan sector in Palestine is vulnerable” as “a flood of cheap knockoffs, mainly from China, has put the sector further at risk.” (Waterman, 2022) These ‘knockoffs’ are produced in mass manufactory settings and sold to consumers who do not realise the disconnect. This begs the question, Is it possible to weave together the past and the present to create a cloth of the future which is threaded with embodied knowledge and understanding in the face of collective disconnect? Craftsmen have the power to “reconfigure the material world through metamorphosis” (Sennet, 2009, pg. 294), can this same power be applied to the physical one?

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