**The Fashion Land Ethic: localism, clothing activity and Macclesfield**

Kate Fletcher

**Abstract**

Almost sixty years after Aldo Leopold first articulated ‘the land ethic’ (1959) this paper extends, to the fashion context, Leopold’s view that an ecological conscience is based in a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the places in which humans live. The paper’s starting point is that the site of an activity is a criterion for sustainability change. It explores place, or in Leopold’s words, ‘an intense consciousness of land’ (ibid: 223) in garments and clothing activity in the town of Macclesfield in the north of England. Through a focus on the fashion resources, actions and relationships in one location, it aims to build understanding of the emancipatory aims of localism in a fashion context and explore how connections between place, nature, society and clothing can act as an explicitly normative route to create sustainability futures.

Keywords: fashion, localism, place-adaptation, sustainability, land.

**Biography**

Kate Fletcher is Research Professor at University of the Arts London where she explores design for sustainability in fashion. Kate has authored five books and more than 60 scholarly and popular publications in the field. Most recently her work was published by the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A and featured in the fashion magazine Marie Claire.

**Introduction**

Ecosystems vary depending on where they are. For locally varied ecosystems to flourish and for their wealth, their ‘natural capital’ to be conserved, the activities within them – knowledge, communities, products, cultures and practices – require adaptation to their specific place. This process is localism. It involves the shaping of activity by a region’s natural factors and by what is intriguing and dynamic in a place to ensure its long-term prosperity. It favours the use of nearby resources, place-specific knowledge, community self-reliance, practices shaped by traditions, necessity, climate, imagination and a distributed form of authority, leadership and political power (Curtis, 2003).

Localism is recognised as a central tenet of sustainability that will, it is claimed, ‘solve at root many of society’s theoretical and practical problems’ (Pepper, 1996: 306). Its promise arises from two main sources. First, the different ways power is divided when the scale of living is revised: smaller, local scales change the influence that people have over decisions that affect their lives. And second, the recognition that a community’s well-being depends on the health of the ecosystems it lives within, the fitness of which that same community is uniquely placed to understand and affect. David Orr describes the relationship between, nature, place and community as, ‘…an inescapable correspondence… between the quality of our places and the quality of the lives lived in them. In short, we need stable, safe, interesting settings, both rural and urban, in which to flourish as fully human creatures.’ (1994: 161) Place, its make-up and its calibre, is central to how humans live their lives. And if, as Ehrenfeld (2008: 7) suggests, sustainability is an outcome of these life processes, place is also a major influencing factor in sustainability change.

In this paper, I experiment with compiling new and different understanding of localism for fashion clothing in a process that starts, literally, from the ground-up. My point of departure is close examination of a town, its surroundings and the social and material resources there as the gateway for engaging with local adaptation. I ask, what are the garments and the clothing practices of a specific location? I investigate the material and social affordances, that is the support offered by the surroundings, for good or ill. I enquire about the mix of things locally, the clothing culture. Throughout I draw upon fieldwork conducted as part of the ‘Fashion Ecologies’ project in the town on Macclesfield in the north of England and describe the approaches taken. I also outline initial findings and tentatively offer priorities and vision for fashion localism as the cumulative clothing-related activity, including production activity, in a particular place with multiple goals.

**Localism**

The practice of connecting a community with the place that supports it introduces a feedback loop that is location-specific and which binds together a community’s actions, their effects and responsibility for them. This loop has been described as the IMBY effect (In My Back Yard) (Curtis, op cit), an update of the more widely known NIMBY phenomenon (Not In My Back Yard) which refers to opposition made to the occurrence of something when its

impacts are felt close by, while no such concerns are raised to similar developments elsewhere. In an IMBY feedback loop, a community’s values steer its activities, including the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. This steer reflects preferences for employment in a place, the tools available, the childcare on offer, the speed of the internet connection, the recycling facilities. It prefers near-by resources because that is what is available, a constraint that also reduces transport-related emissions – a commonly cited benefit of local activity (Sustain, 1994). Yet beyond emissions reduction, local values drive products and services to be better considered for the consequences of not doing so will be felt directly at home. It tends towards creating goods that are appropriately durable as determined by those who use and repair the products in the places where they live. It reflects the skills, stories, the motifs and visual language of a place. The steer regulates the scale of economic activity because the associated costs of each extra unit of production or service delivered will be borne locally and the trade-off between cost and benefit negotiated. Because there are many places, localism takes many forms. It is characterised by diversity, by ‘social and environmental responsibility, health of the community, stewardship of nature, affection for and commitment to place, fidelity, propriety, and sufficiency’ (Curtis, op cit: 86). A suite of values highly congruent with those of sustainability.

In this theoretical frame, the cosmology of localism rests on a simple hierarchy that promotes society (the local community and the land on which it is mutual reliant) above the economy. In it nature-community is the superset and economics the subset; environmental and community priorities dictate industrial ambition, describing natural and human limits to growth. In his book, *Lean Logic: A Dictionary for the Future and How to Survive It* (2011), environmental thinker David Fleming describes localism as, ‘a rich earthy mixture of reciprocities and culture [which] will be the resilient successor to the market economy in the tasks of meeting material needs, sustaining social order and keeping the peace.’ (389) As such localism is a system unlike the present one. In it, diverse, distinct economic and social structures replace globalised, homogenous ones. A ‘one economy’ view of society is replaced by multifarious alternatives, shaped by the particulars of the diverse places in which life unfolds. Such particulars may not always lead to conclusions and strategies that are easy to understand or which best represent the long term, but they are based on local empowerment and are a community’s joint responsibility.

**Fashion and localism**

As should be obvious, the ‘emancipatory aims’ (Starr, 2010: 484) of localism directly challenge the priorities of contemporary capitalism. Applied to the fashion sector, arguably the quintessential poster-child of consumer capitalism, it has a similarly confronting effect. In fashion, the dominant project of realisation undermines place-based adaptations. Large volume and global, contemporary fashion provision is enabled by use of cheap and indiscriminately sourced raw materials, standardised products, intensive commercialisation, economies of scale and long-distance trade. These priorities, concentrating economic and political power outside communities, are centrifugal forces, generating directions of travel away from the distinction of a specific ecosystem or place. Localism, by contrast, is a centripetal movement (Curtis, op cit).

The blatant contradiction between the ideological mission of localism and the predominant globalising force of the fashion sector, has not acted as a total deterrent to work in this area. In the case of two projects, localism’s centripetal force – the shaping effect of a region on activity – directs opportunities for fashion. In the Hemp for Textiles project run by the environmental non-governmental organisation BioRegional in the 1990s (Riddlestone et al, 1995), years of research into growing traditional fibre crops suitable for the southeast of England resulted in practical farm trials, agricultural machinery development, new networks of manufacturers and the production of the first UK-grown pure hemp fabric for generations. And active today, Fibreshed (Fibreshed, 2017) develops land-based models for textile production that revive the role of historically respected regional fibre, dye plants and animals. The Fibreshed project, which began in Northern California, now has affiliate regional fibre communities across North America, Europe and Australia. Its work, like that of BioRegional before it, create the fashion offer by its ‘natural address’ and describe routes to provide for and express fashion culture linked to specifics of place.

More typically however, where some element of place interpolates fashion activity, the starting point is economic not ecological. In re-shoring, for example, regional production is promoted as fashion manufacturing is brought back to high-wage countries, in close geographical proximity to large consumer markets to reduce manufacturing lead-times as part of a lean business model (Alliance Project, 2017), an unanticipated consequence of fast fashion and one that re-kindles the development of skills in the Global North. Elsewhere, local themes are interpreted as operational issues, as input substitutes and logistical guidelines – use regional materials, use local production and assembly – within globalised business models the structures of which remain largely unchanged. Irrespective, some of these have had vivifying effects for local places and specific communities. For example, a recent study in the UK reported on a textile growth programme to re-energise the British Textile Industry (ibid). It found that existing infrastructure was so fragmented that it holds little possibility of scalability, but with small investment a surprising resurgence of diverse, small scale businesses emerged. Reflecting this groundswell in small-scale British manufacturing, denim brands such Tender, is optimised at a very small-scale (2017), Hiut, totally allied to the town of Cardigan in west Wales (2017) and Blackhorse Lane Ateliers which has established what it describes as, ‘a modern methodology for a community of makers’ in east London (2017). Other brands, such as Katie Jones (2017), have shifted its activity from production and sales to skills development. Reflecting a discomfort with making pieces that are financially inaccessible for its community, it now delivers make-it-yourself workshops, an interesting indication perhaps of a resilient, community-linked successor to the fashion status quo.

Each of these examples reveal a little of the range, variability and still inchoate nature of localism for the fashion sector and the often-indistinct routes to fostering change. They suggest that the global fashion system is contested but also reveal how little the dynamics, relationships and practical material effects of localism are understood in the fashion context, in a real sense. It appears that in the absence of working knowledge to the contrary, designers, brands, policy makers, environmentalists, the wearers of clothes, have interpreted the radical potential of localism within what they know: business-as-usual, but with a bit more regional manufacturing. In the rest of this paper, I take a different tack.

**Fashion Ecologies**

The starting point for Fashion Ecologies (2015 – 2017) was that the location of an activity is a criterion for sustainability change. It comprised one work package of the larger project ‘KRUS’ funded by the Norwegian Research Council and the fieldwork was conducted in the UK by myself and research assistant Lizzie Harrison. Ecology is the study of the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings. In our investigation of ‘fashion ecologies’ we focused on clothing activity, interactions and relationships in the place in which they happen. Here localism was understood not as single items, like, say, iconic British pieces or traditional materials, but as a dynamic mix of resources and interactions in an area, the sum of what a place can offer. The objective was to document the fashion resources, garment-related actions and relationships in a place, including the difficult and unpopular bits; and to use any insight generated to build new understanding about localism and fashion.

In this project I drew on the same themes as I do in much of my work, namely ecological thinking and connection with nature. In Fashion Ecologies, I used analogies of farming and gardening to help develop the link between garments, communities and land, including the way perennial and annual plants differently impact the soil as a metaphor for understanding support systems for ‘healthy’ growth. I also adapted research methods from disciplines that investigate natural systems, like ecology and geography, to help structure the gathering of data about place and the fashion ‘populations’ there. Further I drew on the work of nature writers to guide the spirit of the investigation, including farmer and poet Wendell Berry who, in advocating for understanding derived from direct experience, inspired the approach of this project: ‘We came with visions, but not with sight. We did not see or understand where we were or what was there’ (1981: 82). Observe. Listen. Do not exert control. I also called upon the writing of Aldo Leopold (*op cit*: 223) whose articulation of ethical behaviour as something which leads towards ‘an intense consciousness of land’, where, ‘Land is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit’ (ibid: 216) that leads towards place and community, set the course for this work.

The task of recording the fashion interactions, relationships and related resource flows of an area is a highly unusual one – a hybrid anthropological-scientific investigation of holistic, place-sensitive and multi-modal sources – that few conventional textiles and clothing research methods are set up to deal with. In fact, work around adapting existing and creating new methods became a central activity and outcome of the project. The process of data collection for the Fashion Ecologies work was frequently improvised based on actual conditions; something that Ehrenfeld and Hoffman see as requisite for real world investigations: ‘What’s needed in complex systems isn’t positive knowledge, it’s understanding. Understanding comes from a keen sense of observation and continuous learning about the system in which one lives’ (2013: 94). The challenge for Fashion Ecologies was to devise approaches to data gathering that reflected the epistemology of localism and then to keep coming back to this understanding of what it means to know about clothing in the materials, practices and relationships inscribed in place. For us, this meant methods that included mapping, drawing, interviewing, auditing and loitering; methods inspired by art practice, ethnology, soft systems methodologies and ecology research, among others. The goal was to gather data from both the formal and informal economy, data from private and public spaces, data that conformed to conventional understanding of what constitutes valuable clothing activity and also that which did not.

The first action taken was to identify a place in which to conduct the fieldwork. The place chosen was Macclesfield, a market town in Cheshire, England. Macclesfield was selected for its accessibility as a research site and like many similar communities in the UK its centre has some features of a ‘clone town’ (Taylor et al, 2004). Macclesfield is in the middle of the UK as seen on a map. It is a midmost place, described by a town centre store manager as ‘run-of-the-mill’. Building knowledge of such a ‘standard’ place is central to understanding how to foster change across the population at large.

**Macclesfield ‘Market Town’**

Population: 52 044 (UK Census, 2011). Co-ordinates: 53°N, 2°W, elevation: 150m. According to the Köppen Climate Classification, Macclesfield has a ‘warm temperate climate’, with an average temperature of 4.2°C in January and 20.3°C in July (World Weather, 2017). Rainfall is significant throughout year and amounts to annual average of 1189mm (ibid). The River Bollin runs South-North through the town.

In the Domesday Book (1086), the place is named as ‘Macclesfeld’, where ‘feld’ meant open country. Indeed much of Macclesfield’s wealth was dependent on agriculture until the seventeenth century. According to Shaw and Clark (2003) a wide range of crafts and industry took place in Macclesfield from 1372 onwards: shoe repairers, cheese production and from 1574, button making. In the nineteenth century Macclesfield dominated silk throwing (twisting) and hand weaving in the county of Cheshire and is still locally known as ‘Silk Town’. In 1814 the town had 30 mills. Within a decade this had increased to more than 70. After 1870 very few new mills were built until the 1920s when the town’s mills experienced a revival based on rayon and a trend for washable ‘artificial silk’ dresses in ‘Macclesfield stripe’. In the mid nineteenth century, the number of shopkeepers in Macclesfield was around 200, with 100 boot and shoe makers and around 60 tailors and drapers.

Today Macclesfield is classified as ‘a relatively affluent town’ with slightly better than average rates of unemployment, level of educational attainment and health compared to the rest of the UK (I Live Here, 2017). The town boundary includes a centre which is relatively deprived and extremely prosperous surrounding villages. The chief employer locally is a pharmaceutical company and many residents commute to work in Manchester, 35km away. Until around 30 years ago, there were a significant number of textile producers and garment manufacturers in Macclesfield, today these number in single figures. The town centre is run down and dominated by charity shops, discount stores and empty lots. There is a small out-of-town retail park and two large supermarkets. Once a month a food and crafts market takes place in Macclesfield when the town becomes busy and vibrant.

The landscape around Macclesfield is dominated by the Peak District National Park that rises steeply up at its eastern margins, the geology of which is gritstone and soft shale (see Figure 1). At lower elevations the national park is chiefly turned over to agriculture and specifically sheep farming of hill breeds including Swaledale, Derbyshire Gritstone and Herdwick. There is also a small amount of forestry. At higher elevations (around 600m), the landscape is entirely without trees, a moorland of heather and bilberry and a breeding ground for red grouse, curlew and skylark. In places the moorland is managed for the shooting of game. Surrounding the town on all other sides is the Cheshire plain which lies on Bunter pebble beds overlain with glacial sand. The plain is given over chiefly to the production of grass as part of dairy agriculture, golf courses and horse paddocks.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Figure 1 caption: View towards the Peak District from Macclesfield town centre.

Image courtesy of the Fashion Ecologies project. Photography credit: Ian Ray.

**Methods**

In Macclesfield, the Fashion Ecologies project used seven different methods for data gathering, commencing with mapping. The first method used, was an adaptation of a practice used in geography to delimit an area of study when surveying populations of an area to make it manageable: a transect. In our site, we defined the transect as a 1km continuous stretch of street front in the centre of town. We measured the transect using a trundle wheel and recorded the retail offer along it, transcribing this onto a paper plan. The mapping process involved the logging of all premises as well as store type, if appropriate. This was then repeated three times at yearly intervals.

The ‘populations’ of the transect were also mapped using other methods, that we called ‘Mapping, Counting, Loitering’ (Fletcher and Harrison, 2017). Inspired by the observation techniques used by artist Michael Swaine in his project ‘Counting Objects’ in which he stood on a street in San Francisco for a day, listing the items carried by passers-by; and also by research methods of walking and loitering in a place to engage with it more fully (Evans and Jones, 2011). We hung about at five key sites along the 1km stretch for one-hour time slots, observing people, sketching the activity of the transect and counting branded shopping bags carried in view at specific (busy) times. We repeated the exercise twice. The data was collected on specifically designed data collection sheets and the drawings made within sketchbooks.

We attempted to juxtapose the data from the streets with data about clothing-related activity from domestic settings. To do this we conducted wardrobe audits and interviews in three homes within a short distance of the transect. A wardrobe audit is a method of data collection that combines ethnographic fieldwork together with a cataloguing approach primarily found in an ethnological tradition. It involves conducting an inventory of a total or part collection of clothes. In our case, we adapted the method to audit the total clothing resources in possession of, or accessible by, one person, a ‘Whole Fashion Audit’ (Fletcher et al., 2017). Total clothing resources are understood here as the total number of garments in a person’s wardrobe plus the various tools, materials, machinery used to maintain and care for these clothes throughout their life and make up a functioning wardrobe. The research team and participant moved around the home counting the number of garments owned by the participant across 22 categories, including items in the wardrobe, in storage and in the laundry process. The research team then audited the tools and equipment needed make, repair and care for clothing across 21 further categories. Sewing equipment, textiles tools and materials were photographed to visually document their quantity. The data are documented on a specially designed chart that presents clothing and clothing maintenance items in taxonomic rank of families, species, genus, similar to biological classification (see Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 about here.

Figure 2 caption: Whole Wardrobe Audit record sheet organised as a taxonomy.

Image courtesy of the Fashion Ecologies project.

We also supplemented the wardrobe audit with other questions. Before the actual inventory took place, we asked the participant to first estimate the number of items they have in each of four clothing categories and then, after the audit was complete, compared this with the actual number to gain more knowledge about the accuracy of people’s estimations of the size of their wardrobes. We also asked the participant to select specific items from their wardrobe that represented common descriptions of clothing: ‘practical’, ‘good’ and asked for any pieces that characterised ‘local’ clothing. In addition, we interviewed the participant about the flow of clothing through the household and the resources that the household access from beyond the home. Around 20 semi-structured questions elicited responses about the movement and interaction with clothing moving into, around and out of the wardrobe. Our intention was to capture something of the metabolism of a functioning wardrobe within the transect area.

The same question about flows of clothes, use of clothes and maintenance behaviours within wardrobes was investigated with another method, ‘Mapping My Clothes’ (Harrison and Fletcher, 2017) this time drawing on making-as-inquiry research practices and rich picture drawing activities for gathering information about a complex situation, part of a soft systems methodology (Checkland, 2000). For this method we used a trigger question about the ways in which an individual’s collection of clothes does not work and causes frustration to the wearer, as a catalyst to start a process of using drawings or pictures to think about the wardrobe. The method was conducted in a workshop setting, in our case two community venues. We set up the workshop space for a maximum of 10 participants around a large communal table with an A3 drawing sheet per participant and a collection of craft materials placed in the middle including; pens, pastels, magazines, scissors, glue sticks, wool and stickers. Participants first introduce themselves and are then asked to think about, note down and share with the group an aspect of their wardrobe that they find frustrating. They are then asked to visualise the area of frustration by firstly drawing the location where it occurs. Then they draw in the structures around the frustration (which might include the places that the clothes come from, how they arrive, how they are washed and cared for, where they go when no longer worn). Once this is added the participants are asked to draw in the process by which the clothes are managed including people and relationships that are part of the system (Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 about here.

Figure 3 caption: Participant collage making as part of the Mapping My Clothes method.

Image courtesy of the Fashion Ecologies project.

In addition, we conducted around 20 interviews in Macclesfield with organisations related to garments in some way both within the transect and those connected to it. This included launderettes, textile printers, haberdashers, hosiery market stall holders, managers of large clothing stores, supervisors of waste disposal sites, sewing machine repair engineers and community crafts clubs. Subjects were found through web searches, community notice boards, word of mouth and personal recommendation from other interviewees. The interviews used semi-structured questions to probe the organisation’s relationship of place and community, both in the vicinity, and more broadly. From the Macclesfield recordings, over 50 hours of interview recordings were then transcribed.

**The fashion ecology of Macclesfield**

The fieldwork data built a complex and often messy picture of place-context and associated social and material resources for clothing. A selection of findings include:

Material assets – survey of the transect repeated over three years (see Figure 4)

2015

135 shop front properties, 18 properties are empty (13%), 27 sell some clothing (20%), comprised of 10 chain stores, nine independents, eight charity shops.

The independent stores are concentrated on Chestergate, and particularly the stretch furthest away from the town centre. Chain stores are predominantly located on Market Street, the heart of the town. Charity shops are mainly found on the lower end of Market Street and Mill Street. This clustering reflects business rate charges which vary dependent on position relative to the centre of the town. Charity shops pay reduced business rates, enabling them to occupy properties with a relatively central position. Positioned as they are in numbers and proximity to each other, they convey a sense of a town in decline.

There are no clothing maintenance or repair shops along the transect. Likewise there are none selling haberdashery, trims or fabric. These stores are sited in basements, in the indoor market or further afield away from the town centre.

2016

135 shop front properties, 21 are empty (16%), 28 sell some clothing (21%) of which ten are chain stores, nine independents and nine are charity shops.

In the period of one year, Macclesfield experiences changes to shop occupancy mainly at the margins of the transect. The chain stores, especially the ‘household names’ do not change. Independent stores are more transient, especially ones where the stock is low price, they have a temporary ‘pop-up shop’ feel. Charity shops move between vacant lots in a limited way. Overall, the number of empty properties is increasing, changing the material fabric of the town centre and by extension is social fabric.

2017

135 shop front properties, 19 are empty (15%), 28 sell some clothing (21%) of which ten are chain stores, twelve independents and six are charity shops.

Chain clothing stores do not leave. Independent stores convert to temporary, discount pop-up shops and one new shop selling bespoke children’s tutus. The number of charity shops has declined by 33%.

Insert Figure 4 about here.

Map of the Macclesfield transect, including changes over three years.

Image courtesy of the Fashion Ecologies project.

*Counting bags*

Early in the day, the transect streets were very quiet, ‘dead’, with lunchtime the busiest period. Plenty of food shopping bags and reusable shopping bags are visible. No branded clothes shopping bags were spotted. Most footfall on the street was young mothers pushing prams or elderly people. A man was arrested. The predominant dress was casual wear, ‘bland, comfortable clothes’, tracksuits, hoodies, leggings.

At the train station (outside the 1km transect), passengers alighting at Macclesfield carry branded clothes bags, eight in one hour were visible, the majority, low price clothing stores.

*Retailers*

In interviews, retailers on the transect describe shoppers as “below average income” and “very price conscious”. Marks and Spencer (M&S), the ‘anchor retailer’ in Macclesfield – its opening hours are mirrored by other stores in the vicinity – has a product offer dominated by cotton and synthetics. There is no silk (“not even in the Silk Town”) and little wool, deemed to make products too expensive for local customers. The fibre palette of another mid-price point brand, FatFace is chiefly cotton, with T-shirts its biggest selling item.

Material assets - wardrobes

Three Macclesfield wardrobes (that of a young woman, a middle-aged woman and an older man) were audited and contained 224, 245 and 126 pieces respectively. In all three wardrobes, the number of upper body clothing items outnumbered lower body pieces by between a factor of five and eight. Clothing identified as ‘local’ included a Manchester United football top, “football is important to the region”; a pair of jeans from a British brand; dungarees bought in Macclesfield; and a crop top from a Manchester-based designer-maker with a label ‘Made it in the Mill’.

Each wardrobe contained some clothing care and repair equipment. Two out of the three wardrobes audited had access to a sewing and washing machine, an iron and clothes brushes (lint roller, bobble comb). All wardrobes had hand tools for sewing, thread, fabric scraps for repair jobs, laundry detergent and clothes maidens for drying garments.

Circulation

The circulation of garments through wardrobes and the flow of pieces in and out of homes had features similar in the three wardrobes audited: at least one piece in each wardrobe was also worn by others in the household; there was some seasonal storage of garments in all cases; items brought into the wardrobe were typically bought new; and garments left the wardrobe most commonly as part of a consignment donated to a charity shop, packaged up in small amounts regularly or more occasionally as a large bundle.

Evidence suggests that most garments arrive in Macclesfield wardrobes from outside of the town: the stock of the Scope charity shop, 85 percent of which is donated goods, “mostly come from brands not sold locally”. There are many charity shops to donate to. When inside the locale, these clothes appear to pass sequentially between groups, although these groups, perhaps from varying social classes, do not overlap: “different people buy from charity shops than donate to them”. Some items are also sold to recycling merchants who pay for clothing by the kilo and sell them to international rag traders. The average load of clothing in one such organisation, Cash4Clothes Macclesfield, is five large (dustbin liner size) bags. For the best items, 40p per kilo is paid out in cash. As elsewhere, there is full knowledge in Macclesfield that donations to charity shops are the corollary of more purchasing: “People buy new items and these make other items unwanted”. The general picture is of a linear flow of clothing through the town, possibly with a general drift down the social classes, with the ‘passing on’ of existing items triggered by the purchase of new pieces and limited storage space.

Some additional detail of the circulation of garments into and out of Macclesfield wardrobes emerged from the drawing activity ‘Mapping My Clothes’. In a group of young women, the flow of clothes through the wardrobe was fast, and much of the activity concentrated on getting access to new and different pieces. For them, the chief source of new clothing was online retailers and resale and trading websites were widely used to sell-on unwanted items and recoup money to fund the next purchase. In a group of older women, the circulation of clothing around the wardrobe was slower and shaped by the specific demands of individual bodies, the effort required to adapt pieces to improve fit and a lack of confidence of how to combine newer garments with older ones from different stylistic eras.

Exchange

Interviews with the store managers of Marks and Spencer and FatFace revealed that they meet together with other retailers at a business forum in the town, but see few opportunities to link to other clothing-related activity locally. The manager of the Scope charity shop - one such other organisation – confirms this de facto segregation, saying it has no links with local retailers, its only connections are with other charity shops.

Other actors within the broader garment-related sector of Macclesfield, report more, and more variety of, local interchange. For instance, a haberdasher in the basement of an old mill, the Fent Shop, describes itself as, “part of a community of makers”. It sells fabric, haberdashery and trims which, “pass the test of ‘useful’” – an understanding garnered from ongoing feedback from customers. It offers customers “as much help as possible” including use of the shop cutting table for those working on large projects. Another example, Hurdsfield Launderette, which offers self-service and service wash laundering of clothes, says it doubles as a, “social centre, beauty parlour, health clinic and dog-sitting service”. Clothes maintenance becomes a gateway to tending community. Different again, Best Man, a formal suit hire company functions within a local network of cleaners, repairers and fabric suppliers with which it makes ties and cravats. And a textile merchant, Shufflebotham’s, a century-old family business reselling fabric over-orders, seconds, roll ends and factory clearance stock from its warehouse of more than half a million metres of fabric has given over its entrance to a notice board of local textile-related services. Though the picture of exchange is not uncomplicated. Shufflebotham’s only local contacts with skilled makers are with curtain makers, not tailors, “I couldn’t name one”.

Participation

Participation in fashion manufacturing activity in Macclesfield was widely reported as being hampered by the lack of locally-held skills and acumen. Think Positive Print, a high-end digital printer, which works primarily with silk and wool, is typical in finding hand sewing and finishing skills problematic to access in Macclesfield, “there are too few skilled people”. Yet this experience appears to be contradicted by notice boards, like that in Shufflebotham’s doorway mentioned above, which are covered with business cards and small advertisements for local makers, suggesting the presence of talent, albeit informally organised. Phil Morton Sewing Machine Sales and Repairs, established 1986, describes a shifting landscape of opportunities, if not actual skills. Originally its work focused on repair and servicing of industrial machines, then it shifted to domestic machines. Now industrial clients are growing in number in Macclesfield again but this is alongside a change the way business is organised: “At one time there was clothes manufacturing on virtually every street in Macclesfield. Now it is homeworkers, often using domestic machines.” A case in point is Macc Sewing Solutions, an alterations and repairs service, run by its owner from her front room using three domestic machines, one overlocker and where necessary, pattern cutting on the floor.

A more general lack of garment-related skill in the Macclesfield populace was conveyed by the owner of a hosiery stall in Macclesfield indoor market. Her observation was of a decline in basic self-knowledge of the clothes-wearing public, a diminishing of practical wisdom: “no one knows their waist size any more”. She speculated that this may be down to self-denial of an increasingly overweight population, “people don’t want to know what size they are” and also because of other technical changes: tights used to be sold in waist and foot sizes, but with the addition of elastane in tights for more stretch, a smaller product range now accommodates a larger range of sizes. Fibre innovation has led to standardisation which has precipitated a loss of precise knowledge about bodies and clothes. In hosiery terms, she saw this waning know-how as including technical terms like ‘denier’: “older women know what it is and what they want. Young women have no idea.” While lack of knowledge may be explained by the lower levels of tights-wearing in young woman today compared to previous generations, it perhaps signals a change in practical understanding of material products and by extension a change in how they, and a broader material resource base, are engaged with.

**Building insight into fashion localism**

The fieldwork data from Macclesfield – ranging from the size of wardrobes to views on knowledge of body measurements – reveal a miscellany of tangled correspondences between garments and place. At a big scale of operations, a local branch of a nationwide chain store, little direct place-adaptation occurs (beyond the retailer adjusting its product offer to the economic profile of local shoppers). Conventional fashion activity, the formal economic buying and selling of clothes, shows itself as independent of place-context. Yet when the scale of activity is reduced, when it becomes personal, human-scale and intimate, place matters.

Reflecting this, the data roughly divides into two parts: activity which is visible (stores, manufacturing, charity shops often involving some element of market exchange); and the hidden (dispersed, often informal, clothing-related actions, participation and relationships, often centred around families and the everyday wearing of clothing). The chef Dan Barber (2014) in his examination of sustainability change in food systems, finds food-related activity to be divided similarly; by what takes place ‘above’ and ‘below ground’. And just as a delicious meal is entirely dependent on a ‘subterranean’ community of plant roots, soil quality, agricultural nous and food culture all of which contribute to the dish’s flavour and the continuing longevity of the system delivering the portion on the plate; so too a total fashion system is reliant on an underground network of capabilities, goodwill, imagination, reuse networks, maintenance facilities, as well as manufacturing industry, for it to function. It is as Leopold suggested: ‘A system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided. It tends to ignore and thus eventually eliminate, many elements in the land community that lack commercial value, but that are essential to its healthy functioning. It assumes falsely that the economic parts of the biotic clock will function without the uneconomic parts’ (op cit: 214).

While fashion localism is perhaps easily grasped as a movement (in the UK) of tweed and shooting jackets, of local manufacturing or of fibres with a historical connection to place; it is also something more subterranean. Local stewardship and a sense of responsibility is found in the ‘root system’ that governs how clothes-related skills, aptitudes, ideas and resources of a place – the fashion culture – reflect a place’s distinctiveness. In Macclesfield, this local adaptation was found in small exchanges; in a community’s affection for and commitment to a particular haberdasher; in a laundrette owner providing basic social care to surrounding residents as well as clothes’ maintenance; in a thriving word-of-mouth network of small businesses. Such experiences are not open to commodification or control. They are part of an other infrastructure or web of relationships that support fashion practices to dress with the whole place.

The reality of local material resources for fashion in Macclesfield is not glamourous. Despite sheep grazing on hillsides visible from the town centre, no locally grown fibre is available beyond a miniscule amount of alpaca knitting yarn. Instead Macclesfield’s ‘local’ fashion resources comprise the locally donated clothes that fill the town’s charity shops (which number almost one quarter of stores selling clothing) and the stock of the textile merchant Shufflebotham’s that has the equivalent of ten metres of fabric for every resident of the town in its warehouse. Cheap, second-hand, predominately polyester-blend garments and roll ends of (mainly) furnishing fabric are not popular choices, but it is what there is. The vectors of expansion of fashion localism necessarily begin with what is available. These local material and social assets shape a process of adaptation that serves to intensify a vision of what is important in a place, of what can be done there. It is part practical infrastructure – supportive individuals, knowledge of where to buy fabric, skills development; and part conceptual – seeking to reimagine garment-related interactions and decentralised modes of production as valuable clothing activity that contributes to the process by which places are made.

Expressed like this, fashion localism can aspire to mimic something of a perennial plant system which is native to a place. Compare an annual plant and a perennial one, both above the soil and below it. The annual, introduced, plant is sewn, fruits once and dies within a year. It has short roots that provide little stability to the soil and because they do not tap deeply into the biomass often requires extra inputs (fertiliser) to bring the crop to harvest. Most of its activity is the quick, showy growth above ground. The depth of its connections into the soil are weak. By contrast, the perennial plant is longer living. Its large, established root structure sustains the soil and accesses nutrients from deeper within the biomass. It grows the resilience of systems both above and below ground. The plant covers the soil, protecting it, maintaining its fertility. Harvests are collected year on year. Investment below ground results in good growth above it. The longevity of the system maintains the land’s quality. Just as a healthy agricultural system has a corresponding weight of activity above and below ground (Barber, op cit: 92); a ‘healthy’ system of fashion provision and expression must cultivate a balance of activity if it is to sustain infinitely varied communities and ecosystems.

The process of engaging in (after Leopold) ‘an intense consciousness of land’ for fashion in Macclesfield underscores most patently that locally significant clothing-related activity happens at small scales. It involves some typical market-based interactions - small merchants and independent repair services – and other, more fuzzy, hybrid fashion-related activities, dealing in economies of care, reciprocity and community as much as trade of goods. It suggests fashion localism not as products, brands or government policy but as a collective process and long term discussion around creating a fashion system that supports the total garment-related material and social assets of a place such that a specific, vibrant, unconventional fashion culture can emerge.

This understanding begets many questions not least, if scales of activity need to *reduce* in order to affect change, then who, in a fashion system focused on growth and *increase*, will lead the charge? How can effort be channelled into cultivating the activities that pay as much attention to the environments and communities (hidden root systems) as to more conventional fashion activity (above ground visible growth)? How can these activities sustain the places they are based in? What would they look like? Perhaps something like a project of the design collective Assemble (2017)? And would they lead to a shift in values towards a more sufficient and responsible fashion system, penetrating deep enough to effect change? If, as I have argued, the intent of localism is to increase the taking of responsibility for the places in which we live; then fashion localism is a flourishing of responsibility for fashion pieces, practices and relationships that emerges from where we are. Beginning with what is real, rather than what we might wish were real, affords us agency over our actions. It harnesses the capacity to act and imagine fashion in ways unrecognised by globalised market forces and likely rooted in decentralised modes of production and garment use that change the balance of the economic distribution of power and address environmental issues. Perhaps then a more active and adapted fashion system will emerge where producers and wearers of clothes are both participants and collaborators in creating the places in which they live. Places where garments are part of the community of the land.

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