

# **Weaving DNA: An exploration of notions of identity and the re-appropriation of textiles.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on the collaborative project *Weaving DNA*, between Icelandic product designer Hanna Dís Whitehead and Scottish textile designer Claire Anderson. Together the designers research traditional Nordic and Scottish textiles, examining the ways in which these represent and shape aspects of national identity. Inspired by broader socio-political discussions centred around the Scottish independence debate, the project explores the potential to create a common material identity drawing on the Nordic/Scottish regions' shared cultural, historical and geographical roots. Together they forecast the identity of a futuristic Nordic-Scottish tribe, inspired by its Viking heritage. The Nordic-Scottish tribe emphasises the designers shared influences, as well as DIY conceptual strategies that favour the spirit of immediacy, craftsmanship and sustainability. The project provokes audiences to reflect on their identities, suggesting visions of cultural fusion and evolution.

*Weaving DNA* is also an investigation into collaborative practice between designers physically separated by geography - Hanna Dís Whitehead lives and works in Reykjavík, Iceland while Claire Anderson is based in Glasgow, Scotland. The designers first met in September 2014 after the initial research and development phase had begun. Figure 1 shows a playful illustration of themes underpinning the project from May 2014 and before the designers' first meeting. The initial research and practice undertaken as part of the *Weaving DNA* project has opened avenues to explore further the shared practices and influences of Nordic and Scottish material textile traditions, which to date are under explored; new work in this regard can only help inform and enhance our understanding and notions of design practice. *Weaving DNA* opened its first public exhibition in August 2015 at the National Museum of Iceland in Reykjavík with a second show scheduled for April 2016 at the Lighthouse in Glasgow. *Creative Scotland* and the Icelandic wool company *Istex* support the project.

Key words: Collaboration, identity, Nordic, Scottish, textiles

Figure 1: An illustration of themes underpinning the project, May 2014. Illustration Hanna Dís Whitehead.

## Introduction

This project was initially inspired by the broader political discussions over Scottish national identity prompted by the 2014 Independence Referendum and was driven by a focus on the potential for collaboration between Hanna Dís Whitehead and Claire Anderson to create a shared material identity with a view to producing a curated public exhibition around the theme. As noted by Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs, Fiona Hyslop, as part of the *2013 Viking Congress* in Shetland, Scotland and the Nordic countries ‘...share a vibrant cultural DNA through their Viking heritage, as well as their geographical proximity’ (Wylie 2013).

This paper reports on *Weaving DNA*’s discussions and processes to date, which recognise the pertinence of cultural fragmentation in defining notions of identity, and also on *Weaving DNA*’s ambition to develop works underpinned by a desire to determine a sense of national identity while simultaneously elevating the experiences of cultural or social hybridity. Dís Whitehead and Anderson’s collaboration was structured to enable the designer’s to work experimentally around the theme of Scottish and Nordic identity through the medium of textiles and related crafts.

## Context and *Weaving DNA*

It is widely acknowledged that textile traditions ‘...offer us a way to re-establish physical and cultural connections’ (Hemmings 2006: unknown) with land, evidenced in contemporary Icelandic and Scottish design practice. For example, Iceland’s *Vík Þrjónsdóttir* fashion and textile collective uses Icelandic wool for its knitted sun hat collection: each of the twelve different colourways represent the Arctic sunset of the twelve months of the year (Pálsdóttir 2014). Similarly, in 2014 as part of the *Glasgow 2014 Cultural Programme* Scottish woven textile designer Angharad McLaren and graphic designer Emlyn Firth collaborated with Scottish textile manufacturer *Johnstons of Elgin* to create a set of two merino wool scarves inspired by the home and away support of sporting events for ‘Scotland Can Make It!’ (Duffy 2014). With this example, the ‘...geometric pattern is an abstraction of the herringbone structure of traditional tweed; the original performance fabric worn to protect against the Scottish elements’ (Duffy 2014).

Dís Whitehead and Anderson's collaboration has been supported by digital technology. The designers have worked together in person on only two occasions, and they have developed the project with telecommunications application software (e.g. *Skype*) and social media platforms (e.g. *Facebook*, *Tumblr*). As the UK Consultancy for trend forecasting *Future Laboratory* describes in its 'Global Consumer Futures Report' 2015 'Identity Sharders': 'In the age of social media, the directive to just be yourself has taken on a new meaning. People are adopting multiple identities and reaching new levels of openness as they strive for their cyber voices to be heard' (Radcliffe 2015: unknown). The use of this technology therefore highlights the complex relationship we have with physical environments and consequently notions of identity. It encourages us to value the reciprocal nature of working relationships, provoking us to consider mutualisms in collaborative practice.

In order to develop the theme of a common material identity, *Weaving DNA* not only draws inspiration from the Nordic/Scottish regions shared cultural, historical and geographical roots but also from each designer's influences. As explained by Scottish designer Beca Lipscombe, of *Atelier E.B.*, designers '...create from research, we draw our influence both from history and from our peers' (Lipscombe 2011: 12). More specifically *Weaving DNA* presents a multivalent view of national identity by embracing individuality and provoking possibilities in interpretation. *Weaving DNA*'s first public exhibition, which opened in August 2015 at the *National Museum of Iceland* saw the designers speculate on the visual identity of a futuristic Nordic-Scottish tribe; the designers thus envisaged a 'Normcore Tribesman' shown in figure 2. 'Normcore' is a unisex fashion trend defined by New York trend agency K-Hole (2013: unknown), 'Normcore doesn't want the freedom to become someone...'. The Youth Mode report announced, 'Normcore moves away from a coolness that relies on difference to a post-authenticity that opt into sameness' (Farrell 2014: unknown).

Figure 2: The Normcore Tribesman from the *Weaving DNA* exhibition at the National Museum of Iceland, August 2015. Photograph Tian Khee Siong.

## **Method**

*Weaving DNA*'s processes, although informed by, sit outside traditional Scottish and Nordic textile craft frameworks, being strongly influenced by ad hoc strategies. According to Jencks et al. (1972: 2), 'Adhocism is the art of living and doing things ad hoc – tackling

problems at once, using the materials at hand, rather than waiting for the perfect moment or 'proper' approach'. In applying this as a principle of design to textile crafts, improvisation has taken place, for example with, traditional materials (i.e. wool knit fabrics) substituted for more readily available everyday materials (i.e. recycled plastics, fishskin leathers). The implications of this ad hoc approach to the portrayal of our cultural, historical and geographical roots is intentionally subversive, for instance, an abstract reappropriation of materials outside traditional craft frameworks raises questions around sustainability. For example, how can we optimise underused and undervalued resources?

Significantly, at the *2013 IDEAS CITY*, a biennial four day festival in New York that explores the future of cities globally with the conviction that arts and culture (including crafts) must play an essential role in urban centers helping to improve standards of living, working and playing, ad hoc was a strategy being explored and 'Adhoc strategies for the next industrial revolution' (Grima 2013: unknown) were presented. The festival's 2013 theme was 'Untapped Capital', which is significant to *Weaving DNA* with its focus on resources that are under-recognised or underutilised.

*Weaving DNA* is strategically ad hoc with counterfactual reasoning. Counterfactual reasoning has been explored in recent design practice; one example is 'Unlikely Objects: Products of a Counterfactual History of Science' by Thomas Thwaites (2011). In this case, Thwaites (2011) questions how dependant knowledge is on historical accident and chance. Related to this, *Weaving DNA* moves away from placing an emphasis on a traditional textile model, and instead advances an open-ended improvisational form of identity. This open-endedness is complemented by the audiences' input as it reasons an application and a purpose for the layers of textiles enabling multivalent interpretations of identity drawn from a Nordic and Scottish Viking heritage. Significantly, the Vikings were reinvented during the eighteenth century from cruel and violent to civilized and heroic.

In May 2015 Icelandic wool company *Istex* contributed to the *Weaving DNA* project by providing waste and offcuts of wool from their spinning factory in Iceland (figure 3). The offcuts were made up of a combination of handknitting yarn from Icelandic wool: Plötulopi, Álafosslopi, Bulkylopi, Léttlopi and Einband. Icelandic sheep are unique, and as such, so is their yarn. The breed has evolved in isolation as a result of being separated from other breeds for centuries, in addition, exposure to the sub-Arctic climate has produced wool with two distinctive fibers. The first, soft, insulating fibers which are found

close to the body are called 'þel'; the second are long, water-repellent fibers which are found on the surface called 'tog'. The designers responded directly to the materials, and deliberately eschewed the intended application of knit, through manipulation, deconstruction, knotting and stitch. *Weaving DNA* acknowledges the strong traditions of wool in Nordic and Scottish textile practice and consequently the designers have let the nature of the materials determine their application in this project.

Figure 3: Hanna Dís Whitehead with samples of wool from Icelandic company *Istex*, May 2015. Photograph Hanna Dís Whitehead.

### **Exhibition - *National Museum of Iceland***

In August 2015 *Weaving DNA* audiences were invited to play dress up at the *National Museum of Iceland* where layers of textiles described the cultural fusion of a speculative Nordic Scottish tribe and the complexity of definitions of identity. Exhibition pieces included an Icelandic wool infinity sweater (figure 4). The sweater was constructed from an infinity knotting technique. The infinity knot is synonymous with Viking folklore and the circular yoked sweater pattern is evocative of the popular 'Lopapeysa' or 'Icelandic sweater'. This originated around or before the 1950s, at a time when imports had displaced older and more traditional Icelandic clothing, and people began to search for new ways to utilise the plentiful native wool. The 'Icelandic sweater' has had a resurgence in popularity, becoming an unofficial national symbol, described as 'a uniform for Icelanders' (Peterson 2013), in the movement to restore national identity and boost morale after the economic crisis in 2008 (figure 5). The history of the Icelandic sweater is ambiguous with designs for the sweater said to be inspired by old Icelandic patterns, but also from imported embroidery manuals.

Figure 4: Icelandic wool infinity sweater displayed in the exhibition at the National Museum of Iceland, August 2015. Photograph Tian Khee Siong.

Figure 5: Icelandic sweaters in the Handknitting Association of Iceland in Reykjavik, August 2015. Photograph Claire Anderson.

For the exhibition an Icelandic Wool Highlander fèileadh beag ('little kilt') was made from individual strands of Icelandic Wool offcut waste (figure 6). A mixture of these coloured yarns were stitched alongside each other as alternate diagonal lines of shading, to reference the visual characteristics of traditionally woven tartan cloth. This abstract

reappropriation of materials is outside the description of standardisation of 'The Setts of the Scottish Tartans' (Faiers 2008: 16) highlighting the complexities and multi-layeredness of notions of identity. Furthermore the 'little kilt', an internationally recognized symbol of Scottish cultural identity, is '...generally accepted to be the invention of Thomas Rawlinson, a Quaker industrialist from Lancashire...' (Faiers 2008: 79) who customised the traditional fèileadh-Mor ('belted plaid') during the early 1700s in order to create a more practical working uniform for his Highland staff. The exhibit 'little kilt' had an accompanying tasselled sporran made from neon yellow, Icelandic wool, a Spring/Summer 2016 colour trend. Significantly, the tassels on the Sporran worn by men in Scotland are similar to the tassels of the traditional Icelandic skotthúfa hat worn by women in Iceland. In this example different placement creates associations with masculine and feminine traditional dress synonymous with national identities.

Figure 6: Little kilt displayed in the exhibition at the National Museum of Iceland, August 2015. Photograph Tian Khee Siong.

Two Nordic Scottish totems at the exhibition were made from a combination of Icelandic and Scottish wool. Giant toories (pompoms) had Icelandic yarn tassels attached to them with plaited ties (reminiscent of female Viking hair plaits) (figure 7). The Scottish wool used in the totems is a double-knitting wool from *New Lanark Mills*. Once a spinning centre, the *New Lanark Mill* has reinvented its role, now producing woollen yarn instead of cotton, a switch significant to *Weaving DNA* and its exploration of the multi-layers of identity. A totem can be a sacred object, or symbol that serves as an emblem of a group of people, such as a tribe. Referencing both the tassels of the Scottish sporran and the Icelandic skotthúfa hat, as already discussed, the totems also refer to the toorie from the Balmoral bonnet, a traditional Scottish hat that can be worn as part of formal or informal Highland dress. On the original knitted bonnets, the unused yarns were gathered in the centre of the toorie and tied. The contemporary toorie is made from yarn wrapped around a card, tied in the middle, and then both ends are cut and tied into a neat little ball, commonly known as a pompom. Today, pompoms are synonymous with American popular culture, in particular the uniform of American cheerleaders, gaining popularity during the great depression of the 1930s '...as compared with tassels and jeweled trinkets, the pom-pom was an economically sound embellishment and could be scrapped together with leftover yarn' (Churchill 2015: unknown).

Figure 7: Two Nordic Scottish totems displayed in the exhibition at the National Museum of Iceland, August 2015. Photograph Tian Khee Siong.

The exhibition's exploration of a new visual identity was designed with the intention of promoting audience interaction. Digital prints of the works, on transparent silk organza, were displayed parallel to the constructed textiles. Audience members could try on the pieces and become part of the speculative tribe (figure 8). The first *Weaving DNA* exhibition was successful in presenting a multivalent identity and social media platforms (e.g. *Instagram*, *Facebook*) enabled audiences to share online and accessing further audiences (figure 9).

Figure 8: Audience members trying on the Icelandic wool infinity sweater print at the exhibition at the National Museum of Iceland, August 2015. Photograph Claire Anderson.

Figure 9: Instagram post of an audience member trying on an exhibition piece at the National Museum of Iceland, August 2015. Photograph Claire Anderson.

## Conclusion

Driven by a desire to create a common material identity drawing on the Nordic/Scottish regions shared cultural, historical and geographical roots, *Weaving DNA*, has to date combined innovative design approaches with the experience of cultural and social hybridity from the perspective of both designers' influences. *Weaving DNA* has taken inspiration from adhocism and counterfactual reasoning in design as well as underused and undervalued resources in order to achieve provocative notions of identity aimed at provoking audiences to read multivalent interpretations of identity, which recognise the significance of cultural fragmentation. During the course of the project work, the two designers have established a productive collaborative relationship through the shared cultural DNA and influences enabled by *Skype* and social media platforms. More specifically these tools enabled the designers to communicate by thinking in terms of forming mutualisms in collaboration. Dependence on one another to adopt this online relationship was necessary to determine layers of identity and establish purposeful to playful definitions and creative responses.

*Weaving DNA* presented a common material identity during the first public exhibition at the *National Museum of Iceland*. Through a curated display of layers of textiles describing the visual identity of a speculative Nordic-Scottish tribe. Figure 10 shows the layers of a

Tribesman's cape at the Museum; the constructed textiles layer and the digitally printed silk organza layer. The layers of textiles included digitally printed transparencies which audience members could try on to become the multi-layers of identity and be part of the tribe. Audiences were then able to share their new identities through social media transforming *Weaving DNA's* multivalent interpretation of identity to become a familiar online digital and common identity.

Figure 10: Tribesman's cape and digital print displayed in the exhibition at the National Museum of Iceland, August 2015. Photograph Tian Khee Siong.

*Weaving DNA* will be developed by revisiting further examples of under-recognised or underutilised Nordic and Scottish material textile traditions and shared and individual influences of the designers, adopting a similarly multi-layered approach, for example, with reference to underutilised traditional techniques determining application. This is something *Weaving DNA* would be keen to explore building up new layers of understanding and of notions of identity in design practice.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Figure Captions**

Figure 1: An illustration of themes underpinning the project, May 2014. Illustration Hanna Dís Whitehead.

Figure 2: The Normcore Tribesman from the Weaving DNA exhibition at the National Museum of Iceland, August 2015. Photograph Tian Khee Siong.

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