



Fiber and Place Seminar Session
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Spun, twisted, entangled, woven, knit: fibers are a genesis as well as a journey. They are harvested from plants rooted in the ground, sheared from the backs of animals, nanospun or extruded with a spinneret. The *Fiber and Place* seminar session explored the multi-sited nature of fiber, tracing lifecycles and ongoing histories to understand how cultural, social, economic, aesthetic, scientific and natural worlds are produced, transformed and engaged through fiber. Seminar participants identified themes shared across their various research projects, including: (1) phenomenology and ways of knowing; (2) aesthetics and design practice, (3) supply chains and “value”; (4) production/consumption in a transnational context; and (5) life cycle and seasonal cycles. In this paper, we present aspects of our seminar participants’ distinctive research projects and how they intersect with fiber, place and the aforementioned themes.

Hoover’s research focused on the embodied and emplaced knowledge required in the earliest stages of wool production—sheep rearing, shearing, and wool classing. Embodied knowledge intersects with environment, as sheep ranchers make decisions about what breeds to raise and how to manage their flocks based on local climate. Environmental factors such as water quality, nutrition available from pasture grasses, and predator populations influence both the health of the sheep and the quality of the wool they produce.

As shearers and classers return annually to process the wool, they develop a sense of place through the qualities of the wool they handle. All senses are engaged; however, the haptic qualities predominate—that is, how fine, strong, greasy, and crimped the wool feels. Color can result from genetics or a mineral deficiency, fleece strength produces different sounds when tugged, and smells may indicate microbial contamination. The wool classer begins the standardization process by sorting wool so that uniform bales can be sold on the commodity market. Paradoxically, the process of preparing wool for clothing manufacture erases expressions of place by homogenizing and blending lots from many places to produce a uniform material.

Haar applied aesthetic and scientific perspectives to explore the distinctive design outcomes of transferring regional plant imagery onto textiles. Application of color for decorative purposes

dates to the early Paleolithic period and evidence of coloring or dyeing to the Neolithic period. However, creating color and pattern on fiber from plant chlorophyll through mechanical means, such as pounding and compressing, is not well documented in textile history possibly due to poor colorfastness of the mechanical application compared to chemical means of transferring color from plant to fiber. Recently, scholars and artisans have been dialoging about eco-printing (Flint, 2008; Feldberg, 2014; Haar, 2010/2011), contact printing and dyeing (Kadolph & Casselman, 2004), flower pounding (Frischkorn & Sandrin, 2000), and leaf hammering (Aycock, 1996).

Haar's interest in plant pounding and natural dyes intersected with the research of Michel and Lee who introduced the green burial movement in connection with the Cradle-to-Cradle approach to sustainability (McDonough & Braungart, 2002). They suggested considering the grave as a place of transformation (and decay) of fibers and textiles buried with the body, rather than a final, changeless resting place. The work of three artists working on green burial apparel design – Mark Mitchell, Jae Rhim “JR” Lee, and Pia Interlandi – was featured. Each of these artists focused on the body and grave as a site for transformation through the use of luxury fabrics and heirloom finishing techniques to create unique, costume-inspired, natural fiber burial apparel; a transformation into edible, toxin-remediating mushrooms; and the interconnectedness of the fibers enveloping the body below ground with the soil, respectively. Their presentation provided an understanding of the avant-garde in the green burial movement, revisiting the connection among body, grave, and fiber as locus for transformation and decay, and reflecting on this phenomenon in their lifespan.

Also focusing on life cycle, Burckhardt's research with weavers of the indigenous reservation of La María, in the Colombian department of Cauca, analyzed one particular item of Guambiano dress: the *chumbe*, a traditional garment closely linked to women's reproduction. She argued that the cosmological and functional contexts of the *chumbe* allow it to position women as producers of value. Guambiano traditional thought positions the *chumbe* as a metaphor for the umbilical cord, which ties all Guambianos to their land. This is explored in order to argue that the relationship between weaving and the land grants Guambianos their indigenous identity.

Jennings also explored the complex relationships among fiber, place, and identity through her research with the Betsileo people of the central plateau region of Madagascar. The Betsileo have for generations collected silk cocoons from the wild *Borocera* moth for making ancestral shrouds. They collect the cocoons, boil off the sericin, spin, dye and weave the cloth using traditional techniques. Families work on the cloth together, creating social networks and an automatic means for teaching younger generations. Much of the upper story of the plateau region's forest has been replanted with white pine and eucalyptus. Both trees grow voraciously, providing lumber and fuel, but are also noxious to understory plants. Realizing that the forest floor was no longer providing the plants on which the Betsileo rely, they decided to encourage reforestation with the indigenous tapia tree, also the exclusive food source for the *Borocera* moth. By reconfiguring the size of the cloth that they are making, they can sell the cloth as scarves and shawls, adding a monetary value to replanting the forests. The plants are nurtured, as

are the traditional methods of processing the silk. In this way, the already sustainable fiber production is being used to stabilize and improve environmental conditions.

Trejo's research examined how creative design work may be produced through agro-tourism in New York State. She focused specifically on the Washington County Fiber Tour, and chronicled her visit to ten fiber farms during the Fiber Tour weekend in late April 2015, which inspired an original knitted sweater dress. Huacaya alpaca fibers, and wool from several sheep breeds such as Romney, Cormo and Merino were sourced during the tour, and hand-spun into 855 yards of variegated yarns on a drop spindle. Her customized dress was hand-knit in a circular top-down sequence using stockinette stitches. The intertwining of the alpaca and wool fibers as plied yarn and as knit stitches parallel their existence in diversified fiber farms, and represented the emerging availability of both fibers in the state. A short film highlighted the learning outcomes from participating in the Washington County Fiber Tour and included the uniqueness of each fiber animal, their history, farmer narratives, and their land.

Kallal, Ruppert-Stroescu, Keiser, Orzada, and Kilfoyle also illustrated how shared experience of stimulating places can yield diverse textile design inspirations and aesthetic products. In the summer of 2014 these five designers serendipitously found themselves together in Paris where they experienced many sensorial aspects of the city. Their interaction cultivated each designer's senses, which stimulated unique design ideas and discussions as to what enriches creativity. Common interests in textile dyeing and felting and the need for focused time in a creative place motivated them to organize a retreat to design textiles inspired by an aspect of Paris at the Kilfoyle textile studio in Missouri seven months later. During the intensive studio time in Missouri, the designers developed a heightened awareness of how time and place can influence the design process and enhance the designers' abilities to manipulate the aesthetic properties of fibers into tangible textile products.

Davis Burns provided examples of effective narratives of fiber and place through the lens of supply chain transparency, one of the principles of design for sustainability and social change. Through supply chain transparency, apparel brands can effectively tell their stories behind design and production processes: where, how, by whom? As such, they can bring to life the relationship between the fibers and fabrics they use and the place where the fibers and fabrics originated.

While scholars are aware of the enduring moral conflicts and ethical dilemmas behind the production of fast fashion, Ayres explored how reuse and upcycling may mitigate some of these tensions (sweatshops, animal rights abuses, environmental degradation). She argued that the secondhand clothing trade offers an alternative view of globalization, replete with examples of local particularities, sovereignty, and exchange. Secondhand clothes produce new localities between object, place, and consumer, and in terms of the marketplaces that pop up to trade and exchange these goods. If we look at how clothes are repurposed or reused to create idiosyncratic, contemporary fashions around the world we can no longer accept that the 'third world' is seen as the historic economic dust bin of progress of 'first world' consumption and culture.

The scale and scope of the commodity chain make it difficult to use place as an analytic to understand secondhand clothes. Because fiber is radically decontextualized from any origin point, Ayres argued that secondhand clothes at thrift stores become desirable. Yet, the space and sites of thrift stores and secondhand clothing resale emerge as an important dimension for understanding the movement of clothes. Ayres suggested examining how the local is produced in the way certain markets use, distribute and circulate secondhand clothes. An examination of the relationship between local exchanges and global trade might shed light on the capacity of clothes to cycle in and out of multiple commodity regimes and challenge the very distinctions between firsthand and secondhand. Interrogating this division allows us to see how meaning and value are bound up in the production of symbolic locations and place.

Themes of fiber and place are multi-sited and situate themselves in complex, intersecting networks around the world. Tracing these themes and their various sites and life cycles becomes a huge challenge in a transnational world of production, distribution and consumption. Understanding the extent to which these processes become embodied, valued, and meaning-laden remains an important goal for the field of textiles and apparel studies.

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