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Crafting place: Women's everyday creativity in placemaking processes

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Louise C Platt**

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Abstract

Amid a resurgence of domestic craft, this article contends that everyday creative practices of women are part of placemaking processes in the creative city. Specifically, the research focuses on Liverpool in the Northwest of England, the so-called (and self-proclaimed) 'centre of the creative universe'. This article utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of knitting groups and the city centre Women's Institute to explore how women use craft practice to create a sense of self and attachment to place. The idea of women gathering to craft is enduring, and is examined here to understand affective labour and the role that creativity plays in the urban experience of women. It is argued that the groups demonstrate a lack of engagement with the wider market and official placemaking processes, but instead demonstrate an element of self-valorization. The article challenges thinking around culture-led placemaking in cities like Liverpool, where discourses of creativity have been used as a driver for regeneration by shifting the emphasis onto seemingly banal settings on the edges of the so-called creative city. While urban placemakers have been more recently concerned with developing hubs of creative industries, the role of these groups that are not producing a profitable 'product' should not be underestimated or exploited.

Keywords

Affective labour, craft, creativity, knitting, Liverpool, placemaking, women

Introduction

While there has been some attention paid, particularly within feminist geographies, to the mundane activities of women in communities, in particular the role as caregiver and homemaker (Dyck, 2005), there remains limited attention paid to the place of the

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everyday experiences of women who are engaged in creative practice and placemaking. While the role of craft practice in the urban environment, in terms of activism and interventions (Mann, 2015; Price, 2015), has been examined elsewhere, this article contends that *everyday* and informal creative practices are part of crafting an identity and that they contribute to placemaking. Hall and Jayne (2015) position crafting as a geographical concern and make explicit that the gendered nature of dressmaking, in the case of their research, is ‘inseparable’ (p. 15) from the spatial. This article, drawing on qualitative data, explores how women use creative practice (predominantly knitting and crocheting) in both formal and informal gatherings to create their own sense of self and attachment to place, and how they contribute to placemaking processes that should not be underestimated with the so-called creative city. Specifically, by undertaking semi-structured interviews with fifteen women who were members of either knitting groups or the city centre Women’s Institute (WI), the research focuses on Liverpool in the Northwest of England, the so-called (and self-proclaimed) ‘centre of the creative universe’.¹

There has been a resurgence, or so it seems, in everyday domestic craft participation (Luckman, 2013). Turney (2009) comments that Rowan, the UK yarn manufacturer, estimates that 11% of the population knits. The prominence on UK television of programmes, such as *The Great British Bake Off* (the 2016 final was viewed by 14.8 million people), *The Great British Sewing Bee*, *Kirstie’s Homemade Home* and media interest in the 100-year celebrations of the formation of the WI in 2015, suggest that there is an appetite for so-called ‘nostalgic’ pastimes and activities. However, this article suggests that renewed interest in this type of activity goes beyond narratives of nostalgia and austerity, or the idea that it is driven by popular culture, but is rather part of how we experience place and – crucially – make sense of home in the urban environment. As Hagedorn and Springgay (2013) found in their research in Canada, ‘Much crafting speaks to a human desire to leave your mark on the world in an innovative and sincere manner’ (p. 25), and this article explores how crafting place is part of that desire.

Indeed, it has been argued that creativity, in more general terms, plays a role in shaping vernacular landscapes. Edensor et al.’s (2010) volume considers the role of seemingly mundane creativity in placemaking. From gardening (Crouch, 2010) to decorative Christmas lights (Edensor and Millington, 2010), they conclude that these are sites where ‘vernacular creativity imprints class and ethnic identity upon the landscape, that resonate with affective and expressive values and articulate communal conviviality and social solidarities’ (Edensor et al., 2010: 14). In focusing on the experiences of those who craft as ordinary, everyday activity, this article examines contemporary women’s craft practice as immaterial and affective labour (Negri and Hardt, 1999).

The product created is often not the priority for the amateur maker but the immaterial that is embedded in the material. As will be reflected in the findings below, Miller (2011) comments that to craft is to enact an ‘art of care’. Gauntlett (2011) frames creativity within the realm of the everyday. So rather than viewing creativity as something unique or in which there is a high level of skill involved, creativity is seen as what occurs within our daily lives, not requiring external verification or validation. For example, as Gauntlett (2011) highlights, for many the *process* of knitting is important, rather than the creation of a product. A survey by the UK company Wool and the Gang (2015) found that 37% of respondents had given away (as gifts) over 21 items they had knitted. In terms of coming

together to craft, Bratich (2010) explains, ‘manual production of a material object involves organizational forms infused with immateriality, from specialized technical knowledge about the work itself to the wisdom and emotional support of life advice’ (p. 307). Thereby, considering the collective nature of craft can allow us to rethink the value of crafting among these groups of women in the urban setting of Liverpool.

To see value ‘from below’ (i.e. in the everyday) can offer an optimistic view, as Hardt (1999) explains: ‘the production of affects, subjectivities, and forms of life present an enormous potential for autonomous circuits of valorization, and perhaps for liberation’ (p. 100). Therefore, the article follows other critiques of creative placemaking as a top-down activity and agrees with Warren (2014) that special attention needs to be paid to the relation between creative labour and place. It challenges thinking around culture-led placemaking in cities like Liverpool, where discourses of creativity have been used as a driver for regeneration (see Campbell, 2011), by shifting the emphasis onto seemingly banal settings on the edges of the so-called creative city.

Placemaking in Liverpool and the role of women

Drawing on the work of Doreen Massey, Fincher et al. (2016) suggest that placemaking is a ‘chancy event’ which accounts for everyday encounters (p. 522). However, they go on to argue that placemaking has been taken up by ‘professional place-makers’, especially in relation to urban renewal, thus forgetting how these everyday encounters contribute. This shift is particularly relevant to the location of this research. Placemaking in Liverpool has often been a ‘top-down’ activity (Jones and Wilks-Heeg, 2004) in an attempt to counteract the negative perceptions that, at a national level in particular, people hold of Liverpool (Platt, 2014). The character of Liverpool is embedded in its geographic position as an outward-looking port city, at the edge of the country (therefore characterized as being ‘apart’ from the rest of England). Once a wealthy centre of trade in the 19th century, then globally recognized for its music culture in the 1960s, it became a city in serious economic and social decline by the late 1970s. The city has experienced investment in regeneration projects since the 1980s, such as the development of the International Garden Festival in 1984, the renewal of the Albert Docks as a tourist attraction, through to the European Capital of Culture in 2008 (a wide range of studies explore the changes the city has seen, for example, Belchem, 2006; Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993; Kokosalakis et al., 2006; Munck, 2003; Platt, 2015; Sykes et al., 2013). These highs and lows contribute not only to how outsiders understand Liverpool, but also how local people understand and perform their own identities (Boland, 2008, 2010; Platt, 2014).

The designation of Liverpool as European Capital of Culture 2008 was another formal intervention in the placemaking of the city. However, there has been disconnect identified in the official placemaking discourses of the city and the everyday experiences of the people (Jones and Evans, 2012). Oakley (2004) explains that there is an expectation of cities, like Liverpool, to deliver impacts based on the creative industries without understanding the social and cultural functions at a ground level. In recent times, the Turner Prize winning work of Assemble in Toxteth in ‘regenerating’ a previously semi-derelict area was seen as successful do-it-yourself (DIY) creative activism. However, this was far from clear-cut, and the success of the project relied on investment from a

‘mystery millionaire’ (Thompson, 2015). However, the groups that participated in this research are not working towards a particular goal of social good, but their creativity is predicated on informality and friendship. Indeed, Evans (2010) suggests that vernacular spaces of creativity are overlooked when constructing the notion of the creative city, but traditional spaces of meeting are still salient (i.e. designated *cultural quarters* are not the only spaces of creativity), such as the meeting places of the groups in this study (cafes, libraries, church halls etc.). So while high-profile schemes like that of Assemble in Toxteth contribute to the official placemaking discourse of a creative city, the informal spaces of creativity remain unexamined.

In relation to the role of women in these processes, there remains limited literature of the gendered nature of placemaking activities. Particularly influential, however, is Dyck (2005) who focuses on ‘hidden’ placemaking in her work on women as caregivers. She argues that ‘it is from the home that social and economic life is orchestrated and, in tandem, political economies are supported’ and therefore the ‘very local’ (Dyck, 2005: 240) should not be disregarded in discussions of placemaking. In relation, however, to the urban setting, Massey (1994) considers that it is in the ‘metropolis’ that women are most free. By coming into the urban centre, away from the ‘rigidity of the patriarchal social controls’, women are able to ‘exult in its energy and vitality’ (Massey, 1994: 258). Indeed, this is something reflected in the research explored below.

The women of Liverpool have an historical reputation for organizing as a collective. In her research, Fagan (2003) found that women in the deprived areas of Dingle and Speke in Liverpool had mobilized themselves to campaign for community centres, play-schemes and health centres. One of her research participants commented, ‘They didn’t think we were capable of controlling all this money, they didn’t think we could do it. I mean at the end of the day it was mostly women that did it’ (Fagan, 2003: 116). Similarly, during the dockers’ disputes of 1995 to 1998, *The Independent* newspaper reported a story about the influence of the Women of the Waterfront (WoW):

You wouldn’t believe it’, says one docker, gesturing at the closed door of the WoW meeting room in the TGWU’s Liverpool headquarters, ‘but they’re not talking about knitting patterns in there, you know, they’re having a proper political meeting. I sometimes think they’re more organized than the men. (Wynne-Jones, 1997)

Here, we see craft practice as being explicitly associated with the domestic, and that the perception of women in Liverpool was that of homemaker. To be politically active was beyond the usual role of the woman, despite evidence to the contrary.

Craft-practice, women and the urban experience

Domestic arts are traditionally viewed as female pastimes which can struggle to shrug off their granny-related connotations (Luckman, 2013; Stalp, 2015). Hall and Jayne (2015) state that while craft is viewed as ‘gendered labour’ (p. 6), gatherings of women, such as in the *sewing circle*, allow for ‘political and economic subject-formation’ (p. 7). The idea of women gathering to craft is salient here. It is an enduring space of community, and affective labour produces timeless outcomes of friendship, sharing, and well-being

(Hagedorn and Springgay, 2013; Miller, 2008). This is nothing new. The influential work of Parker (2010), in her historical examination of embroidery, illustrates the emancipatory potential that gathering to craft has for women. Indeed, the WI, featured in this research, has always been at the forefront of political and social campaigning.² Yet, despite this, women's craft practices are subject to stereotyping and misrepresentation.

In relation to the prevalence of craft activity in popular media, Dirix (2014) views the regressive nature of depictions of wholesome femininity as dangerous. She is scathing in her attack of television programmes, such as Channel 4's (United Kingdom) *Kirstie's Homemade Home*: 'It is an idealized picture, but the idealism is one that is regressive, middle class, and white, and the woman it glorifies is a living stereotype of passive femininity' (Dirix, 2014: 97). Furthermore, the notion of *new domesticity* was coined by Matcher (2013). She describes a *new domesticity* devotee as 'the Brooklyn hipster who quit her job in PR to sell hand-knitted scarves at craft fairs' (Matcher, 2013: 4). Her analysis, in this respect, moves beyond critiquing over-feminization outlined by Dirix (2014). Matcher (2013) examines how the retreat to simpler times is often only available to those that have the means to do so (financially or time-wise). While her US-centric example is often tongue-in-cheek, her examination of the phenomenon raises some interesting points around femininity, class, social inequalities and anxieties of modern urban existence which are further examined in the work of Luckman (2013) and Peach (2013) who both suggest the post-9/11 world has led to us seek comfort in such domestic craft.

However, this image of cosy domesticity is not the full picture, and the shift to craft in public was seen as a way to disconnect this image of domesticity with craft (Myzelev, 2015). Third-Wave Feminism in the 1990s influenced Debbie Stoller's *Stitch 'n Bitch* books (and related knitting groups) and was further proliferated through online platforms such as Ravelry.com (Orton-Johnson, 2014; Stalp, 2015; Turney, 2009). Knitters (and crocheters or *hookers* as the community often likes to be called) can find patterns from the usual hats and scarves to more risqué and novelty items. The feminized nature of crafting is challenged through this shift from private (i.e. in the home) to public domains.

This development of online craft communities (Fuller et al., 2013; Gauntlett, 2011; Orton-Johnson, 2014) has opened up the potential for crafters to organize offline as well as online. The notion of 'craftivism' was outlined by Betsy Greer (2007), who coined the term:

In promoting the idea that people can use their own creativity to improve the world, craftivism allows those who wish to voice their opinions and support their causes the chance to do just that ... but without chanting or banner waving and at their own pace. (p. 401)

Yarn bombing, for example, is seen as the graffiti of the yarn world, where knitters adorn urban objects in yarn as a form of civic action and placemaking (Hahner and Varda, 2014). The use of such guerilla tactics 'embodies the spontaneous, the unexpected, and offers a touch of chaos or anarchy in a rather regimented world' (Turney, 2009: 97). Yet, as the awareness of yarn bombing has increased, it has become subsumed into the urban experience. Mann (2015) explains that yarn bombing could be seen as a 'politics of

whimsy' but is only temporarily powerful as it has become imbued with 'intention and utility' (p. 70). It has been argued that craft is not necessarily seeing a reinvention, but is merely part of the process of societal evolution reflecting responses to capitalist production:

Crafting was bifurcated, taking on new forms and spaces of concentration. Its real subsumption means there is nothing purely new here; just another point in the cycle that began with handicraft's integration into newly industrializing forms. (Bratich, 2010: 311)

As will be developed in the findings, yarn bombing in the urban milieu is managed, planned and expected as part of the creative city.

Methodology

The research presented here developed from a *crafternoon tea* in Liverpool. Knitting groups and members of a new city centre WI were invited to discuss themes of creativity and how their activities were part of their broader urban experience of living and working in Liverpool. The event was exploratory, seen as a *divergent dialogue* in which ideas were tested out and examined informally over tea and cake. The groups who attended had not met each other before. The WI group meet once a month, while the knitting group members meet weekly (although this is on a 'drop-in' basis). The researcher, herself a knitter, took part in the conversations while knitting with the women. The researcher does not take part in the groups in question but is familiar with this lifeworld having attended other knitting groups elsewhere. The two groups were distinct in nature. While both had members of varying ages, the knitting group was overall younger. It was also noted that the WI members were quieter in their conversations. The knitting group did not shy away from profanity when speaking and many were dressed in handmade knits in bright colours. There was only one member of the knitting group who had used her craft skill in a commercial enterprise; however, this activity was now minimal due to her closing her small retail premises. Following from this event, a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen group members (some individual and some as small groups). The interviews took place approximately 2–3 months after the 'crafternoon tea', and only three interview participants had not taken part in that initial event due to other commitments.

Negotiating a 'place' in the creative city

The following analysis will explore the empirical data and examine how the groups saw themselves as part of the city of Liverpool and as contributing to placemaking. The research found that the nature of gathering in a city centre came with certain barriers and also expectations from the members. Finding the right location to meet was key for all the groups to not only reflect their nature but also meet their needs. This negotiation of public space is essential in the placemaking processes (Massey, 2005) of women, particularly when thinking about the shift of crafting in private to public spaces. While there has been increased attention given to craft in online spaces (Orton-Johnson, 2014), there

is still salience in understanding how face-to-face crafting communities interact not only with each other but also in relation to the place where they meet (Evans, 2010; Massey, 2005; Myzelev, 2015). Despite being less formal than the WI group, one knitting group member recalled how the location of the meetings was important for how they felt a sense of belonging in the city. Her group used to meet in a city centre pub:

[...] we didn't like it there so we stopped coming. 'Cause we met in the pub, and it was the place it was, all the men had to go ... walk past to go to the toilet and the drunken men would come across ... and it wasn't a particularly nice atmosphere. (Denise)

The new environment of the city library was preferred. Therefore, it is evident that taking something which is viewed as domestic into the urban setting was difficult for the groups to reconcile, both in terms of creating a sense of identity for themselves, and in how they are viewed as part of the urban milieu. Despite Liverpool being labelled 'the centre of the creative universe' (Grunenberg and Knifton, 2007), the domestic crafts of knitting were difficult to embed as part of the everyday in locations such as pubs which were still seen as a masculine domain.

The WI group have membership fees which thus necessitated meeting in a more contained manner. As a result, the WI struggled with creating their identity as a 'city centre' WI:

[...] it's a city centre WI which is quite unique, they tend to be in rural areas or there's one here in Walton [area in suburbs of Liverpool] sort of localized. Now they tend to be big WIs but I do think you get that with a community, but in the city centre, you have to make a bigger effort to get into the city and then parking can always be a problem [...] (Jane)

The creative city is a challenge for framing the idea of the WI, an institution whose identity is so often tied up in rural imaginings. A member, for example, talked about the expectations that came with being a city centre group and their inability to connect to the city of Liverpool and what was already happening there post Capital of Culture:

I know a lot of members want to be something bigger and fit within the structures of the city. Um, but a lot of people just want to turn up at a meeting and be entertained, you know. So, so, we're sort of struggling with trying to push the, um, push getting involved in the wider community. (Gaby)

She expressed how difficult it was to see themselves as a group fitting into the city as a creative place, but understood the importance of being a collective in terms of placemaking:

So, um, it, but it's very hard to see how individuals fit into that and yet individuals create that, if you see what I mean, so but it's hard to see how me personally affects everything in Liverpool when I am sitting here doing my tatting³ or whatever. But I think the fact that a lot of people are interested as a collective sort of boosts everything, even if you can't see how you're doing it. (Gaby)

This role of the vernacular in placemaking (Edensor et al., 2010) emerges in Gaby's reflections. Particularly, it returns to Dyck's (2005) notion of the 'hidden placemaking'

of women, in that a very individual activity like craft is transformed when practiced as a collective. Therefore, while the movement to knitting in public from within the domestic sphere is seen as a feminist action by Myzelev (2015), this was far from unproblematic for the groups in Liverpool. The negotiation was more in line with Massey's notions of place as chancy-event as explored above. Placemaking occurs through these negotiations which are often antagonistic (Massey, 2005). This will be developed in the proceeding section in an examination of collective placemaking activity such as yarn bombing; however, it is worth noting here that the relationship between the vernacular creativity of domestic crafts and creative placemaking is problematic. While Evans (2010) suggests that these spaces of vernacular activity are still salient, the work here suggests that finding these spaces in a so-called creative city is far from straightforward as domestic craft is still viewed as cosy, feminine and a private activity.

In terms of being seen as part of the Liverpool landscape, the WI in particular struggled. By its very nature, it is a formal collective. They spoke about understanding their place within the wider WI federation and how to develop their own group within the rules and regulations of this:

I don't think you can say that we're a typical WI because you know, we're a central city sort of WI, so we don't do things like sing Jerusalem, and we find it hard to ... it's hard ... you know the typical village where you have a central hall and everybody knows each other and they all meet up [...] You know, there's a fairly strict structure from, from the WI that says you ought to do this and you ought to do that. (Gaby)

In a sense, it could be argued that they found the wider collective of the WI more of a hindrance in creating their own sense of identity as a Liverpool city centre group. They questioned how to embed themselves as part of place while maintaining the central rules of the organization. There was also the tension in being representative of a city like Liverpool alongside the image of the WI as a traditional, White, middle-class organization as identified by Faith: '[...] we hope to appeal to some younger people in Liverpool [...] be more representative of the city, 'cause at the moment it doesn't feel very representative'.

There was an ambivalent relationship to the urban setting from all groups. They are aware of what being in a city environment meant and what they can and cannot achieve within that space, with the location of Liverpool being problematic:

You know, sort of the thing at the moment is the fact that because Lancashire is such a huge county and the Liverpool branches are very new in relation to everybody else, so it's very much based in the north of the county. So we therefore feel that we're left out and, um, and it's too far for us to go to get involved in things, especially a lot of our members work as well, so it's not the traditional sort of retired people or not working. (Gaby)

The contribution to placemaking of the group was acknowledged as complex. They wanted to embed themselves in the city of Liverpool. However, they understood that their identity as a WI was difficult to reconcile with the image of working-class Liverpoolian women in the past, organizing and fiercely protecting their communities

and families as seen in the WoW campaign explored above despite the campaigning history of the WI as an organization.

All groups felt that coming together as a collective to craft was important to feeling part of the city and being seen in the city as a creative group:

- Rachel: It is better if you're sitting here on a Tuesday evening knitting with people than sitting on the sofa.
- Nicola: Knitting at home by yourself?
- Rachel: Yeah, it's errr.
- Fiona: I did that last night.
- Nicola: They're quite different activities. The knitting is part of the group.

The women felt differently about crafting in a group than at home alone. The collectivity was part of the experience. However, the sense of scale of being in a big city was acknowledged:

I think in a small community you would be invited or there would be something in the local primary school of an evening and the mums would organize it or the parents or something. And it would be just there, it would be available. But in a big city like this it makes it a bit smaller and just, kind of, makes people meet each other. It is important. (Denise)

Further to this identification of the role of coming together within a big city, this was rooted to place, and creativity embedded in Liverpool was essential, as these members of the knitting group explained:

- Fiona: Yes, I do. I think Liverpool has had a chequered past in terms of poverty and civil unrest, and ...
- Nicola: And creative things hold ... give the city an identity and hold it together ...
- Rachel: Oh, yeah.

Similarly, Jen conjures up the sense of a creative community which suggests that the urban setting also allows for a collectivity that crafting in the domestic setting does not create:

I found that you can go out somewhere in Liverpool and find creativity hidden around every corner [...] I think because there is a network of people who see each other's work and know each other for different reasons. (Jen)

However, there was acknowledgement from the knitting group that the regeneration that had taken place in Liverpool was essential for their existence:

But I think it's partly a, a side effect of some of the regeneration in Liverpool that we are all here and are all here with the, the ability of the umm, that time and money to do something like this. And actually there are bits of the city where this wouldn't happen ... (Nicola)

So while there are critiques that placemaking in the city being ‘top-down’ is problematic (Jones and Evans, 2012), it was seen here as part of the reason why the group met. However, in the same breath, the above comment acknowledges that the benefits of this are not felt across the city as predicted by Jones and Wilks-Heeg (2004) prior to the European Capital of Culture year. Referring back to Hall and Jayne (2015), the spatial is linked to the craft practice and the research here suggests that an urban setting, while problematic for both, was more so for the formalized WI group bound by rules and regulations. The urban setting leads to the questioning of whether being a WI is the right option for the group going forward. So while the notion of the creative city and the culture-led regeneration experienced in Liverpool is seen as a motivating factor behind the existence of knitting groups, the formality of the WI is more problematic.

One explanation for this might be around the perceptions of the WI and the middle-class nature of that organization. If we refer back to the notion of the women of Liverpool organizing for change, this was very much a working-class movement and thus can be seen in contrast to the formation of the WI in rural communities and the idea of the WI in popular consciousness today, thanks to UK television coverage of the 100 years anniversary. It was already noted above that the group did not feel like they represented the city in terms of membership and that this was something they were very conscious of. However, this classed nature of crafting was not unnoticed by all the groups. There was an awareness of how craft is perceived as a middle-class activity due to how it was promoted in the media. For example, Sharon commented, ‘it’s very class distinctive the way it is marketed, definitely. Erm ... harping back to Kirsty Allsopp and I think ... it’s not a cheap thing to do really [...]’. Similarly, Fiona recognized that craft practice displayed via social media was aspirational: ‘Look at my amazing life and look at what I am eating or look what I have made’. All of the participants had an awareness of the rise of craft on television and in general were quite mocking of this in line with Dirix’s (2014) analysis. The view of domestic craft practice that is seen on television is not in line with the notion of Liverpool as an edgy creative city, but we see in general that the critique of Liverpool as a creative city is that it stratifies communities further (Jones and Evans, 2012; Jones and Wilks-Heeg, 2004). However, there was optimism that creativity in itself brings people together across class distinctions: ‘are on the same level as creativity gives them that balance’ (Jen).

Furthermore, there needs to be a distinction made here between this notion of the so-called creative class and their contribution to placemaking, and creativity as an economic necessity. Jane, the WI member who was the eldest participant, spoke more about how craft was linked to austerity and ‘a necessity for, you know, economical [reasons]’, whereas there was an acknowledgement from many that knitting was now a very expensive hobby and no longer really about *make do and mend*:

Rachel: Well, now it is cheaper to buy something from Primark or Tesco than to make something.

Fiona: I think in this day and age it probably isn’t the thrifty thing, the thrifty option that used to be there.

So the nature of crafting has shifted over time and the relationship to the urban is important here. The once hidden placemaking of domestic craft is now becoming integral into the creative city as will be examined in the proceeding section, but these informal and vernacular creative spaces are not being recognized for their meaningful potential in a city dependent on creativity as a placemaking discourse.

'Will you yarn bomb this for us?'

Craftivism was seen as problematic in relation to placemaking as it has become subsumed into an official narrative of what a creative city should be like. The groups were critical of official placemaking schemes that were part of the narrative of the creative city, and viewed the political intention behind the activity as having been lost. Sharon, who set up one of the knitting groups, spoke about being amused when the city council approached her with the request, 'will you yarn bomb this for us?' She noted the sense of irony of 'officially' being asked to do something which was meant to be a form of political activism. The repositioning of Liverpool as a creative city has led to certain expectations (Oakley, 2004). The increased popularity for yarn bombing was discussed by most participants to varying degrees and there were mixed opinions on the value of this activity. For some, there is a tension between a willingness to do something that contributes to city placemaking, but the time that it takes to produce a handcrafted product was considered a barrier to this.

- Fiona: I think it's very time consuming, labour intensive, we don't really have a lot of opportunity as it were [...] I mean I do literally do products for charity, but it's not like, you know?
- Rachel: On a massive scale.
- Fiona: No, no it's, it's hardly a sweatshop in that regard I just when, I kind of feel like I'll do some.

There was a sense that the work had to be meaningful for the group itself, and that a wider social good was incidental. While the groups were made up of very different women who maybe only came together once a week/month, the emotional attachment to the group and what they got from this were evident:

- Rachel: One of the group got married and we knitted enormous quantities of bunting for her.
- Nicola: These projects as in the joint-public projects?
- Fiona: Yeah. Well we did the blood drops (knitted items) because [member's name] works at the tissue ... NHS, and it was a campaign for the ... obviously blood donation [...]

The charity work here was connected to a group member. Ultimately, the collective is important here as Hagedorn and Springgay (2013) suggest in their work. However, this reveals that the affective labour of craft is complex in that any work that is not for personal reasons has to be meaningful for the group rather than for place. The

placemaking here is a by-product of friendship – to return to the statement by Miller (2011), it is an ‘act of care’.

The participant who set up one of the knitting groups suggested that she takes a cautious approach to requests to do placemaking projects from businesses and the city council:

Whether I think somebody is exploitative of the group ... erm ... because you know people be like, ‘Oh will you knit bunting?’ Well actually the knitted bunting takes weeks and weeks and weeks of work and you’ve ... erm ... so I don’t want the group to end up feeling like they’re just a sweatshop for other people so money comes into it now because it has to be, because even if we can’t cover time, the group can’t be out of pocket for wool. (Sharon)

This, as Bolton (2009), reminds us, is an issue with forgetting the very nature of affective labour. It exposes the skilled nature of craft and, as many participants identified, the hidden costs of making. So while the group members were happy to work on bunting for the wedding of their friend and fellow group member (they all dropped whatever projects they were working on to do this), they are more cautious when asked to undertake wider community projects:

I tend to filter a little because otherwise we’d be doing yarn bombing projects for loads of businesses so I tend to stick to things that I think are a little bit crazy maybe or a little bit interesting. (Sharon)

This exemplifies the complex balance between everyday placemaking and top-down placemaking. The women in the knitting group specifically were politically engaged and spoke enthusiastically about the potential of being radical through knitting (e.g. they discussed how amazing they thought the pattern for a Michael Gove pincushion was).⁴ However, related back to the work of Dyck (2005), we can say that the placemaking of women was more hidden in the sense that their emphasis was on friendship and making the world a better place for their immediate circle.

Yet another participant from a different knitting group was more enthusiastic about yarn bombing projects and spoke about the element of surprise that it held:

Why do we undertake them? Because we enjoy it, I think. I know some people say that it’s a waste of time and money and we could have been crocheting or knitting for charity. But I think it gives that community spirit in a big city like Liverpool. It’s not a common thing to find. (Denise)

This echoes the idea of placemaking as ‘chancy-event’ and Denise finds pleasure in yarn bombing. However, rather than viewing it as ‘anarchy’ (Turney, 2009), she speaks more in terms of how it ‘softens’ the city. This reflects the notion of whimsy outlined by Mann (2015), but the difference between yarn bombing as political action and as merely for decorative purpose was noted by Jen: ‘when yarn bombing first started it was proper yarn bombing, in that it just appeared and nobody knew how it had got there, then yes that had a political statement’. This was further reiterated by Sharon: ‘It has to have some kind of engaging ... yeah, yeah ... but there’s been a big movement of it just being purely decorative thing and I find it a little infuriating’.

Faith (from the WI) was ambivalent: ‘Have you seen people that, they knit and then put their knitting on, like, lampposts? Things like that. Yeah I never really understood that. Like what’s the point of it?’ The yarn bombing of urban spaces has thus become problematic, and even though Faith felt she did not understand it, there was a shared sense that, as an action, it has lost its social message. Yarn bombing has become ubiquitous in many urban environments – it has become bifurcated and subsumed as Bratich (2010) explained, and thus potentially lost its political potency. Faith, who did not understand yarn bombing as political, was maybe responding to a creative act that was no longer powerful, and therefore, there was nothing to understand politically. The appropriation of yarn bombing is a clear example of a misunderstanding of the immaterial that is embedded in the material. While urban placemakers have more recently been concerned with developing hubs of creative industries, and Liverpool has been particularly successful in this post-European Capital of Culture, there is a concern that everyday creative practice can be exploited. In particular, the high-profile nature of the work of Assemble in Toxteth has further contributed to this discourse of so-called DIY creative placemaking which can only be maintained through financial investment and political will (Thompson, 2015, 2016).

Conclusion

There is value in coming together as a collective to perform an activity which is domestic, or seen as nostalgic and dated, when we think about the value in terms of placemaking and experiences of place. Affective labour as ‘biopower from below’ (Hardt, 1999: 100) suggests that the role these groups play in placemaking cannot be underestimated by the ‘official’ city placemakers and cannot be expected to be subsumed into official placemaking processes. The appropriation of yarn bombing alongside the difficulty that the groups have in finding their ‘place’ in the structures of the city suggests that placemaking should be a process of negotiation rather than an official imagining of what place should be.

The groups demonstrate a lack of engagement with the wider market, and wider placemaking agendas instead demonstrate self-valorization (Hardt, 1999; Negri and Hardt, 1999), which links back to the idea of creativity being about a feeling and a sense of becoming (Gauntlett, 2011). This allows the women to establish their identities within the city and to contribute to placemaking when *they* chose to do so. The social good of their work is both incidental and meaningful, in that it connects with place as it is driven by the group and their enactment of the ‘art of care’ (Miller, 2011). The women in this study enacted their own agency in how they negotiated the wider placemaking initiatives. Recalling Massey (2005), the women are empowered within the metropolis but take care in how they are co-opted into the ‘official’ narratives of place. Despite being located within the urban centre (in relation to which there were some difficulties), their emphasis is on placemaking at a micro level. Yarn bombing might be a desirable attraction within the so-called creative city, but these women do not seek visibility in activity that they do not collectively view as meaningful.

Therefore, the importance of informal creative groups, which are not producing a ‘profitable product’ or working towards a measurable social goal (i.e. Assemble in Toxteth), should not be underestimated or exploited. Negri and Hardt (1999) state that

affective labour creates communities, but we need to heed the warning of Bolton (2009) to not forget that this is gendered. The role of women in informal creative placemaking activity warrants further study, especially outside of the home and in the urban milieu. The rise of domestic craft activity and the prominence of organizations like the WI need to be examined further in relation to how we understand experiences of the urban – without harking back to the nostalgic visions of creativity and craft which often dismisses the agency of women. This is particularly important within places, like Liverpool, that brand themselves as creative destinations.

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Notes

1. This was iterated throughout the European Capital of Culture year in 2008. Tate Liverpool used it as the title of an exhibition in 2007 (Grunenberg and Knifton, 2007).
2. For more detailed overview of Women's Institute (WI) campaigns, see <https://www.thewi.org.uk/campaigns> (accessed 2 November 2015).
3. A form of handicraft that creates lace using knits and loops.
4. The Michael Gove pincushion was a crochet pattern which was created in response to the member of Parliament's (MP) time as education secretary. It was small act of protest by a Brighton-based knitter and its creation received media attention (<http://stiffstitches.com/michael-gove-vooodoo-pin-cushion/>).

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