



Buchczyk, M. (2020). Making certainty and dwelling through craft. *Journal of American Folklore*, 133(528), 178-192 .
<https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.133.528.0178>

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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[10.5406/jamerfolk.133.528.0178](https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.133.528.0178)

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Making Certainty and Dwelling through Craft

This article offers a fieldwork-based reflection on how the performance of craft is entangled with attempts to overcome uncertainty. Drawing on research with two urban craft groups, I explore how participants engage in textile making and other craft activities. This article reconsiders the importance of heterogeneous craft practices as ways of operating in a precarious environment, suggesting that in the face of adversity, craftsmanship can play a role in carving out spaces of possibility.

Keywords

AFS ETHNOGRAPHIC THESAURUS: Craft, textiles, ethnography, women, uncertainty, material culture, refugees

Introduction: Thinking Uncertainty through Craft

There has been growing interest among social scientists in probing the ways in which uncertainty constitutes a feature of our times and of urban life (see Horst and Grabska 2015; Pine 2014; Simone and Rao 2012; Zeiderman et al. 2015). The experience of living in the city is frequently seen as being underpinned by a sense of unpredictability, loss of control, and lack of assurance about the future (Boholm 2003; Cooper and Pratten 2014). Scholarship to date, however, has overlooked the ways in which uncertainty interacts with embodied material practices such as craft.

Exploring everyday urban experience, as de Certeau pointed out, necessitates an investigation of the intricate, interwoven practices of dwelling (1985:124). Such a perspective offers a unique insight into situated engagements with the urban environment. Drawing from research on learning and craft practice with de Certeau's call in mind, I explore how participation in craft activities intersects with experiences of uncertainty. This junction is traced in two interrelated contexts: a craft corner organized as part of a drop-in center for refugee women and a textile-making group linked to a mental health support initiative.

First, I briefly outline some of the existing research on craftsmanship and its relation to the notions of dwelling, movement, and uncertainty. Second, I present two brief

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fieldwork accounts of craft groups encountered during my ethnographic research. Finally, I explore how craft can be seen as a form of engagement that carves out spaces of possibility. Thus, this article makes a distinctive contribution to craft scholarship by shifting attention to material practices in exploring uncertainty. Such a focus contributes to anthropological projects that investigate craft as a distinct form of engagement (e.g., Marchand 2010; Yarrow and Jones 2014) while offering a unique perspective on its embodied everyday articulations (e.g., Herzfeld 2004).

Field Site and Methods

The research on which this article draws is part of a wider project on learning in the city, conducted in Bristol with Keri Facer. The “Reinventing Learning Cities” project focused on contexts where learning emerges as part of everyday activities and how learning relates to wider material, affective, and discursive contexts (Facer and Buchczyk 2019).

Fieldwork for the project, conducted between October 2016 and September 2017, combined multi-sited ethnographic research with a community research initiative and a curatorial project (Facer et al. 2019). During the study, I conducted participant observation of a range of everyday community learning sites and forms of textile making (Buchczyk 2014; Facer and Buchczyk 2018). The groups were voluntary drop-in sessions for, in the first case, refugee women and, in the second, women who were facing issues ranging from financial difficulties to domestic violence and mental health problems. The group for refugee women was part of a weekly drop-in, where women could access a range of support and advice. In addition to language classes, one-on-one housing and employment advice, literacy training, and public health workshops, the drop-in included a craft corner where the participants could try out different forms of making.

The second group was set up by a charity organization with a mission to promote mental well-being among women who would otherwise not engage with the organization's work. The aim of the service was to engage women who experienced barriers to support due to their social or cultural background or particularly chaotic lives. The activities were tailored to serve the needs of women with poor experiences of support or who were fearful or mistrustful about ideas of mental health. In both groups, the women were living precarious urban lives, in some cases caused by their displacement or their personal circumstances such as long-term unemployment, poor mental health, or domestic violence.

I visited these groups to explore their role in the wider ecosystems of learning in the city. The purpose of the interviews and participant observation was thus to investigate the forms of learning, seen as “expanded possibilities for action” (Fenwick and Edwards 2013:56) emerging through the activities, and the ways in which membership in these groups enabled or hindered other learning in participants' everyday lives. During the weekly sessions, I joined the activities and engaged in informal conversations. Discussions with the participating women and the group facilitators often took place over the course of the activities, sometimes in the form of ad hoc chat about different topics as they emerged through making together. Some were in the

form of one-on-one encounters; others involved more participants as they gathered around the task. Whenever possible, women were invited for interviews outside of the group—these took place in their homes, in the corridors before drop-in sessions, or at local cafés.

Through exploring the informal, at times provisional learning contexts, the theme of uncertainty emerged as a key experience of learning in the city. In the course of these conversations, women often mentioned situations of loss of control, unknown outcomes, and conditions of threatening change (Whyte 2009:214). These discussions pointed to conditions that resembled Lupton's description of uncertainty as "anxiety created by disorder, the loss of control over our bodies, our relationships with others, our livelihoods and the extent to which we can exert autonomy in our everyday lives" (1999:3). Drawing on these accounts, this article aims to rethink my field material to consider the role of craft as a medium for exploring the negotiations of day-to-day uncertainty.

Dwelling in Problems, Learning to Move On

Much has been written about craft as engagement. Existing anthropological literature explores craft as an immersive practice and a changing field of relations between bodies, minds, and the environment (see Coupaye 2013; Ingold 2000; Marchand 2010). For Richard Sennett, craft is a practice of dwelling in things and problems, considering different options, and learning to anticipate what things might become. Craftwork compels the practitioner to dwell in frustration, mess and error, false starts, and wrong moves and dead ends (2008:173). As every weaver has once found an unexpected knot and every potter has once struggled with hard clay on the wheel, craft practice is intrinsically linked with resistant material. As a way of working with material challenges, craftwork facilitates the skill of managing ambiguity and making and remaking uncertain relations with others (2008:308).

Craft involves much back and forth movement, like learning when it is time to stop to trace the error back to the source, as in the case of the weaver's knot or the potter's clay. The work of craft moves through trial and error and improvised adjustments and allows for the discovery of new possibilities (Sennett 2008:289). In this interrelated practice of problem-solving and problem-finding, craft sheds light on improvisatory techniques of working with ambiguity. Thus, it has a capacity to "bring forth" the practitioners (Hallam and Ingold 2007).

Yarrow and Jones explored this complex relationship—between dwelling and moving, engagement and detachment—intrinsic to craft through an ethnography of stonemasons' work, finding that although they dwelled in problems, they also had to be able to let go and detach themselves from the product of their craft (2014). The dynamics of engaged and detached orientations in craft highlight the different and emergent conjunctions between people, objects, practices, and future trajectories: "When people and things are caught up in interactions that combine them in shifting configurations, a subject/object division is produced as a precarious and processual achievement" (273). Craft thus emerged as an interrelated practice situated between continuity and change, dwelling and movement, and engagement and moving on.

There is an affinity between the enmeshed experiences of craft and uncertainty. As discussed above, craft involves a degree of dwelling in problems. Uncertainty is often experienced as a crippling and debilitating state of limbo, affecting one's ability to move or imagine a future (Bock 2017; Horst and Grabska 2015). At the same time, uncertainty requires learning to solve problems or “get by” and “make do” (Berthomé, Bonhomme, and Delaplace 2012). It necessitates creating and “crafting” opportunities and resourcefully piecing together styles, influences, and skills (Johnson-Hanks 2005; Schilling et al. 2015). Uncertainty is thus about tuning into and moving through a continually changing environment, working with different forms of resistance, and deploying incremental practices. Both craft and uncertainty therefore depend on pausing and navigating in order to reconstitute relationships and open possibilities for other futures (Yarrow and Jones 2014).

The Craft Drop-In

On a crisp February morning, the refugee center drop-in at the inner-city community center was buzzing with activity. As I approached the center, I saw women of different ages coming from all directions, walking from the bus stops in the city center and the eastern districts. Some arrived on their own, many arrived with children, and others



Figure 1. Decorating pottery at the craft stall. Photo by Magdalena Buchczyk.

approached the gate in small groups. The community hall was being set up; at the entrance, the volunteer receptionists were greeting the first visitors, young mothers with their toddlers. On the right side of the reception area, a charity worker started arranging leaflets on the table and setting up chairs for discussion. The drop-in was a large open space, with a number of activities positioned in different parts of the hall ranging from tuition literacy to legal and employment advice and a community kitchen. At the back of the hall, volunteers had set up a free shop with donations of clothes, books, and household items. The front had a small exhibition about diabetes prevention consisting of a banner, some posters, information sheets, and food samples with labels indicating sugar levels. Group English lessons were taking place in the small classrooms adjacent to the hall, and the women who chose to attend these classes could leave their children in the drop-in day care area.

In the middle of the hall, I noticed two volunteers running a craft stall, decorating small pottery objects. They were joined by women and children from Libya, Syria, and Kurdistan. I spoke with Gabrielle,¹ a community artist running the activity. She explained that the pots had been made by the craft group participants a few weeks earlier. Although the first session proved particularly popular, Gabrielle reflected, she struggled to entice the women to decorate the pots. She explained that her work demands much patience, as it is hard to know what the women will be interested in on any one day. Although the craft activity organized by Gabrielle at times felt very hit-or-miss, she treasured every occurrence of engagement.

Najma was one of those women who only occasionally had an opportunity to take part in the craft activities. She came regularly to the drop-in with her little daughter and, due to the limited availability of the crèche, frequently needed to take care of her while using the services. Originally from Iran, she had been in Bristol for 8 years and intended to stay in the city. Having worked in administration in Iran, she was not able to find a job in her profession in the UK. Her plan was to start a nursing degree in the future, a career that would enable her to find a job if she needed to move on.

Despite her lengthy stay in the city, she admitted that she had not been able to put her plan into action. She felt that she needed to improve her English and continuously apologized for her poor grammar. She explained that, with little financial stability, she struggled to find the time and resources for college. Moreover, she did not have friends to leave her child with, and childcare was unaffordable. She was trying to learn the language through scattered attempts at different free courses and English sessions. In the drop-in, she also prioritized her English, often leaving the craft table behind.

There was, however, a skill Najma was very confident about. When I first met her in the drop-in over lunch, I started talking about her little girl as the toddler was playing between the different tables. During the conversation, Najma pointed to the child's sweater—a beautifully decorated red cardigan made with complex patterns—and told me with pride that she had made it herself. In a later interview, she emphasized her proficiency in the craft: "I can do knitting very well and when I came here that lady said you can teach knitting to another people, you can come as a volunteer worker" (2017). She spoke with great delight about the volunteer's offer. This potential identity as a teacher—someone who can share her abilities—was incredibly rewarding. Rather than a constant reminder of her lack of language skills and qualifications, knitting was

an activity that gave her a sense of accomplishment, proficiency, and skill. Gabrielle, the craft drop-in volunteer, was aware of the competencies of the group attendees: “I am showing her how to do something she could do a million times better than me. So there’s a steep learning curve, do not make any assumptions” (2017). She knew that the women could do much more than they were able to verbalize. Through engagement with their existing skills, the craft activity created a sense of intimacy with a limited need for communication through language. At the same time, some refugee women with a limited ability to speak English liked to share stories through craft. “There was a woman last week said ‘Oh my grandmother was a potter.’ She comes from . . . was she Zimbabwean? And she said . . . you know she had childhood memories of watching her grandmother make pots. So it’s just a gentle way to engage with people, particularly people we just have no idea, and don’t ask, about their journeys to get here or how long they’ve been here” (Gabrielle 2017).

Although the unstructured activity could be quite frustrating at times due to uneven interest, Gabrielle felt that some participants found space to make a connection. The craft activity can also serve as an entry point to different, more ambiguous encounters: “I had been talking to a young woman and I did ask her where she came from, and she had not long come from Syria. And you know I just really you know regretted that I’d opened up a lot of unhappiness for her” (2017). The shared engagement in the activity and conversation has created an affective space, as it has carved out an opening between the participants and the volunteers where different stories can be told.

Gabrielle was deeply affected by some of the experiences of the women:

Some of them, because of their history or because of the lives they are forced to live in this country are quite depressed. So it’s a gentle way of having a chat, having something to do, being interested. You know I did this very very simple it’s a running stitch, like darning, . . . a piece of cloth that’s getting threadbare, so you put another bit on the top and you just attach them together but you can do it in a



Figure 2. Shaping small pottery figurines at the craft stall drives conversation. Photo by Magdalena Buchczyk.

very decorative way. And a woman who's very depressed came, and I just gave her the three layers of cloth and she spent you know a good hour or two, and then she handed it back—she didn't want to keep it—and she just said you know it had made her day to do that. (2017)

Although much of the work involved sharing the burden of their difficult experiences, there were brief moments of respite and comfort. For many participants, the regular weekly drop-in and craft activity was a stark contrast to other parts of their weekly routines, such as the never-ending cycle of bureaucratic procedures: signing forms, registering, queuing, and compulsory reporting to the police station. For example, people who have applied for asylum in the UK are required to regularly report at a police station or reporting center. During every such visit, the applicants are at risk of being detained or deported. The refugees signing in at the immigration reporting center

are very vulnerable at that point, because that's the point at which they can be detained and taken to a detention center, which is the first step to being deported. So for a lot of them every week you know Tuesday comes around and they just don't know. . . . Some of them have been doing it for years, every week or every month. . . . I think it's made me think a little bit more deeply about the needs of the people there, you know things that I . . . you know it's so easy just to make assumptions, not having been through what they have to go through, or have been through. (Gabrielle 2017)

Gabrielle participated in the signing support provided for refugees at a reporting center, where she has been accompanying the refugees in the process. This signing support involves providing emotional assistance in the threatening bureaucracy of the reporting event, signposting the applicant to refugee aid agencies, and holding crucial information such as contact details for family and solicitors or official reference numbers in case of detention. This allows for tracking the refugee through the detention and deportation system, should such a decision be made on the reporting day. Having witnessed this Kafkaesque and anxiety-provoking routine of reporting, Gabrielle was able to understand differently her own role in the weekly schedule of the women. Given that their weekly rhythms are punctuated by such a degree of unpredictability and uncertainty, many refugees do not trust anybody in a formal role; they also show a lack of preference for activities that require regular weekly participation and signing up.

In this context, through the craft activity, she aimed to create a non-threatening, flexible space of learning and care: “So people may have had bad experiences or feel not confident, but there's opportunities for making connections, just talking to somebody and you might discover that you know they either have a shared interest or a shared language” (Gabrielle 2017). For Gabrielle, such connections could be created and nurtured through shared embodied practice and the materiality of the craft itself.

The story of a textile piece made in the refugee center encompasses how objects and making came to foster connections. As part of a refugee charity appeal, Gabrielle put out a plea amongst friends for donations of African fabric. One of the many donations was a tunic with a Ghanaian school logo and a “Rise and Shine” inscription. Inspired

by this cloth, she decided to make a quilt based on traditional strip weaving techniques common in West Africa. As her personal network contributed the materials, she reached out to other groups for expertise to support the making of the piece. She engaged a number of community centers, refugee groups, and interested neighbors to work separately on elements of the cloth.

The women at the refugee drop-in joined in with much enthusiasm, creating constitutive parts of the quilt from the leftovers and the donated fabric. Later, the different elements were joined together into a large Rise and Shine quilt. For Gabrielle, “there was a lot of connecting and . . . what do we call it, oblique learning . . . the way of learning that isn’t . . . that happens serendipitously by happy coincidence” (2017).

Thus, in Gabrielle’s view, the project not only fostered connections but also mobilized new skills. The case of this craft activity, situated in a wider space of the refugee support infrastructure within the drop-in, suggests that craft may be seen as a gathering force for finding a shared language. Firstly, the drop-in craft practice was a place in which women could open up and make connections. The rhythmic practice of the craft group fostered new forms of engagement and sociality, where skills could be mutually shared and new stories could emerge in serendipitous encounters. Secondly, the group activity established a non-threatening, open-ended, and non-committal routine in the often uncertain lives of the participants. In contrast to the uncertainty of other routines and the liminal nature of life in Bristol, the craft drop-in was a different type of regular encounter—one that brought about ordinary, serendipitous, and affective connections with materials, objects, and people. This encounter constituted a craft-based embodied practice of care. Thirdly, the craft activity illustrated a dynamic relationship between engagement and detachment by allowing for uneven participation and moments of intense immersion and rhythm of sharing and exchange.

As I pointed out, the women’s daily existence was punctuated by regular threats of detention and deportation, chronic financial instability, and a lack of time for developing necessary skills needed to adapt to life in the new city. Craft was a form of sanctuary and one of the activities that highlighted proficiency, skillfulness, confident practice, and pride in the ability to do the job well (Sennett 2008:9). Although it did not ensure stability (see Horghagen, Fostvedt, and Alsaker 2014), the craft activity seemed to provide a relief from daily uncertainty through non-prescriptive routine and opportunity for achievement and discovery. It was a space of hope, mediating their uncertainty and creating opportunities to act (see Horst and Grabska 2015). Thinking about hope, Pine argues that it is “a complex, many-layered notion resting on the capacity for imagination, on a sense of time and of temporal progress, on a desire to believe in a better future or in the possibility that something can change, and to some extent on uncertainty” (2014:96). The craft activity constituted a sporadic, embodied experience of “bringing forth” the makers through a momentary enactment of sociability and imagination.

The Textile Group

When I first joined the textile-making class on a chilly January weekday morning, the community center was mostly attended by local residents trying to warm up in

the café. At the reception area, I was instructed that the class would meet in a small back room upstairs, between the kitchen and offices of the local support services.

At the time of my research, the group had been running for a year and had attracted a network of South Asian women of diverse ages—from young mothers to elderly women—of mostly Pakistani and Indian origin. For the organizer of the group, engaged in mental health support, the group arose from an idea to “create a space, a very comfortable space, where people can come, sit together, have a cup of tea—they can either do their sewing, they can either do their knitting—whatever they like. They can come together and talk and discuss their own issues” (Diya 2017).

As I came in to the first class, the group was already busy setting up and making teas and coffees. Having exchanged greetings, some of the women started to prepare fabrics or move toward the sewing machines lined up on tables around the room. On the side, two participants were using the sewing machines. In the opposite corner, three elderly women were chatting and preparing a heart ornament to learn to craft a particular shape. On the right, a teenage girl with learning difficulties was quietly working on a knitting project.

The middle table was the busiest—this was the key space for shirt pattern cutting. The main instructor, an elegant woman in her fifties, was leading the activities, instructing other women who were congregated around her. She was helping with cutting neckline patterns, fixing mistakes in the drawings and measurements, and motivating some of the young women who seemed to be incredibly confused about the proportions of the shirt. During the session, two young girls did not proceed with their patterns at the same speed. Given their limited experience, the material seemed to resist—the cut sometimes was not straight, and the threads were sewn unevenly. One apprentice appeared to have resigned for now; she preferred to watch the other women’s progress. The other was learning to avoid mistakes by asking for help with the most complex parts of fabric cutting. The participants were speaking with each other in their own languages punctuated by occasional English words.



Figure 3. Parts of a fabric heart are stitched together. Photo by Magdalena Buchczyk.



Figure 4. Measurements are taken for the shirt patterns. Photo by Magdalena Buchczyk.

One of the women, painstakingly working on the pattern outline, was Rasheeda. She had moved to the city 2 years earlier from Bedfordshire. Having heard about the group through a family member, she started coming to learn to make her own clothes. Rasheeda was joined by Deena who was knitting a jumper for her 7-year-old son. Originally from India, she had also lived in Africa and Southern Europe. As a speaker of English as a fourth language, she was aware that she still could not fully express herself and used the group to practice her English. As I learned afterward, most women discovered the sessions by word of mouth or through the advertising posters located around the venue and other community spaces. Many of the participants were relatives, colleagues, or neighbors, and they often maintained social relationships outside of group meetings.

The sessions seemed to develop organically, with some participants working on specific, long-term projects and others joining in subgroups engaged in crocheting, knitting, pattern making, cutting, or sewing. The participants were assisted by volunteers who were taking care of the set-up of the room, helping the participants with their craftsmanship, and simply engaging in welcoming conversations. One of the volunteers was Alex, a young woman who had moved to the city from another region. She saw her role as making herself useful and just being present for low-key support, fitting in with the participants:

Learning to be in a community of people that I wouldn't be in—I wouldn't hang out with you know a 70-year old South Asian woman. . . . I just wouldn't, you know. We might cross paths on the street or in a shop or smile, but that would be like the only kind of exchange I think that I would have. So I think learning to be with different people has been great, really good . . . and also just things like finding out more about Islam. So I've had a really long chat with one of the ladies there one week, and she was telling me all different stuff about Islam that I didn't know about. I've been invited to the Gurdwara, the Sikh temple. (Alex 2017)

This way, the mental health support offered by the group has not only generated a network around the activity, but it has also facilitated wider social relations between different participants.

In one of the weekly sessions, I was sitting with three women knitting and crocheting in a circle. The skill level was very diverse across the group, from the elderly Hungarian woman who used to be a professional textile maker and her neighbor who knew how to work in most techniques (and regularly taught other group participants about pattern cutting and stitching), to younger women with much more basic skills. As we were sitting in a circle, knitting in unison, the conversation moved to intimate topics ranging from family histories to advice on aging, menstruation, baby health, and contraceptives. The synchronized activity centered on learning and sharing textile practices acted as a prompt for mutual advice, fostering a safe environment for exchange and support.

During an interview with one of the regular participants, I learned that through participation in the group, many women who experience isolation or domestic violence have an opportunity to meet with others and exchange experiences.

I think the best way to keep yourself you know occupied, going to groups, meet people, give them your ideas, learn some things . . . and that sort of breaks up the thing, otherwise just staying indoors watching TV and getting bored. . . . Like abuse and things like that. Well it's just meeting people, I never saw there [*laughs*]. I only made a few things. . . . Yeah you get to go out better and you feel better. And obviously I try to make it . . . unless it's very very bad, then I put it off, otherwise I still go out. Because it does break the day and it makes it . . . otherwise you're just glued to TV. I mean housework, how much can you do? (Prisha 2017)

Her narrative demonstrates that craft activity can provide both a way of breaking from routine and of leaving a domestic environment that might pose significant challenges.

One of the most active members of the group, who had been a professional textile maker, came to the group on the advice of a friend. This petite elderly woman came to the city as a child refugee and from a very early age worked in the UK with textiles, from simple manual jobs such as ironing or alterations to the complex tailoring of bridal dresses. Her participation in the group became an opportunity to socialize and share skills:

This is a wonderful thing to do, it includes not only to making things in a group in a building, we're going out as well to enjoy life together . . . especially when you get older. But I must admit in a sewing class there come quite a few young people there who want to learn sewing—anything I could show them, making hearts, making pin cushions, making stars out of material and so on, and so on. (Maria 2017)

Maria had been introduced to the group by her friend who was very active in the South Asian community. She felt that the sewing class was a means of tackling isolation and building a sense of togetherness as well as enabling women to learn invaluable skills: “Because the useful thing is that people who do that, they may find that

they feel good about making their own things to wear instead of going to the shops to spend on their outfits—double the amount that it costs them to make it” (2017).

Knitting, sewing, and altering garments were ways of tackling financial difficulty by avoiding the significant costs associated with the purchase and repair of clothing. As part of the group, some entrepreneurial women also made occasional attempts to sell small pieces of textile and garments through the network. Craft activities thus seemed to create potential openings for trade and exchange, at the same time actively weaving and reweaving relationships (see Newhouse 2017). Other women came to make clothes or talk about their problems in a supportive, caring environment. The sessions helped them to deal with isolation and safely discuss their uncertain situations “in which no known possibility is sufficient to counter it” (Samimian-Darash 2013:2).

Within the group, craft also emerged as an opportunity to create new connections and drive involvement with people through the deployment of craft skill. For example, Alex’s experience of the group suggests that craft facilitates a different “condition of being engaged” (Sennett 2008:20). For Alex, the encounter with the craft participants was in many ways a launch pad for new ways of being and knowing—being in the new city and knowing about difference. Through shared making, she was caught up in new sorts of interactions and shifting social configurations.

Most importantly, what the example of the sewing group seems to illustrate is that the weekly craft activity performed a wide variety of functions—from providing a caring environment and a support network to creating a space for sharing and teaching practical skills, enabling women to minimize financial uncertainty. Finally, yet importantly, it constituted a mode of gathering skills and opportunities for improvisational creativity.

Conclusion: Weaving Pathways into an Uncertain World

Studying uncertainty requires anthropological attention, as it touches the body and the mind and results in particular ways of knowing and being (Pink, Akama, and Sumartojo 2018; Samimian-Darash and Rabinow 2015). Among the women in the two craft groups in Bristol, making was a respite from an environment full of looming uncertainty. Within their everyday lives, immersed in dealing with problems of migration bureaucracy, the constant threat of deportation, or poor mental health, it seemed that craft was a sporadic respite. It was a space of sanctuary and hope. It was a facilitator of discovery, achievement, and learning.

Discussing life in the city, an outreach worker in the community center I worked in reflected on the significant challenges faced by the residents:

People are trying to struggle with not enough money, poor housing, overcrowding, trying to get their kids into schools, trying to deal with health issues. . . . If you think beyond that sometimes it could be quite difficult to see what you’ve got in common with other people, ‘cause those are quite isolating. But they are issues that lots of other people share, so you know if you can create support networks and you know just where people can feel that at least they’re not on their own with it, then that does help them with their learning and with their advancement. (Helen 2017)

In these groups, through improvisational work with fragments, the participants were gaining the capacity to imagine a different life. Thinking about improvisation, Ingold suggested that it “is to follow the ways of the world, as they open up, rather than to recover a chain of connections, from an end-point to a starting-point, on a route already travelled” (2011:216).

Improvisation involves hazardous action, joining with the world and launching forth. Many have been negotiating adversity by navigating the city and improvising with what was at hand or venturing with different speeds, gestures, lines of drift, loops, and knots. The women’s everyday lives consisted of such threads and lines of drift in an open and complex relationship between movement and immobility, feeling constrained and gaining the capacity to improvise. As Sennett suggests, “the use of imperfect or incomplete tools draws on the imagination to repair and to improvise” (2008:10). In both craft and uncertain everyday life, the women were immersed in knotted rhythms, in which they attempted to improvise and repair, imagine alternatives, and find ways to stitch their lives together (see De Boeck 2015:56).

The rhythmic and routine participation in activity, such as the craft classes, enabled movement and “brought forth” (Hallam and Ingold 2007) the women situated in the activity. Secondly, by moving forth, they became knowledgeable about practice and the ways in which they could start “crafting” their everyday experiences. Finally, they juggled the engagements and detachments of the craft activity to carve out spaces of possibility. Craft, therefore, could be seen as part of the complex and inconspicuous ways in which these women engage with the uncertain environment in which they operate. By creating new material and social connections, shared languages, and rhythms, craft creates a rare opportunity for imagining different everyday lives and, perhaps, new potential futures.



Figure 5. Knotted rhythms and their different potentials. Photo by Magdalena Buchczyk.

Acknowledgments

The Reinventing Learning Cities project was funded as an AHRC Connected Communities Leadership Fellowship (AH/N504518/1), awarded to Keri Facer (principal investigator). My research position was co-funded by this grant and by the University of Bristol. I owe special thanks to Keri Facer for her exceptional support in the period of extreme uncertainty. Thanks to all the participants in the project for their time and generosity.

Note

1. Throughout this article, I have used pseudonyms for the respondents and anonymized the fieldwork location. Some identifying details have been changed as well. All interviews were conducted by Magdalena Buchczyk in English.

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