

Crafting a Fibre Scene in Cape Breton: The Tools, Technologies, and Motivations of the Unspun Heroes

Janice Esther Tulk

Volume 87, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070680ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070680ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Cape Breton University Press

ISSN

1718-1259 (print)

1927-9264 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Tulk, J. (2018). Crafting a Fibre Scene in Cape Breton: The Tools, Technologies, and Motivations of the Unspun Heroes. *Material Culture Review / Revue de la culture matérielle*, 87, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070680ar>

Article abstract

In the 21st century, spinning, knitting, and weaving are largely thought of as hobbies, pastimes, or small business activities. Despite the availability of mass-produced wool and fibre products, homespun and handmade products have seen a resurgence in popularity, partly because practitioner communities have developed. This article provides an ethnography of one such group, the Unspun Heroes in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Following a brief history of the group, the individually- and communally-owned tools and technology utilized within the Unspun Heroes is described. The forces that shape fibre artists' access to tools and other resources of their craft in Cape Breton are identified, elucidating how strategies of shared, repurposed, and DIY tools enable fibre artists to sustainably engage in their craft. The motivations of members of the group are then considered, demonstrating how economic diversification strategies in Cape Breton have facilitated fibre arts, but are seldom the driving force for engagement in fibre arts and the Unspun Heroes group. In conclusion, the concept of "scene" is applied to the people, places, technologies, and connections described in this ethnography of the Unspun Heroes as a way of understanding the complex web of interactions and activities that plays out within and around the fluid membership of the group. This exploration demonstrates the innovative and entrepreneurial ethos of fibre artists in rural Canada.

JANICE ESTHER TULK

Crafting a Fibre Scene in Cape Breton: The Tools, Technologies, and Motivations of the Unspun Heroes

Abstract

In the 21st century, spinning, knitting, and weaving are largely thought of as hobbies, pastimes, or small business activities. Despite the availability of mass-produced wool and fibre products, homespun and handmade products have seen a resurgence in popularity, partly because practitioner communities have developed. This article provides an ethnography of one such group, the Unspun Heroes in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Following a brief history of the group, the individually- and communally-owned tools and technology utilized within the Unspun Heroes is described. The forces that shape fibre artists' access to tools and other resources of their craft in Cape Breton are identified, elucidating how strategies of

shared, repurposed, and DIY tools enable fibre artists to sustainably engage in their craft. The motivations of members of the group are then considered, demonstrating how economic diversification strategies in Cape Breton have facilitated fibre arts, but are seldom the driving force for engagement in fibre arts and the Unspun Heroes group. In conclusion, the concept of "scene" is applied to the people, places, technologies, and connections described in this ethnography of the Unspun Heroes as a way of understanding the complex web of interactions and activities that plays out within and around the fluid membership of the group. This exploration demonstrates the innovative and entrepreneurial ethos of fibre artists in rural Canada.

In the 21st century, spinning, knitting, and weaving are commonly conceived of in the Western world as hobbies, pastimes, or niche business activities or cottage industries¹ as a result of increased access to low-cost, mass-produced textiles and yarn. Like many traditional practices, fibre activities that were once necessary for survival have become recreational pursuits (see, for example, Proeller 1996). Despite this, homespun wool and handmade fibre products have seen a resurgence in popularity. Increasingly, environmental awareness movements emphasize the use of natural fibres over synthetic and the importance of buying local, while economic development and diversification strategies in economically depressed areas focus strategic initiatives on small business development in the culture and craft sectors. Within this context, groups of practitioners who carry and share the knowledge required to produce homespun and handmade products, and possess a passion for those processes, have developed. The Unspun Heroes is one such group located in Sydney, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia; they meet on a weekly basis to engage in their chosen fibre activities and share their knowledge. In addition to exchanging information and techniques, the Unspun Heroes also collectively own a number of tools used to process fibre.²

Influenced by material culture, occupational folklore, and oral history studies, and based on interviews, participant-observation, and autoethnographic reflection, the present inquiry into the tools and technologies of local fibre artists serves as an entry point into understanding the individual motivations of fibre artists and broader group dynamics. It begins with the history of the Unspun Heroes before describing the individually and communally owned tools and technologies utilized within the Unspun Heroes group. It then identifies the forces that shape fibre artists' access to tools and other resources of their craft in Cape Breton, elucidating how strategies of shared, repurposed, and DIY tools enable fibre artists to sustainably engage in their craft. The motivations of members of the group are also considered, demonstrating how economic diversification strategies in Cape Breton have facilitated fibre arts, but are seldom the driving force for engagement in fibre arts and the Unspun Heroes group. Throughout, connections are drawn to historical

practices, thereby contextualizing current and modern methods within the broader literature of fibre arts and material culture (see Burnham 1950, 1972, 1981; Mackley 1967; MacLeod and MacInnes 2014).

One key objective of this article is to document the Unspun Heroes group and their processes for the future, thereby contributing to and expanding upon the existing literature devoted to the history of fibre arts and crafts in Cape Breton. *Celtic Threads: A Journey in Cape Breton Crafts* by MacLeod and MacInnes (2014) is a central text that delves into processes, patterns, and people continuing and energizing fibre practices on the island. Though primarily concerned with weaving, the authors address related fibre arts, such as spinning, and profile several other practitioner groups on the island. The present study of the Unspun Heroes helps to construct a more complete understanding of fibre arts practices in this region, while also examining more deeply the motivations of practitioners who form and participate in fibre arts groups in the 21st century. Importantly, the present ethnography also demonstrates the innovative and entrepreneurial ethos of fibre artists in relation to their creative pursuits in rural Canada.

The Unspun Heroes

The Unspun Heroes group had its genesis in the 2000s through both formal classes at the Cape Breton Centre for Craft and Design and informal individual and small group instruction. Under the tutelage of Chris Thomson, a spinner who moved to Cape Breton in the early 1990s, a number of local women and one man learned to spin fibre or advanced their existing skills. When Chris decided to stop teaching formally, her students still wanted to get together and spin in a group setting, so they began rotating between their homes on a monthly basis. Thus, the group organically emerged and grew over time. For these gatherings, they transported their spinning wheels, sometimes negotiating who would spin and who would knit instead due to space limitations. Members of the group became connected to the broader spinning community in the Atlantic Provinces via the Maritime Spinners Retreat, an annual event established in 2000 that rotates

Fig. 1
Unspun Heroes logo
 designed by Kristy
 Read. Contributed by
 Annamarie Hatcher.

between sites in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island.

In 2008, the Cape Breton spinners hosted the Maritime Spinners Retreat at the Gaelic College of Celtic Arts and Crafts in St. Ann's Bay, Cape Breton Island. During the preparation for that event, members discussed the need for a name for their group. Member Sidney Reid suggested Unspun Heroes (a play on the expression unsung hero). The name, along with a logo designed by graphic artist Kristy Read, was adopted by the group and printed on reusable tote bags filled with fibre-related paraphernalia prepared for the retreat (see Fig. 1). Thus, the organization of this event served as a catalyst for the formalization of the group to some degree.

Around the same time, an Unspun Heroes Yahoo! Group was established to enable communication between members and coordinate their monthly gatherings via an online forum and mailing list. As the popularity of Facebook grew, however, the Unspun Heroes began to transition to a private Facebook group in 2013. Membership in the Unspun Heroes' virtual group on Facebook is attained by meeting the minimum threshold of having attended one face-to-face gathering. As member and group administrator, Janet Dawson, explained, "That ensures that the people in the group are either local or occasionally local" (personal communication, July 17, 2016). Given that personal information, such as home addresses, is sometimes shared in the Facebook group, the face-to-face requirement is seen partially as a safety measure.

The primary means by which individuals become members of the Unspun Heroes is by acting upon an invitation from an existing member to attend a face-to-face gathering. In the past, there have also been open-house events that were advertised to the public that attracted curious individuals, and in a few cases would-be spinners introduced themselves to the group at public demonstrations.

Over time, as the membership of the Unspun Heroes grew, it became increasingly challenging for spinners to meet in someone's home, given the space needed for both personal spinning wheels and additional equipment that had been acquired by the group (discussed below). One of the members who then was employed by the local university sought the permission of a dean



to hold spinning gatherings in a laboratory on campus. Around 2014, weekly knitting events were established in conjunction with The Bobbin Tree, a downtown fibre shop owned by Unspun Hero member, Janet Dawson. Members of the Unspun Heroes began alternating on a weekly basis between The Bobbin Tree and a local coffee shop. These knitting events were a natural outgrowth—many spinners are also weavers and/or knitters as a means of using the homespun they produce.

During the time that this research was undertaken, from May 2016 to May 2018, the Unspun Heroes met on a weekly basis to knit, crochet, or do needlepoint (or other fibre arts) in public spaces, alternating between The Bobbin Tree and the restaurant-lounge of a local hotel. Membership was also increasing, with new knitters and weavers who joined with the intention of learning to spin fibre. Usually between four and ten members attended weekly gatherings on Thursday evenings for 2-3 hours. Some members of the group also saw each other on Wednesday evenings if they were participating in knit-along events at The Bobbin Tree.³ Every four to six weeks during fall and winter (and less frequently during spring and summer), members met in a biology laboratory at Cape Breton University to process and dye fibre, as well as to knit, crochet, and weave. This location was valued for activities requiring more space (like warping a loom) and messier activities (dyeing). Most commonly held on a Sunday, but sometimes on a weekday evening, these laboratory events always included a potluck meal, with members coming and going over the extended session (usually five hours). Members also gathered a few times a year for public demonstrations or to participate in com-

munity events, such as the KnitFit Community Knit-a-thon at the Cape Breton Regional Library, and at a member's home in December for a Christmas party.

Though membership in the Unspun Heroes is open to anyone with an interest in fibre, the group is almost exclusively comprised of women. Members range in age from late-20s to early-80s. Many possess some degree of post-secondary education (including completion of terminal degrees) and are employed (or retired from careers) in education, healthcare, heritage interpretation, information technology, and business fields. Many members of the Unspun Heroes are "come from aways," meaning that they have moved to Cape Breton from other areas in Canada and the United States. For example, of the sixteen members who participated in interviews, only four identified as being from Cape Breton Island. Some members of the Unspun Heroes live in single-income households or are retired or underemployed, while others live in double-income households or have full-time employment. Though it is difficult to pin down exact membership numbers given the fluid and informal nature of the group, the membership of the Facebook group reveals 48 members, three of whom identify as male.⁴ The attitude toward membership might best be summed up as, "Once a Hero, always a Hero." Individuals who participated in the group in the past, but have since moved away, for example, are still considered members despite no longer attending face-to-face gatherings. Similarly, members are free to participate as frequently as they like and while some attend on a weekly basis, others may only join the group for the annual Christmas party.

A Folklorist Joins the Unspun Heroes

My first introduction to the Unspun Heroes was at an open house event held at Cape Breton University's Cooperative Study Club, located in the New Dawn Centre for Social Innovation (formerly Holy Angels School and Convent), in March 2015. Knowing that I had an interest in material culture, arts, and crafts, my colleague Annamarie Hatcher invited me to the event to meet people and learn more about fibre arts. A

reluctant knitter who had been working on the same scarf for many years, on that occasion I brought along a round loom and some acrylic yarn to knit a hat. When the group next met at the laboratory for a "dirty dyeing day" (one member's humorous way of referring to the messy process), I attended to observe the methods employed. I was immediately interested in the tools and how they were being used, and expressed a desire to document them for use in a material culture course that I teach periodically at the university. I began sporadically attending Sunday gatherings, sometimes chatting, sometimes loom-knitting a hat, sometimes trying to finish a seemingly never-ending scarf project on two bamboo needles, and sometimes colouring in a mandala colouring book.⁵

At some point, I was added to the Facebook group so that I could be apprised of future gatherings and events. Personally, the event that marked my membership in the group came on January 16, 2016. The library at Cape Breton University had organized a knitting event as part of the 25,000 Tuques campaign—an initiative to provide a warm welcome to Syrian refugees arriving in Canada—and invited the Unspun Heroes.⁶ I attended this event with the group and was given a nametag featuring the Unspun Heroes logo. All members of the group would wear them to identify themselves to any novices who might need help knitting. When I protested that I was not in a position to assist any knitters, my colleague somewhat humorously declared me the loom-knitting expert of the group.

Ultimately, it was my academic interest in the group that served as the catalyst for a collaborative multidisciplinary research project with two colleagues who were also members of the Unspun Heroes and had an interest in fibre arts communities, the motivations of women who participate in them, and how they might be working to keep such traditions alive locally. While we were all interested in the social aspects of the Unspun Heroes, I was intrigued by the tools used to process fibre and produce knitted, woven, and crocheted goods, rather than the end products themselves. I had more of an outsider's perspective than my colleagues, who were both deeply involved in fibre pursuits: one a skilled, productive knitter and the other an accomplished spinner.

Between May 2016 and April 2017, sixteen members of the Unspun Heroes (all women) participated in semi-structured interviews using a guide that focused on how individuals became engaged in fibre arts, as well as in the Unspun Heroes group.⁷ The majority of those interviewed responded to an invitation to participate in the research that was posted on the Unspun Heroes Facebook group, though the project was discussed at both the weekly knitting sessions and the monthly laboratory sessions, and some members self-identified for the project through those discussions.⁸ Interviews were video-recorded with the intention that relevant clips could be shared in educational contexts and a short documentary profiling the group could be prepared.⁹

The researchers also engaged in participant observation at the various events held by the group over a two-year period. As the one researcher who did not have an extensive grounding in fibre arts prior to beginning the project, I also took an experiential approach to the study. During the fall of 2016, I registered for a weaving class at The Bobbin Tree and two members of the Unspun Heroes, Janet Dawson and Sandra Gillis, taught me to warp a rigid heddle loom and weave a scarf in a formal, small-group setting. Under the tutelage of Kelly,¹⁰ one of the accomplished spinners in the group, I learned to use a drop spindle (given to me by a fellow Unspun Hero) during the Christmas party in 2016. I also periodically knitted with needles or a loom at gatherings. Through this hands-on approach, I came to better understand processes and values, as well as the tools that were essential to the members' craft and their attitudes toward those tools.

Personal Tools of the Unspun Heroes

Each member of the Unspun Heroes has their own personal tools, such as spinning wheels, looms, and knitting needles that are essential to their crafts. Most own their tools, but some rent or borrow spinning wheels or looms when first learning. There is a great deal of diversity in terms of the brands and models of spinning wheels (see Table 1) and looms that are preferred by members of the group. As well, many members of the Unspun Heroes own more than one wheel

or loom, with each one suited to a particular task or set of circumstances. How they come to their chosen model(s) varies from one spinner or weaver to the next. For example, some have purchased their wheel to suit their personal needs and aesthetic preferences. Annamarie Hatcher bought an Ashford Traditional as her first spinning wheel and, while describing it, noted her brand loyalty to the New Zealand company, as well as the utilitarian nature of the wheel. She appreciated that, unlike modern wheels, it did not have plastic parts and could be easily fixed with a coat hanger. Annamarie also has a spinning wheel and drum carder that were given to her by a friend who has since passed away. As she described them, she noted the emotional connection and personal history that is carried by such objects:

You know, I have a drum carder that a friend of mine gave me. She's passed away now. Every time I use it I think about her and I know she'd really like seeing it being used. I also have one of her old wheels, which is interestingly exactly the same as this and it's about the same era. You know, this is called the Ashford Traditional, but hers has a single foot pedal, so it's just a little bit different, but I use both of them. Hers I have set up to use for larger, you know, thicker yarn. Anyway, so I think about her every time I use those two bits of equipment because she was a fibre fanatic and she, I knew her when I lived in Halifax, so she passed away about two months after I moved to Sydney. I didn't have a lot of interaction with her here, but I still meet up with her two sons. They're friends of ours. (personal communication, May 15, 2016)

In a similar fashion, Chris Thomson, who has a number of different wheels made by Ashford (Traditional and Traveller), Lendrum (original double treadle), Louet (S10 Classic), and Majacraft (Wee Peggy and Rose), as well as several looms, related the personal history associated with a jumbo flyer wheel that was given to her by a friend and neighbour of her parents (personal communication, January 15, 2017). Such pieces of equipment that are received as gifts rather than purchased, then, provide a connection to the past and serve as memory objects, while also being utilitarian.

Brand	Model	Wheel Type	Portability
Ashford	Elizabeth	“Cinderella” or Saxony wheel; wheel and flyer arranged horizontally	Fair
Ashford	E-Spinner 2	Compact, electronic spinner (no wheel or treadle)	Excellent
Ashford	Joy	Compact, modern castle wheel; components arranged vertically; folds for transport	Excellent
Ashford	Kiwi	Compact, modern castle wheel; components arranged vertically	Good
Ashford	Kiwi 2	Compact, modern castle wheel; components arranged vertically	Good
Ashford	Traditional	“Cinderella” or Saxony wheel; wheel and flyer arranged horizontally	Fair
Ashford	Traveller	Castle wheel; wheel and flyer stacked vertically	Fair
Lendrum	Original Double Treadle	Castle wheel; components arranged vertically	Good
Louet	S10 Classic	Modern wheel; components arranged vertically	Good
Majacraft	Wee Peggy	Castle wheel; components arranged vertically	Fair
Majacraft	Rose	Modern wheel; components arranged vertically; adjustable handle and head position	Excellent
Schacht	Ladybug	Compact, modern castle wheel; components arranged vertically; built in carrying handles	Good

Table 1: Spinning wheels used by members of the Unspun Heroes

It is clear, however, that portability is an important consideration for many members of the Unspun Heroes. When Sue King was first introduced to spinning via an open house held by the Unspun Heroes, she fell in love with Kelly’s Schacht Ladybug, and so she ordered one (personal communication, August 28, 2016). Donna Tatlock, after purchasing an Ashford Elizabeth and an Ashford Kiwi, also opted for greater portability when she sold the Kiwi to purchase an Ashford Joy, which folds into a backpack for easy transport (personal communication, August 11, 2016). Indeed, even Annamarie, who has an interest in more traditional wheels and the historic connection to the craft, ultimately added an Ashford Joy to her collection of spinning wheels to make participation in group events, such as the Sunday gatherings of the Unspun Heroes or the Maritime Spinners’ Retreats, easier (Hatcher, personal communication, May 15, 2016).

In relating the history of how the Unspun Heroes came to be, Annamarie Hatcher pointed to the challenge of transporting equipment:

Well it all started as all of Chris’s students and so when she decided to stop teaching we decided that we’d continue to meet, and so we all continued amongst people’s houses for a while, and that was kind of hard because we were assembling equipment, communal equipment, and it always would be the person who had it last who had to transport all this equipment to the next meeting and people’s houses are not all huge. So, sometimes, you know, that was impossible. Sometimes there wasn’t even really room for a lot of wheels, so we had to pick and choose who got to spin, and so that wasn’t great. We still do that for our Christmas party. We’ll go around to somebody’s, you know, we usually alternate amongst people’s houses. So, anyway, I ran the idea at that time past the dean of using this space [a laboratory] here at CBU [Cape Breton University] and he used to join us. So, he’d come in and have dinner with us, and talk to us about what we were spinning and that kind of thing, and it doesn’t impede any other group from using

the place. We keep our equipment at the back and we come in here usually when there are no classes that would want to use this place, you know Sundays and that kind of thing. So, that worked really well. (personal communication, May 15, 2016)

Interestingly, the desirability of portable wheels is not a recent phenomenon. As MacLeod and MacInnes describe in their book on weaving in Cape Breton, the parlour wheel became popular because “it was a very light wheel that was convenient to carry over the fields to join friends for a spinning frolic” (2014: 51). This points to a historic connection between spinning frolics of the past and the gatherings of the Unspun Heroes in the present.¹¹

Similar issues of portability for group engagement are seen in terms of looms used by weavers. Commenting on her Schacht Flip, Sandra Gillis explained,

Weaving by the whole nature of the equipment is a craft you do on your own, without a lot of people. The only time you're together is when you take courses or you go to guild. This is not a new invention, it's been around for a long time. But, it's a two-shaft loom, there's two sheds, which is what two shafts will do. And, it's portable. This thing is portable to the point where it comes off the stand and it folds in half. So, it's half that size and it has a carrying bag.



Fig. 2
Kelly and Kara spinning in the laboratory at Cape Breton University. On the left is a Schacht Ladybug (note the handles for transport) and on the right is an Ashford Kiwi 2. Both are modern wheels. Photo by author.

They make them all out of plastic and you can take them through security in your suitcase, in different sizes. This particular brand comes in three or four different sizes, this being the smallest. There are other brands that come in different sizes, the smallest one being eight inches wide. It's basically just a sampling loom. I saw this one time and I thought I would like one, so my husband gave me it for my birthday or Christmas or Mother's Day or something. Then I've been collecting all the pieces to go with it and the yarn that I need to use on it. I've had it for about three, four years now and it's great because I can bring it out. We actually have a small group of people with rigid heddle looms that gets together once a month at Janet's shop The Bobbin Tree, and weave and so, you're giving moral support and plus technical support to those who are just learning. Janet and I also teach classes on this. (personal communication, September 11, 2016)

The solitary nature of this craft has its roots in the early years of the practice. As MacLeod and MacInnes note, “looms were large and often located in attics and sheds. Hence, they were not natural gathering places” (2014: 64). Other parts of the process, such as milling the woven cloth, were more social in nature.

In addition to aesthetic preferences and issues of portability, economic considerations may also come into play when deciding which wheel or loom to purchase. Kara Thompson, for example, opted to buy a smaller, more portable Ashford wheel—the Kiwi 2—from The Bobbin Tree, but noted her dream wheel is a Schacht Ladybug (see Fig. 2). At the time of purchase, however, the Kiwi 2 was the more economical option (personal communication, July 27, 2016).

Finally, the desire to produce greater quantities of homespun as part of one's livelihood is an important consideration. Kelly, for example, who employs a drop spindle for historical accuracy in her work as a heritage interpreter, also owns two wheels: an Ashford Traditional and a Schacht Ladybug. While the Traditional is “fun to use,” it “doesn't produce as quickly as” the Ladybug does (personal communication, June 22, 2016). Since Kelly sells items made from her own homespun,

the ability to produce a quality product more quickly is important. Members of the Unspun Heroes refer to this as production spinning. Janet Dawson also has an interest in the tools and techniques that facilitate production spinning. As someone who has always had a passion for technology and is a self-professed “tool junky,” she recently purchased an Ashford E-Spinner 2, which has a built-in motor that eliminates the need for treadling (personal communication, July 17, 2016). Of course, part of Janet’s motivation for trying such a spinning device is also to be familiar with the product, since she sells it in her store. In addition to the E-Spinner, Janet owns two spinning wheels (an Ashford Traveller and a Schacht Ladybug), seven different floor looms, and a collection of rigid heddle looms from a variety of makers, including LeClerc, Schacht, Glimåkra, and Louet.

While sharing is an important central principle for members that came up in the majority of interviews, it was also clear that such sharing occurs within specific parameters. For example, one member noted that you should never spin at another person’s wheel without asking first:

“There’s also an unwritten rule that you don’t spin on somebody’s spinning wheel without their permission and I think that’s true for all spinners. ... I would invite somebody to try my spinning wheel, but I wouldn’t be really happy if they just sort of sat down and started spinning what I was spinning” (Kelly, personal communication, June 22, 2016).

Annamarie also reflected, “I don’t tend to share my wheel. I have taught various people how to spin on it and it’s okay to share it for an hour or so” (personal communication, May 15, 2016). Similarly, in her interview, Janet noted that, “For the most part, no, we don’t share needles” (personal communication, July 17, 2016).¹² Her humorous expression of this “rule” drives home the notion that some tools of the trade are considered personal items.

Smaller tools, like knitting needles or crochet hooks, may also reveal preferences related to the tactile experience of tools and fibre arts more generally, such as the feel of wood versus steel knitting needles. Likewise, preferences around the materials used in the manufacture of knit-

ting needles may be indicative of an orientation towards ecological sustainability, such as the use of bamboo needles instead of plastic (Kathy Snow, personal communication, May 2, 2019). Thus, it is clear that some tools used by fibre artists, such as spinning wheels, are deeply personal items that embody personal aesthetic and tactile preferences, as well as practical considerations, and are not normally shared.¹³

Shared Tools of the Unspun Heroes

Sharing of other, less personal tools does occur among members of the Unspun Heroes. The group owns a number of communal tools that are stored at Cape Breton University, including a picker, a drum carder, and a set of acid dyes already mixed in Mason jars. The picker and drum carder are both tools that are used to process raw fibre so that it can be spun. The picker, made for the group by a man in New Brunswick at a cost of \$200, is used first to pull open locks and clumps of fibre, turning an unprocessed fleece into a cloud-like mound of fibre (see Fig. 3). It also helps to remove larger debris that may be in the raw fibre, such as twigs, vegetable matter, or dirt. The hand-cranked drum carder, purchased new for \$700-800, is then used to align the fibres and prepare batts for spinning. Both of these tools are expensive and used with significantly less frequency than a spinning wheel, especially since many spinners purchase their fleece already processed. They also take up considerable space. By having a communal drum carder and picker,

Fig. 3

Annamarie Hatcher demonstrates how to use the picker while Sue King watches. Photo by author.



members of the Unspun Heroes have access to these valuable machines when they need them, but do not personally have to take on the financial burden or physical storage requirements associated with them.¹⁴

Both machines are used at monthly events, though the drum carder can sometimes be borrowed and used at home with the permission of members of the group. The picker, on the other hand, is considered a dangerous tool that can only be used under supervision by fellow Unspun Heroes. Kelly, while reflecting on the shared tools, commented, “The picker is a dangerous, dangerous piece of equipment. I have used it once” (personal communication, June 22, 2016). Both Kimberly and Annamarie independently described the tool as “nasty” (personal communication, September 9, 2016 and May 15, 2016), while Kara expressed fear that she would hurt herself while using the picker (personal communication, July 27, 2016). Indeed, when the picker comes up in informal conversation among members of the group, they sometimes share a story about one of the first times it was used. While distracted for a moment, one member accidentally got too close to the picker, which cut through her shirt and a tank top she was wearing underneath. While I initially thought this story might be apocryphal and a cautionary tale, the individual about whom the story is told confirmed that it happened and described the experience as a “wake up call” in terms of the danger associated with that particular tool (Janet

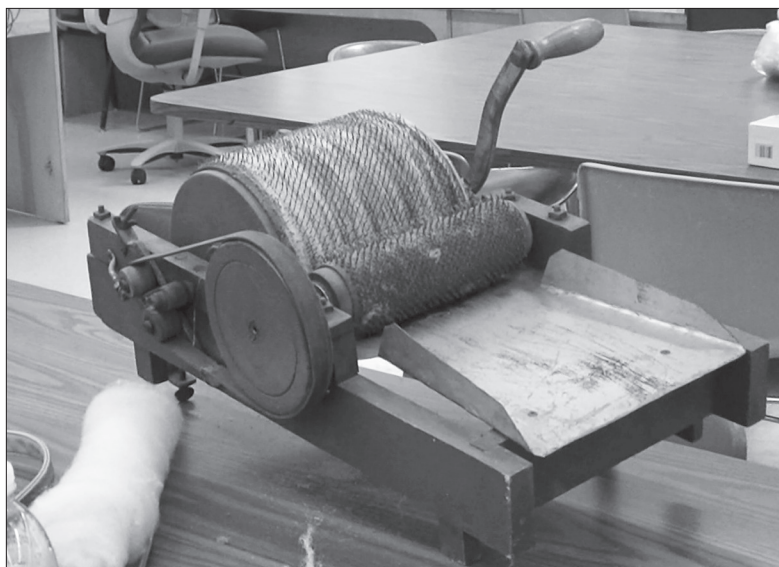
Dawson, personal communication, April 17, 2019). Thus, when the picker is not in use, it is stored with locks that prevent parts from moving and ensure it is not operated by anyone other than an Unspun Hero.

How the Unspun Heroes came to own and share these tools tells us much about the collective orientation of the group and the supportive environment they co-create. After hosting their first spinning retreat, there was a small amount of profit resulting from registration fees. With this, as well as funds raised by members selling flowering bulbs, the group was able to purchase the drum carder and picker for use by its members. As described by Janet, “They’re not the kinds of equipment that you buy when you’re just learning to spin, but they are useful to have when you’re learning to spin” (personal communication, July 17, 2016). Echoing these sentiments, Chris Thomson explained the rationale behind purchasing the shared tools: “I do think they’re important to have, because not everybody can afford that big of a purchase” (personal communication, January 15, 2017).

Another advantage is that members are able to try these tools before investing in them. Sue, for example, made significant use of the drum carder when she first joined the group because she was particularly interested in processing different fibres. Eventually, she purchased her own at a flea market (see Fig. 4). She explained:

Well, I was using the drum carder here that is shared by the community, the Unspun Hero community, and when I saw [one] at the flea market I was like, “Wow, you know, maybe I can get this old thing going.” And then I wouldn’t have to wait every two weeks or so, whenever we meet. And so I bought it and I brought it home. It was full of rust—all the tines on the carding cloth, they were all full of rust—and we ran the fleece through it and you [Annamarie Hatcher] gave me the real greasy fleece and that really took all the rust off of it. I still have to pull it apart, get up the nerve to pull it apart—I’m not mechanically inclined. I’d like to pull it apart and see if there’s any rust on the inside and see why the lick-in drum isn’t moving backwards. (Sue King, personal communication, August 28, 2016)

Fig. 4
Drum carder purchased
by Sue King at a local
flea market. Photo by
author



Similarly, the dyes used during “dirty dyeing days” at the laboratory were left over from a workshop at the retreat and are available for any member to use. Over the years, the group has also amassed a collection of other equipment, such as vegetable steamers, equine syringes, pots, and buckets, which are used in dyeing. As Annamarie noted, “Often people, if they have one excess, they’ll bring it in, store it with all our communal stuff” (personal communication, May 15, 2016). Members of the group also share small tools that they own, such as ball winders, hand carders, and swifts.¹⁵ They bring these items to the Sunday gatherings to accomplish their own goals and share them with others who are present. They may also bring a tool specifically at the request of another member, as when Kelly brought a blending board for Kara to try (see Fig. 5). In some cases, sharing also extends to fibre. If a member has a new or unusual fibre that they think others might also like to try, such as alpaca, they often bring it to a gathering to distribute. In some cases, experienced spinners who have a “stash” of fibre that has built up over time will share it with new spinners as a way to de-stash fibre or unprocessed fleece.¹⁶ Thus, resources are redistributed amongst members, thereby benefitting individual members, as well as the group as a whole.

Repurposed Tools

In addition to sharing the larger shared tools that are owned by the group, members of the Unspun Heroes also repurpose tools and equipment to achieve their artistic goals. For example, on dyeing days at the laboratory, vegetable steamers purchased by individuals from a local second-hand shop are used to heat set the dyed fibre or skeins. While some members pour dye straight from the jars, others use equine syringes purchased by individuals at a local country store to achieve a more controlled application of colour. Squeeze bottles used for hair dye are similarly employed. Used at monthly events, these individually-purchased, shared tools are stored with the picker and drum carder and are available for use by any member.

At home, some members of the Unspun Heroes have experimented with Wilton gel food

colouring¹⁷ and Kool-Aid drink crystals to dye fibre, using their microwaves to heat set the colour. This method has a number of advantages, including the ease of use and clean-up in a home setting compared to other commercial dyes. As well, it is an inexpensive and accessible option for small dye batches, and a safer, non-toxic option for the home.

Along with these repurposed tools and materials, members also repurpose other everyday items. Placemats from a discount store serve as packing materials when warping a loom, Velcro straps or nylon loops may be used on looms to hold rods against beams, and, in a pinch, a paper clip can be used as an orifice hook on a spinning wheel. Again, this creative problem-solving and make-do attitude harkens back to the early years of fibre processing, spinning, and weaving in Cape Breton, as described by MacLeod and MacInnes (2014).

DIY Tools

Along with the sharing of expensive and/or bulky tools and repurposing other equipment to practice their chosen fibre arts, some members of the Unspun Heroes also construct their own tools. This is in keeping with the re-emerging DIY (do-it-yourself) culture and ethos that has been enabled by maker-focused social media, such as Pinterest and YouTube; however, it also recalls similar processes in the emergence of fibre traditions in Cape Breton (discussed below).

Fig. 5

Blending board used to mix and layer fibres to produce custom blends that achieve aesthetic effects once spun. Photo by author.



At the time of her interview, Kara Thompson was a novice spinner who had not yet amassed a collection of spinning tools and accessories. After spinning and plying her first batch of fibre, she required a niddy noddly on which to wind her first skein so that she could free up her bobbin and continue spinning. While she wanted an Ashford niddy noddly, at the time she could not afford the specific model that she wanted. A librarian, she turned to Google and located instructions online for a niddy noddly made of PVC plumbing pipe (see Roush n.d).¹⁸ She went to a local hardware store and, finding that the plumbing pipe was unavailable, purchased electrical conduit instead. After cutting the pieces and assembling it, she decorated the edges with washi tape (see Fig. 6). She explained:

I wanted a niddy-noddy. I really want a good one, but I just wanted something because it was just that first stuff that I had spun. It wasn't anything special, but I had to get it off the bobbin so I could spin something new and I went online and I just didn't want to spend seventy bucks, so I found a pattern. It was actually for plumbing pipe, but they don't sell plastic plumbing pipe anymore, so the guy at Home Depot suggested electrical conduit, so that's what I used. (personal communication, July 27, 2016)

Her inexpensive solution impressed other members of the Unspun Heroes, who noted that,

not only did her niddy noddly fold flat, but it could also be taken apart, which they thought would be good for travel. While Kara certainly could have borrowed a niddy noddly from another member of the group, she felt a sense of pride in solving the problem without having to borrow a tool that others would use with greater frequency.

This same Unspun Hero at the time of this study was planning to make a blending board. While she had borrowed one from another member of the group, she preferred to have her own, but she also knew that she would not use it all that often. She decided she would purchase a piece of blending board cloth and have a wood-working colleague cut and finish an appropriate sized board for it. The advantage to this DIY project was that she would be able to customize the design of the blending board in terms of shape and size, and it could be achieved at about forty per cent of the cost for a commercially available blending board.

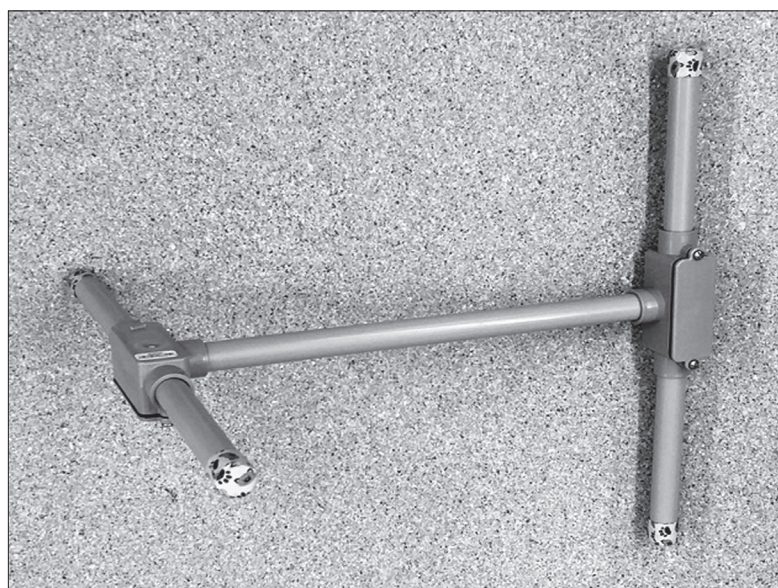
Fibre artist Kari Fell, who joined the Unspun Heroes early in 2018 as this research project was concluding, also employs a number of DIY solutions in her weaving. To facilitate tablet weaving, she has attached two different drawer pulls to a 3-foot length of 1x5 pine. She also constructed a warp-weighted tablet weaving loom from a breakfast tray, fruit box, and bolts (personal communication, May 3, 2019).

Additionally, while no one in the group has yet tested it, there has been a great deal of discussion among members of the Unspun Heroes around the possibility of 3D printing items, such as additional bobbins, especially for antique wheels.¹⁹ Underpinning all of these endeavours is an orientation toward resourcefulness and creative problem-solving.

An Attitude of and Orientation Toward Resourcefulness

In rural and relatively remote areas like Cape Breton, it is not uncommon to encounter a prevailing attitude of resourcefulness. This partly emerges from historical necessity to make do with the available resources, but continues in the present as local economies and geographic isolation impact access to products and services. There are few specialized vendors locally—The Bobbin

Fig. 6
Niddy noddly made by Kara Thompson from electrical conduit. Photo by author.



Tree being a notable exception—and while those vendors serve the fibre arts community, they face limitations in terms of the items they can stock. Consequently, purchasing larger tools and machines—or specific makes and models of the same—may require a special order. Additionally, given the island location, shipping costs may be higher and the time required to procure an item may be greater (in some cases, significantly). Certainly, this geographic factor does not necessarily impede the practice of fibre arts, but it can constrain the practice.

Also significant is the economic context of Cape Breton Island, an economically depressed area of Nova Scotia. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the area referred to as Industrial Cape Breton relied on coal mining and steel fabrication as primary economic drivers. As the island transitions to a post-industrial economy, it faces high unemployment and poverty rates. Living in such a context fosters particular attitudes towards money and how to spend it wisely. There are some members of the group who cannot afford, or *choose* not to afford, the investment required to purchase all of the tools and equipment necessary to process fibre. Most members seem willing to invest in sophisticated machines that will be used frequently and are central to their craft, such as spinning wheels, which require expertise to construct given the mechanics at play and the careful balance of the wheel that must be achieved for it to function correctly. Some members are less willing to invest in tools that will be used infrequently and are less central to their craft. It is more practical and economical, then, to share a drum carder or picker. Tools such as blending boards that are less sophisticated in design may be constructed by fibre artists because they are easier to replicate via DIY processes.

There is a historical connection to be found for such DIY approaches. When settlers came from Scotland to what is now known as Cape Breton, they brought with them spinning wheels and looms, but constructed or otherwise acquired additional equipment once they arrived. For example, MacLeod and MacInnes note that, “the most common wool winder in early Cape Breton was made from the stump of a tree or a block of wood. Three or four arms of wood were attached to the centre of the stumps and a peg was placed at the end of each crosspiece. The

yarn was wound onto the pegs and then twisted into a skein” (2014: 48; see also Hatcher 2018). Modern technology has enabled contemporary approaches for the DIY orientation of Cape Breton fibre artists. Almost all members of the Unspun Heroes are “connected” and engage in the online environment. Some purchase supplies and equipment from online retailers, while others access guides and resources (blogs, videos, etc) via a variety of social media channels and websites. Thus, technology facilitates access to the means required to produce fibre arts products, including the knowledge required for DIY responses to challenges, and enables creative expression.

The Unspun Heroes, then, employ a number of strategies to engage in their chosen fibre arts within current geographic, economic, and technological contexts. Sharing tools and equipment makes the means of production accessible to all members of the group, regardless of personal economic status. This sharing includes both communally-owned items and contributions by individuals, resulting in a “potluck” of tools, fibre, and other resources. By repurposing accessible, everyday items, members are able to achieve their goals without purchasing additional specialized equipment. This is an economical and practical approach to a very technical and labour-intensive production process. Finally, the DIY approach employed by some members enables independent access to necessary tools and engenders a sense of pride and resourcefulness in one’s own creativity and innovation.²⁰

Motivations of the Unspun Heroes

Though the focus of this study has largely been the communally-owned tools of the Unspun Heroes, access to such tools should not be misinterpreted as a primary motivation for membership in the group. It is more a consequence of other motivations coalescing with the particular membership of the group. As Jones has observed, the reasons for making art are diverse and, though they are often considered in isolation, “many are present in a particular instance of art making” (1995: 271). Gatherings of the Unspun Heroes are primarily social, but often involve learning of some sort. As Diane Harris, a knitter who attends the weekly gatherings, said of the Unspun

Heroes, “for me its purpose was initially social and that’s anything but that now, because I’ve seen too many things that I need to learn. So, it’s educational and it’s filling its role quite nicely” (personal communication, April 20, 2017). An accomplished knitter, Diane’s Aran knitting is in the Nova Scotia Art Bank, but her reflection on the group as a social-learning outlet highlights a common value among members for life-long learning. In a similar fashion, Donna Tatlock reflected, “I think everybody’s teaching something to somebody” (personal communication, August 11, 2016) and Shelly Lee commented, “I just don’t want to stop learning” (personal communication, September 11, 2016).

Lianne Comeau, a knitter who was introduced to weaving through the group, explained that she has learned not only new techniques through the group, such as knitting socks with two circular needles (instead of four double-pointed needles), but the processes behind preparing, dyeing, and spinning fibre. Consequently, she has a greater appreciation for homespun and better understands why it costs more to purchase than other yarns (personal communication, July 2, 2016). Sue King elaborated on how social learning works better for her in terms of a learning style: “I could never read a book. It just doesn’t stick in my head, ... but when I see it being done, it’s like, oh yeah, I can do that” (personal communication, August 28, 2016). She sees the primary function of the group as providing a space for social “learning and mentoring” that occurs in a face-to-face situation. Such learning and mentoring is captured through the concept of sharing that emerged throughout interviews.

Related to this, the group provides an outlet for challenging oneself. As Kimberly explained,

Being with the Unspun Heroes encourages me to try new things, because when you see somebody doing something new, you wonder, “Oh, how does that work? I think I’ll try that.” ... The Wilton cake dyes – that wasn’t something I learned off the internet; that was because of a spinning gathering. So, they encourage me to try new things. Try lace knitting, which I’ve done. I made a scarf. (personal communication, September 13, 2016)

Thus, not only do members of the Unspun Heroes provide learning opportunities for each other, but they also inspire one another to challenge themselves and try new things. This is reflected in the interviews, as many members when asked who inspires them pointed to other members of the group who have particular skill sets or talents.

Another important motivator for membership in the Unspun Heroes is the space it creates for structured social time. The gatherings are seen to enable productivity that is not always possible at home. As Kimberly explained, “I don’t know if it’s like this for everybody else, but for me sometimes I can’t get any spinning done unless I go to spinning gatherings. So, I want to spin and I have an excuse to spin and just do that. It’s productivity and a chance to engage in my hobby” (Charron, personal communication, September 13, 2016). Donna agreed, noting that “It’s fun to get out and do some spinning, where if I’m at home there’s always something else to do. I don’t usually take out the spinning wheel, so this is really the only time I get to spin” (Tatlock, personal communication, August 11, 2016). With busy lives, filled with work and family commitments, it can be difficult to find time to engage in one’s hobby. The Unspun Heroes provides a space for that, and enables members to feel good about their productivity, while also enjoying the social aspect of the group. This orientation toward productive social time recalls the working social frolics of the past. As MacLeod and MacInnes point out, “for most of its history, weaving was work, but ... many associated activities could be done communally, including shearing, washing, carding wool, spinning and dyeing” (2014: 68).

Interestingly, it was noted that these social events are good for particular types of projects and not others. Diane explained, “One knitting piece that I’m doing cannot be done in public, so when I go out with you guys I have to take something that doesn’t take so much concentration” (Harris, personal communication, April 20, 2017). Kelly noted that, “Once you know how to spin, there’s not a lot that can go wrong” (personal communication, June 22, 2016). Spinning, then, is an activity during which you can easily engage in a social conversation without risking mistakes in your work. These comments highlight the

importance for members of balancing productivity and social engagement.

While social engagement, productivity, and informal learning are important motivators for members of the Unspun Heroes, the gatherings and the fibre arts that occur there are important means of relaxation for some members. Kelly observed that spinning has an almost meditative quality: “It’s just really soothing, it’s very gentle, it’s very rhythmic, and I find it sort of very comforting to be able to do it” (personal communication, June 22, 2016). Whether done alone in the home or in the context of a larger group, it has the effect of relaxing her. Similarly, Mary²¹ observed that knitting with the Unspun Heroes takes her away from everyday stresses:

I think for me, it’s just an outlet to kind of remove myself from my everyday routine of where I find that, even these days, I’m so saturated with chemistry and how the chemistry has to work, and expectations, and short deadlines. With Unspun Heroes and getting together with all of the fibre arts people, if there’s a mistake in a project, it’s such a small, minute thing and it just becomes something that’s either really humorous or it’s something that’s easily shared by everyone, but the frustration I guess is contained within just that session or in that small moment. You’re not consumed by it, it’s a different type of stress or pressure. That’s how it’s relaxing, because it’s frustrating, but it’s not. (personal communication, February 8, 2017)

This recalls Jones’ observation that “emotional therapy” maybe “both a motivation for and a consequence of making art” (1995: 268).

The motivations of the Unspun Heroes, as described above, echo what is found in the literature around fibre arts and knitting in particular. Indeed, a parallel might be drawn to the concept of “serious leisure” (Stalp and Conti, 2011). Members of the Unspun Heroes engage in their fibre arts for relaxation, enjoyment, and satisfaction, as described in King’s study (2001). They enjoy engaging in a communal activity that has a link to the past and they take great pride in their output—motivations identified in a study by Prigoda and McKenzie (2007). Further, many of the members identify as life-long learners and see the Unspun Heroes as a means of continually

learning new techniques and strategies. Further, the multiple, often overlapping motivations to engage in fibre arts as members of the Unspun Heroes mirror those of art making more generally (Jones 1995: 271).

The DIY and maker literature specifically, however, often draws associations between activities such as knitting with anti-capitalism, resistance to mass production, and environmentalism (see, for example, Pentney 2018; Winge and Stalp 2014; Farinosi and Fortunati 2012; Bratich and Brush 2011; Dawkins 2011; Williams 2011). Such “craftivism” does not fully resonate with the Unspun Heroes.²² Members are certainly socially aware and willing to contribute to initiatives, as demonstrated by their participation in events such as 25,000 Tuques, but this political activism is not the foundation of their participation, nor was it emphasized in interviews.

In addition to the social, educational, and wellness motivations described above, it is also important to consider the possible economic motivations for engagement in fibre arts. During the second half of the 20th century, as the industrial-based economy weakened in Cape Breton, tourism and craft industries were targeted as an opportunity for economic development. Donna Tatlock, for example, has a loom as a result of an economic development initiative of Enterprise Cape Breton Corporation (ECBC).²³ To develop the craft industry in the area, ECBC provided grants to help artisans purchase equipment. Her mother-in-law purchased a knitting machine and worked for a local company that produced sweaters. Donna used her grant to purchase a 60-inch LeClerc Colonial loom and has sold some of her work to supplement her income (personal communication, August 11, 2016).

Two of the Unspun Heroes participated in a craft cooperative located at the cruise pavilion with other artisans. Chris Thomson explained,

We all got together and we rented a kiosk at the cruise ship terminal and called ourselves Mixed Media Artisans Cooperative and we did that for several years. And that was great. We did well. We didn’t do well enough to pay ourselves to be there. We had lots of fun, met a lot of people, and sold enough to keep us going, but not enough to pay ourselves a wage to be in the shop. But, you know, I justify it by, okay, I can sit out

and spin when there's nobody here, and Janet [Dawson] did the same with her little portable loom. (personal communication, January 15, 2017)

Eventually, however, the group disbanded and moved on to other endeavours. Chris, for example, started a new job at the local library, while Janet pursued a storefront.

Several of the weavers in the Unspun Heroes, Janet, Chris, and Donna included, now collaborate during the Christmas season to sell their products with other members of the Sydney Weavers Guild at local sales, such as the Deck the Halls Christmas Craft Market held at St. Patrick's Church Museum. Sandra Gillis, who sells her work year-round at the Bobbin Tree, is also part of this group, but when asked about her motivation, she explained that she sells "just so [she] can buy more yarn" (personal communication, September 11, 2016). It can be difficult in Sydney to sell items at a price point that reflects not only the cost of materials, but also the hours of labour required to produce the item, as individuals in the local market may not have adequate disposable income (uncommon in rural communities with limited industries and high unemployment rates²⁴) or understand the production processes that add value to handspun and handmade products (as described by Lianne Comeau above). Consequently, many fibre artists sell their work either as a supplement to their income or to further enable their hobby.

A notable exception is Kelly, who sells her work on consignment at a shop along the Cabot Trail, which is particularly popular with American tourists. While she is generally able to sell her work at a fair price in this location, her ability to profit is limited by how much she can produce, given the time-consuming process of spinning wool or other fibres, and then knitting items with that homespun. She explained, "I sell at one location. I can only produce enough, my mother and I can only produce enough, to really sell at one location. We don't have a huge supply because it takes time" (personal communication, June 22, 2016).

While it cannot be denied, then, that there are economic motivations for some members of the Unspun Heroes to engage in fibre arts and participate in the group, as some members of the

group sell what they produce, such motivations appear to rank behind those of relaxation, social engagement, inspiration, and life-long learning.

Innovation and Entrepreneurial Ethos: Crafting a Fibre Scene

The Unspun Heroes take practical and pragmatic approaches to enable their engagement in fibre arts, regardless of the specific motivation driving each individual's participation. With an ever-changing, self-selecting membership, the Unspun Heroes is amorphous in nature. Nevertheless, together, the Unspun Heroes are co-creating "a scene, forming a network of people, places, and events that [allow] them to create, to belong, and to be heard" (Pierce 2009: 1). In the study of music, a scene is a "cultural space in which a range of ... practices coexist, interacting with each other in a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization" (Straw 1991: 373).²⁵ As Straw has refined the notion of scene, he has described it as the "assemblage which gathers around a particular ... 'object' (a style, a genre) and names the people, places, technologies and activities which sustain this ... 'object'" (2017). Fibre arts, then, might be thought of as the creative expression around which the Unspun Heroes gather, while the laboratory at the local university, The Bobbin Tree, the restaurant-lounge of a local hotel, and the public library (among others) are the places that sustain it. Among the activities that sustain fibre arts are smaller and larger local and regional gatherings, while shared, repurposed, and DIY tools and other technologies sustain and advance fibre artists' practices.²⁶

This fibre scene is characterized by collaboration, resourcefulness, and redistribution. While access to the tools necessary to engage in fibre arts may be limited by economic and geographic forces, new technology and entrepreneurial attitudes ameliorate such forces. For the Unspun Heroes, sharing tools makes the means of production accessible to all members of the group, regardless of personal economic status or proximity to retailers. Repurposed tools enable members to achieve their creative goals without purchasing additional specialized equipment. DIY tools enable independent access to tools and

engender a sense of pride. The resourcefulness displayed in these approaches ties to the broader history of fibre arts in Cape Breton. Moreover, these processes demonstrate that the Unspun Heroes are actively crafting a scene that supports creative expression through fibre arts in Cape Breton. The supportive network of people, places, technologies, and events fosters an effervescent space within which those engaged not only learn from one another, but also challenge one another, thereby sparking creativity and driving innovation.

Notes

1. A cottage industry is a home-based, small-scale, manufacturing business.
2. This article is based on data collected through the collaborative project “Communities of Practice, Material Culture, and Life History: Fibre Arts in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia” conducted by Janice Esther Tulk, Annamarie Hatcher, and Kathy Snow between 2016 and 2018. The research project was supported by a Cape Breton University Research Policy (RP) Grant awarded in 2017. An earlier version of this paper was presented by Janice Esther Tulk at the *Cloth Cultures: Future Legacies of Dorothy K. Burnham* conference held by the Royal Ontario Museum in November 2017 and the Folklore Studies Association of Canada annual conference held at Memorial University in May 2019. Thank you to Annamarie Hatcher and Kathy Snow, and members of the Unspun Heroes, for their feedback on earlier versions of this article.
3. A knit-along is when a group of knitters gather to knit the same pattern at their own pace. In the process, they are able to receive mentorship from other participants and the leader, though it is not a formal instructional class. The projects can vary and the gatherings are sometimes named for the project, such as sock-along or shawl-along.
4. Accurate as of October 1, 2018.
5. During the course of the research project, I did complete the scarf—an accomplishment that was celebrated by members of the Unspun Heroes.
6. For more information about this event, see Shannon 2016.
7. Though there are three members of the Unspun Heroes who identify as male, only female members responded to the invitation to participate in the research project. Because members of the research team were also members of the Unspun Heroes, they each participated in a recorded interview. For the purposes of this paper, the interviews with Janice Esther Tulk and Kathy Snow are not included in the analysis. However, the interview with Annamarie Hatcher is included, given that she is a founding member of the group who holds significant knowledge about the group’s formation and evolution through time.
8. As part of the interview process, a contact map was employed to conduct social network analysis, an interest of one of the co-investigators. As well, a survey was developed and deployed at the Maritime Spinners Retreat in October 2016 in an effort to determine whether and how the emergent data from interviews with the Unspun Heroes might be representative of broader trends. Designed to inform the broader research project, this data is not included in the present study.
9. This initiative is still ongoing.
10. Note that while most members of the Unspun Heroes chose to be referred to by their full names, two chose to use pseudonyms and thus are called Kelly and Mary respectively throughout.
11. A more deliberate investigation of the connections between spinning frolics of the past and modern spinning gatherings, as touched upon in Hatcher (2018), may be a productive line of inquiry in the future.
12. It is not lost on the author that this expression is more often used in relation to illegal drug use. Indeed, the language of addiction is common among fibre artists in relation to their craft and their stash-building. An examination of such language is, however, outside the scope of the present investigation.

13. One area for future study might be a more detailed investigation of personal preferences for various brands of spinning wheels and looms, and of brand loyalty.
14. It should be noted that occasionally used equipment is available at very affordable prices. Sue King, for example, purchased an old drum carder at the flea market for \$15 and refurbished it.
15. A ball winder is a small, hand-cranked mechanism for winding wool into a ball. Hand carders are hand-held paddles covered with carding cloth, which has small wire bristles for aligning fibres. A swift is used to hold a skein of yarn while it is being wound.
16. SABLE is a common acronym among spinners. It stands for stash acquisition beyond life expectancy.
17. Sold as Wilton Icing Colors.
18. Tutorials can be found on the Internet to fashion almost every tool and piece of equipment imaginable, and the DIY solutions available vary in difficulty and investment required. A nostepinne, a traditional tool to make a centre-pull ball for plying, can be made from a rolled up piece of paper or a cardboard tube (Jessyz 2010), while a swift (a tool used to wind skeins of yarn) can be constructed from a lazy Susan and an accordion-folding wine rack (Rudder). It is even possible to craft a drop spindle from an empty CD spindle (though it is unclear how well balanced it might be), recycled CDs and a dowel (Merrow 2016), or a chopstick and some polymer clay (see Culturespy [n.d]).
19. The innovation around tools is boundless. At a Maritime Spinners Retreat in 2018, Annamarie Hatcher saw a spinner winding a bobbin with a drill, thereby significantly reducing the labour (treading) and time required.
20. A similar ethos is observed in Sanchini's study of tomato canning by Montreal Italians, where she describes a "homemade device [. . .] from a clothes dryer motor and a light switch in a MacGyverian attempt at saving money" that is used to process tomatoes (2014).
21. See note 10.
22. The term craftivism was coined by author and maker Betsy Greer in 2003, who established an online space to promote the relationship between activism and craft (see <http://craftivism.com/>), and was further popularized by Sarah Corbett, an activist who founded the Craftivist Collective (see <https://craftivist-collective.com/>). Pace (2007) uses a similar concept of "knitivism" to describe activism through knitting. See also Stannard and Sanders 2015.
23. ECBC was a Crown development corporation focused on Cape Breton Island. In 2014, operations ceased and were divided between the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) and Public Works and Government Services Canada. For more on various economic development initiatives related to fibre arts in Cape Breton, see Holton and Thorvaldsson (1979); MacLeod and MacInnes (2014: 85, 111-12); Langford (2017); and Childs-Rolls (2018).
24. According to the Labour Force Survey, in May 2019, the unemployment rate for Cape Breton was 13.8 per cent in comparison to the national rate of 5.4 per cent (Statistics Canada, 2019).
25. Throughout this section, I am deliberately removing the references to music within the discussion of scene to emphasize the applicability of the concept in other expressive realms.
26. MacLeod and MacInnes would likely characterize the Unspun Heroes as a "recreational craft circle," a term the pair applied in their book *Celtic Threads* to other groups in Cape Breton, such as the Mabou Weavers (better known as the Lake Ainslie Weavers and Craft Guild) or the South Haven Guild of Weavers, Spinners, and Dyers (2014: 113-26). Such a label, however, does not account for the complexity of these groups, the professional output of their members, or their functions beyond recreation. Another means of characterizing this group could be as a community of practice, which emphasizes the shared learning element of the Unspun Heroes. This concept was first introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991) to describe the social learning that occurs in some occupational settings, for example through apprenticeship. It emphasizes practice within a shared domain of interest which results in social learning (whether intentional or not). An exploration of this concept in relation to adult learning within the Unspun Heroes is currently being led by Kathy Snow.

References

- Bratich, Jack Z. and Heidi M. Brush. 2011. Fabricating Activism: Craft-Work, Popular Culture, Gender. *Utopian Studies* 22 (2): 233-60.
- Burnham, Dorothy K. 1950. *Fibres, Spindles and Spinning Wheels*. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology.
- Burnham, Dorothy K. 1981. *The Comfortable Arts: Traditional Spinning and Weaving in Canada*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada.
- Burnham, Dorothy K. and Harold B. Burnham. 1972. "Keep Me Warm One Night": Early Handweaving in Eastern Canada. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Buszek, Maria Elena and Kirsty Robertson. 2011. Introduction. *Utopian Studies* 22 (2): 197-200.
- Childs-Rolls, Vanessa. 2018. Sheep Farming Doesn't Take Off in Cape Breton as Expected. *Cape Breton Post*. 25 August. <https://www.capebretonpost.com/community/vanessa-childs-rolls-sheep-farming-doesnt-take-off-in-cape-breton-as-expected-235764/> (accessed April 22, 2019).
- Culturespy. n.d. Make an Awesome Drop Spindle. <http://www.instructables.com/id/Make-An-Awesome-Drop-Spindle/> (accessed November 2, 2018).
- Dawkins, Nicole. 2011. Do-It-Yourself: The Precarious Work and Postfeminist Politics of Handmaking (in) Detroit. *Utopian Studies* 22 (2): 261-84.
- Farinosi, Manuela and Leopoldina Fortunati. 2012. The Role of the Internet in the Urban Knitting Movement. Prato CIRN Community Informatics Conference. Unpublished paper. <http://ccnr.infotech.monash.edu/conferences-workshops/prato2012papers.html> (accessed October 11, 2017).
- Hatcher, Annamarie. 2018. Scottish Spinning Traditions in Cape Breton. *Spin Off: The Art & Craft of Spinning Yarn*. Winter. <http://www.interweave.com/store/spin-off-winter-2018-digital-edition> (accessed April 29, 2019).
- Holton, Tomas and Thrainn Thorvaldsson. 1979. Study: The Potential of Developing a Woolen Industry on Cape Breton Island. Prepared for the Cape Breton Development Corporation. https://ecitydoc.com/download/study-the-potential-of-developing-a-woolen-industry_pdf (accessed April 22, 2019).
- Jessyz. 2010. My Creative Space: Make a Nostepinne. 19 August. <http://www.chocolatem-intsinajar.com/craft/2010/08/make-a-nostepinne/> (accessed November 2, 2018).
- Jones, Michael Owen. 1995. Why Make (Folk) Art? *Western Folklore* 54 (4): 253-76.
- King, Faye Lynn. 2001. Social Dynamics of Quilting. *World Leisure Journal* 43 (2): 26-29.
- Langford, Will. 2017. Trans-Atlantic Sheep, Regional Development, and the Cape Breton Development Corporation, 1972-1982. *Acadiensis* 46 (1): 24-48.
- Lave, Jean and Etienne Wagner. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mackley, Florence MacDonald. 1967. *Handweaving in Cape Breton*. Self-published.
- MacLeod, Eveline and Daniel W. MacInnes. 2014. *Celtic Threads: A Journey in Cape Breton Crafts*. Sydney: CBU Press.
- Marrow, Anne. 2016. How to Make a Drop Spindle. 23 November. <https://www.interweave.com/article/spinning/how-to-make-a-drop-spindle/> (accessed November 2, 2018).
- Orton-Johnson, Kate. 2014. Knit, Purl and Upload: New Technologies, Digital Mediations and the Experience of Leisure. *Leisure Studies* 33 (3): 305-21.
- Pace, Lisa A. 2007. *Changing the World One Stitch at a Time: Knitting as a Means of Social and Political Action*. MA thesis, University of Akron.
- Pentney, Beth Ann. 2018. Feminism, Activism, and Knitting: Are the Fibre Arts a Viable Mode for Feminist Political Action? *thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory & Culture* 8 (1). <http://journals.sfu.ca/thirdspace/index.php/journal/article/viewArticle/pentney/210/>.

- Pierce, Leslie. 2009. *Making A Scene: An Ethnography Of Participation in the St. John's Independent Rock Music Scene, Circa 1985 To 1995*. MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Prigoda, Elena and Pamela J. McKenzie. 2007. Purls of Wisdom: A Collectivist Study of Human Information Behaviour in a Public Library Knitting Group. *Journal of Documentation* 63 (1): 90-114.
- Proeller, Marie Luise. 1996. Needlework. In *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jan Harold Brunvand, 1059-64. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Roush, Rebecca. n.d. How to Make a Niddy Noddy. <https://www.allfreeknitting.com/video-basics/how-to-make-a-niddy-noddy> (accessed November 2, 2018).
- Rudder, Sarah. n.d. DIY Yarn Swift and Ball Winder. <http://blog.sarahrudder.com/diy-yarn-swift-and-ball-winder> (accessed November 2, 2018).
- Sanchini, Laura. 2014. I've Been to Italy and They Don't Do This. *Digest: A Journal of Foodways & Culture* 3 (2). http://digest.champlain.edu/vol3_issue2/article3_2_2.html.
- Shannon, Chris. 2016. Knitting for a 'Warm Welcome' to Canada. *Cape Breton Post*. 16 Jan. <https://www.capebretonpost.com/news/local/knitting-for-a-warm-welcome-to-canada-10976/> (accessed November 2, 2018).
- Stalp, Marybeth C. and Rachel Conti. 2011. Serious Leisure in the Home: Professional Quilters Negotiate Family Space. *Gender, Work and Organization* 18 (4): 399-414.
- Stannard, Casey R. and Eulanda A. Sanders. 2015. Motivations for Participation in Knitting Among Young Women. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 33 (2): 99-114.
- Statistics Canada. 2019. Labour Force Survey, May 2019. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/190607/dq190607a-eng.pdf?st=j9-3iwod> (accessed September 27, 2019).
- Straw, Will. 1991. Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music. *Cultural Studies* 5: 368-88.
- Straw, Will. 2017. Interview. *Musicalist: Research revolving around music and crossing other disciplines*. 1 January. <https://musicalist.hypotheses.org/437> (accessed April 22, 2019).
- Williams, Kristen A. 2017. "Old Time Mem'ry": Contemporary Urban Craftivism and the Politics of Doing-It-Yourself in Postindustrial America. *Utopian Studies* 22 (2): 303-20.
- Winge, Theresa M. and Marybeth C. Stalp. 2014. Virtually Crafting Communities: An Exploration of Fiber and Textile Crafting Online Communities. *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/889/> (accessed April 22, 2019).