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Abstract: This paper explores the devaluation and recent revitalization efforts of local sheep wool in the Czech and Slovak Republic, where wool has become a waste due to economic and structural changes in the agricultural and textile sector especially after 1992. Through an interdisciplinary and (post)qualitative approach combining interviews, observation, and theoretical insights from posthumanism, ecofeminism and Actor-Network Theory the study analyzes initiatives that bridge eco sheep farming with arts and crafts. Through three case studies – the Kubák Weaving mill, the multispecies art practice of Kateřina Žák Konvalinová, and the Slovak initiative Naša Vlna – the article analyzes how human, and nonhuman actors collaborate to build alternative wool communities, economies and values. The research examines wool's potential as a transformative material within ecological, social, and cultural contexts. This study aims to uncover strategies that are still in the infancy, but they re-establish wool's value in sustainable production chains, promote community building, and foster innovative practices.

Keywords: Czech and Slovak sheep wool, art, craft, value chain, posthumanism, community economy, multispecies agency

Highlights

- Analyzes the economic and cultural decline of Czech and Slovak wool.
 - Investigates interdisciplinary projects that blend eco sheep farming with artistic practices.
 - Showcases local designers, mills, and artists who use Czech and Slovak wool in innovative ways.
 - Applies posthumanist and ecofeminist theories to view wool and sheep as agents in human-animal relationships.
 - Suggests ways to restore wool's value, support local economies, and build resilient communities.
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1. Introduction

Across Europe, local sheep wool has undergone a dramatic devaluation over the past few decades. Once central to rural economies and craft traditions, wool has increasingly been rendered a waste product – discarded, underpriced, or overshadowed by synthetic fibres and global merino markets (Klepp & Tobiasson, 2022; Vičiūnaitė, 2020). Scholars have identified this paradox as emblematic of deeper structural contradictions in rural development, environmental sustainability, and material culture (Lennon, 2017; Winter, 2003). While a growing body of literature addresses regional textile economies, sustainable fashion, and posthumanist design, little empirical attention has been paid to local wool revalorization, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.

In Czechia and Slovakia, this marginalization is acutely visible. Since the early 1990s, the withdrawal of state support, privatization of industry, and structural preference for imported wool have left domestic wool with little economic or cultural standing (Horák, 2011; Postrellová, 2024). Yet alongside this erosion, new grassroots efforts have emerged – led by artists, farmers, designers, and weavers – seeking to restore local wool's significance not only as a resource, but as a relational, ethical, and ecological medium.

The study positions wool not merely as a substance but as a situated actor embedded in networks of meaning, labor, and affect. Drawing on posthumanist and ecofeminist theory, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), and community economy approaches, it explores the material, cultural, and ethical dynamics at play in reimagining wool's (and human and animal) worth under post-socialist conditions.

The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How do artistic and community practices in Czechia and Slovakia revalue local sheep wool, restoring its significance as both a socio-material resource and a medium of care, connection, and ecological imagination?

Methodologically, the study employs a (post)qualitative approach centered on three case studies with ethnographic strategies: the historical Kubák Weaving mill, the multispecies artistic practice of Kateřina Žák Konvalinová, and the grassroots Slovak initiative Naša Vlňa. Fieldwork included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and sensory ethnography across multiple sites during 2024.²

2. Theoretical Framework: Posthumanism, Ecofeminism, Actor-Network Theory, Localized Embeddedness, and Community Economies

This study applies posthumanist and ecofeminist perspectives and it also draws on Actor-Network Theory (ANT), sustainable fashion research, and community economy concepts to show how wool operates not just as material but as an agent within socio-material networks.

2.1 Posthumanist Perspectives: Wool as an Active Material

Posthumanism and ecofeminism challenge anthropocentric hierarchies by recognizing the agency of non-human entities (Haraway, 2016; Wolfe, 2010; Braidotti, 2013; Braidotti, 2019). In this study, wool is not merely a passive byproduct but an active participant in socio-ecological systems. Haraway's (2008) concept of "becoming-with" highlights how wool carries the history of political decisions, sheep breeding, ecological conditions, and human craftsmanship, shaping both economic and artistic practices. Barad's (2007) theory of material agency further supports this argument, emphasizing how the properties of wool – such as insulation, texture, and durability – dictate the methods and technologies used in its transformation. This study illustrates how wool mediates relationships between humans, animals, and machines, making alternative to global and capitalistic production systems.

2.2 Actor-Network Theory: The Dynamics of Wool Networks

Building on Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005; Law, 1992), this study examines the interplay between human and non-human actors in the Czech and Slovak wool industry. ANT provides a framework to analyze how wool, sheep, machinery, farmers, designers, and policy regulations form interconnected networks that influence the production and utilization of wool. By recognizing the agency of all actors within this network, ANT enables a more comprehensive understanding of the systemic challenges and opportunities facing local wool production.

For instance, in the Kubák Weaving mill, traditional looms interact with the unique properties of Czech wool in a way that today's machines can't, while human knowledge and the need not to consider local wool as waste influence the decision to favour local materials. Similarly, newly established mini-mills rely on machinery capable of processing small batches, which interacts with the logistical and economic constraints of small-scale eco sheep farming and the need that small-scale farmers and wool processors have. These examples highlight the non-hierarchical relationships within the network, where each actor – human or non-human – influences the outcomes of wool production.

2.3 Localized Embeddedness and Relational Practices

In line with the findings of Fosstenlökken et al. (2023), this study also considers how micro-entrepreneurs in the wool sector engage in localized embedding practices to develop and sustain alternative textile economies. Localized embeddedness refers to the ways in which actors are rooted in specific geographic, social, and material contexts, forming dense networks of mutual support, knowledge exchange, and value sharing.

² It should be mentioned that Kateřina Žák Konvalinová participated in most of the interviews - together we are preparing an artistic publication on this topic, Vlňa, which will be published in 2026.

This concept is developed also in Winter's (2003) critical reflection on embeddedness within local food economies.³ Drawing on Polanyi (1944) and Granovetter (1985), Winter emphasizes that economic action is always socially embedded, and that trust, meaning, and social networks are essential components of local economies. However, he cautions against simplistic interpretations of embeddedness as inherently progressive or alternative. In the Czech and Slovak wool context, this serves as a valuable reminder that the embedded nature of wool networks may reflect a mix of motivations – including trying to give value to something that has been considered as a waste for 30 years and nobody knows what to do with it, efforts to re-establish the wool processing value chain through a combination of contemporary and historical approaches, care for land, be economically self-sustainable, artisanal values, and symbolic attachments to rural life.

Winter's notion of "defensive localism" also adds a critical layer: local embeddedness may arise from resistance to global markets or national policies, but can equally reproduce exclusionary dynamics or romanticize tradition without structural change. Therefore, this study approaches embeddedness as layered and contingent and self-reflective – sensitive to both material conditions and the symbolic values ascribed to wool, place, community and the terms such as locality and "our".

In the Czech and Slovak context, such ambivalences become evident when local wool initiatives define themselves in contrast to globalization, yet at the same time seek broader product sales, struggling to gain access to international markets,⁴ wider public attention, recognition of their work (often tied to economic valuation), or even to gain the necessary knowledge or considering grant opportunities. There is also a risk of idealizing a nostalgic image of "traditional rural life" that does not fully account for current socio-economic inequalities, or the actual diversity of actors involved. Moreover, discourses of quality and authenticity surrounding local wool sometimes privilege particular narratives – such as heritage, naturalness, or purity – which may inadvertently exclude other perspectives or reinforce narrow visions of who belongs in these networks. For example, a certain 'return to roots' is very sporadic – what roots and in what period in those two countries? Local wool may have been bought back for good money under the previous regime, but it is not yet clear from the research to date how far it was sufficiently valorised in the subsequent process – often it seems to have been processed into second or third category products that would not even have a market today (itchy cardigans and sweaters for example). Under the previous regime, the economy was planned in 'five-year plans', which were mostly blindly followed without any more comprehensive reflection: for example, it was a given that 'the more sheep the better', but it is clear from the available literature and interviews that this strategy came at the expense of other actors, such as the sheep themselves (Horák, 2011).

Acknowledging the nuanced insights of Winter (2003), this study views embeddedness as neither inherently radical nor conservative, but as a field of contestation and negotiation where meanings of quality, locality, and sustainability are actively produced and debated.

In conclusion, understanding embeddedness in the Czech and Slovak wool context requires attentiveness to its ethical, practical, and political dimensions. It calls for critical reflection on which forms of locality are being supported, which are marginalized, and how discourses of tradition, sustainability, and community may shape access to resources and recognition. This nuanced approach highlights both the emancipatory and ambivalent potentials of embedded local economies.

3. Methodology

This research was designed as a qualitative case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), focused on the phenomenon of local wool processing in the Czech and Slovak Republic. The aim was to examine how actors involved in small-scale wool-related practices navigate material, cultural, and economic conditions in a post-socialist context. The case is defined as the contemporary revitalization and reevaluation of local

³ Local food production, and an awareness of the issues and challenges associated with it, repeatedly comes up in texts on local sheep wool processing as an example to work from (and also where to start thinking about the sector in the first place) (Klepp & Tobiasson, 2022; Vičiūnaitė, 2020).

⁴ This is what Kubák Weaving mill and Mokoša especially are trying to do.

sheep wool as a cultural, ecological, and economic resource, bounded geographically by the Czech and Slovak Republic and temporally by the period following the early 1990s transition. This represents a single-case design with three main embedded units of analysis, including independent weavers, artisans, artists, farmers and textile cooperatives.

In line with recent calls for post-qualitative approaches (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013), the study resists rigid methodological templates and embraces emergent, relational inquiry. This means that rather than collecting and categorizing data in advance, the research unfolds through responsiveness to material encounters, affective forces, and human–nonhuman entanglements in the field. The aim is not to represent or codify lived experience in a traditional sense, but to trace the becoming of meaning in ongoing relational processes. This orientation complements the project’s grounding in posthumanist and ecofeminist theory, and allows the wool itself – as a tactile, resistant, and affective material – to participate in shaping the knowledge-making process.

The study draws on a qualitative, multi-sited ethnographic strategy, including semi-structured interviews, field visits, participant observation, and document analysis conducted between June and September 2024. Fieldwork was carried out in various rural and semi-urban regions, targeting initiatives such as artisanal weaving mills, sheep farms, community-based wool projects, and artistic collaborations. Interviews (approx. 25 in total) were conducted with farmers, shearers, spinners, weavers, hand-knitters, designers, cooperative members, artists, activists, and local policy actors. Rather than applying formal coding procedures, the analytical process was interpretive and iterative – drawing on principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019), which emphasize the active and situated role of the researcher in constructing meaning, rather than discovering (or waiting that they somehow “emerge”) pre-existing themes, and interpretive grounded theory approach and reflexive engagement of researcher (Charmaz, 2006), while remaining open to abductive movement between field observations and theoretical frameworks (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The final three cases were selected with the reference based strategy (Neergaard & Uhløi, 2007) when talking to few experts in this field.

Case selection in the beginning followed the principle of maximum variation (Patton, 1990; Neergaard & Uhløi, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2006), aiming to capture a broad range of engagements with wool: from individual, domestic-scale practices to semi-industrial approaches and artistic interventions. Selection criteria emphasized actors who frame their work in terms of locality, circularity, traditional know-how, or sustainability.

The methodological framework is, as mentioned in the previous chapter, informed by posthumanism, ecofeminism, and Actor-Network Theory, which emphasize situated knowledge and agencies of all actors in this network.

As part of a broader commitment to ethical, situated research, the study also acknowledges the affective and embodied dimensions of working with wool – its smell, tactility, resistance, and presence – as central to how value, identity, and sustainability are felt, enacted and build through the monitored community. This aligns with insights from sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009), which foregrounds sensory and embodied modes of knowing in fieldwork. Throughout the analysis, the aim was not to generalize, but to illuminate specific configurations, tensions, and practices that can reveal the motivations of the interviewees, often linked to direct contact with the wool.

In what follows, I present empirical insights from this case study, focusing on three selected initiatives and actors engaged in the revitalization of local wool practices. Rather than aiming for comprehensiveness, the analysis highlights the relational, material, and symbolic dynamics that emerge in situated engagements with wool – showing how local actors reimagine value, sustainability, and combine traditional heritage with contemporary thinking in Czechia and Slovakia. Before that, however, it is necessary to introduce the European and local context.

4. Contextualizing Local Wool in Europe

The European wool industry is facing a paradoxical challenge: while wool is a biodegradable, renewable, and historically significant fibre, vast amounts of it are today treated as waste (Klepp & Tobiasson, 2022). This section explores the current landscape of local sheep wool processing in Europe, with a particular focus on the structural, economic, and cultural challenges that hinder sustainable utilization of this resource. Drawing on recent scholarly research, project reports, and ethnographic studies, this chapter provides a critical synthesis of key trends, case studies, and emerging strategies aiming to revive and revalue local wool within regional economies.

4.1 Structural Challenges and Policy Gaps

Several structural issues underpin the wool problem in Europe, rooted in both historical neglect and contemporary industrial limitations. First, centralized industrial processing systems are generally optimized for fine, white wool from dominant commercial breeds (especially merino). Norwegian wool standards, for example, offer higher payments and subsidies for white wool while pigmented and coarser fibres are often placed in lower categories or lose subsidies entirely (Lennon, 2017, 13). This renders them ill-suited for handling wool from heritage or mountain sheep breeds, which often produce coarser, pigmented fibres. As a result, such wool is frequently discarded or deemed commercially unviable despite its cultural and ecological significance. Klepp and Tobiasson (2022) highlighted that wool from rare and indigenous breeds (in Norway but in other European countries) is systematically excluded from mainstream processing pipelines due to its incompatibility with industrial sorting, scouring, and spinning technologies designed for standardised outputs. This technical rigidity is reinforced by market preferences for light-coloured wool, and consumer aesthetic and softness preferences (Lennon, 2017), which limits the valorisation of natural variation in fleece colour and texture. Vičiūnaitė (2020) similarly notes that micro-producers in Norway attempting to build local value chains based on pigmented and coarse wool encounter not only market indifference but also infrastructural inaccessibility, forcing them to either discard the material or rely on artisanal-level processing. A recurring theme in all available texts and interviews is the missing chain, not only in terms of value but also in terms of wool processing, with wool washing and scouring being one of the weakest links (Klepp & Tobiasson, 2022, 116).

Second, European agricultural policy has historically (since 19th century) prioritised meat and milk production (Vičiūnaitė, 2020), marginalising wool in both rhetoric and subsidy frameworks. This trend continued through the 20th century under agricultural support regimes (like the EU's Common Agricultural Policy) that heavily subsidized meat and milk, but not wool. Consequently, there are few, if any, targeted subsidies or development schemes aimed specifically at wool valorisation. This institutional neglect discourages investment in wool innovation, contributes to its low market value, and even can exacerbates rural depopulation by undermining potential value-added activities in textile production. As Vičiūnaitė (2020) observes, this policy orientation creates a structural disincentive for farmers to invest in wool quality or processing. Lennon (2017) also points out that while certain regional development policies may reference traditional crafts or cultural heritage (or local food production), wool is rarely the focal point of targeted innovation or infrastructure support, making it vulnerable to being treated as waste rather than a resource.

Third structural issue, as Vičiūnaitė (2020) points out, sustainability-oriented consumers often lack access to transparent information about the wool's origin and processing, limiting their ability to make informed ethical choices. Meanwhile, supply chains remain fragmented and poorly integrated at the regional level, preventing economies of scale and innovation in local processing.

Fourth issue is connected to the transition of global textile industry to fast fashion and other than woollen materials. Klepp and Tobiasson (2022) noted that in Europe, wool has lost its value as a commodity, largely displaced by synthetic fibres.

4.2 Entrepreneurial and Educational Innovations

Amidst these challenges, numerous grassroots and institutional initiatives have emerged. The KRUS project in Norway (Klepp et al., 2019), for instance, mapped local wool value chains and emphasized actor-network collaborations to build regional resilience see also (Lennon, 2017). The Selbu spinning mill in Trøndelag exemplifies a successful model using mini-mill technology to process pigmented wool from rare breeds (Vičiūnaitė 2020). Similarly, the Woolume and Slovol projects organized later by Oslo Metropolitan University have built transnational research networks linking universities, designers, and craftspeople to reintegrate wool into local economies. In Spain, the Wooldreamers initiative in Castilla-La Mancha revives traditional wool processing through partnerships with shepherds, designers, and urban makerspaces, aiming to reconnect rural fibre production with urban textile innovation. Likewise, Tejiendo Redes, part of Madrid Design Festival, supports artisanal and circular wool practices, promoting cultural heritage and local materiality.

4.3 A Shift Toward Regional Resilience

All these projects also lead to the dissemination of information and education – both of the participants in the wool processing and the public. Educational and entrepreneurial models play a key role in regenerating wool cultures. The Lab-to-Lab Wool Mondays, under the SheMakes platform, encourage knowledge sharing among labs, schools, and innovators across Europe. Viciunaite (2020) identifies "effectual networking" as a crucial strategy among micro-entrepreneurs who, despite systemic constraints, leverage informal ties and shared learning to develop sustainable business models. This includes small producers prioritizing transparency, ecological value, and local community engagement over conventional growth metrics.

A key insight from regional studies (Lennon, 2017) is the move from sustainable "development" to sustainable "resilience." Rather than scaling up in conventional economic terms, local wool networks aim to deepen ecological, social, and technological capacity within regions. This involves preserving biodiversity through native breeds, investing in decentralized processing infrastructure, and cultivating long-term collaborations that cross institutional and geographic boundaries.

5. Contextualizing Wool in Czech and Slovak History

The history of sheep wool processing in the Czech Republic and Slovakia has a deep history, and for this study it is essential to mention several milestones that are related to the shaping of the current situation and the global wool trade. According to the historian Michal Jirman, the largest number of sheep (over two million) in the Czech Republic was in 1837. Thereafter, there was a gradual decline, with only 760,000 sheep being kept in the same area in 1880 (Jirman, 2023). The 'macroeconomic factor' (Eide & Wiese, 2023) was the rapid increase in Australian breeding, with the merino wool there subsequently absorbing the global market during the 19th century. It was cheaper (imported into England duty-free), finer and of better quality. The number of sheep in Czechia in the 20th century fluctuated mostly between 200,000 and 300,000, except in the 1950s and 1990 when over 420,000 were bred. The year 1990 is "typical of the highest number of sheep bred in the historical (Czech) lands in the last 100 years" (Horák 2011, 11).

Most of the sheep fulfilled (till the 1992) the so-called triple use – meat, milk, and above all wool. The latter was apparently supplied mainly to the Karnola factory in Krnov, where it was mainly used to make heavier canvas – for example, for military uniforms (Horák 2011). A smaller part of it went to the newly established factories in Brno in the so-called Brno Manchester and back to the hand knitters. Local wool continued to be bought up until 1992, and according to the sources available so far, in these years it went also to the Soviet Union countries, to the construction industry, and also to the countries of the then Western world (Horák, 2011; Horák, 2012).⁵

⁵ Most of this information is mentioned only in passing in the available literature, some of it I found out from the interviews I conducted. But where the local wave went most before 1989 is a subject for further research.

In the 1990s, the structure of breeds also changed: in 1990, breeds for wool (compared to the other breeds: mixed breeds, breeds for meat or dairy) represented 62.9% of the total percentage, but in 2000 they represented 0%. The situation changed so dramatically because in 1992, then Czechoslovakia state stopped buying sheep wool from breeders and stopped subsidising it. This was the result of a change in the political situation and a change in the structure of wool imports and trade in general (Horák, 2012). This fact led to a lack of interest among breeders in wool breeds – for example, the Czech 'gyrene merino' breed, which was closest to fine Australian merino – was considered to be 'true' wool, had a closed pile and achieved the best qualities in terms of value, falling into the A–B groups – completely disappeared after 1992 (Horák, 2012).

In the 1990s most of the wool processing factories went bankrupt (e.g., Vlněna Brno in 1997, Karnola in Krnov in 1998, etc.), mainly due to privatisation and restructuring after the political coup (Tučková, 2014; Mertová & Ryšková, 2014).

For completeness, however, it should be added that the Czech Republic is, according to The Observatory of Economic Complexity, currently the world's fourth largest importer of (sweat, uncombed, shorn and unshorn) wool (3.77% in 2022). This wool is mainly imported to the Nejdek Wool Combing company near Karlovy Vary, where it is washed and processed into combs. The history of this mill dates back to 1846, but in 1995, it was bought by Italian company G. Mondiano, headquartered in London. On the website of the comb factory, we read that their production capacity is 23 million kg (combs) per year. Wool is imported into the Czech Republic mainly from South Africa (39.7%), Australia (39.4%) and New Zealand (6.09%). Wool exported from the Czech Republic is a negligible amount: 0.024%.

Brno is today's home to another huge wool processing factory – Nová Mosilana. Its predecessor, Mosilana, one of the largest in the socialist era, was bought by the Italian Marzotte Group in 1994. It currently processes wool from Australian and New Zealand sheep, and their website says that they process up to 20 tonnes of material a day in worsted and yarn. Their production consists of treating wool from combs to fabric, which is bought by companies such as Versace, Armani and Hugo Boss. According to available information, the Czech Republic will thus also remain in fourth place in 2022 in terms of wool fabric exports (after Italy, China and Germany with 4.95%).

The wool industry therefore persists in our country, but it is literally "slipping through our fingers". The reason for this is also the absolute lack of interest on the part of the state, which only comments on the treatment of wool as waste. It thus meets the conditions of the current global trade in wool (hence textiles) (Postrelová, 2024; Eide & Wiese 2023). But what happens if we start asking if and whether it is possible to have our own wool washed / combed / spun locally, or to buy such wool somewhere? This study explores the answers to these questions – before presenting the research itself, it can be stated that it is possible (in specific amount and quality), but it is not easy.

6. Kubák Weaving mill: Material Constraints and the Relational Dynamics of Industrial Heritage

The Kubák family Weaving mill in Strmilov is the only manufacture of its kind (family-owned and using specific machines) in Czechia and Slovakia that survived both communism and the post-1989 privatization era. It has operated continuously since 1870 and today employs seven people, including three members of the Kubák family. The main owner is now Filip Kubák from the fifth generation since the beginning of the manufacture. The mill maintains a unique production model based on century-old looms and heritage craft techniques. Kubák occupies a unique position between tradition and modernity, between material resistance and market adaptation.

The company produces approximately 2,500 kg of clean wool (however washed elsewhere-see below) annually, which is processed into high-quality blankets, bed linen, and tablecloths. Their approach combines manual and mechanical processes, allowing adaptation to various fibre characteristics. This includes local coarse wool, which is less suited for fine garments but ideal for robust woven textiles. As a result, Kubák emphasizes sturdy, long-lasting products designed for everyday use.

Their production relies on a network of local and regional suppliers. However, due to difficulties with industrial washing facilities (e.g., unsatisfactory results from Lanatex), the mill now collaborates with a small-scale washer near Zlín⁶, which has become a key partner for artisanal producers, despite its limited 30 kg batch capacity.

Recognition of Kubák's commitment to quality and local materials includes the 2020 Czech Grand Design Award for Manufacturer of the Year. The company also collaborates with contemporary Czech designers such as Durch Duo, reflecting a bridging of tradition and innovation. Kubák exemplifies how localized wool infrastructure can be sustained through a mix of historical continuity, design-forward thinking, and careful adaptation to material constraints.

The machinery itself becomes a limiting – but also revealing – actor in the network: it co-determines what kinds of wool are considered usable, how quality is defined, and which blends are economically viable. The owners and workers at Kubák must constantly negotiate between the technical capacities of their inherited infrastructure and the demands of contemporary consumers, who often seek soft, standardized yarns similar to those produced by large-scale international suppliers. This puts them in a position of interpretive tension – valuing the local and artisanal, yet constrained by expectations of smoothness, softness, and modern design. The agency of the wool as a material is palpable: its coarseness resists market norms. Rather than being fully malleable, the wool asserts its presence and pushes back, demanding specific forms of handling, blending, or reinterpretation. This material also requires constant communication with customers – Kubák must constantly explain what local wool actually means, why it has such a texture, why it is more expensive than products from large chains, etc.

This case illustrates how posthumanist and ANT perspectives can inform our understanding of local production: not as a nostalgic return to craft, but as a dynamic negotiation between machines, fibres, human intentions, and market discourses. The situated knowledge of mill workers and consumers – how they feel, read, and adjust to the fibre – embodies a tacit form of material literacy that bridges tradition and adaptation. Meanwhile, their position within a broader economic landscape – where imported fibres are cheaper and more standardized – reveals the structural vulnerability of localized, heritage-based production systems. Kubák also revealed in the interview that his manufactory is actually a still functioning historical museum – but without the possibility of receiving state subsidies, as is the case with museum institutions.

Through the lens of embeddedness, the mill is not simply a production site, but a node in a dense network of local farmers, designers, and consumers. Its survival depends not only on profitability, but also on the strength of these relationships and the shared meanings attributed to Czech wool.

7. Wool as a Medium of Relationship and Care: Kateřina Žák Konvalinová's Posthumanist Art Practice

Following the exploration of Filip Kubák's localized wool weaving manufacture, we turn to a markedly different yet complementary case: the artistic and agricultural practice of Kateřina Žák Konvalinová. Konvalinová is Czech audiovisual artist and occasionally small-scale farmer whose career uniquely bridges contemporary art with farm life. After graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, she even trained at an ecological farming school in Czechia and currently pursues doctoral research on initiatives that link art, agriculture, and degrowth theory at Faculty of Fine Arts in Brno. She spent some time in Spanish organization Inland / Campo Adentro where she was taking care of sheep – she was processing the wool, absolved transhumance and was making cheese (Konvalinová, 2024).

This dual, yet coherent and intertwines identity – artist and agricultural worker – is embodied in her daily routine and creative output. It enables her to treat wool not merely as a raw material or commodity, but as a medium of relationship that entangles human and more-than-human actors (sheep, land, plants, microbes, and even machines) into a shared practice. In Konvalinová's work, caring for sheep and working

⁶ This washer do not wanted to be mention by name.

with their wool becomes an artistic act, and conversely, art-making becomes a form of caregiving to neglected materials and species. This approach resonates strongly with posthumanist and feminist ethics of care (Donovan & Adams, 2007), decentering the human artist-genius and instead emphasizing collaboration, interdependence, and bodily engagement with the environment.

One of Konvalinová's standout projects, created with collaborator Judita Levitnerová for the 2024 Prague Matter of Art Biennale, exemplifies her posthumanist ethos. Titled *Rusty Sheep Dreaming*, this multimedia installation – huge wool tapestry and audiowork – was realized through an expansive network of participants: it was co-created with a local organic sheep farm (Jednorožec Farm), a professional shepherd-shearer (Jiří Santner), heritage sheep breeds (Skudde, Zwartbles, Jacob), a traditional textile mill (the Kubák Weaving mill in Strmilov), a social enterprise spinner (Dobroděj), and a university textile laboratory at University of Technology in Liberec (Jiří Chaloupek), Ivo Brzobohatý (former mechanical engineer of Art Protis), artists Lucie Rosenfeldová and Jan Kašpar. In other words, the artwork's authorship is distributed across humans, animals, and machines – a living actor-network that blurs the line between artistic collaborators and wool-production stakeholders. Such an assembly itself is an artistic statement: Konvalinová and Levitnerová positions the sheep and their wool as central actors, not passive resources. Indeed, as the curators of Biennale describe at the Biennale website: "They want to make sheep the heroines of this history. They shift the focus from a human perspective to a broader, more-than-human outlook, expressing their concern for animal well-being and ethical practices in sheep keeping and breeding.". The installation's narrative explicitly foregrounds the sheep's perspective and wellbeing, thus concretizing posthumanist theory into experiential form. The care for more-than-human actors isn't just symbolic here – it is built into the production process (through ethical sheep husbandry and shearing practices) and into the display (the sheep are acknowledged as co-authors and their environment is sensorially present).

In *Rusty Sheep Dreaming*, wool functions as a connective tissue between these actors, weaving together stories of industry, animal life, and ecological cycles. The installation incorporated a textile made using Art Protis – a semi-obsolete Czech technique for non-woven wool tapestries – which the artists resuscitated for its conceptual value. Historically, the Art Protis machine was a socialist-era innovation now seen as a technological dead end. Konvalinová and Levitnerová boldly fed it with raw fleece that contemporary industry deems worthless. By embracing the notion of "uselessness" and literally giving "trash" wool a new life as art, the artists engage in what we can call ethical imagination: they challenge the audience to reconsider societal definitions of waste, value, and utility (Konvalinová & Levitnerová, 2024). The wool used in the tapestry would have ended up on the manure pile at the farm if not for this project. Instead, it became the centerpiece of a communal creation, demonstrating an alternative value system where material that the capitalist market discards is revalued through care and creativity. This gesture aligns with degrowth principles – reducing waste, valorizing local resources, and questioning the drive for profit that rendered the wool "valueless" in the first place. In Konvalinová's hands, wool carries the memory of economic and ecological change (the collapse of the socialist wool industry, the mass culling of flocks after subsidy cuts) while also hinting at a more hopeful future where such material is tended to rather than tossed aside.

Equally important is how *Rusty Sheep Dreaming* engages the senses and bodies of its human audience, inviting a form of embodiment that deepens the human-sheep connection. Visitors to the installation are encouraged to touch, sit, or even lie on the thick woolen Art Protis tapestry, while a 15-minute audio track envelops them in the soundscape of the pasture – the gentle bleats of sheep, the bark of a herding dog, and the rhythm of shears clipping wool, interwoven with sung-spoken word storytelling. This immersive design collapses the distance between urban gallery-goers and rural farm life, bridging spaces and species through sensory experience. The warmth and smell of raw wool, and the act of reclining on it, create an intimate encounter where human bodies directly engage with the material trace of sheep bodies. Such an embodied interaction is a form of quiet activism: it generates empathy and familiarity, countering the typical consumer detachment from the sources of textiles. In this way, Konvalinová's artistic practice extends care to her audience as well – offering them an opportunity to rediscover wool relationally, not as a commodity on a store shelf but as a tactile link to animal lives, cultural heritage, and land, that are also the motifs of the abstracted story in the audio.

Beyond the gallery, Konvalinová's commitment to integrative practice manifests in real community building. She is a co-founder of the Ovčina (whose name riffs on ovce, sheep) collective, an "artistic-agricultural research colony", she organizes St John's Day festivities at Jednorozec Farm connecting art workshops (with sheep wool), farm works, cooking etc. By literally (and collectively) cultivating land and caring for farm animals, Konvalinová embeds artistic practice within everyday acts of multispecies care. This blurring of roles is ethnographically significant: the artist becomes a shepherd and gardener, and the sheep become muses and partners in creativity. The result is a holistic practice where ethical imagination is theorized and also situated and enacted on the ground. Konvalinová's work thus exemplifies how posthumanist art praxis can contribute to a community economy of wool: she fosters networks of exchange (sharing fleece, knowledge, labor) that are driven by empathy and sustainability rather than profit. In summary, her case shows wool's potential as a medium of relationship – one that spins together humans and non-humans, art and agriculture, memory and possibility, all through the threads of care, embodiment, and imaginative ethics.

8. Naša Vlna and Community-Based Wool Revival in Slovakia

While Konvalinová's practice is situated at the intersection of art and farming, a broader, community-oriented movement for wool revival has been emerging in the Slovak context through the civic initiative Naša Vlna ("Our Wool"). Established in 2018 by a group of women working with sheep's wool, the initiative arose from a shared concern over the fate of local wool, which – just like in the Czech and European context, had long been treated as a waste by-product of pastoralism. The initiative shows how material agency and collective action interweave, in line with posthumanist and ecofeminist perspectives that view care and knowledge as relational and distributed.

Naša Vlna's activities exemplify the creation of a platform of contacts for different stages of manual or industrial processing of Slovak sheep wool and to promoting and spreading awareness of wool as a material suitable for an extremely wide range of uses. They also share the knowledge through organising meetings and courses on the subject of hand processing of wool and shearing sheep. One of Naša Vlna's aim is to make improvements in wool production and to raise the purchase price of quality wool to a reasonable level.

8.1 From Raw Material to Micro-Manufacturing

Naša Vlna is a loose association of individual women with similar interests, but each of them also has her own sheep wool processing micro-business. A pivotal development has been establishing the first mini-mill in Slovakia: this step illustrates the emergent and situated nature of wool economies as understood through post-qualitative inquiry (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013), where meaning and infrastructure co-evolve through grounded engagement: small-scale wool processing facilities that can wash, card, and spin wool in low volumes. Recognizing the lack of accessible processing as a bottleneck (as we saw with Kubák's struggles to find wool washing for modest batches), the community welcomed the establishment of Slovakia's first mini-mill, Vlnárska manufaktúra, founded by wool enthusiast Martina Vozárová and her husband Imrich Vozár in 2021. They said in an interview that the capacity of their mini-mill is still increasing, having reached 2 000 kg of sweat wool in 2023. This is a similar amount to Kubák, but their focus is different – Kubák does not wash its own wool, it is primarily a weaving mill. Another difference is that Kubák produces machine yarn, and the Vozárovi said in an interview that they cannot guarantee the same quality of yarn in their spinning mill – they produce wool mainly for hand knitting. They may have to increase the capacity of the spinning mill in the future (they would like to triple it) – they currently have only four bobbins and see that yarn is the most in demand, combs less so. After they started the manufacture, they are both fully occupied with the work, for two people it is said to be just enough, only occasionally they take one local lady on maternity leave and one local retired gentleman for temporary work.

Vozárovi have a few sheep, but their main goal is to offer their services to other small sheep farmers. They take orders from 3 kg, which is wool after shearing 3–5 sheep, which is different from Šeliga, which takes

wool from a larger quantity (about 30kg). Vozárovi were inspired by Šeliga before buying, they also had their wool washed there, but they said they were not completely satisfied with the quality.

In terms of community building, Martina regularly holds workshops with local women where they do handicrafts - knitting, dyeing, weaving and teaching each other these skills, depending on what each of them can do and what they come up with. However, yarn from the Vlnárska manufaktúra is too expensive for the local women. Nevertheless, Vozárovi are also building community across Slovakia and the Czech Republic, their involvement in Naša vlna helps them to do this. Increasingly, customers who buy from them tell them that they have been able to increase their production thanks to their yarn, or have their own wool processed by machine in this way and therefore have time to make their own products. Among other things, this is the Gubaňa brand, whose co-founder Marcela Nemcová, established the initiative Naša vlna. Another Slovak brand Mokoša, founded by Ľubica Noemi Kováčiková (who is also the founder of Naša vlna) and Alena Ninajová also use wool processed in Vlnárska manufaktúra.

8.2 Mokoša and contemporary challenges

However, it turns out that the Vlnárska manufaktúra does not manage to process all the requests⁷ that come to it. The founders of Mokoša, for example, would need to process more wool than their cooperation with the Vlnárska Manufaktúra allows. According to them, there are two large factories in Slovakia where wool is washed, but again in too large quantities. Mokoša also tried washing in Poland and at the washer near Zlín, but neither experience was good – either the wool shrunk or they faced other challenges – such as paperwork around this animal product or their own time and capacity. Mokoša is not yet profitable, and both founders confided that they have alternately thought about quitting. However, they still believe that the activity is meaningful and that it is the community with whom they can share their woes and find some outlet for their products. At the Slovol International Seminar in 2023, the founders presented the theme of the Woolen Cycle, which illustrates how all the actors in this network have to be reckoned with – and none of them are currently sufficiently nurtured to be stable (Fig. 1). The biggest challenge and problem the women of Naša Vlna see is the lack of funding.⁸ Nevertheless, most want to continue – they feel that the outreach is working, albeit very slowly, and also that the interest is increasing year by year.

Although there are already two mini-mills⁹ operating in the Czech Republic, there is no similar initiative to the Naša vlna. Hand spinner and educator Eva Vobrová of the Dobroděj association, for example, has similar aspirations for establishing some kind of network, and she organizes the annual October wool meeting in Prague at Toulcův dvůr. Linda Havlíková, a designer who works with local sheep wool and one of the most important person in this area in Czechia, also ran the Czech Naše vlna website for some time, but it did not last long.

Naša vlna also has formed partnerships beyond Slovakia – for example, participating in on the aforementioned international wool webinars (Slovol) – which broadens the actor-network while still keeping the focus on local empowerment. In doing so, they show how cultivating a community can be both rooted and open, drawing strength from solidarity across regions. The ethical commitments remain central as the network grows: transparency, mutual aid, and environmental mindfulness guide these collaborations, distinguishing them from conventional trade partnerships.

⁷ They come mostly from Slovakia, some of them from Czechia.

⁸ The economic side of processing local sheep wool is also not stable, the market for it is very small to compete with the global market for foreign merino wool and most of the interviewees expressed their opinion on subsidies, for example, that even if there are some that would be suitable for them, they do not want to apply for them because they do not have the time or other capacity to do so, the classic answer was that it is too much paperwork for how much they benefit in the end.

⁹ Mini-mill are owned by family of Šantorovi in Přestání Farm since a year and by family of Křenkovi in Stránské Farm since autumn 2024 (Jesenické vlnění). Both of them are originally sheep farmers.

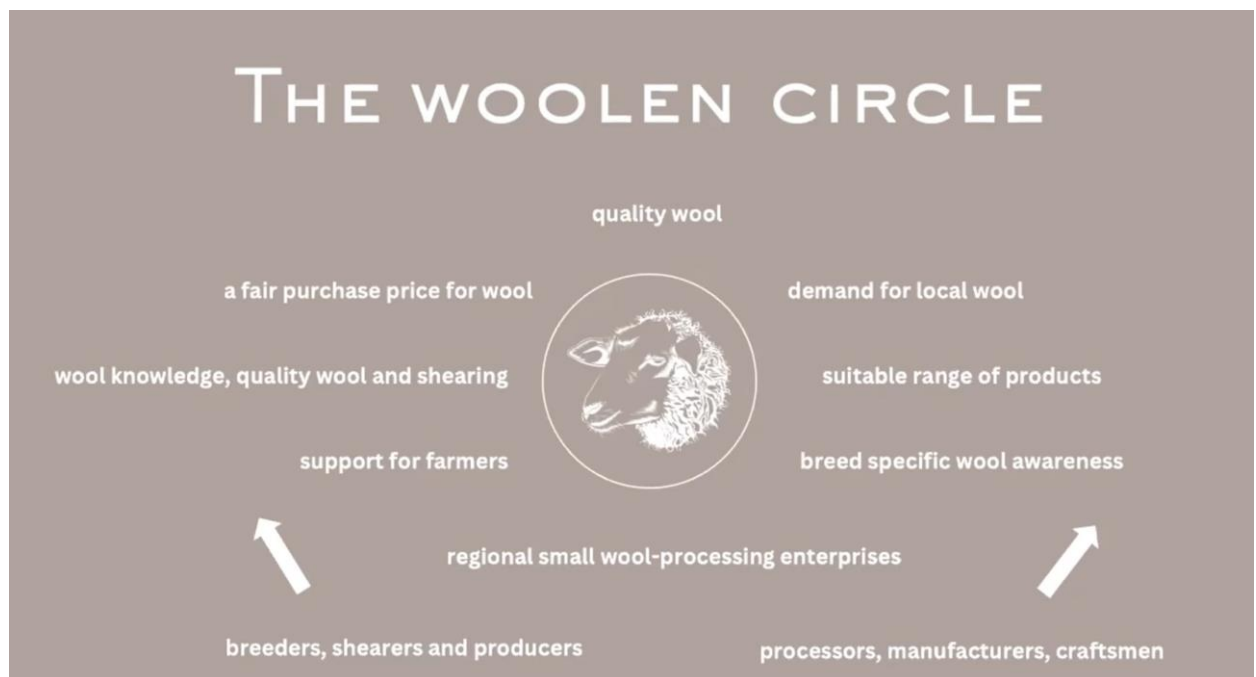


Fig 1. Woolen circle by Mokoša and Naša vlna. Source: 2024, screenshot, Slovoool

9. Discussion

The revaluation of local sheep wool in Czechia and Slovakia illustrates how material, ethical, and economic dimensions intertwine through multispecies relations and community-based practices. Drawing on insights from the three case studies – Kubák Weaving mill, Kateřina Žák Konvalinová’s artistic practice, and the grassroots initiative Naša Vlna – this section revisits the research question and reflects on how wool is re-signified through care, community, resistance, and situated agency.

9.1 Multispecies Networks and Material Agency

In all cases, wool is not a passive backdrop to human activity but an active participant that shapes decisions, relations, and outcomes. From an posthuman perspective, wool acts as a material actor in a network full of different other entities through its properties, textures, and limitations influence production processes, aesthetic choices, and alliances. For example, the thickness and coarseness of Czech and Slovak wool resist transformation into conventional (fast fashion) synthetic and soft merino garments, yet this resistance spurs new uses – such as blankets, art pieces or hand knitting. This “material resistance” provokes innovation and invites collaboration across disciplines.

Sheep themselves also emerge as co-actors. In Konvalinová’s practice, the animal’s presence and needs are not external to the work but integral to it. Their movement, behavior, and life cycles set the rhythm of artistic production. Similarly, at Naša Vlna, the sheer physical presence of accumulated wool – discarded by farmers and lacking processing infrastructure – initiated new alliances and practices, effectively demanding human response. These multispecies entanglements challenge anthropocentric models of value creation and support posthumanist theories that decenter human agency in favor of relational becoming (Haraway, 2016).

9.2 Ethics of Care and Affective Labor

The practices documented here are deeply embedded in what ecofeminist theory conceptualizes as an “ethics of care” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). This care is not abstract or sentimental – it is daily, embodied, and affective. It includes the tending of sheep, the labor-intensive cleaning and sorting of fleece, and the cultivation of trust and reciprocity within communities. In these wool economies, affective labor is not an accessory but the foundation: it is what sustains the work despite economic constraints.

At the Kubák mill, this care is embedded in the commitment to slowly¹⁰ weaving, the maintenance of century-old machinery, and the preservation of craft know-how. Konvalinová's work blends artistic production with farming practices, demonstrating how care can blur boundaries between aesthetics, agriculture, and multispecies relations. Naša Vlna thrives on volunteer labor and shared passion, exemplifying how affective investment generates resilience and shared purpose.

As Konvalinová and others repeatedly claim, for example, we have bred sheep for centuries to grow as much wool as possible. So humans have made, and sheep still make, great "efforts" to ensure that this continues to happen. But if things have changed in the world so that we consider this material as a waste, we also face a certain ethical question and a certain responsibility. In all the interviews it was said that although we don't have any clear answers at all in this respect, and probably won't for a long time, we should nevertheless find some use for this material, even if it is "only" aesthetic or symbolic. For further research, it is important to note that most of the participants are struggling with a certain sadness or even disgust (for example, Kubák directly mentioned that he finds the circulation of merino wool around the world "sick") over the treatment (i.e., throwing away) of local wool. This feeling, although at times with an ambivalent search for culprits, is also the driving force behind the actions of these people, even though they are often on the verge of financial or psychological exhaustion.

9.3 Local Embeddedness and Community Economies

All three initiatives are profoundly rooted in place. Their success depends not on scalability or market expansion but on the cultivation of dense, situated networks. These actors draw on local breeds, family knowledge, regional infrastructure, and cultural memory. Rather than competing on price or volume, they leverage their locality as a strength – offering transparency, uniqueness, and relational value.

This aligns with Gibson-Graham et al. (2006, 2013) notion of "community economies," where economic activity is dependent on creating, strengthening and maintaining connections within and outside the community. All interviewees are aware of the importance of sharing what works and what, in turn, is a deepening challenge as they all proceed by trial and error and try new things. From the interviews so far, in addition to supporting each other online (even if only by sharing posts on social networks) and creating events where the community comes together, it is important to constantly clarify within the community which points need the most nurturing. As shown, for example, in the "woolen cycle" by Mokoša / Naša vlna, there are many of these points that deserve attention. However, the most important ones, also for economic stability, are to find more options where the shorn wool can be washed in the necessary quantities (but which vary widely) so that it can be further used in the desired products, that can then be monetized. Alternatively, new mini-mills could be set up, but this is a matter of at least 80,000 Euros per one. Grants are not considered very often in this community, but it is clear that the door is not completely closed in this way.

9.4 Tensions, Trade-Offs, and Reimagined Viability

Working outside dominant capitalist structures brings both opportunities and constraints. Economic viability remains a constant challenge. Kubák must compete with industrial textile imports; Konvalinová's work often falls outside monetary systems; women and brands connected in Naša Vlna depends on volunteering. These limitations highlight the fragility of ethical and localized economies.

However, these actors are not naive about these tensions. Instead, they develop hybrid strategies: pursuing niche markets, building cooperative partnerships and create public awareness and education. Rather than opposing market logics outright, they reconfigure them – framing value not in terms of profit but in terms of community benefit, ecological attention, and cultural continuity.

This also reframes the notion of "success." If measured by industrial standards (efficiency, profit, growth), these initiatives may seem marginal. Yet when viewed through the lens of relational ethics, material

¹⁰ According to Kubák, their machines work up to 10 times slower than the current machines.

vitality, and ecological stewardship, they exemplify resilient forms of co-existence. They “stay with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016), creating space for alternative futures to take root.

10. Conclusion

The revitalization of local wool economies in Czechia and Slovakia offers critical insights into how small-scale, community-embedded and art/craft-related actors can reconfigure dominant models of rural development, production, and value. Rather than simply opposing industrial logics, these initiatives propose alternatives grounded in material care and collaborations, although often struggling with their economic situation.

The study contributes to broader conversations on posthumanist ethnography, community economies, and rural resilience by showing how value can emerge through care-based practices, material negotiation, and situated agency. In doing so, it highlights the generative potential of treating local (Czech and Slovak) wool not as waste, but as a connective tissue between species, histories, and futures.

As wool’s revaluation continues to unfold, these experiments offer not only practical models, but conceptual provocations: What might an economy look like if built on care, texture, and interspecies dialogue? What kinds of rural futures can emerge when we attune not just to growth, but to entanglement?

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