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# **The Map is Not the Territory and Taking the Cloth: The Role of Fabric in Our Lives: Two Art Pieces to Explore Women's Relationships with Laura Ashley Plc**

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## **Abstract**

These two art pieces explore the use of art in making visible the hidden in organisational research findings. They form part of a project on the role of Laura Ashley plc in the identity formation and maintenance of a group of British women. The first paper-based piece explores the two sides of the cotton fabric made by the company: the pure and homely versus the commodity which gives rise to slave labour and ecological devastation. The second, a piece of performative writing, explores the absent stories of unhappiness in women's narratives about the company.

## **The Map is Not the Territory and Taking The Cloth: The Role of Fabric in Our Lives: Two Art Pieces to Explore Women's Relationships with Laura Ashley Plc**

### ***The map is not the territory*<sup>1</sup>**

I am currently in the fieldwork stage of a large project looking at Laura Ashley plc, the fashion and soft furnishings retail company, and the role the brand has played in the lives of British female quilters. I am collecting data largely in the form of narratives about the brand, and am slightly perplexed to find that the stories I am being told about the company and the role it has played in the identity construction and maintenance of this particular section of British women are almost exclusively happy and positive stories. While I have no reason to doubt the veracity of the women I am talking to, as someone who has worked in Social Sciences for a number of years, I am taken aback by the absence of negative data the women offer. Life is a vale of tears, (Psalm 84:6) and I have known the storytellers long enough to know that there must be some sad stories behind the nostalgic recollections of happy life events.

This tension between the stories I am hearing and the lives of the women I know about is particularly difficult to capture in conventional research. Such research urges us to talk about what is there in the world, and not what is absent, that for which there is no proof rather than that which we have to infer. And yet, knowing that there is an untold, hidden story nags at me, and for this reason, I have to turn to arts-based methods.

I present here two responses to the untold stories. The first is a paper-based piece, *The map is not the territory* and the second, *Taking the cloth: The role of fabric in our lives*, is a piece of performative prose, which I wrote at the very beginning of the fieldwork. I have not attempted to make them look like conventional academic research because their purpose is to evoke rather than to describe, which is all that I can do with shadowy, phantom data: evoke its presence.

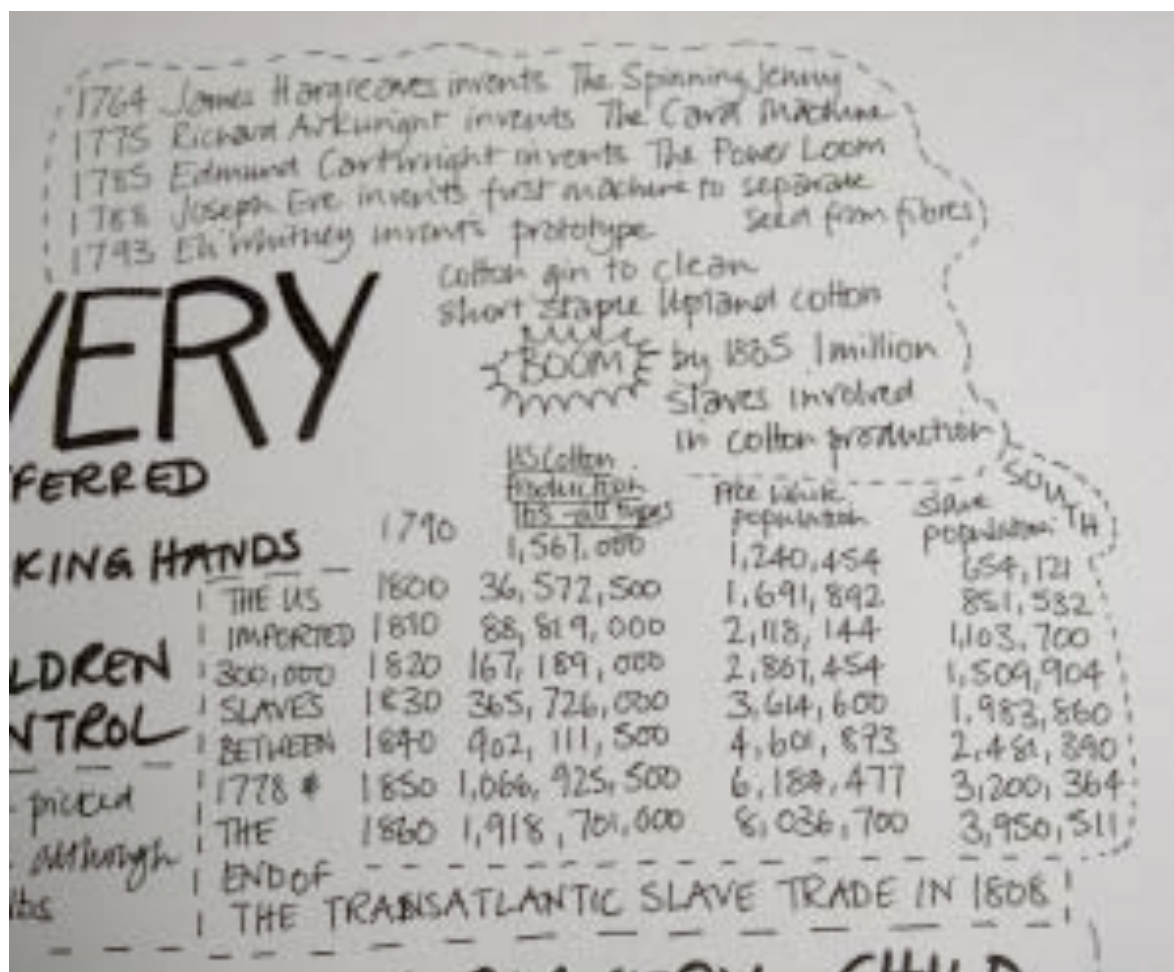
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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Korzybski coined the expression in "A Non-Aristotelian System and its Necessity for Rigour in Mathematics and Physics," a paper presented before the [American Mathematical Society](#) at the [New Orleans, Louisiana](#), meeting of the [American Association for the Advancement of Science](#), December 28, 1931. Reprinted in *Science and Sanity*, 1933, p. 747–61.









**Figure 3 – The map is not the territory - detail - narrative in statistics**

The parallels did not escape Karl Marx, of course, and he, famously, wrote:

As long as the English cotton manufacturers depended on slave-grown cotton, it could truthfully be asserted that they rested on a twofold slavery, the indirect slavery of the white man in England and the direct slavery of the black men on the other side of the Atlantic. (New York Daily Tribune, October 14, 1861)

The flat plane of the paper, which might even contain cotton rag, then, provides a space to explore two narratives of cotton, and our relationship to its manufacture and commercialisation.

### ***Taking the cloth: The role of fabric in our lives***

The second piece is a performative piece.

There is a growing interest in performative writing as a way of communicating research 'findings' (see, for example, Soyini Madison and Hamera, 2006) and also of making compelling accounts of social science inquiries (see, for example, Davies, 2008). Davies traces a number of turns in social sciences since the 1970s including the linguistic, the cultural and the performative. There is not scope here to give a complete review of the literature and so I will outline the work that has influenced me in my thinking rather than trying to give an exhaustive account.

My starting point in understanding performative writing is J.L. Austin's foundational 1962 work, *How to do things with words* which offers the definition that the performative is an

utterance that calls something into being (Davies, 2008). This is text that ... It is text that causes something to happen in the world. And from my reading it seems clear that for many authors this means social change (Bauman, 1977, cited in Pollack, 2008). This is particularly the case in the work of probably the most influential writer in this area, Dwight Conquergood. My own definition of performative writing would involve writing which seeks a reaction in the reader at an embodied emotional level as well as a cognitive analytical one through the skilled use of language, but also through a sense that the author has experienced the phenomenon under consideration at a particular time in a particular place and a particular historical context. It is local and specific writing. It comes from the writer's bodily response and at its best evokes a similarly embodied response in the listener or reader. It is in that sense, dialogic, a term which is used extensively in accounts of performative writing (Conquergood, 1985; Kershaw, 2005). Conquergood, for example writes:

The aim of dialogical performance is to bring self and other together so that they can question and debate, and challenge one another. It is a kind of performance that resists conclusions, it is intensely committed to keeping the dialogue between the performer and text open and ongoing. (Conquergood, 1985: 9)

Performative writing, then, insists on the relationship between the researcher and the reader or audience member. It sees scholarship as a living thing. This is quite a radical position to assume, particularly as research output becomes increasingly audited and normalised into conventional peer-reviewed journal articles. Kershaw quotes Conquergood throwing down a challenge both to the orthodoxy of the academy, both the gatekeepers and those effectively being kettled:

The on-going challenge ... [of performative studies] is to refuse and supersede the deeply entrenched division of labor, apartheid of knowledges, that plays out inside the academy as the difference between thinking and doing, interpreting and making, conceptualization and creativity. The division of labor between theory and practice, abstraction and embodiment, is an arbitrary and rigged choice, and like all binaries it is booby-trapped. (Conquergood in Kershaw, 2008: 24, no reference to original)

I am very much in sympathy with this political challenge to the orthodox, but I have other reasons for choosing to work in a performative idiom. I agree wholeheartedly with Tami Spry, a leading exponent of performative autoethnography, who writes:

When I read/write scholarship,  
I want to feel scholarship.  
...  
I want to be personally and politically entangled  
by scholarship.  
...  
Other-wise  
what  
is the  
autoethnographic  
point?'

(Spry, 2011: 212)

In this case, the performative text allows my voice into the work, and I can talk about the absent unspoken stories in the research.

*Taking the cloth: The role of fabric in our lives*

After our mother's skin the first thing we feel is cloth.  
And cloth is the last thing most of us feel when we leave this world:  
The bedclothes, the winding sheet.

Constantine and Reuter write in the most expensive book I have ever bought:

Whole cloth is planar and pliable; it can be given volume.  
One can animate cloth: drape and crumple, and fold it;  
Compress, pleat and tuck it;  
Festoon, swag and swaddle it;  
Bunt it and cut it;  
Tear, sew and furl it;  
Appliqué, quilt, and fabricate it.  
Cloth is ductile; it expands and contracts.  
Cloth can be embellished with stitches, dyes, or print.  
Cloth can be burned or scored.  
It is for each generation to expand the vocabulary of approaches to cloth. (p. 9)

Cloth is so tightly wrapped round the lives of women that we can hardly breathe. Our whole lives and the places where we live and have our being, are, as Ingold reminds us, entanglements and enmeshments, apparently solid surfaces but close up, meshworks, always pull apartable. Threads always available to spool off and join other enmeshments. Every piece of lace, pillow lace not machine-made lace, is constituted by a single thread held in stasis in the world by two knots, beginning and end, fragile and vulnerable to the finger that pulls at the loose end.

Our stories are our cloths; our selves are our cloths. The metaphor of self and cloth seems irresistible. Julian Baggini, philosopher, writes:

The metaphor of feeling torn is very powerful, it's in the detail that it stands up or breaks down. If what comes to mind is a single, rent sheet of fabric, then I'm afraid the symbolism has led you astray. The fabric of the self is not a smooth continuous surface but a patchwork quilt, and feeling torn is simply a coming apart at the seams.

He says:

Creating a life means constantly trying to stitch together these disparate ingredients of ourselves into something we can hold together and call our self. No wonder that we often find that the joins just won't fit, and we're not sure which patches to trim or throw away completely (Baggini, 2011: 51).

How people love a cloth metaphor. The weave. The warp and the weft. It almost seems that to be human is to understand the structure of cloth, its interlacings, and its feltings.

Jo, a colleague, says, "your experience gets woven into the fabric".

She is talking about what happens when you wear your clothes. The dress that you wore for that rite of passage will always carry that trace every other time you wear it. Wash it, scrub it, hang it out in the burning bleaching fading strafing sun, iron it, press it, bleach it, dye it, cut it up, cut it down, change the hem, change the buttons, it will make no difference. That experience remains imprinted on it. In it. You wear the experience again.

At the start of this project, I am expecting to hear about baby quilts and wedding dresses and bridesmaids dresses, and curtains for starter homes. I am expecting to hear tales of celebration: daughters making good marriages, fortunes made on the property ladder, babies made under Laura Ashley hexagons from the very bold. I have already been told these tales by women with shining eyes revisiting such happy times in their lives, times of great possibility, times of open moments, times of being alive. I have been given great scoops of joy by women even before I begin to listen carefully, respectfully, diligently to their stories. They have given me full measure, pressed down and then given me more. So much love, so much joy, so much fun in their eyes when they remember their urban milkmaid outfits and perhaps, sweet, unforeseeing selves.

And I wonder if I will hear the smaller quieter stories. The counternarratives to the golden hours. The other side of being a snowy white middle class, menopausal woman.

I was wearing a Laura Ashley dress the first time he hit me.

I remember standing there in my Laura Ashley dungarees with the baby, watching as he walked away.

I remember holding her in my arms in the Laura Ashley cot quilt my mum had made, and knowing she was dead.

I remember sitting on the sofa in that old frock, cutting up all those stupid, stupid Laura Ashley milkmaid dresses and making a patchwork quilt with them as my depression really bit.

Constantine and Reuter again:

Cloth. What an elegant substance it is, at play with the breeze,  
In combat with the wind  
Protecting and wrapping and shielding and comforting.

... Cloth, that old silent companion of the human race, has always kept very special company with artists (p. 9).

Malcolm, another colleague, is talking about handling data. He says no matter how careful we are when we handle talk, no matter how pristine the white gloves we wear, we will always leave our finger prints on the glass, our maker's mark.

Of course, of course,

The glorious Eve Sedgwick urges us to read Renu Bora, who celebrates this very point. Because Bora alerts us to the instructive distinction between texture and texxture.

You may wish to hear this again. Between texture with one x and texxture with two.

Texxture, (with two xs) Eve tells us,

... is the kind of texture that is dense with offered information about how, substantively, historically, materially, it came into being. A brick or metalwork pot that still bears the scars and uneven sheen of its making would exemplify texxture in this sense. (p. 14)

These women I will interview have been creating texxxxxxxxture for years with every stitch they have put into their quilts. I want to let that texxxxxture sing out. I want to celebrate our making with them.



Pattie Chase says:

A woman made utility quilts as fast as she could so her family wouldn't freeze,  
and she made them as beautiful as she could so her heart wouldn't break.

To make is to connect. The work is relational. The work is throwing gossamer threads, over and over and over again.

For years I have made quilts with these women I will interview. For Bosnia, for Alzheimers, for the Woodland Trust. We are standing by to send quilts to Japan when the call comes. We make a steady supply of unquilted coverlets for the premature Bristol babies too tiny to cope with a layer of wadding, and to give to their mothers to keep no matter what the outcome. We would wrap up the entire world if we could. We understand the intimate relationship between fabric and disaster: shredding, rending and tearing, patching, stitching and darning.

Constantine and Reuter one last time:

Bits and pieces of cloth sewn together curtain the world....Every civilization has this tradition of squirrelling away precious fragments until they are needed to construct a whole. Works of art, especially in the twentieth century, are often nothing more than ordered fragmentation - with each fragment carrying its own cultural load. (p. 91)

The memories, with the scraps of Laura Ashley cotton are squirrelled away. And we are very careful which ones we select to display to the researcher, to subject to the light of day.

### **Concluding thoughts**

These two pieces of arts-based work, one graphic and one performative, are offered as a way of thinking about the contribution of the aesthetic to the study of organisations. I suggest that they are powerful ways to show the multi-faceted nature of knowing, the levels of language and the co-existence of many often contradictory narratives in the data we hear. I think that arts-based methods are particularly useful for showing two sides of a phenomenon simultaneously: the purity of cotton and its shadow side, the happy narratives of being a woman and a quilter, and the sorrows and disappointments. These aesthetic methods are indispensable in capturing and (re)presenting the absent present without which social sciences and organizational research can only ever be partial.

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Ann Rippin is a senior lecturer in Management at the University of Bristol. Her research interests are largely methodological as she is fascinated by art as a form of management research. Her work focuses on narrative, organisational history, and, recently, branding and identity. She is currently working on a major project on the impact of Laura Ashley plc on women's sense of self and construction of the feminine. She describes herself as an academic quilter and makes large textile pieces as part of her work. Her quilts have won prizes internationally, and she regularly exhibits her quilts. Galleries of her work can be found on her blog: [www.annjrippin.wordpress.com](http://www.annjrippin.wordpress.com).