

Intertwined: Narrative Cloth and the value of craft history Rachel Johnston

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“Both the difficulties and the possibilities of making things well apply to making human relationships. Material challenges like working with resistance or managing ambiguity are instructive in understanding the resistances people harbour to one another or the uncertain boundaries between people.” (Sennett, 2009, 289)

What can we learn from looking at the past and the values associated with making? I don't need to make my own clothes, I don't need to spin and weave, but it's important for me to do so. The process of working with materials has an intrinsic personal meaning – as Darian Leader says it *“touches on something at the heart of our embodied experience.”* (Leader, 2016, 3) Embedded in the body, the gestures of making give space for thinking and mapping experience in a consideration of collective and individual identity. The title here, 'Intertwined' refers to the making of thread and fabric, but also the complex interconnections that the making of fabric has with individuals and societies.

The Narrative Cloth project was a year-long collaboration between Fine Art and History staff at the University of Chichester. The aim of the project was to make a series of open-ended contemporary interpretations of research by Dr Danae Tankard into the clothing of the 17th century rural poor with reference to the Historic Clothing Project based at the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum. The project culminated in an exhibition at the museum in September 2015.

1. Stories and identity: Elizabeth Coulstocke

“Poets long ago recognized the power of cloth to symbolise the binding together of social relations. Spinning and weaving form a major theme in Homer's epics, as human destinies are exposed through the threads which gods or fates bind around a person at birth.”
(Weiner A, 1989, 33).

The stories that Danae Tankard brings to life through her research are very human and identifiable. Embedded in the history of textile production and clothing, she uses mostly written material such as inventories, court records and wills to form a 'dynamic view of clothing'. There are very few surviving examples of clothing of the rural poor from this era, so looking at the manufacture, acquisition and appearance of garments in contemporary written sources forms the starting point in research. For me the documents were of particular interest and provoked questions around social dynamics, trade and the value placed on textiles during this period: the monetary and personal value attributed to cloth in the 17th century was difficult to comprehend from a contemporary perspective – why would someone leave clothing in a will?

In her paper *“A pair of grass green woollen stockings”: the clothing of the rural poor in seventeenth century Sussex*, Tankard relates the story of Elizabeth Coulstocke of Ditchling who was indicted in 1651 for the theft of one and three quarter pounds of mingled green and tawny yarn from weaver John Copper. In the court deposition Copper stated that a one and a half yard length of 'green and tawny' cloth found in Elizabeth Coulstocke's possession had been made from yarn stolen by her from his workshop and belonging to another customer. Coulstocke claimed that she had bought wool from three people, dyeing it a green and 'tawny' colour before spinning it herself and giving it to a different weaver, John England, to make into cloth. The story is complicated and, as Tankard points out in her paper, in these complex interlinked accounts it is impossible to know who is telling the truth, especially as in this instance the disputed yarn had been made into fabric at the time of the accusation.

In this story, as in many similar court records, specific weights and measures as well as detailed descriptions of the materials form an essential starting point in determining the sequence of events

and guilt of the individual on trial. The unfolding narrative shows the intimate relationship that people had with the production of their own clothing; the idiosyncrasies that arose from the processes of spinning, weaving and dyeing were so personal that individuals could identify their own work even once it had transformed through use, from unspun wool to cloth for example. The same was true of wear and tear – the shaping of garments through use and the way individuals made repairs was highly recognisable. In Coulstocke's case this record of skill and dexterity was in contrast to the fact that she could not write and whose presence on the document was indicated by the words "the mark of Elizabeth Coulstocke" and a scrawled cross.

2. Interpretation: body and identity, the value of making.

Susan J Vincent describes her investigation into historic dress as an attempt to "diminish the distance" between those living in the past and ourselves and I considered Elizabeth Coulstocke – what lay behind the facts and figures? As a character Coulstocke seems distant, but some of the activities and many of the values under discussion in the indictment, have relevance now. Did the accusation of theft weigh heavily on her conscience? What were the personal and social consequences of her actions? A new set of narratives was suggested.

In considering the kinds of human experience that might connect past and present, the immediate connection was a haptic one – Coulstocke had spun her own yarn, so this was where I began, starting to spin one and three quarter pounds (the disputed amount) of wool with a drop spindle, reflecting upon the intense labour and time required in the creation of cloth. As Pallasmaa says, "*The hand registers and measures the pulse of lived reality.*" (Pallasmaa, 2009, 117)

The difficult-to-understand concept of value came sharply into focus - the time taken to spin even a small amount of yarn was huge. As Craig Muldrew says in his article about the economics of spinning during this period, a spinner "would have carded and spun at a rate of just under 7 lbs of raw wool each per week" in order to provide enough yarn for one for weaver. Honestly, I didn't even finish the one and three quarter pounds. The persistence for me was a choice, an experiential process rather than a necessity. In a society where to master skills was essential to life and to be able to trade and exchange materials was key, the act of making things with skill had wider implications in terms of social cohesion and cooperation. If you were outside this chain of production or violated its expectations you placed yourself beyond the boundaries of the community. As Richard Sennett suggests, human nature and the constraints society puts on us find a parallel in the processes and materials we use; we have to be adaptable and imaginative - when things don't go according to plan you change your plan (or perhaps in Coulstocke's case, your story).

3. Symbolism and justice: gloves and their meaning

The intensely tactile nature of spinning brought a focus to the hands and, making a connection with clothing, gloves, as Susan J Vincent describes them "a textile proxy" for the hand. Hands are "*Clenched in anger, pledged in loyalty, extended in friendship, plighted in love*" (Vincent, 2009, 133) In historical terms, gloves related closely to the matter of justice and were a symbol of honour and trust in trade. SW Beck's 1883 volume about the history and symbolism of gloves tells us that a glove was borne aloft at a fair as a sign of security "*a material guarantee of justice and good governance*" (Beck, 1887,194)

The rural poor would only have considered them important for manual tasks (cutting hedgerows or blacksmithing), but the symbolism of innocence and justice that surrounded them in wider society was enormous, embedded in the language and ritual of social relations. In a court of law, gloves were laid before the judge as a demonstration of innocence, "*white gloves at the maiden assize represented the zero of a crime - the antithesis of the black cap.*" (Beck, 1887, 51)

This notion of the bodily hand as a maker and the symbolic 'proxy hand' of the glove, rooted in the language of law and justice, coalesced into a theme: the interpretation of the Coulstocke story

became a series of gloves, each pair or set weighing one and three quarter pounds; some were made of felt, most woven yarn and wire. The aim was to show base instinct balanced against societal rules: culture versus nature.

Weaving was important both as a way of constructing a coherent object which retained a sense of bodily imprint, but also referring directly to the original story in both practical and relational ways. The huge symbolic weight of weaving and its associations with narrative and time resonated with the Coulstocke story, "*We talk about the 'fabric' of our society when characterising our collective ideas.*" (Sullivan Kruger, 2008, 12).

The Platonic proposition that weaving may be seen as an analogy for ideal political structures and harmonious social relations, where warp and weft are perfectly balanced and mutually supportive, seemed apt: "*Was it not these characteristics that enabled Plato to use the model of weaving as the paradigm for "royal science", the art of governing people or operating the state apparatus?*" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 475)

4. Bodily Consequences: Making and wearing

In finding the scale and form for these pieces, I referred to my body not only in the studied hapticity of the making processes (my own hand was the template for the glove), but in acknowledgement of the fact that units of measurement arose originally from the body. In Coulstocke's indictment, there are references to weights and measures and the first piece 'An Ell', referred to a common measurement of cloth. It is thought that in its original form an ell defined the length from the tip of a man's middle finger to the elbow, around 18 inches, although there were variations in the measurement according to geography and custom: an English ell was 45 inches, the length from fingertip to opposite shoulder.

From the structure of the woven 'hand' I added a mass of extruding yarn (related to my own height) - the chaos of the emerging thread representing the heightened immediacy of sensory processes (then and now), but also the reality of chaotic and uncertain human relationships. In the tension between the ideal of structure and the actuality of interaction, a state of flux exists.

"The original disorder, the raw wool, is replaced by an organised fabric, in which each fibre is in place. To weave is really "to give order to a great tangle of matters" in order to "put matter in its proper place." It is to interweave what is different, contrary or hostile, in order to produce a unified, harmonious textile..." (Scheid & Svenbro, 1996,12)

Wearing the gloves was a crucial part of the process, shaping them and giving them identity in relation to places and people. I wore the gloves in various locations and as they were worn they became shaped, picking up detritus from the path and connecting wearer and place or wearers with each other. Dragging the gloves on a path, the weight of them became a felt experience - they became heavier, catching and snagging on stones as they accumulated material - leaves, grass, bits of wheat, twigs. The morphing and changing of the glove as it was worn resonated with the earlier ideas around wear and tear and how garments could be identified through idiosyncrasies evident in repairing clothes and shoes.

A state of open-mindedness as to the consequence of this action was necessary and I used the moment of wearing to explore some thoughts. I tried to put myself in Coulstocke's shoes - what did she feel? The focus on her became a new experience, the made object a catalyst and a bridge between eras. What happens in the wearing process?

I followed my instincts and after a while I started to fling the extruding threads into the air. An imaginative space opened up and the story evolved.

"All artworks articulate the boundary between the self and the world, both in the experience of the artists and in that of the viewer/listener/occupant." (Pallasmaa, 2009, 20)

As Coulstocke's experience was articulated through her actions and the record of events, so a new narrative emerged in a set of objects and prints. The wearing photos became monoprints – another transformation and another telling of the story.

In addition to wearing the gloves in particular places, I made looped pairs (also 1 and ¾ lbs) with hands that connected (suggesting a kind of dead end – you can't trade with yourself) and that could also be linked with other pairs, the relationship between myself and the other wearer becoming the point of focus. I had intended to investigate this idea in an illustrative sense – the wearers being figures who animated the characters in the original story, following a train of narrative thought and focussing on the politics of exchange. Push and pull, the tension of negotiation and the cooperation required in trade were driving forces in setting up these images.

The surprising consequence of this experiment, however, was that the outcomes were about the 'here and now' characters involved. The intimacy and tension became attached to other things... affection, frustration, fear... "in many social relations we do not know exactly what we need from others – or what they ought to want from us." (Sennett, 2008, X) as Richard Sennett says, seemed to play out.

Wearing the gloves as part of the making process lent physical and metaphorical shape to the objects, but I had not intended that the exhibition audience would necessarily interact with them. Visitors, however, seemed inextricably drawn to the gloves - it seemed to form a spontaneous reaction to the work. A pile of felt gloves near the entrance to the exhibition was an immediate draw and virtually every visitor picked up and put on a glove. This was partly down to context – the Weald and Downland Museum is a hands-on kind of place, but there seemed to be something more visceral to it than this – a kind of bodily recognition or a desire for transformation, integrating into the material world of an artwork and the story. Interestingly, visitors in their interpretation of the work made associations with activities such as Cats Cradle and winding yarn – tasks that require cooperation.

Making being a bodily activity leads to processes of discovery that have their own momentum and meaning - everything becomes shaped as part of an ongoing process in which all actions have a consequence and the time and narrative of the making is embedded within the cloth.

In moving on from this work (which had felt like the start rather than the conclusion to something) I have continued to work with the idea of glove, thread and interconnection to create a new series of pieces.

Using my own body in relation to the objects has driven the way this work has evolved, but expanding the opportunities for others to engage has become key in considering new ways for making and for interacting with others. I tentatively asked people to wear gloves from this new set to see what would happen, but participants offered themselves as subjects with insistence and seemed genuinely curious. Several people commented on the weight of the gloves and how in wearing them they moved and behaved in particular ways. The consequences were thought-provoking, poignant and life affirming, rather like the original story.

In attempting to 'diminish the distance' between past and present we see that the tension and entanglement inherent in human relationships and the cooperation and restraint required in negotiating them, are as understandable to us now as they were in Coulstocke's time. That the skills required to live peacefully with others may parallel those needed in craft is significant perhaps because those skills exist so often on the periphery of contemporary society. Richard Sennett suggests that in an era of "*cultural homogenisation... The desire to neutralise difference, to domesticate it arises... from an anxiety about difference.*" (Sennett, 2013, 8)

The idiosyncrasies of mark and making were intrinsic to the way 17th century individuals provided for themselves and interacted with others – shaping identity through making was an evident quality in everyday life. From the process of exploring the story of Elizabeth Coulstocke arise questions concerning the value of making and craft now and the possibilities for using it as a way of creating new narratives and means of communication.

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For a selection of related imagery please go to: <http://racheljohnstonart.com/Narrative-Cloth>