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## Locally Grown & Sustainable Textiles: Exploring Current Possibilities

Faith Hagenhofer

*Hercules Farm, Tenino, Washington*, [faithatcatspaw@yahoo.com](mailto:faithatcatspaw@yahoo.com)

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### Locally Grown & Sustainable Textiles: Exploring Current Possibilities

Faith Hagenhofer

[faithatcatspaw@yahoo.com](mailto:faithatcatspaw@yahoo.com)



*Figure 1. Author's flock, who are out, standing in their field, grazing. Faith Hagenhofer, photographer.*

Conversations on “sustainability”, a term that has been used to describe a broad array of ethical methods and materials, have been expanding, whether one speaks of food, energy, or – as here - textiles. When food activists and farmers participate in this conversation one value they have embraced as having high quality, is” localness”, equating high quality foodstuffs with small carbon footprint, small farms, and the ability to pay attention, as in tending their crops and land closely. Borrowing this term in speaking of textiles often limits interpretation to local assembly of materials. I am going to speak more of a bioregional approach to textile production. (Figure 1) Together, “local and sustainable” must refer to specific places and practices. I use my farm as an example. 21 Years ago I began working with hand felted wool as an art medium. Over the course of time and with the influence of children I began to raise goats, then sheep. For seven years farming and art making have been moving toward a soft collision in my life; these days many of my studio activities are acts of artisanal farming and/or farmeric artistry. Currently 90% of the wool I use in my sculptural work originates with the sheep I raise, an elastic cross bred flock of between 12 and 20 sheep. I relish this intimate involvement with my art supplies - physically, practically and conceptually. In the last 2 years I have been tending a madder cultivation project involving about 8 other gardeners and running an 1/8 acre test plots of flax as well. These projects are in service to investigations into issues of local and sustainable fibers/textiles, from my ground up, and include research into sustainable textiles worldwide. (Figure 2)



***Figure 2. researching Artistic farming and farmeric artistry.  
Faith Hagenhofer, photographer.***

The good news is that “sustainability” has entered the textile, fashion and clothing conversation in a big way. Almost every element of the textile life cycle, from supply chain to fabrication, up to and including disposal is being scrutinized, and many of the players and voices in the conversation are big. Large companies are engaging in sustainable textile development, among them Patagonia, Ibex and Nau, as we might expect, but also Nike, new Balance, Target, Kohl’s, Eileen Fisher, Nordstrom, and DuPont. In early October, 2012, Hong Kong will host a Sustainable Textiles Conference, which brings these and many other businesses together with various players in the NGO and policy realms. On the agenda were: Public/private collaboration, social and environmental responsibility, much about cotton, and the recently released Higg Index which is a sustainability standards measurement tool.<sup>1</sup> Other discussions of sustainable fashion qualities that show great ethical traction include designing out waste, using resources- virgin and otherwise- with the best ecological profile, responsible supply chains and can include concerns and criteria such as water quality, design for disassembly or recycle, low impact production methods, local or heritage production, responsible animal husbandry and welfare standards, fair trade production conditions and wages, and possibly even indigenous textile and handcrafts protection and support.<sup>2</sup>

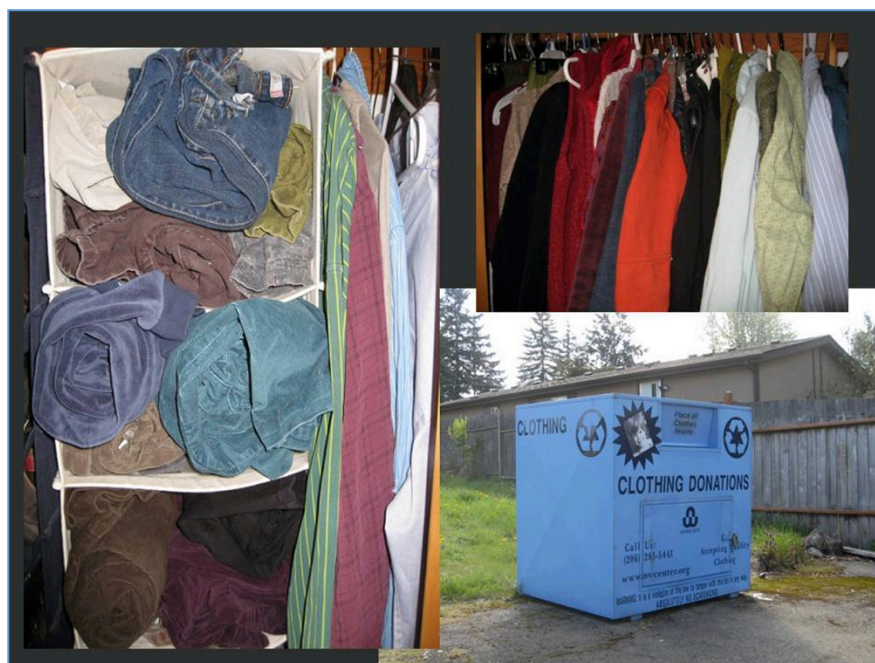
The bad news is that the production of fibers as farmed materials isn’t a basis for every sustainable fashion conversation. Because of this there are erroneous examples of sustainability that show up, such as encouraging consumers to just buy better stuff- deemed sustainable because the labor used to produce

<sup>1</sup> [www.TextileExchange.org](http://www.TextileExchange.org) , accessed 1 September, 2012

<sup>2</sup> Lucy Siegle, *To Die For: is fashion wearing out the world?* (London: HarperCollins, 2011), 276.



them was equitable, or the designer worked to incur no waste in the cutting of pattern pieces, or the fabrics used are guaranteed to be recyclable. All these and many more that we can find, while good, do not address issues of appetite, and don't discuss textiles from a resources perspective, from a bioregional perspective, from a small farms perspective. On a global level, in order for fashion to be sustainable there must be a lot less of it produced, and what is produced must have a long life designed into it. Using parallels to food consumption, which both work and don't when discussing sustainability in clothing, few people would think kindly of producers who encouraged them to purchase way more food than they might ever eat. Food waste feels embarrassingly wrong to most people, in ways that having entire rooms devoted to shoes doesn't. In *To Die For* British fashion writer Lucy Siegle suggests that we should compare the way fashion is shopped for with "the way the conscientious consumer navigates grocery shopping. The process of filling your cart with an eye to ecological credentials, provenance and fairness can verge on the forensic. "Why is it", she asks "that we know (*and want to know*) perfectly well how to buy an organic Fair Trade banana... but not how to buy a sustainable pair of tights?"<sup>3</sup> A friend of mine who has been a chef for 20 years recently acknowledge having given little thought to the pig that led to the pork. Just think of all the years we've each spent getting dressed without wondering about the lamb that led to the sweater, the grasses that led to garments. The disconnected and toxic relationship western societies have with clothing - its manufacture, use, and eventual disposal - will kill us. (Figure 3)



*Figure 3. stuffed closet and random clothing recycle drop-off kiosk.  
Faith Hagenhofer, photographer.*

As a fiber farmer, I ask where do I step into the textile production dance? Surely at the raw materials and the manufacture end, but not without consideration of the chain of events that follow. In the introduction to, *EcoChic: the fashion paradox*, Sandy Black acknowledges the numerous issues that accompany each stage of the fiber to fashion process, well before the customer finally selects, wears,

<sup>3</sup> Siegle, *To Die For*, 236.

launders, and subsequently discards their various garments.<sup>4</sup> *Eco-Chic* features the work of numerous designers from whose work one easily concludes that not only are design work and manufacture “green” issues, but that how we consume absolutely shapes the future of the planet.<sup>5</sup> So, again, how do I as a small farmer in the United States, participate in positively breaking into and changing what has been till now the unsustainable cycle of clothing/textiles and fashion? Many of the answers rest in clean, green, responsible farming practices. Green, clean, careful and caring, environmentally responsible farming practices, with careful and attentive breeding programs, no matter the size of one’s enterprise, are the broad brush strokes of a recipe for producing a high quality adequate quantity product. No matter the market, tending a flock of sheep – large or small – entails daily tending, with conscientious feed adjustments, attentive field and pasture management and the growing of good grass, timely local hay purchases, annual breeding and lambing, and constant worry. And regardless of size, US shepherds face competition with the enormous ranching facilities of Australia and New Zealand, where the main focus of growing lambs is wool—so much so that their ability to undercut US lamb markets is a result of it being essentially a byproduct, and a valuable one at that, of their “vast and profitable wool industry.”<sup>6</sup>

In May of this year New York City hosted the International Wool Trade Organization meeting, a big deal for both New York as a fashion center and the US. According to the FAQs on their website “wool is produced in about 100 countries from a global flock of more than 1 billion head of sheep. Major producers are Australia, Argentina, China, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, New Zealand, Russia, South Africa, United Kingdom and Uruguay.”<sup>7</sup> I dare say the United States used to be able to be included, as a place where we could, at very least, clothe ourselves from our flocks and crops. The next description of wools current origins might give some clues as to one reason why the US is not there anymore. “Depending on the country and region, wool producers range from small farms to large scale commercial grazing operations.”<sup>8</sup> This statement has a lot to say about ever larger and ever more consolidated and corporate farming trends in the US, as it contributed to the demise of wool here. That half of the story, when met by manufacture outsourcing, completes the story. According to USDA statistics published by the American Sheep Industry Association “sheep ranching peaked in the US in 1945, when ranchers raised 56 million head.”<sup>9</sup> Though there was participation in the conference by numerous American wool apparel companies (who do not necessarily manufacture here), the role left for the US, according to the IWTO, is sad. IWTO hopes that the participation of these American companies indicates “a stronger footprint of wool usage in North America”<sup>10</sup>. Buy, buy, buy!

We may again take a lesson from Lucy Siegle who has observed the decline of clothing manufacture and in particular, of wool in Britain : “We had built up an army of finishers, tailors, machinists, cutters, colourists (dyers), weavers, and of course designers, served by the sort of infrastructure of farmers producing sheep for wool, slaughterhouse producing for the leather trade, cobblers, menders, and rag and bone men (recyclers) that today’s sustainable warriors can only dream about.”<sup>11</sup> As one such

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<sup>4</sup> Sandy Black, *Eco-Chic: the fashion paradox* (London: black dog publishing, 2012),14-47.

<sup>5</sup> Black, *Eco-Chic*.

<sup>6</sup> Julia Moskin, “American Ranches Struggle to Keep Lamb on the Table”, *New York Times*, 20 April, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> [www.iwto.org/wool/factsheet](http://www.iwto.org/wool/factsheet) , accessed 6 July, 2012

<sup>8</sup> [www.iwto.org/wool/factsheet](http://www.iwto.org/wool/factsheet) , accessed 6 July, 2012

<sup>9</sup> [www.sheepusa.org](http://www.sheepusa.org) , accessed 15 July, 2012

<sup>10</sup> [www.iwto.org/wool/factsheet](http://www.iwto.org/wool/factsheet) , accessed 6 July, 2012

<sup>11</sup> Siegle, *To Die For*,111.

“sustainability warrior” I would take on the work to support the possibilities for these skills and those associated with growing raw materials, to form sectors of our national work profile again. (Figure 4) Circumstances, like those Siegle describes, including the vast infrastructural system of fiber mills, were not that different in the United States. Siegle asks, as I have time and again<sup>12</sup> “What on earth happened to our wool industry?” Only the sense of tradition and longevity associated with these trades and crafts in the US was shorter with less timeworn culture to buttress it, which may account for how easily the US has abandoned these pieces of textile infrastructure and sent them off shore. We might also ask the same questions of other fibers as well, knowing as we do that vast quantities of linen as well as linsey-woolsey were produced in New England through the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as in other parts of the country. In the Willamette Valley of Oregon, for example, Salem hosted a flax mill until the mid 1950’s. The vibrancy of locally growing of our foodstuffs, with practices that are hopefully organic and sustainable, relies on most of the added value occurring on the buyers end. Consumers cook raw materials into delicious meals of their choosing. Then they eat, consuming the food again. They do not expect to only ever buy ready to eat. In comparison precious few of us buy a garment we like the fit of, knowing full well that the first thing we will do with it is replace the buttons.



***Figure 4. The authors spinning wheel, sheep and daughter, Nora White shearing.  
Faith Hagenhofer, photographer.***

Let’s look again to the role a small farmer might have in 2012, in the United States. After a year or two of satisfying my studio needs for fiber, I have, in the last 5 years sought to market more of my wool clip. I have sold my products at local farmer’s markets, online, and through word of mouth. During any given year I’ll harvest between 65 and 80 # of wool fleeces. After being shorn the fleeces must be washed, picked and carded to batts or roving, and then possibly processed further, through mill spinning to yarns, dyeing (either in the wool or yarn dyeing), or creating quilt batts, all using custom mills. All these result

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<sup>12</sup> Siegle, *To Die For*, 164.

in products with potential, for the ordinary buyer to purchase, much like one would purchase ingredients. Should I desire to have wool from my farm become yardage, or further still a garment, more processes are required- weaving, fulling, cutting, stitching, and let's not even talk about design work. Also, as you have probably already realized, each of these steps involves skilled labor. And, to be skilled at raising great sheep that produce fabulous fiber doesn't mean that one has tailoring or design skills. Like many other small farmers I have purchased many of these services, before ever bringing my crop to market. Clearly there are dilemmas here, because not having the time or skills to accomplish these tasks leaves me, as a small farmer, either paying upfront, which I have done, marketing raw fleeces or needing other markets. Skills notwithstanding, I have been unsatisfied with solutions that have me bearing all the value adding up-front costs beyond those necessitated in growing fibers- keeping sheep and shearing fleeces. I have grown to wanting to push the current situation of small farmers like me, so that we may have a viable place in the US economy and in the world of textile production. Small landholder farm production is often a given in many other places in the globe- Remember that list of countries IWTO cataloged as the world's largest producers? But it hasn't been the norm in textile production in the US in many years. Many rancher/sheep growers/fiber farmers my size, participate successfully in niche markets for yarns. Selling at craft festivals, specialty events and the like; serving this market for exotic, hand crafted; meeting an American hobbyists demands – knitters with cash to spare: Sadly these can appear to be the only entry points for a small farmer. Selling ones clip to the few wool apparel companies in the US has the obstacle that they purchase wool by the bale, roughly 400#. Also, they often limit the wool they will buy to white wool, while many of the exceptional US breeds grow excellent colored wool. Finally, companies that have been successful here, such as Rambler's Way and Pendleton are often vertically integrated, having at least some interest in the flocks whose wool they are using.

The largest professional organization for sheep (which is not the same as the breed specific organizations), the American Sheep Industry Association,<sup>13</sup> has a campaign on to increase the economic profile of domestic wool. It's called "*Let's Grow.. with two plus*",<sup>14</sup> and it challenges farmers to increase their flocks, ostensibly to meet demand that appear to be detailed only in so far as meat is concerned, by 2 head for small farmers and 2 head per hundred if flock size is that large. I'm dismayed that the website and organization don't appear to address small fiber farmer marketing concerns. They do offer many directory services, among them lists of statewide wool pools. Washington state doesn't have one, and what stands in for it is a modest online sales directory, [www.washingtonwool.net](http://www.washingtonwool.net). I have great admiration and the deepest respect for small farms who are able to be small batch yarn producers. Their vertical integration on a small scale is a remarkable investment, and often their craftsmanship is awesome. And I credit them with creating products that are reflective of a feel for their place, creating culture in the way local foods reflect "terroire", the taste of their place. My goal is to have my farm product enter a larger supply chain and end up in larger but also local markets, helping to normalize an American expectation of "locally" produced ordinary, quotidian, and wonderful products, while giving me a good return and allowing my farm to remain economically viable. Take socks for example. Imagine what regional socks of the US might be like, based on the sheep that thrive in various locales. One could have ones sock needs met with Southwestern Navajo Churro socks, northern Midwest Icelandic socks, Wyoming Rambouillet, or Oregon Columbia. It may, on the surface, seem an absurd idea. According to Colin Gale and Jasbir Kaur, authors of *The Textile Book*, "Western fashion and design culture (*from which our clothing choices derive*) assumes that Western style is modern and all

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<sup>13</sup> [www.sheepusa.org](http://www.sheepusa.org) , accessed 15 July, 2012

<sup>14</sup> [www.growourflock.org](http://www.growourflock.org) ,accessed 15 July, 2012



other styles, including other cultures, are at once ethnic and historical.”<sup>15</sup> They go on to acknowledge that handmade things that contain flaws, which act to enhance them, make them more human, charming and, and imbue them with that troubling quality, authenticity. Again, paralleling food industries, a recent New York Times article put forth data on US exports of beer from regional microbreweries. These beers are in high demand in Europe precisely because they reflected authentic American culture.<sup>16</sup> Authenticity and culture as benchmarks for clothing production is another discussion entirely.

Currently I’m working with a group of farmers like myself, from Washington and Oregon, on the baby steps of wool pooling, forming a wool co-op, or collectively investing in value added / branded products. We have been conversing on line, in between flushing our ewes for breeding, mucking their barns, and myriad other activities. We will meet for the first time in November at the Washington Tilth conference. Together we will perhaps reach bales-size, at least. I’m also sure that the question of organic practices and certification will enter the conversation. Currently the standards for certifying textiles are identical to those for ingestible food crops. This process favors large producers in the case of sheep. In my case my lambs are grass fed. I buy hay from my neighbor, which accounts for about 40% of what I feed, supplementing my pastures. I cannot certify my neighbor’s field, though I know it well, and they acknowledge that no chemicals are ever put on these hayfields. Inspired in the same way, I am currently working with my local county extension agent, Lukas Patzek, as we explore ways to bring the potential for flax growing back to the Pacific Northwest, and to a broader audience. (Figure 5)



*Figure 5. Author rippling 2012 flax harvest, Douglas White, photographer.*

This may involve varietal testing, and feasibility study for flax processing. Currently Vancouver BC is home to a patented flax processing plant, Crailar, who has apparently perfected an enzyme retting

<sup>15</sup> Colin Gale and Jasbir Kaur, *The Textile Book*, (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002), 72.

<sup>16</sup> Dan Frosch, “Craft Brewing Finds a Welcome Atmosphere”, *New York Times*, 2 March, 2012.



method, which greatly eases one of the tough spots in the chain of activities that are necessary to transform flax plants into linen. So far, on my 1/8<sup>th</sup> acre, I have successfully grown, harvested, dried, and rippled my crop. My seeds are ready to be winnowed and my fibers are dew retting as we speak. Crailar's website offers the fill-in box for a farmer: "Are you interested in growing flax for Crailar?"<sup>17</sup> it asks. I have not yet heard back from them, but I anticipate that they will have crop size requirements that make it difficult for a small farmer.

In a recent issue of *American Craft*, Sasha Duerr, exceptional natural dyer and founder of the Permacouture Institute in California's Bay Area, is quoted: "Textiles are almost an invisible aspect of our society. Everyone wears them. You need them in your life. Yet understanding where they came from is so abstract to most people."<sup>18</sup> In the same issue the editor wrote: "Sustainability is a work in progress. But a closer relationship to materials and makers is an important step."<sup>19</sup>

Clearly the conversations about "Sustainability" and "Localness" are hot topics with constant changes, and about which there are numerous opinions and from which many want to profit. I've drawn conclusions about textile production, consumption, and industry as well as The Industry: finding more farmer's or specialty markets to carry locally grown yarn is not, by far, the only way forward to realizing local sustainable textiles and guarantee viability of small US fiber farms. Organizing among the small farmers will be a vital first step to designing sustainable textiles with considerations of the sources and resources from the ground up. Being met by knowledgeable and committed careful consumers will make the products of these farmers economically viable.

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<sup>17</sup> [www.crailar.com](http://www.crailar.com), accessed 19 August, 2012

<sup>18</sup> Julie K. Hanus and Joyce Lovelace, "Material World", *American Craft*, April/May 2012, 42.

<sup>19</sup> Monica Moses, "Knowing Our Sources", *American Craft*, April/May 2012, 8.