

WILD FIBRES COMMONING

TWISTING CORDS OF BELONGING

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Abstract

With this text I would like to show how nettles and other wild fibres have changed my self-perception as a cultural scientist over the past three years. My intensive involvement with textile fibres has opened fundamentally different perspectives in research and teaching. I suppose that they have great potential to bridge the conceptual gap between nature and culture that still prevails in people's minds. The conceptual perspective for this field of research is referred to here as *NatureCultureTransfer*. This premise has led to many encounters with other fibre enthusiasts in recent months. Using autoethnographic methods, I have explored my changing relationship to fashion and textiles based on my study of nettles. Workshops and training courses, my impressions of seminars and other autoethnographically recorded explorations of wild fibres and the consequent broadening in textile knowledges are presented here. In addition to the references usually cited, all persons named shared their findings with me and voluntarily gave me permission to publish them, for which I am very grateful.

Keywords: *Nettle; Ethnography; Textile Knowledges; Education of Sustainable Development (ESD)*

WILD FIBRE COMMONS – TEXTILE ACTIVITIES PRODUCE RESISTANCE

For my research, wild fibres are a sign of a common, still loose and at the same time designable textile connection between humans and other than human worlds. How can their transformative power be recognised? – Over the last three years, I have constantly come across wild plants and people who approach them differently. I experience it as an ongoing process of growing community in the sense of actively spreading a mindful and knowledgeable practice in working with wild fibre plants that are easily accessible. I see *commoning* as an activity that enables, creates and maintains vital relationships between me and

other worlds. I look critically and angrily at the increasing capitalisation of common goods and am convinced that the value of these commons cannot be understood in terms of so-called goods but rather as ways of acting. With Silvia Federici (2016) I think, “if commoning has any meaning, it must be the production of ourselves as a common subject” (p. 386). Throughout these connecting encounters, activities and exchanges around wild fibre occurrences, extraction and processing, I am slowly getting an idea of what it might mean to practice a subjectification process that is common to all. The performativity (Barad, 2003) of wild fibres functions for me here on the one hand as a vivid symbol for my abstract, rather philosophically conceptualising thinking, and on the other hand

conceptualising thinking, and on the other hand as a concrete action and transformative manner to handle everyday fibre material honorably (Kimmerer, 2013).

In a joint conversation, the textile artist Alice Fox called it *silent activism*. Grateful for this formulation, which I already appreciate in Fiona Hackney's work (2013), I would like to add a certain defiant resistance. Contrary to general expectation, my sensory attention is directed towards the seemingly insignificant, the incidental or the disruptive, the permanent *vibrating material presence* (Bennett, 2010) of wild fibres. Full of joy, I perceive a kind of *cosmological murmur* (Stengers, 2005) and increasingly see fibres and cord in everything that encompasses me. Nettle fibres, for example, can be easily tapped with bare hands and twisted into strong cord. In no time at all wild and prickly bramble vines are transformed into sturdy ropes that can carry us. The immeasurable variety of wild fibres becomes more obvious to me every day: the tattered tree bark on the asphalt, the fine strands of algae collected at the Baltic Sea, the fine threads surrounding my freshly harvested corn, the floating seeds of the thistle, the little hairy clouds left behind by the daily wandering dike sheep, the remains of your pullover on my lint brush, the woolly mice under our bed. I twist threads out of everything that connects me – with places, things, people and more than human beings, my *Mitwelt*, the world as the epitome of the co-living¹.

SITUATING KNOWLEDGES – CONNECTING WITH OTHERS DIFFERENTLY

A few years ago, working as a lecturer in the theory and history of fashion in the context of fashion design training, I initially felt a growing desire for a truly different approach to fashion, dress and textiles. It seemed increasingly pointless to me to accompany young people in their development into critical beings without being able to provide them with effective tools, which really matters for sustainable change in the fashion system.

1 As Donna Haraway emphasises: “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.” (Haraway 2016, 34).

The global context of Fashion² is too complex for the people working in it to feel self-effective, empowered or capable of acting. As in almost all areas of life, the economic principle of competition prevails in the textile industry, regardless of how sustainable an ecological transformation of fashion is intended to be. *Defashioning* (Niessen, 2022), as a concrete activist practice for a growing appreciative perception of the various fashions, is therefore the only effective option for action for me. As I am not a competitive person myself, I prefer to seek out encounters that create common ground. This entails a different understanding of education: as a teacher, I always remain a learner. To facilitate learning with intrinsic motivation, I need a space that can be explored together and that enables the exchange, acquisition and growth of self-empowering education (Haug, 2003) and social comprehension (Ahmed, 2018).

My longing to teach fashion, dress and textiles differently, to nurture ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway, 1988) and textile practises to explore quite alternative paths of togetherness, initially led me to nature education. A good three years ago, I took part in a three-day nettle workshop run by Mechthilde Frintrup on processing nettle fibres into textile yarns. In her *Brennnessel-Buch* (Frintrup 2020), which is now in its 4th edition and was awarded the German Garden Book Prize in 2021, you will find detailed instructions on how to process nettle fibres as well as biological, cultural and culinary knowledge based on her many years of practical experience with this plant (Fig. 01). The course was organised by the Swiss nature education cooperative *Feuervogel*. This organisation, which grew out of forest education, has now been offering courses, activities and meetings for twenty-five years to “develop a meaningful, constantly growing and sustainable relationship between people and nature” (Feuervogel, 2024). Training lead Nadja Hillgruber has been organising numerous further education courses and campaigns on the magic of nettles for several years, such as the nettle weeks in Winterthur for the association *Brennpunkt*

2 Fashion written with a capital F stands for the global fashion system driven by so called modern, Eurocentric values; fashions in the plural mean all possible ways of dress from various cultures worldwide (Niessen 2022, 440).



Fig. 01

Brennessel, an initiative of *Swiss Nettle*, whose aim is “a holistic approach to the utilisation and promotion of nettles” (Abt & Hofer, 2024). Mechthilde and Nadja have recently translated the film *Nettle Dress* (2024, www.nettledress.org) by Allan Brown, founder of the *Nettle for Textiles Group* (www.nettlesfortextiles.org.uk), to make it more accessible to a German-speaking audience. With her love of textile experimentation and courageous composure, Mechthilde sparked both my nettle addiction and my growing curiosity for the textiles in our immediate surroundings during the workshop. On the way to the hostel together, we each harvested a stalk of nettle (*Urtica dioica*). Equipped with gloves and secateurs, we grasped which growth form is suitable for fibre processing and how to handle and cut the plant: first wipe from bottom to top, so that many of the small, upward-facing stinging hairs on the stem and underside of the leaf break off. They are very fragile, consisting of silica and injure the skin with a light touch. The burning sensation is triggered by the liquid they contain, and the ingredients can even heal rheumatic inflammatory processes.

Equipped with these insights, it is no longer such a great test of courage to brush the underside of a small heart-shaped nettle leaf across one's forehead. This activates the third eye and thus the pineal gland, explained Mechthilde. With my forehead marked, my attention was sharpened when I harvested nettle fibres myself for the first time. After cutting and wiping a plant and then stripping the leaves from top to bottom, I gently bit at the evenly spaced knots between the square, hollow stem and then slowly and forcefully broke it open from the bottom up. This creates a special sound, amplified by the cavity inside. The fibres of the stinging nettle lie next to each other, arranged in parallel in the waxy thin bark. If the lengthwise split wood layer is always broken between the knot-like thickenings of the leaf bases, the bast fibre bundles can be carefully detached at these hinges from above and below. Now, holding the outer layer with the fibres in my hands, which is divided into two to four strips, I am more than enthusiastic, I'm passionate. Even as a child, I loved to peel the bark off willow branches to feel the coolness and fresh scent. The stinging nettle has a special odour

and flavour that quickly become memorable. I'm already beginning to believe that I can even smell and taste a difference between nettles growing in certain regions.

PERSONAL NETTLE STRING REVOLUTION – IN ONE GO

As a dressmaker, fabric has always seemed to me to be the most basic textile material. For as long as I can remember, I have been involved in the production and finishing of textile surfaces, experimented a lot and am always keen to explore other textile practices that are still unknown to me. It's crazy that I've only just realised that thread, yarn, cord or string are actual works of wonder. I seem to have understood these linear structures only as an in-order-to. Sure, I know the groundbreaking book *Women's Work* by Elizabeth Wayland Barber (1994), it's been on my bookshelf for years. But why did I miss out on the *string revolution* for so long? It was only by working with wild fibres that I finally came to this profound realisation: "String seems such a simple, almost inevitable invention, yet its appearance was a momentous step down the road of technology" (Barber, 1994, p. 70). Immediately after I learned about harvesting and extracting the fresh fibre in Mechthilde Frintrup's nettle workshop, she showed us how to make bracelets from twisted cords in no time at all. It is a technique that is as simple as it is ingenious: two strands of fibre are twisted and crossed in constant repetition. I take a strand of the parallel fibres between the thumb and index finger of my left and right hand, two thumbs apart. I twist the strand away from my body with my right hand until it twists over and forms a loop by itself. I take this between the thumb and index finger of my left hand. Now I have two strands, one at the top and one at the bottom. I always twist the upper one away from me and then cross it over the lower one towards me. I hold the formed twist on the left with my thumb and index finger. Now twist the upper one away from the body again, then cross it over the lower one towards the body and hold it in place. Twist, cross, hold, twist, cross, hold, again and again. When I let go of the cord after a few centimetres, it does not untwist. The opposing forces of the crossed twist and the twisted cross hold each other. If the two ends become too short, I lay another fibre strand across the cord as in an inverted V, so that both previous strands, the upper and the lower one, are lengthened. The extension created in this way is included in the next twist-

ing and crossing and disappears. The cord can be continued endlessly in this way, even with different fibres. The most fascinating thing about this basic textile technique is how enthusiastic so many different people are about it. Perhaps it is because of how quickly we can recreate it, without long descriptions and many explanatory words: just by watching and trying it out. The ability to transform the fibres of a supposed weed, of the inconspicuous and ubiquitous stinging nettle, into a tough cord without any additional tools feels like a textile initiation from seemingly nowhere. Therefore, it feels textile spark from nowhere to be able to transform the fibres of a supposed weed, the inconspicuous and ubiquitous stinging nettle, into a tough cord without any additional tools. It seems remarkable to me that Barber speaks of a groundbreaking technological development, and that Mechthilde sees the things made from such cords as 'animated utensils' (Frintrup, 2020, p. 169), without the two being in contradiction. Handmade from wild fibres, these cords contain both perspectives and have given me a deeper, practical understanding of the complex *NatureCultureTransfer* in textiles.

WILD FIBRE BONDS – COMMONLY CREATED CONNECTIONS

The nettle fibre prompted me to start further training in nature-based environmental education at SILVIVA (2024), a Swiss foundation that promotes a holistic approach to the ecological, social, cultural



Fig. 02



Fig. 03

and economic aspects of mankind's relationship with the natural sources of life. I intend to give a fundamentally different perspective to the education of fashions and textiles in terms of their natural and cultural context, both theoretically and practically, which in my opinion cannot be separated. At various training courses, I have had the opportunity to develop activities with textile fibres and to do them with many different people. In addition to stinging nettle fibre, I have studied the use of nutria fur, mushroom leather production and the potential of native trees for textile fibre production from both a cultural and natural science perspective. As part of the training programme, my personal goal is to integrate education for sustainable development (Unesco, 2024) into the teaching of material culture. This is achieved through concrete, practical and theoretical examination of wild fibres, which I translate into we had the task of developing an outdoor game, and to realise our idea we needed a string. action-oriented methods. Cord twisting is the simplest and most impressive. In one of the courses, The others were amazed when I quickly twisted together an extremely robust cord from the delicate blackberry

vines that covered the forest floor. They also wanted to learn it and persuaded me to pass this technique on to all the other participants in the course. It was wonderful, the entire course consisting of mixed-age people with different professional backgrounds was enthusiastic. Many immediately had ideas for application in their own educational settings. For example, the idea was born to develop a group dynamic activity with young people, in which the processing steps are divided up among each other in order to carry the heaviest possible stone with the jointly produced rope. Bramble fibres are thicker, more durable and longer than those of nettle, and their processing is also slightly different, as the fibres are located between the thorny outer skin and the soft, slightly woody stem filled with pith¹. The cord twisting itself was just as fascinating for everyone as it had been for me.

3 A very useful tutorial on processing bramble fibre and many other fibres and further processing is shown by Sally Pointer (<https://youtu.be/3SJdWjSEN6g?feature=shared>). She is an archaeologist and has been teaching ancient heritage skills for many years..

From then on, many of the participants could be seen with happily twisting hands. This common twisted time filled us with great joy and still connects us today.

ENTHUSIASM EDUCATES – DESIGNING TEXTILE TEACHING

For a few months now, I have been responsible for teaching textile education at the Institute for Material Culture, Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg. Fortunately, this job has allowed me to continue my further education and integrate my research on *NatureCultureTransfer* into my teaching. As a matter of course, I shared my previous fibre experiences with the students in the seminar *mit Welten – NaturKulturTransfer mit NesselKraft*, and they have acquired the techniques for fibre extraction and cord twisting (Fig. 02) “I can’t stop,” says Elias Isfort, describing his enthusiasm. For him, it was an important realisation that nettle fibres are available everywhere as a textile material, and he now has the valuable ability to harvest and process them from the plant. This has given him a different approach to nature in practice and a different understanding of aesthetic research in the field of textiles. Sophie Bartsch experimented with obtaining the nettle fibres through the natural rotting process, like the retting of the linen plant in the processing of flax fibres. She found it remarkable how much patience, care and precision are required for this delicate process. Appreciation for the stinging nettle, which was previously only perceived as a painful, annoying weed, grew with every fibre that was sourced and twisted (Fig. 03). This became very clear during the presentation of the specially designed *textile thing* at the end of the seminar: even the shortest, twisted piece of cord is valuable. When student Antonia Rieger returned a borrowed book to me, there was a little cordage inside (Fig. 04). For me it was a precious gift, which I now always associate with her and the wonderful work *Brennnesseln. Ein Porträt* by Ludwig Fischer (2017). It provides an excellent scientific insight¹

4 The book *Die Brennnessel: Kleidendes Unkraut* by Václav Michalička (2021), translated from the Czech into German, provides another very comprehensive short cultural history. In English, the publications *From Sting to Spin: A History of Nettle Fibre* by Gilliam Edom (2010) and *Yarn from Wild Nettles: A Practical Guide* by Birte Ford (2017) are very informative. It is also worth noting that these books are



Fig. 04

into the biological and cultural-historical significance of the nettle plant and has been published in the *Naturkunden*-series, which brings together strong voices in nature writing. The editor and writer Judith Schalansky sees one reason for the problems of our time in the fact ‘that we’ve left nature to the scientists’ (Schalansky, 2021). It is now a matter of finding a different language that can convey nature to people. The seminar showed me: the simple technique of twisting cord is a textile

self-published or by very small publishers.

wild fibres differently. This *NesselKraft*-seminar took place in cooperation with the Regional Environmental Education Centre Oldenburg (RUZ) to initiate, strengthen and further develop thematic cooperation between nature-based environmental education and teacher qualification in textile studies. The aim is now to jointly develop a course for primary school classes about nettles. I sat in on the RUZ course *Our Second Skin*, which has already been held with many school classes, for research purposes. The participating children in a fourth primary school class were highly motivated. In terms of content, this is about the textile chain, which is taught in learning stations from the fibre to the dress. At one station, the children can try out how cords are made by untangling existing cords and twisting them again. One child was particularly active and when I showed how a woollen thread could easily be made from raw wool, which was presented at another table, there was no stopping them. Everyone else who showed an interest was immediately involved and gave it a try. Many children learnt quickly, some developed an ambition that I unfortunately had to carefully curb as there was not enough unspun wool available. The clearly pre-structured concept of the course emphasised other forms of learning: The children were to cognitively deepen their acquired textile knowledge by solving written tasks. However, education for sustainable development needs to involve all the senses equally, enable research-based learning and be multi-perspective. Textiles could empower people to take transformative action if they are trusted to acquire valuable knowledges in an open, self-responsible and intrinsically motivated way. During this interaction, I have a lasting memory of the enthusiasm for textile techniques that was quickly kindled: "I can do that with *anything*," said the child, beaming.

WILD FIBRES WANDER – TEXTILE BONDS GROW

The book *Wild Textiles* by Alice Fox (2022) provides a great overview of the other wild plants that can be used to make cordage. There are detailed instructions on harvesting and extracting fibres from plants previously regarded as weeds. She also processes many other materials, gathering in the wild and usually regarded as rubbish or scrap. Her artistic works encourage people to simply treat things otherwise. For a long time, I had been

toying with the idea of taking part in one of Alice Fox's 'Wild Fibres' workshops and talking to her. In August this year, I had the opportunity to go on an intensive short textile fibre research trip to South Shropshire in Great Britain: Bobby Britnell (2024) organised a three-day workshop with Alice at her studio in Moor Hall. She is a textile artist and expert in bark cloth, and lives in a beautiful place in the middle of nowhere west of Birmingham. With the programme of textile and art educational workshops and meetings at her studio she is also a focal point of the *Textile Study Group* (2024). For more than fifty years, this network has been active in the encouragement and dissemination of artistic textile techniques throughout Britain. The diversity of textile artwork by its currently twenty-five members is extraordinarily remarkable: "If there is a definitive insight to draw from these varied perspectives on creative practice, it is that ways of making as many and varied as the individuals involved" (Hill & Miller, 2020, p. 14). The evening before the workshop at Moor Hall, I was able to gather impressions relevant to my research: I finally got to meet Bobby, and Alice Fox reviewed her artistic path in a lecture for a wider audience, showing numerous works and answering questions from the many guests. Most of the materials for Alice's current work are sourced from her allotment, a rented patch of land and tool shed, amongst others in an urban setting. This is where she grows, harvests, collects, dries and processes all her wild fibres and many other natural stuffs (Fox, 2022). When Alice asked me at the beginning of the workshop what our conversation would be about, what I wanted to know from her, I couldn't tell her. It was only when I got to grips with the fibres that I was able to formulate my thoughts: How can it be that we pay so little attention to the fibre, the cord, the thread and the value of these inconspicuous textile objects? Neither in their materiality nor in their cultural impact do we notice the omnipresence of fibres as the basis of textiles in our everyday surroundings. How can we change this?

During our conversation and in the moments of sharing it becomes clear: Alice does not claim to have any knowledge or skills that she wants to pass on to others. It's more about listening to her conversation with the wild fibres, witnessing the process and entering a conversation with the material, the plants and the place. Making precious little cords from previously completely underestimated, mostly overlooked, often unloved plants



Fig. 05

is a gentle and quiet change that is very fulfilling. Alice doesn't instruct us how to do things and how not to do them. Here she shares how she creates, shows us what she thinks and recounts about where her inspiration comes from: the material itself. She communicates things through her artisanal and artistic dialogue with the properties of what she meets in her everyday environment. In this way, she forms a connection with the natural spaces and cultural places (de Certeau, 1985), available through her creative practise.

The days in Moor Hall were full of intense conversations between all the participants and just as many quiet moments in which we collectively twisted our previously collected fibres into a variety

of cords and strings (Fig. 05). Not only are nettle fibres processed differently from those of bramble, rush, field bindweed, iris or willowherb, even the fibres of a single plant species differ depending on harvest time, growing location and weather conditions. The diversity lies in the difference and therein lies their actual value. Every cord has become different and is now something special for us.

SUMMARISING THOUGHTS – WHAT'S TO COME

Writing this text gave me the opportunity to summarise the numerous experiences of the past three years as well as the most recent ones in a brief

narrative overview. I am very pleased about this, because I often find it difficult not to formulate my research topics in an overly theoretical and conceptual way. What is now pending is a more comprehensive scientific evaluation of the extensive data on *NatureCultureTransfer* by means of autoethnography. I hope I will have enough time and space to continue writing *Textile Circumstances on the Outskirts of Fashion* soon. After all, the nettle course for primary school children also needs to be developed, and another plant fibre love has been kindled in me, willowherb .

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CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Young, wild, and vigorous nettle plant in spring. When carefully processed these fibres are very soft and light green. (Image right is held by the author.)

[Fig. 02] A student who has just learnt the technique of twisting cords packs her treasures into a theory paper. (Image right is held by the author.)

[Fig. 03] A round bundle of nettle fibres from rotten stems, divided and stripped wooden, hollow components and an intact stem. A stone was used to divide the fibres, as the wooden parts were already very hard. (Image right is held by the author.)

[Fig. 04] This little cord gift from a student is still in one of the nettle nature books on my bookshelf. (Image right is held by the author.)

[Fig. 05] Full of pride and appreciation, all workshop participants show each other their small woven cord pieces. (Image right is held by Alice Fox.)

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