

# The Materiality of Research: 'Woven into the Fabric of the Text: Subversive Material Metaphors in Academic Writing' by Katie Collins

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*In this feature essay, Katie Collins proposes that we shift our thinking about academic writing from building metaphors – the language of frameworks, foundations and buttresses – to stitching, sewing and piecing. Needlecraft metaphors offer another way of thinking about the creative and generative practice of academic writing as decentred, able to accommodate multiple sources and with greater space for the feminine voice.*

*This essay is part of a series examining the material cultures of academic research, reading and writing. If you would like to contribute to the series, please contact the Managing Editor of LSE Review of Books, Dr Rosemary Deller, at [lseviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk](mailto:lseviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk).*

## Woven into the Fabric of the Text: Subversive Material Metaphors in Academic Writing



*It's rather like a ball of yarn when it gets tangled up. We hold it this way, and carefully wind out the strands on our spindles, now this way, now that way. That's how we'll wind up this war, if we're allowed: unsnarling it by sending embassies, now this way, now that way (Lysistrata).*

Often there is no space in my favourite café with its walls of textured teal, thronged with faces that may have meant something once to people who've long since donated the quirky paintings and photos to a charity shop. Anyone can find their place among them, bending or stretching to frame a new face in one of the pitted art deco mirrors. Even the rickety tables in the middle, little inhospitable islands buffeted by passing elbows and rucksacks, are full. Academic disciplines are like this: bustling, tightly knit communities, space at a premium. Customs and practices woven into a rich tapestry of enquiry and knowledge; questions and answers interlaced; threads taken up from the writings of the serious, scholarly faces peering down from their frames. But different as each discipline might be from the others – the colours of the walls, the style of the frames and how they are arranged – there's a common strand that runs through: we write.

Weeks later, I sit at my temporary desk – a borrowed kitchen table with one leaf folded down – in my new study that used to be a kitchen. I can see the eighty-year-old seams of the house: two doorways once led to a scullery and a coal store, bricked up now but not yet smoothed out of sight by plaster. Copper pipes, dully glowing, cut off partway down the wall. Compared to what would have been the parlour and dining room, this kitchen was tiny, more reflective of the lowly status of the person who cooked and cleaned than how much space they might need. The women of this house would toil here and now so do I, writing to reinvent, to cobble together fragments in the pauses between other things. Stitching rejected remnants, making a form of frameless art, like a patchwork quilt.

The previous two paragraphs are stuffed with material metaphors: knitting, weaving, tapestry, embroidery and quilting variously represent kinship, identity, complexity, time, structure and style. In the social sciences, though, often we write about our research [as if theories and arguments are buildings](#). Theories have *frameworks* and *foundations* and they need *support*. Arguments can be *constructed*, *shored up* by facts and *buttressed* with a solid line of reasoning. Sometimes they can be *shaky* and even *fall down*. But as well as communicating what we mean, metaphors structure our thinking. Or, at least, the metaphors we choose when we write can reveal a great deal about underlying assumptions. The theories-as-buildings metaphor always makes me imagine an enormous wall made of rectangular bricks, orderly and straight, progressing upwards and onwards. The researcher's job is to climb the scaffolding, find a gap near the top and make a brick to fill it, or to knock a few crumbling bricks out and replace them with others, strong and freshly fired. Or rarely, to grab a spade and start digging a new foundation, because this metaphor doesn't work like Minecraft: bricks can't float, unsupported.

Why does this way of thinking about knowledge hold such sway over us? For one thing, it offers a comforting sense of progress and control. Buildings have blueprints; their construction appears to proceed in a predictable fashion; engineers can calculate precisely where the load bearing walls and lintels need to be; construction workers know how to mix the mortar so it won't crumble. Making buildings is also something that happens in the public sphere; even with houses, the insides only become private when the work is finished and people move in. And though we all know full well that knowledge creation doesn't actually happen in the controlled and predictable way the metaphor implies, this is the structure that it imposes on our writing: an activity that is orderly, involves rationality over emotion and inhabits the public sphere not the private. Notice that these are a set of characteristics that fit nicely with conventional notions of masculinity.

Needlecraft metaphors offer another way of thinking about the creative and generative practice of writing – and about how we write in relation to particular knowledge claims and communities – that is more about piecing together fragments...

...patchwork from best gowns,  
winter woollens, linens, blankets, worked jigsaw  
of the memories of braided lives, precious  
scraps...(Marge Piercy, 'Looking at Quilts', 21)

...of things of varying source and quality (at least, in conventional terms) that wouldn't necessarily fit together seamlessly in the more structured metaphorical tradition of theories-as-buildings. This essay, for example, was stitched together 'by squares, by inches' (Joyce Carol Oates, *Celestial Timepiece*, 22) from fragments of life writing, books, articles and blogs written by feminist art historians and quilt makers, poetry, references to Aristophanes and Thomas Pynchon, books about linguistics and philosophy, personal experience and belief. And now it forms a single piece.

But why do I regard switching from a metaphor of building to one of stitching as a subversive act? For several

reasons. Throughout history, needlework has been a marker of femininity in its various iterations, [a means to inculcate it](#), and something to sneer at as a way of shoring up women's supposed inferiority. [Theodore Roethke](#) described women's poetry as 'the embroidering of trivial themes [...] running between the boudoir and the altar, stamping a tiny foot against God...' (1965), for example. Women's naturally nimble fingers were to be occupied; we were to be kept out of the way and out of trouble, shut in the top room of a circular tower and thus prevented from engaging in the masculine pursuits of politics, thinking, reading and writing and making Art (for a fascinating discussion on women, folk art and cultural femicide, I recommend [this post](#) by Dr Lucy Allen). The frills and fripperies our needles produced were ample evidence, should anyone require it, that we were frivolous creatures entirely unsuited to public life. Or so the story was. So using needlework metaphors in my academic writing blows a resonant raspberry to that notion, for one thing. But the subversion here is not as straightforward as reclamation, of presenting something usually disparaged as having value after all. Femininity and its inculcation is a displeasingly twisted yarn of benevolence and belittlement. The trick is to unpick the knots without snapping the thread and unravelling the beautiful work, to value that which has been constructed as feminine while at the same time escaping its constricting net.

Imagining academic writing as piecing fragments is one way of recognising that it can integrate all sorts of sources but, more significantly, [piecing is also a decentred activity](#). When quilting, one can plan, cut and stitch many individual squares whenever there is a moment spare, before bringing them together to form the overall pattern, which is flat and in aesthetic terms may have no centre or many centres, and no predetermined start or end. This holds true both for the practice of quilting and how we might think differently about academic writing, with each contribution not a brick in a structured wall but a square ready to stitch onto other squares to make something expected or unexpected, the goal depth and intensity rather than progress (see [Mara Witzling](#)). There is sedition here in several senses. This way of imagining how writing works is not individualistic or competitive. Each voice is a thread, and only when they are woven together do they form a whole, as [Ann Hamilton's tapestries represent social collaboration and interconnectedness](#); many voices not one, cut from the same cloth or different.

But acknowledging that one might have to fit the work of writing around other things, a problem that has occupied me from the moment I became a mother, is a particularly rebellious act, I think. As Adrienne Rich expresses in the poem 'Transcendental Etude':

*Vision begins to happen in such a life  
as if a woman quietly walked away  
from the argument and jargon in a room  
and sitting down in the kitchen, began turning in her lap  
bits of yarn, calico and velvet scraps,  
laying them out absently on the scrubbed boards  
in the lamplight, with small rainbow-colored shells  
sent in cotton-wool from somewhere far away,  
and skeins of milkweed from the nearest meadow –  
original domestic silk, the finest findings*

This way of imagining academic writing as something that is part of life, rather than something apart, challenges the

view of the scholar as the extraordinary, solitary genius who sits alone in his study day after day while the minutiae of clothing and food is organised for him, around him, despite him. But with metaphors that emphasise the piecing of fragments, both everyday and exceptional, we recognise a way of working in which every fragment that can be pieced together into a square is [‘the preservation of a woman’s voice’](#).

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**Dr Katie Collins** is a Visiting Scholar at Wolfson College, University of Oxford. Her current project is a work of creative non-fiction, family fables organised as a collection of short stories narrated from different points of view, fragments stitched together into a multi-layered autoethnographic family herstory spanning 100 years. The stories themselves include Tishy fighting with her husband, a man of violent and ungovernable temper, in her bedroom in the autumn of 1899; Ethel, a midwife, attending women who lived in such poverty in 1920s London that there were just old coats and newspapers on the beds and no clothes for the children; and a family conference in 1950 to decide whether the talented 16-year-old Ted should be permitted to take up her place at art school or be sent on a course to train as a comptometer operator.

*This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog as an entity, or of the London School of Economics.*

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