Re-Sourcement as Emancipation:  
A Case Study of Ritualized Sewing  

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Re-sourcement as a rhetorical strategy for emancipation is explored as it occurs through ritualized sewing. Re-sourcement involves creating and living in a world through energy drawn from sources other than patriarchy. It is accomplished in ritualized sewing through rhetorical processes of declaring a commitment, entering into marginal space, cleansing, demarcating boundaries, working magic, returning to the external world, and emblematic display.

The contemporary phase of the feminist movement typically features rhetorical strategies that exemplify persuasion as it traditionally is conceptualized—characterized by direct engagement with and challenge to the patriarchal system. For example, feminists who employ such strategies encourage individuals or groups to make changes in their personal linguistic habits to be more inclusive of women, work to elect political candidates favorable to women’s causes, campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion rights, and work to end sex discrimination in educational institutions and the workplace. Some feminists, however, question such change efforts and have begun to propose strategies that eschew traditional persuasion (e.g., Gearhart, 1979, 1995; Johnson, 1987, 1989; Foss & Griffin, 1995). My purpose in this essay is to contribute to the expansion of the array of emancipatory rhetorical strategies available to feminists by explicating the option of re-sourcement, one that Gearhart (1982) believes “has the potential to be [a powerful] threat” to patriarchy (p. 195).

Feminists question traditional persuasive strategies for a number of reasons. Some reject them as incompatible with feminist values (Foss & Griffin, 1995). One such value is a recognition of the immanent value of all living beings in the universe. With this recognition comes a reluctance to seek to change another’s unique perspective. Self-de-
termination—acknowledging the right of individuals to choose for themselves—is another value violated in traditional persuasive approaches. When audience members are envisioned as authorities on their own lives, with the right to constitute their life worlds as they choose, then a rhetor’s efforts to change those decisions violate individuals’ life worlds (Gearhart, 1979).

Other feminists seek alternatives to the traditional means of persuasion because such efforts often are ineffective. Sonia Johnson (1989), a feminist theorist on whose work I will draw extensively in this essay, makes a case for the ineffectiveness of traditional strategies of resistance:

Women have resisted patriarchy with unsurpassed cunning, craft, and passion for at least 5,000 years. I don’t want to be hasty, but it seems to me that 5,000 years is long enough to try any method, particularly one that doesn’t work. Women want above all else to be fair, and we have given resistance a fair trial. In all fairness then, it is time to try something different (p. 15).

Sally Gearhart (1982) concurs with Johnson’s position about traditional strategies:

It is clear to me now that in terms of these . . . strategies we have already lost. In the world of these . . . strategies there is no antidote for the pell-mell rush to annihilation because all the rules there are devised and revised constantly by the dominant culture and enough of us can never become skilled enough fast enough to beat that system at its own game (p. 195).

Efforts directed toward changing a system, idea, or position sometimes are not just ineffective but may produce greater resistance to a desired change. Johnson (1989) presents a vivid picture of resistance to patriarchy in her metaphorical description of women running with a battering ram at the gate of the fortress of patriarchy:

I looked to see what was happening behind the gate during all this . . . . [The men, drunk with Adrenalin, are being spurred by the assault to incredible heights of creativity. They have invented huge metals to reinforce the gate and walls wherever the ram reveals a weak spot, gradually making the fortress impregnable, impeneetrable. . . . The assault, by forcing them to strengthen, refine, and embellish the original edifice, serves to entrench patriarchy further with every Whoom!] (p. 17).

Another problem feminists associate with traditional persuasion is that it implicates the challenging rhetor in the system being challenged, thus fosiering the rhetor’s dependence on that system. “We become what we resist,” suggests Johnson (1989, p. 56), and the rhetor who confronts a system often becomes ensnared in it:

When we react, when we resist injustice, we are not free, we are bound to the perpetrators, dependent upon their every move, attached to them as if with puppeteers’ strings; they pull our strings and we dance. It’s as if there’s a silent agreement, a contract (1989, p. 297).

Rhetors become implicated in the system they oppose in part because of their reliance on the terms of the patriarchy to construct their challenge. Rhetors cannot institute change by drawing from the terms of a system, however, because those very terms are designed to render opposition invisible or ineffective (Ferguson, 1984, pp. 192-193). Consequently, to confront a system “within its own discourse is to forfeit the struggle” (Ferguson, 1984, p. 29). This notion is akin to Lorde’s (1981) statement of the principle that the “master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 99).

Because of the problems endemic to traditional strategies of persuasion, feminists seek and are developing alternate strategies for emancipation. One such option undertheorized and largely unacknowledged in the communication literature is Gearhart’s (1982) conception of re-sourcing. Re-sourcing “suggests we must go to a new place for our energy. To re-source is to find another source, an entirely different and prior one . . . discovered only by moving inward to the self, . . . finding our individual or intrapersonal energy flow” (p. 195). Gearhart’s sense of re-sourcing is spiritual in that the source she sees is “deeper than the patriarchy and one that allows us to stand in the path of continuous and cosmic energy” (p. 195).

Elsewhere, others and I (Foss & Foss, 1994; Foss & Griffin, 1995) have expanded Gearhart’s conception of re-sourcing to include any non-patriarchal source, so that any feminist, regardless of her spiritual views, has the option of participating in re-sourcing. In this modified view, re-sourcing reflects a perspective that “involves the choice not to participate in a dominant system or not to accept as a given a particular framing of an issue . . . .” (Foss & Foss, 1994, p. 13). It “is a response made by a rhetor according to a framework, assumptions, or principles other than those suggested in the precipitating message . . . . It is a means, then, of communicating a perspective that is different from that of the individual who produced the message to which the rhetor is responding” (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 9). Further, re-sourcing utilizes twin “processes of disengaging” from the framework, system, or principles embedded in the precipitating message and creatively developing “a response so that the issue is framed differently” (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 9).
I suggest that re-sourcing exists in many forms and that communication scholars barely have begun to explicate them as rhetorical options. In this essay, I examine a type of re-sourcing that involves creating and living in a world that constitutes an alternative to patriarchy. In this perspective, feminists do not merely envision or work toward the creation of a new world but actually live that new world, enacting values and ways of being vastly different from those offered in a patriarchal world. In other words, they create a world drawn from a source other than patriarchy.

Creating a new world through re-sourcing is accomplished by living as though that desired reality already exists. Johnson (1989) explains the essence of this option: "Live today as you want the world to be" (p. 251). This involves living "as if we were free, as if we were in every way the women we have dreamed of becoming, as if the world were as we wish it to be..." (p. 52). If women want a future world in which they are not afraid, then, they must be unafraid now; if they want a world in which women love and trust one another, they must feel that love and trust now; if women want peace, they must be peaceful now (pp. 39, 48, 47).

The re-sourcing that creates a feminist world is rooted in the view that "all time is together and now" (Johnson, 1989, p. 38). Using a metaphor of the ocean, Johnson explains such a perspective on time:

Atomic science tells us that, contrary to how we have been conditioned to perceive it, time does not move from here to there; it is not like a river, it is not "passing," not going anywhere. Instead, it simply is, like the ocean, and we are in it as fish are in the sea... There is not a detached blob of time somewhere out in the ocean called "future ocean," or a partial blob of ocean left behind called "passed ocean." (p. 38)

This view of time disrupts the dichotomy at the heart of traditional persuasion, one characterized by a separation of means and ends, causes and effects, actions done in the present to affect the future. Rather, "The means are the ends... how we do something is what we get!" (Johnson, 1989, p. 35).

In re-sourcing, the audience or receiver is the self. Rather than working to change another to produce the world in which feminists wish to live, through re-sourcing, rhetors enact self-modification, recognizing that they only can control and change themselves. As Gearhart (1995) asserts, "cleaning up my own act is the best contribution I can make to any cause" (p. 8). In essence, rhetors recreate themselves "so that the world that is there, that is in us, that is us, can become our external, concrete reality" (Johnson, 1989, p. 215).

Re-sourcing, then, challenges the patriarchy, not by confronting, engaging, or responding to it but "by being itself Another way of thinking/speaking" (Daly, 1978, p. xiii). The goal of this strategy is to render that discourse obsolete, to reveal the partiality of its universal claims and the inadequacy of its institutional practices (Ferguson, 1984, p. 156). Re-sourcing represents "a new kind of separatism" in which women's "emotions, energy, and power" are withdrawn from the patriarchy (Gearhart, 1982, p. 193).

Descriptions of rhetorical options such as re-sourcing usually generate criticism for being admirable in theory but impractical or impossible to execute in reality. Because patriarchal structures are so ingrained in our culture and its institutions, critics suggest, disengaging from them is nearly impossible. Only physical withdrawal—typically envisioned as moving into an isolated rural area with a group of like-minded women, far away from the tentacles of patriarchal surveillance—seems a viable option. Few women—even the most committed feminists—are willing to give up an entire way of life to employ re-sourcing. Another criticism is that this alternative strategy reinforces patriarchy's view of women as "incapable of functioning in a male world, that we are the passive, receptive, quiet, non-violent, introverted sex," which is what "men have trained us to be" (Gearhart, 1982, p. 201). Still another is that the option cannot produce real resistance to patriarchy and thus is not an emancipatory strategy.

Despite these criticisms, I want to suggest that re-sourcing can be a legitimate option for feminists. To that end, I will explicate how one activity—sewing—may constitute re-sourcing and clarify its nature and function as an option for emancipation. I hope to show that women regularly can and do engage in re-sourcing as part of their daily lives and that re-sourcing need not reinforce the view of women as passive but rather allows women to be active, constructing themselves as they choose. Finally, I suggest that the change produced by re-sourcing can free women in ways that are meaningful and significant.

The Potentiality of Sewing

My exploration of sewing is the result of what best may be described as a participatory case study. I will explain how sewing works as re-sourcing by drawing on my own experience with the activity.
and thus privileging “knowledge grounded in living experience” (Stanley & Wise, 1983, p. 201). I embrace Stanley and Wise’s (1983) perspective that the essence of feminism lies in its re-evaluation of ‘the personal’ and its insistence on the location of ‘politics’ and ‘revolution’ within the minutiae of the everyday (p. 200). Examining sewing as re-sourcing, then, is consistent with feminist projects that recover the personal, going back into the everyday in order to explicate all the many features of it (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p. 200).

I sew virtually all of my own clothes and have been sewing since I was 11 years old, when my mother taught me and I how to sew so we could make clothes for our Barbie dolls. Although sewing clearly functions to produce utilitarian objects for me, I long have sensed that it serves more important functions for me and for other professional women I know who sew (we are all somewhat successful professionals in academia who would not be expected to find satisfaction in or want to take the time to sew). In particular, I noticed a pattern in my life in which sewing plays a prominent role. Although I sew intermittently throughout the year, I almost always make space for about two weeks of sewing at the close of the academic year in June—I call it my sewing sabbatical (and, in fact, at the end of one especially demanding year, I confess, my two weeks stretched into two months). During this period, I do nothing academic and feel irritated and imposed upon if I must; I simply sew all day long for two weeks. Why I feel such a need at the close of a cycle in my professional life intrigued me and was, in part, the impetus for this essay.

I acknowledge that the argument that sewing can constitute the basis for emancipation seems difficult if not impossible to support. After all, sewing easily can be seen as a traditionally feminine activity or as a sign of women’s internalized oppression, resulting from the imposition of patriarchal standards. Sewing and other forms of needlework have a contradictory and complex history; often originating as gender-neutral activities that were accorded value, they eventually were transformed into devalued domestic, feminine arts. As a result, they became linked to an ideology designed to essentialize and confine women, inculcate femininity, and develop feminine virtues such as obedience and subjugation (Parker, 1987).

Sewing also is patriarchal in the sense that most of the products made by women who sew are associated with stereotypically feminine concerns like physical appearance or the home that fulfill “the woman’s role to present herself and her home in an aesthetically pleasing way” (Davis, 1990, p. 9). Sewing also links women with frugality, with “[w]omen’s responsibility to keep careful watch over the household budget” (Davis, 1990, p. 9). A woman can save a great deal of money by sewing a quilt or a dress, for example, rather than purchasing a similar item at a store. In addition, women who sew are “consumers, especially of fabric, rather than producers (artists, designers, and professionals)” (Langellier, 1990, p. 52), thus reproducing women’s lack of agency in the world. Sewing, then, can be construed as an activity bent to the service of patriarchy, making suspect its potential as an emancipatory activity.

Yet, various forms of sewing function as rhetorical strategies in the service of social protest and change. The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt is one recent example in a long history of the power of quilts and needlework to function as protest (Williams, 1994). The embroidered banners and parasols carried by suffragists in their demonstrations and the embroidery on clothing of participants in the counter-culture movements of the late Sixties, symbolizing “love, peace, colour, personal life and rejection of materialism” (Parker, 1984, p. 204), also exemplify the use of needlework for protest.

Feminist artists such as Beryl Weaver, Kate Walker, Catharine Riley, and Margaret Harrison incorporate embroidery and needlework techniques in their works, using their associations with femininity to deconstruct and subvert femininity itself (Parker, 1984, pp. 205-208). Feminist artist Judy Chicago also is well known for using applied arts associated with women in her works. Needlework runners form an intricate part of The Dinner Party (Chicago, 1980), while The Birth Project features images of birth executed in embroidery, quilting, needlepoint, and beadwork (Chicago, 1985).

Needlework also has been used in other ways to challenge the patriarchy, but these ways rely less on confronting patriarchy than on creating alternatives apart from it—thus bearing more directly on the option of re-sourcing. Parker (1984), for example, describes practices of embroidery throughout history that function in ways not unlike re-sourcing. “Paradoxically,” she states, “while embroidery was employed to inculcate femininity in women, it also enabled them to negotiate the constraints of femininity” (p. 11) and “to make meanings of their own while overtly living up to the oppressive stereotype” (p. 13).
Quilt making sometimes serves a similar function for women. Langellier (1990) suggests that this activity facilitates mental, emotional, and physical healing for women and allows them to exercise choice and control over their activities and time. Although Langellier (1990) does not discuss quilt making as a strategy of re-sourcing, the functions she identifies include the creation of a new world for women by the patriarchy. In her analysis of quilt making in 19th-century America, Davis (1990) suggests that quilters “created various opportunities, within what has always appeared to be the perfectly gender constant female world of quilt making, to achieve a kind of autonomy and personal fulfillment which break from idealized behaviors” (p. 6). Quilt making thus allowed women both to experience and demonstrate modes of being other than those sanctioned by patriarchal culture:

Quilt making supplied the informal structures within which women, who were to some degree discontented with society’s stereotype of the female’s modest aptitudes and ambitions, could subvert those restrictive domestic roles. In this way, women who chose to gain some amount of personal freedom, a degree of power, and certain opportunities for public sphere involvement which were usually considered available only within the male realm. (p. 8)

Historically, needlework of various kinds has worked for women to subvert or challenge definitions of women’s roles and identities and simultaneously to substitute in their place new worlds or alternatives to prescribed patriarchal practices. Little attention has been paid, however, to how sewing activities rhetorically enable such functions to be served—how they create alternative worlds. I argue that ritual is the process through which an activity constructed by the patriarchy to benefit itself is transformed into a strategy with the potential to function as re-sourcing. Although ritual has been studied from multiple perspectives in anthropology, religion, and communication by theorists such as Turner (1969, 1974, 1977, 1982); Durkheim (1965); Goffman (1967); and Carey (1975), I draw largely on Grimes’ (1990) discussion of the process of ritualization to explain the nature of re-sourcing. Ritualization is the solitary and private “act of cultivating or inventing rites” by individuals (p. 10), and the rites that constitute it generally are not recognized as part of the larger ritual tradition of a community. In the following section, I will explicate the ritualizing processes of sewing that transform the activity into re-sourcing.

The Ritualization of Sewing

The essence of the ritualization of sewing is a territorial passage involving a transition from one domain to another, or movement between a patriarchal and alternative feminist world. The passage occurs in seven steps that incorporate many of the steps scholars and practitioners of ritual (e.g., Starhawk, 1989; Grimes, 1990; Turner, 1969) identify as typical of rituals: declaring a commitment, entering into marginal space, cleansing, demarcating boundaries, working magic, returning to the external world, and emblematic display.

Declaration of Commitment

The first step in ritualized sewing is the woman’s declaration of commitment to initiate the ritual or to undertake a sewing project. She justifies her forthcoming participation in the sewing ritual by formulating a rationale that will be perceived by family and friends as legitimate and that she can voice, if necessary, to justify her activities: “I need to get away from all this writing—I need a break” or “I don’t have anything appropriate to wear to the banquet—I’d better make something.” Such statements are not requests for approval from those around her; rather, they provide a means for the woman’s involvement in a potentially subversive ritual to be interpreted as non-threatening and insignificant in the context of patriarchy.

Entrance into Marginal Space

Following the woman’s declaration of commitment to enact the ritual of sewing, she enters the fabric store, a preliminal space “of separation from a previous world” (van Gennep, 1960, p. 21). In this marginal space, a world where patriarchal space and the free space that will be created merge, the woman begins her separation from the realm of the patriarchy. Entrance into the fabric store signifies her detachment “from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions” (Turner, 1969, p. 94), and initiates the transition into a new world.

In the space of the fabric store—where participation in the ritual no longer requires justification—the woman receives support for her commitment to proceed with the ritual. The store provides all the materials necessary for the completion of the sewing ritual and thus constitutes, in itself, support for her participation. But the clerks and other women
there also provide encouragement and celebrate the proposed sewing project with her. They question her about what she is planning to make and respond with comments about how nice the garment will be; they give advice on the best kind of fabric for the pattern, share experiences with particular patterns, and help with the selection of buttons and other notions.

Already, the break from patriarchy has begun, for all women in this space are accorded immanent value based on their shared interest in sewing. In the fabric store, women enter into conversations with one another, learning from one another and appreciating one another’s ideas. The hierarchical distinctions of patriarchy on the basis of class, status, age, and taste dissolve as women share their knowledge with others and ignore the boundaries that might separate them in the patriarchal world. Professional, executive women who might not otherwise have occasion to talk with homemakers or blue-collar workers, white women whose contact with black women is limited, and young women who do not usually share interests with older women, for example, find such traditional barriers irrelevant in the fabric store. All women’s plans for garments are held to be valid and are supported verbally, even if they do not correspond to individual taste preferences. Statements of support are neither dishonest nor deceitful; they simply recognize individual differences and reinforce women’s participation in the sewing ritual.

Communicative support for the woman who has declared her commitment to enter the ritual is particularly evident during major sales at fabric stores. At such events, women fill the store, often waiting in long lines to have their fabrics cut and to make their purchases. But the emotions of frustration and anger that often accompany crowds at sales are conspicuously absent, replaced by cooperation, pleasure, and joy. Women talk pleasantly and courteously to one another in line, show their fabric choices, and share their plans for the fabrics with those around them. The sales event is not to be endured but celebrated for representing wonderful bargains, the purchase of new fabrics, and the exciting potentiality awaiting these fabrics.

But the marginal world of the fabric store, poised between patriarchy and feminist space, engenders more than just support for the commitment to a sewing project. It provides the woman with an array of choices largely inaccessible to her outside of this space. Although she may choose to design and create a garment that conforms to patriarchal expectations for women, she is not limited to this option. She is free to develop her own image of herself, unconstrained by others’ expectations or by the stock of ready-made garments available in stores.

The woman’s envisioning begins with the selection of the pattern she will use to create the garment. She begins with her favorite pattern book, the one in which she is most likely to find a pattern appropriate to her self-definition. Envisioning herself, for example, as unique and complex, she may choose a Vogue pattern that is complicated and sophisticated in its design. But if she sees herself as more pragmatic, she may turn to Simplicity patterns and their more mature, enduring styles.

As the woman turns the pages of the pattern book, she writes down patterns and page numbers of possibilities, returning to review them, comparing and contrasting styles, and eventually eliminating those that do not fit with the identity she is imaging for the garment. “I like the sleeves on this one, but I don’t want to make all those buttonholes. This one has similar sleeves, but it has a zipper instead of buttons; that’s better. This skirt seems fuller at the bottom, it would be easier to walk in. Yes, the width at the lower edge is 50 inches, and it’s only 42 on the other one. I don’t like the cuffs on these sleeves, but I could leave them off and roll up the sleeves. This one takes too much fabric; I only have 4 yards of 45 wide, and it calls for 5 1/4. Ah—this one only calls for 3 3/4 yards; I could get it out of my fabric.”

If the woman has not chosen her fabric already, its selection completes the process that occurs in the marginal space of the fabric store. Again, the possibilities seem limitless, and her choice of fabric continues to refine the identity she is creating for herself: “A print or a solid? Red or purple? Rayon or cotton? Can it be washed, or must it be dry cleaned? How much is it? $18.00 a yard? I’m not going to pay that. Yes, but is it 60 inches wide? If it is, I won’t need as much fabric, and it wouldn’t cost as much. No, it’s only 45 inches wide. Too bad; it would have been perfect. Here, this is better; it’s $6.98 a yard. Would this work? Hmmmm, I’m not sure like those splotchy red flowers on it. I think I’ll keep looking.”

The marginal world of the fabric store is full of textures, colors, and styles. Rarely is the woman confronted with choices so numerous and varied. Abundance—even extravagance—characterizes this world. Certainly, constraints exist; the occasion for which the garment is being created, others’ expectations and preferences, price, availability of fabric, and the woman’s own level of skill. But even so, choice still dominates and requires that the woman achieve a creative and unique
synthesis of texture, color, and design. Rarely does such an opportunity exist to create a truly unique object, designed specifically to cater to a woman’s own identity.

Once the fabric is selected, the cut that separates the fabric from the bolt is made. This cut eliminates choice and possibility. Furthermore, it expels the woman from the marginal world of the fabric store and launches her into the core of the ritual itself, one that takes place in the space of her home.

**Cleansing**

The next step in ritualized sewing is cleansing, a process of purification designed to signal separation from the psychological, internalized world of patriarchy and impurity. Here, attention turns to the physical space of the alternative world being created. As Starhawk (1990) explains, “Rarely do we have the luxury of celebrating ritual in a space designed for our forms.” The ritual “itself must transform the space it is in” (p. 103).

The woman transforms physical space by preshrinking her fabric, washing or soaking it in water of the temperature in which she will wash it as a garment. She hangs the fabric to dry, perhaps over the shower rod. If the fabric’s color runs, drops of aqua or rose or chartreuse wend their way to the shower drain, cleansing the tub below the fabric of its monotony and utility (a tub she probably keeps sparkling clean and white on other occasions) by imbuing it with new colors and patterns.

Cleansing occurs in other places as well. The woman may clear off a table or a desk, moving aside other projects in order to set up her sewing machine. If her sewing machine has its own permanent spot, she still may have to complete or clear away other projects to create a space in her life for her new project. She lets go of “concerns, anxieties, or preoccupations” that might prevent her from being “fully present in sacred space” (Starhawk, 1990, p. 100). Undesirable energies or unwanted obligations to others are banished from the space through such acts of purification.

**Demarcation of Boundaries**

Following the cleansing step, the woman marks and delineates the boundaries of her physical space, introducing special spatial objects into the ordinary environment to create “a magic circle, a ring of sanctification” (Gray, 1988, p. 94) that separates her world from any other world. Marking such boundaries functions “not so much to keep out negative energies as to keep in power so that it can rise to a peak” (Starhawk, 1989, p. 72). As Starhawk (1989) explains, “You cannot boil water without putting it in a pot, and you can’t raise power effectively unless it is also contained” (p. 72).

The woman marks her boundaries in various ways. She may bring her sewing machine out of its case and set it up on her desk or kitchen or dining-room table. Its presence alone suggests that a new activity is about to be introduced into the routineness of the space. She may appropriate the ironing board as a spatial marker, making it accessible to her by moving it from the laundry room, closet, or bedroom to stand beside the sewing machine. Its new placement blocks usual pathways in the room and makes more difficult ordinary tasks such as ironing shirts for wear in the outside world. Those who choose to use the ironing board for such purposes must dodge fabric, pattern pieces, a pressing cloth, pins, and the sewing machine.

The delineation of boundaries also occurs during the cutting of the fabric. The woman spreads the fabric out, usually on the floor, so that a dramatic new presence is established in the living room or bedroom, covering the carpet or floor. Often, she must move furniture so that all of the fabric can lie flat, and she rearranges lamps to provide the best light for her work. As she lays out the pattern pieces and prepares for the cutting stage, pattern pieces expand into the space beyond the boundaries established by the fabric, their tissue forms floating and crumpling at its edges. Anyone who enters the room must walk around the space and, even then, only with difficulty, for it has become unusable space for all but the woman.

As the sewing ritual proceeds, new spatial perimeters are continually created to mark and re-mark the space, serving as physical representations of the energy the space contains. Pins, threads, and trimmings of seams creep from the sewing area out into the wider living space, serving as temporary emblems of the energy created there. These emblems expand the space created by the sewing ritual until the entire living space is inundated with evidence and remnants of it.

**Working Magic**

In the next step, the woman works magic in the construction of the garment, engaging in the “work ‘hat realizes the purpose of the ritual” (Starhawk, 1990, p. 107). A special terminology, rarely heard in patri-
archy, contributes to the creation of such space. Characterized by terms such as nap, grain line, cutting layout, fold line, yoke, ease, pleat, seam allowance, interfacing, selvage, understitching, blind stitching, unnotched edge, busting, and dart, this vocabulary suggests that "the classifications on which order normally depends are annulled or obscured" (Turner, 1974, p. 273). I recall my father jokingly—almost mockingly—using sewing terms incorrectly and with no knowledge of their meaning when my sister and I were sewing. His attempt to connect with this world communicatively merely reinforced his exclusion from it.

In contrast to the patriarchal world outside of the space of sewing, the woman has control within the world she is creating. In the patriarchal world, a sense of control is difficult to attain and maintain because when "one is a subordinate, one does what must be done in order to survive in a world largely beyond one's control" (Ferguson, 1984, p. 26). In her alternative world, however, the woman is in control, and she is not simply responding to requirements and demands imposed by others.

Control stems in part from the fact that the woman establishes her own goals. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) contends that the two most important dimensions of optimal experience are the establishment of a goal and the discovery of ways to measure progress toward that goal. In the world created through ritualized sewing, the woman identifies what she wants to achieve—to complete the dress by Tuesday, for example—and then works toward its completion and the rewards that result from its accomplishment. What is important about goal setting is that the exigence for action is internal; it is rooted in an intrinsic motivation rather than one prescribed by the external environment. To act as an active agent of one's own goals is an experience not easily available to women in the patriarchal world. In such a space, the woman "is encouraged to know her will, to believe that her will is valid, and to believe that her will can be achieved in the world, three powers traditionally denied to her in patriarchy" (Christ, 1982, p. 82).

Another factor that enables the woman to achieve control is the limited stimulus field sewing involves. The actual work of constructing a garment consists of repetitive operations of the same patterns and formulas, relieved only by minor variations: the interfacing is applied, the pocket is attached, the back is connected to the front at the shoulders, the collar is attached, the facing is applied and understitched, the front and back are stitched together at the sides, the sleeve seams are sewn, seams are pressed open and finished, the hem is ironed up and blindstitched, the buttonholes are made, and the buttons are sewn on. Variety derives only from differences in garment design—a collar, for example, is attached in a different way, a pocket has a different shape, or a sleeve is set in rather than cut on. As a result of this repetition, the woman's attention centers on a limited stimulus field so that consciousness is narrowed and intensified. The multiplicity that normally characterizes her life yields, in this space, to simplicity.

The women also controls time in her alternative world. Although the patriarchal world still exists and impinges on her—for example, it may restrict the amount of time she can devote to sewing—in the world she is creating, she is free from the demands of patriarchal time. During the construction phase, she inhabits a realm that is "out of time," i.e., beyond or outside the time which measures secular processes" (Turner, 1982, p. 24). She works at her own pace, not bounded by pressures to produce an object in a finite time frame. She has the time to be careful and meticulous in ways she is not always able to be in the outside world.

The woman's control of time in her new world differs from time in the patriarchal world in that sewing gives her time for herself. She separates from the roles she normally assumes—professor, wife, mother, or daughter. A woman's time in patriarchy frequently is not her own and often is sacrificed to meet the needs of others; consequently, the ritualization of sewing marks out an interval of her own time.

In this alternative world, the woman also is endowed with qualities not often experienced or expressed in the patriarchal world. In her ritualized space, the woman has value; the patriarchal hierarchy that devalues who she is and the work that she does disappears. As Turner (1969) explains this feature of ritual, "Symbolically, all attributes that distinguish categories and groups in the structured social order are here in abeyance" (p. 103). Outside of the structural position she normally occupies in the patriarchy, the woman is valued, competent, and is rewarded for her expertise.

The woman continually enacted her value and expertise as she completes the construction of the garment. If she experiences problems, she must resolve them on her own, experimenting, pinning, perhaps ripping, until the garment goes together properly. When she tries on the garment at various points in the process, she decides whether or
not it must be adjusted and how to execute the changes she desires. She makes the decision whether to use a modified construction technique or a different sequence from the one recommended in the pattern instructions. If the garment turns out differently from her expectations, she must decide its disposition: fix it, transform it into something else, or abandon it. All of her choices are enactments of her competence, expertise, and value.

Transition of Return

When the garment is finished, the woman returns to ordinary space and time—to the realm of patriarchy. This transition may begin as the woman finalizes handwork on the garment—cutting open the buttonhole, sewing on the buttons, and blindstitching the hem. These tasks do not require her sewing machine, and she may move away from it to other spaces in the house. She may enter the living room, listen to music, or talk with family and friends, renewing her connection with those outside of her created space as she completes this phase of construction.

The transition of return is consummated when the woman engages in a cleansing process to signal the close of the ritual. She presses the garment and hangs it in her closet. She vacuums the floor, obliterating the traces of thread, fabric, and pins throughout the house that signaled her participation in the ritualized activity. She returns the ironing board to its usual space and puts her sewing machine back into the closet. On the surface, all is as it was before: the woman has returned to patriarchal space.

Emblematic Display

The final stage of ritualized sewing involves the public display of the emblem produced by the ritual: the wearing of the garment that has been constructed. As she does so, the woman is likely to behave in accordance with the norms attendant on her by the patriarchal structure. But she does not acquiesce totally to that structure, for the garment she wears symbolizes change. As a token of the energy of creation, she is continually reminded of her alternative world and her different way of being in it. Thus, she returns to patriarchy but neither capitulates to it nor is reincorporated fully within it. Her commitment to patriarchy, then, is tempered by the re-sourecement she experienced and the qualities that characterized it in her alternative world.

Conclusions

My focus in this examination of ritualized sewing has been on how the performance of a seemingly mundane task can be transformed into re-sourecement through the enactment of ritualization. Such a process, I suspect, occurs for some women in activities such as cooking and gardening as well. Ritualization, however, separates an activity's instrumental purpose from its function as re-sourecement.

The steps of ritualized sewing I have described, then, do not characterize every act of sewing, nor do they reflect the practices of sewing for all women who sew. Sometimes, a woman sews hastily, simply to repair or complete a needed garment. In such cases, she does not clear her space, reposition the ironing board, or revel in the joy of construction. Similarly, women who sew in factories to earn a living do not engage in re-sourecement; in fact, recent exposes of the garment industry's exploitation of women (e.g., Brannigin, 1995) suggest that the sewing experience for these workers is marked by particularly violent domination by patriarchy. Finally, while I acknowledge that men engage in hobbies with ritualistic dimensions similar to those I have described here, they do not constitute re-sourecement unless they allow the participant to experience a mode of being not typically encouraged by the dominant culture. Sewing or other hobbies—even if they are ritualized—rarely function in the same way for men as they do for women because of the different places women and men hold in patriarchy. Men receive support in and from the patriarchal world and thus tend not to use sewing or other such hobbies to create a world where they experience qualities unavailable to them elsewhere.

Ritualization is key to the transformation of an activity into re-sourecement because it introduces dimensions into the experience that relate directly to the creation of a different world. For example, ritualization contains an exigence crucial to the development of agency required for world creation by the woman sewing. In ritualized sewing, this exigence is internal, and the woman who chooses to engage in the process does so because the functions it performs are important to her. In non-ritualized sewing, the exigence is externally imposed; perhaps the woman’s daughter needs a new dress, perhaps insufficient funds prompt her to make rather than buy clothing, or perhaps sewing is her livelihood. Ritualization prompted by an internal exigence accords agency to the woman, giving her the capacity to become the creator of a world of her own choosing.
The ritualization of sewing also facilitates re-sourcement because of its attention to process rather than product. In instrumental sewing, the point of the activity is the end product—the garment produced. In ritualized sewing, however, the garment is almost a by-product for the woman; what is important is the pleasure she receives from engagement in the process and the nature of the experience it affords her. This focus on process requires careful attention to details and a commitment to steps seemingly unnecessary to accomplish the basic task. Yet, this attention to process contributes to re-sourcement because it fosters reflection about the nature of the world being created, the woman’s definition in it, and how she wants to feel about it.

Ritualization also is necessary for re-sourcement because it introduces an element of concealment or subterfuge. Simply creating a garment typically involves no such concealment or subterfuge. What the woman is doing clearly is evident to any observer; she is sewing a garment. In ritualized sewing, however, the primary purpose of the activity largely is personal and hidden and, therefore, unlikely to be noticed by the casual observer.

This concealment is possible because sewing constitutes an “allowable” activity for women in patriarchal culture (Langellier, 1990, p. 52), and because processes of ritualization appear so ordinary and insignificant that they are not likely to be viewed as strategies of resistance that might “unsnarl, unknot, untie, unweave” the patriarchy and “knit, knot, interlace, entwine, whirl, and twirl” a new world in its place (Daly, 1987, p. 386). Concealment is common to strategies used by subordinate groups for the articulation of a meaning other than a patriarchal one; in addition, through concealment, “the same language or act simultaneously confirms the oppressor’s stereotypes of the oppressed and offers a dissenting and empowering view for those in the know” (Modleski, 1986, p. 129). In this case, the ritualization that transforms sewing into re-sourcement is itself the cover that masks the significant function performed by the sewing.

Because it creates a world in which a woman’s being is defined apart from patriarchy, ritualized sewing is a potentially significant and meaningful form of emancipation for the woman. In this case, emancipation does not mean that patriarchy somehow is changed. Instead, the woman frees herself, to some extent, from the pull of patriarchy. Patriarchy exerts its hold in part by alienating women from their own definitions and knowledges, from their “internal energy source” (Gearhart, 1982, p. 196). “In a world where every nook and cranny has been filled with superficialized and competitive external energy,” says Gearhart (1982, p. 196), women seeking to resist patriarchy need some space where they can separate, if at all possible, from patriarchy and its dominant energy forms. Re-sourcement facilitates emancipation in that it simultaneously provides that space for the individual and keeps patriarchy’s energy, definitions, and constraints at bay.

As a result of re-sourcement, the patriarchy no longer wields its power over the woman. As Johnson (1987) observes, “But if we refuse the contract, if we disengage from their strings, no amount of pulling can make us dance. We’re free” (p. 297). She elaborates:

When women leave patriarchy—when we untwist reality and realize that we do not have to respond to this system,... patriarchy will simply cease to exist. . . . It takes two groups to do tyranny: the tyrants and the slaves. Tyrants never stop doing tyranny until the slaves stop responding in the necessary way for tyranny to be done to them. When they stop, the game is up. (1989, p. 74)

Ritualized sewing and other such forms of re-sourcement provide the woman with a place to be different from definitions provided for her by the patriarchy—it allows her to be “at home” (Gearhart, 1982, p. 195).

Re-sourcement in ritualized sewing also constitutes emancipation because it enables the woman to affirm herself and thus her value. This image contrasts with the self-hated and misogyny that mark patriarchy. As Gearhart (1982) explains, “The first milestone in a developing feminist consciousness seems to mark a loving and affirmative embrace of the self as a whole entity and an internal energy flow from that holistically experienced self” (p. 197). As she changes the way she feels about herself, the woman no longer is limited by patriarchal conceptions; she experiences pure potentiality, “hypothesis, supposition, possibility” (Turner, 1977, p. 71). Although patriarchy still exists, it has lost some of its hold on her and she is less able to be tyrannized by it because she has experienced an alternative to its dictates.

Finally, re-sourcement functions as emancipation in that it creates an atmosphere that encourages other women to change. As the woman grows and develops her self apart from patriarchal definitions, she exemplifies a way of being different from that demanded by patriarchy. As she becomes that different person and continues to enact her
new self, she shows others what such a self looks like. Others may not see her sew, but they do see and experience the culmination of that process through her modeling of a self independent of patriarchal definitions and values. Moreover, her interaction with others allows others to change if they choose and when they are internally ready because she creates an environment receptive to change.

Participation in re-sourcement does not negate the need for women to enact traditional efforts at persuasion; such strategies continue to be useful, necessary, and effective in certain situations. In fact, they often serve a very important function in relation to re-sourcement: "to draw the enemy's fire, to operate as a kind of holding action, to stave off the knowledge and reaction of the patriarchy so that time and room are bought for the essential work of genuine transformation" (Gearhart, 1982, p. 200). Women engaged in re-sourcement should appreciate "the fact that their work could not continue if that buffer state failed"; they "need to acknowledge the protection of women working in the other... strategies" (Gearhart, 1982, p. 200). In this sense, participation in re-sourcement constitutes a privilege of sorts. It is a privilege of class in that it requires sufficient leisure time to spend on the activity and sufficient income to purchase the sometimes expensive patterns and fabrics. It is also a privilege of rare freedom to make self-chosen decisions about one's life world, allowing the woman to "separate even temporarily from the patriarchy" (Gearhart, 1982, p. 203).

In most rituals, the activities that occur in them comprise only "a subversive flicker" (Turner, 1982, p. 44) because they reinforce the societal structure. As Turner (1969) explains, rituals typically "involve mockery and inversion, but not destruction, of structural rules" (p. 201); thus, they function essentially as devices that adjust the individual to the basic conditions of the social structure. The ritualization of sewing that results in re-sourcement, however, does constitute emancipation for women because it creates a "free space, a hole torn in the fabric of domination" (Starhawk, 1990, p. 98).

References


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