

FIBERSHED: Textile Culture & Community

BY SUZANNE SMITH ARNEY



"It may sound very simple, but just having the word 'Fibershed' to hang an entire concept on has been invaluable. Using a watershed concept makes it very easy for people to understand."

— Jennifer Osborn, sheep farmer and felter, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

HERE: Coreopsis and yarn dyed from it.
TOP CENTER: Handwoven wool blankets made by rancher Robin Lynde, who raises Jacob sheep on her farm in Vacaville, California. The model is Geana Sieburger.
BOTTOM CENTER: This outfit was designed by Amy Keefer and Myrrhia Resneck for Fibershed's 2013 fashion gala. The dress and jacket are made of organic cotton from Sally Fox's farm in the Capay Valley in California, and the cowl is made of wool from Mary Pettis-Sarley's ranch in Napa, California. The model is Sarah Bloch.
FAR RIGHT: Fibershed member Monica Paz Soldan knitting a top she designed for the 1-year wardrobe project that launched Fibershed. The yarn is organic color-grown cotton from Sally Fox's farm in the Capay Valley.



Nice sweater...where'd you get it? seems a simple-enough question, but not when Rebecca Burgess is doing the asking. Burgess wants to know where the wool originated, was spun and knit; she even asks where the color comes from. Most of us haven't a clue. Burgess, on the other hand, can pinpoint the ranch and even the specific sheep that produced her wool, ID the spinner, dyer, designer, and knitter. And she can do that for every garment in her wardrobe. All three-dozen items.

Burgess also takes seriously Gandhi's quote, "Be the change that you wish to see in the world." She set herself a challenge to reduce her ecological footprint by designing a personal fibershed, with herself at the terminus and limited to a maximum 150 miles. She uses the term fibershed in the same way as watershed and foodshed, to refer to a "flow" of clothing from source through designers, dyers, makers, and markets, to wearer. In one year's time, she created a basic wardrobe of twenty garments (including socks and underwear), each with a personal pedigree. What began in 2011 as a personal challenge, has grown to a multifaceted organization with affiliates in the U.S., Canada, and England.

One of those affiliates is Los Angeles Fibershed, co-founded by Amabelle Aguiluz and Ashley Thayer. I exchanged emails with Aguiluz, an artist and knitwear designer, who wrote, "I felt a responsibility as an artist to make conscious choices on how I buy and produce and sell my work, and the importance of sharing alternative methods to the community. In the whole scheme of things everything (our environment, local community, industry) is connected and matters." The Fibershed affiliate logo is a visual statement of values, and the connection between Burgess and herself, says Aguiluz, has been a source of information and opportunity. Emma Hague, founder of Working Wool in Bristol, England, agrees, calling Fibershed "a great comfort and inspiration" when she feels "a bit out on a limb."

Education is one of Burgess' defining gifts; she has a national reputation for teaching innovative, hands-on classes in fiber and dye techniques, and has a master's degree in place-based education from Dominican University of California. Another characteristic is her concern for the environment of her beloved Marin County, California, where she is a fifth-generation native. Marin County is a peninsula north of San Francisco known for the natural beauty of its land and marine ecosystems and is part of the California Floristic Province. Burgess, a twenty-year weaver and dyer, combined her complementary skills of education and environmental ethics to write *Harvesting Color: How to Find Plants and Make Natural Dyes* (NY: Artisan, 2011). In the book's introduction she writes, "For thousands of years, the art and craft of natural dyeing has connected our creative urges with the inner workings of the natural world." This concept was the impetus for undergraduate art classes, but it proved to be a lesson in irony, she says. All the materials used "were products of a synthetic chemical culture that was destroying the very living systems that had inspired me." It was Native American basketry, with its nature-dyed plant fibers, that restored and reconnected her dream of an interconnected, sustainable culture.

Burgess' dream articulated became the mission of Fibershed: "To change the way we clothe ourselves by supporting the creation of local textile



"I've discovered that my 'happy place' consists of equal parts community building, communication design, program development, and teaching. I love bringing people and organizations together to create art, events, and educational initiatives."

*—Emily Smith,
Vancouver Fibershed
Community*

HERE: Fibershed founder Rebecca Burgess, wearing a felt jacket made from the fiber of this alpaca at Renaissance Ridge Alpacas. The felting was done by Katharine Jolda, and the jacket designed and sewn by Mali Mrozinski.
TOP CENTER: Rancher Jean Near of Mendocino County, California with her Cormo sheep.
MIDDLE CENTER: Coreopsis in solar dye pot.
BOTTOM CENTER: Fibershed's Sheep at School program brings sheep and dye plants to local schools to teach children about the origin of their clothes.

All photos by Paige Green.

fibershed
local fibers • local dyes • local labor



cultures that enhance ecological balance, and utilize regional agriculture while strengthening local economies and communities." As an example, let's go back to the beginning.

Nice sweater... where'd you get it?

Thanks! I picked out a pattern online for a basic pullover from Fibershed Marketplace, along with a lovely yarn from Monica Paz Soldan. She buys her fleece from Fibershed producers, so I don't have to wonder how it's been raised or processed. After Yolo [Wool Mill] spins it, Monica blends Cormo and Romeldale/CVM —The yarn is very fine, lustrous. It's hand-dyed this rich gold from coreopsis.

Coreopsis is one of my favorites! It's sometimes called dye-flower, and I use a traditional solar oven so it's simple and gratifying. Just like my sweater! I think I'll be wearing this one a long time.

Burgess' classes in natural dyes brought about an introduction to Dustin Kahn. "I asked Rebecca to teach a class," said Kahn, "and was so impressed with her ideas that I offered to help her with graphic design." It was a good fit, and Kahn joined a dedicated cadre, the heart of a burgeoning organization.

As I write this, Fibershed is putting the finishing touches on the third annual *Wool & Fine Fiber Symposium*, to be held in November. (See the website for past symposia materials.) Throughout the year, Fibershed offers classes, workshops, and public presentations on a variety of topics, such as dyeing, native plant restoration, and carbon-cycle literacy. Economic programs include research and development projects, including a Wool Inventory Map of Northern California, assessment and feasibility studies, and bast fiber seed trials in Colorado. In 2012, Fibershed began a Producer Program, identifying farmers, artisans, and retailers who meet Fibershed criteria for certification. See the website for a full listing and description of activities and alliances, and information about memberships; follow a link to the blog for profiles of producers.

Fibershed takes a "soil-to-skin" approach to clothes. "We're starting a process of cultural change," says Kahn, with emphasis on "process." Not everyone can or will choose a minimalist wardrobe produced entirely within a local fibershed. Kahn suggests buying second-hand, clothes swaps, recycling/repurposing, in addition to supporting local producers and artisans whenever possible. Just as public consciousness of environmental issues and healthy food choices has grown in recent decades, so is awareness of the impact of our clothing and textiles decisions. A steady diet of fast food has consequences; so does a steady diet of "fast fashion"—the hottest designs at the lowest price, so fleetingly trendy and cheap they're disposable. No time for the back story, with its sweat-shop labor, petroleum-based, lead-infused fibers, and open dumping.

"I would really like people to understand that the wardrobe is a process-based lens into the possibility for living in a harmonious state with people, plants, and animals within my own bioregion," Burgess told me. "We need this approach to take place in all sectors—a deep and sensitive look into our material culture—How is it procured? If it's an exploitative process that's required, do I really need that thing?"

Living in a harmonious state might just start with a sweater made of soft fleece, flowers, and sunshine—a style that has nothing to do with trends. Washing it by hand, time slows; I imagine sheep grazing, a woman spinning. One glorious sweater (instead of three in neon brights and nylon thread) a sweater connecting me to this time, place, and people.

See www.fibershed.com.

Suzanne Smith Arney is a freelance writer who enjoys writing about artists and their work, and the role of art in our everyday lives. Although she's written about a variety of media for publications in the US and Europe, she is especially excited by work being done today in fiber. <http://suzanneandco.blogspot.com>.