

CENTER for EXPERIMENTAL LECTURES

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The Sexual Life of Patterns

by Edie Fake

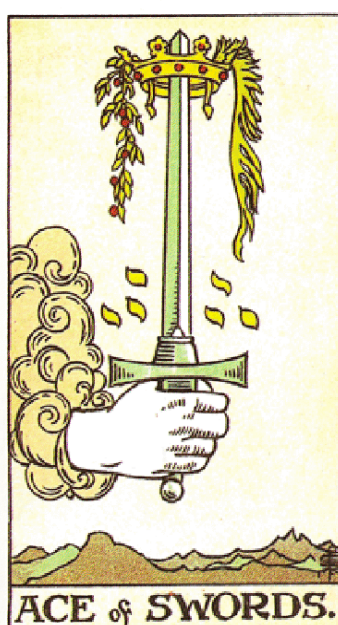
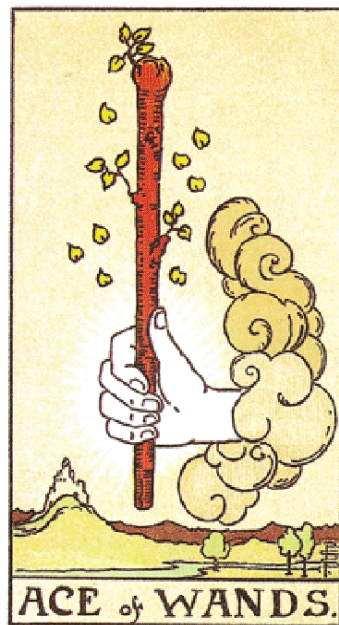
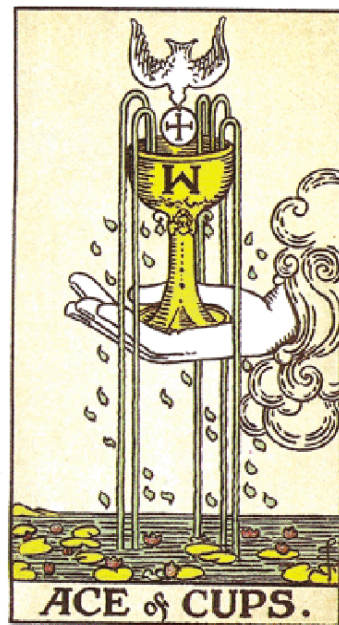
Hello strings, hello cords, hello ropes, yarns, and twines.

This lecture is experimental, in that it's not going to be tethered to facts, or science, or credible anthropology and in that it is intuitive, it's squirrely, and generally unfounded. I've described it as a "guided meditation" before, and I think that holds, and I think that's how it's most presentable and, perhaps, actually the most useful.

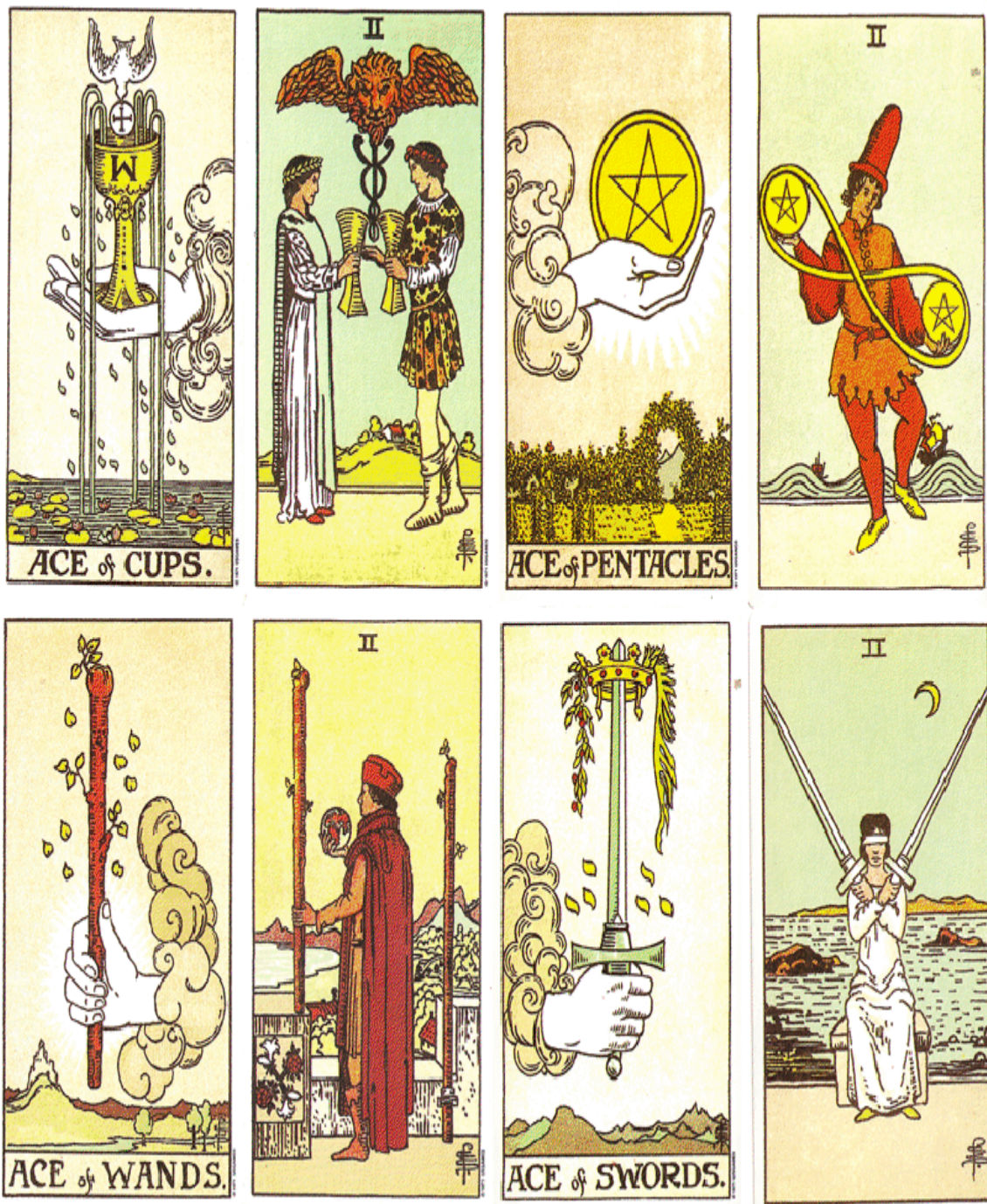
One thing I want to make clear right off the bat- I'm not a textile historian by any means and this isn't about learning traditional symbols or culturally specific meanings, and that's key and important to not using textiles in an appropriative or exploitative way, and I'd just like to acknowledge that before I begin talking about the sexuality of textile patterning.



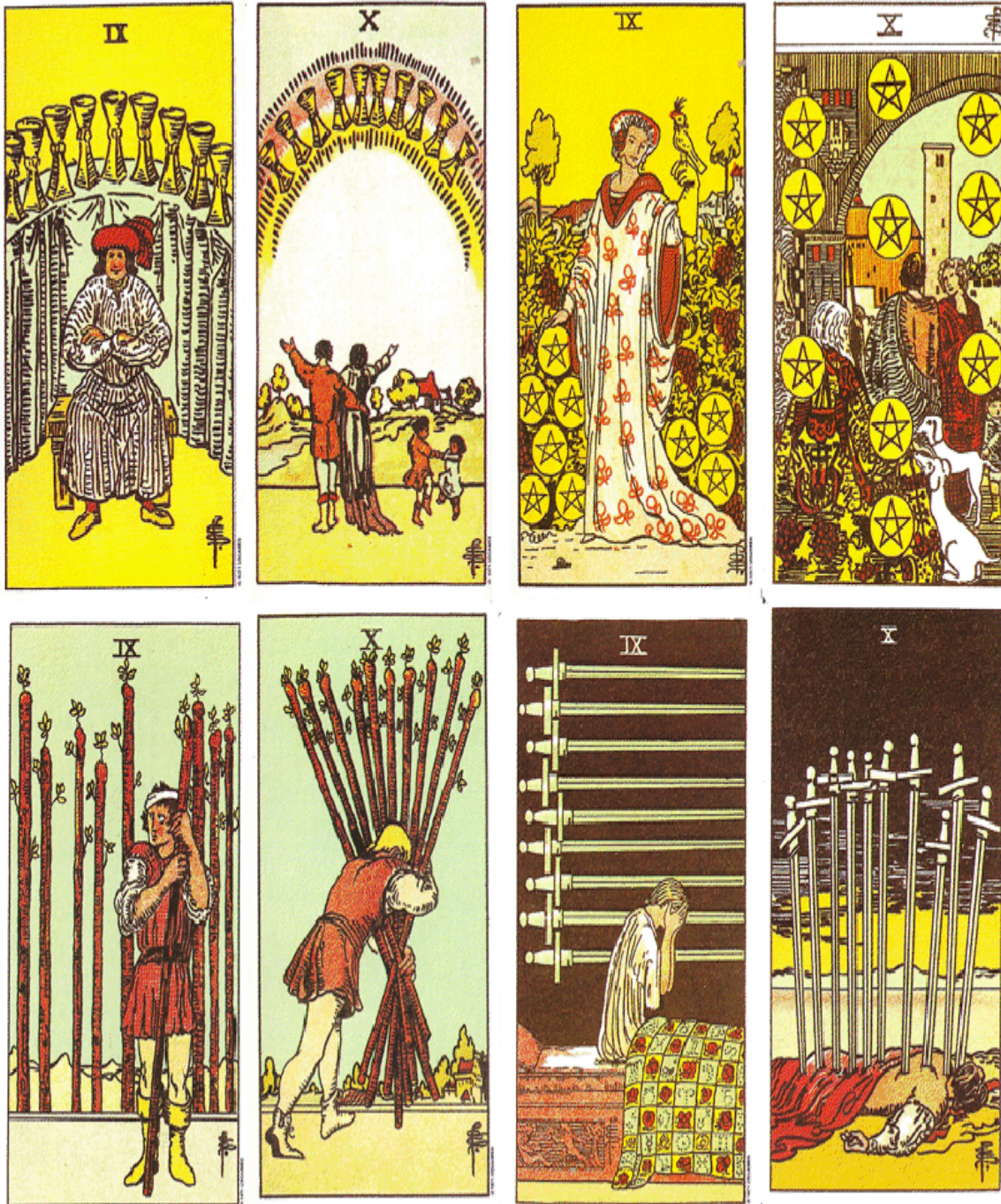
My thought process about intuitively reading social meaning and, yes, sexuality, into fabric patterns began with thinking about interpreting the visual systems of the Rider-Waite tarot deck. I have always been impressed with the cross-current of codes and progressions that produce all the subtleties of the Tarot cards. First, you have each suit representing a different aspect of the human experience:



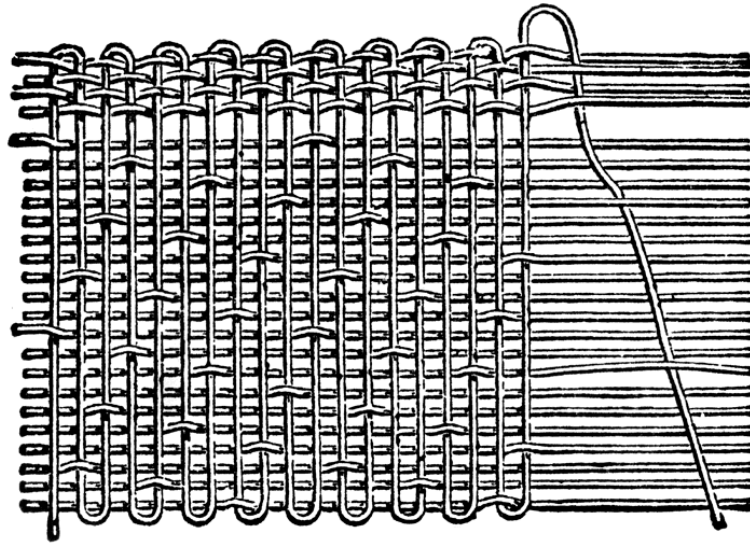
Swords are the intellect; Cups are concerned with emotions; Wands deal with energy and energetic realms; Pentacles are all about physical matters. Taking these four aspects, each suit progresses through 10 phases, the numbers 1-10 that correspond with increasingly complicated scenarios. The aces in the each suit, for instance, represent a simple generative force – an outpouring of the suit’s primary quality.



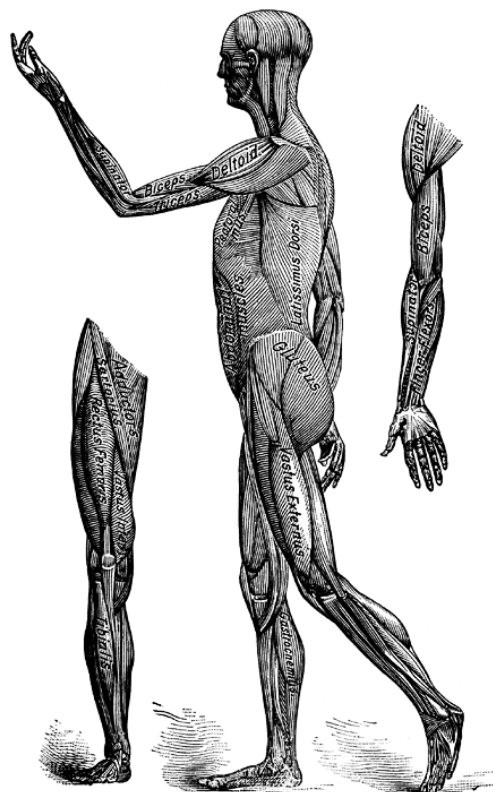
When you compare Aces to twos, which represent a choice, you start to see how the numbers bend and shape to the suit's energies, each creating a different story that's a cross-current of the aspect of the suit and the number's implication.



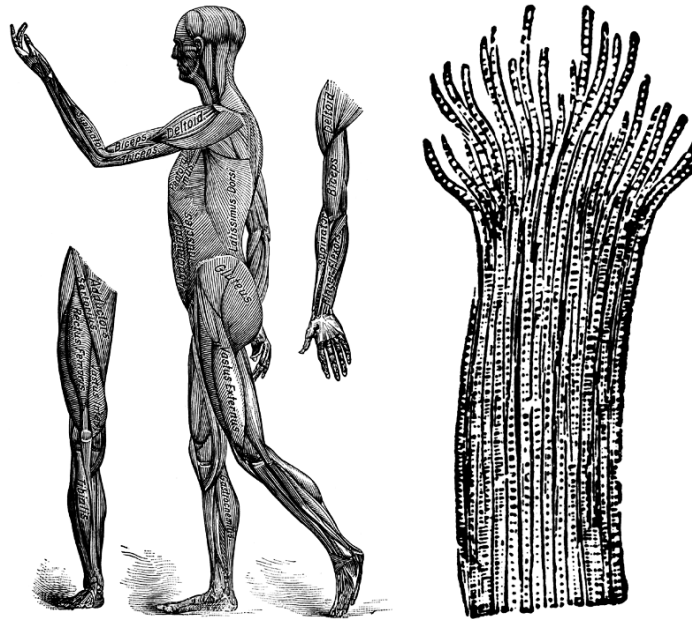
Likewise, by the time we get to looking at the finality, the nines and the tens of a suit, you can see how each has gone a completely different place, each path is reaching its conclusion. These conclusions are all over the place, from glorious rainbow bounty to total mind destruction, but you can see how each is shaped as it is moved through the numbers, and it's being guided by two basic properties- its aspect and its situation, and that's how meaning can begin to be intuited across the imagery of the Tarot. This intuition in thinking about the way numbers work in the Tarot was my entrance point to looking at patterns in fabric, and that's how I'm going to start with the warp and the weft.



Ultimately, we'll tackle some wilder patterns, but let's begin with the fundamentals—“the aces” in the situation, as it were- seeing ourselves in the construction of simple, solid fabric. Fabric is woven, it's a gridded braid, it's strands. It's weft strand passed amongst it's perpendicular warp strands. I'm going to jump into string theory here: in fabric, in textiles, the string is the self, the strand represents the singular body. The fabric is the totality of the string interaction, the fabric is the experience of a body in the world. Strands represent our bodies, and that, just like our bodies, the fibers within that strand can be dissected into their components.



So, you begin to see the self here. Smaller wrapped fibers around still smaller wrapped fibers- our bodies as ropes: so, when we unravel the strand, let's compare that to seeing the body as a conglomerate of muscles, and foods, and fats, and organs, and bones wrapped around a column of empty space.

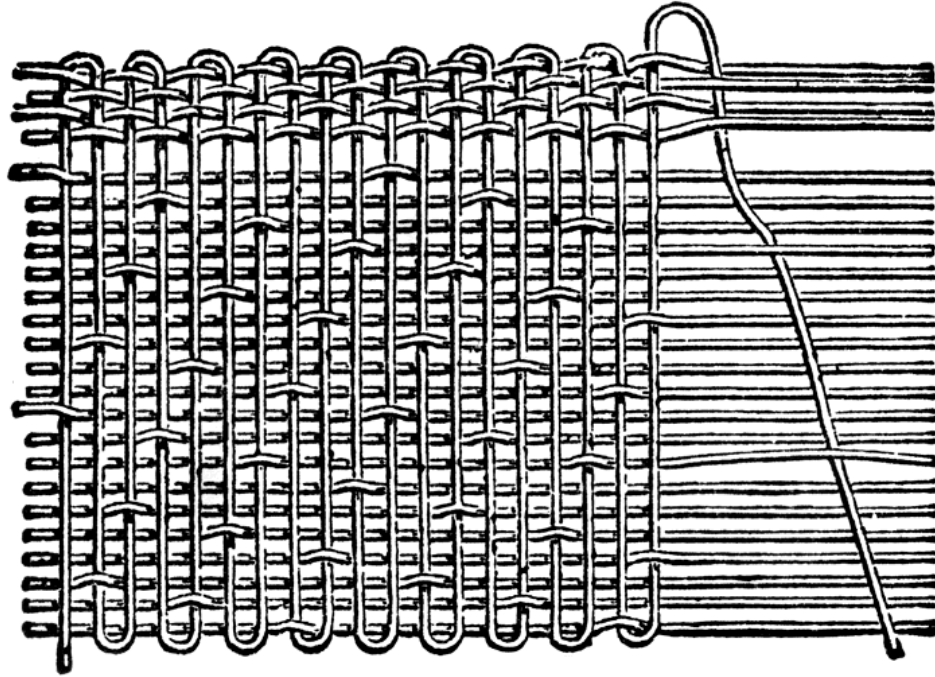


That's a close-up of muscle tissue over there, and...

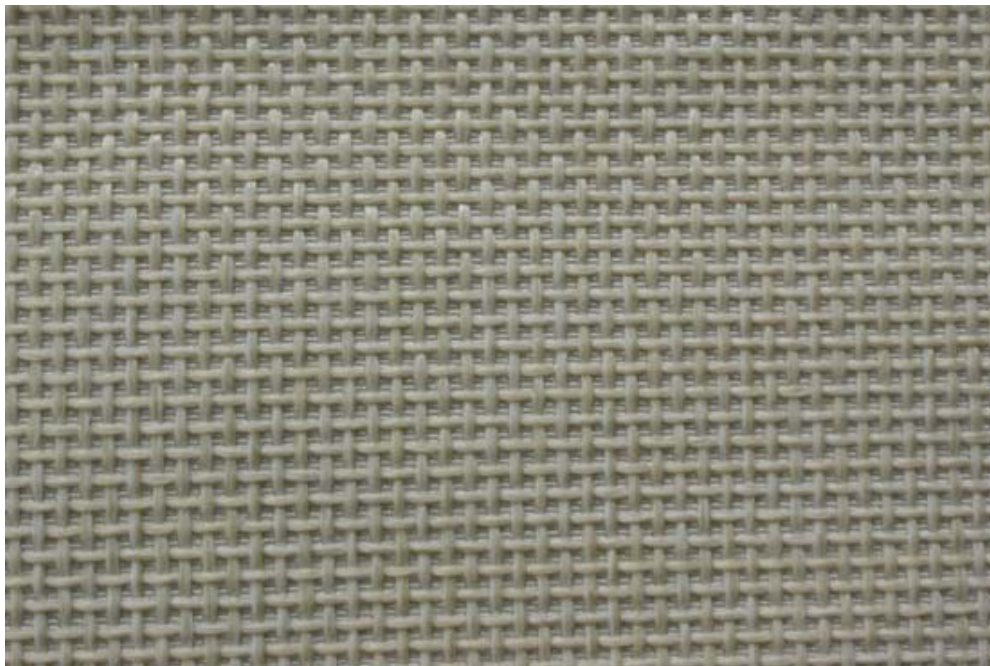


...the strand.

So we are rope, the cord, the thread, the string; it tells our stories, in a weave, and our role is the weft of the self.

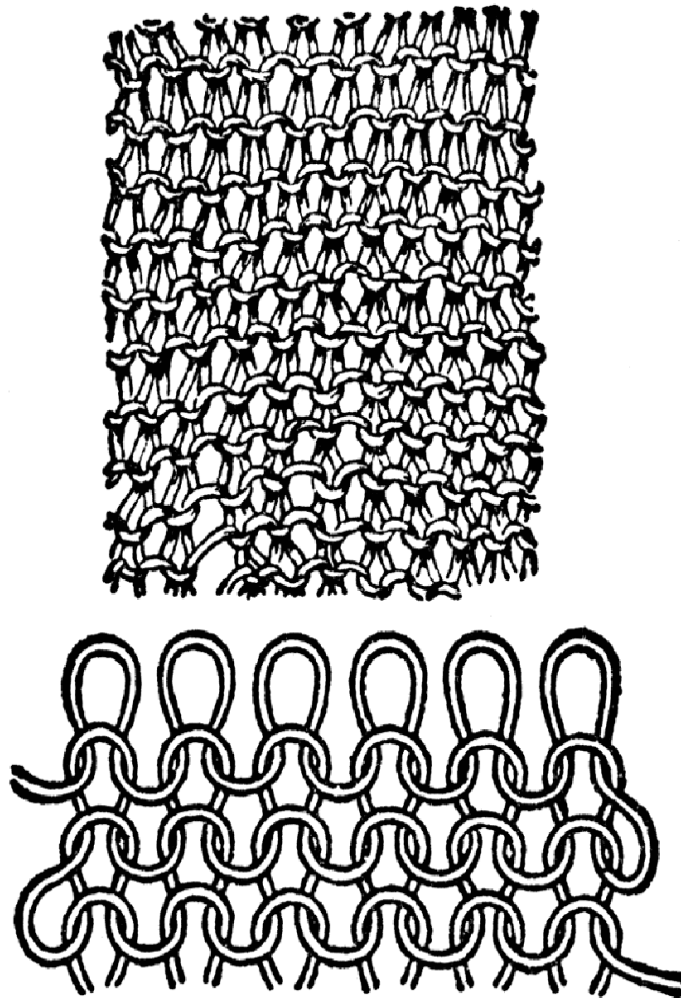


In your fabric, you're weaving through a lifeline of other bodies- you're weaving your lifeline through the warp of all other bodies and the other things you encounter, and your life ties your fabric together.

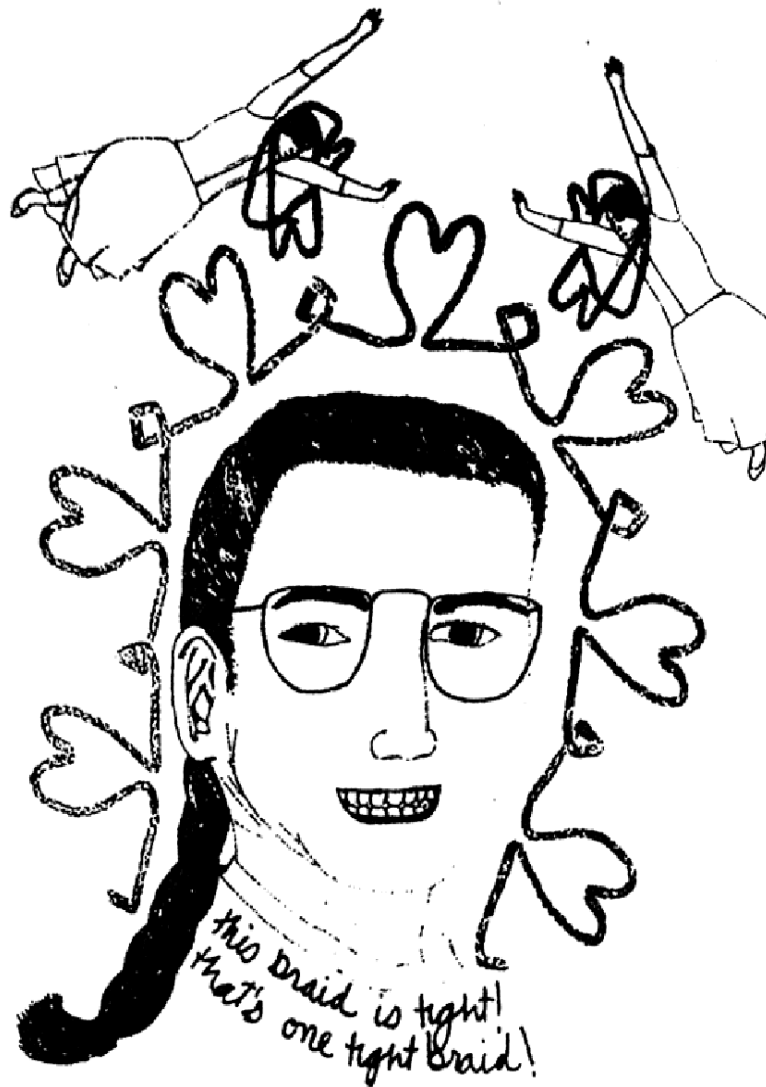


Now, we're moving back and forth amidst this warp, a field of bodies, similar strings, cords, and ropes. With a solid fabric, all the bodies and strands involved, they weave and it becomes essentially uniform, it sort of has this Dr. Bronner's All-Is-One sort of thing going on. Solid fabric—it posits that we are essentially the same, that it's very universal, that your strand gets lost amongst the other strands; it's very "don't sweat the small stuff, you are part of a grand fabric". And so the bodies and cords are all made of the same stuff- and we're all in this room, we're the fabric of this room. And the weft becomes lost in the warp, vice versa, it's the sameness, it's beautiful, it's peaceful, it puts it in perspective—that fabric is the universe, and the universe stretches out for yards and yards.

I want to put a few things out here as kind of relevant textile sidenotes to this point: First, is that I feel that the tighter and smaller and more invisible the weave of a textile, the more the evidence of human hand is lost—it leaves the fabric and it brings the fabric closer to losing all individuality and embracing a universality. And then, conversely, with a chunkier weave, one that demonstrates more fibers, more physicality, more texture—the more that you can see the warp versus the weft, the more that you can distinguish the strands from each other—the more a solid fabric brings discernable individualities into that universe that it creates.



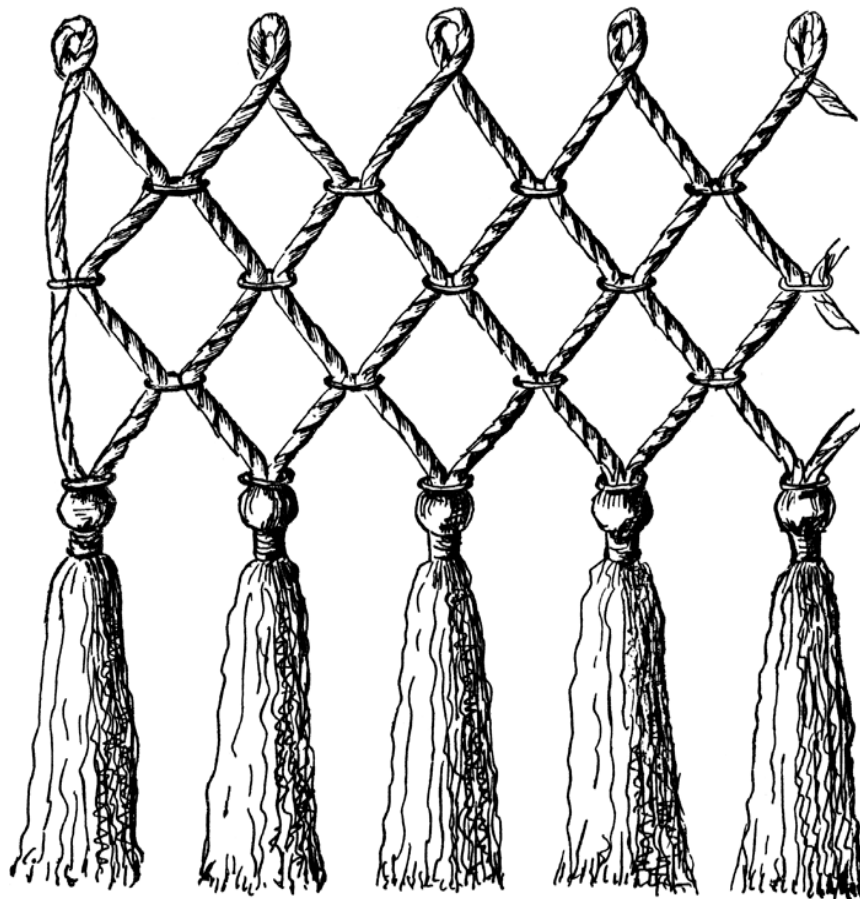
Secondly, I'd like to consider knitting and knits as a specific way of weaving where the yarn of the self is cast onto the yarn of the self. So you have a string that is building a fabric by building on itself; I think this represents an introspective self-supported textile. The uniformity of a knitted scarf is self-reflexive--reflective oneness, like the self building it's own integrated identity. And I've again made the clowny decision here to bring up the Weezer lyric about destroying a sweater by pulling a string as you walk away, because it's a valid way to destroy a sweater, and it's a good way of representing what I'm talking about. When you destroy a knit, you unravel the construction of the self so it's not tethered to its own history, memory, or integrated structure anymore; you're reducing a lived lifetime back to the essence of just being a cord, a body, without the built identity of the sweater. A knit is a textile from the perspective of the self, relating to itself—to jump forward in this lecture for a second, the sexual aspect of knits, their essence is masturbatory.



The third and final sidenote on solid fabric and basic weaving today: my sometimes collaborator Lee Relvas and my good friend Kim Kelly came up with this drawing about community years ago. The text on it says: "That braid

is tight. That's one tight braid." And when it came time to write this lecture I couldn't stop thinking about how smart this drawing is—tightly woven braids and tight knit community. A braid as representative of our own "self-string" interacting with a select few of our favorite other strings. The last time I did this lecture, the idea of friendship bracelets came up in the Q&A and upon reflection I think this is similar, this is exactly what makes friendship bracelets so much of what they are—one tight braid. Kinship and community. Nets and lace are similar—working with a select set of fibers, they are select networks, our stringy beginnings.

In *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Samuel Delaney focuses on two modes of human interaction—networked encounters and contact encounters. Networked encounters deal with known kinships—shared interests, lifestyles, resources, friends, needs, professions, or class identities—encounters that form a stepping stone of common identification and need. In contrast, contact encounters are semi-random, representing our relation not just to what is nearest and dearest to us but to everything and everyone we encounter and the acknowledgement of relating to things outside our closest comforts.



I believe that networked encounters relate specifically to the social relations inherent in nets and braids, friendship bracelets and lace. Seeing our place in nets and braids reflects a view of our inner circles. Seeing our strand path in the weft of a broader fabric is the expansive view, the contact encounter, or at least its textile equivalent.

OK, I think we're solid about some solids.



The title of this section of the lecture is called “On Jeggings: How Patterns Happen”.

This is about the structural divide between a pattern that is printed on fabric versus one that is woven into fabric. And it relates entirely to my findings in the field of jeggings. Building on what I’ve said about solids, patterns represent immediately a more individualistic impulse, or at least they might be used to talk about how we live as individuals. Patterns are differentiated color and texture areas, and I want us to consider how they were created in the fabric when we consider what they might mean.

In the case of jeggings—leggings that are never-too-cleverly disguised as jeans, we will always dealing with a garment that is trying to play a funny joke, no matter its construction. However, on my many jegging-related shopping expeditions—I have noticed two families of jegging construction. The first is solid colored fabric with an image of “jeans” silkscreened onto the fabric. These jeggings tend to be more *trompe l’oeil*, trying to convey a “regular denim” sensibility. This jegging group is fabric where the patterning is imposed by print or dye. The second family is where a depiction of jeans is actually woven into the fabric of the legging. Usually this is done super crudely, in just two colors and it has a kind of clowny drawing style to it—just an outline of pockets, or, like, a weird snake belt drawn kind of strangely. This style tends to be more bizarre and do more surreal things, and the flexibility of the patterning is governed foremost by the weave of the fabric; the patterning is generated by the individuality of the strands constituting it rather than the realistic portrayal of jeans imposed on a solid.

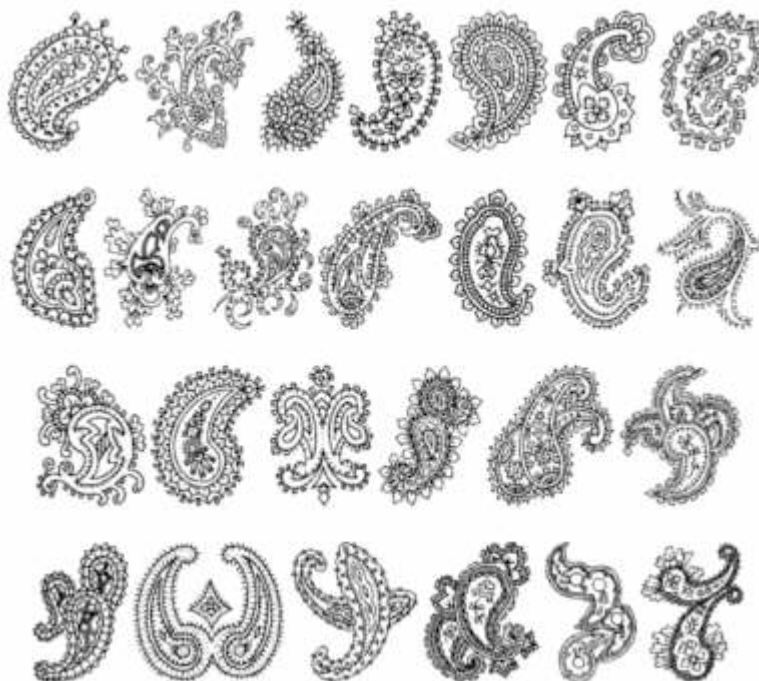


First, let's look at a pattern printed on a solid weave: you start with the solid fabric, a field of oneness that I just talked about, and then through ink or dye you impose color differences onto this field. I'd like to posit that by constructing a pattern like this, whatever you put on the fabric to an extent is a conceit; it acts in relation—or it acts in reaction—to the oneness of the field, and whatever it's trying to say, it says in the context of humanity's oneness. You have the solidness of a fabric, and you're dyeing it or printing on it after the fact that it's been woven, you'll always be laying something on top of the idea of oneness. It's almost a trick, or rather, I think that prints are trying to play with us. Their foundation is "the solid"—this fabric, this life-fabric; where patterns occur on the cloth is not in anyway dependent on where particular strands weave through other strands. Structurally, prints are saying that patterns rest on our lives arbitrarily, like we're not composing the patterns ourselves. Prints take the stance that if your life is part of pattern, it's beyond your control and your part in it would be unrecognizable if you were to remove it from the whole. So powers beyond humanity are responsible for prints, it turns out. Prints are god- and goddess-fearing textiles.

I'll be honest: in the textile universe that I am building, the worldview of printed and dyed fabric is not nearly as sexy to me as when patterns are woven into the fabric, for reasons I'm going to try and make clear. However, that doesn't mean that prints don't have things to say for themselves, in their own way of being, and they certainly can do some things that woven patterns can't.



One thing prints that do very well is polka-dot forms of patterning—dots as individual units—bursts of singularity on a solid field. When this happens on a print, I feel like the question is posited: what is the individual? What is the pattern of an individual doing on the integrity of connectedness, oneness, the fabric? It is as if the polka dot acts as an aura or a spotlight on the strands in the fabric that it graces. Printed shapes afloat on a field are all examples of this—the representation of specific individualized moments or identities, even, and in spite of, the oneness of its solid foundation. And to me, therein lies, kind of, the queerness of polka dot permutations.



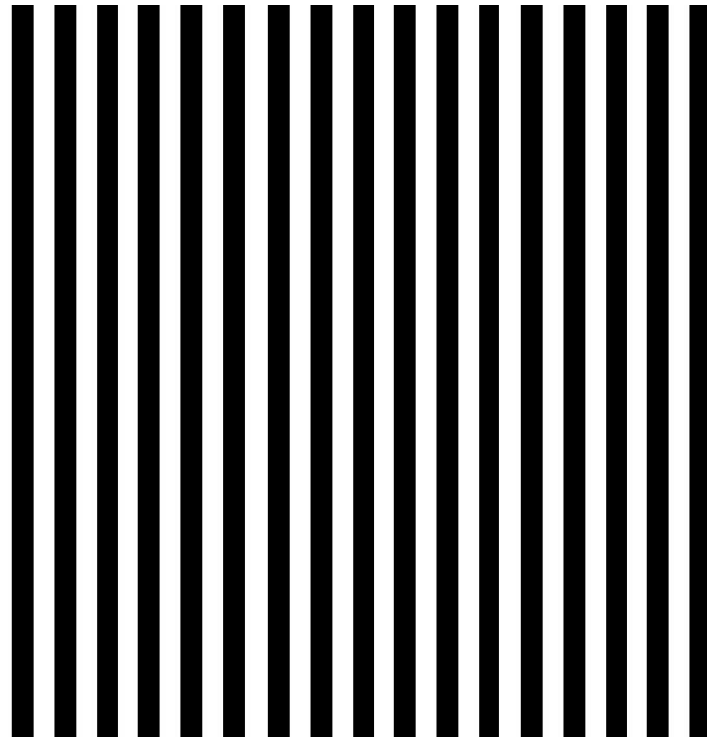
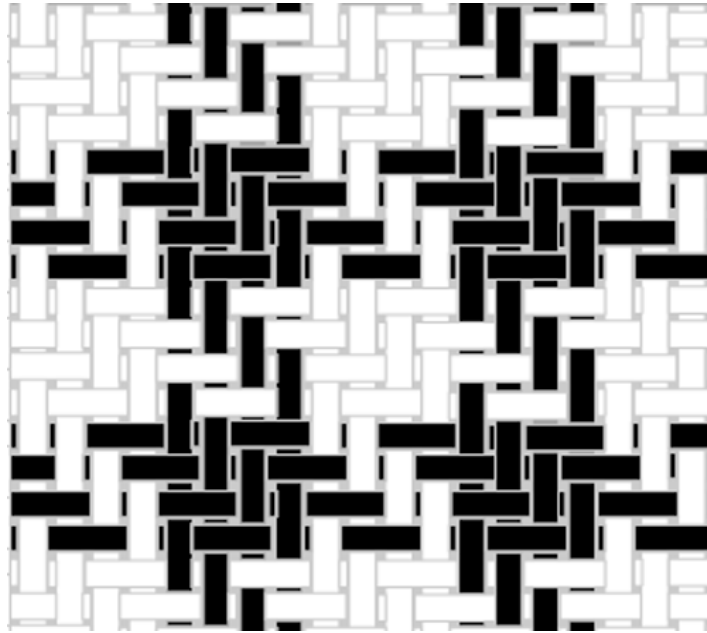
Floral patterning is often presented in polka dot style groupings, isolated spots of flower-bursts. Novelty prints are also often in this nature. And one of my favorite patterns, paisley, usually appears as a polka-dot formation, its own singular unit amongst other singular units, and in a formation of flaming contradiction in florid blossoms. I think that paisley concisely flaunts the idea of a flamboyant self. A pattern of paisley is a field of queers, these dots united as bodies by a similar shape, but each one astoundingly unique from its neighbors and confoundingly specific in the details that constitute its construction. The fact that you have this incredibly individualized shape so specifically printed on a solid seems to posit the question of what it represents—it complicates the simple statements of a dot. Where the dot can stand for human wonderment over the individualized self, even as the physical self of the strand is dwarfed in the scope of humanity. A paisley queers this idea. Paisley drives outrageousness and beauty into the equation, and becomes a specific confrontation, theologically embodying a pantheon of gods moving through us in ways we'll never know. The specificity of prints, in many ways, is what loads them with contradiction when we intuit their purposes.



Dyed fabric, while also being an imposition upon the solid of a fabric raises a much different set of questions and loosens the riddles of prints. While the webs and bursts of color in tie-dyed fabric could be interpreted as similar to the specific highlights of a polka dot or a paisley, the specificity is undermined—it's undermined by a lack of solid borders. The ebb and flow of colors in the cloth speaks more of an adjustment of solid fabric than a termination of it—the oneness of life, and less about the contradiction of it. Tie-dye plunges the humanity of cloth into a free-form astral mood soup. Furthermore, without these solid boundaries of color, one color flowing into the next can represent a vision of humanity moving through different aspects, different colors, different moods, and different eons.



I feel like we have given prints their due. Most of the rest of what I'm going to be talking about are woven patterns, a.k.a. juggling group number two. Woven patterns embrace the idea that we are all connected, woven through each other's lives, but also present the individuality of the bodies involved by having distinctly colored cords forming distinct entities on a fabric. This is what's behind the expression "dyed in the wool," as being intrinsic, whereas a pattern that is printed on the solidity of a fabric is sort of a contradiction of itself, when the cords going into it are already a certain color, making a certain shape, that reflects a different idea of a world wherein the individual shapes the patterns. And then you start to see social relations develop between these patterns, and you think of what these blocks of color as people or animal friends or things we commune with mean. Woven patterns have the primary construction—an individual moving through, weaving back and forth through the various elements of the world to constitute a fabric; the way the elements of our lives come together is present in shapes that propose social relations.

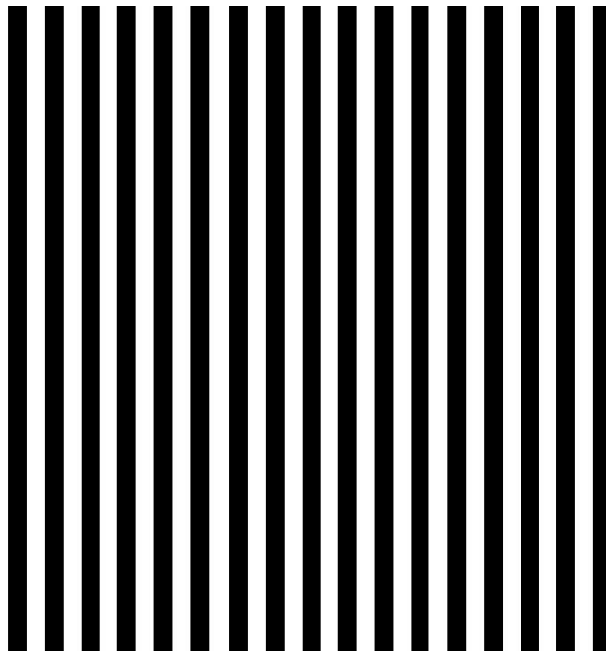


I think the easiest place to start with this is stripes, because you see simple the fabric variation is and yet how immediate you start to see something that is a collection of individuals; each one is distinct from its neighbor. A stripe is the first step in textiles becoming sexualized—acknowledging social relations, and in discerning

individual bodies; each one of us is a stripe, and we're all in this room together. Our relation to each other is represented simply; we coexist on this fabric. [*points at stripe.*] That's me.



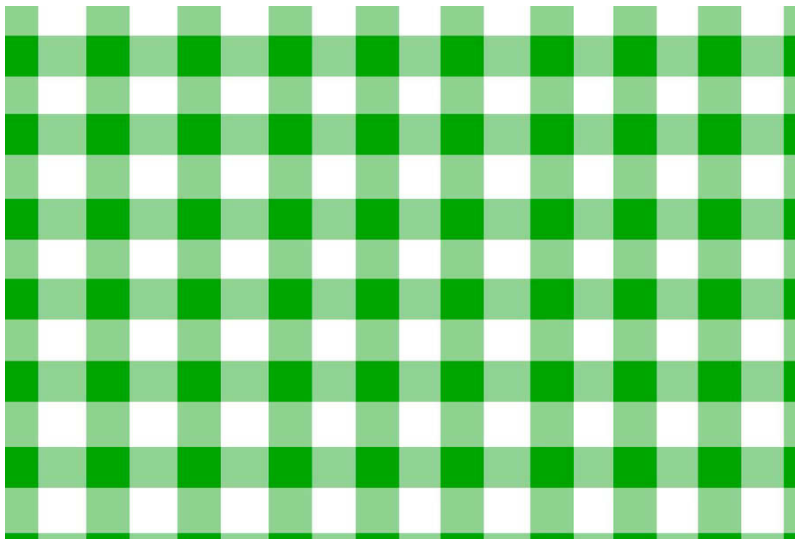
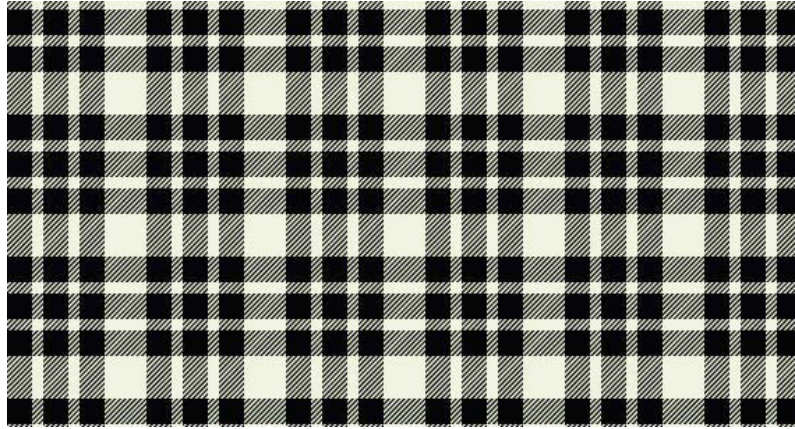
There's mutations of stripes that shift the simplicity of that meaning. A pinstripe, which drastically alters the stripe ratio, presents itself less as a collection of different-sized stripes and more as a singular blazing stripe striking out on its own across a solid, the individual identity forging a lone path across an indistinguishable, unnoteworthy field of "other". The pinstripe is a pattern of you against the world, you ignoring or acting remotely from your fellow shapes, quite comparable to the structure of a polka dot— not touching, not even holding hands.



Let's take stripes in the opposite direction now, though: let's take the stripes to a different place, where they start having more interaction with each other, they start interacting and they start permeating each other and reshaping rigid borders.



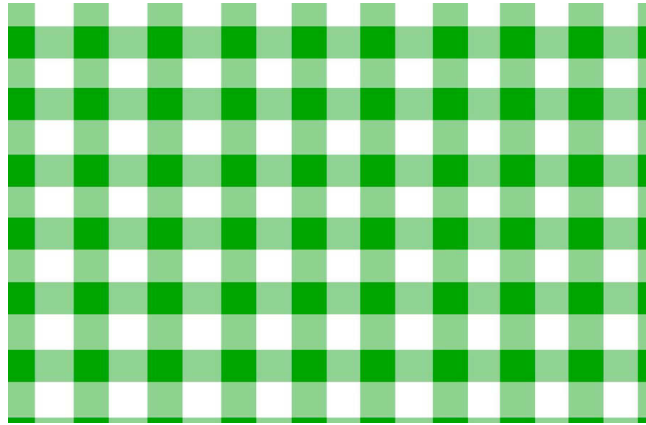
Perhaps the easiest way to develop this interaction is to start with a zigzag, which takes the stripe in relation to other stripes beyond just being in a room with someone and puts it deeper into conversation- the cupping of a zigzag, the Vs, is a hug, it's an embrace, it's physicality. It's a zigzag or curve or wave can be a stand in for open arms or open legs, wrapping your body around another, arching backs with other backs. Zigzags, curves, and waves are stripes trying to embrace fellow stripes, and it's starting to complicate the act of simple tessellating. Stripes, just on their own, tessellate naturally and simply. They fit together, but until they start bending into each other they refrain from penetrating each other. A zigzag or a wave is the first step towards representing our physical and psychic contacts with each other—the first step to sex seeping into this patterned cloth.



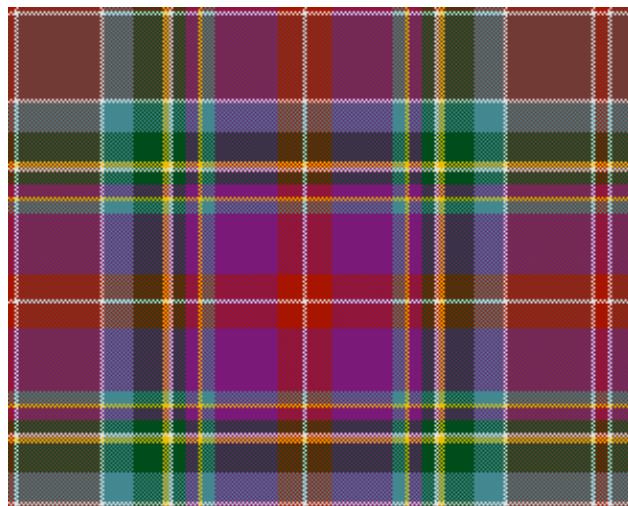
Another primary and sexual motion of stripes can be found in plaids and gingham where stripes are always in the path of their fellow stripes:



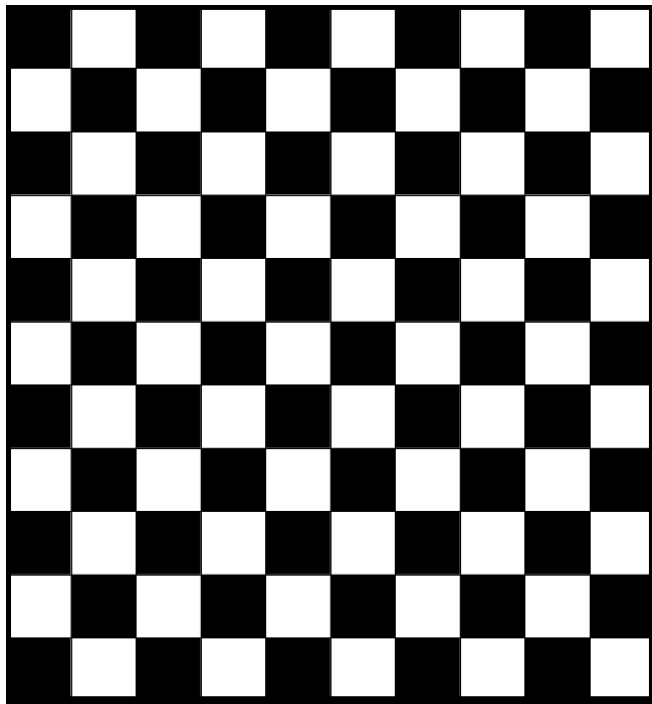
Their individual hues are being cross-woven with those of the stripes it interacts with. A plaid is a form of orgy, in a way—a social acknowledgement of new vision of self through the overlaying of our bodies—fucking, and the love of bodies interacting and cross-pollinating. The infinite possibilities of woven plaid mirror the different levels we penetrate each other as individuals as we encounter each other, the different consents and boundaries we offer our fellow strands of fabric. Plaid is about the possibilities of human interaction, the possibilities of sex. Sometimes the lines overlay and they hardly impact each other, other times the combinations are brilliant and explosive.



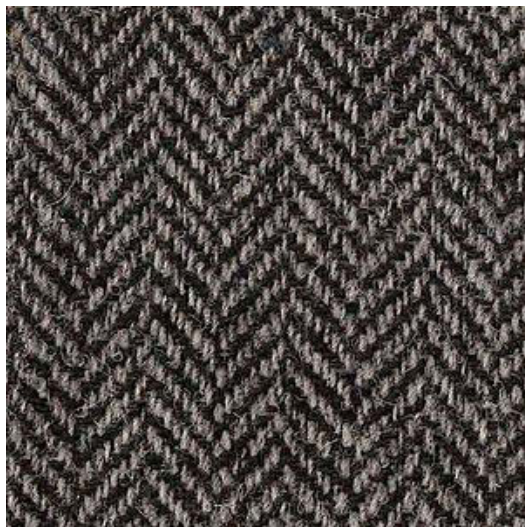
Let's spend a second on gingham, a sort of primary form of plaid. There's a couple of interesting things to bring up about gingham. On one hand I see the stripes interacting, on the other I see a new individuals—new individual shapes—take form in a tri-color tessellation, the square, tessellating into checkered cloth. With gingham you start seeing maybe a heteronormative potential of sexually woven patterns as well, if we were to read these square units as the babies of two straight lines fucking each other. Although the resultant squares coming out of stripes combining could represent any new element of human experience resulting from interaction, in gingham the homogeneity of the stripes, and the homogeneity of their progeny, seems to paint a predictable social story in that way.



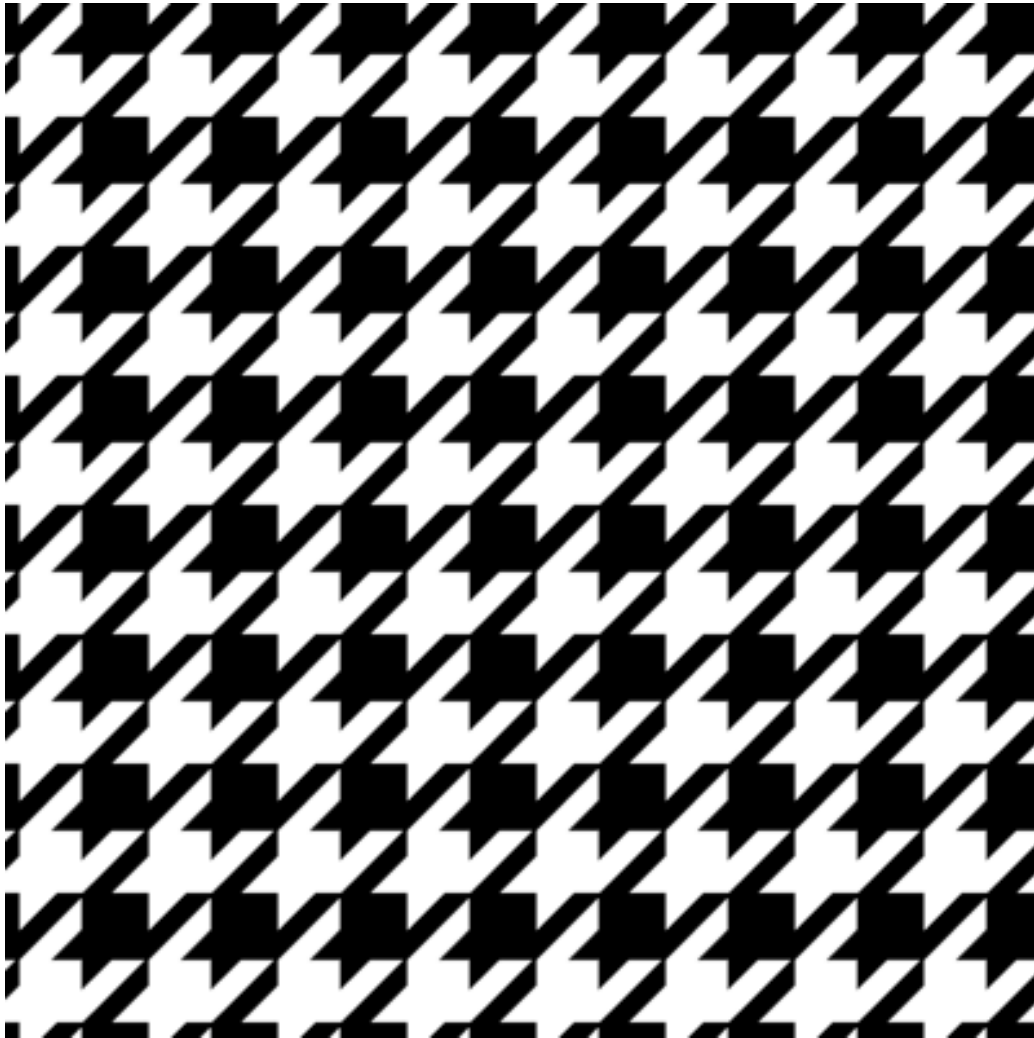
As a queer, I personally think that plaid is much more adequate at representing the transformative power and productive diversity of human interaction, by typically demonstrating a more playful approach to the varying results of stripes fucking—or overlapping.



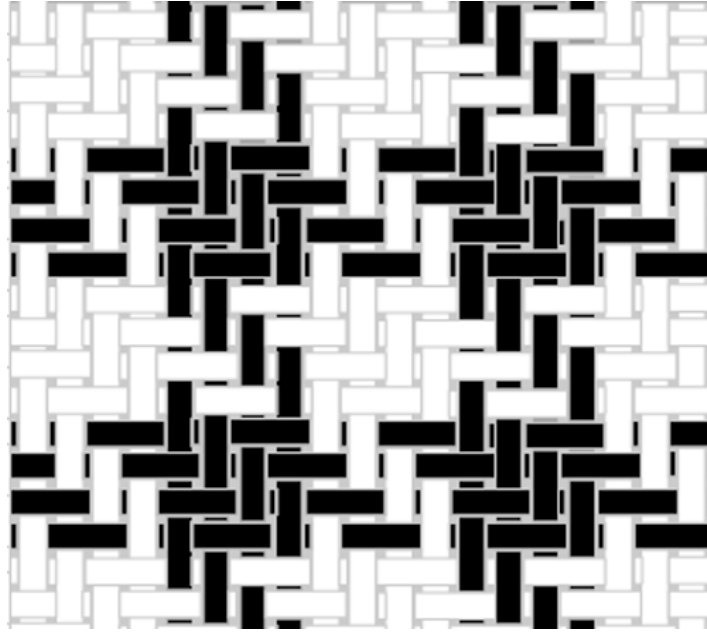
Let's return to the checkers that the gingham produced. Reading each square as the individual, immersed in a field of other surrounding individuals, begins our path toward more complicated tessellation. Like a stripe, a checker is the self in a society. When we see checkers, we see an individual's most rigid relationship to the society it's part of.



As its shape bends and contorts though, like a zigzag, it begins to permeate and poke into its neighbors. It becomes—what I wrote is “a deflowered tessellation”. Each shape in a herringbone—like a stretched and twisted checker—languidly lays atop its fellows.



We can extend the contortions of tessellating forms even further into things which are distinctly complicated, such as houndstooth, where you begin to see the true transsexuality of tessellating forms. They are both penetrated and penetrating shapes. The way their forms interlock confounds a singular reading, and a singular gendering. Tessellations imply physicality and sexuality, an idea of bodies fitting around other bodies, and inherently in that, tessellations render themselves—and I may be inventing this word right now—“ungenderable” shapes. I feel like a tessellating shape is a shape that to some degree has freed itself from gender and yet remains intensely interactive and sexual, because it fits into itself over and over again and in every which way.



It's interesting to look at it as a pattern on the greater picture, and then it's also amazing to break it down and see how it's woven into the fabric and, in that way, how it's dependent on the other shapes around it and is replicated in the other shapes in this kind of beautiful overlap of idea sharing.

So with these strands making patterns, we see how it—our strands can be woven into specific and very social patterning, and that—how that brings into fabric a sexuality, the sexuality of textiles, the social fabric of textiles, the trans-social sexual fabric. And this is where I am going to weave you: where fabric is at the cusp of the realm of intuitive sextiles.