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Stitching for Our Lives: Embroidery and Needlework as Feminist Art, Praxis, and Resistance

Second-wave feminist textile artist Beryl Weaver's embroidered pieces use feminine-coded images and the feminine-coded art to comment on the construction of femininity. One piece depicts a woman in a crinoline outside of a cottage with the double captions "'To women's work'" and "'Two women's work,'" alluding to "women's double burden" of work outside the home and work within the home, the assumed mutually exclusive categories of 'women's work' and 'waged work,' and the presumed solitude of both the woman worker and the stitcher (Parker 1996, 206). This commentary relies on the supposed 'feminine' nature of embroidery and its consequent designation as 'women's work' to challenge the notion that to be feminine is to not work. This use of embroidery in feminist activism evokes both the history of the art as a tool for the subjugation of women and its use as a subversive tool of liberation for women, especially by working class women and women of color. It references embroidery's use as a challenge to capitalism and industrialization. It both affirms femininity, via its ideological ties to embroidery, as a source of power and reinforces the idea that embroidery is feminine.

In the medieval period in Europe, both women and men worked as professional embroiderers in embroidery workshops, and embroidery was considered an art "the equal of painting and sculpture" (Parker 1996, 17). However, the Renaissance-era emphasis on individualism and widening economic class differences introduced a divide between 'art' and 'craft,' with the former defined as the creative expression of a single artist, often belonging to the upper class, and the latter as the collective drudgery of many artisans, often belonging to the

working class. Mediums like painting and sculpture thus retained the label of ‘art’ while embroidery was demoted to a ‘craft.’ The class divide in the art/craft divide was based on the assumption that the upper classes were more enlightened than the lower classes and therefore possessed greater creative intellect to produce complex, valued art. The emergence of the middle class during the Renaissance and early industrial eras produced a class eager to differentiate itself from the working class, which created embroidered works for pay and in which women labored outside of the home, and emulate the upper class, which could afford to pay for embroidered works and in which women did not labor outside of the home. Establishing the non-working noblewoman as the emblem of the upper class placed her as the model for middle-class women who hoped to prove their household’s economic status and thus as the model for femininity (Parker 1996). However, middle-class women’s “households’ still uncertain status demanded embroidered furnishings,” which they could not afford to pay others to create, so they labored within the home to produce embroidered textiles as a sign of economic status (Parker 1996, 69). This shaped a gendered and classed divide within embroidery production – the collective embroidery work of working-class men in the ‘public’ of the market and the individual embroidery work of middle-class women in the ‘private’ of the home – and initiated the association between embroidery and the ideal of femininity (Parker 1996).

The Western ideal of femininity further developed in contrast to the supposed lack of femininity and thus immorality and wrongness of non-Western women used to justify imperialism and colonialism. Imperialists interpreted the comparative sexual freedom of women of color in non-Western countries as indicative of a lack of moral education and suggested that colonization of such countries would generously provide their citizens with the opportunity to better themselves by adapting to white, Western norms of civility, modesty, and sexual purity.

This construction of women of color as uncivilized, immodest, and impure and thus unfeminine strengthened the assumption that femininity mandated such qualities in white, Western women as the association of femininity and embroidery simultaneously intensified (Hill Collins 2004).

Beyond its display serving as a marker of privilege, embroidery enforced silence, stillness, and sitting with "Eyes lowered, head bent, shoulders hunched," the physical manifestation of the obedience and subservience expected for femininity (Parker 1996, 10). Originally incorporated into girls' education in the sixteenth century to evoke "elevated class associations," by the eighteenth century embroidery was taught to girls at such a young age that their resulting expertise with a needle, thread, and fabric appeared 'natural' to them (Parker 1996, 73). To support the notion that embroidery is naturally feminine, women naturally embroider, and women are naturally feminine, the Victorians invented a history of the medieval era – which they considered the golden age of embroidery production – in which women were the primary or sole creators of embroidery. They also invented the idea of the solitary, medieval noblewoman embroiderer stitching within the home to support their construction of needlework as emblematic of feminine silence, subservience, and domesticity, reinforcing the private, feminine, and craft nature of embroidery in contrast to public, masculine arts (Parker 1996). The belief that embroidery was both a manifestation of and the creating force of femininity designates embroidery as a performative – an action which both evokes meaning and creates meaning – under Judith Butler's theory of performativity (Butler 2009). The construction of embroidery as feminine excluded women not considered feminine, particularly women of color, from Western-centric histories of needlework, obscuring both the economic necessity and liberatory practice embroidery constituted in their lives.

Many working-class women and women of color in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries performed embroidery and needlework to supplement their family's income, contradicting the assumed 'private' and domestic nature of women's embroidery and its perception as performed primarily or exclusively by upper-class white women with the leisure time to do so. In the antebellum United States, Black women and girls used embroidery and needlework as a means for financial independence and commonly worked as "seamstresses, dressmakers, and milliners" (Coles 2020, 4). These professions allowed enslaved Black women freedom of movement around their cities and provided self-employment for free Black women, who were rarely hired by textile mills or other factories that refused to employ Black workers. Additionally, the limited scholarship on Black women's embroidery in the United States ignores the possibility of African influence and even suggests that embroidery was new to Black schoolgirls when taught to them in properly 'feminine' curriculums (Coles 2020). However, embroidery was common in the textile traditions of West Africa, "the ancestral homeland of the greatest majority of Africans who were taken to be enslaved in the Americas," and had religious and cultural significance (Coles 2020, 6). Enslaved peoples likely passed embroidery and needlework knowledge through generations, so Black schoolgirls likely had experience with needlework and simply "honed their skills under the instruction of their needlework teachers" (Coles 2020, 6). Enslaved Black women in the South used their needle skills "to clothe themselves, their families, their enslavers" and to produce clothes and quilts to barter for necessities their enslavers did not provide (Coles 2020, 5). While needlework was forced on enslaved women by their enslavers and operated as a tool of oppression, it also offered a means of economic liberation and connection to African culture.

As capitalist industrialization moved production from the home or workshop into the factory, skilled craftspeople – including working-class women and women of color performing needlework within their homes – lost income potential because the factory system's mechanization produced goods more quickly and at cheaper prices (Keats 2021). The removal of paid production from the home also promoted the assumption that labor performed within the privacy of the home does not contribute to the public economic market, exacerbating the public/private divide by introducing corresponding 'market'/'domestic' and 'work'/'nonwork' divides (Dimitrakaki 2018). The expectation of women's subservience, frailty, and domesticity via their assumed (and constructed) femininity implied that they were unfit to labor physically in the public market and therefore belonged in the home completing domestic labor, adding a masculine/feminine dimension to the market/domestic and public/private divides. In relation to the art/craft divide, already associated with the masculine/feminine and public/private, this established the expectation of art created by men in public for profit and craft (exemplified by embroidery) created by women in private to provide comfort for others.

The devaluing of craft by industrialization placed craft in opposition with both capitalism and art, and the utility of craft competed with both the other useful products of capitalist manufacturing and the purely decorative products of "'art for art's sake'" (Parker 1996, 193). In the late nineteenth century, Russian artists, attracted by craft's challenge to both capitalism and 'high' art with its upper-class connotations, embraced the peasant style of embroidery as a means of socialist rebellion against those systems (Parker 1996). Embroidery had material use in decorating Russian dress in traditional and indigenous styles (therefore symbolically rejecting Western influence on Russian culture) and was often a collaborative project, locating it as "an art compatible with socialism and collective practice" (Parker 1996, 193). This use of embroidery as

public art contests the division between the feminine private and the masculine public, alluding to the interdependence of private and public lives and therefore to the twentieth-century feminist slogan ‘the personal is political.’ It reveals that “homes (private spaces) are affected by capitalism, global markets, and patriarchal systems” via the socially constructed market/domestic and masculine/feminine divides that dictate who should perform what labor where, so there is not a public/private divide nor a corresponding work/nonwork divide (Segalo 2022, 3). Embroidery and other crafts consequently constitute a challenge to capitalism, industrialization, and individualism and to the art/craft, public/private divides.

Dismantling the association between the public/private and masculine/feminine yet not contesting the construction of embroidery as feminine, activist campaigns historically used embroidery to make the public more ‘feminine’ and thus more ‘appropriate’ for female activists. In the nineteenth-century United States, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union decorated stages with needlework pieces. This practice called on the supposed femininity of needlework to feminize the space, make the female speakers seem less ‘out of place’ in the masculine-coded sphere of public speaking, and present them as more credible speakers because they were appropriately ‘feminine’ (Pristash et al. 2009). Their activist platform also included more radical reforms like women’s suffrage, expanded property rights for women, and “higher ages of consent in each state,” but their strategy of “aligning temperance work with – rather than in opposition to – popular beliefs about woman’s sphere and woman’s duty” protected their public credibility as activists (Pristash et al. 2009, 25). This reflects the idea that adhering to some norms allows one more lenience to break others, just as Sojourner Truth – who violated expectations of femininity by speaking in public - posed with her knitting in her most-distributed photos to “re-establish her normative femininity” and paint herself as a woman worth listening to

(Joreen; Pristash et al. 2009, 18). In utilizing embroidery to convey political messages, feminist activists call upon this association to reclaim femininity as a source of power and an expression of disobedience and outspokenness. Embroidery and its characterization as a 'feminine' craft was critical to the organizing of the nonmilitant Suffragists and the militant Suffragettes in Great Britain in the early twentieth century (Parker 1996). By carrying banners adorned with the mixed media of embroidery and paint and thus equally representing both a 'feminine' craft and a 'masculine' art, the Suffragettes disproved the notion that rallying for suffrage was unfeminine and articulated their "demand for equality, not androgyny" (Parker 1996, 199). This reclamation of embroidery and its femininity established both embroidery and femininity as political tools.

Embroidery also provides a means for less public protest via the subversion of expectations for what is stitched in the fabric. For instance, an embroidered sampler reading "'Polly Cook did this and she hated every stitch she did in it'" expresses a young embroiderer's dissatisfaction with the system emphasizing stitching as the source of proper femininity for women (Pristash et al. 2009, 20). In this manner, embroidery is a form of discourse, rhetoric, and epistemology, particularly because it was historically more accessible to women than publishing. Embroidery was a coded craft, with a system of symbols expressing subversive meanings "in a way that only someone familiar with a specific subculture's message system could understand," therefore conveying the message to its target audience yet protecting the embroiderers from outside scrutiny (Pristash et al. 2009, 15). Even explicitly subversive expressions in embroidery were protected by the assumed frivolity of the craft. Elizabeth Parker, a working-class English teenager, used her circa 1830 cross-stitched sampler to detail her life story, allude to the "sexual violation and physical abuse" she experienced from her employer "Lieutenant G," and relay her resulting depression and suicidal thoughts (Goggin 2009, 36). While her opening line "'As I

cannot write'" could reference the lack of access women had to public means of expression like publishing, it more likely alludes to "a self-imposed silence" surrounding her abuse (Seys 2022; Goggin 2009, 37). She refused to tell others about the abuse because she wanted to adhere to the expectation of women's feminine silence, obedience, and submission and instead used her stitching to work through her trauma privately. Testifying to the facts of trauma, whether publicly or privately, is critical to one's mental health as it affirms one's experiences and reactions, so Parker was "quite literally stitching for her life" in creating her sampler (Goggin 2009, 40). This attests to the personal benefit embroidery as protest or expression provides yet reinforces embroidery as an appropriately 'feminine' means of expression.

For modern activists, embroidery is a promising method of feminist praxis. As was imperative for Elizabeth Parker, the time that needlework takes provides the stitcher with time to self-reflect and consider how they construct themself as a person (Pristash et al. 2009). When stitching about social justice issues, the time-consuming nature of embroidery allows for detailed rumination on and conscientious engagement with the topic about which one is stitching (Seys 2022). Embroidery collectives and guilds provide community for feminist activists and opportunity for consciousness-raising, whether through discussion of the injustices portrayed in the stitches or through individual storytelling to reach the realization that their 'personal' experiences are caused by systems of oppression and thus require political change to remedy (Segalo 2022). Embroidery also makes use of skills that many people already have (elementary dexterity with a needle, thread, and fabric) and produces pictorial or plainly worded artwork that is accessible and understandable to a wide audience, suggesting that embroidery as a means of conveying feminist theory fulfills the feminist of color assertion that theory must be able to be "shared in everyday conversation" in order to be truly accessible and applicable (Segalo 2022;

Dimitrakaki 2018; hooks 2009, 30). Needlework can be picked up and put down quickly, making it easy to incorporate into a hectic schedule filled with familial, professional, personal, and activism demands (Oliviero). Additionally, stitching can be therapeutic, a method for emotional expression in repeatedly stabbing the needle into the fabric or for emotional regulation in establishing a calm rhythm of stitching (Parker 1996).

Some feminist embroiderers endorse the stabbing method because "[t]he construction of femininity inhibits the direct expression of anger" while embroidery provides a 'feminine' way to express such emotions (Parker 1996, 213). However, this suggests that these embroiderers still feel confined or confine themselves to social expectations of femininity as engendering passivity rather than assertiveness. Similarly, some feminist embroiderers explain that the medium of craftivism (activism through craft) is more comfortable than conventional activism of protests and rallies because it is "a less masculine space to protest within" (Tedder 2019, 253). Their implication that embroidery is more accommodating because it is a less confrontational manner of activism alludes to the craft's feminine connotation and the assumption that femininity and confrontation are antithetical (Tedder 2019). Others argue that craftivism is more effective for feminism than conventional activism because embroidery and other forms of needlework carry history as 'women's' mediums (Parker 1996).

Like "[t]he purposes in creating textiles are, in and of themselves, as meaningful as the end product," the purpose in utilizing needlework's feminine connotations in activism matters (Pristash et al. 2009, 16). To do so to recognize women's subversive uses of needlework throughout history and affirm femininity as positive is truer to a feminist stance than to do so while implying that it is a more appropriate medium of activism for women because it fosters femininity. The truer intention behind incorporating embroidery into feminist art and resistance

also reveals that the idea that embroidery is both an expression of femininity and inculcates femininity paradoxically suggests both that femininity is natural to women and that femininity is taught through gender socialization. Although embroidery is commonly considered the domain of upper-class white women (as a result of the Victorians' revisioning of the past to conform it to that construction of embroidery), the use of embroidery in feminist praxis illuminates the diverse history of the art. Because capitalism, industrialization, and individualism degrade embroidery and needlework, using it in feminist praxis is a challenge of those systems. It offers another tool for political and community organizing, so through needlework as feminist art, praxis, and resistance, we are stitching for our lives.

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Cross-Stitch Analysis

My cross-stitched work to accompany the research paper reads “The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb,” the rumored original version of the common saying “blood is thicker than water,” the words of which are stitched in darker red thread in my work. This was done to show the prominence of the saying that remains while the original fades away. While “blood is thicker than water” is used to emphasize familial bonds as being of the utmost importance, the original saying suggests that chosen connections are stronger and more meaningful than biological connections. Stitched as cross-stitch, a craft entrenched in the feminine connotations of needlework, “The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb” is radical for women because they are often expected to place family first and labor diligently within the home to sustain the family. Women are expected to be the primary caregivers to children and thus foster the strong familial bonds championed by the common saying. To suggest that there can be things more important than family for women rejects the idea (discussed in my paper) of the solitary woman working within the home. It instead gestures to the power of ‘chosen family’ and female friendships, perhaps even to the female erotic as described by Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich. It is therefore also a rejection of heteronormativity and the expectations of femininity for women.

As someone who has previously only used cross-stitch to produce decorative works (often of flowers – how feminine!), often for others as gifts, using the craft in feminist art was exhilarating. It showed me the true power of the medium as a political tool and a means of self-expression, gave me time to contemplate the implications of the work as I stitched, and prompted conversation about this project with others around whom I was stitching. I am already dreaming up new feminist cross-stitch projects for the future!