

The Subversive Stitch Revisited

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This chapter proposes a substantial shift away from understandings of sewing as a gendered, individual, domestic activity, theorized most notably by Rozsika Parker in her 1984 book, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*.¹ While acknowledging Parker's important contributions to the study of sewing by women in Europe and Britain in particular, the chapter reflects critically on her lack of attention to class, race, and geography. Parker's near-exclusive focus on unpaid domestic embroidery by white, class-privileged women of Western European descent elides the complexity of women's sewing practices – which straddle paid and unpaid labor performed across private and public spaces – while ignoring needlework by women of color, immigrant women, white ethnic women, and low income women. Parker also fails to acknowledge the ways in which patriarchy combined with European colonialism and proto-capitalism to harness women's low waged labor, producing new forms of exploitation that persist today.

This text proposes new and more inclusive understandings of the subversive stitch, considered through projects by artists Aram Han Sifuentes and Carole Frances Lung. Working across fiber, performance, and social practice, the artists mobilize sewing to draw attention to labor exploitation and immigration and mobilize for racial and economic justice.

Unraveling the Subversive Stitch

One of the first contemporary studies of gender and sewing, *The Subversive Stitch* charts the domestication, suppression, and silencing of women through the deployment of embroidery, a form of creative expression believed to be naturally associated with the female gender and femininity.² Parker charts an increasingly differentiated workplace in Europe beginning in the fourteenth century, as paid, professional

needlework became the domain of men, whereas women were relegated to unpaid, amateur, domestic embroidery. She surveys moral, social and cultural shifts that increasingly privileged a woman's "proper" place as being in the home, noting that as women's paid labor outside the home became increasingly stigmatized, domestic embroidery – embraced as a respectful and productive activity for women – played a significant role in relegating women to their homes.

Parker (2010) devotes only a few pages to women's *paid* embroidery work, describing how the advent of industrially produced fine muslins in the nineteenth century led working-class women in England, Scotland, and Ireland to do drawn thread work, working extremely long hours under highly injurious conditions in a subcontracting system. This instance aside, Parker fails to acknowledge the hundreds of thousands of women who, despite the stigmas of paid labor, continued to do paid needlework, often working across multiple sites spanning the workshop, the factory, and the family home.

Parker's lack of attention to women's *paid* needlework masks a much more complex and representative history of what artist Lou Cabeen (2007) describes as embroidery as a female trade. Historians Marla R. Miller (2006) and Judith DeGroat (2005) note that women were often highly skilled entrepreneurs and employers who ran their own shops. For Miller, a disproportionate focus on middle-class domesticity obscures women's artisanal, skilled professional labor in sewing, embroidery, and lacemaking, while romanticizing unpaid domestic, ornamental needlework.

It is impossible to fully comprehend the historical shifts in embroidery theorized by Parker without acknowledging women's paid needlework, and it is also impossible to theorize the changing social and economic functions of embroidery without considering the ways in which Christian morals and proto-capitalism combined to exploit women's labor. Historians Miller (2006), DeGroat (2005), Maxine Berg (1998), Deborah Valenze (1995), Jane Humphries (1995), Sara Horrell (with Humphries 1995), and Katrina Honeyman (1997) observe that during the Victorian period, Christian, patriarchal ideologies dovetailed with the economic imperatives of an emergent capitalist industrial order that aimed to subordinate and control women's labor in order to exploit its cheapness, channeling them into some of the most marginal, low-waged, and exploitative forms of labor in the new industrial economy (Valenze 1995). Victorian divisions of labor emerged simultaneously with the norm of the "respectable" family unit comprising a male breadwinner with a dependent wife and children (Humphries 1995; Horrell and Humphries 1995; Valenze 1995; DeGroat 2005). This served to justify women's low wages while excluding them from better paid jobs that may have afforded them more independence, thereby rendering them dependent on husbands and fathers (Humphries 1995; Horrell and Humphries 1995). As Humphries asserts, social norms that questioned the respectability of married women's employment were "the pillars of capitalist patriarchy in the later nineteenth century" (1995, p. 8). New gendered divisions of labor systemically forced women out of skilled needlework trades like specialist tailoring, patterning, and cutting, confining them to the lowest waged occupations, such as pieceworkers and seamstresses (Valenze 1995; Honeyman 1997; DeGroat 2005; Miller 2006).³ Gender hierarchies served as a mechanism of male control over women, with men monopolizing skilled, better-paid operations.

Poor and working-class women worked in the new industrial factories, and they also worked in their homes, taking in piecework, sewing gloves, making buttons and

lace, and mending smocks, shirts, caps, gowns, bodices, and petticoats for contractors (Lemire 1997; DeGroat 2005). Because women's needlework unfolded across a range of sites that included the factory, the home, and cottage industry, it is impossible to neatly separate factory work from domestic labor. As curator and scholar Carol Tulloch observes, the notion of home is not spatially limited to one's place of dwelling but rather, "stretches beyond the four walls of a house and a home, to incorporate geography and a sense of one's place in society" (1999, p. 118). The lack of attention to these types of needlework and the fluidity of sites they occupy constitutes a substantial gap in Parker's study. By detaching middle- and upper-class women's domestic, amateur embroidery from this complex socioeconomic web, *The Subversive Stitch* presents a very specific subset of gendered sewing.

In looking at shifts in needlework during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, one must also acknowledge connections between European colonialism and Western industrialization – which began in textiles – as noted by scholars William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1935), Margaret A. Villanueva (1985), Lisa Lowe (1996), Karen B. Graubart (2000), Virinder S. Kalra (2000), and Ana María Presta (2010). European colonists seized control over highly advanced indigenous, local, and regional expertise, textile systems of production, raw materials, and trade routes across Asia, Africa, and the Americas, reconfiguring them to align with European proto-capitalist trade and commodity systems, while also imposing European gender norms and divisions of labor on colonized populations (Villanueva 1985; Graubart 2000; Presta 2010). Europe's colonial powers built their emergent textile industries by deliberately destroying advanced textile economies in their colonies, harnessing raw materials like cotton and linen, imposing steep tariffs on imports, and flooding the colonies with European cloth (Kalra 2000). The unpaid labor of millions of enslaved and indentured indigenous, African, and Asian women, children, and men – in particular African slaves forced to work in American cotton production – fueled industrialization in Europe and the US, providing the resources for their new textile industries (Du Bois 1935; Lowe 1996).⁴ These connections provide crucial historical context for thinking about gender, labor, and needlework.⁵

Another area where *The Subversive Stitch* may have been more robust is in its consideration of the material culture of domestic embroidery, notably historical sewing samplers. Although Parker provides a detailed study of the changing thematic, stylistic, aesthetic, and educational properties of English samplers over five centuries, she devotes minimal attention to sampler making practices elsewhere. In contrast, other studies of historical samplers and embroidery published around the same time (Philadelphia Museum of Art 1971; Dreesman 1972; Smithsonian Institution 1984), include a much broader range of European and international practices, with examples from Italy, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Greece, Mexico, Peru, Persia, Yemen, India, China, Thailand, and Japan. Parker could at the very least have acknowledged these histories.

Rachel Maines's study of historical American embroidery (1978) devotes particular attention to the needlework practices of immigrant women, who "brought with them needlework traditions of their own to become part of the emerging variety of American and ethnic fashions and techniques" (pp. 77–81). Did immigrant women's sewing practices also have an impact on needlework in Britain? *The Subversive Stitch* sheds no light on this subject, as Parker devotes no attention to immigrant women in Britain.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, large numbers of Irish and later Jewish immigrant women worked in the lower rungs of the textile and needle trades, in factories and sweatshops, and in their homes. In the aftermath of World War II, Britain needed workers to help rebuild the country and bolster declining industries, like textiles, and it invited tens of thousands of immigrants from Eastern Europe and its former colonies in South Asia, East Africa, and the Caribbean to work in Britain. Immigrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh labored in the textile mills, their cheap labor exploited to fill jobs abandoned by working-class white women (Kalra 2000). Jamaican women – recruited for domestic work – brought freehand home dressmaking skills to Britain, where they confronted high levels of racism and exclusion. They used their sewing skills to earn a living as seamstresses, but also, to advocate “*their* cultural values, *their* ‘colouredness,’ *their* ‘Jamaicanness’” as they negotiated a new social reality tainted by racism and prejudice (Tulloch 1999, p. 122) (*italics in original*).⁶

In the introduction to the 2010 edition of *The Subversive Stitch*, published to mark the 25th anniversary of the original volume, Parker laments the lack of connection between embroidery and feminism today, going so far as to assert that, “there is no longer a thriving political movement of women” (2010, p. xi). This assertion raises questions about the scope of what counts as feminist engagement with embroidery, as it does about her conceptions of feminism itself. Despite writing at a time of substantial activity and visibility of Black British feminism, intersectional feminism, and indigent and women of color feminism – a period that extends across both the original and updated editions of *The Subversive Stitch* – Parker fails to even acknowledge feminisms that challenge and expand upon white dominant Euro-American, middle-class, heteronormative strains of feminism. Parker also fails to include even a single artist of color in her updated (2010) analysis of late twentieth-century embroidery, a glaring omission given the large numbers of whom use embroidery to resist oppression across race, genders, class, migration status, and sexuality.

Attention to the differentiated economic, racial, and social dynamics experienced by low-income women, women of color, and immigrant women is necessary in order to understand the intersectional complexities of sewing performed both inside and outside the home. Parker’s account is incomplete and diminished without their histories and experiences.⁷ *The Subversive Stitch* does not provide a universal analysis of “women” and embroidery as claimed.⁸ Whether by oversight or deliberate exclusion, it is devoted to needlework by cisgender, heterosexual, white, nonethnic, Christian, middle- and upper-class women of European descent, who sewed primarily for leisure in their homes. The various elisions noted here constitute an unforgivable historical blind spot in Parker’s account – which is probably the most widely circulated and cited text on women and embroidery. It must no longer be read, cited, or assigned without attention to its substantial oversights and omissions. An analysis of projects by Aram Han Sifuentes and Carole Frances Lung can help fill those gaps while expanding our understanding of subversive sewing, gender, and labor.

Valuing Immigrant Labor and Lives: Aram Han Sifuentes

Korean-born, Chicago-based Aram Han Sifuentes uses sewing to explore immigrant labor, migration, citizenship, and race. She completed her bachelor of arts in Latin American studies with a focus on immigration policy, and holds a master of fine arts

degree in fiber and material studies. Han Sifuentes is a teaching artist and adjunct associate professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She also lectures, organizes panels, curates exhibitions, and writes about the politics of labor, race and racism, and decolonizing craft.⁹

When Han Sifuentes was five years old, her family emigrated from Seoul, South Korea to Modesto, California, where she grew up in a primarily Hispanic immigrant community. Her parents owned a dry cleaning store, working 12-hour days, 6 days a week, and she grew up attuned to the long hours that immigrants like her parents had to work to earn a living, along with the lack of value and respect for their labor. Her mother – an artist trained in classical Korean landscape painting – worked as a seamstress, doing piecework at the store and then at home after business hours. She taught her daughter to sew at the age of six.

A Mend: A Collection of Scraps from Local Seamstresses and Tailors (Chicago) (2011–2013) explores piecework, sweated labor, and the value of immigrant labor. It began with the artist’s collection of her mother’s scrap jean cuffs collected from the numerous pairs of jeans she hemmed. Soon after moving to Chicago to pursue her MFA in 2011, she began regularly visiting local seamstresses and tailors at area dry cleaning stores, using their services, engaging them in conversations about their work and their lives, and collecting jean cuffs.

A series of questions emerged: Where did you emigrate from? How long have you been in the US? How long have you worked as a seamstress or tailor? What type of work did you do before? Do you enjoy this type of work?¹⁰ Of the 23 participants in the questionnaire, all but one are women. Most are from South Korea; one is from Mexico, one from Iraq, and one from Palestine. Most had been working as seamstresses in the United States for between 10 and 20 years, and some for as long as 20 to 30 years. Only one had been employed as a tailor before coming to the US; others listed their prior professions as artist, graphic designer, banker, teacher, clothing retailer, clothing manufacturer, and corporate businesswoman, and a few listed stay-at-home mother. This indicates that many were probably of middle-class status before coming to the US, and that women who did not have to work outside the home in their countries of origin now have to work to help support their families. The long periods of time spent as tailors and seamstresses demonstrate the very limited possibilities for career advancement for many immigrants in the US.

Immigrant Workers in the Garment Industry

Under late capitalism, women of color and immigrant women “disproportionately occupy the most degraded positions on the economic ladder” (Ho et al. 1996, pp. 384–85). Sociologist Edna Bonacich (1984) notes that capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism combine to force migration: imperialism and colonialism displace people from their lands and pursuits, making them available for migration, whereas capitalism creates a demand for cheap labor. Most immigrants have little choice but to work in the most competitive, seasonal and unstable sectors, where turnover “may even be desirable as a means of continually lowering labor costs” (Bonacich 1984, p. 36). Because of their immigration status, they are less able to demand better working conditions, and are more likely to be stuck in poorly paid industries and jobs. Immigrant workers are also subject to high levels of racism and discrimination. Professor of

gender and Asian American studies Grace Kyungwon Hong asserts that racialized populations like immigrants and women of color are enlisted for capitalism “precisely due to their capacity for exploitation” (2006, p. xv), adding that, “global capital fixes on racialized women as the cheapest and most vulnerable form of labor” (2006, p. xvii).

This is especially true of global apparel manufacturing, which scours the planet to seek out “the cheapest and most malleable labor – predominantly female, low-skilled, and disempowered” to maximize profits (Ho et al. 1996, p. 391). Immigrant workers have always comprised a majority of workers in the American apparel industry. During the first part of the twentieth century, white ethnic immigrants – Jews fleeing persecution and Italians and Eastern Europeans fleeing growing labor exploitation – worked in garment manufacturing in substantial numbers. With the elimination of country-based immigration quotas in 1965, tens of thousands of immigrants from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa found employment in apparel manufacturing. Today, most garment workers are immigrant women from Asia and Latin America, many of whom are undocumented. For historian Him Mark Lai and sociologist Russell Jeung, US garment manufacturers turn to immigrant and undocumented workers because it is easier to exploit them and prevent them from organizing, creating “conditions not unlike that which manufacturers sought by going abroad” (2008, p. 8).

Women in the apparel industry are employed primarily as sewing machine operators, their labor considered less skilled than male cutters, pressers, and tailors (McLean Petras 1992; Chin 2005). Most are pieceworkers – paid by the piece and not the hour – working extremely long hours for very low wages. They do not receive overtime compensation, health insurance, or other benefits. Piecework is seasonal and unstable, and its unpredictable nature allows contractors to keep wages low by constantly changing their piece rates (Bao 2003). Many pieceworkers labor in their homes, where they rent their sewing machines and pay for their own supplies; they are invisible to – and therefore unprotected by – existing labor law protections (Nutter 1997).

Immigrant seamstresses like Han Sifuentes’ mother are most often pieceworkers who do minor repairs and alterations such as hemming pants and replacing zippers. Shop workers who have to take extra work home from the workplace “turn into homeworkers at night” (Green 2003, p. 47), blurring the lines between the home and the factory. As cultural theorist Lisa Lowe asserts, the immigrant’s lack of civil rights “permits the ‘private’ space of the immigrant home to become a workplace” (1996, p. 169). Historian Nancy L. Green calls this “the dispersed assembly line” where “home, workshop, and factory have all coexisted” (Green 2003, p. 43).

A good deal of scholarship in contemporary textiles, *The Subversive Stitch* included, theorizes the domestic as the site of leisured textile and craft activities, like embroidery, by middle- and upper-class Euro-American women. This serves to conceptualize the domestic as a site of classed and raced privilege. Who is able to access and maintain this type of home? And by extension, who is not? Scholars Susan Fraiman (2017), Grace Kyungwon Hong (2006), Lisa Lowe (1996), Martin F. Manalansan (2014), and Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Biddy Martin (2013) observe that the domestic sphere has been conceived as a stable, Euro-American, white, heteronormative, middle- or upper-class space. They insist that we recognize the ways in which low-income, racially othered, queer, immigrant, and undocumented lives are devalued and excluded from normative institutions like domesticity. Notably, Fraiman, Manalansan, and scholar and curator Chon A. Noriega (2017) point to the very instability and unattainability of home: in the US, full-time minimum wage workers cannot afford to rent a two-bedroom apartment anywhere in the country (National Low Income Housing

Coalition 2018); Black Americans are nearly 30% less likely than whites to own a home, Hispanics 26.1% less likely, and Asians 16.5% less likely, and Black residents are more likely to be denied home loans (Joint Center 2018). Deeply entrenched racism and racially motivated immigration and naturalization laws against property ownership have shaped American housing policies, resulting in ongoing inequality, segregation, discriminatory lending practices, and deracination.¹¹

All the while, the majority of domestic labor – whether piecework, cleaning, or caring for others in their homes – is performed primarily by low-waged workers of color, prompting Hong to observe that the white, middle-class, heterosexual home depends on the unrecognized domestic labor of women of color. Noriega asks, “Will we notice the gendered and racialized bodies of the people that work in this home, bodies that are deeply associated with domesticity, yet somehow not there?” (2017, p. 58). When it comes to low-waged, gendered, and racialized labor, distinctions between domestic space and public space, the home and the factory, cannot be easily made. Accordingly, conceptions of the domestic in contemporary textile discourse must be radically reconsidered.

Garment Work, Materialized

A Mend is composed of hundreds of scrap jean cuffs collected by Han Sifuentes and hand-sewn together using gold thread to create a 10 by 14 ft. sculpture suspended from the ceiling, resembling a barrier or fence (see Figure 15.1). *A Mend* materializes human interactions over time, assembling shared experiences into new material forms. It is at once sculptural, relational, and corporeal. The jean cuffs allude to the body, evidencing the hard work of cutting, hemming, trimming, and sewing. The body, engaged in repetitive labor, suffers the pain of hours spent bending over a sewing machine or



FIGURE 15.1 Aram Han Sifuentes, *A Mend (A Collection of Scraps from Local Seamstresses and Tailors)*, 2011–2013. Jean cuff remnants from 23 seamstresses and tailors and gold jean thread. 144 x 120 x 48 in. © The artist. Source: Photograph: Hyounsang Yoo.

needle, and the eyestrain of close, highly detailed work. The jean cuffs – remnants that would normally be discarded – seek to make visible the labor performed by women of color immigrant workers, whose labor is unacknowledged, underpaid, undervalued, and rendered invisible. The cuffs are the cast-off materials of a global production system that preys on the low cost labor of women of color, and the stitched assemblage of cuffs materializes a larger network of exploitative labor practices. Most of the jeans were manufactured overseas, and *A Mend* links abusive labor practices in the US to those in other parts of the world.¹² Poor women of color are exploited – though not in the same ways – whether in factories or their homes, whether in the US or abroad, and *A Mend* connects the sweated labor of individual women to global systems of production that thrive on their exploitation and marginalization.

Stitching a Citizen: *The US Citizenship Test Samplers*

Han Sifuentes also uses sewing to call attention to discrimination against immigrants, and to help alleviate the isolation many experience. Her participatory project, the *US Citizenship Test Sampler* (2012–ongoing), values and builds community among noncitizens in the US, where she herself was a noncitizen until 2017. In 2012, the artist began embroidering a 22-ft. by 8.5-in. sampler inscribed with the 100 study questions and answers for the United States Civics Naturalization Test. Prospective citizens must pass this test, which covers American history and government. Inspired by the educational function of historical samplers, Han Sifuentes expanded the project by creating 100 samplers, each inscribed with one of the test questions and answers, and invited other noncitizens to embroider them (see Figure 15.2). She created a series of sewing workshops held in conjunction with schools, community centers, and immigrant rights organizations, providing materials, supplies, and instruction in basic embroidery. Noncitizens from diverse places of origin came together to collectively sew and to learn the test material, covered in English, Spanish, and Korean. Han Sifuentes asked participants to embroider the test questions and answers, along with their first name, age, and the year they completed the sampler. Participants began to personalize their work with additional embroidery and embellishment. *Test Samplers* include American flags, state and national maps, the Statue of Liberty, and the American eagle; some sampler makers stitched photographs onto their samplers.

There are over 100 *US Citizenship Test Samplers* and counting.¹³ They have been exhibited at venues including the Center for Craft, Babson College, the Elmhurst Art Museum, Jane Addams Hull House, and the DePaul Art Museum. Han Sifuentes organizes public sewing workshops to accompany the exhibitions; workshops have also been held at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Smithsonian’s American Art and National Portrait Gallery, Wing Luke Museum of Asian American Experience, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Citizens and noncitizens alike are invited to sew a sampler, and the workshops provide an opportunity for American-born citizens to learn about the challenges facing immigrants and noncitizens.

Han Sifuentes sees the *US Citizenship Test Sampler* as a project that builds community among increasingly vulnerable populations of noncitizens in the US. The larger context for the project is one of fearmongering, hostility, intolerance, and hate against immigrants and noncitizens. The project was created during the Obama administration, which dramatically increased ensnarement, detention, and expulsion



FIGURE 15.2 *U.S. Citizenship Test Sampler (Made by noncitizens living and working in the United States), 2013–present, 24 out of 120 samplers. Embroidery floss, sequins, beads on linen. Each sampler 11 × 8.5 in. Source: Photograph: Hyounsang Yoo.*

practices aimed at Hispanic communities and Mexicans in particular. Since 1996, Congress has passed numerous draconian laws restricting immigration and facilitating deportations, and since 9/11 antiterrorism efforts have combined with measures to further criminalize and restrict immigration. Immigration scholar Douglas Massey, writing in 2015, observed that, “not since the days of slavery have so many residents of the United States lacked the most basic social, economic, and human rights” (in Ewing et al. 2015, p. 4).

US President Donald Trump rose to power on a xenophobic, white nationalist, anti-immigrant platform, and the situation for immigrants and noncitizens in the US has become increasingly perilous under the Trump regime. Anti-immigration “zero tolerance” laws and policies have stepped up harassment, arrests, prosecution, criminalization, detention, removals, and deportations, sparking fear and terror in immigrant communities, and devastating families and entire communities. Cruel and barbaric policies include the traumatic separation of families, indefinite detention, and inhumane living conditions in concentration camps along the southern US border. It is essential to remember that most of the migrants who are vilified and criminalized, are *legal* asylum seekers under US and international law, fleeing unspeakable violence. The Trump administration is also waging a legal assault on asylum and legal immigration: in addition to unilaterally barring most migrants from claiming asylum, the

administration has systematically eliminated legal protections; stepped up revocations of permanent residency and even citizenship; and implemented entry bans for nationals from majority Muslim countries, among other draconian measures.

Yet these actions are not entirely new: they are consistent with historical American immigration and naturalization policy, which is characterized by racist and discriminatory quotas and exclusions.¹⁴ Today even lawful permanent residents of the United States are increasingly vulnerable to arrest and deportation. Given the current climate, becoming a citizen cannot be reduced to a chosen mode of national identification and franchise – it is for many an urgent legal category of subjectivity.

Each *Test Sampler* can be purchased for \$725, the cost of applying for US citizenship, with the proceeds going directly to the maker to pay the fee or costs associated with naturalization; sampler makers who are undocumented can use the funds to cover legal fees or living expenses. Since the 2016 election, Han Sifuentes has stepped up efforts to support project participants through advocacy, education, and selling their samplers (nine samplers exhibited at the De Paul Art Museum in Chicago were purchased by the institution in 2017).

In the run up to the election, the artist worked with collaborators across the US and in Mexico to create *The Official Unofficial Voting Station: Voting for all who legally can't*, to call out the exclusion of those disenfranchised from American democracy (noncitizens, incarcerated people, ex-felons, and residents of US territories), providing an unsanctioned process of electoral participation.¹⁵ In the immediate wake of the election, Han Sifuentes launched the Protest Banner Lending Library (2016–ongoing), holding workshops for members of the public to make a cloth banner, offering a form of resistance for those who cannot risk attending protests, such as undocumented immigrants, noncitizens, and parents of young children.¹⁶ Workshops have been held at major venues including the Chicago Cultural Center, the Pulitzer Foundation in St. Louis, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, organized in collaboration with artist Cauleen Smith.

For Han Sifuentes, the needle is a political tool, deployed to confront social and racial injustice. Her projects like *A Mend* and the *US Citizenship Test Sampler* resonate within larger histories of samplers and sewing as a form of political speech and political resistance. Christine Checinska observes that sewing provides a vehicle for postcolonial life writing, the “ability to represent/re-present the cultural, racial and social histories of those who often remain absent from received histories in the West” (2015, p. 165). Although not a substitute for legal inclusion and equitable immigration reform, the dialogical function of embroidery is especially valuable given the scapegoating of immigrants and the hate that dominates immigration policy in America and beyond.

Carole Frances Lung’s Subversive Stitches Across Time

Artist, activist, garment worker, and educator Carole Frances Lung, also known as Frau Fiber, creates works that seek to raise public awareness about the perils of global garment manufacturing. Imploring us to “Stop Shopping and Start Sewing!” she asks us to buy less, buy better, and mend and reuse as alternatives to purchasing ready-made clothing manufactured under highly abusive working conditions.¹⁷ Inspired by a desire to revive domestic sewing skills and in homage to labor organizing in the

garment industry, her projects emphasize hands-on skills instruction workshops and performances, and often coincide with major events in labor history, such as Labor Day, May Day, and the anniversaries of the 1911 Triangle Factory Fire and the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse. She has performed and exhibited her work at venues including the Craft in America Study Center, Maloof Foundation, Jane Addams Hull House Museum, the Craft and Folk Art Museum, the Center for Craft, and the Ghetto Biennale.

Management Professor Andrew Godley observes that the ready-to-wear clothing industry is “perhaps the single most important industry in the economic history of the western world” (1997, p. 3).¹⁸ Historically and today, labor constitutes the most significant production cost associated with garment manufacturing, and producers have consistently attempted to drive down wages. The apparel industry is associated with low wages and poor working conditions, and with the sweatshop in particular. From its earliest inception, the sweatshop was “both a kind of workshop characterized by the lowest paid, most degrading of American employment and a symbolic labor environment for sweated labor conditions” (Hapke 2004, p. 18).

Despite substantial technological developments in the garment industry – in design, warehouse management, inventory, and distribution – sewing itself has not changed very much over the years: “Cloth is limp and tailored shapes complex, and there has been and remains no machinery which is able to replicate the dexterity of the human hand in manoeuvring cloth through a sewing machine” (Godley 1997, p. 7). Consequently, sweatshop conditions remain more or less the same as they were 100 years ago (Howard 2007). Sweatshops can range from sprawling factories, to a bedroom in a pieceworker’s home (Hapke 2004). Their sites of operation may shift and expand over time, but the sweatshop apparatus remains the same.¹⁹

Lung’s project *Knock Off Enterprises* (2010–present) is a series of public sewing performances in which she reproduces or “knocks off” apparel mass produced under sweatshop conditions – but with ethically sourced materials and her own labor. A bicycle-powered vintage sewing machine allows Lung to perform outdoors. It requires a second person to pedal, generating power while helping to foster discussion about working conditions for garment workers. The artist has knocked off clothing produced by Columbia Sportswear and H&M and dedicated several performances to replicating Forever 21 fashions across Los Angeles, where its clothing is produced under sweatshop-like conditions (Hines 2012).

Today, Los Angeles is the center of American apparel manufacturing.²⁰ Most manufacturing takes place in small, immigrant-owned subcontracting shops with between 5 and 50 employees. Wage theft and failure to comply with state and federal workplace laws are rampant in the industry, and it is not common for workers to work over 50 hours a week for less than one third of the legal minimum wage (Lu and Mak 2004). Most toil in overcrowded, sweltering factories that do not meet building code and lack proper ventilation and filtration, putting workers at risk of serious respiratory illnesses. They endure punctures from sewing machine needles, repetitive strain injuries, eyestrain due to poor lighting, and frequently lack access to drinking water or clean bathrooms.²¹ Workers are subjected to physical and verbal abuse, and sexual harassment of women workers is rampant (Nutter 1997).

Ninety percent of garment workers in the city are immigrants (Nutter 1997), most of them from Asia and Latin America; many are undocumented, and most of them are female. Many were forced to flee life-threatening violence and poverty in their home

countries (Lu and Mak 2004). Legal scholar Catherine Dauvergne (2008) notes that more and more jobs are part time or seasonal, work is increasingly outsourced, and the global economy depends “to a large extent on the perpetual availability of cheap, dispensable, illegal labor” (Dauvergne 2008, p. 19). While prosperous western nations attempt to halt so-called “illegal” immigration, their economies *require* the precarious labor that immigrant and undocumented workers are relegated to perform (Dauvergne 2008).

Lung’s most long-term and ambitious project to date is *Sewing Rebellion*, initiated in 2006. The project provides free, hands-on instruction in sewing, mending, and garment construction, together with access to sewing machines and supplies. Participants learn skills ranging from basic darning and repair, to patternmaking and complex garment construction. Workshops instruct participants on transforming worn items like fabrics, pillowcases, t-shirts, dress shirts, and jeans into shopping totes, wallets, aprons, hats, infinity scarves, travel pouches, sewing and supply organizing pouches, backpacks, ponchos, banners, and quilts. In addition to hands-on skills sharing, *Sewing Rebellion* provides instruction about the perils of global apparel manufacturing, connecting working conditions for garment workers in Los Angeles to those in other parts of the world (see Figure 15.3).



FIGURE 15.3 *Sewing Rebellion* (Shirt Apron Production). Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach CA, 2019. Source: Image courtesy the archive of the Institute for Labor Generosity, Workers and Uniforms.

In 2012 *Sewing Rebellion* established a national headquarters in Long Beach, a low-income, multi-ethnic area of Greater Los Angeles, offering twice-monthly sewing instruction workshops and access to equipment. *Sewing Rebellion* also hosts regular (monthly or bimonthly) free workshops at community centers, libraries, and art spaces across Greater Los Angeles. Workshops have been held all across the country, at museums and galleries, craft fairs, pop-up shops, community centers, universities and schools, and the project maintains an online repository of free sewing patterns.²² Many workshops are conducted by “Faux Fraus,” a team of dedicated volunteers who learned or perfected their sewing skills through the *Sewing Rebellion*, and who work in close collaboration with Lung. In 2015, a *Sewing Rebellion* chapter was created in Boulder, Colorado, under the supervision of “Faux Frau” Steven Frost. Free, monthly gatherings host up to 40 participants at a time at the Boulder Public Library. The project has since also expanded to include *Sewing Rebellion* chapters in Santa Monica, Long Beach Downtown and North, Redondo Beach, and Baldwin Hills, CA; Broomfield, CO; and Asheville, NC, with regular workshops hosted by “Faux Fraus” from those communities. In 2019, the *Sewing Rebellion* began publishing *Pins and Needles*, a biannual production manual featuring articles, sewing projects, and instructions, together with a link to online patterns; the project also hosts a YouTube channel with a growing collection of instructional videos.²³

Today, many people want to learn how to sew, and *Sewing Rebellion* responds to a larger desire for traditional craft skills instruction. Lung learned to sew from her grandmother, and spent over a decade working in the apparel industry as a seamstress, cutter, patternmaker, and designer. With *Sewing Rebellion*, Lung seeks to value and reclaim sewing skills that were lost when ready-to-wear clothing replaced the home sewing of garments in the US in the years following World War I. The project is therefore connected to the conflicted histories of the home sewing of garments. Like embroidery, home sewing served a range of utilitarian, decorative, and leisure functions. And, as with embroidery, the history of home sewing in the West is bound up in normative constructions of ideal womanhood, class, and social standing. Fashion historian Barbara Burman observes that, “the making, repair and alteration of clothing in the home was a transformative activity crucial to keeping up appearances” (1999, p. 11). It provided the public face of the family and allowed entry into public, religious, and civic events; respectable clothing indicated employability, creditworthiness, cleanliness, and moral hygiene (Burman 1999).

The advent of the home sewing machine in the 1850s coincided with the rise of increased consumer power for women in the US and Britain, which brought challenges to ideals of Victorian womanhood and male economic authority.²⁴ Sewing machine companies encouraged men to buy their wives a sewing machine to reinforce male power in the household (Page Fernandez 1999). The sewing machine was promoted to middle-class women as an instrument of increased leisure that would do the work for them, much like a servant would (Gordon 2007), whereas working-class women were encouraged to use their machines to secure a job and earn a living (Gordon 2007). Gordon notes that,

Home sewing represented both traditional values and economic and cultural changes. As these values shifted over time ... Sewing continued to represent traditional ideas about women and the home, *but it also offered a tool for critiquing those older patterns.* (2007, p. 6) (italics added)

In the US, ready-to-wear women's clothing became more widely available and affordable around 1920. Yet women of differing class and ethnic backgrounds continued to sew clothing in the home, albeit for very different reasons. Gordon (2007) explains that many rural and working-class women could not afford to buy ready-made clothes, and home sewing represented a valuable contribution to the household economy. Making over or remodeling an existing garment was another way for women to save money and personalize their clothing (Gordon 2007). Garment workers could not afford to buy the clothing they worked to produce, but they expertly sewed fashionable replicas. For immigrant workers, dressing in the latest fashions allowed them to better assimilate and fit into American society (Glenn 1990). For many African American women, "dressing well was a political act" that served to counter racist stereotypes; sewing was also a way to assert individual style and refuse white fashions of the time (Gordon 2007, p. 41). Middle-class women often chose to sew at least some of their family's clothing, as home sewing was associated with being a caring wife and doting mother (Gordon 2007, p. 6). Some women sewed out of a desire to assert more personal and individual tastes, and others because they did not fit the limited measurements of ready-made clothes (Tulloch 1999; Gordon 2007). Women sewed as part of their household tasks, sometimes also taking in piecework or sewing for neighbors. Consequently, the home functioned as both a place of labor and a place of shelter (Hapke 2004). As Burman asserts, "Making clothes at home does not belong neatly in the public or the private sphere, it traverses both" (1999, p. 11). What is more, the home sewing of garments "was an activity *equally as unforgiving* in its own way *as the mechanized sewing in the factory system*" (Burman 1999, p. 11) (italics added).

Collaborative Sewing, Collective Organizing

Lung's creative oeuvre – and *Sewing Rebellion* in particular – is inspired by the historical labor movement's efforts to improve working conditions for garment workers. The *Sewing Rebellion* is based at the Institute for Labor Generosity, Workers and Uniforms – the ILGWU – which has one location in downtown Long Beach and another in the Art Department at California State University Los Angeles. It shares its acronym with the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, historically the largest union representing workers in the women's ready-to-wear clothing industry in North America.²⁵ During the first half of the twentieth century, it won some of the most historically significant rights for garment workers. At its peak in the 1960s, more than half of American garment workers were unionized and earning good wages, largely as a result of its campaigns (Howard 2007). Yet the ILGWU had a very poor track record with people of color (Gutierrez De Soldatenko and Maria 2002), maintaining a leadership dominated by white and Jewish men. The union was also reluctant to include African American, Puerto Rican, Asian, and Latinx workers, even as they comprised a majority of garment workers and played an active role in struggles for better working conditions (Gutierrez De Soldatenko 2002; Chin 2005).²⁶

The context for *Sewing Rebellion* is one of draconian cutbacks to unions, collective bargaining, worker protections, wages, benefits, and job security. Today only 6.5% of private-sector workers in the US belong to unions (US Department of Labor 2018). Garment manufacturing takes place primarily in regions with few or no unions, and most garment workers in the US are nonunionized. Worker centers – grassroots,

community-led organizations that provide support and advocacy to low-wage workers – play an important role in mobilizing and assisting nonunionized workers and especially immigrant and undocumented workers, often simultaneously fighting for labor justice and immigration reforms. Worker centers are more democratic and inclusive than traditional unions, actively ensuring that members are able to meaningfully participate (Fine 2005), and the worker center movement engages large numbers of workers who have been deliberately excluded from coverage under the National Labor Relations Act, such as independent contractors, farm workers, and domestic workers (Wong 2015). Labor lawyer and scholar Kent Wong (2015) notes that some of the most dynamic union organizing campaigns in the country are being led by immigrant workers in Los Angeles. The Garment Worker Center (GWC), created in 2001, organizes low-wage, mainly immigrant women workers in the LA garment industry, where it has been at the forefront of struggles for change. It hosts worker-led, know-your-rights workshops, campaigns against wage theft and other workplace violations, and organizes worker-led research aimed at documenting and reporting on abusive working conditions. Carole Lung collaborates with the GWC, helping to develop a sewing curriculum for job training designed by their worker-members.

In December 2019, the *Sewing Rebellion* ended its regular activities and workshops, declaring a victory for sewing. Lung explained that there is much more awareness about fashion consumption and sustainability, and much greater access to resources for those wanting to sew and mend, than when she started the project in 2006 (personal communication, 15 January 2020). And she acknowledges that the *Sewing Rebellion* played a role in that progress. Moving forward, *Sewing Rebellion* will produce occasional training materials and workshops, and the Faux Fraus and anyone who ever participated in the project are encouraged to continue their efforts individually. A project archive and resource library will be maintained at the Institute for Labor Generosity, Workers and Uniforms and also exhibited periodically at museums and galleries.

Lung is an associate professor in the department of Art at California State University, Los Angeles, where she was named a 2016–2017 Fellow for the Public Good. As an educator Lung is also able to integrate perspectives on sustainable and ethical fashion into the classroom, teaching emerging designers that fashion does not have to succumb to the abuses of global supply chain manufacturing. Although there is an overall race to the bottom in LA garment manufacturing for large multinational brands, the city is also home to some 3770 independent fashion designers. Lung holds out hope that through policy shifts like immigration reform, greater enforcement of labor protections, support for small businesses and entrepreneurs, and developing markets for ethical products, Los Angeles can provide a model for sustainable apparel production that pays fair wages to all workers and designers.

Today it is generally more affordable to purchase cheap, fast fashion than the fabrics and equipment required to sew one's own clothes; those who do make their own clothing are primarily highly economically advantaged (Miller 2006). Many people who want to make their own clothing lack the time, knowledge, and resources to do so. *Sewing Rebellion* provides access to the skills and resources required to change our roles as consumers of fast fashion, connecting back to moments when sewing was mobilized to produce economic and social change. And by stressing the importance of mending and investing in fewer, higher quality, more durable items, Lung is enabling consumers to make better, more ethical decisions (see Figure 15.4).



FIGURE 15.4 *Sewing Rebellion* (Shirt Apron Production). Melissa Tran, Happy Participant in blue. Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach CA, 2019. Source: Image courtesy the archive of the Institute for Labor Generosity, Workers and Uniforms.

Mending is a form of repair applied to cloth, but it may also apply to healing society more generally: immediately after the 2016 election, Lung pledged to mend America by fighting racism, sexism, xenophobia, and oppression. She launched a series of ongoing Mend America events (some of which overlap with *Sewing Rebellion* workshops), bringing people together to sew patches, protest sock puppets, wearable body banners, and protest banners; letter writing campaigns to elected representatives comprise an important part of the workshops, and participants learn to hand embroider a custom-designed card to send to members of Congress.

Conclusion: Subversive Sewing Today

Rozsika Parker's most important contribution may well have been to highlight that, while inextricably connected to gender oppression, embroidery was also used subversively to resist normative and prescribed gender roles.²⁷ Yet much more inclusive and expansive understandings of the subversive stitch are embodied in the work of contemporary artists, who are exploding the idea of sewing as a female, domestic, privileged, leisure activity. Importantly, sewing can no longer be regarded as the domain of the female gender. Subversive sewing is being deployed by transgender, agender, intersex,

and gender non-binary artists like L. J. Roberts, Buzz Slutsky, Ben Cuevas, Tuesday Smillie, and the late Mark Aguhar, as well as by male-identified queer artists like ektor garcia, Bren Ahearn, Pierre Fouché, Chiachio and Giannone, Jeffery Gibson, Jovencio de la Paz, Aaron McIntosh, and Jade Yumang. These artists are turning to needlework to tackle the politics of genders, sexuality, body image, and belonging, through intersectional frameworks that also address colonization, race, migration, and class.²⁸ Yet other artists like Ghada Amer, Doris Salcedo, Lubaina Himid, Teresa Margolles, Gina Adams, Sara Rahbar, Nadia Myre, Margarita Cabrera, Aya Haidar, Ebony G. Patterson, Melissa Leandro, Maria E. Piñeres, Gunes Terkol, Johana Moscoso, Mary Sibande, Yvonne Wells, Mounira Al Solh, Diana Guerrero-Maciá, Sonja Dahl, NedRa Bonds, Melissa Blount, Jordan Nassar, Vanessa Dion Fletcher, Jamila Lamrani, and Melissa Calderón (and this list is not exhaustive) are using sewing to explore labor, class and economic inequality, globalization, exile and displacement, settler colonialism, Native genocide, sexual assault, systemic racial violence, and mass incarceration.

One of the most important developments in contemporary sewing has been a substantial move out of the domestic sphere: today's subversive stitches are just as likely to be sewn in public by groups of people sewing together.²⁹ Like Han Sifuentes and Lung, numerous artists are using sewing and quilting in participatory projects that cross art and activism. They include *Walking with Our Sisters*, an all-volunteer crowd-sourced beading and sewing project initiated by Native Canadian artist Christie Belcourt to honor, memorialize, and demand justice for over 2000 missing and murdered Native women and girls in Canada; *The Lynch Quilts Project*, a community-led initiative by artist Lashawnda Crowe Storm that examines the history of lynchings and their connections to present-day forms of racial violence; and *The Monument Quilt*, a crowd-sourced, sewn collection of stories and a public healing space by and for survivors of rape and abuse.³⁰

Although there exists no singular definition of the subversive stitch, the term is often associated not only with embroidery (or even sewing at all) but with textiles that are bound up in political resistance and political demands. Because subversive sewing is in no way limited to the creative production of white, heteronormative, class-privileged women, it is also essential that the "canon" of seminal scholarly texts be radically expanded to better include accounts of needlework by low-income individuals and people of color, as written by scholars of color who, by and large, remain more marginal within the field.³¹ African American scholars and quilters like Cuesta Benberry, Gladys-Marie Fry, Roland A. Freeman, Carolyn Mazloomi, Floris Barnett Cash, Kyra E. Hicks, Jean M. West, bell hooks, and Bridget R. Cooks have contributed invaluable studies of African American quilting, largely in response to the exclusion of African Americans from the discourse on quilting. Scholars Eli Bartra, Sarat Maharaj, Jasleen Dhamija, Paul Sharrad, Tina Sherwell, Karen Hampton, Carol Tulloch, Christine Checinska, Davina Gregory, Grace S. Fong, Sarah Cheang, Michelle Maskiell, and Kemi Adeyema are addressing violence, colonization, race, migration, trauma, and otherness. These scholars are among the many authors who are dramatically expanding fiber's Eurocentric and white dominant canon.

As Rozsika Parker observed over 30 years ago, sewing is bound up in systems of oppression, but it is also intimately connected to resistance. Sewing continues to be deployed by artists and activists, individuals and communities, as an act of self-assertion and political resistance. The subversive stitch, with its legacies of resistance, continues to be stitched and performed, written and enacted, by contemporary artists like Aram

Han Sifuentes, Carole Frances Lung, those named above, and countless others who mobilize sewing in general and embroidery in particular to educate, foster community, and agitate for radical social change.

Notes

- 1 Other early texts on the subject include Lippard (1978), Meyer and Schapiro (1978), Parker and Pollock (1981), and *Heresies'* 1978 special issue on Women's Traditional Arts.
- 2 The book was originally published by the Women's Press in 1984. All citations and references are to the 2010 edition, published by I. B. Tauris, which contains an updated introduction by Parker.
- 3 Industrialization also provided the impetus for excluding women from agriculture, dairy production, and raising livestock, areas in which they had played a central and at times managerial role (Valenze 1995).
- 4 On textile labor by enslaved African women in the US, see Fry (2002), Hampton (2000), and Fox-Genovese (1998).
- 5 On textiles as instruments of Western colonization and ongoing colonialism and imperialism see Nakamura (2014), Anderson (2012), Cheang (2008), Sharrad (2004), Sunseri (2001), Maskiell (2002), and Sherwell (2001).
- 6 For a decolonizing account of home dressmaking in the immediate post-independence period in Jamaica, see Gregory (2018). See also the important work by scholar, artist, designer, and curator Christine Checinska (2014, 2015) on textiles, dress, migration, and African diaspora identities in Britain; see also "Aesthetics of Blackness? Cloth, Culture and the African Diasporas," special issue of *Textile*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2017, edited by Christine Checinska, and Checinska's chapter in this volume (Chapter 13).
- 7 Although outside the scope of this writing, it is worth mentioning embroidery as practiced by British men during the twentieth century; see in particular McBrinn (2015) and McBrinn (2016), and Daly Goggin (2013).
- 8 Most notably on the back cover of Parker (2010).
- 9 See <https://textilesocietyofamerica.org/6728/steps-towards-decolonizing-craft> (accessed 21 January 2020).
- 10 See <https://www.aramhansifuentes.com/a-mend> (accessed 21 January 2020).
- 11 Hong (2006) notes connections between the privileging of white domestic space and the criminalization of impoverished racial communities, while Fraiman (2017) cites the persistence of "personal insecurity" for immigrants to the USA, Mexicans, and Mexican-Americans in particular.
- 12 On global denim production see Snyder (2008).
- 13 They can be viewed at <https://www.aramhansifuentes.com/us-citizenship-test-sampler> (accessed 21 January 2020).
- 14 The Naturalization Act of 1790 restricted citizenship to whites, while immigration policy generally favored immigrants from western hemisphere nations, often restricting or forbidding migration from the non-Western world and Asia in particular. For an overview of US immigration laws and policies, see Charles 1999; Daniels (2004) and Ewing (2012). For detailed analyses of Asian immigration to the US, see Cheng and Bonacich (1984); Lowe (1996) and Lai and Jeung (2008).
- 15 See <https://www.hullhousemuseum.org/vox-pop-the-disco-party> and <https://www.aramhansifuentes.com/the-official-unofficial-voting-stat> (accessed 21 January 2020).

- 16 See <https://www.aramhansifuentes.com/protest-banner-lending-library> and <https://www.facebook.com/protestbannerlendinglibrary> (accessed 21 January 2020).
- 17 See <https://sewingrebellion.wordpress.com/about/> (accessed 21 January 2020).
- 18 On the history of the ready-to-wear industry, see Lemire (1997); on the modern apparel industry see Collins (2003).
- 19 Although sweatshops continue to be associated most closely with the apparel industry, workers in other sectors such as food and data processing are also subject to sweatshop conditions (Hapke 2004).
- 20 For details see Appelbaum and Bonacich (2000).
- 21 See <http://garmentworkercenter.org/get-informed> (accessed 26 January 2015).
- 22 See <http://sewingrebellion.wordpress.com/2008/11> (accessed 21 January 2020).
- 23 <https://vimeo.com/sewingrebellion> (accessed 21 January 2020).
- 24 A detailed account of the advent and promotion of early domestic sewing machines can be found in Putnam (1999) and Godley (1999).
- 25 For a comprehensive history of the ILGWU, see Tyler (1995) and Stein (1977).
- 26 Kent Wong (in Cervantes 2006–2007) and Glenn Omatsu (1995) note that the larger American labor movement has had a very antagonistic relationship with immigrant communities and especially Asian Americans.
- 27 Checinska (2015), hooks (2007), Cabeen (2007), and Fong (2004) have also written about needlework, oppression, and empowerment.
- 28 On queer identity and representation through needlework see in particular Chaich and Oldham (2017), and Bryan-Wilson (2017); Jeanne Vaccaro writes extensively about textiles, transgender identities, and crafting of communities.
- 29 See Robertson and Vinebaum (2016).
- 30 For details, see <http://walkingwithoursisters.ca>, www.thelynychquiltsproject.com, and <https://themonumentquilt.org> (accessed 21 January 2020).
- 31 On average, less than 10% of textile scholarship published in major edited anthologies and academic journals is written by scholars of color and/or scholars from the global South (author's research for a book project, presented at the College Art Association annual conference, February 2018).

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