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Mary Babcock

University of Hawai'i at Manoa, mbabcock@hawaii.edu

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Mending as Metaphor: Contemporary Fiber and Cultural Change

Mary Babcock

mbabcock@hawaii.edu

Mending

The act of trying to
understand
how and why
something
has been
torn-out/ eroded/
destroyed/ tattered/ erased
in order
to
re-make, re-weave
re-alize,
re-invent
it.
-Vita Plume¹

It means regenerating, by using my best skills to give certain events,
objects, people or culture a new life.

-Jan-Ru Wan²

Mending is what we need to get by...

-Kerry Phillips³

I grew up predominantly in a context of privilege and protection, with a goodly smattering of denial and despair. I remember as a child sitting in my mother's sewing room watching her mend socks wondering why – like the other kids—I couldn't just get new socks instead. It wasn't until later, far past the time those stitches became the soul-saving sutures of the permanent vest my mother stitched across my beloved stuffed rabbit's chest, that I realized those mending stitches reflected an act of care – of preserving and mending relationship.

Like many, I live in a world of contradiction, and the warmth of this literal mending was juxtaposed by a cultural tattering left unattended. My family spent many holidays with Gert-and-Dorothy. Gert was my grandmother's sister, yet the Gert-and-Dorothy duo was such a tight pair you never uttered one name without the other. It wasn't until my late twenties, after coming out myself, that I realized just who Dorothy was and why they were so comfortably together for

¹ Vita Plume, letter to the author, June 17, 2008

² Jan-Ru Wan, letter to the author, July 12, 2008

³ Kerry Phillips, letter to the author, July 24, 2008

many years. The L-word was not in my family's or that decade's vocabulary. I never heard how they met, how they struggled, how they cared for one another. Histories lost – possibilities of connection left unnamed and unexplored.

Here I am many years later having recently returned from a trip to Cambodia. During my recent travel, I was struck by the intense beauty of the Cambodian textiles, a rich tradition lying in stark contrast to the poverty Cambodia faces, yet somehow completely in harmony with the warmth and beauty of the people themselves. I was struck by the fact that had I been there only 30 years prior, I would have witnessed the great devastation of a culture, a full scale attack on the people from both within and without that decimated the land and destroyed over 30% of the population, and devastated a country's cultural and aesthetic memory. I was struck also by a current phenomenon: the teeming number of organizations that recognize a potent route to regaining cultural memory and richness is to rebuild working knowledge of traditional craft. I could feast my eyes and soul on the majesty of hand-dyed and hand-woven ikats.

But I can't help but wonder about the dormant stories – memories of individual lives lost now memorialized in the frighteningly sterile photos hanging in Toul Sleng – a one-time school transformed into one of the most brutal torture prisons of modern times... or other memory laden fabrics - remnants of a rich and diverse population, now nothing more than a series of fabric scraps. I contemplate the clothes of victims to the killing fields, still scattered on the ground, escaping from the earth under our footsteps as if emerging in an urgent plea for memory. I can't help but wonder about the dynamic living story— the tenacity, courage and resiliency of a new generation of students (young and old), learning or relearning traditional crafts – in a context where only 30 years prior, both education and refined artistry were invitations for death squads. And despite the sheer overwhelming beauty of the traditional ikats, I can't help but wonder what an even richer palimpsest I might see, where these textiles also interwoven with the memories of the past, the hopes and visions of the present, and the imaginations for the future --- the tatterings and courageous piecing and re-piecing that makes Cambodian people who they are today.

I think back to my own relatively safe middle-class background and wonder, how would our lives be different – richer— if the many stories falling outside the dominant cultural narrative, cast off like irritating fuzz balls, were instead valued and woven into our cultural fabric. Tattering might be inherent ...it is part of the wear and tear – some necessary, some not so necessary. But we seem to fall short on the art of mending. I go back to the early tools my mother shared with me in that sewing room with socks for clues to the knowledge that lost art. And I think not only of the mending process, but also of the quality of the fabrics in need of mending, and the anticipated results.

What causes a fabric to be tattered? How does this relate to cultural fabrics as well? In the remainder of this paper, I share the words of several artists in the current exhibition “Tattered Cultures: Mended Histories” and invitational TSA member's exhibition at the Academy Art Center in Honolulu. These words reflect the artists' insights on cultural mending.

The first thing that comes to my mind is the issue of overuse. Despite our best intentions, we often lose what we love by over-clinging to familiarity and comfort.

I came across these images of men from old personal photographs in John Ibson's book, *Picturing Men: A Century of Male Relationships in Everyday American Photography*... John Ibson argues in his book that we must be blinded to these men's sexualities, as they are not explicitly known and most likely these men were best friends and experienced a certain intimacy unknown in today's male friendships. I do not think we should be blind to these men's sexualities—I think we should be open-minded. After all, why couldn't they be queer? The same justifications for their probable heterosexuality can be used to justify their questionable homosexuality... -Aaron McIntosh⁴

Oftentimes overuse comes in the form of exploitation – of using without permission, of using to the point of duress.

Going to schools controlled by Euro-American, it felt odd in fourth grade when they made us study Manifest Destiny... As an Iroquois it was a shock to see people from the settler culture assert that God had given them the right to steal our land. Most of us learned that we could not trust the educational system, and felt a deep and abiding distrust of things we learned from books written by outsiders. Our stories were not represented, and our enemies' stories were studied as truth. It made it difficult to talk to outsiders that didn't feel our grief...
– Gail Tremblay⁵

Another is inadequate structure – of not recognizing the demands a fabric is under because of place, local conditions, or stresses particular to a condition or circumstance, for example, not having a cultural narrative structure that embraces multi-culturalism.

I think much of my cultural background is considered “other”. Kids made fun of the Japanese bento boxes my mom made me for lunch; I often got asked why we didn't have a Christmas tree. When I was younger I hated the question “where are you from”. ... I really hated when people thought that I was Native American or Latino – not because I didn't like those cultures, but because I WASN'T. When asked where I was born and I responded the United States people had quizzical looks on their faces. It was always strange to not really fully feel embraced by a culture. - Lisa Solomon⁶

...A lack of continued care or attention... ignoring the warning signs of stress until it is too late and a major overhaul must take place

After each war, we mend and heal little by little while at the same time having new killing events all over the world. In thinking about current wars such as in Iraq, I can't help but to reflect about my own country's tragic history, especially the bombing in Hiroshima in WWII. “Bullet Cloth VI” represents organic beings whose skin holds the bullets inside metaphorically. – Seiko Atsuta Purdue⁷

⁴ Aaron McIntosh, letter to the author, June 17, 2008

⁵ Gail Tremblay, letter to the author, July 21, 2008

⁶ Lisa Solomon, letter to the author, July 21, 2008

⁷ Seiko Atsuta Purdue, letter to the author, June 20, 2008

...From placing a fabric, appropriate for one situation, in completely inappropriate places or circumstances.

In the early 1980's when central America was again invaded by outside commercial and political interests, the indigenous, American peasantry was forced off its lands, split off from the societal network that nurtured local custom, and placed into the slums of the city, where wearing a rebozo (a traditional shawl) became unthinkable, and weaving one even more.

I decided to construct a contemporary rebozo that would not be woven but rather "pinned" together... The "CAUTION" sign on each square was to remind the wearer to be on the lookout for what was then called the INS. Now that same agency has been folded into another, larger bureaucracy known as Homeland Security. Terrorists who bombed New York came into our country via Canada, not Mexico. Our government is continuing to put us in jeopardy by focusing not on our enemies but on the Indigenous, American population that comes here to work and raise families. - Consuelo Jimenez Underwood⁸

Myopic focus – figuring one tear doesn't really matter. Not recognizing tatterings are contagious and stress the integrity of the whole.

Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania are the three Baltic States." This one sentence, in my grade 7 geography textbook was the only mention of Latvia in my entire primary and secondary school experience in Canada. I'm sure only Latvians, Estonians and Lithuanians even noticed the sentence. One blink of the eye or of memory and it was gone! - Vita Plume⁹

So, what conditions afford successful mending? What is successful mending... why should we bother? The artists suggest some possibilities - patience, courage to face obstacles.

While the term Whitework refers to a type of European embroidery often associated with purity and innocence, in this instance, Whitework refers to the work we must do as white Australians, to reveal and repair repressed aspects of our history. - Kay Lawrence¹⁰

Recognition of something on the precipice of being lost if not attended to, yet responding with creativity, diligence and fortitude.

My dad ... can always fix things, and he likes to make things work better and more efficiently. He does this the same way they fixed things around the farm—oldfangled know-how meets MacGyver ingenuity. The fixings weren't always pretty or fashionable; but they were efficient and they worked...

⁸ Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, letter to the author, July 25, 2008

⁹ Vita Plume, letter to the author, June 17, 2008

¹⁰ Kay Lawrence, letter to the author, 2008

These are the mendings I know. They are not restorations or putting something back to its original state. In these farm mendings there is an inevitable acceptance of brokenness and an unwillingness to let the brokenness have the last word. This is how we mend. - Kerry Phillips ¹¹

Re-visioning the so-called scraps as fertile fodder.

In retrospect, my “heroes” reflect a California multi-cultural pantheon of the 1950’s-60’s. The list includes Emiliano Zapata, John Chapman, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Woody Guthrie, Cesar Chavez and Joan of Arc. Their courageous hearts and brave deeds inspired me to overcome my personal struggles and codify a “point of view” for history to recognize, identify, and place.

... When I weave, sew, or embellish, the old ones seem to express their encouragement and support; and my creations become an external validation of ancestral memory and personal quest. - Consuelo Jimenez Underwood ¹²

And, the recognition by someone of the inherent value in the tattered fragment and deep trust that the mending will create new value.

The space between the threads of culture changes as civilizations evolve. These spaces expand, often tearing, causing a disconnect from the source. Living cultures span these spaces by drawing upon all that surrounds them to reconnect these ends. The importance isn’t its originality, but that the thread continues.
- Marques Marzan ¹³

My vision in curating the exhibition of which I speak, “Tattered Cultures: Mended Histories” in conjunction with this 11th Textile of America Symposium is to reveal “mending” as a potent metaphor for cultural enrichment and transformation. The work reminds us to honor textiles as living — not historical— research tools, and to invites us to continue to locate contemporary concerns with issues of marginalization, colonialism and social justice as an essential discourse within textile arts.

¹¹ Kerry Phillips, letter to the author, July 24, 2008

¹² Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, letter to the author, July 25, 2008

¹³ Marques Marzan, letter to the author, July 12, 2008