2018

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Dahl, Sonja, "Whitework: The Cloth and Call to Action" (2018). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 1072.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/1072>

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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

**Textile Society of America 16th Biennial Symposium
Vancouver, Canada — September 19-23, 2018**

Published in *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings 2018*

Presented at Vancouver, BC, Canada; September 19 – 23, 2018

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Race Traitor, detail image. Jacquard-woven cotton, 2018. Sonja Dahl

Whitework: The Cloth and Call to Action

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Reconciliation. This is a word that demands action, both tender and determined. It is a needle threaded and ready for repairs, for the suturing of that which has been rent, estranged, or torn apart. Interesting, that embedded in its etymology is the assumption of past wholeness, of a relationship once friendly, then betrayed, and now poised on the threshold of forgiveness.

These things have been on my mind since returning to Vancouver in September 2018, and seeing some of the outward evidence of the city's 2014 commitment to become a City of Reconciliation.¹ As a child growing up just south of there, I was rarely encouraged to consider the implications of being a settler of indigenous lands, nor did my school curriculum fully represent the fraught nature of that history. Like many young people of my generation, I was raised on a steady diet of National Geographic magazines, which sent the implicit message that ethnicized cultures not my own were a subject available for me to study, to copy, and to make art about. And I have done all of those things. And in doing so, I have learned a great deal about my own capacity to move through the world, and the capacity of the world to move through me. Returning to my childhood home, which is the ancestral home of the Semiahmoo, Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations, it was inspiring to see many ways the city and its institutions have embraced and worked towards fulfilling Vancouver's vision of reconciliation, however imperfectly.

When I took the podium for my talk at the Textile Society of America's Symposium, I realized it would have been disingenuous for me to pay my recognition and gratitude to the First Nations on

¹ For more information about Vancouver's City of Reconciliation program, see: <<https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/city-of-reconciliation.aspx>>

whose land I was uninvited guest, if I did not also recognize and openly take responsibility for the privilege of being among the dominant, white, settler culture of the TSA and the knowledge that the podium I occupied would play host to more people like me than those who have ancestral right to such a platform. As an artist and scholar invested in this field of textiles studies, which is so deeply entangled with colonial histories of extraction, appropriation, and collection, I have been working to shift my practices into alignment with those actively countering and dismantling these dominant cultural forces. This paper is a sampler of the thinking and material research that form the connective tissue of this work. In it, I outline a terrain of thought linking aspects of Euro-American material culture with the systemic power and cultural constructs of whiteness at play in both society-at-large, and the shared field of textile studies in which I make my work.

The topic of my project is Whitework - as cloth and as cultural action. The word "Whitework" references forms of white-on-white embroidery and quilting popular in the 16th to 19th centuries throughout Europe, Scandinavia and North America. Considered the epitome of a young woman's needleworking skills, whitework required patience, time, focus, precision, and a steady hand. Unsurprisingly, these pristinely stitched textiles were often employed to metaphorically uphold attributes of whiteness that reflected favorably upon the needlewomen themselves, and the societies to which they belonged. In many so-called Western societies today, white continues to evoke innocence, purity, and virtue, all attributes that have been weaponized throughout history to exert control over specific populations such as women, ethnicized colonial subjects, slaves, and their descendants. In response to this, I have reinterpreted Whitework as a cultural process and a call to action, for both myself and other white-identified people to awaken from historical amnesia and take responsibility for our embeddedness in and implicit benefit from such systems of exclusion and oppression.

In the United States today, where I currently live, there is a cultural shift underway in which the benefits of white identity are simultaneously being contested and championed on the public stage. There are activist calls to both decenter whiteness and to expose the oft-hidden structures of its inner workings. Taking these contemporary social cues, it would not be enough to speak about the techniques and use-value of historic whitework textiles; rather, the semiotic functions of their very materiality must also be peeled back and examined. Jane Schneider's research about linen manufacturing in early-modern Europe shows, for example, that "Degrees of whiteness, rather than hues of color, were (in addition to fineness) the index of a linen cloth's reputation."² As an allegorical material linen is so fascinating to me precisely because it still carries some of those telling associations with innocence, purity, and virtue. Other materials such as cotton, indigo, rice, and sugar carry the semiotic weight of their indisputable ties to colonial exploitation and fraught racialized social relationships that continue to play out in the United States today. But linen somehow manages to evade the critical attention that other materials in our cultural lexicon cannot. It still often manages to function as the clean, white field of a well-domesticated and guileless social subject. But as Gloria Wekker writes in her critical examination of white

² Jane Schneider. "Rumpelstiltskin's Bargain: Folklore and the Merchant Capitalist Intensification of Linen Manufacture in Early Modern Europe." *Cloth and Human Experience*. Eds. Annette B. Weiner & Jane Schneider. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, 1989), 202.

Dutch culture, “The claim to innocence is a double-edged sword: it contains not-knowing, but also not wanting to know.”³

With such associations in mind, I am compelled to examine more carefully what is meant when we invoke “the fabric of society” as an organizing metaphor for shared civic culture. What is the structure of such a social cloth? Is it plain-woven, with equal balance between threads moving back and forth, up and down? Is it a stitched patchwork of many designs, radiating outwards from a centralized motif? Is it like Penelope’s weaving, perpetually a work of fiction - of creation and erasure doomed to an infinite cycle of repetition? Or is the fabric of society a story-cloth, embroidered with the tales of all the lived experiences that comprise its past and present, unfurling into the future?

Cloth of any spun material is formed from weave structures, the simple binary system of warp thread up, or warp thread down. This image calls to mind the way Ijeoma Oluo describes privilege in white supremacist structures: as a system in which one group of people flourishes and grows in direct relationship to another group of people who are structurally disadvantaged, submitted to violence and suppression. One part of society is up *because* the other is kept down, and vice versa.⁴ Try to translate this sort of system to a loom, and you will find it challenging to weave even the plainest of cloths, because white supremacy is engineered in such a way that the threads rarely shift positions, and the roles are rarely reversed. Those who are “down” are kept in their place through many methods both blunt and subtle by those who are “up.” White supremacy does not allow for the creation of a whole cloth, wherein every thread is afforded agency to contribute to the whole.

When we embroider our own stories - both personal and collective - are we considering the structure of the cloth that supports our stitches? Because the process of making Whitework demands that equal attention be paid to the underlying structure of the cloth as to the composition of the stitches applied to it, the stitcher becomes intimately involved in their relationship with both substance and technique. With a piece of finely-woven linen stretched only inches from the face, one passes their needle back and forth in the tiny holes between warp and weft threads, tugging to open up space between them. Whitework involves re-adjusting the vision so that one can look at the very structure of the fabric’s weave with great precision. Knowing how and with what a cloth is made allows the stitcher to analyze and plot their interventions.

There is a long and interesting history of needle-based activism to draw from as one learns to make Whitework. Rozsika Parker’s 1984 book *The Subversive Stitch* continues to serve as a cornerstone in conversations linking stitchwork and radical thinking.⁵ As Lisa Vinebaum points out in her essay “The ‘New’ Subversive Stitch,” one of the more remarkable aspects of Parker’s analysis, “is her exploration of embroidery as both a disciplinary force and an emancipatory practice.”⁶ But as Vinebaum goes on to show, “with the exception of a fleeting mention that

³ Gloria Wekker. *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. (Durham: Duke University, 2016), 17.

⁴ Ijeoma Oluo. *So You Want to Talk About Race*. (New York: Seal Press, 2018).

⁵ Rozsika Parker. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010). Originally published 1984 by The Women’s Press Ltd

⁶ Lisa Vinebaum. “The ‘New’ Subversive Stitch.” Presentation of original paper at Textile Society of America’s Symposium, *Crosscurrents: Land, Labor & the Port*, Savannah, GA, October 22, 2016.

‘race, class and sex intersect to shape women's lives’, Parker's analysis also fails to include any discussion of sewing in the lives of ethnic, immigrant and women of color in Britain, most of whom did not [unlike the primary subjects of Parker's study] enjoy the privilege of domestic sewing for leisure.”⁷

This whitewashing of embroidery's history continues to play out in contemporary discourse around craft, wherein associations between hand-making and radicality often suffer superficial over-simplification. While there are some artists whose artwork is substantially and devotedly linked to their activist work, by and large these artists tend to be people of color and LGBTQ who have far more at stake in the notion of craftivism than their relatively comfortable straight, white counterparts. Marie Lo and Sarita Echavez See, co-curators of the online exhibition *RaceCraft*, take to task the popular ideals of contemporary craft movements, asking pointedly that we consider how race intersects with craft practice and discourse. They explain in their curatorial statement:

The artists and writers in this exhibition foreground alternative practices and genealogies. They make visible the neoliberal underpinnings of the contemporary craft movement. They reveal how craft is marked by race, heteropatriarchy and colonization, and they challenge an environmental politics founded on sustaining whiteness. In *RaceCraft*, being “crafty” is not just aptitude and a lifestyle choice. It is artful subterfuge in the face of racial constraints.⁸

Aram Han Sifuentes, one of the artists featured in *RaceCraft*, and a tireless activist within and outside of the contemporary artistic field of fibers, authored and published in TSA's Spring 2017 newsletter a very useful guide titled, “Steps Toward Decolonizing Craft.” In the essay's core call to action, she writes: “Recently, the deeply-rooted colonialist frameworks of craft have just begun to fracture. It is our job to break open the cracks and continue to question, reveal, and abandon the colonialist spine upon which the craft discourse is built. It must be ruptured. A new decolonized perspective must be built.”⁹

The process of Whitework to which I've dedicated this paper takes most of its cues from the work of artists and thinkers such as Aram, whose fierce commitment to exposing the tangled roots of dominant, white culture is to be credited for any amount of rising social consciousness we are currently experiencing on a societal or institutional level. We must give credit where credit is due. The very fact that I have been able to stand up and lecture critically about whiteness is *because* of the incessant, dedicated, and brilliant work of artists, writers, scholars, and activists of color. They continue banging on the doors of white culture, demanding that we all remember what Robin Wall Kimmerer writes so eloquently: that the work of restoration and healing, while deeply necessary, must be tempered by a focus on reciprocity and inter-relationship in order to achieve long-lasting, successful results.¹⁰

⁷Vinebaum, ‘New’ Subversive Stitch.

⁸ Marie Lo and Sarita Echavez See. Curatorial Statement for *Racecraft*, an online exhibition. 2015. <<http://centerforartandthought.org/work/project/racecraft>>

⁹ Aram Han Sifuentes. “Steps Towards Decolonizing Craft.” *Textile Society of America Newsletter*. Vol. 29, No. 1, Spring 2016. p 16. <<https://textilesocietyofamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/170511-2017-Spring-Newsletter-REDUCED.pdf>>

¹⁰ Robin Wall Kimmerer. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 336.

So, when one picks up their needle to perform the reparations of Whitework, it is useful to remember that the needle *will* pierce the substrate to which it is aimed, including our very senses of self. As Mark Newport writes in his statement for his series of Mendings, "...darning and suturing leave a mark, a scar. Each pierces the substrate it is repairing, performing a modest violence upon what is to be mended, and reminding each of us of our sensitivity, vulnerability, and mortality."¹¹ The disturbance that Whitework inflicts upon those of us who identify as white - upon ourselves, our familiar ways of life, our professional pursuits, and our outlook on society - however modest it might be, *will leave its mark*. Whitework is a process of opening up spaces in the cultural cloth but it is also a process in which we must each acknowledge that all the hidden assumptions, prejudices, fears, and desires we each carry forms a matrix of cloth that defines our lives, our selves, and our individual experiences of the world. To engage in Whitework it is necessary to pull back the warp and weft of our own cloth and open up spaces that release these things and allow for new growth and new awareness to penetrate.

As any experienced stitcher can also tell us, knots and tangles are an unavoidable part of working in thread. Oftentimes as I am stitching, I find that these knots occur on the underside of the cloth, just as I am pulling my needle forward. In order to proceed, I must turn the cloth over to look at the side I usually keep hidden from view, where all the mess and tangles hide. Sometimes the knot is bound so tightly, so small, that I lose patience and take up my scissors to sever it. But the lesson of Whitework is one of entanglement, and in order to engage fully in the work I know it's necessary to step willingly into the tangles and offer my time and patience to the struggle of unknotting them. Tangled thread can seem impenetrable, it's true, but I find with practice that I can recognize the moment of defensive reaction when challenge first arises. Rather than shut down and reach for the scissors, I am learning to remain open and patiently observe the nature of the mess at hand, slowly plucking away until knots loosen and defenses drop.

Beyond the task of unknotting our inner tangles, one of the challenges of this work is knowing when to engage and when to put the needle aside. It is the job of white people allied with racial justice work to follow the cues of its leaders and do what is asked. And if we are fully open to this task, we will have to contend with and navigate some uncomfortable requests. As fervently as I, and other justice-oriented white people may wish to contribute to the reparative work of allyship, we may be asked to give things up that we hold dear; things like space, voice, recognition, validation, and the privilege of platforms such as the one I occupied to present this talk.¹² Paul Kivel, author of *Uprooting Racism*, reminds his readers that an "ally is not an identity, it is a practice."¹³

I will be honest. I struggle with this. In making this work I have to continuously interrogate myself, my intentions, and the ways that I am benefiting financially, professionally, and socially from espousing these ideas of Whitework. There is a delicate balance to strike when dedicating

¹¹ Mark Newport. "Mending." Artist Statement. <<https://www.marknewportartist.com/MENDING>>

¹² DiDi Delgado. "Whites Only: SURJ and the Caucasian Invasion of Social Justice Spaces." *The Huffington Post*. April 04, 2017. <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/whites-only-surj-and-the-caucasian-invasion-of-racial_us_58dd5cf7e4b04ba4a5e25209>

¹³ Paul Kivel. *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*. (Gabriola Island: New Society, 2017), 133-134.

oneself to the incisive study of whiteness while simultaneously aiming to decenter it on a systemic level. One of the lessons of whitework shows that oftentimes our task as white people allied with justice work is to create or identify spaces and then *leave them open* - to resist the urge to fill them with content ourselves. We have taken up too much of the shared space for too long, and now we are being asked to step aside so that others may pass through those openings in the social fabric as well.

So, what about the fabric of this, the textile field, to which this paper is aimed? Culminating her plenary talk at the 2016 TSA symposium in Savannah, Stephanie Syjuco concluded the gathering with a series of pointed questions: “Who else needs to be here to generate the discussions and ideas that will fuel what is ostensibly a diverse, interdisciplinary and multi-valent field? What will be the concerns of those who come after us and how can we prepare for their inclusion in this shifting time? What voices are we missing?”¹⁴ Pursuing the solutions to these questions poses no small challenge, of course. Quite a few colleagues have expressed in conversations, presentations and letters during and since the symposia in both Savannah and Vancouver that their feelings of being subjected to an ethnographic gaze and related forms of subtle othering within TSA lead them to question their continued involvement. Angela Hennessey shared one such story in the Fall 2016 newsletter, writing: “While the chance to catch up with friends and colleagues is always a lovely affirmation of a shared commitment to textiles, it is too difficult for me as a person of color to participate in the whitewashing and whitesplaining of non-white textile histories—in Savannah, of all places, at the very site of the historic slave port.”¹⁵

During the proceedings in Vancouver I met with a number of colleagues who voiced similar feelings of exasperation, hurt, betrayal, and frustration at personal encounters as well as upsetting content in presentations that left them feeling marginalized to the extent that they would not return to future TSA Symposia. Let me be clear: this should concern every single member of this organization, because it shows that TSA operates with the same sort of imbalanced power dynamics as any other institution steeped in white supremacy. There is a power-holding center in the field of textile studies, into which the majority of its members belong, and there are clear margins, populated with scholars and artists resistant to and openly critical of the ways the field has conducted its business over decades and centuries. There is friction, and it is understandably uncomfortable. But there is also a great deal of listening and dialogue happening, and I perceive that there are shifts underway that can and should be nurtured. Rebecca Solnit writes movingly about the power of belief, hope, and the shadowy work that happens in the margins, in the imagination, in stories that circulate and grow outside and around the central stage of dominant culture. It is in these side spaces where the real work of change happens, and the stories and beliefs migrate into the center sometimes without people even registering anything has changed.¹⁶

¹⁴ Stephanie Syjuco. “From the Global to the Local (& Back Again): The Practice of Cultural Contestation and Reinvention.” Closing Plenary at *Crosscurrents: Land, Labor & the Port*, Textile Society of America Symposium, Savannah, GA, October 22, 2016.

¹⁵ Angela Hennessey. Opinion Letter. *Textile Society of America Newsletter*. Vol. 28, No 2, Fall 2016. p 13.

<<https://textilesocietyofamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Formatted-Member-News-FINAL-121616.pdf>>

¹⁶ Rebecca Solnit. *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 25-34.

But let us not wait for the new stories to sneak their way in quietly. Let us ask ourselves what we can do now, how we can soften ourselves for the work of reconciliation, to open ourselves to being shifted from both within and without. What would it entail for those of us whose artistic or scholarly work is built upon the foundation of someone else's material culture to alter our practices away from the role of interpreter and reporter? What would it mean to alter our practices in such a way that we do not benefit financially, professionally, or socially from the embodied knowledge and artistry of cultures not our own? And likewise, what would it mean to make these changes without shutting down the deeply important pathways of cross-cultural exchange and dialogue that keep our work and thinking vibrant, engaged, and mutual?

It is quite possible that the personal and cultural processes of Whitework will indeed demand the highest level of skill as we, who benefit from our whiteness, take our needles and thread and responsibly re-enter the social fabric to which we are inextricably entangled. It will absolutely require patience, time, focus, precision, and steady hands, and the flexing of what Toni Morrison refers to as "Response-ability."¹⁷ Let us stitch into our lives' samplers all the questions and complexity of this *re*-education and *re*-searching. What is so precious, urgent, undeniable, and deeply needed that warrants this work? And what are we willing to give up, to alter, to shift in ourselves and the world we share? Whitework will, I hope, grow from such little accumulating acts of treason; the rise and fall of needle and thread piercing cloth, rearranging the weave structure one stitch at a time.

Closeup image of whitework embroidery process. 2018. Sonja Dahl

¹⁷ Toni Morrison. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. (New York: First Vintage, 1992), xi.

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