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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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The Radical Fiber Art Practices of *The Yarn Mission*: A Case Study

Lila Stone

Knitting has historically been dubbed women's work, seen as a sedentary, passive act requiring negligible intellect and reserved for the domestic sphere. In actuality, knitting has a "deliciously rich history of political subversion," according to Textile Society of America's Tove Hermanson's 2012 talk titled *Knitting as Dissent: Female Resistance in America Since the Revolutionary War* published in the proceedings for *Textiles and Politics: Textile Society of America 13th Biennial Symposium Proceedings*, Washington, DC.¹ The knitting club, with its antecedent the sewing circle, is used as a social and political tool to create a cohesive community. Leading up to the Revolutionary War, women knitted competitively in demonstrations called "spinning meetings" to compensate for boycotted British goods as a result of the Stamp Act of 1765.² In the post-2000 context of knitting revivals, the use and re-use of yarn in fiber arts has again become synonymous with protest and radical ideologies. The term "yarn bombing" is popular as a proactive form of knitting, where the artist literally knits around an object, anything from a bicycle rack to a signpost, and often with a political bent. As a way to purposefully situate fiber arts at the forefront of challenging racism and sexism, subversive knitters and knitting groups have been popping up across the United States and the world.

From the craftivists of The Revolutionary Knitting Circle to the open source Pussyhat Project, both seasoned and novice knitters like those of The Yarn Mission are taking a stand in the public sphere. The Yarn Mission is a pro-Black, pro-rebellion, pro-community knitting collective that formed in St. Louis, Missouri, in response to the tragic death of Michael Brown in the fall of 2014. It now has chapters in Minneapolis, MN; Atlanta, GA; New York City, NY; and Wilmington, DE. The Yarn Mission began as a way for Black women to share space off of the streets and outside of demonstrations. Participating in group meet-ups helps the women create something new in the midst of political unrest. The organization began to grow organically as founder CheyOnna Sewell and early members taught interested collaborators—others with similar values—how to knit. The intention behind the organization is Black liberation. They believe that when all Black people are free, all people are free. They support cooperative economics as well as conscious consumerism. They practice radical skill-sharing and help people to become producers through knitting.

The Yarn Mission is built upon three tenets: being pro-Black by purposefully supporting other Black people; supporting rebellion to end oppressive systems; and being pro-community by stressing accessibility and intentional community building through providing free materials.³ As an organization, they build communities and take in communities. Unearthing the intersection of political action/ideas and creative work is integral to shedding light on their socially engaged practices. For the group, art is necessarily intended to be revolutionary and through the very process of making art they are able to envision future liberation. Since its inception, The Yarn Mission has expanded geographically and materially to include other fiber arts, like crocheting, needlework, and quilt work. The collaborative effort stems from the need to create a sense of

¹ Hermanson, Tove, "Knitting as Dissent: Female Resistance in America Since the Revolutionary War," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, Paper 696, 2012. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/696>

² Ibid.

³ CheyOnna Sewell, phone interview by Lila Stone, March 24, 2017.

community and empowerment through the task of eradicating oppression and simultaneously getting people jazzed about fiber arts.

Why is this topic compelling? Are they resolute? Are they artists? I argue that while the The Yarn Mission knits, they are in the process of mending. This paper aims to discover, through the process, the act of what it means to use knitting, an art form, as a way to mend. I have examined how amateurs and practiced artists alike seek to use knitting, an age old way to pass time, as a way to work through systemic issues of civil rights.

The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration and the *Memorial for Peace and Justice* both founded by The Equal Justice Initiative, opened in Montgomery, Alabama in April 2018. Broadly speaking, the museum and memorial both draw attention to senseless acts of brutality against African-Americans throughout history, both past and present, and both seek to rewrite history. The memorial is situated atop a mound overlooking downtown Montgomery. It features 805 steel structures which represent the victims of lynchings by county. The steel structures, said to be the shape of coffins, either hang above head or lay on the ground. The audience, or onlooker, is made to gradually experience these structures in different ways; first walking past them and then walking under them and finally walking beside surrounded with benches and places to reflect. I found the structure for Levy County where the Rosewood lynchings took place. While in school at the University of Florida, I would drive past this small town often on the way to another town on the coast called Cedar Key. There is a small, slightly obscured, plate that stands as a memoriam for those victims on the side of State Road 24.

The museum, built in downtown Montgomery, Alabama, houses a variety of exhibits that showcase a chronological survey, tracing the evolution of the enslavement of African-Americans to the present day problem that is mass incarceration. Sanford Biggers' piece *Bam (For Michael)* stands at the exit of the museum. He creates conceptual art in creative ways to spark conversation that encourages discussion about our shared past. In consideration of the victims, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Trevon Martin, Biggers created a set of sculptures. He coated each of the sculptures in a thick brown wax and took them to a shooting range to "re-sculpt" them using bullets. Biggers then re-casted them in bronze like the one you see in the museum in Montgomery. In order to situate The Yarn Mission in a post-2000 context of contemporary knitting circle revivals, as well as contemporary art that speaks thoughtfully and consciously to issues of social justice like *Bam (For Michael)* does; I am aim to show how craft, and knitting specifically, is being utilized as a way to mend. When asked, "Do you think knitting is particularly conducive to problem solving?" Maria Asp stated, "Yes, because we are using your hands. You're watching it evolve in your hands. You are part of how it's growing. You create the thing that you want to make. Make that scarf that you want to make. Make that world that you want to live in."⁴

The Yarn Mission is not exclusionary; all people and all races are welcome to join, learn, teach, and participate. In an interview with CheyOnna Sewell in 2017, she stated, "Our base is black women and black femmes, but we work to engage people who support black women and black femmes."⁵ And you may wonder, why radical? The Yarn Mission's message is confrontational.

⁴ Maria Asp, phone interview by Lila Stone, February 19, 2018.

⁵ CheyOnna Sewell, phone interview by Lila Stone, March 24, 2017.

But is the Yarn Mission's artist practice confrontational? While the pieces themselves, can seem innocuous at first glance, if you look deeper you realize the knitted clothing items are steeped in shared stories. It is as if the knits and pearls, and the tightening and loosening of them, reflect and mirror the anxiety and unease of the complex history of civil rights, police brutality, and also the individual and shared process of mending. The question is to what end do these wares, these knitted items, serve as a reminder of the pervasive inequality in our societies today?

Members of The Yarn Mission consider themselves artists; if not just solely because of the responsibility they have to create but because the group is partially comprised of practicing artists. Though this issue is historical and systemic, it is crucial to consider the contemporaneity of it. "Art making has a way to help us identify those systems that are oppressing us... and in some way these systems are becoming invisible. It is a way to really examine the structures that exist. Name them to be able to transform them," said Maria Asp, a member of The Yarn Mission in Minneapolis during an oral history interview in February 2018. Their mission is to decenter whiteness and empower Black workers and support Black workers rights. They have a social responsibility, a conscious consumerist policy that pushes them to "pay Black women."⁶ This manner of knitting is meant to embody a humanist relationship; through the process of creating, knitters work through the solidarity of a collective.

This group of knitters is particularly pertinent in light of the political situation we find ourselves in today. They fit into a long line of groups that have used knitting and other fiber arts as a way in which to comport themselves in present society. These issues that The Yarn Mission takes up, such a police brutality, racial injustice, racial inequality, and gender inequality, among others, are systemic in character. These issues are societal and for this reason what The Yarn Mission is fighting for is compelling. The Yarn Mission, a growing group of people, are dedicated to shedding light on the inadequacies of our current society. One of their main goals was to protest peacefully, in a sense, off the streets and in safe spaces such as community buildings. But some are tired of politics, per se, and they want to make the solution as grass roots one, in which people are involved rather than institutions. The Yarn Mission is resolute in their aims; for Black women to be free, for Black people to be free, and including but not limited to excluding capitalism for cooperative economics. "We are not all truly free until EVERYONE gets to live with the same privileges. The effects of colonization and inequity. There are so many things we need to fight for. We need to fight for our children to do better than our generation."⁷

The Yarn Mission seeks to decenter whiteness by really examining the structures that exist today. That is, the way in which our current capitalist system manipulates through the use of seduction. "We are seduced into the ease of convenience rather than working with our hands," stated Maria Asp, a member of The Yarn Mission in Minneapolis.⁸ The process of knitting together in a group is The Yarn Mission's way of flipping the script; the conscious effort to pay more attention to the African-American experience. "We have these forms of technology. How can we introduce a way of making together and sharing knowledge that exists outside of rapid

⁶ Maria Asp, phone interview by Lila Stone, February 19, 2018.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Maria Asp, phone interview by Lila Stone, February 19, 2018.

speed, Snapchat. The process of knitting together is sharing knowledge and creating relationships and sharing techniques,” stated Asp.⁹

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⁹ Ibid.