



Tracy Floreani

## “Sewing and Telling”: On Textile as Story

For contemporary art historian and curator Maria Elena Buszek “old-fashioned handmade images and objects should resonate with artists and audiences in our high-tech world. In today’s information age the sensuous, tactile, ‘information’ of craft media speaks . . . of a direct connection to humanity that is perhaps endangered, or at the very least being reconfigured in our technologically saturated, twenty-first-century lives . . . “ (1). Columnist Emma Taggart argues in tandem that the increased demand for local, handmade, artisan (and, I would argue, the “folk” aesthetic in housewares, clothes, and music) is concomitant with the “loss of individuality” in the abundance of smart phone/virtual reality/IKEA global culture.

The high-tech culture of contemporary life may not be the only impetus behind a renewed love of traditionally “domestic” craft forms in middle-and working-class cultures of the early 21<sup>st</sup>-century West. Politicized home crafters like Jacqueline Witkowski and Betsy Greer assert a direct connection between a handicraft revival and the events of September 11, 2001—especially for people who were in their twenties at the time of the events. Various knitting clubs and stitching blogs offer similar testimonials about “nesting,” taking up knitting, crocheting, embroidery, handloom-weaving, or other handicrafts as part the post 9/11 Zeitgeist. Participation in craft for this generation is no longer one of necessity—nor all that cost-effective—but has served as a practice of comfort, expression, or self-preservation, as well as social statement born of activist impulses that nod to historical forbearers, a reclaiming and reconfiguring of the skills taught a generation ago in home economics classes. Consider a “knit-bomb” enfolding a parking meter or the proliferation of homemade pink “pussy” hats at the national Women’s Marches, for example.

---

(Traditionally gendered work, the new cloth-based craft is also not limited to women makers, however, as men were also involved in knitting the pussy hats and gifting them to women friends.) To create something handmade—something typically domestic—and insert it into a public space contributes to “an environment where any and all acts of making have value to our humanness” (Greer’s “Church of Craft” mission statement).

Of course, this return to handicraft has been present in the publishing world not just in the rise of hip craft publications, such as the *Stitch ‘n Bitch* knitting instruction books and the Sublime Stitching embroidery design series, but also in a number of popular fiction series, like the Knitting Mystery Series or the various quilting-themed novels by Jennifer Chiaverini. The use of a specific craft as device in a fiction series can become a bit gimmicky (e.g. *Knit One, Kill Two*), but craft can also be for writers an entry into thinking deeply about the meanings that come from making, about the connections between one’s identity and what one’s mind and hands produce.

Such is the case in several recent nonfiction works that employ handicraft as central to the purpose of their narratives. A critical monograph by Mary Jo Bona sets a foundation for thinking about textile motifs in literary works and creative nonfiction titles by Rachel May and Clara Parkes contribute meaningfully to the conversation initiated by “craftivists” like Betsy Greer. These three authors link textile work not just to social or artistic statements but deeply, too, to the sense of self and historical truths found in textile work made by people from various socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Each of these authors delves into the very idea of craft in an intriguing way and, zooming in on the details of the fibers in front of her, articulates the potential subversions of our cultural assumptions about what we make—or don’t—as well as how and why.

---

Mary Jo Bona’s *Women Writing Cloth*, a slim volume of traditional literary criticism endowed with a personalized feminist voice, reassesses the way we think about women characters in classic and

---

contemporary literature by means of the shared motif of cloth work. In the dedication we see how Bona's family legacy of "clothworkers par excellence" inflects the critical framework of the book. While her focus is primarily on literary fiction, the ideas forwarded in the book's preface can be applied to any creative work with a significant textile element: how cloth work can be used in artistic ways that may be read as both personally expressive and transgressive. She argues that re-thinking and re-reading textile artifacts can challenge domestic stasis, provide for social and physical mobility in women's lives, and create subversive visual and linguistic narratives. For Bona, this potential is as present in re-readings of how Hester Prynne embellishes her embroidered scarlet letter "A" as in the contemporary installation work of fiber artist Chris Perri. Her study serves as a useful basis for rethinking how we read all kinds of artworks and texts with traditional thread, yarn, and fabric scraps as part of a narrative medium.

Bona evokes ancient myth in establishing the weaving and unweaving tactics of Penelope in *The Odyssey* as foundational for understanding how American women characters and narrators work within a tradition that "has always transcended" cultures and eras. Her idea of "sewing and telling" is a nice basis for thinking about how women writers of all sorts use textile as metaphor, as inspiration, as a basis for reassessing gendered assumptions, social phenomena, or the everyday realities of women's lives at various historical moments. As Bona notes about Sandra Cisneros's and Adria Bernardi's stories, the younger generation may never successfully learn to do the kinds of textile work of their predecessors, but they inherit the material pieces of weaving and lacework that document migrations and inform their sense of modern identity.

*Women Writing Cloth* makes good use of some literary theory to rethink fictional titles like Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), alongside Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo* (2002), and Adria Bernardi's *Openwork* (2007). Though these four novels are dealt with in formal critical fashion once the book gets underway post-Preface, Bona's personal interest in re-examining these stories via cloth work is present in the sincere feminist appreciation of the depictions of characters whose

---

ethnic identities become inextricably connected to gendered craft. Her discussions of these texts are as carefully detailed and deliberate as the work her own relatives might have brought to an elaborate, hand-stitched embroidery project.

Bona writes, “the manifold potentialities of cloth to tie, to express, to unravel, and to mend likewise encouraged me to examine works across different time periods and cultural groups, threading connections between canonical and lesser known texts” (xiii). While ancient Greece’s Penelope may seem trapped in an unpleasant patriarchal predicament (to accept that her missing husband is dead and choose another from her many suitors), she uses her cloth work to delay and manipulate the situation and afford herself a modicum of power. Likewise, the characters and women writers included in Bona’s study deploy traditional gendered cloth work in clever ways. As she explains it, *Women Writing Cloth* “examines how women’s cloth expressivity enabled different kinds of mobility, extending their art forms into new places” and the finished knitted, threaded, or woven pieces function as “unconventional documents” of sorts (xiii). Not only do the crafted works within these imaginative works function as “documents,” they also serve as vehicles for freedom and mobility. Such is the case for two recent works of nonfiction, in which craft literally inspires or enables mobility.

---

The idea of a cloth work object as “document” provides the inspiration for Rachel May’s *An American Quilt: Unfolding a Story of Family and Slavery*. In the way quilts become part of a narrative reconfiguring for Celie in *A Color Purple*, a quilt becomes the source of historical rethinking for Rachel May. An established writer and avid quilter, May documents what she learns about history and about her own New England roots from studying an early 19<sup>th</sup>-century quilt tucked away in a special textiles collection at the University of Rhode Island. The result is part detective work, part personal reflection, part historical imagining, part call for a reckoning of our nation’s real relationship to the Atlantic slave trade.

---

May writes persuasively about history through the prose of personal experience, with material culture at its base. The quilt she discovers is an unfinished piece with paper templates still nestled in the basted patchwork, and those scraps of paper become the clues in a pretty impressive research project. Fascinated by the references to “Barbados” and “shugar” on a few inches of 19<sup>th</sup>-century shipping-record fragments, alongside small hexagons of early 20<sup>th</sup>-c. mimeographs and repeated words that seems like penmanship exercises, May hunts down the origins and family papers to do her own piecework of telling the story of an extended family’s participation in Atlantic trade. The well-documented lives of the extended Anglo-American Crouch and Williams families, with personal and business interests based in both Providence, Rhode Island, and Charleston, South Carolina, provide the information from which May tries to excavate and piece together the lives of the families’ slaves—particularly three women whose hands may have touched the quilt itself: Eliza, Minerva, and Juba. She writes, “The enslaved women are not overtly recognized in the archives of documents and in the quilt tops that mark Susan and Hasell’s lives, but they’re decidedly here. We can recognize their labor and legacies they created—the gardens, food, clothes, and quilts that were their art” (52).

May’s own lens helps to bring readers through the exploration with her and expose our culture’s misunderstandings of the history of slavery—primarily, how much the strength of the slave trade and cotton/textile industry came from the very New England states whose historical memory has erased such culpability. In the preface to the book she clearly owns the acts of imagination at work in filling in historical gaps in her well researched book. The documents do not tell the full stories of the lives of the enslaved people whose presence shadows the family histories she studies, so May is forced to imagine them based on the material evidence at hand. Her approach is not unlike that of MacArthur Fellow Tiya Miles, whose creative methodology for researching and documenting the history of marginalized peoples, which includes the citing of imaginative fiction like Toni Morrison’s as historical evidence of emotional realities, has rocked and revitalized traditional academic approaches to historiography. Returning constantly

to the “document” of the quilt itself, May uses the details of paper and cloth as touchstones to multiple lines of exploration and, ultimately, into a radical rethinking of historical understanding. The writing becomes recursive, like the repeating pattern of the quilt itself. This is mostly effective in that it replicates the process of circling back, discovering, and seeing how so many lives are connected.

Photos of the quilt are peppered throughout the narrative, too, and not in the ways we might expect: shots of the quilt top from different angles, various zoomed-in details of writing on the paper templates or of a print on a swatch that she realizes is the same as that labeled in a family album as “probably for slave gowns.” Also included are a variety of photos that illustrate her research—a building that comes to be related to the family history, maps, diagrams, a historic photo of a slave mammy with a white charge, a snapshot of a person she has met in her travels and investigations—almost all without formal captioning. These images draw the reader into the author’s experience of a multi-faceted (and fascinated) exploration of the object. Through the visuals we see and explore the minutiae of the unfinished patchwork and experience the investigation and cultural questioning along with her, rather than her asserting documentation for readers to simply accept as historic truth. The reader might feel her words truly: “The more I learn, the more my perception of the world around me changes” (159).

---

This statement rings true for Clare Parkes, as well, who launches herself on an experiential investigation of the artisan wool trade that causes her perceptions to deepen and shift. While Bona’s book provides a model for how to think about various prose narratives about women and craft, and May’s books dwells somewhere between cultural criticism and personal nonfiction in the ways she inserts herself as a participant-researcher in reading the primary “texts” of old quilt tops, Parkes carries us back to the elemental beginnings of the story, with the creation of the textile medium itself. In *Vanishing Fleece*, a new book by the travel writer and self-described “yarn critic,” Parkes takes to the road to explore how knitwear is produced from the back of a sheep to the finished yarn. The narrative is less a “how it’s made”

---

documentary than a study in the precarious existence of traditional small-scale herders/wool producers, mills, and dye-makers. As in her last book, *Knitlandia*, Parkes demonstrates that the stories of how yarn is made and used are actually stories about people, stories that “run the gamut from heartbreaking to life-affirming” and provide a deeper understanding of “an industry and way of life that have been hard-hit but refuse to die.” Not just a hobbyist’s outing, Parkes strives to show “what’s at stake and how much all of this matters” (*Vanishing* 8). At her best, Parkes seems almost like the knitting world’s version of Susan Orleans, out and about trying to get to know the people connected to knitting culture in all possible ways, resulting in vivid profiles of intriguing, sometimes eccentric artisans that few of us will ever meet in person. This is true of both *Vanishing Fleece* and her 2016 travelogue *Knitlandia*. Before she became the editor of *Knitter’s Review* and the continent’s foremost yarn critic, Parkes was a magazine travel writer. She has a gift for depicting places through simple linguistic *tableaux*, capturing dialogue, and playful description. She also has a good eye for helping readers feel the lovely absurdities in situations, such as the mash-up of knitters and legendary baseball players occupying the same hotel for their respective conventions.

Only occasionally veering toward the technical, more often than not Parkes’ writing effuses a creative view of the world she is examining and her own quirky tendencies, the way she sees fibers spinning into soft-serve ice cream or how she resists an intense urge to “lie on [the] floor and let the fibers spill over me” (*Knitlandia*, 10). Almost all of us wear knits at some point, so she wants us to see how the work of these people is relevant to most of us. In *Vanishing Fleece*, she starts out with a playful tone as she acquires an entire 676-pound bale of fine merino wool from a famous heritage-breed sheepherder. Through this one bale she will follow the life of the raw wool through various types of milling, dying, and spinning into sweater-grade merino yarn, and she pokes fun at her own obsessive quest as, like an Ahab with a fuel-efficient car, she sets out to follow “The Great White Bale.” The quest itself becomes what Parkes really gets to keep, as she farms out the actual finished product to subscribers who have funded her trip Kickstarter-style. Clara Parkes and her readers will likely never raise sheep or run a mill, but her sense

---

of what it means to use artisan yarn becomes deeply influenced by seeing the legacies and generations at work on the raw material side of the craft.

By letting us meet the people behind the quality versions of wool products, she helps us care for their livelihoods and the principles on which they attempt to operate in a culture threatened by disposability and instant-gratification consumption. *Fleece's* purpose is very focused on processing the wool bale in a set-out plan to make and compare yarn at four mills, and the outcomes become somewhat predictable: the larger the scale of production, the less satisfying the final product. While the narrative in *Vanishing Fleece* remains mostly light and inventive, Parkes uses one bale of wool to help us learn about the precarious state of artisan work and offers pointed (though not obnoxiously polemical) commentary on how such producers are threatened by mass production for fast fashion, chain hobby stores, and Etsy-fueled craft trends. Such is the downside of the return to craft in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, as the demand has built for products and participation in the process as a hobby mostly for the privileged, but quality hasn't always kept pace.

---

All the writers and thinkers discussed here connect making to making meaning, particularly for women. Each examines specific textiles and the effects of those textiles in the lives of the people who make or possess them, the complexities of weaving story through textile, and the politics of how we read those stories. Some of them might argue that the act of making itself is most important, despite the origins of the threads. Others might assert that the medium is part of the message, too, that raw cotton harvested by slave labor or synthetic yarn made in a labor-exploiting textile mill in East Asia alters in subtle ways the meaning of the making. (Most serious crafters would both agree with that notion, and, I suspect, also refuse to use \$30 skeins of artisan yarn to yarn-bomb a public bicycle rack.) The craftastic explosion in our culture had seemed to wane a bit in recent years—a few local “gourmet” yarn shops even closing down and the craft sections of megastores shrinking or being remarketed for children's instead of adult crafting.



But then the political climate shifted, many people feel less comfortable now than they did five years ago, and craftivism has been reignited. See again, for example, the hats of the Women's March, or Diana Weymar's "Tiny Pricks Project" which claims a goal of channeling frustrations into action by collecting the 45<sup>th</sup> U.S. president's most outrageous quotes into small embroidery samplers. Removing words from Twitter and placing them on antique textiles highlights their absurdity and disempowers them; collectively, the making creates an alternate narrative. Here the conversation between the previous generations who made the original textiles and our current high-tech culture continues in a novel way, one that will tell its own story in generations to come.

## Works Cited

- Bona, Mary Jo. *Women Writing Cloth: Migratory Fictions in the American Imaginary*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016.
- Buszek, Maria Elena. *Extra/ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Cascone, Sarah. "To Channel Her Frustration, One Woman Started Embroidering Donald Trump's Most Outrageous Quotes. She Inspired an Army of Needleworkers." *Artnet News*. June 14, 2019. <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/tiny-pricks-project-lingua-franca-1572865> Accessed August 8, 2019.
- Greer, Betsy. *Craftivism: The Art and Craft of Activism*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014.
- May, Rachel. *An American Quilt: Unfolding a Story of Family and Slavery*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2019.
- Miles, Tiya. *The Ties that Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Parkes, Clare. *Knitlandia: A Knitter Sees the World*. New York: Abrams Press, 2016.
- . *Vanishing Fleece: Adventures in American Wool*. New York: Abrams Press, 2019.
- Taggart, Emma. "The Revival of the Arts and Crafts Movement and the Artisans Behind It." *My Modern Met*. March 24, 2018. <https://mymodernmet.com/arts-and-crafts-movement-revival/> Accessed June 28, 2019.
- Witkowski, Jacqueline. "Knit for Defense, Purl to Control." *Invisible Culture* 22. April 18, 2015. <https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/knit-for-defense-purl-to-control/> Accessed June 28, 2019.