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The Pen and the Needle: Intersections of Text and Textile in and as Nonfiction

“We might begin with Anne Bradstreet’s famous line: ‘I am obnoxious to each carping tongue/ Who says my hand a needle better fits.’ That sentence establishes a creative tension between pens and needles, hands and tongues, written and non-written forms of female expression, inviting us not only to take oral traditions and material sources more seriously. . . .but also to examine the roots of the written documents we take so much for granted” (Ulrich, “Of Pens...” 202).

“Has the pen or pencil dipped so deep in the blood of the human race as the needle?” asked the writer Olive Schreiner. The answer is, quite simply, no. The art of embroidery has been the means of educating women into the feminine ideal, and of proving that they have attained it, but it has also provided a weapon of resistance to the constraints of femininity” (Parker ix).

As a writer of texts that include sewing, and a scholar of historic quilts, I’m invested in understanding how to “read” historic sewn work by women, and how I can use this knowledge to understand sewn-and-written work by women today. In her 1990 essay, “Of Pens and Needles: Sources in Early American Women’s History,” Laurel Thatcher Ulrich describes her process of researching colonial American women, and how difficult it was to find sources of their work. When she approached librarians to ask for help, their response was that Ulrich wouldn’t find anything. Of course, over time, she did, concluding that: “The problem, it seems to me, is not so much a dearth of sources or even the logistical problems in using them as it is the lack of appropriate conceptual frameworks for interpretation” (Ulrich “Of Pens...” 200, 201). She goes on to say that “women were everywhere” and that “Critical use of probate inventories and account books in combination with women’s letters and diaries, newspapers, court records, almanacs, traveler’s narratives, oral traditions, and surviving artifacts” can begin to answer the question of how “female economic life” played a part in colonial history (202). Ulrich used these methods to write several noteworthy books, including *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*

(more on this momentarily), and won the Pulitzer Prize the year after this article, “Of Pens and Needles...,” and her book, *A Midwife’s Tale*, were published.

In 1987, Pat Ferrero, Elaine Hedges, and Julie Silber make the same argument for reading women’s textiles as documents of history: “When nineteenth-century women described their quilts as ‘bound volumes of hieroglyphics’ or as their...‘di’ries,’ they were fully aware of what we have recently newly recognized: that their stitched fabrics were often the most eloquent records of their lives. Today we are in the midst of an explosion of interest in women’s history, and historians...are increasingly recognizing the need to turn to other sources...since women, who were often denied education and discouraged from writing, left fewer written records than men” (11). So the writers are in agreement with Ulrich, both writing in the eighties and early nineties, when, as Roszika Parker notes, there was a “financial recession,” as in 2010, when there was another surge of renewed interest in the “hand-made” (Parker xi). I wonder what we are doing with the needle today, and whether we’re reifying old norms or subverting them—or both. I’m working to understand why women writers are more and more often employing sewing in their work, and why so-called “modern” quilting is so popular today, with more than 200 guilds around the country and the world. I’ve written in conference presentations about the “renewed interest” in the handmade, which I would argue began after September 11, and includes Debbie Stoller’s “Stitch n’ Bitch” revolution, and subsequently, modern quilters and yarn bombers.

Ulrich writes that women writers in the colonial era were not very common, but there were more than the canon would reveal. Ulrich notes an exhibition that featured “five American women poets ‘rarely studied despite their talent,’” including Susanna Wright and Elizabeth Graeme Ferguson, whose names can be added to the two women writers usually acknowledged from this era: Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley (203-204). However, using the pen was physically awkward—a task to be learned—and uncommon (202). While most women didn’t write, women’s histories can be uncovered through their “stitchery”: “Because far more women were accustomed to using needles than pens, textiles may offer the

richest unexplored body of information in early American women's history. Women's stitchery, both plain and fancy, offers ways of examining class divisions, education, technology and commerce, family relations, attitudes toward the body, work and leisure, marriage and death" (205). In this way, we can start to consider stitchery as a form of nonfiction, a work of letters separate from poetry. Ulrich cautions that: "Surviving needlework often has the very same biases as letters and diaries and was probably produced by the same relatively small group of women. For every cross-stitched picture of Harvard College thousands of plain shirts and aprons were produced in New England. Although a few survive, most were worn till full of holes, then recycled into dishcloths, pocket, rag coverlets, scrap bags, and lint" (207). Some were even recycled into paper.

Writing Invisible Histories in Textiles from Pre-Contact to the Civil War

These issues of race and class are taken up by Ulrich in *The Age of Homespun*, and by bell hooks, Faith Ringgold, and Gladys-Marie Fry, who speak to the problem of a culture that's made invisible African-American women. In *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*, Ulrich explores Native American history through a series of artifacts. She dispels such myths as the disappearance of Native Americans after King Philip's War, for example, by dating the Native American-made basket after 1676, which "reduces the mythic but enlarges the historical significance of the basket" (73). She then traces the story of this basket and writes of the conflict between the Massasoit and Narragansett tribes, and the relationship between the British and Native Americans in the 16-1700s (75). She uses the archaeological evidence of the basket, along with oral tradition and the accession records of 1842 to uncover this story, and explains that "One can read the history of 17th century New England as a series of exchanges" of fur, land, coats, and Indian heads (58). Part of this history, too, is Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative (she sewed for her captors) (158). Ulrich's book is a sort of revisionist history, a

response to Bushnell's 1869 history of New England, which championed the rights of African-Americans but silenced the Native American story (23-24).

She dispels the myth of the age of homespun, an idealized image of the pre-industrial era. Instead, she writes: "The history of rural cloth-making is a story about the wealth that ordinary people created. But it is also a story about cultural conflict, violence, and death...The English conquered North American with spinning wheels as well as guns. From the beginning, cloth-making was also implicated in the expansion of New World slavery" (38). She writes that "cloth literally transformed the landscape as Algonkian beaver passed into the hands of English felt-makers and English sheep began to graze on American meadows" (38). Ulrich cites a farmer's uncovering of twelve bodies, clearly, from their burial, part of a Native American grave; the bodies are now in the "Indian Room" in a Deerfield, MA museum, "near a 'Domestic Room' filled with antique spinning wheels..." (38). And, like Parker, Ulrich argues that needlework could serve as both oppression and expression: "...needlework was simultaneously a site of cultural production and a field for personal expression," and, in the vein of Bill Brown's thing theory, in which objects and subjects bear a relationship and an object might "speak," Ulrich declares, "Artifacts tell us most when they are imbedded in the rich texture of local history" (39). The objects she explores in the book are indeed so imbedded, and with them, she rewrites the colonial history of New England to include Native Americans and their work.

hooks uses her analysis of textiles to rewrite history as well, to include African-Americans. She writes, "Often such shows [of American quiltmakers] suggest that white women were the only group dedicated to the art of quilting. This is not so. Yet quilts by black women are portrayed as exceptions...Art historians have just begun to document traditions of black female quiltmakers, to name names, to state particulars" (Livingstone and Ploof 326). hooks cites Ringgold as a quilter who speaks African-American history in her own work. Marcia Tucker writes, in her foreword to Ringgold's work, "Her work is a stunning visual History of Histories—her own, her family's, that of the African American

artist in the United States and abroad, of social activism and feminism in the New York art world of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the history of historical omission by race and gender, anywhere and everywhere” (Cameron et al. ix). With both images and written text in her quilts, Ringgold folds in the layers of her personal and collective history, creating a new archive (to invoke Shawn Michelle Smith’s language), which her daughter notes includes artists, African-American writers and thinkers, and family—having “no specific roles models,” she “drew on a willy-nilly hodgepodge of role models” (Cameron et al. 14). Ringgold notes that her use of the “series” form allows her work to take on the “sequential format” that “emulat[es] the chapter form of a book” and aids her work of “historical revision” (Cameron et al. 6).

In 1990, Gladys-Marie Fry published *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South*,” and also spoke the “silenced history” of African-American quilters (5). Fry argues that, “As women’s work, quilting would also have been considered unimportant;” because women quilted on their “own” time, at night, after the work of the plantation had been done, quilting wasn’t considered their “trade” and was therefore not recorded as men’s work has been (4). She explains:

While slave men have long been acknowledged as skilled carpenters, brick masons, iron makers, furniture makers, wood-carvers, and potters, women have been seen primarily in the role of the plantation ‘mammy’ figure. This limited view of slave women has made them the victim of three *isms*: racism, sexism and regionalism. In particular, the contribution of slave women to textile production has been ignored. (Fry 1)

Additionally, slave-made quilts that stayed in the quarters (as opposed to being sent for use in the main house) were heavily used, leading to their destruction, along with frequent fires, “theft, and sale for extra income” (39). And, when slaves were emancipated and moved frequently (one testimony recounts a move required to save their lives), the quilts and other belongings were left behind: “Dat’s de way all de cullud people was fer freedom, never had nothin’ but what had on de back” (39).

Two of the most popular and widely-discussed slave-made quilts are the pair by Harriet Powers, one of which is held by the Boston MFA, the other by The Smithsonian. Powers' quilts are "story quilts," with images of people and animals in historic local events (for example, a meteor shower), as well as Biblical myths (Fry 85, Ferrero et al 45). Ferrero et al tell us that Gladys-Marie Fry "rediscovered and thoroughly researched Powers in the 70s," an act, I would argue, of historiography that enables Powers' voice to speak through her quilts (47). Powers was "born a slave in Georgia on October 29, 1837, during the period (1775-1875) when appliqué flourished in the South" (Fry 85). We know from Jennie Smith, who bought the first quilt from Powers for five dollars, that Powers had wanted to see the Barnum and Bailey Circus when it came to town in 1890, "because she wanted to see 'all the Bible animals,'" many of which are depicted in the quilt (85).

The second quilt was commissioned by the Atlanta University faculty ladies in 1898, and is the one that the Boston MFA holds. This second quilt includes an image of a "dark day," which occurred in New England as a result of "smoke from forest fires," so that "day is turned into night" (Fry 89). "Scientists say this was confined to New England, but oral tradition concerning the dark day circulated throughout the country. Harriet Powers heard about it in Georgia," and so it's depicted in her quilt with a black square background, the sun shining, animals lying around a barn, and three people, arms raised (one with a gun or tool over his shoulders) (88-89). Fry argues that the appliqué technique comes from the Dahomean (in West Africa) tapestries and are not unlike the "bas-reliefs" of the Abomey palace (85). These quilts are not just evidence of Powers' skill as a quilter and storyteller, but also of the complicated relationships between African American women and white women: "In Harriet Powers's quilt lies an almost intriguing classic tale of the South: the skilled work of the slave craftsman embedded in the creator's African heritage and preserved by the patron" (84-5). Fry notes that, ironically (because Powers did not want to part with them), the quilts would likely have disappeared had they not been bought by Smith.

Harriet Powers' quilts are a rare example of slave-made quilts preserved to the present day. Like Ulrich, Fry ran into the same problems of finding records of other quilts made by slaves, and therefore relied upon a combination of sources: "(1) official historical accounts; (2) the testimony of former slaves from the WPA Federal Writers Project and other nineteenth-century writings by African-Americans; and (3) oral tradition, primarily family accounts pertaining to the provenance of their own surviving slave-made quilts" (3). Fry checked the sources against one another, in order to establish reliable histories of the objects.

She also points out that historians of slave-made quilts need to learn to "read" the quilts and to be aware of their own biases and of previously-disseminated misinformation, namely that "crudely made pre-Civil war quilt[s] could be identified as a slave-made quilt," or that "cotton seeds" would be found in the batting of a slave-made quilt (6). She argues that slaves were responsible for both plain and fancy quilts, and that they incorporated African symbols and mythology into the quilt designs (7). In addition, Fry counters the myth that the white mistress of the house did all of the sewing for the plantation, noting that large plantations had their own slave seamstresses, who made clothes for the slaves, including quilted petticoats, as well as quilts and coverlets (17). Some of these slaves, like Elizabeth Keckly, used these skills to buy their freedom; Keckly went on to become Mrs. Lincoln's seamstress (16-17).

Fry's insistence on the talent and skill of slave quilters is evidenced in the quilts of Gee's Bend, now famous, thanks to the 2003 show of their work at the Whitney (also the museum where, in the 1970s, quilts were hung on walls and displayed as art, a revolutionary concept at the time). The quilters of Gee's Bend, a rural and isolated part of Alabama, are the descendents of slaves. Gee's Bend is a former plantation, surrounded on three sides by water. Ferry service was discontinued in 1962 to prevent African-Americans from crossing the water to protest and vote. Service wasn't instated again for 44 years, which contributed to the community's isolation in the twentieth century. In her 2012 article, Erin Z. Bass also notes that Gee's Bend is in the process of building a community center and developing its potential as a

tourist destination. Already, quilters can travel to sew with the Gee's Bend quilters. Alvia Wardlaw writes, "The Gee's Bend quilts...represent only a portion of the rich tradition of African American quiltmaking in the South, but they are in a league by themselves. Few other places can boast the density of Gee's Bend's artistic achievement, which is the result both of geographical isolation and an unusual degree of cultural continuity" (Beardsley et al 8). With a population of just 700, Gee's Bend is a close-knit community where mothers teach their daughters to sew and many of the original patterns have been preserved by this lineage of quilters (9). The quilts were collected by William Arnett and the Tinwood Alliance, and some have been accessioned by major museums like the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (7).

Jane Livingston writes that the quilts are celebrated for their "minimalist aesthetic," derived from the use of everyday items like work clothes. The quilts are made of worn out scraps of fabric pieced into blocks of color, or cut from large pieces of used cloth, to create abstract "modern" designs. Often, the cloth used is that of worn-out clothes: "Most of these [work-clothes] quilts are simply pieced together, but are done so in ways that create groundbreaking works of art" (56). She argues that while the quilting stitches are used in Amish quilts like drawing, "taking on a life of its own that rarely occurs among Gee's Bend women" (56). The Gee's Bend quilts focus instead on design in the blocks of fabric, colors juxtaposed, and patterns particular to this community played out in different fabrics and colors. These quilts move like poetry, rhythmic. If part of poetry's appeal is sound texture, these quilts are color-texture, and move like sound. Shelly Zegart and Paul Arnett write: "[T]hese quilts also build bridges to other expressive languages, such as music. Were it a contemporary paintings, Missouri Pettway's 'Path through the Woods' could easily be titled *Syncopated Rhythm*. Using two simple 'notes'—pink and jersey gray rectangle—this one's unusual movements and relationships echo elements of jazz" (78). The writers go on here to note the "flexible but unbreakable will" that drives women to create these quilts and that "marks these women daily lives" (78). While I won't return to the idea of the will here, I am struck by the connection between the feminist kill-joy and the act of making, particularly in the work of women creating

new ways to tell their own stories on their own terms. Pushing against results in this art. The notion of seeing quilts as poetry is long-standing, even as the concept of quilting as nonfiction is equally compelling. Fry quotes a “former Georgia slave” who “describes another slave’s pride in her quiltmaking skills: “Nancy was proud of her quilt-making ability...and when Vanna brought the gay pieces made up in a ‘double-burst’ (sunburst) pattern, Nancy fingered the squares with loving fingers. ‘Hit’s poetry, ain’t it?’ she asked wistfully...” (19).

This idea of reading a quilt as poetry puts me in mind “Thing Theory,” in which Brown writes, “The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object, than a particular subject-object relation” (4). And Daniel Miller writes: “We as academics can strive for understanding and empathy through the study of what people do with objects because that is the way people that we study create a world of practice” (19). Miller notes that Bourdieu cites our relationships with “clothes, furnishing, and cooking” as the sources of our early learning and acculturation (73). Thus, our relationship with things is revealed through our daily rituals (quiltmaking is one such ritual), and the engagement with old clothes in the Gee’s Bend quilts reveals a great deal about their social and financial circumstances in a way that is essential to the work of nonfiction.

Quilts as Nonfiction Artifact

Prown writes: “Artifacts are tools as well as signals, signs, and symbols. Their use and functions are multiple and intertwined. Much of their meaning is subliminal and unconscious. Some authors have talked about reading objects as texts, but objects must also be read as myths and as poetry” (21). The two models for material culture studies are offered by Prown and Fleming. Prown, an art historian who looked at works that had a recognized creator, emphasizes the maker more than Fleming. The Fleming model makes more sense when the maker is unknown, as is the case for many quilts and textiles. The Fleming model

puts the object into context and allows for a cultural analysis and interpretation, explaining why it's important for our culture today. The Prown model can cause historians to make assumptions based on one's own present-day culture; the Fleming model helps to avoid this mistake (Welters class notes February 2012, Fleming's "Artifact Study..." and Prown's "Mind in Matter..."). While acknowledging that this can become problematic and might cause an overlaying of one's own culture on the historic object, I'm nevertheless intrigued by the connection between poetry and objects, which is related to the idea of the object that can "speak," imbued with our own desires and drives and revealing our deep relationship with the things we see and make.

Similarly, hooks makes the connection between her grandmother's quilting (her grandmother was illiterate and a talented quilter) and her own writing: "Symbolically identifying a tradition of black female artistry, [this quilt] challenges the notion that creative black women are a rare exception. We are deeply, passionately connected to black women whose sense of aesthetics, whose commitment to ongoing creative work, inspires and sustains" (Livingstone and Ploof 332). hooks argues that part of the historiography of black women is to name them and their work—their quilts, in this case—to give them their due legacy: "I call their names in resistance, to oppose the erasure of black women—that historical mark of racist and sexist oppression" (327). Doing so gives the necessary voice back to their histories that are written into the quilts themselves in the way that applies to other cultures with a history of storytelling and textiles, particularly the Hmong, as depicted in Kao Kalia Yang's memoir *The Latehomecomer*.

As Sara Ahmed writes in her essay "Happy Objects": "We are moved by things. And in being moved, we make things" (Gregg and Seigworth 33). Certainly, hooks illustrates this relationship with her use of the quilt to inspire and ground her own writing. (Elizabeth Wayland Barber makes historic objects as part of her research, replicating ancient patterns of found cloth in order to understand how they were made. Barber is the author of *Women's Work, The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times*, in which she analyzes textiles from the Palaeolithic to the Iron Age. In addition to her use of making as a

research tool, she also relies upon linguistics to understand these early cultures: "...language itself is remarkably durable. Sometimes it preserves useful clues to a more abstract and thought-oriented part of the human past than material artifacts do" (13.) Later in the essay, Ahmed cites hooks in "plac[ing] the figure of the feminist kill-joy alongside the figure of the angry black woman" (39). Ahmed reads the resistance of the kill-joy as a necessary part of our understanding of our history—and notes that "the experience of being alienated from the affective promise of happy objects gets us somewhere....A concern with histories that hurt is not then a backward orientation...If anything, we might want to reread melancholic subjects...as an alternative model of social good" (50). Thus, the "melancholic" can be as revealing as the "happy object," and happiness is not necessarily the goal—but understanding alienation from the "happy object" is. hooks does the work of the feminist kill-joy in her essay on her grandmother's quilt; by naming her grandmother and placing her within a history of African-American artists, she rewrites a history that was previously silenced.

Mythmaking and the Cult of Domesticity

The same kind of subversive work, understanding how to "read" objects in order to let them "speak," is accomplished by Roszika Parker in her seminal book, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. While Barber explores the prehistoric roots of textiles, Parker focuses on the Middle Ages through the twentieth century, explaining how embroidery has both "constrained" women and offered them "a weapon of resistance" (Parker ix). Parker traces examples of samplers with images of power, as well as young girls' expression of hatred of stitching. She also notes those women who spoke out against the inculcation of femininity through embroidery. For example, "Sixteenth-century feminist poet Louise Labé of Lyons had no doubt that the demand for women to practice domestic arts prevented them from doing anything else...Domestic arts were equated with virtue because they ensured that women remain at home and refrain from book learning. Ignorance was equated with innocence; domesticity was a defence

against promiscuity” (75). In the nineteenth century middle-class, femininity was bound up in the relationship between mothers and daughters: “The key to the hold embroidery and femininity established over middle-class women was that it became implicated in an intense relationship, shot through with as much guilt, hatred, and ambivalence as love” (130). The “cult of domesticity” relied upon the association of femininity, domesticity and chastity (130). As David Jaffee notes, the development of the parlor as an important space in the mid to late 1800s was part of this “cult of domesticity.” “The Bixbys, like many other provincial families throughout the northeast, fashioned a parlor for performing the rituals of social life” (316). And yet, even as these parlors were developed, lower class “mill girls” occupied the textile mills in Lowell, in the midst of these middle-class women:

In encouraging women to stay at home, the cult was resisting the new industrial world, or positioning women as a bulwark against it. Meanwhile, that world was beckoning women to enter it, including some of the very ones the cult addressed. As their traditional work of spinning and weaving was transferred to the factories, young women who were being deprived of that work in the home yet who remained skilled in it followed it into the new mills, where they became the first industrial workers. (Ferrero et al. 31)

While the first mill girls were the (often educated) daughters of New England farmers, they soon ceded their role to immigrants—“French-Canadian and Irish immigrant women, men and children...Factory work had become exploited work, and native-born white women avoided it” (31). Even as the demographics in the mills changed, the cult of domesticity went on, until the early twentieth century.

The power of this era’s mythology persists into the twenty-first century. Parker notes that in the 1970s, Beryl Weaver embroidered “pretty” images that illustrate “the Victorian idealization of rural life” (the rejection of industrialization of which Ferrero et al speak, above) and, “embroidered with the words ‘shattered and shuttered,’ reveal “Weaver’s feelings about the solitary confinement of a life

dedicated to domestic femininity and nothing else” (206). Yet, in the art world, needlework is still seen as “craft,” as opposed to “art” (though Elissa Auther and other art/craft theorists argue that the two ought to be seen as part of the same realm). Parker’s explanation for this? “The role of embroidery in the construction of femininity has undoubtedly constricted the development of the art. What women depicted in thread became determined by notions of femininity, and the resulting femininity of embroidery defined and constructed its practitioners in its own image” (215).

Elizabeth Wayland Barber would turn to the even longer history of women’s association with cloth and the use of the medium for telling one’s own stories when the woman herself has been silenced in other ways. First, there’s the mythology of women weavers and sewers; for example, “Medea uses poisoned cloth to kill her rival,” and Philomena, after being raped and having her tongue cut out, “wove into a cloth the story of her misfortune,” an example of subversive stitching if ever there was one (233, 232). Wayland writes of the many examples of women spinning in Greek myths: “One could argue that, since women were the people who spun, the spinners of one’s destiny would have to be women” (235). Schneider and Weiner note these myths as well, citing Penelope, and noting that “Cloth as a metaphor for society, thread for social relations, express more than connectedness...The softness and ultimate fragility of these materials capture the vulnerability of humans, whose every relationship is transient, subject to the degenerative process of illness, death, and decay” (2). In her denim project, “Indigo Blue,” an installation in Charleston, South Carolina, Ann Hamilton attempts to speak a history silenced by the tourist economy in the city, by setting her installation near the docks of the old slave ports, and piling denim and letting soybeans rot in hanging bags, evoking this sense of decay and transience in our daily labor, to which Weiner and Schneider speak (Livingstone and Ploof 333). Schneider and Weiner go on to explore these relationships via an analysis of cloth and weaving across several eastern and western cultures.

Wayland has traced a history of these women spinners. She notes that “prehistoric European women wove together,” which we know by the way the cloth was woven (the process required two people)

(72). Once “purposeful planting” was undertaken in 10,000-7000 BC, animals were domesticated, and women stayed near the home to tend to the garden and animals and care for children—and weave. This is called the “courtyard economy,” in which cereal, vegetables, fruit, eggs, and lamb were all at the house and managed by women (84). In the third century BC, housewives “ground the flour and worked on the cloth for the household”—or, if they were rich, they hired slaves to do these tasks (166). (Evidence of men weaving appears about 1300-1500 BC, in Egyptian images of massive looms (Barber 260).) Women could sell their textiles, to pay to “run their households, to pay taxes, and as capital to buy raw materials for the next textiles to be woven” (173). I can’t help but think of contemporary women quilters who have given up their full-time jobs to stay home with the children and subsequently become entrepreneurs, selling quilts, patterns, and books to support themselves and their families.

Final Considerations

Despite the centuries of associations of domesticity with sewing, reinforced in particularly emphasized by the Victorians, Parker sees hope, because “definitions of sexual difference, and the definitions of art and artist so weighted against women, are not fixed” (215). Just as they have “shifted” in the past, so will they “be transformed in the future” (215). I see this work of transformation being done by contemporary sewer-writers like Jen Bervin, Jennifer Tamayo, and most recently (with her piece in *Poetry*), Matthea Harvey. These women incorporate sewing into their writing, or place their sewing *as* writing in lit journals and presses, which “carrie[s] it] across the borders into masculine territory,” as Parker writes, and forces a new consideration of the role of stitching and writing in women’s lives. Other women artists, such as Tracy Emin and Chawne Kimber, who have quilted poems, and the many “subversive stitchers” who create irreverent cross-stitched pieces, make textiles that include written work. Stitched works have become more accepted in the fine art world, with the help of artist like Sheila Hicks.

We could be experiencing nostalgia for the pre-information age, just as Ulrich notes nineteenth-century Americans had a pre-industrial mythology of “the age of the homespun.” Part of the allure of sewing is—and has always been—its tactility and sensuousness, which, today, might be a salve for our lives spent staring at screens. Like the early twentieth-century response to the typewriter with an emphasis on handwriting and using the body (automatic writing, for example, and, later Sol LeWitt’s automatic gestures), perhaps sewing is an attempt to draw the body back into writing. The question remains: how does sewing signify today? We can invoke the history of embroidery and sewing in our writing with the use of cloth and thread. Or, perhaps the associations with femininity and domesticity still remain (they seem to, in the contemporary quilt guilds and online sewing communities to which I’m privy), and using sewn work with writing is another way of subverting those associations, undermining them, and reclaiming the use of the stitch as an art form that might be free of those associations. While most western women today have access to writing and the technologies required to share it, why are they choosing to sew, how does their sewing intersect with their writing, and what do sewn works reveal about women’s lives today? These are the questions that I continue to pursue, following the threads that unite all of our making.

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