

Sewing and Seam Ripping

Reflections on the Fabric of Society

by Sonja Dahl



ABOVE: Artist **THI BUI** and her mother hold up the banners they collaboratively made during *Reap What You Sew* held at UC Berkeley as part of a day of visual production and resistance. Sponsored by *Someday Is Now*, an artist collective of UC Berkeley students, staff, and faculty. Image courtesy of **STEPHANIE SYJUCO**.

LEFT: Historic portrait of a woman Suffragette from the collection of photographer Harris & Ewing, 1917. Image courtesy of The Library of Congress.

As the United States has erupted in protests, demonstrations, and staggering public acts of solidarity with beings as diverse as women, immigrants, and the Earth herself, I am not the only one noticing the role textiles are playing in these movements. In my home region of the San Francisco Bay Area, I participated recently in demonstrations for Martin Luther King Jr. Day, protests against

President Trump's inauguration, Women's March Oakland, a human billboard for Black Lives Matter, and moving demonstrations of solidarity with the Indigenous Water Protectors facing down the Dakota Access Pipeline. At each of these events, fabric banners are raised high, carried on a torrent of voices, emotion, and conviction. I have seen quilted, appliquéd, embroidered, painted, pieced, sewn, and



Reap What You Sew protest banner making workshop organized by **STEPHANIE SYJUJO**, hosted by Southern Exposure Gallery in San Francisco as part of their one-day program “Resistance is Fruitful”. January 2017.



RIVER BLACKBELT and **CAROLINE HAYES CHARUK** work on an appliqué banner during *Reap What You Sew* at Southern Exposure Gallery.

screen-printed banners made with varying degrees of skill and urgency. Many of these creations are taking shape in open workshops springing up all over the region, such as the series *Reap What You Sew* organized by artist **Stephanie Syjuco**¹ and the ongoing work of **David Solnit**² and his community of arts activists. The metaphorical and material connections between text and textile are, in these cloth banners, made increasingly potent.

In reflecting upon these public actions and their cloth-based compatriots, I find myself returning again and again to this small, evocative poem by **Nayyirah Waheed**³:

for you, i am sweeping words against each other.

— quilts

Written as if from the standpoint of a quilt, this brief lyric is an offering, an opening, a gesture of allegorical care in both language and cloth. A deeper reading of Waheed’s body of poetry gives greater hints at how to interpret this particular poem. She often writes devotional passages of mourning, strength, and care to her ancestors, and the ancestors of all who were torn from their home soil in order to build an empire in fields of indigo, cotton, tobacco, and rice. As a white person also embedded in this country’s history, I do not presume access to the emotional terrain of Waheed’s experience, nor the experience of



The crowd of demonstrators gather around an enormous fabric banner reading “PROTECT” and sit down en masse on Mission St. outside the San Francisco Federal Building during a demonstration against DAPL and Keystone XL Pipelines.

Organized by **IDLE NO MORE SF BAY** with many of the banners communally made at **DAVID SOLNIT**’s studio. January 26, 2017.

anyone else descended from those who survived slavery and genocide in the project of creating America. But, as someone also working with text and textile and acutely aware of the implications of my own ancestry, I know my work requires a particular weight of responsibility. **Robin Wall Kimmerer**, a botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, has written, “Asking our responsibility is perhaps also to ask, what is our gift? And how shall we use it?”⁴ According to the ways of reciprocity she learned from her ancestors, every living being has a responsibility to generously offer their gifts to the world, whether it be



"Lilitz, Pennsylvania. The Moravian sewing circle quilts for anyone at one cent a yard of thread and donates the money to the church."
 Photograph by Marjory Collins, 1942. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

photosynthesis, singing to greet the morning, or making art. In fulfilling our individual gift-giving responsibilities, we become co-authors in the larger story of creation.

Returning again to Waheed's poem, I am drawn to the stories quilts themselves have to tell us. Allegorically, the quilt might function as a composition of layered stories—many pieces sewn together make a whole cloth in much the same way that many lives in collective labor build a strong society. As heirlooms, handmade quilts are also storytelling objects, markers of particular lives in particular periods of history. Unsurprisingly, one of the most-used terms for describing our shared customs, practices, rituals, and etiquette comes in the form of a textile metaphor. "The fabric of society" connects us in a common storyline: the threads of many lives and experiences stitching together a patterned cloth of beautiful complexity—many pieces radiating out from the center, through time, across the land, from sea to shining sea. Our collective stories, the material of our lives and core beliefs, are the powerful heirloom we pass on from generation to generation.

But I must admit feeling troubled by these metaphors right now. The necessity of such movements as Black Lives Matter and the Indige-

nous uprising at Standing Rock illustrate once again that the tidily stitched patchwork of the American imagination does not actually form a whole cloth, inclusive of all who have labored and sacrificed for it. The quilt of America, as beautiful as it may often be, is sewn onto a torn foundation. We often forget that it is like this in the craft of quilt making. No matter our intentions to use every little piece, some are left out of the final design. And it is easy to forget that the materials themselves—cotton, color, thread, and needle—carry in their DNA complicated histories that interweave with our own human narratives.

These histories are also embedded in the material DNA of the fabric protest banners and pink knitted hats currently proliferating across the American social and political landscape, and in the demographic discrepancies of their makers as well. If we use the quilt-as-collective-labor allegory for building and safeguarding a society, we must acknowledge who is laboring, and in what ways. One thing I observed while participating in such demonstrations as Women's March Oakland is the predominance of other white people. It is good for us to be outraged, to take out our scissors and thread in service of repair. It is also important to look around and see who is and is not participating,



ABOVE: Quilters working together in Gee's Bend, Alabama in 2010. Image courtesy of The George F. Landegger Collection of Alabama Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith's America, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

BELOW: *The AIDS Quilt* in Washington D.C. photographed by Carol M. Highsmith (year unknown). Image courtesy of the Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.





LEFT: SONJA DAHL installing *Colonial Glory*, her 8' x 8' quilt pattern made of indigo-dyed rice for the exhibition *Between: Layering Context & Perception in Patchwork*, curated by Molly Evans Fox and hosted by Jelinek Creative Spaces, Savannah, Georgia. October 2016. Detail ABOVE.

BELOW: SONJA DAHL *An Etymology of Red, White and Blue* 2017, cochineal beetles, salt, and indigo-dyed rice. Exhibited in *Women, Art and Fibers: Contemporary Responses to Abolition and the Journey North* curated by Laurie Carlson Steger and Dr. Memory Holloway at University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. March 2017. With detail.



and ask ourselves why. While hoards of predominantly white women across the US took up knitting needles and pink yarn, a great many others questioned even participating, wondering how these seemingly collective spaces would greet them, and if and how their voices would be welcomed.

As artists and makers, when we choose our materials and methods, we are either purposefully or unwittingly aligning ourselves with particular lineages. I personally like to imagine myself in conversation with such forebears as the suffragettes whose sewn and spoken activism brought me the vote, or women gathered together with their communities around a large quilt, stitching their relationships into cloth. But I am also aware that when I use cotton or indigo dye, one of my great material loves, I am in conversation with the far more complex and painful genealogy of slavery, capitalist inequality and, therefore, the racism that still plagues our society today. With the cloth-based activism I am seeing now, I am reminded that, while we may choose certain media in order to feel embedded in a certain lineage, we can also use the same materials to challenge and reassess lineages that no longer culturally sustain us.

In my own work, the emblem of quilts has become increasingly useful for exploring the cultural narratives in American identity formation. Like many folk traditions, quilting carries connotations of both nostalgia and a resourceful agency that typifies popular imaginings of “Americanness.” In her recent article “Love Your Homemade Quilt? Thank Capitalism,”⁵ Virginia Postrel delves into the history and symbology of American quilting traditions. “Symbolizing handicraft and thrift, quilts seem simultaneously old fashioned and counter-cultural, an authentic alternative to impersonal industry.” Of course, as she goes on to show, the inexpensive mass-manufacture of printed cottons fueled by the labors of plantation slavery is the very thing that made patchwork possible in the first place. This massive system of exploitation put more fabric into the hands of sewers, who in turn produced more scraps of cloth, which—as thrift demanded—were used to create ingenious and complex quilt designs. The cartography of these human-material relationships—cotton and color, empire and exploitation—charts an ever-shifting

landscape, both temporal and quite tangible.

In researching both American quilting and the colonial underpinnings of our social, economic, and spiritual storylines, I am reminded again and again of how we look to our material things for a sense of connectedness as a broader culture. As artists and makers, we often similarly turn our energies to creating objects and interactions for meaningful connection. In this way, the urgency of an appliquéd protest banner can share gravitas with the trajectory of a life’s creative work, stitched incrementally over time onto an ever-evolving substrate. In her own life’s work, Robin Wall Kimmerer draws from the circular understanding of time inherited from her Anishnabe forebears to frame a worldview of interconnectedness: “Stories are both history and prophecy, stories for time yet to come. If time is a turning circle, there is a place where history and prophecy converge.”

I believe we are currently in just such a place, confronted on the one hand by the increasing harm people inflict on each other and the land that sustains us, and on the other the upswell of reciprocal and generous action taking the streets by storm. In addition to all the colorful banners proclaiming in so many ways the core message of RESIST!, it is my hope that more of us will take up our scissors and needles in service of a quilt pattern titled “Redemption.”

¹Hotchkiss, Sarah. “With Fabric Banners Stephanie Syjuco Shares Patterns for Protest.” 01-30-2017. kqed.org/arts

² See: <https://vimeo.com/161333820> for an introduction to David Solnit’s arts activism.

³Waheed, Nayyirah. *Salt*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013, pg. 184.

⁴Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2013.

⁵Postrel, Virginia. “Love Your Homemade Quilt? Thank Capitalism.” 12-17-2016. Reason.com

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Screen printed fabric ribbons and patches designed to pin to one’s clothing or backpack, made by STEPHANIE SYJUCCO for dissemination at protests and gatherings. Image courtesy of STEPHANIE SYJUCCO.

